# 40 - First Assignment (4)

A series of events had made something clear.

Magical artifacts that outwardly emitted waves of Mana tended to be more flawed than expected. It wasn't a problem with the internal Formula or combination; it was simply due to the skill of the Sorcerer who created the Magical artifact.

No matter how amazing the Formula used to create a Magical artifact, it was only natural for there to be defects if the manufacturing process wasn't perfect.

Of course, to ordinary people, there might not seem to be any particular problem, but Asel, and others who were very sensitive to Mana, were reluctant to use such Magical artifacts.

Especially now that he realized it was possible to overload a Magical artifact with external interference.

There was no need to spend a lot of money to buy a Magical artifact in a precarious state.

So, Asel didn't pay much attention to the Magical artifacts as he walked around the store.

He had been quite interested in Magical artifacts made in the Magic Tower, but his interest cooled just as quickly.

Well, not all magicians affiliated with the Magic Tower could create excellent Magical artifacts.

They, too, had to go through trial and error and gain experience to create proper items, so it was only natural that there would be results of trial and error in a place like this.

From a general point of view, the byproducts formed in the process of creating flawless Magical artifacts were also great items. There was a reason why they were sold for a lot of money.

Still, there were a few items that caught his eye from time to time. The item Asel was currently examining was one of them.

A small, pocket watch-shaped Magical artifact. However, the hour hand could only point to eight times, and there were no minute or hour hands at all.

Since there was no residual Mana, he couldn't see it working, but Asel could discern the dormant Formula simply by focusing on and staring at the Magical artifact.

'High-level elemental magic. A Magical artifact with different high-level Formula Engraving at each time, and the magic that is activated changes depending on how much Mana is put in.'

It was a type of Magical artifact that could never be made without a thorough understanding of elemental magic. Asel raised his gaze slightly to check the origin of the Magical artifact.

[Made by Ruendel Magic Tower]

[Harmony of Elements]

Ruendel Magic Tower, huh. Asel recalled information about them and made a small humming sound.

Ruendel Magic Tower was a rather unique case among Magic Towers. It dealt with elemental magic, but instead of dividing them, it recognized them as one and the same magic, bringing together all kinds of elemental Sorcerers, a Magic Tower of diversity.

Thanks to this, the magicians affiliated with Ruendel Magic Tower, such as Flame Sorcerers and Water Stream Sorcerers, tended to get along harmoniously without separating.

This Magical artifact must also be one of the products created by such magicians working together.

'Different elements are not encroaching on each other's territory. The Sorcerers who assembled the Formula seem to have gentle personalities.'

It was obvious, but Asel didn't think that one person had made this Magical artifact. The nature of the Mana contained in each Formula was different.

In order for one person to make this, they would have to suffer from multiple personality disorder at the very least, and all of those personalities would have to be magicians capable of using high-level magic.

That didn't make any sense.

Asel chuckled and stood up, straightening his bent back.

Various elemental Formula swirled in his grasp and then scattered. He didn't just watch the interesting Magical artifact; he also disassembled and acquired the Formula contained within.

With this, he could use high-level Formula for elemental magic, which had been relatively weak except for Flame Magic. Since it was possible to handle the power without buying the Magical artifact, this place was like a warehouse of knowledge for Asel.

He turned his head and looked at Saya, who was carefully observing a Magical artifact. As he approached her, Saya opened her mouth without even looking at Asel.

"It's a Magical artifact containing tracking magic."

"……."

"A compass-shaped Magical artifact that automatically tells you the location of the owner if you inject someone's bodily fluid. It's not that expensive, but it's also more likely to break."

"Hmm."

Asel glanced at the price of the Magical artifact at Saya's words.

A compass smaller than the palm of his hand. The price was 15 gold coins. The absolute amount was quite expensive, but it was certainly relatively cheap for a Magical artifact, as she said. Asel put aside his thoughts on the price for the time being and carefully observed the compass.

Then, he blurted out the facts he had grasped intuitively.

"It's tracking magic, but if you think about it, it's a type of Blood Magic. However, if you use Blood Magic alone, the effect is weakened, so it's closer to a tool with other pure magic added. It's quite a complex combination? The creator seems to be a fairly high-level magician."

"……You can tell just by looking at it?"

Saya blinked and asked.

The first people to experience Asel's talent always showed such absurd reactions. It was a familiar occurrence, so Asel pointed to the compass without much emotion and asked.

"It's a useful item for hunting monsters, but it's not cost-effective. You're not going to spend that much money for the assignment, are you?"

"I'm going to spend it?"

Saya answered with a grin. Asel was speechless. Regardless, she called an employee, expressed her intention to buy the compass, and continued.

"As you said, it's a waste to use gold coins only for completing the assignment. But if I think of it as an investment, I don't feel so bad."

"……."

"Doppelganger blood sells for 10 gold coins for just one cup's worth. It's possible because there's a lot of demand but little supply. But if you catch one Doppelganger, you get at least dozens of cups of blood. It's difficult to collect all of it because of its unique toxicity, but you can still collect more than half of it. That's a whopping 50 gold coins."

"That's what you're investing in?"

"That's right. It's an item that will help with the assignment and will be helpful later. You won't lose much buying it here."

She seemed to sincerely believe that. Asel didn't bother to argue with her. She was going to buy it with her own money, so it would be nosy to say anything.

'If it helps with the assignment, anything is fine.'

He thought so and changed his mind.

The first assignment starts tomorrow. Asel planned to finish the gem polishing before then. He also had to take a closer look at the elemental Formula he had obtained from the Magical artifact store, and he had to finish the other tasks little by little.

As always, time flew by without a moment of boredom after becoming a formal magician. But he didn't hate it.

Asel chuckled for no reason and followed Saya, who was leaving the store. The two of them went around to various stores to buy the necessary items, had dinner, and then returned to their respective dormitories.

As soon as Asel entered his dormitory, he went straight to the laboratory and took out the gem he had thrown on the desk.

He was running out of time to finish the polishing before dawn, when he would leave to resolve the request.

Without looking back, he drew out Mana like a thread and began the polishing work.

"Hoo……."

Asel took a long breath and wiped the cold sweat that had formed on his forehead. He checked the clock on the desk and saw that the hour hand had already passed midnight.

The polishing work took much longer than expected. It was inevitable because he was trying to do something for the first time perfectly without anyone's help.

Fortunately, the result was good. Asel rolled the round gem between his fingers and wore a satisfied smile.

With this, he had finished everything he had to do before the first assignment. The rest could be continued after the Doppelganger hunt was over. There was no point in being impatient, so it seemed better to take it easy here.

Asel thought so and carefully wrapped the polished gem in a cloth and stored it in a drawer. He could just leave it there and take it out right before he left.

He went to the living room and immediately touched the Messenger bird. He put Mana into the metal body and put a strand of Ena's Mana-filled hair into the Messenger bird's mouth. Then, the eyes of the Messenger bird, which had been lying like a corpse, lit up and flapped its wings and stood up.

[Gurgle]

"Take care of it."

Asel put the folded letter into the Messenger bird's body, which opened with a clatter, and stroked its cold metal head.

Flap!!

The Messenger bird looked at him once and flew out through the open window.

The Messenger bird, which was moving with Asel's Mana as its power source, felt that its body was much lighter than usual and burst into laughter, drawing a spiral in the air.

[Gurgle gurgle gurgle!!]

Asel closed the window and stretched as soon as he could no longer hear the crying sound.

Knock knock.

At the same time, someone knocked on Asel's door. Asel's face tilted slightly to the side. He instinctively manifested a search magic to check who the owner of the knock was.

"Grace?"

A viscous and sharp unique energy. Asel approached the dormitory door as soon as he confirmed that it was her.

He didn't know why she had come, but seeing that she had come at this hour, it couldn't be a simple matter.

He had been thinking of having a sincere conversation with Grace. They hadn't known each other for very long, but sincere conversations didn't have a significant impact on the relationship. Rather, there were things you could say openly because you didn't know each other well.

However, he wondered if that time was in the early hours of the morning. Still, well, it meant that the other person was that urgent, so he could overlook it.

Asel thought so and opened the door wide. Then, he put on the most benevolent expression he could muster.

"What's wrong, Grace? Do you have something to say?"

The answer didn't come back right away.

Asel didn't say anything more. He stared at Grace, who was looking up at him with a dazed look, and frowned.

A strong smell of alcohol. Her disheveled bangs were in her lips, and her cheeks and face were flushed. The breath she exhaled was dripping with unmistakable intoxication.

She was obviously drunk. She was so drunk that if she was thrown on the street right now, someone could carry her away without her knowing. It wasn't even in her right mind to come to have a sincere conversation.

But Asel wasn't disappointed.

If she was a prosecutor of Grace's caliber, she could evaporate her intoxication whenever she wanted. If such a prosecutor deliberately left her intoxication behind…….

'Either it's something she can only say when she's drunk, or she's been driven to the brink mentally.'

Neither was a good sign. Asel approached her and asked in a worried voice.

"Grace, are you okay?"

"Glenn."

"……What?"

"Call me Glenn. Like before."

"……I've never done that."

Asel frowned as if he was saying something out of the blue. But Grace was adamant.

She pushed her body into Asel's wide-open arms. A faint smell of alcohol, a strong perfume, and a body odor filled Asel's nose. His body stiffened momentarily because of it.

Grace lightly kissed Asel's neck while he was flustered.

Smack.

A sticky saliva connected Asel's skin to Grace's lips.

"Puh, haah……."

It happened in an instant. Grace let out a panting breath. Asel, who had suppressed his soaring desires with extreme patience, frowned and spat out.

"You crazy bitch."

He couldn't stand it.

# 41 - The Regressor

Fortunately, Grace was subdued by Asel before she could make any more of a spectacle of herself.

A hangover cure spell and a sleep spell, both condensed with Mana. Thanks to the appropriate combination of these two spells, Grace woke up after a short nap, blinking with clear eyes.

She had definitely downed more than five bottles of cider like a madwoman, but her head was not dizzy at all; it was clear. In fact, she felt even more lucid than before she drank.

'This is Asel's room.'

She could quickly figure it out from the scent that filled the room. Grace brought the blanket she was covering herself with to her face and sniffed. As she did so, her mind began to calm down. Her eyes drooped, and her lips twitched.

"..."

She remembered the disgraceful behavior she had exhibited while drunk. The five bottles of cider she had drunk after returning to the dormitory. She had been drinking while reminiscing about the past, and before she knew it, it was past midnight. A time when the stars twinkled in the sky, and the moon shyly hid behind the clouds.

