# 20 - Entrance Exam (6)

Mages' blood tastes different depending on the type of magic they've mastered. To ordinary people, it all tastes the same, fishy, but vampires can clearly discern the differences.

A Flame Sorcerer's blood tastes spicy, while an Ice Sorcerer's blood tastes cool. Those who use Destruction magic have a tangy taste, and Unique Sorcerers all have different tastes, but they all share a sweet taste.

Among these, the most preferred blood is undoubtedly that of a mage who has mastered Unique magic. Because various flavors flow in between the intense sweetness, everyone likes it without any dislikes. However, the supply is small, so it is traded at a very high price, and even if you have money, it is difficult to obtain, making it a rare resource that even nobles can only eat once every ten years or so.

That ecstatic taste of blood swirled on Elena's tongue.

"...Delicious."

Elena was just reaching adulthood by vampire standards. She had only tasted the blood of a Unique Sorcerer once or twice in her life, and even then, she couldn't drink much because it was a treasure that the Duke cherished. But she remembers how good the blood tasted back then.

However, Asel's blood tasted far superior to that. Not only had he mastered Unique magic, but he also used many types of magic. It was only natural that the various Mana contained in his blood would blend together to create a better taste than other Sorcerers.

Of course, Elena didn't know all these behind-the-scenes details, but that didn't matter to her. What mattered was that Asel's blood tasted better than she had imagined, and that her Mana was full after only drinking a few drops.

"More... I want more..."

With a face ecstatically unfocused, she licked the drops of blood that had formed on Asel's fingertips. Asel recoiled in horror at the smooth, hot sensation.

"...What are you doing?"

"Ah, that. My blood bag..."

"Who's a blood bag?"

Asel looked at Elena, whose lips were drooping, roughly treated his wound, and got up from his seat. Elena also got up from her seat, smacking her lips. There was probably barely any blood left now, but judging by the way she kept pursing her lips, she seemed to like it quite a bit.

'I wouldn't be surprised if she ambushes me later.'

A beast that has tasted human blood will crave human flesh. Asel felt that her eyes seemed fierce as she looked at him for some reason, and he opened his mouth.

"Now it's your turn. Use any Blood Manipulation Technique."

"..."

"Answer."

"Ah, ah! Okay! I'll show you!"

Elena, who had been staring blankly at Asel's face, seemed to come to her senses and said in a hurried voice, biting her finger slightly to make a wound.

A small wound. Blood, which should have ended with a slight bleeding, flowed out like a waterfall from the wound and formed a round sphere next to Elena. When Elena put her will into the sphere, it began to transform into a long spear.

[Blood Flow Shaping]

[Blood Spear]

The created spear was grabbed by Elena. Elena immediately gripped the spear in reverse and threw it over the bushes.

[Blood Flow Acceleration]

[Body Enhancement]

Explosively flowing blood increases her physical abilities. A spear drawn out like magic is thrown with the body of a warrior. A sound that cuts through the wind, no, tears it apart, is heard, and a huge sonic boom echoes from beyond the bushes. Asel focused his Mana in his vision to see what she had hit.

It was a golem. The lower body of the golem, which had been slowly crawling towards them, was completely smashed and rolling on the floor.

After Elena confirmed the scene, she stretched out her hand and retrieved the spear she had thrown. The blood-colored spear smoothly settled into her grasp.

She swung the spear to shake off the stone dust on it, looked at Asel, and made a triumphant expression.

"How is it, how is it? Amazing, right?"

"...It is amazing."

Asel readily admitted. Honestly, it was amazing.

He knew that Blood Manipulation Technique was a completely different power from magic. The power they wielded as a race was more like a Hetero ability. A miracle that allows them to freely control the blood under their control and arbitrarily twist its shape and properties. That's why they are not bound by Mana or Aura.

The techniques Elena had just used were the same. Drawing out the spear was similar to magic, and enhancing the body was similar to Aura. The unique Hetero ability of the race was a blessing that allowed them to use all these different powers.

'Blood Magic is a power closer to Blood Flow Shaping.'

He had never seen their magic directly. However, since the power closest to magic for Blood Manipulation Technique is Blood Flow Shaping, he could guess that it was related to that. Asel recalled the Blood Flow Shaping that Elena had shown him and established a Formula in his head.

"Hehe, I am pretty amazing!"

The moment Elena said that, looking at Asel who was lost in thought, someone appeared across the river.

It was a girl with striking long blonde hair and pink eyes. She had a huge double-edged axe on her back, and the blood on the robe she was wearing dripped down. In her right hand, she held a decapitated wild boar.

It was a gruesome sight. Asel noticed her refined Aura and turned his gaze. The girl seemed to sense his gaze, glanced at Asel for a moment, then turned to Elena and said.

"Elena. You were here."

"Ah, Ellen!"

Elena waved her hand with a happy voice. The girl called Ellen nodded, concentrated Aura on her legs, and jumped. She crossed the river in an instant and stood between Asel and Elena.

"I got something to eat. All you have to do is light a fire."

"I already ate!"

"...? Weren't we going to eat together?"

"Were we?"

Elena tilted her head. Ellen also tilted her head.

"Then I'll eat this by myself. More importantly... who's that man?"

Ellen said, pointing at Asel. Her gaze was no different than before, but the emotions contained within were not. A slight wariness and hostility. Asel felt that blatant emotion and burst out laughing.

He looked at Elena and opened his mouth.

"You had a companion?"

"Yeah. We met yesterday and decided to move together. This is Ellen!"

"...What's your name?"

Ellen asked. Asel readily answered.

"Asel."

"You don't have a weapon. You're not a martial artist... are you a Sorcerer?"

"I'm a mage."

"A valuable talent."

Ellen muttered, scanning Asel with eyes that seemed to be appraising him.

"It's hard to grasp your exact level because your Aura is so well-concealed. You seem to be a high-level mage. Do you have a party?"

"No. This is a sufficient test even alone."

"That's true, but it won't be easy enough for a mage to pass alone. Are you perhaps a Summoning Sorcerer?"

Asel shook his head. He stretched out his palm towards the golem that was poking its head out from beyond the bushes.

[Lightning Net]

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!!

A net made of lightning is launched at high speed towards the golem. The golem, instantly covered in the net, struggles, but when he increases the net's output, it immediately turns to ashes and disappears. Asel used his Mana thread to fish out the core that was left alone among the scattering ashes and put it in his backpack.

"I'm a Sorcerer who uses magic like this."

"...Lightning. I heard that a disciple of The Beginning is participating, so that was you."

"Has the rumor spread?"

"Some people know. Not all."

"Hmm..."

He didn't expect the rumor to spread even before he entered the academy. It was unexpected. But it's not a bad thing. There's nothing to lose by being known. It didn't seem necessary to worry too much.

"I have a proposal."

Ellen said to Asel, who was unraveling his Mana thread.

"How about we move together?"

"...You're suggesting we travel together?"

"The magic you just showed. If you're a Sorcerer strong enough to take down a golem in one hit, there's nothing to refuse. We currently have a total of 15 cores. I'll give you some of them, so let's cooperate during the test."

15 cores. That was quite a lot. But Asel didn't feel a great merit in her proposal. There was no reason to cooperate.

"Okay. I'll cooperate."

But Asel accepted her proposal.

If he were only considering the cores or whether he would pass the test, there was no need to accept her proposal. But Asel had a great interest not only in Elena's Blood Manipulation Technique but also in the Aura that Ellen wielded. He wanted to actually see how they operated and handled Mana.

Last night, he saw Paul and Sevia's Aura, but it ended so quickly. He was disappointed that he didn't have a chance to observe them in detail, but now that he had this opportunity, there was no reason to refuse. In the first place, he was planning to accompany her during the test to observe her Blood Manipulation Technique because of his promise with Elena, so there was nothing wrong with adding Ellen to that.

"Thank you. We'll distribute them right away."

Ellen immediately took out 5 cores from her pocket and handed them to Asel. Asel didn't refuse and put them into his backpack. Carrying the backpack, which now felt quite heavy, on his back, Asel gestured towards the bushes.

"Let's go right away. There are golems gathered over there."

"Did you use a search magic?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When I pointed."

An absurd answer. Ellen momentarily suspected that Asel was lying, but she sensed the presence of the golems caught in her expanded senses and let out a hollow laugh.

"...Amazing. Is it possible to use magic without any Formula or anything?"

"Why don't you hurry up instead of being surprised?"

Asel asked, turning his head. Ellen pointed to the wild boar lying on the floor and answered.

"We have to eat."

"...Ah."

Asel scratched his cheek, briefly muttering as if he had just noticed.

Author's words (Author's afterword)

Thank you.

# 21 - Entrance Exam (7)

Five days into the exam.

Asel and the other two had settled in the golem creation zone they found through detection magic, repeatedly dispatching the golems as soon as they were created. The interval between the golems' appearances wasn't very long, but thanks to the three of them taking turns to kill, none of them felt fatigued.

"Uh, it's out."

Elena, sitting on a rock, said. Asel, whose turn it was, immediately stopped what he was doing and unleashed magic toward the golem.

[Heat Fragrance Building Fire]

An invisible heat was released. In an instant, the form of the golem melted away, and just before the core turned to ashes, he pulled out a mana thread and snatched it. There was a slight charred mark left, but the mana contained within was unharmed. Asel tossed the core into a roughly dug pit and resumed his work.

The work itself was nothing special. It was a disassembly task to figure out how that massive golem operated with just this small orb. Not only did it require talent in magic, but also delicate manual skills, so Asel focused all his attention on tapping and splitting the core.

"Knife."

"Here!"

As he reached out his hand, Elena handed him a dagger made of blood. Asel took the dagger and gently scraped the edge of the core. Ellen, watching the scene while leaning against a tree, let out a hollow laugh.

"……Can you really figure it out like that?"

"I've already figured out about half of it."

Asel replied while skillfully maneuvering the knife to avoid damaging the mana within the core.

"Roughly, it's a core created by a seventh-tier sorcerer. They've integrated magical engineering to enhance the efficiency of the mana and connected the formula to the outside. In simple terms, this core is merely a power source to move the golem; all the formulas and calculations necessary to actually construct the golem depend on some external device."

"……."

"If the external device is destroyed, all the golems here will stop functioning and collapse in an instant. The power may still exist, but the formulas that maintain that body will be shattered. That would be the only weakness of the infinitely multiplying golems."

Asel looked into the split core with an intrigued gaze.

"The reason golems are continuously generated here is that a one-time activation teleportation formula is engraved into the core. When the formula is activated through the device, it teleports to this location and activates the construction formula. It creates the skeletal structure using dirt and sand, and alters its properties to have skin like rock. It's fascinating."

"……You sound really perverted right now, Asel."

Elena said with a slightly pale expression. Asel lightly ignored her comment and tucked the split core into his pocket.

"I'd like to meet the sorcerer who created this golem if I get the chance. They must be a wizard specializing in magical engineering. I'm curious about how much incredible knowledge they possess."

"……I think you're the more impressive one for figuring that out."

Ellen muttered, checking the newly generated golem and picking up her axe. Despite being a massive double-headed axe much larger than her height, she swung it lightly as if handling a feather.

With that trajectory, the golem's waist was severed. The golem, which had just been born, seemed confused as its upper and lower bodies separated, flailing its arms, but even that was cleanly cut off. Ellen split the upper half of the golem, which was left with just its head, and pulled out the core. The golem soon scattered into sand.

"Is that a hundred now?"

Ellen murmured as she placed the core into the pit she had dug.

It had already been two days since they settled here. Excluding the time spent sleeping, they had dedicated all their efforts to hunting golems, so it was only natural that cores were overflowing. With this amount, even if other participants came to loot, they could smile and share a little.

'Looks like we'll pass the exam easily.'

Ellen thought as she watched Elena draw blood.

In the academy entrance exam, it was common for injuries to occur. The format of the exam changed every year, but there was always combat involved. Whether minor or serious injuries, they were inevitable.

Some people criticize such an exam structure.

And they were right. Which academy would put participants into a death game from the entrance exam and only rescue them just before they die?

Other academies, excluding Luminous Academy, conduct entrance exams solely through written tests and safe practical tests, regardless of whether they are combat or non-combat departments. This difference is why the stability issues of Luminous Academy's combat department entrance exam arise every year.

However, the principal never wavered in the face of public criticism.

* The reason we are considered the best among academies is because of that special entrance exam. It filters out the weak in the first round. I want talents who can truly excel in war, not just any random individuals.

During the monthly meeting titled 'Is the Academy Okay as It Is?', the principal said this. Some agreed with her opinion, while others were aghast, but her words were indeed true. Those who pass the entrance exam generally have some level of combat ability.

Moreover, most participants in Luminous Academy's entrance exam are those who take pride in their skills. Having heard the term genius at least once, they quickly grasp the essence of the exam and strive to pass while minimizing injuries.

Thanks to this, while injuries do occur, they are not numerous. At most, about ten. If it exceeds that, it meant the exam's difficulty was set incorrectly. This was a stage where the supervisor had to take responsibility and normalize the exam's difficulty.

And today was that stage.

"Shit."

The chief supervisor of the exam, Ross, cursed as he peered into the patient tent.

"Ugh…."

"Ahhh! Lightning keeps sparking from my arm!! Help me!"

"……That damn Grace. Who the hell is Asel? Why did she attack when I said I didn't know!"

"My leg, my leg…!"