It was the perfect time to indulge in sentimentality. So, after clearing away all the bottles, Grace looked out the window and reminisced about the past in her drunken state. Remembering in a slightly dizzy state was clearer than remembering sober.

It was during one of those moments of reminiscing about the past that she had found herself in Asel's room.

To be honest, Grace's past was not happy or harmonious.

She had failed in her family, struggled at the bottom of the academy, and graduated with only the nanny who raised her as a friend. Nevertheless, she worked hard, wanting her family's recognition and love, and barely managed to master all of the Bloodline Inheritance swordsmanship.

But it was all in vain.

It was because her family had been destroyed. No, to be exact, the empire itself had been destroyed. One day, a plague demon suddenly descended and waved its hand, melting away most of the nobles, including the imperial family. After that, the plague spread, and lawless zones expanded within the country, and the empire was destroyed in an instant.

All the survivors defected to other countries.

Grace was no exception. She lived day by day as a mercenary in the Kingdom of Kidwin, a country ruled by corrupt royalty.

Fortunately, the swordsmanship she had honed through hard work kept her head attached to her body for a long time. As time passed, her reputation grew, and she received the recognition she had so desperately wanted from people other than her family.

It didn't move her. Everything bothered her. So Grace didn't team up with anyone. When a request was over, she would lock herself in her lodgings and not come out.

She just repeated the cycle of killing, getting paid, drinking, and sleeping.

It was one day, while living such a life, that she met Asel, the famous mage hunter and spell hater.

"You're awake?"

"......!"

Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice. Grace was startled and hurriedly lowered the blanket she had been holding to her nose. Asel, who had entered the room with a glass of cold water, chuckled at the sight.

"......What are you doing?"

"Ah, no, it's just that... that's..."

It was a strange sight to anyone. Even a monk would suspect the intentions of someone who smelled the blanket someone else was sleeping under while making a sentimental expression. So, rather than making excuses and receiving strange looks, she attempted a frontal breakthrough.

"It makes me feel good to smell it! It makes me feel comfortable!"

She regretted it as soon as she said it. Grace's face turned bright red in the blink of an eye, and she completely covered her face with both hands. At the same time, she twisted her upper body back and forth. She was writhing in embarrassment.

Asel muttered as he watched her.

"......Is she still drunk? No, the spell worked fine."

He had never failed a spell since becoming a mage. But the spell had failed in this situation? That was impossible. He had even confirmed that the spell had worked properly.

Then, what did Grace's reaction mean?

"......"

Not wanting to think about it, Asel levitated Grace's body, which was twisting and turning as if she was about to kick the blanket off.

"......Heup."

Grace dangled in the air. She desperately avoided Asel's gaze, looking upset, as if she was embarrassed. But she didn't resist the magic. She just waited quietly for her emotions to subside. Asel also waited for her, reading a book he had casually left open.

About five minutes passed. Grace opened her mouth quietly.

"Um... Asel...?"

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah... I think you can put me down now..."

Her voice was much clearer than before. Asel closed the book, nodded, and put Grace down on the floor. She casually dusted off the pajamas she was wearing and glanced at Asel.

"So."

Asel stared straight at Grace and opened his mouth.

"Why did you suddenly come? And why did you drink so much?"

"......Just. Something bad happened."

"Is it something related to Saya?"

"......A story that was related. It's all in the past now. She doesn't know anything about it, but I remember it clearly."

"I didn't start this conversation to have a philosophical debate."

Asel said that and sighed deeply. Grace's shoulders shrank.

He knew that she had something she couldn't tell him. He could tell from her reactions and behavior.

However, he had no idea how big the lump in her heart was because of it. He could only vaguely sense that it was so big that he couldn't even describe it.

'If I just let her go like this, this will happen again.'

That was definitely not good for Asel himself or for Grace. He had to relieve her inner demons, even if only a little, right now for the sake of the future.

He had managed to get rid of some of it through the conversation in the tent, but it was only a slight amount. She may have looked fine on the outside for the past few days, but she must have been rotting on the inside.

"When we first met."

Asel said, and stared at Grace, who was standing stiffly. The same colored eyes collided in the air.

"You definitely seemed to know me. You already knew my name."

"......"

"But that was the first day I saw your face. It was a bizarre situation where a stranger suddenly came up to me and asked if I knew her."

"......I'm sorry. I didn't think it through."

"No, it's not that you didn't think it through. There must have been a reason why you had to act that way, a reason why I had to know you. And the second meeting."

As the story continued, Grace's expression twisted strangely. On the other hand, Asel felt as if a puzzle was being put together in his head.

"You called me a 'mercenary.' And you said I used a sword. But I've never held a sword in my life. Swordsmanship? I've never seen even the basics or third-rate swordsmanship, and I have no intention of learning it."

"......"

"I brushed it off lightly at the time. To be honest, I thought of you as a talented mental patient. It's not that rare for the minds of those who have shown promise at a young age to go crazy. But you're mentally sound. You don't seem to have delusions or schizophrenia. So what is it? What was the intention behind saying those things?"

He pulls out and confirms one by one the facts that he had buried in his memory because they seemed to have no particular meaning.

Just by recalling them, the situation and the feelings he felt at the time, and the other person's actions are as vivid as if they had happened just yesterday.

Asel continued, recalling Grace's appearance as she covered herself with a blanket and swallowed her tears.

"Why were you crying then?"

"......"

"What is the cause, the reason, for everything you said and did? What is the identity of the thought that is gnawing at you?"

"......If I tell you."

Grace, who had been silent until now, muttered in a low voice at Asel's question.

"Will you believe me?"

"Maybe I won't be able to believe you."

"......"

"But whether I believe you or not, that's a decision I'll make after hearing the answer. I don't think it's a concern for you to be agonizing over alone."

"......"

No answer came back. Grace bit her lip tightly and clenched her fists as if she was worried. Her eyes shook back and forth, and her mouth opened and closed repeatedly. The psychology of wanting to speak but not being able to speak collided and confused her mind.

Just how much hardship was she going through to be so worried? Asel was curious, but he waited quietly for Grace to open her mouth first. There would be no proper answer if he urged her now.

So time continues to pass. But the situation remained the same. Asel stares at Grace with a calm gaze, and Grace swallows hard, unable to hide the confusion in her mind.

After a long time.

Grace cautiously made a sound.

"......I have a condition."

"What condition?"

"Instead of just telling you, a condition that I want Asel to listen to."

It was sudden, but Asel nodded obediently because Grace's expression was so pitiful.

"Tell me."

"Don't think of me as a weird person."

"......"

"Don't avoid me. Even if you despise me, hate me, and loathe me, just let me watch you from nearby."

"......Grace."

"Me... me..."

Love me like you used to.

Those words could not come out of her mouth. It was too much of a burden for Asel. Asel was a very big presence for Grace, but Grace was not that big of a presence for Asel.

In the end, Grace forcibly swallowed the sentence she was about to say at the end. She smiled bitterly and continued.

"Forgive me. I'll try."

"......Is that all?"

"Yeah. That's all."

She nodded and answered. Asel replied without a moment's hesitation.

"I'll accept it."

"......Really?"

"It's not a difficult request. So, what is the burden on your heart?"

Asel asked.

"......I remember them, but they don't know me."

Grace sat on the bed and spoke in a quiet voice.

"The people I fought with, the people I became friends with by sharing each other's pasts. None of the bonds we built remained, and only emptiness filled the space. Why was it me? Why did it have to be me?"

".......”

"The wedding with the person I vowed to love for the rest of my life, the sweet conversations we had, the laughter we shared while deciding on the name to give our child when it was born. Now it's all gone. No matter how hard I try, no matter how hard I struggle, it's a past that will never come back."

"......"

"It was good that the deaths of the people I loved and cherished were gone, but the fact that they don't remember me at all... it's been quite hard to bear. To be honest, I just wanted to let go and collapse. But I couldn't."

Asel listened to Grace's story in silence. Then, the puzzle pieces in his head quickly came together and began to show one picture.

Time, past, memory.

Three words with deep connections. And the contents of Grace's story.

When these were properly combined, one word was created in Asel's brain.

His eyes widened.

"Wait, Grace, you..."

"The person I loved left me a message before he died."

"......"

"Please take care of the next world. I'm at the end here, but I hope that the branch you're drifting on will have an ending where you and I can be happy."

Tears welled up slightly in Grace's eyes.

"May our love be eternal there too."

"......"

"Asel, I am..."

Grace trailed off and recalled the image of the man dying with his lower body gone. She recalled the words he had uttered in a dying voice for quite a long time thanks to the demon's grace.

-Please pretend to know me when you see me again. Maybe I'll remember you. Even if I don't, don't be too disappointed or sad. I don't want to see you cry. You look best when you're smiling.

"I am..."

-And if I don't remember you, don't say anything rash about what you're going to go through from now on. Never, until I'm sure I believe you. But if you have to say it due to unavoidable circumstances... say this.

"I'm actually a regressor. We were married in the previous timeline."

A tear ran down Grace's cheek.

"And... I'm the person who loved you, loves you, and will love you for the rest of my life."

I hope you don't forget this time.

A word from the author (Author's Note)

There is no heroine distribution. I'm leaving this here just in case.

# 42 - The Price

Regression.

Asel knew that word very well.

One of the extreme time-based magics. A rebellious technique that reverses the timeline of the world, returning everything to the past. Therefore, it was unpermitted, a divine miracle existing only in theory. It was a realm that even the time wizards of the past had not reached.

Grace was saying that she had directly experienced such a miracle.

Some deny the possibility of regression itself. They don't believe that such an absurd thing could happen. It was even harder to believe if the person claiming regression was a swordsman, not a transcendent or a high-ranking wizard.

But Asel didn't dismiss her words.

An absurd story. A meaningless sound not even worth listening to. A secret that no one could understand, a secret that had to be kept alone.

Asel already had one such secret.

'I, who have memories of a past life, can't just deny regression outright.'

So, instead of worrying about the possibility of regression, he first thought about the connection between regression and Grace's actions.

Acknowledging him at their first meeting. Talking about mercenaries and swords at their second meeting. And calling Saya a Cursed fox. All of these could be understood if they were based on her experiences in the previous iteration. It meant that her words weren't sudden, without any background or basis.

However, all of these required the background explanation that she was a 'regressor'. Anyone who didn't know would only hear the ramblings of a madman.

Even Asel himself had seen her as mentally ill until she revealed that she was a regressor.

"……."

A secret that cannot be revealed to others.

A fact known only to oneself can become a dagger, but sometimes it becomes a curse that gnaws at oneself. Just by looking at Grace's unstable appearance, it was clear which way the secret of regression had worked for her.

Regression and past lives were both topics that could easily be dismissed as mental illness if blurted out. However, in the case of a past life, it was a story of another world that wasn't directly related to the present, so there was no need to tell others about it.

Maybe use it as a joke sometimes. There was no reason to reveal that you were a reincarnator while showing off knowledge from another world, except in specific cases.

On the other hand, regression was deeply related to the present. The past events that Grace had experienced had all become present events, and she had to run around like crazy to prevent the same tragedy from happening.

In the process, she couldn't ask for anyone's understanding, nor could she shake off the resentment that had built up inside. She could only silently prepare for the coming end.

It was easy to know which one would have a more profound impact on the mind without even thinking about it. Asel let out a groan and stared at Grace.

"Hoo... Haa...."

Grace was looking down at the floor, breathing heavily. She was trembling with anxiety, revealing that she was a regressor, and fearing that she might receive Asel's disbelief or contempt. Asel's brief silence as he tried to organize his thoughts was the cause.

So, as soon as Asel had sorted out his thoughts to some extent, he immediately opened his mouth.

"Grace."

"……! Y, yes."

Grace quickly raised her head and met Asel's gaze.

Their reflections were visible in each other's pupils.

Grace tried her best not to avoid Asel's eyes, but she couldn't stop her head from turning to the side.

If he said something that denied her, she probably wouldn't be able to look him straight in the eye. And she would probably live like that for the rest of her life.

It was the worst possible ending. But if that was Asel's choice... she was willing to accept it humbly.

But the terrible words that Grace had imagined didn't come out of Asel's mouth. Instead, he gave a slight smile and casually blurted out in a soft voice.

"You've worked hard."

"……Huh?"

"I don't know how long it's been since you regressed, but it wouldn't have been easy from then until now. You've been through a lot."

"……You believe me?"

Grace asked with wide eyes. Asel smiled and nodded.

"There's no reason not to believe you. And I also... have a similar secret."

"That you're a reincarnator?"

"……How did you know?"

"You told me. In the previous iteration."

"……."

They were married, so he told her even that. Asel scratched his head for no reason and sat down next to Grace. Grace's body flinched, but she didn't avoid him.

In any case, what was important right now was the story about Grace's regression. It seemed better to talk about the past life later.

Asel thought so and opened his mouth.

"Anyway, I believe you. Don't worry too much."

"……Thank you. Thank you so much."

At the same time as her reply, Grace began to shed tears. It was a natural reaction that occurred as the tension and anxiety she had been holding in gradually melted away. Asel patted her shoulder and waited for Grace to calm down.

The wait lasted quite a while because she started sobbing again just when he thought she had stopped. But Asel didn't show any signs of displeasure and killed time by thinking about this and that in his mind.

How long had it been? Grace, who had been sniffling, turned her head towards Asel and said in a tearful voice.

"……I, I'm okay now. I've calmed down. And... I'll say it again. Thank you for believing in me."

"Yeah."

Asel chuckled and took his hand off her shoulder. Then Grace twitched her eyes as if she was disappointed. It had happened before, but this time Asel was able to figure out exactly where her reaction was coming from.

The person she had married before regressing. Now, in a situation where he didn't remember her and it was impossible to act like before, it was perhaps natural that she liked even a little bit of skinship.

Perhaps she was somehow suppressing her desires and needs on a regular basis.

The fact that she had kissed his neck when she was drunk must have been because these desires were suppressed and eventually backfired.

He could understand. Even Asel would feel his heart ache if Ena didn't remember him and acted hostile or like she was looking at a stranger. Grace was experiencing that imagination in reality.

He knew well enough how painful it was without even having to guess.

However, apart from understanding, he couldn't act the way she wanted him to.

'Anyway, I'm not the me she knew.'

It was unfortunate, but that was the reality. It would have been different if they had regressed together with their memories. The current Asel had to live his own life. He didn't want to be stuck in the memories of a regressor, being neither one thing nor the other.

"How did you end up regressing?"

Asel asked. Grace was silent for a moment before answering.

"I don't know. I was fighting a demon, and you died first. I was left behind, struggling, and then my head was cut off. When I came to, I was at home. I woke up in the already devastated Baidel mansion in the Empire."

"Wait a minute."

Asel's eyes widened at the sudden, absurd content. He looked at Grace and continued speaking with a serious expression.

"The Empire is devastated? It's going to be destroyed?"

"……Yeah. A plague demon descends, and 40% of the Empire's population dies from the disease. It's not just the Empire. The entire continent suffers from the plague, and the overall population decreases drastically. The land is all rotten."

"……Huh."

Asel let out a hollow laugh.

The current era was an era of peace that had come for the first time after the tribal wars and the Anti-Demon Holy War. It had been decades since a war had broken out between countries, and even the different races were living in harmony without invading each other's territories.

Demon worshippers, or the group of criminals called Virsia, occasionally caused chaos, but they weren't as loud as they used to be. There were no signs of a great upheaval that would engulf the entire continent.

But suddenly, a plague demon descends and turns the continent upside down. The powerful Empire collapses in an instant, the entire continent becomes corrupted land, and the population is cut in half.

Was this even possible?

"Is that reliable information?"

"It's not information. I experienced it."

"……."

"Originally, it happens after graduating from the Academy, but in this iteration, the demon worshippers started acting earlier than that. Maybe... things could happen before graduation."

"Damn it."

Asel already knew that the demon worshippers had started acting. Even Ena hadn't been summoned by the Alliance because they were rampant near Wiheim.

He hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, but after hearing Grace's words, various possibilities began to pop up in his head. Asel frowned, worrying about Ena's safety.

"……Can it be stopped?"

"……There are prodromal symptoms. If livestock suddenly die of disease in a village, or if an entire village suffers from a plague, it means that the descent has been partially completed, even if it's not complete."

"We have to aim for that time?"

"Yeah. It's impossible to stop the descent. You have to kill it when it appears incompletely like that."

"The Holy Kingdom will have to help."

Asel said.

Since ancient times, demon subjugation wars have been carried out under the leadership of the Holy Kingdom. Their unique divine power is effective against demons. But conversely, the demons' Mana also acts as a deadly poison to the priests, so they needed external manpower to weaken the demons' power.

"What about the other demons besides the plague demon?"

"The plague starts it off, and they keep pouring in. The last two to appear among them."

"……."

"Benevolence and Possibility."

Possibility.

The moment Asel heard that word, he felt his heart flutter. It was a feeling of hearing something he shouldn't have heard. It was a feeling that his instincts were shouting that he shouldn't get involved with that. He frowned and covered his heart with his hand.

"Unlike Benevolence, who killed almost all of the remaining survivors, Possibility didn't commit any separate massacres. Instead, it went around the continent doing some kind of work... Asel? Are you okay?!"

Grace was continuing her story when she noticed Asel holding his heart and hurriedly asked. Asel immediately nodded.

"I'm okay. It doesn't hurt. It's just... something's strange."

"What's strange?"

"……I don't know either."

It wasn't a lie.

Unlike his instincts, which were going crazy, his reason was calm. There were no abnormalities in his body or mind, and the flow of Mana was all normal.

Then, what the hell was that?

"……."

He thought about it, but no answer came. It would be a vague fear of demons, but his body only reacted to the word 'Possibility'. He didn't feel anything for the other demons.

Even when he thought about the demon of Possibility, his body, which had already reacted once, no longer felt any sensation to that word. It was like waking up from a nightmare.

'……I need to investigate.'

Asel thought so and removed his hand.

He put aside his thoughts for now. It was right to focus on the conversation with Grace right now.

"To change the subject, anyway, the plague demon is the beginning of everything."

"…….That's right. But there's not much we can do specifically. Other than subjugating demon worshippers or ruining rituals."

"In the end, we have to wait until the prodromal symptoms appear."

"Yeah. B, but there are many things that are different between the iteration I experienced and the current iteration, so maybe the plague demon won't appear. There was no terrorist attack that was supposed to be at the entrance ceremony either."

"Those things always come back in the worst possible form."

"……."

She was trying to reassure him a little, but she was hit right on the spot. Grace pouted and lowered her upper body.

Asel chuckled as he looked at her.

They had been having a serious conversation until just now, but in the end, the conclusion was that there was nothing special to do but wait.

If something different from Grace's memory appeared as time went on, they might be able to move, but not yet. It was right to live as usual until the prodromal symptoms appeared on the continent.

Of course, they couldn't just not prepare at all. They had to live their daily lives while preparing a little.

However, since there was nothing they could do right now anyway, Asel opened his mouth in a slightly brighter voice to lighten the heavy atmosphere a little.

"Well, anyway, it's just going to give us a headache if we worry about it right now. I think it's better to focus on our Academy life while preparing."

"……Is that so?"

"Becoming stronger is the top priority. Grand Wizard. I need to get there quickly."

Asel said so and smiled, then tilted his head slightly at a fact that suddenly came to mind.

"By the way, Grace. You said I used a sword in the previous iteration, right?"

"Yeah. You were the same as me. Moreover, you not only copied the swordsmanship you saw almost exactly, but you were also famous as a wizard hunter for cutting or twisting the Mana of wizards."

"Hmm... Do you have a sword?"

"It's in the dormitory. Should I bring it?"

Grace asked with a faint smile on her face. Asel chuckled and nodded.

A little later, Grace returned with a sword from the dormitory. Asel immediately drew the sword and began to swing it with as much concentration as possible.

He slashed down from above, then slashed up diagonally.

Asel's muscles trembled just from that. Asel glanced at Grace and secretly activated Mana Enhancement magic. Then he continued to swing the sword.

As time passed, Grace's face, which had been full of anticipation, began to crumple.

The sword path was a mess. The blade was shaking unstably, and the tip of the sword was vibrating slightly. It meant that he wasn't holding it properly.

The swinging was also clumsy, and it seemed like he was copying something, but she couldn't even guess what it was. If the room had been small, the walls or the bed would have been cut off long ago.

"……Asel."

Eventually, Grace opened her mouth first. She looked at Asel, who was wiping away his cold sweat, and closed her eyes tightly.

"Let's not learn the sword. You have no talent."

"No, you said I used a sword in the previous iteration. Isn't this good?"

"Not at all. Let's just keep using magic."

Grace's voice was so firm that Asel had no choice but to nod with a sullen expression. He put the sword he was holding into its scabbard and handed it to Grace.

"I should have known from the moment you, who couldn't use magic at all, became a wizard."

"You couldn't use magic at all?"

Asel asked as he sat down next to Grace.

He couldn't even imagine himself not being able to use magic.

"You were good at capturing and cutting off Mana, but you couldn't use magic. You tried to learn it, but you quickly gave up."