The inside of the tent was a mess. The few beds that had been brought in were already full, and they were currently in the process of procuring more from outside. Even just the seriously injured were numerous. When counting those who had given up midway through the exam, nearly dozens of participants had gathered here.

It was a clear mistake in setting the exam's difficulty. Ross pulled at his hair as he stepped outside the tent.

"This is bad."

Curses kept spilling from his mouth.

In fact, he had made no major mistakes. Accidentally setting the cores for the golem creation device to slightly higher-tier ones? No problem. This could be handled by reducing the number of cores needed to pass.

Allowing participants to loot each other? That was also not an issue. Allowing looting in an exam where something needs to be found was a tradition passed down through the academy. Ross was merely following that.

So, what was the real problem?

"……This is a message from the field supervisor. Currently, the True Ancestor and Lady Hargelin, the Disciple of Creation, have settled in the golem creation zone and are slaughtering the golems."

Those bastards were the problem.

"Dammit."

The moment when a large number of injuries first occurred? It was when Asel summoned lightning and gathered participants. Those who had gathered, thinking there might be a special event prepared by the academy, clashed with each other, resulting in injuries.

Then came the golems.

The fewer the golems, the more violent they became, so after days of slaughtering golems, it was only natural that the danger of other entities increased significantly.

What could have been a mistake that could be handled with improvisation had escalated to an unignorable level because of them. As a result, there were an overwhelming number of injuries caused by the golems.

But yes. This part could be understood. The misunderstanding regarding the golem's core was on the supervisor's side, and they hadn't explained that the golems became more violent as their numbers decreased.

"But damn it. Why is Lady Bydel hunting participants instead of the golems that are supposed to be taken down by Asel!"

"Yelling at me won't help…."

"Ah, damn it!"

For Ross, cursing was as natural as breathing. While he had restrained himself while acting as an academy supervisor, the situation where he had to take responsibility brought out his old habits. He chewed on his lips, contemplating how to resolve the current situation.

It was then. The door to the outdoor meeting room set up outside the forest burst open. Ross was about to shout at the intruder in irritation, but upon recognizing the identity of the intruder, he broke into a cold sweat.

"……Sir Fernan."

Fernan Clark. A professor of the combat department at the academy, renowned for his graceful swordsmanship even within the academy. He had participated in numerous wars and recently reached the level of a master.

He waved his hand at Ross.

"Hello, Ross."

"……What brings you here…."

Ross asked. Fernan chuckled, taking in the flustered expression of the supervisor.

"Why? I came to clean up. Wow, seeing the tent outside, it was quite a sight, wasn't it? No matter how much of a principal you are, if there are that many dropouts, you can't help but get heated, right? I thought the chief supervisor had lost his mind and would come running with magic."

"……I apologize. I will handle it quickly."

"No, no. Don't do that. I'll take care of it before the situation escalates. The principal has given me authority directly."

At those words, Ross's face crumpled.

"……I apologize for disappointing you."

"Eh? Oh, are you thinking that you got fired? Don't worry. The higher-ups have judged that this situation is entirely the participants' fault. They said that some participants are just too exceptional. So, we just need to deal with them."

"……Are you going to kill them?"

"Are you crazy?"

Fernan glared at Ross with a serious expression. Ross immediately lowered his eyes.

"I apologize. I was short-sighted."

"You were too short-sighted. What do you mean by killing participants? Do you want to see the academy disappear from the map? The principal would never ask me to do such a thing. Okay?"

"……I apologize."

"Let's do well, Ross. If someone hears this, they'll think I'm some kind of pleasure killer."

Fernan patted Ross's back a couple of times and continued speaking.

"I can just test our lovely candidates myself. I heard that Grace Bydel is acting alone while Asel and the others are moving together. I can test Grace first, and then go to the three of them."

"……."

"Oh, and about the dropouts from the exam. They said to make a separate list and submit it. Later, like other academies, they will determine pass or fail through a practical exam. We need to avoid having too many dropouts."

"Understood. I will comply."

"Good."

Fernan grinned and tapped the sword at his waist.

"Then I'm off. Let's see how our prospective disciples fare."

With that, Fernan left the meeting room and headed into the forest, spreading his aura. Before long, he sensed Grace's presence.

His new form vanished in an instant.

A word from the author (Author's note)

Thank you to the anonymous sponsor for your support.

# 22 - Entrance Exam (8)

The forest at night is cold. Especially in winter, it is even more so. If one does not light a fire or keep their body warm, they could quickly succumb to hypothermia and die.

Those who have mastered Mana are somewhat free from such environments, but they are not completely liberated. Even they must bow their heads before the harshness of nature. This is why a magician always accompanies long-distance expeditions or labyrinth explorations.

With a mere gesture, they can ignite a fire, spend the night under vigilance magic without a watch, and deal with intrusions through barriers. Their convenience is unmatched by other superhumans. Ellen, who had been on expeditions at the family level, understood very well how important these magicians were.

Thanks to that, she also understood how remarkable the magician named Asel was.

A cave slightly distanced from the golem creation site. The group lit a fire at the cave entrance and made makeshift beds with the leaves they had brought. Normally, they would have to sleep on the hard ground with just leaves, but thanks to Asel's magic, they could rest in a relatively soft place.

"Where did you learn this magic?"

"A maid at the mansion. She was researching life magic, so I was able to learn a few spells from her."

"A maid is a magician?"

"Most people living in Wiheim are magicians."

The beds were arranged in a circle around the campfire. A wind barrier was laid at the cave entrance to prevent the cold from seeping inside. This way, they could sleep warmly even in winter. If they had a tent, they could have camped better than this, but for now, this was the best they could do.

The campsite arrangement was complete. Asel increased the size of the campfire once more and briefly stepped outside the cave to set up vigilance magic. It was a spell that would produce a sound if someone entered within its range. While it was fine to set up traps that directly inflicted damage, he was not inclined to indiscriminately deal with those who bore no ill will.

'This is enough.'

His breath fogged in the air. After confirming that the magic was functioning properly, Asel glanced up at the sky.

Dark clouds, which he hadn't seen in a long time, were pouring rain. It wasn't raining heavily, but it seemed wise to refrain from outdoor activities until the rain stopped. None of the group would catch a cold from getting wet, but it wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

He passed through the wind barrier and returned inside the cave. Elena was already lying on the bed, trying to sleep, while Ellen was sharpening her axe blade. As she ground the blade with the whetstone she had brought, she glanced at Asel and smiled faintly.

"Are you done?"

"Sort of."

Asel said this and plopped down onto his bed.

Though it was just a pile of leaves, he was grateful for it. He nodded in satisfaction and lay back.

"Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be the last day of the exam."

"Got it. I'll finish this and go to sleep right away."

The exam period lasted a total of one week, but if they gathered a certain amount of cores, they could submit them early and finish the exam ahead of time. There was no need to be stuck in the forest for a whole week. Tomorrow, they would no longer have any business in this forest.

'It has been long.'

Asel thought as he looked up at the cave ceiling.

It had already been five days since he left Wiheim. He wanted to return quickly to meet his mentor, Evelyn, and Hailey. Once he officially enrolled in the academy, opportunities to see them would decrease, so he needed to spend enough time with them before that.

They now felt like family to him. His relationship with them was incredibly precious. Not to mention Evelyn, Ena and Hailey were equally important. He could no longer imagine a life without them.

He wondered how he used to live. The taste of moldy bread mixed with stone dust that he used to eat in the slums was now a distant memory. His unfortunate life had completely vanished since the day Ena took him in.

Thinking this made him smile involuntarily. Asel chuckled at the thought of Ena's characteristic blank expression.

'Should I give her a hug when I return?'

He thought she probably wouldn't refuse, as she secretly liked physical contact. Just as he closed his eyes with that thought in mind.

Beeeep!!

The vigilance magic was activated. Elena, who had been lying down, shot up, and Ellen, gripping her sharp axe, hardened her face.

Asel opened his eyes and slowly raised his Mana.

"Asel, does the magic affect beasts too?"

"No."

At that immediate response, Ellen activated her Aura. A chilling light glimmered in her eyes. The grip on her axe tightened, and a fierce aura radiated from her, as if she could slice something at any moment.

Elena also raised her blood energy and wrinkled her nose slightly.

"…I smell blood."

"Is it an injured person?"

"No. There's only a little of their own blood, the rest is someone else's."

"That means they are not a welcome guest."

Footsteps grew closer. Ellen spread her energy to discern the intruder's level, but all she sensed was a presence. It felt as if it were an inanimate object, with nothing detectable at all. This could only mean one thing.

The opponent was a monster standing far above them. Ellen clicked her tongue and turned to Asel.

"What do you plan to do?"

"A man. About 180 cm tall. I don't know his weight, but his arms are a bit long. The clothes he's wearing are high-quality and functional. Judging by the sword at his waist, he seems to be a swordsman, and there are scars on his left forearm."

"…What are you doing?"

Ellen frowned and asked, but Asel did not answer. Instead, he continued to spill the scenes flowing into his mind.

There are many types of vigilance magic. The magic Asel set up was his original formula, a combination of a loud sound-producing amplification spell and a surveillance spell that allows for observation from a distance upon activation. Thanks to this, he could gather a lot of information.

"From the blood dripping from his wounds, it seems he was injured not long ago. The blood on his body, as Elena said, belongs to others. As for the opponent's level… judging by the fact that I can't gauge it, he must be at least a Master."

"…A Master? A monster like that was mixed in with the participants?"

"He's not a participant."

Asel's face hardened as he spoke, hearing the footsteps right in front of him.

"He's an outsider."

"Correct!"

As soon as he spoke, the wind barrier was sliced away. The barrier that had been blocking the rain scattered into the air, and beyond it, a drenched man stepped forward. He brushed his hair off his face and smiled at the group.

"Hello, friends. How's the exam going?"

"Who are you?"

Ellen raised her axe and asked. Fernan smiled wryly at her fierce demeanor.

"You're being quite hostile. Do we know each other?"

"I'll ask again. Who are you?"

"I'm a professor at the academy. Fernan Clark. You've heard of me, right?"

"…Fernan Clark?"

Ellen frowned as she mulled over the name.

Fernan Clark. The eldest son of the Clark family and a swordsman who made remarkable contributions during the demon subjugation war. Recently, rumors had spread that he had achieved Master status, and now he stood before the group.

This was Ellen's first time seeing Fernan's face. After the subjugation war, he had been so entrenched in the academy that she never had the chance to meet him. It was absurd that she encountered someone like him not within the academy but at the entrance exam site.

"…Professor, what brings you here?"

Now that she had confirmed his identity, she could not speak to him disrespectfully. Ellen immediately switched to a formal tone and asked. Fernan smiled and answered while taking in the whole group with his gaze.

"I'll tell you why I'm here later. For now, let me explain the rules."

There was no time to ask what rules he meant. Fernan drew the sword at his waist, openly revealing his murderous intent. A massive pressure weighed down on their shoulders, interfering with the flow of Mana. Ellen and Elena strained against Fernan's surging energy, their eyes wide open.

Meanwhile, Asel stared at Fernan with a cold expression. Fernan admired this and said inwardly.

"First, I won't kill you, but I can render you incapable of fighting."

"…What do you mean—"

"Second, you must come at me with the intent to kill. Otherwise, you'll fail the exam."

"…."

"Understood? Let's begin."

The moment Fernan finished speaking, he aimed the tip of his sword at Ellen. Ellen gulped as she watched the blade dripping with raindrops.

At that moment, a bolt of lightning shot past her temple at high speed.

[Chasing Thunder]

Zzzzzzzzzzz!!

A dark blue lightning bolt flew straight for Fernan's forehead. Fernan swung his sword, deflecting the lightning. His gaze turned back to Asel.

"Electric magic."

"……."

"So you're the one rumored to be Ena's disciple."

"Has it spread that far already?"

"The professors in the magic department talk about it every day, so how could I not know?"

Fernan looked down at his slightly trembling hand from having received the lightning directly.

"More importantly, the power of your magic is strange. Even in a wet state, it can inflict damage on a Master’s body. The fact that your Mana wasn’t fluctuating earlier is also odd. Did Ena pick up a strange monster?"

"He's quite a monster."

Asel smiled and slammed the ground hard.

"I'm coming at you with the intent to kill."

"You're an interesting one."

Fernan swung his sword horizontally. Aura coated his blade, and a sharp sword wave shot toward Asel.

[Thunderous Wall]

A wall of lightning formed beneath Asel's feet, colliding with the sword wave and scattering. Electric currents burst forth in all directions. The humid air mixed with electricity. Fernan smiled at the tingling sensation, while Asel clenched his fist and unleashed the current.

[Thunder Explosion]

The wild lightning shot out, resonating with the remnants of the electric magic. Moments later, a massive explosion of thunder engulfed the cave.

Kwaaaang!!

The cave could not withstand the power of the lightning and began to collapse. Fernan pulled back, and Elena and Ellen pursued him.

The two exchanged glances and split to close the distance on Fernan from his left and right.

[Blood flow shaping]

[Blood glaive]

Elena transformed the blood she drew into thorny threads and swung them. Ellen brought her axe down vertically with great force. Fernan skillfully dodged and sliced through the straightforward attack and the agile one, then elbowed Ellen in the abdomen.

"Ugh!"

Ellen grimaced as the pain surged from her solar plexus, and she was pushed back significantly. Instead of worrying about her, Elena enhanced her body and kicked at Fernan's shoulder. Fernan easily deflected the attack and smiled.