"That friend Asel. Is that me? It doesn't seem like it at all."

"It's the same person. That's for sure."

Grace said so and then made a playful expression and said.

"Or should I tell you our nickname? Then you'll know for sure."

"……Glen?"

"Ugh……! ……Cough, cough. Not that. The name I used to call you."

"Even if you tell me, I won't know."

"No, you'll know. It's your name from your past life."

"……What?"

The moment Asel's eyes widened and he asked again, Grace opened her mouth first.

"Si Hyuk."

"……."

"Right? Oppa Lee Si Hyuk? You told me."

Grace smiled brightly and said so, but Asel's mind was not focused on her.

His name from his past life.

Asel didn't know it.

The lost content in his memories of his past life included his name and age. Thanks to that, today was the first time Asel had heard his name from his past life.

Then why, before regressing, did he know his name from his past life, but now he doesn't? Grace called him Oppa, so it meant that she knew his age too, but why doesn't he even know his age now?

What's the difference? What turning point was there?

"……."

Questions spiral endlessly, each one leading to another. My head throbs, and my chest feels tight. Yet, I do not stop thinking. I struggle to hold onto the questions that arise, repeatedly asking and answering myself.

Eventually, I reached a conclusion.

“……ha.”

Grace's regression. Or something equivalent to it.

And the memories of a past life that have mostly faded away.

What these signify is singular.

‘The price.’

The price to send Grace back to the past, or somewhere else. It is the memory of an existence called ‘Shihyuk.’

The moment Asel realized this.

Thud!!

A sound like tree roots rapidly growing echoed in my mind, and at the same time, I felt someone's gaze upon me.

But it vanished almost immediately. There was no time to confirm.

I hurriedly turned my head, but all I saw was the empty corner of the room.

“…….”

Asel's eyes grew cold.

A word from the author (Author's note)

I failed to manage the length.

Please be lenient.....!

# 43 - The Nameless Village

Loss of memory.

A regression achieved at the cost of the memories and soul of a being known as 'Shihyuk,' who lived a past life, or a transfer of a corresponding level.

Who could have performed such a miracle? One thing was certain: it was not a simple miracle that a knight, who could not use magic, could accomplish. Even if hundreds or thousands of magical artifacts were used, reversing time was impossible unless one was a transcendent being with Authority.

"Then who on earth..."

Asel thought quietly while gazing out at the rapidly changing scenery outside the window.

Currently, there was no sorcerer capable of handling the formula that manipulates time. The very concept of time was a power not permitted to mortals. Even high-level magic, at best, could only accelerate or decelerate time when manifested.

The power to interfere with the world was only theoretical extreme magic. Even that had some records lost.

Even if the formulas existed intact, there was no way mortals could use such magic. This was not a matter of talent or ability.

It was a matter of 'permission.' A brief manipulation of time might be possible, but magic that affects the very timeline itself was not permitted to mortals.

Then, could transcendent beings who surpassed the limits of their kind, such as demons or gods, manipulate time at will?

"......"

Asel briefly entertained that assumption before shaking his head.

If that were the case, the timeline would have already been in chaos long ago. Neither gods nor demons would have refrained from manipulating time to their advantage. They too must have paid some price to handle the concept of time.

And someone must have taken a person's memory and soul as that price.

...Could it really be so?

"......Sel."

It was a miracle that reversed the entire world. The price being merely one person's soul was absurd. The scales did not balance.

There was surely something more. Perhaps an additional price was paid, or it was not a miracle that manipulated time at all.

Either way, it was equally unclear. Asel let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes.

"Asel!"

At that moment, someone called his name from across the way. Asel opened his eyes slightly and glanced at the owner of the voice.

Warren, with a spirit resting on his lap, was staring at Asel with a frown.

"Are you listening? You seem to be somewhere else since earlier."

"......I was just thinking for a moment. Sorry."

"Is it something serious?"

"It's a personal matter. I'll focus from now on."

"Got it. Then I'll continue explaining."

Warren said this and took out a piece of paper from the small table set in the center.

Inside the carriage heading to the village where the incident occurred for the first assignment. It was one of the finest carriages used by the trading company operated by Saya.

The paper spread out on the table showed no signs of shaking, proving its status. Even while traveling on a rough stone road, the seats and the interior of the carriage remained eerily calm.

However, Asel's vision wavered slightly from fatigue. It was only natural to be tired after having talked with Grace all night, especially since they had set off at dawn.

Although he was suppressing his fatigue with an awakening potion and magic, the accumulated exhaustion from several days was unavoidable. He rubbed his drooping eyelids with his hand and glared at the paper with a black figure drawn on it.

"Did you draw this?"

Quill asked. Warren nodded with an expressionless face.

"This is the appearance of a doppelganger when it does not mimic another life form."

Asel let out a low sound as he listened to his words.

The drawing on the paper was predominantly black. Only the eyes shone red, and there were no nose or ears.

Instead, the mouth was attached to the belly. Red paint, resembling blood, was smeared around the mouth, and the long, protruding tip of the tongue was slightly curved, resembling a hook.

"Ugh, that's gross."

Whether it was intentionally drawn this way or not, it was honestly not a pleasant picture. Quill's disgust was somewhat understandable.

Warren continued without paying any attention to Quill's reaction.

"I assume everyone has already looked up information about doppelgangers, but since we're all gathered here, let me explain once more. A doppelganger fundamentally lacks all senses except for sight and taste. The same goes for touch. However, it does have the sense of pain."

"......"

"However, the degree of pain felt is mild, so it does not show extreme reactions. Its teeth are sharp, and the hook-like tongue is used to catch or break its prey. Its main diet consists of living beings like animals or humans."

For Asel, who had not researched doppelgangers in detail due to personal reasons, Warren's explanation was quite enlightening.

He squinted his eyes and listened closely to his voice.

"Interestingly, if a doppelganger survives for over a hundred years and takes on the appearance of a sorcerer, it can even use magic."

"......What?"

"There are already documented cases. A sorceress who devoured people. When they hunted her down, it turned out she was actually a doppelganger, as recorded in the Raymond Magic Tower."

"......That's not exactly good news."

Saya said with a slight frown. Her gaze briefly turned toward Asel.

Asel noticed her concern and smiled wryly.

Even if it were a doppelganger, it could not mimic a spirit sorcerer. Without a contracted spirit, it would not be able to use spirit magic at all. Thus, there was no need to worry too much about a doppelganger transforming into Warren's appearance.

However, it was different for Asel. If a doppelganger transformed into Asel's appearance and used magic, the situation would become somewhat serious. It wouldn't be impossible for the four of them to hunt it down, but it would certainly be a hassle. Saya was worried that such a thing might happen.

Still, there was no need for excessive concern. Asel's main magic, the Electrification Art, could not be used by a doppelganger, no matter what.

Moreover, Asel knew all the countermeasures for the magic he used. He would never lose against a sorcerer using the same magic.

"By the way, where are we now?"

Asel asked, receiving the gazes of the three. Saya glanced out the window and answered.

"We still have two more days to travel. It's quite a distant area."

"Outside the Empire?"

"Not quite, but it's on the outskirts. It's a nameless village."

A nameless village. Asel couldn't help but recall his hometown and closed his eyes.

If they were still far from arriving, there was no reason to force himself to stay awake while suppressing his fatigue. Asel informed his companions that he would take a short nap, then activated a sleep spell on himself.

Before long, his breathing became even.

On the fourth day of riding in the carriage.

The group arrived at the foothills of the mountain described in the request. They got off the carriage, gathered their belongings, and Asel used telekinesis to lift all the food and water into the air.

The coachman was planning to stay in the nearest city to the village with the carriage and return when the time was right. He gave the group a brief farewell and slowly drove away. Saya watched his retreating figure before turning her head.

Despite it being daytime, the mountain felt dark for some reason as she swayed her tail from side to side.

The village was located somewhere in that mountain. Although something indicating the village was drawn on the request, it was unrecognizable, so they ultimately had to search for the village's location themselves.

Fortunately, there were only two sorcerers among the group, so they did not have difficulty in the search.

Asel activated a search spell to find the exact location of the village, while Warren used spirit magic to clear the path.

Warren took the lead. He summoned spirits to create or carve out the shortest route to the village. Asel walked right behind him, observing the spirit magic Warren was using.

'It's more powerful than I expected.'

Spirit magic was known for its low mana consumption. However, its power was only formidable, unlike mana. Considering that the spirits Warren was handling were low-level, the results were quite impressive.

Mimicking it... seemed possible. However, since it was spirit magic used without a spirit, the sorcerer had to bear the mana of both the sorcerer and the spirit, resulting in much greater mana consumption.

In that case, there was no reason to use spirit magic. It would be better to use earth-elemental magic instead.

Asel was not uninterested in spirit magic, but he had no plans to contract with a spirit at the moment. He would consider it if the opportunity arose, but he had no intention of running around looking for spirits. Spending that time researching other magic would be more beneficial for his achievements.

"Wait."

While lost in thought, Warren suddenly stopped the group. Quill, who was walking at the back, leaned forward and asked.

"What is it? Why?"

"There are bandits gathered ahead."

"Bandits? Are you sure?"

"The scent of blood mixed with their presence is spreading from the ground they stand on. And my spirit almost hates them. Considering that spirits generally like good people and hate evil ones, it's obvious. I'm certain."

"Then we can just push through, right?"

Quill said, resting his spear on his shoulder. Warren frowned as he turned to him.

"I know that too. But we have to follow the leader's opinion, so I stopped."

"Oh, thank you. I appreciate that thought."

Saya had no intention of asserting her authority as the leader, but she saw no reason to miss this opportunity. She briefly stepped out of line and stared at the bandits huddled together.

There were not a few of them. However, they would not lose just because they fought. Saya alone could handle them all, as they were a low-tier group of thieves.

If they clashed, they could wipe them out in an instant. Moreover, they had not yet noticed the group. If they ambushed them, it would not take long.

'It would be ridiculous to take a detour because of them, so should we just charge through?'

As Saya was thinking this, Asel, who had been concentrating his mana to observe the bandits, slightly furrowed his brows and spoke.

"They have people captured inside."

"Huh? ...I don't see anyone."

"They're held inside a cave. Three women, two men. They seem weak from not having eaten for days, but there are arms and legs in the cooking pot."

"Really?"

The imprisonment was invisible to Saya's eyes. However, since it was Asel speaking, there was no possibility of him lying. She thought for a moment and then looked up at Asel and said.

"Should we rescue them?"

"If we hadn't discovered them, it would be one thing, but we can't pretend we didn't see them after knowing. Anyway, to pass through quickly, we have to charge straight in."

"Alright. That's the decision then. Quill will take the lead—"

"No, I'll do it alone."

Asel said with a grin. The group's gazes turned simultaneously toward Asel.

Asel knew very well what they were thinking.

There was no need for a sorcerer to handle this alone. It wouldn't matter if he did, but he was currently using magic to move food and water by himself. For an ordinary sorcerer, to chant and manifest another spell here, he would have to cancel the maintained formula and weave a new spell.

In that case, it would be much quicker to let Quill take the lead and charge as a group. There was no reason to accept Asel's opinion.

Saya and Quill thought that way.

But Warren did not.

He took a step back, watching Asel, who was raising his mana with interest.

As a fellow sorcerer, Warren understood Asel's feelings.

"Is your body itching? I think I read a paper that said sorcerers who have learned combat magic often experience withdrawal symptoms when they can't use magic."

"Withdrawal symptoms... that seems right."

Asel chuckled and mentally sketched the formula.

It had indeed been frustrating not to use proper magic for several days. However, the reason he was eager to step forward was different.

He wanted to test a new spell he had created through the inspiration that arose while dissecting the properties and characteristics of freezing magic and fire magic, which he was studying simultaneously.

With the opportunity at hand, there was no need to hesitate. Ignoring Saya and Quill, who were about to speak out to stop him, Asel maintained his telekinesis and activated the new spell.

Flames began to ignite in his grasp.

[Red Cloud Fire Rain]

Whoosh!!

The flames blossomed as Asel gestured, gathering like clouds.

The massive cloud created surged toward the bandits, and as they were taken aback by the sudden magic, the cloud began to pour down a rain of fire.

Sizzle!!!

The falling rain melted and burned through the bandits' skin, muscles, and bones. The flames spread rapidly, meticulously scorching only the area where the bandits were.

"Ughhh!!"

"Help, please, damn it!!!"

"Ahhh!! My leg, my leg!!!"

Screams filled the mountain.

If the opponent was a type of bandit that kidnapped and devoured people, there was no need to hold back. Asel poured down the rain of flames even more fiercely, explosively injecting his mana.

Even Quill, who had witnessed many deaths while living as a mercenary, frowned at the carnage. He stared at Asel as if he were looking at a monster and clicked his tongue.

Before long, the screams abruptly ceased.

Asel shook off the remnants of mana left in his hand and turned to his companions.

"Let's go."

# 44 - The Nameless Village (2)

Fortunately, Asel's Flame did not spread to the kidnapped people. Rescued by the party, they repeatedly expressed their gratitude, bowing deeply.

"Thank you, thank you!"

"It's nothing, we just did what we had to do."

Saya and Warren took charge of dealing with the survivors. Asel and Quill searched the burned corpses and the bandits' hideout for anything useful.

"...Is he really a mage who just studies in his room? He seems so used to this kind of thing."

Quill asked, rummaging through the corpse's pockets. Asel chuckled and tossed him the money pouch he had found.

"I lived like this when I was young. Not very good memories."

The slums were a world of the survival of the fittest. If you were strong, you took; if you were weak, you were taken from. Asel survived like a hyena in that environment, scavenging useful items from dead bodies and living as a low-level member of a drug organization, receiving scraps.

Thanks to that, he was immune to corpses. The burning smell was a bit much, but even that was better than the stench of decay. Asel roughly dropped the corpse he was holding and brushed the ashes off his hands.

There wasn't much to gain from the bandits' hideout. There was some money, but not much.

'Well, how much wealth would bandits hiding in a place like this have?'

Although it was the Empire, it was a mountain located on the outskirts. It wasn't very suitable for banditry. They probably kidnapped travelers or outsiders entering the mountain, selling them as slaves or eating them to make a living.

Of course, maintaining a livelihood in such a way was absurd, but human trafficking and cannibalism were more frequent than one might think. It was just not well known.

In places where the law's reach was weak, actions that abandoned humanity were always happening. As much as it was teeming with demon worshippers and criminals, that much was the same everywhere.

At some point, the world had become a kaleidoscope. Asel thought as he pulled back the tent flap, exiting the hideout.

"Find anything?"

Quill asked. Asel shook his head, tossing him the leather pouch full of silver coins.

"There's nothing but this."

"Is that so?"

Quill roughly stowed the money pouch in his arms and returned to the group with Asel. Saya, who was handing out water and food to the survivors, said to them.

"These people say they live in the village that sent the request. They were kidnapped while out gathering herbs."

"If they're residents, shouldn't we just ask them to guide us?"

"Yes, we've already agreed to go together. Is that okay?"

There was no reason to refuse, so Asel and Quill nodded simultaneously. Saya gave a satisfied expression and returned to the survivors.

Before long, the march resumed. This time, the rescued survivors were at the front, with Warren and Asel close behind. Quill stood at the very back of the formation as Saya's escort. He listened to the occasional animal sounds, carrying his spear on his shoulder.

"Do you know anything about Doppelgangers?"

Warren asked. The survivors looked back at Warren with eyes that seemed to ask what that was.

They lived in villages isolated from the outside world, let alone the countryside. They might know simple basic knowledge, but they couldn't possibly know about monsters, their characteristics, or their ecosystems. Warren seemed to realize his mistake and gave them an answer that it was nothing.

Silence fell again. Occasionally, hungry bears or wolves would appear, but they were all killed by Asel and Warren's magic. There were no other obstacles to the march. As a result, they arrived at the village in less than 30 minutes after dealing with the bandits.

"It's definitely good to have locals."

Quill muttered. Everyone in the group agreed with him.

"Dad!"

"Honey! Where have you been?"

As they entered the village, the families of those who had been kidnapped greeted the survivors enthusiastically. Because of that, the group standing behind them felt a little awkward, but Asel ignored it and looked around the village.

The familiar smell of livestock and all sorts of waste filled the air. The village where Asel had lived as a child, before he even entered the slums, used to have this kind of smell. It wasn't a place with good memories, but he couldn't help but think of it whenever he came to a place like this.

"We are honored to meet such distinguished guests."

As he was thinking, an old man with snow-white hair approached the group. He looked like the village chief at first glance. He bowed to Asel, who was openly looking around, and said.

"I heard that you saved our villagers. I really don't know how to repay you..."

"We didn't do it expecting a reward, so it's okay."

Saya answered. She stood facing the old man and began a conversation.

"Still..."

"If you insist, would it be okay to borrow an empty house to stay in for a while?"

"An empty house... you say?"

"Yes, we need a house to use temporarily while we solve the request."

"The request, you mean?"

Instead of answering the chief's question, Saya took out the request form from her pocket. The chief's face brightened when he saw it. He led the group to his house as if he were treating royalty.

A wooden cabin more than twice the size of other houses in the village. Perhaps he was a rather authoritarian character, as his house was decorated with cheap jewels and ornaments. They were nothing to the group, but for the residents who hadn't seen so many ornaments in their lives, that alone was enough to assert authority.

"Please, have a seat."

The chief said, pointing to the sofa. The group didn't refuse his offer and sat on the stiff sofa. The chief sat opposite them and began to speak.

"I believe you have all confirmed the details of the request..."

"Yes. We believe this is the work of a Doppelganger."

"A Doppelganger, you say? Do you perhaps know what that is..."

In response to the chief's question, Saya kindly explained about Doppelgangers. The chief nodded as if something came to mind after hearing it.

"Indeed... it wasn't just dead people who suddenly appeared. There were also times when residents who were still alive would appear in places where they couldn't possibly be."

"Do you know where they might be?"

"...It's a little difficult to explain in words. I'll guide you myself."

The chief said, getting up from his seat. The group decided that it would be better to divide into two groups rather than move together. Warren and Quill would gather information about Doppelgangers from the villagers, while Saya and Asel would follow the chief.

He led them to the edge of a steep cliff. It wasn't a very high cliff, but it was high enough to easily break a leg if you fell. The chief stood at the edge and pointed to the ground.

"The most recent sighting was here. There's a young man named Nom among our residents, and he said he saw his dead wife here. He was so surprised that he approached her, and she bit his shoulder."

"...Hmm."

"He was a hunter, so he always carried a knife, and he fought back. Thanks to that, they both bled, and that Doppelganger? That monster ran away."

"What happened to the young man named Nom?"

Asel asked. The chief replied with a slightly sad expression.

"He died a while ago. He withered away and died of illness."

Doppelganger saliva and blood contain poison. If the young man named Nom was bitten by a Doppelganger and didn't receive proper treatment, it was natural for him to die.

Asel let out a sigh and carefully examined the ground where the chief was standing.

Faint but remaining bloodstains. Because the cliff was made of rock rather than soil, the red marks still remained on the ground, even though some time had passed. However, they were so faint that they wouldn't be noticeable unless you observed them closely.

That was enough. Asel called Saya, who was holding her fluttering hair, closer. Saya stood beside him with quick steps.

"Did you find anything?"

"Bloodstains. More importantly, take out the Magical artifact."

"Magical artifact?"

Saya asked back, but obediently took out the Magical artifact she had put in her pocket.

A compass-shaped Magical artifact that tracks the owner of the blood if it drinks blood. Its performance was reliable, but all blood or bodily fluids it could accept had to be in liquid form. It couldn't be used on bloodstains that had hardened or only left traces like this.

Asel knew that fact as well. Even so, the reason he told Saya to take out the Magical artifact was because he had a way.

"If the problem is the form of the blood, then we can just turn it back into blood droplets."

"...What? What nonsense are you talking about?"

Saya asked with a dumbfounded expression. Instead of answering, Asel smiled and placed his hand on the bloodstains on the ground. In that state, he manipulated Mana, shaping the Blood Manipulation Technique Elena had shown him into a form of magic.

Asel hadn't forgotten Elena's technique that he had seen during the entrance exam. Even if he hadn't gone into detailed research, borrowing a fragment of that power was easily possible.

Wooong.

Following Asel's will, Mana changes its nature like that of a vampire.

It wasn't Mana with the same properties as a normal vampire. It was directly from the True Ancestor's bloodline. Mana similar to that of a vampire born as pureblood without other impurities. The Formula was assembled accordingly, and Asel instantly created the necessary effect.

"...Who are you?"

Saya, who noticed what Asel was doing, asked with wide eyes.

A Hetero ability allowed on a race-by-race basis. A power unique to them that other races could neither use nor understand. Asel not only imitated their characteristics and properties but even sublimated them into magic.

It was different from Blood Magic. That ominous magic only controlled blood with Formula, but it didn't transform Mana to be similar to that of a vampire like Asel did. It was a miracle that only he, with his extreme talent for Mana, could perform.