"Princess, it seems the royal family didn't teach you martial arts."

He grabbed Elena's leg and swung her roughly. Her body flew and crashed into a tree.

"Ugh!"

A rough breath escaped Elena's lips. Fernan, aiming to finish her off first, swung his sword.

His claim of not killing them seemed sincere, as he delivered a simple downward slash without any Aura. Thanks to that, Ellen, who rushed in, was able to block the attack.

Crack!

The axe blade clashed with the sword, sending sparks flying. Ellen gritted her teeth, enduring Fernan's assault. Fernan looked down at her with a gentle smile.

"The Hargelin family, born with innate strength, cannot withstand a Master's might."

"…Ugh."

"But… even without Aura, it's unexpected that you can withstand this. It seems your practical experience is quite good."

"Thank you for the compliment…!"

"You're welcome."

Just as Fernan was about to add more strength to his grip on the sword.

"…!"

A chilling amount of Mana condensed in the air. The remnants of destructive magic, created solely for killing, registered in his senses.

"Hah…!"

A high-level magic with power far superior to mid-level magic. Moreover, it was high-level electric magic. Having experienced it alongside Ena during the demon subjugation war, he knew its power better than anyone. If hit directly, even Fernan would not escape unscathed.

Moreover, the current environment was highly favorable for electric magic. Simply shooting lightning could electrify the entire forest through the water. How much stronger would high-level magic be?

"This is something I should avoid—"

"No."

The moment Fernan muttered, Asel burst forth from the darkness of the forest and swiftly grabbed his abdomen. Fernan saw the flame wings behind Asel evaporating the raindrops.

[Crimson Wings of Flight]

Boasting an atrocious Mana efficiency, Asel could only maintain a short flight with this fire-based magic for now. Using stealth magic and the sound-dampening 'Silence,' as well as the 'Ghost' that erased his presence, he reached out to Fernan's skin and whispered softly.

"You can't escape."

[Cataclysmic Thunder]

Zzzzzzzzzzz!!

Lightning, condensed from dozens of bolts into one, struck Fernan's abdomen.

This magic, which combined lightning and reduced its range, significantly increased its power. The lightning that spread from the point of impact could incinerate all nerve endings and turn the brain to ashes, making even Fernan furrow his brow for a moment.

'If I move my Aura to block it, it’s a magic that could destroy my inner core. How troublesome.'

Fernan smiled through the intense pain starting from his abdomen.

It was possible to block the magic without moving his Aura. A Master's body was not that weak. However, he had to endure a slight stiffness in the process. The destructive power and penetrating ability of electric magic could not be ignored, even for a Master.

But instead of passively taking the attack, Fernan moved his Aura to erase the lightning that had penetrated his body. He knew that even if it was a magic that attacked his Aura, it would not inflict significant damage on him at Asel's level, so he could afford to do this. Thanks to that, he was free from stiffness, but he couldn't avoid sustaining some internal injuries.

"Is it my turn now?"

Fernan asked, a small amount of blood trickling from his mouth. Asel grinned and stepped back.

"Not yet."

The moment he spoke, the Mana that had been condensed in the sky began to whirl violently. Fernan let out a hollow laugh at the ominous energy and readied himself.

"Are you using another magic while maintaining the formula of high-level magic? Logically, is that even possible? Your head must be about to explode."

"I don't do what I can't."

"Hah, geniuses."

Fernan smirked, and Asel brought his hand down from above.

This was one of the high-level magics that Ena frequently used.

The ancients believed it to be an overwhelming phenomenon, a punishment from the gods.

[Natural Resonance]

[Formula Overlap]

[Simultaneous Casting]

A terrifying blue light flashed from the sky.

[Lightning Strike]

Kwaaaang!!

A massive bolt of lightning descended as if to split the earth in two.

# 23 - Opening of the Mind

The fallen lightning blankets the forest. Rainwater carries the lightning, electrifying everything and forming a zone of lightning. A land of widespread slaughter where no one can survive, searing and obliterating everything at a cellular level.

Ellen, who had taken Elena to safety, watched the scene and let out a hollow laugh.

"...This is absurd."

Ellen had participated in many Labyrinth explorations and monster subjugations on behalf of her family. Thanks to that, she had seen quite a few mages compared to other nobles. But this was the first time she had witnessed high-level magic.

Mages were far fewer in number than warriors to begin with. Among them, those who could use high-level magic were mostly stuck in Wiheim or affiliated with some organization. Among wandering mages who made a living, those who could use high-level magic were few and far between. That was why Ellen had only seen descriptions of high-level magic in books.

A deadly magic that could annihilate an army with a single gesture and change the terrain according to the caster's will. Ellen felt an inexplicable elation at the power of high-level magic, which was exactly as she had read in books.

Even Fernan wouldn't be unscathed if he were hit directly by that level of magic. She felt the electricity in the air and forcibly raised her trembling arm. Elena, who had recovered from her injuries, also drew up her Aura and narrowed her eyes.

"The smell of blood has intensified. But... it's not time to relax yet."

Elena was right. Ellen nodded and stared in the direction where the lightning had struck. Asel, staggering, and Fernan, bleeding all over, were facing each other, raising their fighting spirit.

The amount of blood flowing from Fernan's body was significant, but the depth of the wounds was not that severe. They were at a level that could be cleanly healed with just one recovery potion. But Fernan did not take out the potion from his pocket. It was already shattered by the lightning strike anyway. It would be useless to drink it.

"Hoo..."

As he exhaled, the Electrification Property Magic remaining in his body tore through his oral cavity. His tongue and palate were torn, and Fernan grinned and spoke.

"Ena has trained her disciple well. To grow to the point of damaging a master's body at that age. The elders of the Magic Tower would drool if they saw this."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Isn't this hardly the time for replies? You seem to be suffering from Mana exhaustion, so I should finish you off quickly."

Fernan was right. Asel forcibly held onto his blurring vision and grimaced at the pain he felt near his heart.

The Electrification Property high-level magic 'Lightning Strike'. It was the most intuitive, destructive, and open to revision Formula, but the amount of Mana consumed was also enormous. It wasn't beyond Asel's ability to handle, but simply manifesting the Formula required sacrificing 50% of the Mana in his Core Reactor.

He had repeatedly cast such magic, and continued to manifest other magic while drawing the Formula. As a result, he was able to activate magic of a power that was not yet permitted to him, but the price for that was steadily returning. If there had been no dark clouds in the sky, it would not have ended with mere Mana exhaustion.

'The speed at which Mana is filling up is sufficient. But I can't afford to relax.'

The Core Reactor was completely empty. Mana was slowly entering it, but not enough to continue the battle. In this state, he could only use magic three more times.

Fortunately, there was a solution. Asel spread out his palm and summoned a small aggregate of lightning on it.

[Lightning Child]

The aggregate of lightning, which judges and moves on its own, rises as per the first command Asel input.

The aggregate, glowing with a dark blue light, orbits around Asel. He looked at Fernan, who was leisurely waiting for him, and manifested the next magic.

[Lightning Absorption]

Lightning in the air gathers above Asel's grip. Mana wandering without a master was also helplessly absorbed into the lightning he had created. The lightning, which had grown so large, instantly seeped into the vicinity of his heart, filling the Mana Core with Electrification Property Magic.

Originally, Asel's Mana was flexible enough to use any magic, but now his Mana was made up solely of destructive and violent lightning. As a result, the magic he could use was limited to Electrification Property Magic, but that kind of restriction had no effect.

From the first time he used Electrification Property Magic until now, the magic that Asel was most confident in and handled best had always been the same.

He smiled as he released the lightning that was overflowing. Fernan smiled back. The next moment, the two simultaneously released magic and Aura towards each other.

KWA-BOOM!!

Blue and gray light collided in the air, and a roar erupted. The aggregate orbiting around Asel pierced through the gap. The aggregate, which had reached Fernan in an instant, glowed and scattered lightning around it.

"Hah, I didn't know when Ena used it, but now that I see it, it's a very troublesome magic."

Fernan dodged the lightning fired by the aggregate with bizarre movements, and swung his sword to cut off the magic. Beyond the disappearing aggregate, two blood-colored wolves were seen rushing with their mouths wide open.

[Blood flow shaping]

[Blood Wolf Demolition]

The wolves leaped, aiming for Fernan's head and legs respectively. Fernan cut off the two wolves with a single slash, then deflected the battle ax flying in from the side. His figure was pushed back by the ax filled with Aura. Ellen, who had approached like a slipstream, swung her fist.

WHOOSH!

The fist, stretching out quickly while cutting through the air. Fernan lightly twisted his body to evade the attack. Then, he cut off the Blood spear that Elena had thrown with his sword and swung his leg to kick Ellen's body.

[Spiral Tremor]

The spiraling lightning directly hit Fernan's leg. His muscles contracted momentarily, and Ellen took advantage of the gap. She rotated her body and kicked Fernan's temple with her toe. Fernan's body fell sideways.

A blatant opening. Instead of advancing further from there, Ellen retrieved the ax she had thrown and approached Asel. Elena, who was riding on the blood-colored wolf, also took her place next to him. Asel brushed off the mud on his hair and handed Ellen a potion from his bag.

"Drink it. It's a Strength Enhancement Potion."

Ellen drank the potion without hesitation and threw away the empty bottle casually. She felt the immediately increased strength and looked at Asel, only rolling her eyes.

"What's the plan?"

"Are you asking for my opinion?"

"In these cases, the answer given by the mage is usually the correct one."

"...Hmm."

Instead of answering, Asel drank the Magic Amplification Potion and narrowed his eyes.

"There is no detailed plan. As much as possible, Ellen, you block Fernan's attacks and create an angle that makes it easy for Elena to attack. I will adjust the situation with fire support from behind."

"Can you do it?"

Asel nodded. He shattered the empty bottle with lightning and tapped the two on the back once.

That was the signal. Ellen and Elena rushed towards Fernan at the same time. Asel took a long breath from behind and drew up Mana.

Repeating contraction and relaxation, Mana spreads rapidly. Electricity is mixed in with the exhaled breath. The air is electrified with every movement. An Electrification Property zone is formed around Asel.

Crackle!

The sound of lightning sparks was heard in Asel's brain.

He chanted the magic.

[Lightning Mist]

Crackling!!

Lightning, unleashed like a mist, races through and dominates the space. A wide-area magic that is impossible to cut down one by one. The magic, which accurately avoided Ellen and Elena, covered Fernan from above. Fernan grinned and coated his sword with Aura.

Sword Strength, used for the first time in this battle. A gray aura covered his blade, and Fernan quickly swung his sword towards the sky.

With just that, the magic was physically dismantled. Asel circulated all the recoil caused by the forced dismantling of the magic and manifested a new magic.

[Great Lightning Slaughter]

Crackle.

A small lightning bolt sparked in front of Asel's eyes. It resonated and combined with the lightning in the dark clouds, becoming a lightning bolt as thick as a house. Ellen and Elena momentarily hardened their faces at the overwhelming sense of oppression, and Fernan laughed loudly and swept back his wet hair.

"Haha! Disciple of Creation! How far have you reached!"

"I don't know. But as I said before."

Asel chuckled and shot the lightning bolt forward.

"I'm just doing it because I can."

KWA-BOOOOOOM!!

The lightning, which advanced with a huge roar, advanced as if to annihilate everything in its path with a massive amount of mass and energy. Fernan condensed Aura to the limit on his blade and swung his sword down from above.

Creak!

At that moment, just before the sword cut through the lightning. The huge lightning disappeared and a blue line flew from beyond it.

[Lightning Line]

The magic, which compressed lightning into the form of a line, wrapped around Fernan's wrist and electrocuted him. As the output increased, the line glowed and seared Fernan's skin. Originally, it was a powerful force that would sever his hand, but the master's body did not allow for defects.

It didn't matter. A moment of stiffness was enough.

Crackle!

The lightning turned the rain that soaked Fernan and went up, contracting the muscles of his entire body. Elena and Ellen took advantage of that brief gap. Ellen swung her ax greatly horizontally, and Elena made a hand sign with her eyes dyed bright red.

[Blood flow acceleration]

[Crimson Blood Eye]

The Hetero ability to arbitrarily grant the part that can cause the most bleeding from the opponent is activated.

[Blood flow shaping]

[Blood Lake Gluttony]

A pool made of blood is formed under Fernan's feet.

WHOOSH!

A long red arm popped out of the pool and grabbed Fernan's face. In that state, the fist opened and a sharp tongue was shot from the inside, aiming for his shoulder.

"The coordination is smooth."

His voice is heard from the face covered in red hands.

"But it's still clumsy."

The moment he spat it out, a powerful fighting spirit soared from Fernan's entire body.

With just that, Ellen's ax was pushed back. Elena's Hetero ability is forcibly dismantled. A huge wind pressure violently pushes the two away.

"Ugh!"

"Cough!"

The two who rolled on the floor and crashed into the tree let out rough breaths. But Fernan did not give them his attention. Instead, he stared at Asel and held his sword in reverse.

"Do you know what characteristics masters and archmages have in common?"

"..."

"It's that they can release the Imagery they hold into reality. They implement their own worlds into reality and challenge reality with their own small worlds."

He continued, recognizing the three pairs of eyes staring at him.

"I'll show you."

Fernan grinned and slammed the sword he was holding in reverse into the ground. He stomped on the pommel of the stuck sword and chanted.

"Mindscape Manifestation."