"Vampires will try to kill you if they find out."

He ignored the meaningless voice chattering beside him. Asel separated the Doppelganger's blood from Nom's blood among the bloodstains on the ground and manifested a Formula to turn them back into droplets.

Their control over blood, the bloodline of the night and the owners of blood, didn't discriminate against living things. The Doppelganger's blood bloomed on the cliff without any obstacles. Nom's blood remained as bloodstains.

"Hoo."

Asel floated the blood that had returned to droplet form into the air and injected it directly into Saya's Magical artifact. Saya also calmed her surprised heart and stared at the Magical artifact.

Drddddk!!

The needle of the blood-infused compass began to spin violently. The built-in Formula activated, and the red eye drawn in the center of the compass bloomed with a faint light. Various tracking magics formed around Blood Magic. They wriggled to analyze the Doppelganger's blood and find its location.

Eventually, the moving needle stopped, pointing in one direction.

Saya looked up at Asel.

"Are we going right away?"

"We should go back to the village first. We need to hear the opinions of the rest of the group. And the eye engraved on the compass. After analyzing that Formula, it seems we don't have to worry about the compass stopping unless the Magical artifact and the prey directly face each other."

"That's a relief then."

Saya said that and told the chief to return to the village. The chief nodded and led the way towards the village.

They returned to the village before long. Warren and Quill, who had visited the residents to gather information, had also finished their work.

Now, all that remained was a meeting to decide when to subjugate the Doppelganger.

Saya asked for the empty house she had told the chief about in order to find a plausible place to hold the meeting. The chief gladly gave them the vacant house.

Not very large, but not too small either. The four sat huddled around a wooden table and shared the information they had obtained.

In fact, most of the information was useless. Except for the blood Asel had obtained, there were no major achievements. It wasn't a problem with Walter and Quill, but rather because there was no information to be obtained in the stagnant village in the first place. All they talked about was the content already in the request form.

Frankly, it didn't matter. Now that they had collected blood, finding the Doppelganger was only a matter of time.

All that remained was to decide when to go hunting.

Saya first asked for the opinions of her team members.

"What do you think we should do? Should we rest today and leave tomorrow morning? Or right now?"

"I think we should go right away."

Quill was the first to answer. He chewed on a piece of jerky and looked out the window at the still sunny sky.

"I don't think there's any reason to delay. We rested enough while riding the carriage, and now that we know the location, there's no need to hesitate. In my experience, it's easier to rush in and kill it in one go."

"I agree. I don't want to be stuck in this village for too long either."

Warren clicked his tongue while stroking the spirit.

"Frankly, this isn't a very pleasant village. I don't know why, but the longer I stay, the creepier I feel."

"Hmm... Asel, what about you?"

In response to Saya's question, Asel hesitated for a moment and nodded.

"I don't mind either. I have enough Mana."

"Okay. Then let's leave right away. Everyone, pack your things."

Saya said that and began to pack the necessary items into her backpack. Asel stared at her for a moment, then got up from his seat and gazed out the window.

'Warren said the longer he stays, the creepier he feels.'

Was it just his imagination that he was bothered by that?

Spiritists share some of the characteristics of spirits, who like clean and pure places. Thanks to that, they could identify and avoid ominous and dirty places in advance.

Because the spirit Warren had contracted with was a low-level spirit, his senses weren't exceptionally good, but he should still be able to distinguish to some extent.

And yet, he said he felt creepy. Asel was vaguely feeling it too, but he hadn't been able to confirm it yet.

Still, he should continue to be cautious.

"..."

He glanced at the setting sun and put a dagger he had brought into his arms.

So far, it was going smoothly.

So far.

Author's Note

I will proceed with this episode as quickly as possible.

Thank you.

# 45 - Doppelgänger

They didn't bother telling the villagers directly that they were leaving to subjugate the Doppelganger. Following Warren's advice, they decided there was no need to inform those who, for some reason, felt unsettling.

Although there was no possibility that they were colluding with the Doppelganger, with whom proper communication was impossible, it was better to be cautious.

"This way."

The compass pointed west. The party moved, heightening their tension so they could react at any moment, following the needle of the compass.

-Kyaaah!

On the way, strangely shaped monsters suddenly popped their heads out.

A creature they had never seen before, with a long, worm-like head and an anus that looked like a human head. Even Asel, who had read quite a few monster encyclopedias in Wiheim, couldn't figure out what it was as it attacked the party. Asel reflexively slammed an impact spell into Nom's body.

Thump!

Nom's body was vertically slammed into the ground. It flailed its long limbs to resist the crushing force, but that alone couldn't break free from Asel's magic. Asel planted an Electrification Art into Nom's worm-like head and carefully observed the fallen corpse.

The answer came quickly. He frowned slightly and muttered.

"A creature made with a Composite Formula. A human organ and head were transplanted into a common monster. As a result, it couldn't accommodate the intelligence of either and became a monster with only appetite left."

"...Why is something like that here?"

Warren spat out with a disgusted expression. Asel shook his head and straightened his back.

"We need to find out. More than that, we need to be careful."

"..."

"The fact that something like this is here means that perhaps the Doppelganger was also 'assembled' with someone's Composite Formula. It might not be the appearance we already knew."

Asel's words made Warren swallow hard. Saya's face was also filled with tension. Only Quill, who had hunted monsters a few times as a mercenary, was relatively unscathed. He put his arm around Asel's shoulder and smiled coolly.

"I'm counting on you for backup."

"...Okay."

A statement mixing truth and jest, deliberately uttered to lighten the atmosphere. Asel chuckled and replied.

"..."

After that, they continued to move. As they went deeper into the mountains, more and more monsters assembled by someone's hand popped their heads out. Thanks to the party's timely handling, there was no damage, but they became increasingly edgy at the fact that there were monsters lurking around them.

In this situation, opening their mouths would only cause infighting among the members. So they kept their mouths shut and relied only on Saya's voice, which guided them in the direction of the compass. Asel stood at the very back and unleashed a wide-area magic towards the gazes that were watching him.

[Lightning Flash]

A violent thunder wields destruction.

The lightning that bloomed from Asel's fingertips flashed, and the flash ran through the space, burning all the creatures crawling around the party to ashes. A belated sound echoed after the light of the lightning.

Kwaaaang!!

A deafening roar. But no one reacted to it. They glanced at Asel, who was shaking the electricity from his fingertips, and then continued on.

How long had it been? Saya suddenly stopped the party. She showed the compass to everyone and pointed to a cave in front of them.

"It's there."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. The needle is pointing to that cave."

"Let's go right away."

Quill gripped his spear shaft and wore a fierce expression.

"Let's finish it quickly and get out of here. As the bookworm said, it wasn't an ordinary mountain. I don't want to stay long."

"The life signs I'm sensing inside are roughly dozens."

Asel said. The party's gaze turned to him. Asel stared at the cave with a nonchalant expression as he received their gazes.

His pupils flickered with blue light.

"Many similar reactions to the ones we killed. One that feels like the Doppelganger."

"...Looks like this was their home. What are you going to do? Are you going to charge in there, or are you going to drag them out?"

Warren asked Saya. Saya pondered for a moment, then made a decision.

"Let's go in. It will take too long to take them out one by one. There's no guarantee that they'll come out one by one in the first place. If they suddenly pour out all at once, it will be difficult to identify the Doppelganger inside."

"..."

"And... I want to finish it before nightfall, at least."

Saya said, tearing her pupils vertically. A mysterious demonic power began to flow from her body.

Power allowed only to a very few among the fox beastkin, magic. She wagged her five tails, which had increased in number, and raised blue foxfires.

Watching her appearance, Warren pulled up his Mana, and Quill took a long breath and wrapped Aura around his spear shaft. Asel approached Saya and carefully observed one of her foxfires.

"A flame that lowers the spatial perception ability of the creatures around it and burns what it touches? It's my first time seeing magic, but it's more elaborate than I thought."

"It's my first time seeing someone like you. Strangely, your tone becomes stiff when you have to use magic like this. Should I say high-handed? Anyway, it's usually gentle, but it flips so strangely at times like this."

"...Me?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

He didn't know. His tone was high-handed? Was it a habit from living in the slums that was unconsciously manifesting? Or was there another reason?

It was difficult to know now. He shifted his gaze to the cave to change the subject.

"There are no intellectual creatures among the creatures inside. However, the Doppelganger seems to have some intelligence. It seems like it's been alive for at least several decades."

"That means it can't imitate you. That's a relief."

"You never know. It's better to prepare."

Asel said, slowly loosening his body. He pumped the Core Reactor that he had already warmed up, sending Mana through his entire body, turned his neck, and strode towards the cave. The party formed a formation around him.

Crackle, crackle!

Electricity sparks around his body. Mana that has been transformed in nature is expressed outward, searing the air. His eyes are glazed over due to the overflowing Mana, and lightning is mixed in with his breath. He freely controls the electrical signals in his entire body, giving him the sensation that his entire body has become a single lightning bolt.

An Electromancer who has fully activated the Core Reactor becomes a strategic weapon in itself.

It was no wonder that Ena was active in numerous battlefields and received courtship. Even for Asel, handling Electrification Property Magic with all his might like this was the first time since the Battle of Fernand.

Not a bad feeling and mood. It felt excessive to think that it was just to kill one Doppelganger, but Asel was wary of the owner of the Composite Formula behind the Doppelganger, not the Doppelganger itself.

'A Formula so meticulous and elaborate that I couldn't detect it until I got close. Clearly a magician above me.'

Not a story of talent. A magician whose essence of years and experience as a magician is overwhelmingly high. For some reason, a renegade who has a bad hobby of setting up shop in this mountain and combining monsters and humans. Asel was wary of him and activated Mana with all his might from the beginning.

In any case, there is no Mana that is meaninglessly consumed by this alone. Only the Shield and Mental Barrier magic that protect the body are constantly maintained.

The Mana consumed by the two magic is recovered as soon as you breathe.

The same is true now. Asel put his index and middle fingers together in a straight line and swung them horizontally.

[Lightning Flash]

Pajijijijik!!!

A streak of lightning follows where his fingertips move. As soon as they entered the cave, the Composite bodies that appeared were directly hit by lightning and turned to ashes. The Composite bodies that twisted their joints strangely to avoid the lightning were either stabbed to death by Quill's spear or crushed by Warren's Spirit Spell.

-Krrrrrr!

-Kieeeeeeeek!!

The guys who realized the death of their comrades began to pop out from inside the cave. Warren made a hand seal while making eye contact with the largest of them. At the same time, the spirit began to glow, and the earth resonated with his will.

[Sinkhole]

Deedeudeudeuk!!