Kugung!

An intangible energy swept through the entire forest.

Along with that, a gray moon rose in the sky.

Pale moonlight illuminates the ground. Just looking at it gave the illusion that his entire body was being cut to pieces. He couldn't breathe, and his head screamed for him to get out of here right now. But his body wouldn't move.

Overwhelm.

The body and mind are overwhelmed by the moonlight. The brain cannot give proper commands, and the mind is shaken as if it will scatter at any moment. The Imagery of the one who rose to the position of master with just one sword was so oppressive, horrific, and beautiful.

"Come."

Fernan reached out into the air. A pale sword rose above his grip. He smiled as he pointed the tip of the sword at Asel.

"I'll end the test with this one blow."

"..."

"Endure."

Fernan grabbed the sword with both hands and pulled it to his side. At the sight, Ellen held out her ax as if to protect Asel, and Elena formed a blood barrier. Asel gritted his teeth and chanted the most powerful magic he could currently unleash.

Gather all the Mana in the Core Reactor and draw a magic circle.

Melt the Imagery into the blade.

The magic circles that floated behind Asel resonated and rotated with each other.

The moon that floated behind Fernan was contained in the blade.

He reached out his hand.

He swung his sword.

[Natural Resonance]

[Formula Expansion]

[Magic Amplification]

[Formula Overlap]

[Lightning Pillar Falling to Earth]

[Waning Moon]

A pillar of lightning falls from the sky as if to split the earth.

The swung waning moon advances as if to cut everything.

Thus, lightning and the moon collide.

KWA-BOOOOOOOOOOM!!

The world flickered.

Author's words (Author's afterword)

Thank you for your support, Anonymous and asdew.

# 24 - The Second

As the light returned to the world, the moon that flew in split the lightning.

Instead of disappearing, the vertically split lightning divided and fell to the ground on either side. A tremendous roar followed.

Kwaaaah!!

The wave of the massive lightning swept through the forest, annihilating everything in its path. However, the place where Fernan stood remained intact. He brushed his rain-soaked hair back and smiled coolly. In contrast, Asel staggered, his face contorted from mana exhaustion.

The high-level magic that had been manifested by enhancing and resonating with various symbols. Just that alone had emptied the core reactor, and on top of that, he had faced Fernan's mindscape directly. Mana was slowly flowing into him through the core reactor, so there seemed to be no need to worry about losing his life, but he couldn't prevent his consciousness from scattering. Asel gazed at Fernan with increasingly blurred vision and spoke.

“...Did I pass the test?”

“Is that even a question?”

Fernan chuckled as he sheathed his sword.

“You easily surpassed the benchmark, and I’ll take the top spot.”

“That's a relief.”

As long as he passed, that was enough. Asel let go of the consciousness he had been desperately holding onto and collapsed right there. His face plunged into a puddle where rainwater had collected, and Elena, who was standing nearby, gasped and tapped his shoulder.

“Ah, Asel? Asel, are you okay?”

“...It's mana exhaustion. I must have overdone it.”

Ellen checked Asel's pulse and muttered.

Fortunately, the pulse was normal, but mana exhaustion was a condition with many variables, so quick action was necessary. Many mages had died suddenly from mana exhaustion on the battlefield. It was foolish to think Asel would be safe just because he was Asel.

She manipulated Asel's bracelet to activate a transportation formula and said to Fernan.

“I'll transport the injured for now.”

“Right. You two should go as well. Oh, and you both passed the test, so keep that in mind.”

“...We didn't contribute much compared to Asel.”

“What's important for the vanguard moving with a mage is not the contribution but opening paths for the mage. You fulfilled that role faithfully.”

Fernan replied while shaking off the blood dripping from his body. Ellen frowned slightly, as if dissatisfied, but nodded.

“...I understand.”

“Your expression says otherwise.”

“...”

“Forget it. But remember this: warriors who outperform mages are either exceptionally skilled or are lunatics who want to die.”

He didn’t wait for a response. Fernan waved his hand toward Ellen, who was biting her lip, and collapsed as if he were falling. Ellen also stopped the conversation and moved directly with Elena to the injured tent.

Swoosh!

In the forest where everyone had vanished, the sound of pouring rain struck the ears. The lingering echoes of the lightning that had not yet dissipated occasionally erupted with a massive thunder, and the flowing rainwater mercilessly drenched Fernan's face. He looked up at the sky with a dazed expression, then smiled faintly and closed his eyes.

“It hurts like hell.”

He felt a pain in his brain from the part struck by magic. The wound wasn't deep, but due to the nature of electrification magic, the pain was intense regardless of the injury. Even a master couldn't train their nervous system, so writhing in pain was unavoidable.

Though he pretended to be fine in front of the three, Fernan was also mentally pushed to his limits.

If Asel had been hit by the magic he used at the end, he wouldn't have been able to lie here as he wished. The pain would have been so severe that he might have fainted, or he would have quickly knocked the three down and struggled to erase the lightning that had burrowed into him.

“...Unique magic is indeed unique.”

A magic that even works on a master with a vastly different level. It wasn't classified as unique for no reason. Or perhaps it was because its owner was simply extraordinary.

Fernan exhaled deeply and devoured the lightning that had infiltrated his body with his aura.

It wasn't easy. Asel's mana rampaged as if it had a free will of its own, occasionally attempting to devour Fernan's aura. It was no wonder he was a genius; even his mana overflowed with personality. Ena's mana didn't possess this level of autonomy. Where on earth did such a monster come from?

‘Though Asel overshadowed them, Lady Hargelin and the True Ancestor were quite impressive too. They would become even more useful with some refinement.’

The levels of the two weren't bad either. Both had good bloodlines, so they must have undergone various training from a young age due to their families.

And Grace Bydel.

A genius of swordsmanship born into the Bydel Duke family. She had mastered the swordsmanship passed down through bloodline inheritance at such a young age, and she was a monster capable of partially opening her mindscape.

If Asel had made several small wounds, Grace had carved a deep gash into one of Fernan's arms. Thanks to that, he couldn't completely avoid a slight struggle in the battle against Asel's group. Of course, if he had gone all out, he could have taken their heads in an instant, but it wasn't easy to get injured while keeping things under control.

While he was thinking, he had almost devoured all the lightning that had invaded his body. Fernan groaned as he got up, brushing back the hair that had stuck to his forehead from the rain. He tore a bit of his shirt to staunch the bleeding and sighed deeply as he muttered.

“Ah, can't all four of you just come to my side?”

He knew it wasn't an easy breeze, but he couldn't help but feel greedy. He spat out the blood pooling in his mouth and manipulated the communication device.

Bzzz.

He infused aura into the device to activate it and recalled the sentence he wanted to convey.

[The test is over. Grace Bydel has sustained serious injuries and lost. Ellen Hargelin and Elena von Valdemia returned with the device. The Disciple of Creation fainted and was transported with the two.]

Beep.

The reply came back immediately.

[Ena's disciple fainted during the test? Are you saying I should report this? Is this some new method of suicide I'm unaware of?]

“......”

Consciousness returned along with the injury, and his eyes opened. A tightening pain in his chest surged once and then slowly subsided. It was one of the typical symptoms of mana exhaustion. Forcing his body to move in this state would destroy the balance between the core reactor and his physical body, leading to death.

Though he had read about it in books, it wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

Instead of getting up, Asel stared blankly at the ceiling.

Under the fabric ceiling, small magic lamps were glowing. Turning his head to the side, he saw other participants lying in similar states. None of them looked normal. Among them, he spotted a man whose arms and legs were wrapped in lightning.

“AAAH!! It hurts, it hurts! Please erase this...!”

It was a familiar face. He was definitely the man who had fallen from a single spell. Fortunately, contrary to his worries, it seemed he wasn't dead. If he had died, Fernan would have come not for a test but for an execution.

However, it was clear that he was in a critical state. Due to the nature of electrification magic, the pain felt was significantly greater than that of other magic. Moreover, the mana that spread after being struck by magic couldn't be erased with ordinary control.

Rohan's situation was the same. His control couldn't erase the electrification property magic.

If left alone, he would continue to experience shock and wakefulness from the pain. If he hadn't seen it, it might have been different, but now that he had confirmed it, there was no reason to leave him be. Asel forcibly moved the creaking mana and collected the lightning that had wrapped around Rohan's body.

As a result, Rohan's contorted face relaxed into a dazed expression.

“Just kill me... Huh? It’s gone! It’s gone! Damn it!”

He shouted in ecstatic joy. It seemed he had been in considerable pain. Asel thought that he needed to adjust the power of the electrification art more carefully in future duels.

Their eyes met.

“Ah, hello...?”

The first thing that caught his eye was the red hair. Her eyes shone like obsidian, and she was lying in bed, bandaged on her arms and neck, looking at him.

It was a face he recognized. Asel frowned slightly and spoke.

“That’s the one I saw at the testing ground...”

“Grace! Grace Bydel!”

She raised her upper body and shouted, then grimaced in pain.

“Ugh...”

“Did you fail?”

Since they were not in the testing ground, Asel spoke formally at first. At that, Grace was startled and replied.

“Just speak comfortably, please.”

The emotion in her voice was so earnest that Asel could only nod with a reluctant expression.

What kind of connection could lead her to act like that?

He pondered, but no answer came. His first meeting with her had been just a week ago, and today was only their second encounter.

There hadn't been enough time to properly grasp the other person's disposition. Yet Grace acted as if she held a significant debt and emotion toward him. Showing such a submissive attitude right away wasn't a good sign in a relationship.

“...It's not a failure.”

While he was thinking, Grace spoke. She stroked her neck and wore a wry smile.

“Fernan came to test me and beat me up. He made a wound on my arm, but the result was my defeat.”

“So you were the one who made that wound.”

“...Did you meet Fernan too?”

“Just like you. I took the test and lost.”

Though he wondered if it was correct to express it as a loss, in the end, it would have been him who lost if it had gone to the end, so it wasn't an incorrect expression.

Thinking of Fernan, he suddenly recalled the 'Mindscape Manifestation' he had shown. In any field, when one reaches the extreme, they can use that season and unique world. He didn't know what kind of imagery Fernan held, but the gray moon he had shown was beautiful yet lonely.

‘What would my master's imagery be?’

Ena habitually infused imagery into her magic, but she had never opened her mindscape. She had vaguely realized it was related to eternity, but she didn't know the details.

It would be strange to directly ask about the imagery one holds, so it seemed right to suppress his curiosity until she revealed or showed it. Asel exhaled deeply and spoke.

“Do you know me?”

Other thoughts could wait. Asel felt the need to discuss this with Grace first.

If she was skilled enough to take the test against Fernan, she would definitely have enrolled in the academy. He wanted to avoid feeling awkward every time they met at the academy with someone of that caliber.

He knew she harbored strange feelings toward him, but if she didn't explain this in detail, it would be even more uncomfortable for him. Asel thought this as he glanced at Grace.

Grace met his gaze but didn't immediately speak. Countless agonies flickered in her eyes, appearing and disappearing repeatedly. In the end, what remained was a thread of hope. She forced a smile and, with trembling lips, managed to voice her thoughts.

“...Asel, do you really not remember me?”

“Yeah.”

With that one answer, Grace crumbled.

“...Ah.”

Tears welled up in her eyes and soon began to flow without any resistance. There was no sobbing. Just quietly. She lay still, looking at Asel, helplessly shedding tears. The emotion visible in her was so pitiful that Asel quietly waited for her to stop crying.

How long had it been? Grace finally spoke in a voice mixed with moisture.

“Everything... has disappeared. The promise we made, the simple wedding we held, the house we built together.”

“...”

“Everything has disappeared.”

Asel couldn't understand her murmurs. However, he understood the emotions she was conveying.

Despair, sorrow, sadness, depression, and more. All were negative feelings. Asel rolled his eyes with a perplexed expression.

Honestly, he couldn't empathize much. She was just a woman he had seen twice, and with no explanation, she was crying, leaving him at a loss for words. What could he possibly say when he knew nothing?

Should he offer comfort, or should he just stay silent?

Asel pondered for a moment but decided to respond briefly. He felt that if he left it alone, she might remain like that all day.

“Um... Grace?”

“...Huh?”

“I don't know why you're feeling this way, but wouldn't it be better to focus on the present rather than getting caught up in the past?”

“...”

There was no response. He hadn't expected an answer, but with the sobbing sound gone, he couldn't help but worry that he had said something strange.

Still, it was a relief that the crying had stopped. Asel thought this and cleared his throat.

Grace stared at him intently, then wore a wry smile as she spoke.

“...I still can't give proper comfort, just like back then. I was told that in times like this, I should just hug you...”

He had never heard that before.

“...Yeah, you're right. If I get lost in the past, I won't be able to do anything. I need to get up to avoid the same ending as before. But...”

It's sad, and there's nothing I can do about it. Grace finished her words and pulled the blanket over her head. Faint sobbing could be heard, indicating she was shedding her last tears. Asel sighed deeply and ruffled his hair roughly.

‘This isn't my style.’

When he was in the slums, it was Evelyn who took care of comforting the orphans he happened to meet. All he had done was teach them how to survive. He had calmed crying children a few times when the opportunity arose, but they had all cried even louder or gotten frustrated, leading him to give up quickly. He never imagined he would have to do that again as an adult.

Fortunately, unlike a child, Grace quickly stopped crying. She uncovered her head, rubbed her swollen eyes with her hands, and said,

“I know you have a lot of questions. I'll tell you when the time comes.”

“Is there a reason to hide it?”

“...I don't really know. I just haven't prepared my heart yet.”

He wondered if there was anything to prepare, but he nodded anyway. Grace smiled faintly at his response.

“Let's have a duel later. I want to clash swords after a long time.”

“...? I don't know how to use a sword.”

“?”

“?”

The two of them wore similar puzzled expressions.

“...Aren't you a swordsman?”

“I'm a mage.”

“A mage? The mercenary Asel, who was famous for his aversion to spells, is a mage?”

Grace asked with wide eyes. Asel frowned deeply.

The difference in their memories started right there.

A word from the author (author's note)

Thank you to Radahn for your support.

# 25 - The Church

The term "magic user" was quite infamous. Wasn't it a word coined by the front-line warriors, who directly clashed with enemies, to disparage the mages who just cast spells from behind? It was almost a forbidden word in Wiheim, so Asel knew its origin and meaning very well.

Frankly, he didn't have much emotion towards the word itself. But hearing it directly to his face, he couldn't deny feeling unpleasant. He quite liked magic, and all the people he had formed deep friendships with were mages. He couldn't possibly think favorably of an expression that lumped together and disparaged his favorite field and people.

Yes, to put it simply, it was 'uncomfortable'.

"Ignorant meat shield."

So he retorted with an equally disparaging expression. It was a longer expression than 'magic user', but seeing Grace's brow twitch, it seemed to have hit the mark. Asel raised the corner of his lips and continued to speak.

"You only know how to swing a sword mindlessly, yet you disparage mages? Do you think the civilization of the continent would have developed this far without mages?"

It was true. Most of the tools for convenience that existed on the continent were designed by Magical Engineers and had circuits made by mages. Without them, humanity would still be living a primitive life, grilling meat over a fire. Many uncivilized warriors tried to deny this truth, but it was an undeniable fact.

Grace seemed to inwardly acknowledge that, as she pouted and muttered.

"...I really didn't think I'd be having this kind of conversation with you. Is this that butterfly effect thing...? But I haven't even done anything yet..."

"Speak up if you want to argue. I can't hear you."

Asel said that and turned his head towards the ceiling.

The pain that had been constricting his chest had subsided by now. It was thanks to the Mana in the Core Reactor being more than half full. Now he had almost shaken off the Mana exhaustion symptoms, and it seemed there wouldn't be much of a problem even if he used magic. He raised his upper body and rotated his shoulders, but there was no creaking feeling anymore.

'I think I can move.'

The reason he had fainted and been lying quietly in bed was due to Mana exhaustion. Now that he had shaken it all off, there was no reason to stay still. Asel immediately got out of bed and stretched his arms and legs. His body, which had been stiff from lying down for so long, was quite relieved by that.

"A-are you going?"

"I can't just lie down and take up space when I'm fine."

"I, I want to go too!"

Grace said that and tried to raise her body, but after struggling for a while, all she could manage was her upper body. The injury she had sustained from Fernand seemed quite severe.

'Did he push her harder because she's also a swordsman?'

Asel glanced at the bandages wrapped around her abdomen, then handed her the last potion left in his backpack.

"Drink it. It's a painkiller."

"...Are you giving it to me?"

"It'll just go back into storage if I save it. I should use it here."

"T-thank you..."

Grace reached out with trembling hands to receive the potion Asel was handing her. Asel checked that the bandages wrapped around her arm were slightly stained red, sighed, and opened the lid for her instead.

"Tell me if it hurts."

"...I don't want to be a bother."

"...I'm not twisted enough to see that as a bother."

He checked the effect of the potion inside by channeling a little Mana into it, then brought it directly to Grace's lips. Grace hesitated for a moment, rolling her eyes, but soon opened her mouth and drank the potion.

Gulp, gulp.

The sound of her drinking the potion echoed quietly in the tent. Asel watched her slightly flushed cheeks and raised Mana above his palm. The Mana wildly changed shape according to his will, playing on his palm.

Fortunately, the property of the Mana had returned from Electrification to a fluid form. It was because he had used up all the Mana absorbed through lightning absorption in high-level magic. Thanks to that, he could now use other types of magic again.

It wasn't that uncomfortable, but to use magic for convenience, he had to get rid of all the Electrification Property Magic anyway.

'If I leave it as it is, I might end up frying the whole room just by using cleaning magic.'

He had to avoid such mishaps as much as possible. If only to avoid being killed by Evelyn or Hailey.

"I finished it."

While he was continuing his thoughts, Grace licked the potion off her lips and spoke to him. Asel closed the lid of the empty bottle and stowed it in his backpack.

Come to think of it, none of the Cores he had put in his backpack were visible. Did they disappear automatically when he left the testing ground, or did the examiners retrieve them? He couldn't tell. It didn't matter anyway, since the research on the circuits was over.

"Then I'm going. See you at the entrance ceremony."

Asel said with a faint smile, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Grace bit her lip slightly and tried to nod, but suddenly her eyes widened as if she had remembered something.

"Ah, right! Asel!"

"...?"

"What's your ideal type, by any chance?"

"...Why are you asking that all of a sudden?"

Asel frowned at the sudden question. Ideal type, huh. Wasn't that question too out of place for the situation? It wasn't a question he couldn't ask, but he didn't think they were that close yet. The sense of distance was too strange.

But Grace's expression was serious. The most serious he had seen so far. So Asel, even though he thought about just ignoring it, answered vaguely.

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Still! You must have a general idea!"

"...Hmm. Someone with a lot of understanding?"

"You mean someone with big breasts, right?"

No, why does it turn out that way?

Asel stared at Grace with an absurd laugh, but she lightly ignored his gaze and let out a sigh of relief. Then, she gently looked down at her chest and muttered.

"This is still the same. Good."

"I'm going crazy."

Asel muttered that and started walking towards the outside of the tent. He didn't think any good words would come out if he continued the conversation.

"Asel!"

Grace shouted at him as he did so. When he turned his head, he saw her smiling faintly and waving her hand.

"See you later."

"...Yeah."

Asel chuckled and waved back at her. Then he came out of the tent.

As soon as he came out, the bright sunlight greeted him intensely. It was night before he fainted, but it seemed a day had already passed. The rain seemed to have stopped, and the dark clouds had long disappeared into the distance.

The location was... the entrance to the forest. It was a familiar place, so he could recognize it quickly. It seemed that the injured were being treated here.

"Ah, Asel!"

While he was looking around, he heard a familiar voice from behind. When he turned his head, he saw Ellen and Elena with bandages wrapped around their bodies. Asel smiled slightly and approached them.

"Are you guys okay?"

"It was just Mana exhaustion. There's no need to be out of it for that long."

"You're probably the only one who can say that about Mana exhaustion."

Ellen retorted in a voice that sounded tired now. Asel checked the splint wrapped around her ankle and opened his mouth.

"Is it broken?"

"They said it's cracked. Still, it's a good thing it ended like this after fighting the master."

"Is everything else okay?"

"Yeah, just simple bruises. It must be thanks to Fernand-nim controlling it."

That was true. If Fernand had used his full power, the three of them, including Asel, would have fainted and ended before they could even do anything. That's how huge the gap between a master and those who weren't was. The fact that Asel was able to damage him with magic was only possible because Fernand had reduced the output of the Aura that covered his body.

'I have a long way to go.'

Asel thought that and took a long breath, and Ellen opened her mouth with a smile.

"By the way, Asel, did you know?"

"...? Know what."

"To commemorate the end of the test, I asked the supervisor who was walking around about the number of Cores needed to pass the test. And they said it was five."

"What."

Elena, who was next to Ellen, reacted first to Ellen's words. Asel frowned and asked back.

"...Five? You need 50 to activate the device."

"That's right. But whether you pass the test or not depends not on activating the device, but on whether you fill it with meaningful energy or not. And the minimum requirement for that is five."

It was an absurd answer. Then does that mean all the hard work he had done so far was for nothing?

"If that was the case, I would have finished it on the first day! Why didn't you tell me?"

"They said that finding out that minimum requirement is also part of the test."

"That's malicious!"

"That's right."

Ellen answered with a smile, and Elena huffed. Asel looked down at them and chuckled.

It was all in the past anyway. Nothing would change even if he got angry and argued right now.

"Are you going to stay here?"

Asel asked the two of them. Ellen nodded, tapping the splint on her leg.

"I can't walk anyway. I'm going to get some more treatment and then go with someone from my family when they come."

"I'm going to wait until they come to pick me up too. I got a call that someone from the principality sent someone."

"Then I'll have to go alone."

He had become quite fond of the two of them, having taken the test and fought together. He wanted to go to the city together if possible, but it seemed he would have to go alone. It would be a lie to say he wasn't disappointed, but he wasn't too worried since there would be opportunities to meet in the future.

Asel smiled and nodded, then slowly got up from his seat.

"See you at the entrance ceremony."

"Yeah! Bye, Asel! Don't pretend you don't know me then!"

"See you later."

Asel waved at the two of them and turned around.

"Hoo..."

He glanced at the medical personnel who were busily moving around, then walked towards the shape of the city that could be seen far away in the forest.

He wasn't worried about entering the academy. Fernand said at the end that he had passed the standard, so he would probably be automatically accepted. There was no need to hear any further answers. For the time being, it was a matter of resting well and returning to Wiheim to wait for the entrance ceremony.

Thinking that, he was walking when he saw a group of priests walking from the opposite side. They seemed to be the ones the academy had called to deal with the injured.

Except for one, the rest didn't seem to have much to do with combat. However, they were all definitely dealing with 'Holy power'.

It was the first time he had seen a priest who handled Holy power directly. The elderly nun who had come to the slums as a volunteer in his poor days was just a devout believer. Those who were so openly connected to God were stuck in the clergy and refrained from external activities.

He had heard that there were also priests who mainly engaged in missionary work, but since Wiheim worshiped magic rather than God, priests didn't come and go that much. In the first place, the entry procedures were so complicated that it wasn't a preferred country.

'I want to see the Holy Law once.'

The 'Holy Law' that priests dealt with was a type of magic based on Holy power. Its branches were very vast, from the most basic healing to barriers and buffs. There were quite a few high-ranking priests who dealt with various spells. They just didn't stand out because they didn't come out of the clergy.

Among the branches of the Holy Law, the most widely known and used healing was similar in nature to healing magic. Both were capable of rapidly regenerating even physical defects, and the amount of Mana and Holy power consumed was not that great.

However, while the Holy Law healed wounds without any cost, healing spells were accompanied by terrible pain. It wasn't for nothing that people paid a lot of money to find priests instead of going to healing spell casters.

This difference could never be filled with talent or improvement of spells. Magic and Holy Law had completely different origins and directions of development, so it was impossible to fix it just because they were similar in nature. Still, he wanted to get a rough idea. Knowing and not knowing were vastly different in themselves.

"Sister. Over there."

While he was lost in thought, he heard the whispers of the priests who were walking. Asel used hearing enhancement magic to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"They're coming out of the place where we heard the injured are gathered?"

"Wow, he's handsome."

"...Sister?"

"...Ahem. He doesn't seem to have any major injuries, so let's go and ask him about the condition of the injured."

"Yes? Ah, yes!"

The little girl who was talking to the woman with purple hair nodded and walked towards Asel with quick steps. He knew the contents because he had eavesdropped on the conversation, but Asel tilted his head as if he didn't know and looked down at her.

"Who are you?"

"Nice to meet you, brother. I'm Tina, a priest from the clergy dispatched at the request of the academy."

"Ah, the clergy... Did you come because of the treatment of the injured?"

"That's right. So I have a few questions to ask, would that be alright?"

The other priests didn't move while Tina was talking. Instead, they just looked at her with a pleased gaze.

Perhaps they wanted the youngest nun to have various experiences directly. Considering the rumors that the priests' eloquence was basically excellent, it wasn't something he couldn't understand. It seemed they were trying to improve their communication skills by taking the lead in the conversation and communicating directly.

It wasn't unpleasant, so he decided to get along with her willingly.

"Yes, it's alright."

"Ah, thank you. May God bless you."

Tina muttered, folding her hands as if praying, then looked up at Asel and asked.

"Is it true that you came from being with the injured, brother?"

"Yes. I got a little better and came out first."

"Ah, I'm glad you're feeling better. But just in case, would it be alright if I check your condition myself?"

"It's alright. I'd rather ask you to."

Asel smiled and held out his arm. Tina coughed dryly at the smile and took Asel's pulse.

"Ahem... Th-then I'll check."

She said that and slowly operated Holy power. Asel narrowed his eyes and watched the movement.

Aura is stored in the heart and used. Since it has a physical form, destroying the heart also destroys the vessel.

On the other hand, the Core Reactor has no physical form. To be precise, it exists in the caster's mind. This cannot be physically destroyed, but it can be shaken by damaging the soul or mind. Or by interfering with the passage through which Mana moves. If they were the same mage, it was also possible to extract it through Mana.

Holy power had a nature closer to Mana than the two. Without a physical form, it drew Holy power from the well engraved in the soul to operate the Holy Law. There was no need for spells or complex calculations in the process. All they had to do was move the Holy power according to their will and think of what they wanted.

'If you put it that way, it's similar to praying through prayer.'

If magic was about implementing a kind of law, Holy Law was like wishing for what you wanted from God. A miracle that was impossible to use without unconditional faith in God. It wasn't for nothing that those who lacked faith or were not devout did not awaken Holy power.