With the manifestation of magic, the floor collapsed as if it were being carved out, centered on the place where the Composite bodies were running. The guys who lost their balance for a moment floundered, and Quill sprinted through the gap.

A body and spear blade strengthened with Aura. Practical senses honed while living as a mercenary. All of that comes together to form Quill's swordsmanship.

Pwack!

Every time his shoulder moved, the heads of the Composite bodies flew into the sky. Blood and entrails were scattered, and he, covered in an unknown body fluid, burst into a hearty laugh. Asel watched the scene, stretched out his right hand, and bent his knuckles as if he were squeezing and bursting them.

[Thunderclap]

Kwaaaang!!

The lightning mixed in the air responds to Asel's will. It explodes in the abdomen of the still living monsters. A terrible scream is buried in the thunder. The corpses, which died in a fairly gruesome state, are buried under the sinkhole.

Overwhelming massacre. But no one felt a great impression from this. Everyone knew that they didn't come to kill the Composite bodies in the first place.

The party walked across the bridge connecting the center of the sinkhole that Warren had opened up and swept away the Composite bodies that were rushing in again.

Then the Composite bodies no longer rushed in meaninglessly, and began to hover around the party as if tightening their breath. It was as if the boss had started directing them. Asel twisted the head of one of them with telekinesis and concentrated Mana on his vision.

The opening of the eyes, which has reached the point of expanding or contracting space beyond the limits of eyesight. In his vision, a being who looked like a young girl was captured giving instructions to the Composite bodies.

As soon as he recognized it, Asel stretched out Mana thread at the speed of sound and tied it to a pillar near the girl, and also tied the thread to the bodies of the rest of the party, including himself, and fixed it.

"Hey, what is thㅡ"

"……!""

The party, feeling a sense of restraint for a moment, turned their heads with bewildered expressions. Asel smiled at them.

"Hold your breath. I'm going right away."

"What are you sayingaaaaaack!!!!"

Before Quill could finish speaking, Asel crazily reduced the length of the long Mana thread. Due to the reaction, the bodies of the party members who were tied up moved at high speed along the shrinking Mana thread.

Asel added to that by simultaneously chanting wind resistance magic and telekinesis. He doubled the moving speed.

"Kyaaaaaaack!"

"Shibaal, we're going to crash!!"

"Asel, Asel!"

Thanks to this, it took less than 3 seconds to reach the place where the girl was. Before the party crashed into the wall and became a mess, Asel created a downdraft to gently place them on the floor.

"Hey, you son of a bitch!"

As soon as he landed on the floor, Quill shouted as he rushed towards the girl.

"Tell me in advance when you're going to do something like this!"

"I did."

Asel chuckled and replied, then stared at the girl who hadn't yet grasped the situation and snapped his fingers.

[Thunder Bow]

Pajijijijik!!

A lightning arrow that bloomed from behind Asel accurately pierced the girl's forehead.

# 47 - Sanctuary

Here is the English translation of the Korean novel excerpt:

Necromancer. A type of magician who forcibly revives and subjugates souls that have already died and crumbled. Unlike corpse mages who deal with physical forms like corpses, it is a mysterious miracle that utilizes the abstract concept of souls.

It is a formula that cannot even be attempted without an understanding of souls and the talent to handle them. Although not a unique magic, it is a technique of evil magic with a level of danger and difficulty comparable to it.

Like corpse mages who handle corpses and blood mages who deal with blood, the source of life, necromancers also needed to abandon some of their humanity in order to achieve greatness.

From the 7th rank, where they begin to gain magical uniqueness, they gradually start to discard human ethics, and by the 8th rank of archmage, it is as if their humanity has been completely lost.

The magician before them was like that. An archmage like Zervil and Ena. A monster who had long since lost their human heart. A high-ranking magician who acts solely on their own judgment and reason.

"We need to run away."

Warren muttered. The group didn't turn to look at him, but silently agreed with his words.

This was an opponent they couldn't possibly defeat from the start. Archmages are each treated as a country's major military asset. For mere academy students to discuss their chances against such a mage? It was nonsense. Before courage, it was arrogance and recklessness.

At this moment, even talent didn't mean much.

Asel gritted her teeth and racked her brain to break out of the current situation.

Resistance would only buy a momentary reprieve. To survive, they first needed to escape from this place.

But how?

The moment that question arose, countless souls sprouted up behind her, convulsing while shackled. They spewed incomprehensible words, screamed, and drooled as if about to pounce at any moment.

It didn't matter much whether they were excellent warriors or intellectual mages in life. Their current forms were simply evil spirits living only to kill others.

However, their abilities remained the same as when they were alive. Even at a glance, there were high-ranking warriors and mages everywhere. Easily over several dozen talents that would be hard to find anywhere else.

Moreover, even they were just means to assist the necromancer. The most dangerous thing in this place was the necromancer herself, who directly grasped and wielded souls.

Asel swallowed hard and stacked multiple shields to protect her body. The necromancer watched with a languid smile.

"I believe you're all done preparing. I've given you plenty of time."

"..."

"Then let's begin."

She said, extending her hand forward.

That was the signal. The shackles binding the souls were released. They began rushing in all at once, craving the flesh and blood of the living. Mages chanted spells, and warriors drew their weapons and accelerated.

"...!"

A speed too fast to be detected even by Asel's expanded senses. But she could faintly perceive the paths of the swords they wielded. Asel gritted her teeth and clapped her hands forcefully. Instead of the sound of applause that should have come from her hands, a thunderous roar erupted.

Small sparks fly in the direction the sound spreads.

Soon, the sparks became dozens of lightning bolts that swept through everywhere the sound reached.

[Thunder Wave Advance]

Kwaaaaaa!!

A high-level magic used to face armies or change terrain. Its power needed no explanation.

But most of the dead filling the cave were those who had rolled through battlefields in life. They couldn't fully withstand the speed and destructive power unique to lightning magic, but they could minimize it by deflecting it.

Thanks to this, the dead circling around Asel had limbs torn off one by one, but did not return to being just souls.

In the first place, they were beings that continuously regenerated unless their connection to the necromancer was severed. Partial loss of body parts meant nothing to them.

"Shit!"

Asel heard Quill swear. But there was no time to look back at him. Asel reverse-calculated and deconstructed the fireballs flying towards her, using them as power for her own magic.

[Great Flame Whirlwind Pillar]

Kwarrrrrr!!

A massive pillar of flame violently rotates around Asel. Those who sensed the lingering mana hastily retreated, and the upper bodies of those who couldn't were torn off as if melting.

It was meaningless damage. They soon regenerated arms and thrust their swords through the flames towards Asel's neck.

Asel instinctively inserted a shield into the sword's path, but the shield shattered like glass without any resistance. The aura of the dead, approaching mastery, sliced through the shield like tofu and approached to cut off Asel's neck.

Asel frowned deeply and hurriedly tilted her head back. Thanks to this, she barely avoided having her head fly off, but about half of her left ear was cut off.

"Kugh...!"

Blood splattered across one side of her vision. Through that blood, a spear came flying. She pulled out a mana thread to bind the shaft, and sent it back along its path. At the same time, an assassin cloaked in invisibility magic approached and stabbed a dagger into Asel's back.

For the first time since becoming a magician, she felt intense pain searing her head. Asel coughed up blood and grabbed the assassin's head with telekinesis, bursting it. Then she shattered all the swords, spears, arrows, and magic flying in from around her, pushing them away with mass.

The frenzied attacks paused for a moment. Asel didn't miss that brief respite and spat out the lump rising in her throat along with blood.

"Ugh!"

Red organ fragments fell to the floor with a squelch. Part of her organs had been sliced off by the assassin's dagger. She gritted her teeth and pulled out the dagger stuck in her back, throwing it to the floor.

Woong.

She wrapped her eyes in mana. Her vision, now crossing into the realm of mystery, took in the situation of her companions.

Quill's ankle was twisted backwards. Fortunately nothing had been severed, but there was a deep stab wound in his side. Whether from magic or not, there were deep burn marks on his left forearm.

Warren was on the verge of death. His neck must have been deeply cut, as blood bubbled from his mouth with every breath. Thanks to a spirit sharing its life force, he wasn't dead yet, but he would clearly die in a few minutes.

Saya was pinned in place by a spear that had pierced her stomach, unable to move. Blood continuously poured from her mouth, and though she was responding to the dead's attacks with fox-fire, her life force was visibly draining in real time.

Thanks to the dead concentrating on Asel, the number of enemies they had to face wasn't that many, but the difference in ability was clear. There was no way they could hold out long against the dead with no experience and low ranks.

In the end, only Asel was relatively intact. He glared at the necromancer and wiped the blood from his mouth.

"...You bastard."

Profanity naturally spilled out as the situation became dangerous. The necromancer heard his cursing and smiled comfortably.

"Beings close to death are divided into two types. Those who struggle to the end, and those who accept death. You're the former."

"..."

"I like such beings. When made into the dead, their egos are strong so they're hard to handle, but there's a satisfaction in subjugating them. What you're facing now are those who couldn't do that. In simple terms, they're not even my elite soldiers. They're maggots to be consumed and discarded at will."

"Shut up."

"But don't worry. I have no intention of consuming you like that."

She tore her mouth into a wide grin and looked down at Asel with greedy eyes.

"Your display of using all sorts of magic including the lightning formula was quite impressive. You even showed signs of awakening magical eyes. Very good. I'll specially make you part of my royal guard."

"..."

"And I should show your transformed dead form to my sister, your master. It would be a truly delightful experience."

"Sister?"

Words that couldn't be easily dismissed came out. Asel's mind froze for a moment, and the necromancer showed a gentle expression.

"That's enough chitchat. And you're not in a leisurely situation to ask me questions, are you?"

As she finished speaking, she lightly flicked her finger. Then one of the mages lined up behind her manifested and fired a spell without any warning. Asel ground her teeth and reversed the direction of the spell.

The strange situation of being hit by one's own spell. But the dead didn't falter. Neither did the necromancer.

She still looked down at Asel with a smiling face and crushed the incoming spell.

Asel took his eyes off her and repelled an approaching spearman with repulsive force.

Her words were right.

Focusing on questions in a life-or-death situation was madness. The important thing was to escape this place safely.

Asel took out a jewel he had kept in his pocket.

A magical medium with formula engravings through unsuitable craftsmanship. Asel threw the jewel to the floor without hesitation. Dozens of magic circles floated in the air, and he injected mana into only the necessary ones to activate them.

[Lightning Mist]

[Smoke Mist]

[Flame Banner Accumulation]

[Thunder Flower Resonance]

Various types of magic activate simultaneously.

Lightning fills the space like mist.