'It's a shame, but I don't think it'll be easy to use.'

He grasped the structure at once. He was able to obtain all the information he wanted just by observing. But as expected, it was impossible to handle Holy Law. However, it seemed possible to modulate the Holy Law they used, except for healing, into the form of magic and create it anew.

'I have more to study.'

There was no time, but his greed kept increasing. Asel smiled bitterly and looked at Tina, who was taking her hand off his arm.

"Is it over?"

"Yes. As you said, you don't have any injuries. I'm glad."

Asel answered with a smile instead of an answer and glanced at the gathered priests.

"I'm worried that I'm taking up the precious time of you all. You should go see the injured quickly..."

"Ah, it's alright. I asked you directly, so you don't need to worry too much."

"Still, I can't help but worry. It's not much of a substitute, but if you have any questions, I'll answer them with all my heart."

"Ah, then right away..."

Asel adopted a formal tone, befitting someone addressing a cleric. There was no reason to incur their displeasure.

The conversation flowed smoothly. Tina asked Asel about the number and condition of the injured, and Asel explained in detail what he had seen, including the appearances of those who seemed to be in serious condition. Having received the answers she wanted, Tina gave a light bow and smiled.

"Thank you for your answers."

"Haha, this is nothing. More than that, may I be excused now? I'm a little tired from taking the exam..."

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry, it seems I've kept you for too long. May God bless your future, brother."

"Thank you."

Asel replied with a smile, gave a slight bow to Tina, and started on his way.

Looking back slightly, he saw one of the priests, who appeared to be the eldest, roughly ruffling Tina's hair. From what he could gather, he seemed to be praising her for doing well. Asel chuckled and was about to turn his head forward.

At that moment, he met the eyes of the nun with the purple hair. She smiled slyly and waved at Asel.

Asel smiled and waved back. As he did so, he thought,

'I have a feeling I'll be seeing her often.'

His intuition as a mage whispered to him.

Author's Note

Thank you to Earlybird for the sponsorship.

Thank you for reading today.

+) The nun's name has been changed from Ellie to Tina.

# 26 - On the Flower of Lightning

There were several places in the Luminos area where carriages gathered. All of them were managed by a large trading company, renowned for taking you anywhere on the continent if you paid enough. However, when I inquired about a carriage to Wiheim, the answers were all the same.

“We don’t handle carriages to Wiheim.”

“......”

“It takes ages just to get in, and the road is treacherous. The customers are all rude, so no matter how much you pay, we don’t want to go.”

“......You say that to my face?”

“......Are you a wizard?”

Given the situation, I couldn’t return to Wiheim right away. Reluctantly, I had to stay here for a night and find some means of transportation the next day. It was bothersome, but I had no other choice.

The fortunate part was that I had a bit of money on hand, thanks to Ena’s generous support. I had tried to refuse it, thinking I wouldn’t need to spend much, but that would have been a grave mistake. I had enough experience with homelessness in my childhood, and I was no longer keen on repeating it.

‘First, let’s find a room and then look around.’

Asel thought this while scanning the streets.

Everywhere he looked, there were crowds of people. Nobles with their attendants, merchants, commoners, alchemists, magical engineers, and those waiting for the entrance exam participants filled the streets. A variety of people crowded the area. Just standing still felt like he might suffocate in the throng.

This phenomenon was due to the overlap of the academy’s vacation season and the entrance exam season. With the already dense population, the influx of people made it feel like there were as many as bugs. Every shop was packed with customers.

It seemed the inns would be no different. To find a decent room, he would likely have to pay extra or wander into a place that was downright terrible. Ordinary rooms must have been booked long ago. Today was the last day of the entrance exam, so rooms would become available tomorrow, but he had to endure today first.

“Such a hassle.”

Asel muttered while buying some street food.

Finding a place to stay in a city he didn’t know was troublesome. Asking locals would be easier, but finding a local in this city was like searching for a needle in a haystack. If there were any buildings related to the Witch Council, it wouldn’t matter, but unfortunately, the Witch Council was a closed organization with no branches elsewhere.

In the end, he had to go out and search for himself. Asel sighed deeply and moved on.

The abundance of sights on the streets was somewhat comforting. Since it was a place catering to academy students, the street food sold at cheap prices was quite decent, and there were many interesting items in the artifact and scroll shops. Among them, the scroll shop strongly piqued his interest.

However, securing a place to stay came first, so Asel passed by the shop and entered a moderately sized inn. As soon as the staff at the counter saw his face, they immediately shouted.

“We only have one room left. Two gold coins for the stay.”

“What the hell.”

The outrageous price made a curse slip out involuntarily. Two gold coins for a stay? There’s a limit to madness. Asel left the inn without looking back.

However, as he wandered to other inns, they were all similar or even more expensive. Some places operated like hotels and charged five gold coins for a stay. It seemed they had sold their conscience to the devil. No matter how much money he had, Asel had no intention of sacrificing most of his funds just for a place to sleep.

So, he eventually made his way to the outskirts of the city. It wasn’t as bad as the slums he had lived in, but it was still a back alley with polluted air. Asel took a deep breath and sighed.

Just because it was a city with an academy didn’t mean there were no slums. In fact, the more transient population there was, the more beggars flocked from all over. It was similar to how tourist cities or countries have many beggars. There might not be many criminals, but it was still a filthy place.

For Asel, it was a familiar environment. He hadn’t expected to end up in a place like this, but as long as he could find somewhere to sleep, that was enough. He quickly assessed his surroundings and entered the building that seemed to be in the best condition.

Inside, it was relatively clean, much like the outside. He noticed a few young ladies who looked like low-ranking nobles. Their expressions weren’t very pleasant, but it seemed they had no choice but to come here given the circumstances.

Well, sleeping here was still better than being homeless.

Ignoring the glances from the young lady, Asel approached the staff. The scrawny employee looked at him and spoke.

“Are you a noble?”

“I’m a wizard.”

“Still a distinguished guest, I see.”

He smiled warmly and popped a piece of fruit he was holding into his mouth.

“There aren’t many rooms left, but would you like the best one?”

“How much for a night?”

“One silver coin.”

It was an expensive price for a slum, but considering the city’s cost of living, it was definitely cheap. Asel nodded and pulled a silver coin from his pocket.

“Thank you. Your room is on the second floor, at the very end.”

The staff handed him the key. Asel nodded in acknowledgment and headed to the assigned room.

Click.

As he inserted the key into the lock and turned it, the door opened. Asel loosened his robe and surveyed the room.

It wasn’t bad at all. There were no bugs, and it didn’t smell. The furniture consisted of just a bed and a desk, but since he only needed to sleep here for one night, it didn’t bother him much. This was acceptable. He tossed his robe onto the bed and opened the curtains of the closed window.

The slums of Luminos, despite being slums, received a fair amount of sunlight. It seemed that prosperous cities also had decent conditions in their slums. Asel chuckled to himself as he gathered his backpack and money and left the room.

‘Now that I’ve found a place to sleep, should I wander around a bit?’

There was still plenty of time before nightfall. It seemed reasonable to look around the city for any potential means of transportation to Wiheim. He also wanted to stop by the scroll shop he had seen earlier.

‘Scrolls are single-use, but extracting the formulas inside could help in researching other magic.’

With many things left to study, scrolls were a pretty good option for him. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to buy the parchment needed to create scrolls and adjust the formulas himself.

Just as he was thinking this and stepped out of the building, he caught a whiff of a strange scent wafting from the alley.

A sweet yet addictive aroma. Asel grimaced as he recognized its identity.

“......It’s drugs.”

Though he had never bought or used drugs, ironically, Asel was more knowledgeable about them than most addicts. Thanks to that, he could immediately recall which drug the scent was coming from.

Originally an herb, when processed differently, it became a drug called Quirgalshi that enhanced various abilities related to mana and even physical capabilities. It was a type of drug that was very hard to obtain, and Asel had only delivered it a few times. Its price was also quite high, comparable to a decent mansion.

‘Why is something like that here?’

Drugs in a city with an academy? Contrary to what he had thought, it wasn’t a crime-free zone.

He clicked his tongue and moved away from the source of the scent. Just then, someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

It was a large man. With a sword at his waist, he seemed to be a swordsman, and the scent of drugs wafting from him suggested he was with those smoking drugs nearby. Asel frowned and brushed his hand away.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“Hey, didn’t you just look over there? You seem to know what’s going on.”

“And so what?”

“Whoa, whoa. Why are you so aggressive?”

The man grinned and reached for the sword at his waist.

“Because I want to kill you.”

“......Hah.”

A sigh escaped him. He hadn’t expected to encounter thugs like this as soon as he stepped into the back alley. It brought back memories from long ago.

“Stop sighing like that!”

There was no point in listening further, so Asel unleashed his electrification property magic and struck the man under the chin. That alone sent his body crashing forward. Fluids gushed from his mouth and eyes, and his muscles contracted and spasmed before finally stopping.

Asel looked down at the man with cold eyes, and chaos erupted in the alley where the drug scent had been.

“What’s that noise?”

“That sounds like Lyle. Did something happen?”

The men who had been talking peeked their heads over the alley. Their gazes shifted from the fallen Lyle to Asel, and they each drew their weapons with grim expressions.

“What the hell, what did you do?”

“Accidents always happen like this.”

Asel paid no mind to the men’s growls. Instead, he sighed as if he were used to it. Their faces twisted further at his reaction.

It was a good opportunity. Asel lightly ignored the noisy men and leisurely prepared his spell.

The fight ended rather anticlimactically.

Since they had taken drugs related to mana, he had thought they would have some combat ability. However, they couldn’t do anything and were all taken down by a single spell. They fainted from the agonizing pain in their lower bodies. Asel brushed off the embers clinging to his clothes and rummaged through the unconscious men’s belongings.

It had been a while since he had left the slums, but he hadn’t forgotten the survival methods from those days. After collecting useful items from the men, he exited the slums. He had erased all traces of magic, so there was no need to worry about any repercussions.

“Hm.”

Asel sat in a suitable open space and began to examine the items he had brought. The self-defense dagger could be sold at a forge, and the jewelry could be tossed to a merchant who would price it for him. He could just keep the silver coins.

Then, a black gemstone remained. Asel held the gemstone in his hand and slowly began to channel his mana into it.

‘Oh.’

As the amount of mana flowing in increased, the brightness of the gemstone intensified. It meant it was a mineral with high mana conductivity. It seemed he had just kept it because it looked expensive, but a gemstone with such high mana conductivity could be very useful for jewel spells or engravings. It was worth quite a bit.

It was a decent harvest. Asel smiled as he contained the mana within the gemstone and tucked it away.

‘Since I’ve been interested in engravings, this saved me some money for buying gemstones.’

Thanks to that, he felt a bit better. Asel flicked a silver coin with his fingers as he walked through the academy grounds. He stopped by a forge on the way and sold the dagger for two silver coins, and tossed the jewelry to a merchant for five silver coins. Before he knew it, he had quite a bit of money on hand.

There was no need to sell anything else.

Asel smiled at his bulging pockets and headed toward the scroll shop.

A word from the author (Author's note)

Another part will be uploaded at 00:05.

# 27 - On the Flower of Lightning (2)

Fortunately, there were no particular troubles on the way to the scroll shop. There were a few individuals glaring at him along the way, but once they noticed he was a wizard, they naturally stepped aside.

‘They’re good friends.’

Asel recalled the ones who had fled in a cold sweat and chuckled as he opened the door to the scroll shop. An elderly man sitting at the counter gave him a brief nod.

“Welcome.”

The man had the typical appearance of a merchant. Despite his age, his eyes gleamed with greed, and his belly protruded prominently. His neck was wrinkled, and he wore flashy jewelry. Everything about him exuded a strong sense of self-assertion. It didn’t seem like a wizard managed the scroll shop.

After all, while wizards create scrolls, the majority of users are those who cannot use magic. It might be a better choice to place merchants who are good with numbers rather than wizards, even just to consider their perspective.

“Are you looking for something in particular?”

The man asked, rubbing his hands together. Asel glanced around the shop and replied.

“I’m not looking for anything special. Rather, how is magic classified by floor?”

“Oh, the first floor mainly features life magic. It includes automatic cleaning spells, gardening, alarm spells, and so on. The second floor is primarily arranged with pure-type magic. There are many spells that help with expeditions, such as detection spells, barrier spells, and purification spells.”

“......”

“The third floor focuses on elemental magic, and the fourth floor is dedicated to combat magic. All of these are popular among labyrinth explorers. Nobles who want to imitate magic or those looking for expensive protective spells also visit frequently.”

“I see.”

Asel nodded, letting out a soft hum.

He had no need to look at life magic. He had already learned most of it from Hailey, so there was no need to browse through the scrolls. He thought it would be better to start slowly from the second floor.

After thanking the shopkeeper, Asel headed straight to the second floor.

The inside of the scroll shop was packed with customers, regardless of the floor. Given that scrolls were popular items, this was inevitable.

The formulas contained in the scrolls could be used by anyone who could inject mana, not just wizards. Although they had the drawback of being single-use, considering the low price and convenience, they sold well across various professions.

Thanks to this, the income of the Rapid Magic Tower, which focused on the scroll business, was significantly higher than that of other magic towers. It was said that the price of custom-made scrolls easily exceeded several hundred gold coins, so in a society where non-wizards made up the majority, their status was beyond imagination.

‘Since they focus on bestowal magic, they’ve also ventured into the magical artifact business. I’d like to see that someday.’

Asel thought as he strolled through the scroll shop.

After exploring the second floor, he checked out the third and fourth floors before returning to the second floor.

The variety of scrolls in the shop was vast. There were spells created to assist in combat, spells for surprise attacks, and powerful spells that required immense mana but were equally potent. Scrolls that could fulfill all sorts of purposes were categorized accordingly.

Naturally, there were no formulas for unique spells. Those spells could backfire if mishandled, so it seemed they were not treated separately.

He shifted his gaze back to the scrolls.

He took out a piece of parchment that was placed high up. It was a defensive formula that layered steel-like mana over the skin. Asel narrowed his eyes as he slowly examined the formula of the scroll.

‘A defensive formula that can be used without property transformation. There’s room for revision.’

Currently, the only defensive formula he knew was one that created a barrier around his body. While that was sufficient, it wouldn’t hurt to know more ways to protect himself.

Barriers, no matter how high their output, had clear limits, and while they could layer electric or fire property mana through property transformation, that alone was insufficient. It was just the most basic defensive formula, after all.

‘On the other hand, this magic can activate continuously through the skin without needing to create a barrier, and the mana consumed for maintenance is significantly less.’

Defensive formulas are not spells used in response to an attack. They are spells that need to be maintained continuously and restored whenever they are depleted. In that regard, having lower mana consumption was quite a significant advantage.

Of course, the drawbacks were clear as well. While a barrier could concentrate mana at a single point to maximize physical resistance, this magic distributed it evenly across the body, making it impossible to withstand attacks comparable to high-level magic.

In the end, each had its strengths and weaknesses. There was no need to discard one in favor of the other. Asel mentally calculated the formula within the scroll and returned the parchment to its place.

Fortunately, the magic worked normally. Since he hadn’t used the scroll, there was no worry of being accused of theft.

Just by observing, he had grasped the essence of the formula and stolen it. It was a feat impossible without overwhelming talent in magic. He smiled as he memorized other formulas from the scrolls that seemed useful.

‘This might help confirm the formula. I should also check out a few elemental magic and teleportation spell formulas.’

How much time had passed? The crowd in the shop had thinned out somewhat. A woman who had just entered the shop and was looking around cautiously approached Asel.

“Um… Are you Asel?”

“……?”

Asel frowned slightly at the sudden call and turned to the side.

‘A beastkin?’

The woman, with cat ears sprouting from her head, was wearing the attire of the academy staff, and her long tail swayed nervously. She looked very timid. At the same time, she was a face he had never encountered before. Asel put a few scrolls he was holding into his pocket and asked her.

“Yes, that’s me. What can I do for you?”

“Ah…! My name is Plume. You’re Asel, Ena’s disciple, right?”

“Yes… Is there something you need?”

Asel replied, showing a slightly wary attitude.

The title of the Grand Mage’s disciple attracted attention for various reasons. While it had positive effects, the negative ones couldn’t be ignored either. He had experienced enough of that in Wiheim. The number of people who had tried to tear him down out of jealousy, envy, or inferiority was not small.

While they had kept their mouths shut when he stepped on them directly, he hadn’t done anything like that in Luminous yet. It wouldn’t be strange if someone came to him with ill intentions at any moment.

However, Plume seemed to have no such intentions, as she waved her hands in a flustered manner, seemingly taken aback by Asel’s demeanor.

“Oh, you don’t need to be so wary. I’m here to deliver a message from the Dean…”

“The Dean?”

Asel’s eyes widened in surprise.

There was only one person in Luminous who could be referred to as the Dean. The founder of the current academy and a living history book, the High Elf, Friede Ailak. She had sent a message to Asel.

‘Suddenly?’

This was unexpected for Asel. He hadn’t had any particular connection with Friede, nor had he done anything significant, so why a message? The only plausible explanation seemed to be related to the academy entrance exam, but even that was not something he could predict.

They probably hadn’t even finalized the exam scores yet, so it wouldn’t be about informing him of being first or second…

In the end, it was something he would only know by hearing it. Asel nodded with a slightly puzzled expression.

“What’s the content?”

“Ahem. I’ll relay it as is.”

Plume cleared her throat and took out a piece of paper from her pocket, beginning to read it.

“I’ll skip all the flowery language. Congratulations on your admission, and let’s work well together in the future. Now, to the main point.”

“......”

“I reported that you fainted to Wiheim, and the response I received was that Ena disappeared that day. No matter how I think about it, it seems she’s coming here, so please save me. I just turned 700 years old, and I don’t want to die yet. So if you hear this message, please come to the Dean’s office at the academy as soon as possible. If you’re with me, even Ena wouldn’t dare to act recklessly. I’ll give you whatever compensation you want, so right away—”

Boom!!

“Ahhh!?”

It was at that moment, as she continued speaking. A white lightning bolt suddenly struck from a clear sky. Startled, Plume dropped the paper.

“...Huh.”

Asel let out a hollow laugh as he saw the familiar silhouette that had landed on the academy rooftop beyond the window.

The sky of the academy had opened up.

# 28 - On the Flower of Lightning (3)

Having confirmed Ena's presence, there was no time to hesitate.

Asel immediately told Plume that he would go with her, and she, after composing herself from the initial surprise, began to move. Asel followed her.

The academy's main building was located in the center of the city. Since it was still vacation, not many students remained inside, but some who lived in the dormitories were still around. Female students sitting on benches, chatting quietly, tilted their heads, seeing Plume rushing by.

"Assistant Professor Plume? Where are you going in such a hurry? And do you know what that lightning just now was?"

"I'll tell you later!"

Plume brushed off their questions and hurried into the academy building. Assistant professors and assistants preparing for the semester greeted her, but she, instead of answering, made it clear she was busy and went up to the upper floors of the building. This left them looking embarrassed.

For Plume, it was unavoidable. She hadn't met Ena in person, but she had often heard rumors about her nature.

A monster who frequented demon subjugations and Labyrinth explorations, drastically increasing her magical power at the cost of morality and humanity. A cold-blooded person who didn't hesitate to kill and didn't give affection to anyone. A superhuman who prioritized violence over conversation.

The Dean always spoke of Ena that way, and Plume's perception of Ena naturally turned negative.

"No way...!"

Such a person and the Dean were in the same place. Friede was also a powerful mage, but not on a level to compete with Ena. She would be roasted and rolling on the floor before she could even do anything. That alone had to be prevented.

"Dean!"

Having reached the top floor, Plume didn't hesitate and burst into the Dean's office.

"Run away quickly! I'll take care of this... I?"

Plume shouted that, but trailed off, seeing the scene inside the Dean's office.

"...?"

The presence of an uninvited guest was as expected. A girl with a striking impression, wearing only a plain white shirt and black skirt, glanced at Plume while sipping tea. With her pure white hair and blue eyes, it was probably Ena. She was beautiful like a doll, but also had a cold expression like one.

Opposite her, the Dean sat in a demure posture, sweating profusely. She didn't seem to be injured, but her discomfort was bursting through her smiling face.

In the corner, Fernan was lying face down, his head buried in the floor.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a scene of power abuse. It wasn't a positive situation, but it was a much better sight than the murderous scene Plume had expected. However, it would take some time to accurately grasp the situation and come up with a way to overcome it.

"Who?"

Ena asked, interrupting Plume's thoughts. Plume's thoughts were forcibly cut off. She answered with a startled expression.

"Y-yes! I'm Plume! An assistant professor in the Magical Department and assisting the Dean!"

"Is that so?"

Ena replied with an indifferent attitude, placing the teacup she was holding on the table. Then, she spoke in a chilling voice to Fernan, who was trembling.

"If you tremble one more time, I'll shove lightning directly into your head."

At that, Fernan's trembling stopped as if it were a lie. He remained motionless in place, lying face down, then saw Asel's face, who had followed Plume in, and moved his lips. No sound was heard, but Asel could accurately read his lips.

[Save me.]

Asel's face frowned.

"Asel."

Following Fernan, Ena looked at Asel and opened her mouth. Asel turned to her.

"Master."

"Yeah. How have you been?"

"I've been fine. More importantly, what brings you here, Master...?"

He knew, but asked out of courtesy. Fortunately, Ena got up without any suspicion and answered.

"I heard you fainted? I came because I was worried."

"Worried? You were acting like you were going to execute me and Fernan until just now?"

Ena lightly ignored Friede's words and approached Asel.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Ah, I'm fine. There are no aftereffects."

"Mana exhaustion isn't something you can easily laugh off."

Ena dismissed Asel's jest and slowly began to touch his body.

She massaged his arms, sending Mana into his body, and scanned his entire upper body with her fingers. It was a procedure to check if the Core Reactor or his body was under any strain. Physical contact was essential to check the condition of another mage.

"..."

Asel knew, but he couldn't help but feel embarrassed by her touch. It would be one thing if it were just the two of them, but it was a bit awkward to do it in a place with so many eyes on them. Friede, for one, was looking at them with eyes as if she were seeing a ghost, and Plume was covering her mouth with both hands, her pupils trembling slightly.

"M-Master?"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"...Nothing. Please tell me when you're done checking."

Asel was about to say that it would be better to stop, but he saw Ena's pure eyes and gave up with a wry smile.

'She's checking with good intentions, so it would be embarrassing for Master if I told her to stop.'

In the end, the body check ended about ten minutes later. Ena nodded in satisfaction and took her hand off Asel's body. With a slightly flushed face, she said.

"You seem fine. Everything's okay."

"That's a relief."

"A real relief."

Friede said in a sincere voice. But Ena didn't care about her at all. Instead, she picked up a cookie and looked at Friede.

"Is it fun?"

"...No, why are you talking so scary..."

"Since Asel seems fine, I'll withdraw for today. But keep one thing in mind. If something like this happens again at the academy, it won't end well. Either you die, or the academy closes. Remember that."

"...Aren't you being too protective?"

"What?"

"She said she understood."

Friede smiled and said that. Ena clicked her tongue and got up from her seat.

"You get up too."

"Yes, ma'am."

Fernan jumped up. Seeing the clear red mark on his forehead, he must have been lying face down for quite some time. Asel looked at him with pity, then got up at the same time as Ena tapped his shoulder.

"Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

There was no time to answer. Ena and Asel instantly became a bolt of lightning and disappeared from the Dean's office. The recoil from that movement shook the inside of the Dean's office greatly, but Friede, regardless, sighed in relief and leaned back in her chair.

"I survived again today..."

"You're acting like you went to war."

Fernan muttered quietly, dusting off the dirt on his clothes. Friede said to him.

"Shut up. If you had just done it moderately, this wouldn't have happened in the first place. What kind of professor uses Mindscape Manifestation on a test participant? I clearly told you to do it only to the extent that you could adjust the test result rankings! You're completely out of your mind. You're getting a pay cut."

"What? Where's that in the rules! I just did as I was told! And if you're going to give me something, give me a suspension instead! So I can at least rest!"

"There are still too many places to use you. Let's do well for cheap for half a year."

"Old elves don't understand people's hearts!"

"I'm still young."

"Is 700 years old young? Then the young and bouncy elves are all newborns!"

"Wah."

"This is bullshit."

Plume shook her head, listening to the banter of the two people who were over 740 years old combined.

\*

Asel couldn't use magic to turn his body into lightning yet. But with Ena's assistance, things were different. If she cast the spell on Asel's behalf and Asel projected Mana, it was possible to manifest the magic, albeit with about half the power. It was a common proxy incantation among master and disciple mages who used the same type of magic.

Thanks to that, the road from the academy to Wiheim was very pleasant. There was no need to take a carriage or sleep outdoors. Instead, the speed was slower than when Ena moved alone, so it was necessary to stop by villages in between and spend the night in inns.

Today was the second day. The second night after leaving the academy. Asel rested his chin on the window of the inn and looked outside.

Schupen, a small town that wasn't quite a city, but maintained a cheap tourism business based on a large lake.

Perhaps because it was a famous tourist destination, many people were walking around in the short distance. Guards wearing chainmail armor were seen here and there, and merchants were setting up stalls and soliciting customers.

Perhaps because it was an expensive room, the entire town could be seen clearly from the room. Asel smiled faintly and quietly admired the night sky reflected in the lake. He quite liked environments where he could quietly indulge in his thoughts.

"I'm done washing."

As he was doing so, Ena came out, shaking her head, after being in the bathroom. She put on the shirt and pants she had roughly folded and used magic to remove all the moisture from her body. Then, she came to Asel's side and peeked her head out over the window.

"What were you looking at?"

"I was looking at the constellations reflected in the lake."

"Do you like constellations?"

"Yes. I quite like them. I sometimes look at them alone."

"Hmm... Is that so?"

Ena muttered, pursing her lips, then sat down right next to Asel.

"Then will you teach me? About constellations."

"Is that alright?"

"Yeah. It's something my disciple likes, so I should take an interest too."

Asel laughed at Ena's words and pointed to the sky with his finger. He wasn't an expert on constellations, so he didn't know much, but he could still explain it simply. What the name of the brightest star was, and which constellations shone the brightest at this time. Asel told her in a low voice next to Ena, smiling.

Just as the explanation was almost over, Ena carefully opened her mouth.

"Um... Asel."

"Yes?"

"Now that it's come to this, shall we go see them together outside?"

"Um... Isn't it a bit late to do that? We should go to bed soon to arrive early tomorrow."

The current time was 11 PM. To arrive in Wiheim before tomorrow evening, they had to go to bed by at least midnight. Ena wouldn't be unaware of that fact. Asel wondered why she had made such a suggestion.

"...Is that so?"

A slightly disappointed look mixed in Ena's expression. Asel found the answer in that expression.

The New Year's festival they had looked around together in Wiheim. It seemed that the memories of that time remained as good memories. So she wanted to act together when they could wander around without any worries, like now.

Asel also wanted that. It was good to go to Wiheim quickly, of course, but his memories with Ena were more important. Unless she had business in Wiheim, there was no need to rush. Asel thought so and grabbed Ena's hand as she was about to get up.

"Asel?"

She turned her head and looked at Asel's face. Asel smiled brightly and took her hand, getting up.

"But personally, I would like to walk with Master today, even if it's a little late. If it's alright with Master, I would like to look around the lake together, would that be okay?"

"...You noticed."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend you don't know."

Ena smiled bitterly and snapped her fingers with the hand that wasn't holding Asel's. Then, two robes hanging on the hanger landed accurately on her and Asel's shoulders. At the same time, Ena opened the open window even wider and threw herself towards the lake.

Crackle!!

Ena's body became a bolt of lightning and cut through the night sky. Since he was holding her hand, Asel also moved with her. The two people, who had instantly reached the lake, smiled at each other.

Access to the lake at night was restricted to outsiders. Thanks to that, there were only two people on the lake.

The lake surface, filled with moonlight and starlight, was a painting in itself. The cloudless night sky illuminated the ground, and the creatures in the lake wriggled, creating ripples on the surface. Asel and Ena slowly admired the scene and walked on the lake. It wasn't difficult to walk on water by laying a simple barrier under their feet to give them physical force.

The lake became brighter as they went towards the center. As if standing under stage lighting, the moonlight brightly illuminated the very center of the lake. The two stood in the center and gazed at the sky reflected on the surface.

"It's pretty."

Ena muttered. Asel smiled and turned to her.

"Master, do you remember what you said last time?"

"...? What?"

"When I asked if there were any pretty spells in Electromancy, you told me to make one myself since there weren't any."

"Ah, that. I remember. Why?"

Ena tilted her head and asked. Instead of answering, Asel brought his palm to the surface of the water and drew up Mana.

[Lightning Flower Resonance]

Crackle!!

The lightning that bloomed from Asel's grasp quickly raced in all directions. Instead of going down under the water, the lightning that went straight across the surface of the water condensed in one place each. Soon, it changed its appearance like a small flower. Ena's eyes widened at the sight.

"This is..."

"It still has no practicality, and it's just a spell that creates a flower of lightning that only electrocutes when touched. It takes a long time to cast, and there are many shortcomings to using it in battle. But..."

Asel trailed off and looked around.

The blooming flowers continuously scattered electricity and rotated. Then, when they met other flowers, they shone even brighter and disappeared. The electricity raced through the air like petals fluttering, and the entire lake was dyed in a bright blue light. Asel stood in the center of it and smiled brightly at Ena.

"Isn't it nice to look at?"

"...It is."

Ena muttered that and picked up one of the flowers rotating right below her. Perhaps because she was also an Electromancer, instead of being electrocuted, Ena watched the slowly blooming flower and continued.

"It's pretty. Very."

Ena smiled brightly and said. Asel also smiled back and looked at the lightning flowers floating on the water.

As time passed, it was already after sunrise when the two returned to the inn.

# 29 - Coming of Age Ceremony

Asel had returned to Wiheim, and several weeks had passed since then. During that time, he spent his hours researching by improving the magic he had stolen from the scrolls, using it directly, or even revising it into entirely different effects.

There were results. He had successfully created several spells that required continuous observation, like Brainwave Resonance. However, there was still much that was lacking for practical use. While it wasn't impossible to force them into use, there was no reason to use those spells instead of others that were already available.

‘Still, if I think of it as going through trial and error, it’s not so bad.’

Asel generated a small bolt of lightning above his hand and rested his chin on it. The elongated bolt traced various geometric patterns in the air according to his will. He glanced at two letters that were carelessly thrown on his desk, as if he were solving a cube.

One was from the academy. It contained information about the date of the entrance ceremony and which dormitory he had been assigned to.

Luminous Academy uniquely held its entrance ceremony in the form of a banquet. This was to allow not only the new students but also the current students to socialize and establish connections. It wasn’t a bad idea, but it was true that Asel, who preferred a more static atmosphere, felt a bit reluctant about it.

Still, he wasn’t the type to not enjoy such an occasion, so it didn’t bother him too much.

The problem was the attention and interest he would receive as Ena’s apprentice after his admission to the academy, but that was something time would resolve. Anyone who tried to provoke him could be dealt with thoroughly, and he could treat those who looked upon him favorably with kindness. Unless someone made the first move, there would be no reason for confrontation.

‘The dormitory is Weisel, huh.’

The academy dormitories were named after heroes who had greatly contributed to the empire. Weisel was where the top-performing students stayed. It seemed that his duel with Fernand had not been in vain.

“Hm.”

Asel leaned back in his chair and glanced at the other letter that remained unopened.

A letter sealed with a large Witch Council emblem. It was undoubtedly from the Witch Council. The content was related to his coming-of-age ceremony.

They would hold a party at the mansion to celebrate his coming of age. However, that was not an officially organized event; it was merely a simple banquet. The coming-of-age ceremony held by the Witch Council was separate.

This event took place just before spring every year. Last year, two wizards had their coming-of-age ceremonies, but this year, it would be only Asel. Since the number of young wizards in the Witch Council was not that large to begin with, it was only natural that there would be fewer protagonists for the event.

‘Is it just two days away?’

There wasn’t much time left before the event began. Although it was just a simple congratulatory banquet, he thought he should at least have something decent to wear. All the clothes he owned were high-quality, but there weren’t many that were neat enough for a party.

It seemed like a good idea to move right away. Asel threw on the coat he had carelessly tossed aside, told Hailey that he would be stepping out for a bit, and headed out into the street. He received a decent allowance from Ena every week, so he had no shortage of funds for buying clothes. He stopped by a store he frequented and bought a suitable outfit before returning.

The day of the coming-of-age ceremony dawned. The event would start in the afternoon, so he had quite a bit of free time in the morning. However, that didn’t mean he could roam around freely; he was caught by various maids in the banquet hall and had to endure having makeup applied to his face.

The maids employed by the Witch Council. Since they were in charge of the banquet, their duties were quite varied. Among them was the task of beautifying the event's protagonist. Perhaps because of that, their touch was very delicate and careful, as if they were handling a finely crafted jewel.

While he appreciated it, it was also uncomfortable for Asel. Having lived his whole life without putting anything on his face, suddenly having something smeared on felt suffocating, to the point where he could hardly breathe.

“Do we really have to go this far?”

“Of course! If the protagonist of the event shows up in their raw form, it’s like expressing that they don’t want to participate in the event with their whole body.”

With that said, Asel had no choice but to comply. He let out a deep sigh and waited patiently until the makeup was finished.

Fortunately, the maids released him after about an hour.

They couldn’t hide their admiration for the work they had created.

“Wow…”

“The base is good, so even a rough application looks great.”

Asel slightly bowed his head toward the maids who were moving their eyes as if critiquing his appearance, then exited the dressing room. The brightly shining corridor welcomed him, and Asel made his way toward his waiting room.

“Oh, it’s Asel.”

On his way, he encountered Bell, who had transformed into a cat. She was sitting by the window, purring, and upon sensing Asel’s presence, she opened one eye slightly. Asel nodded his head toward her.

“Hello.”

“Yeah, yeah. Since we met, come over and pet me.”

Bell raised her rear end as she spoke. Asel chuckled and gave her a light tap on the rear.

When she was in human form, she wrapped herself up tightly, but when she transformed into a cat or dog, she seemed to enjoy skipping around as if she were a different person. Was it because her senses changed, or did her way of thinking shift to that of an animal? He had never used the Transformation Formula, so he couldn’t tell.

“Purr…”

As Bell purred in delight as Asel scratched her head and rear, she relaxed completely.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was just sleeping. I need to conserve energy until the coming-of-age ceremony starts.”

“Can’t you just sleep in your room?”

“It feels better to sleep in the sunlight as a cat.”

After swatting Asel’s hand playfully, Bell stretched and spoke. She yawned and turned to Asel, smiling.

“By the way, Asel, have you seen Ena?”

“……? No, I haven’t seen her yet.”

It was a tradition for the master to attend the Witch Council’s coming-of-age ceremony alongside the apprentice. Therefore, Ena had also arrived early at the banquet hall to get her makeup done by the maids, just like Asel. While Asel had few things to apply and his short hair was easy to style, it was different for Ena. Being a woman, she needed more time for makeup, and her long hair required careful grooming.

Thus, it was only natural that she would take longer than Asel. Thanks to that, he hadn’t properly seen Ena’s face since arriving at the hall.

“I see…”

Bell chuckled at Asel’s response and jumped onto his shoulder. She whispered in his ear.

“Don’t fall for her when you see her. And definitely don’t look at her mole.”

“……Is that a sudden warning?”

“Just a piece of advice.”

Bell giggled as she hopped down to the floor. Asel stared at her with a bewildered expression as she meowed and walked away, then shook his head and entered the waiting room.

Inside the waiting room, there was a bed and a sofa of suitable size. They were probably prepared for him to take a short nap or read a book before the coming-of-age ceremony began. Since he wasn’t particularly tired, he plopped down on the sofa and checked the time.

10 AM. There were still about two hours left until the banquet started. Asel pondered what to do in that short time and decided to think about magic casually. To organize the results he had obtained from his recent research, he closed his eyes and recalled the formulas and Mana.

Several formulas he had stolen from the scroll shop. Among them, there were quite a few that he could use immediately, but Asel was not satisfied with that. He aimed to revise the stolen formulas and recreate them into Electrification or Flame Spells.

His top priority was to combine the attack magic-heavy Electrification Formula with a targeting formula to create a remote defense magic. However, this was an achievement that would require further study on the autonomy of magic and the distribution of Mana, so it was difficult to expect significant results immediately. Thus, he was still in the process of taking things step by step, separate from what he considered most important.

So, he began to research his second priority first. Among the formulas inscribed on the scrolls, there were those he had not yet used. Even though it wasn’t a unique magic, it was a type of magic that the Witch Council had not bothered with due to the peculiarities of its circuit.

“Ice.”

Crackling!!

As he uttered the word, an ice spear sprouted from his hand. The ice, dripping with coldness, spun around and scattered ice shards in the surroundings.

A sub-magic of the Freezing Formula.

Ice.

A spell that generates ice.

Asel succeeded in slightly adjusting the formula to shape it into a spear. He had gone beyond merely using the formula he had seen; he had revised it. If a Freezing Mage had seen this, they would have been so astonished they might have foamed at the mouth and rushed at him, but Asel’s face was filled with dissatisfaction.

‘The Freezing Formula accumulates coldness in the circuit every time magic is used.’

The Freezing Magic, created by transforming Water Flow Magic, had a characteristic that, unlike Water Flow Magic, which could simply be used, the circuit would freeze every time the formula was activated.

The more coldness accumulated, the more powerful the magic became, which was an advantage. However, the moment it exceeded a critical threshold, the circuit would freeze and shatter, usually resulting in instant death or, if lucky, leaving the user unable to use magic ever again.

Asel was no exception. He felt the slightly chilled circuit and body temperature as the magic was activated, and his lips curled in a grimace.

There was only one way to eliminate the coldness in the circuit. To spend time without using magic, allowing the coldness accumulated in the circuit to melt away naturally. There was no other way to deal with the coldness.

Asel had been contemplating this for several days.

The answer he arrived at was:

‘To simultaneously manifest fire attribute Mana and freezing attribute Mana to offset the coldness.’

By doing so, it would be possible to melt the coldness accumulated from using the Freezing Formula with the power of Flame Magic. Additionally, it would also become possible to manifest magic with contradictory properties, like cold fire or hot ice.

It wasn’t an easy task. Mixing Mana that stood at opposite extremes was risky. If he wasn’t careful, his body could explode. Given his current lack of knowledge on the subject, he hesitated to attempt it recklessly.

However, he had no intention of giving up. Asel believed in his talent and had no plans to abandon his thirst for knowledge about magic. With continued research and accumulated experience, it was a realm he would inevitably reach someday. That was why he was entering the academy. It was the only place where he could absorb all kinds of knowledge.

Just as Asel was thinking this, someone knocked on the waiting room door.

-Asel, can I come in?

It was Ena’s voice. Asel jumped up from his seat and opened the door for her.

“Master, you’ve come…”

He said in a delighted voice, but trailed off upon seeing Ena’s appearance.

Ena, who usually dressed in simple attire, was not in such a state today.

She wore a black dress that elegantly exposed her shoulders and upper chest, and her white hair was slightly tied back with a fancy hairpin. A brooch adorned her neck. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, as if embarrassed, and there was a black mole on her chest.

Ena had always been beautiful, but with her makeup done and her outfit and hair styled, even Asel, who was used to her appearance, couldn’t help but be speechless. At that moment, he suddenly recalled Bell’s warning not to look at her mole, and without realizing it, he glanced at Ena’s chest.

“……Your eyes are strange, Asel.”

Ena noticed that Asel’s gaze lingered on her chest a bit too long and covered her chest with her hand, speaking in a shy voice.