Smoke rises to fill the cave, and a giant flame banner sticks into the ground, spewing fire.

Flowers made of lightning bloom all around, resonating with each other to form a lightning zone.

An array of magics occupying space. Asel connected mana threads to Warren and Quill, who were writhing in pain, unable to easily approach due to the dead. He lifted them into the air and ran towards Saya.

The two people bound by threads collapsed as soon as their feet touched the ground. Quill, with one leg crushed and organs spilling from his side, couldn't even stand properly, and Warren couldn't do anything but gasp for breath.

Saya, groaning while impaled on the spear, was the same. She coughed up blood as she looked at Asel approaching with trembling eyes.

"W-what do we do? Are we, cough, are we going to die here? I don't want to... There's still, still so much I need to do... My family, my family is still..."

"We're not dying."

Asel said in a voice on the verge of death.

Saya seemed unable to hear his words anymore, and continued muttering to herself. Blood bubbled with each word, and her white clothes were dyed red. She wasn't in a very good state.

Everyone here was the same.

Asel forcibly widened his eyes, which kept blurring from blood loss, and manifested magic. It was magic that somewhat stopped bleeding, but this alone wasn't enough to avoid death. Even if the bleeding was perfectly stopped, it wouldn't be a fundamental solution to survive.

Then deal with the necromancer?

Bullshit. How could they kill a necromancer who was clearly stronger than her elite soldiers, which hadn't even appeared yet?

The only way to survive was to escape. Obviously, in the group's current state, it was impossible to break through the necromancer and exit through the passage. That would just be suicide. It wasn't even worth attempting.

Then there was only one escape method left.

The teleportation formula Asel had directly seen. A high-difficulty magic that moves to preset coordinates when certain conditions are met.

Just thinking about it made the formula appear clearly like a picture.

OTNXSU9XcTFURXdtd0tweHpoait4bU9zVWVDM0czZVlacyt6MU0zVnRGNDFMUVRieUllTEIxcytzQ2xuU1dQSw

There was no time to modify it. Instead of mentally calculating the formula he recalled, Asel injected a large amount of mana to directly draw and activate the magic circle. The magic circle glowed and began calculating the activation conditions for the formula.

It assessed the condition of those judged to be seriously injured. After confirming four people in critical condition, it sent an emergency alarm to the academy's medical department.

At the same time, the magic activated. Light emanated from the bodies of the companions on the brink of death, and they began moving towards the designated coordinates—"How mischievous.""

Puhwak!

Just before the magic activated, a mana arrow flew from somewhere, aiming for Asel's head. Asel layered shields in the arrow's path and even overlapped both hands, but the arrow shattered all the shields and deeply embedded itself in his hands.

"Kugh...!"

Fortunately his head wasn't pierced, but Asel was knocked out of the magic circle from the arrow's impact.

But the magic's activation didn't stop. He gritted his teeth and maintained the flow of mana to manifest the teleportation formula. He transported his companions to the injury reception area from the academy entrance exam.

The mana consumed increased exponentially since he used a wide-area magic rather than assigning it to individuals. Thanks to this, he was able to use the unfamiliar teleportation magic accurately, but he who cast the magic couldn't move and remained in the cave.

A futile result. But Asel didn't panic. He used telekinesis to pull out the arrow embedded in both hands and spat out a mouthful of blood.

The sensation of life being instantly shortened. Asel bit his lip hard and pulled something out of his pocket with his bloodied hands. Before the necromancer could identify what it was, she projected mana to slam his body to the ground.

"Kuhak!"

Asel's face collided with the stone floor. The impact was enough to make his head spin for a moment. Under the pressure pinning his body, he barely raised his eyes to stare at the necromancer's face.

Her face, which had been relaxed throughout, was now filled with unpleasant emotion.

"My oversight."

She said, standing up.

"I didn't expect you to be able to use teleportation magic. From the moment I realized, I tried to interfere with the magic, but it was strangely flawless. Thanks to that, I couldn't do anything but push you out externally, let alone interfere. Nevertheless, the magic activated, and the rest except you safely escaped somewhere."

"..."

"A truly unpleasant experience. If I had known this would happen, I should have sent elite soldiers from the start or come out myself. My hobby of wanting to see the moment souls escape from beings on the brink of death held me back."

"You're still... ugh... talking too much..."

It's difficult to even speak due to the pressure crushing his chest. Nevertheless, Asel sneered at her.

The white hair clutched in his right hand glimmers faintly.

"You've always been like this... Zervil, that bastard, haa, that bastard also talked too much..."

"So you know Zervil. Ah, right. Your previous reaction was like that."

Click click.

The necromancer said as she walked towards Asel. The dead who wanted to kill Asel drooled as they opened a path for her.

"Come to think of it, Zervil said he was interested in Ena's disciple. Seems they've met somewhere. This is quite an interesting situation."

She grinned and grabbed Asel's hair, lifting his head. Their gazes clashed in midair.

"I wonder how he'll react when I return with your soul to the one who wants to make you a corpse? Will that drug addict get seriously angry for once, or will he laugh it off as usual? I'm curious. So curious."

"...No intention of playing along."

Asel muttered in a blood-scented voice, hanging his head low. The necromancer mocked him.

"That's for me to decide. Not you."

"No."

Asel said, raising only his eyes while keeping his head down.

"I decide."

At that moment, two different magics simultaneously burst from both his hands. Mana manipulation so subtle even the necromancer couldn't notice. Not enough to be a dagger to deal with her, but sufficient to briefly steal her vision.

The bleeding from the arrow wounds. He manipulated that blood to draw a magic circle, and used two magics by scraping up his remaining mana to the bottom.

[Ascending Thunder]

Bzzzzzzt!!!

Lightning coalesced from Asel's left hand, which was touching the floor, and burst upwards in an instant. The Necromancer clicked her tongue and took a step back, and Asel used the recoil from the lightning to distance himself from the Necromancer.

In the process, he slammed into the wall, causing his vision to flicker momentarily, but even so, he didn't stop activating the magic manifesting in his right hand.

The teleportation Formula that had sent his companions to safety. He tore apart all the complex principles within it and instantly modified it into a magic that could only be activated with a specific medium.

A simple and limited magic that moved to the location where the Mana was contained within the medium. Asel chose a strand of white hair that he always carried with him to reply to the Messenger bird as soon as it returned, as the medium.

He didn't even need to consider whose it was.

"……!"

The Necromancer, realizing the nature of the magic, distorted her face and, for the first time, directly manifested magic. Souls gathered to form a single sphere, which was launched as if to crush Asel whole.

If he remained as he was, his entire body would be crushed to death before the teleportation Formula could even activate. But instead of responding, Asel closed his eyes and forcibly shut off all his senses.

Already on the verge of death, his talent was reaching even beyond the afterlife.

Imitating a dead person wasn't that difficult.

"……Ah."

A world where all senses had disappeared. A world of death where neither the five senses nor the sense to feel Mana could be felt at all. For some reason, Asel felt as if a tree was growing beyond that, and he slowly opened his eyes. At the same time, all his senses returned.

What he saw when he opened his eyes again was the Necromancer, who had lost an arm after being struck by the magic he had used, and a bracelet glowing on his right wrist. Asel grinned and said to the Necromancer, who was staring at him with bewildered eyes.

"So that's how this Magical artifact works."

"……You."

"Thanks. I'm getting a lot out of this, thanks to you."

He stared straight at her face, which was twisted like a demon.

"See you next time. I'll have quite a few things to say then."

He didn't get an answer. As soon as the teleportation Formula that manifested in Asel's right hand detected the location of the Mana in the medium, it activated immediately.

His body disappeared from the cave in an instant.

The Necromancer, left alone, didn't even think about stopping the blood flowing like a waterfall, and let out a hollow laugh.

"……Haha."

Soon, the hollow laughter turned into a wild roar.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

A contradictory laughter mixed with anger, interest, and joy at the same time. She stood there for a long time, laughing like a madwoman, then suddenly stopped laughing and quietly muttered.

"……Ena's disciple."

It was the moment that name was deeply Engraved in her mind.

# 48 - Sanctuary (2)

"Looking at that again?"

Irina blew out a puff of cigarette smoke and spoke. She casually shoved aside a corpse rolling around at her feet and approached Ena, who was sitting on a rock reading a letter. Ena cleanly ignored her and wore a faint smile.

The last sentence written in the letter Asel sent pleased her heart.

[I miss you, Master.]

"Ugh, how cheesy."

Irina mumbled, resting her chin on Ena's shoulder. Ena pushed her face away firmly.

"Get lost. You stink of cigarettes."

"Cigarette smell or whatever. You're seriously addicted. How many times a day do you read that letter? If Asel saw you like this, he'd be disgusted and run away."

"Asel wouldn't do that."

"What do you know."

"What do you know? He's my disciple."

Ena said that and stood up. She brushed off the stone dust on her butt and turned her head toward the investigation team walking out of the forest.

Clad in heavy armor, they didn't even think about wiping off the blood covering their bodies, reeking of blood as they approached the two Archmages.

The knights of the Empire exuded a neat atmosphere. The man standing at the very front took off his helmet and opened his mouth.

"We have dealt with all the remnants inside the cave. The escaped demon worshippers..."

The man deliberately trailed off. Instead of answering, Irina pointed to the corpse lying on the ground with the end of her smoking pipe. That was enough. The knight nodded and ordered his subordinates to gather the corpses together. Then, he used an ignition device to cremate them all.

Among the demon worshippers, most Mana users had traces of human sacrifice on their bodies. If left alone or simply buried, they sometimes revived through rituals, so they had to be killed thoroughly when killed.

Fortunately, Ena had turned a few corpses into ashes with lightning beforehand, so the cremation didn't take long. The knight stepped on the corpses, now only bones, crushing them, and turned his head.

The cremation of the demon worshippers who died inside the cave was also complete. There were no more demon worshippers left around the Empire.

They were Nom found after searching even the lawless zones where no countries existed. They had lived with blood on their armor and swords for quite a long time, so it seemed there would be no need to be wary of demon worshippers for the time being. Of course, he had no intention of letting go of his vigilance.

Demon worshippers were the kind of people who could crawl out anytime, anywhere. They were not eradicated even if killed, and sometimes even had regenerative abilities.

A vitality that was disgusting and even tiresome. A level of tenacity that even Druids, who obtained life from nature, would be amazed by. Such people were teeming in demon worshipping groups.

No matter how much cleaning was done, one could not be careless. The knight thought so and slightly bowed his head to Ena and Irina.

"Thanks to the two of you, the subjugation was completed faster than expected. As the representative of the special task force that was fully entrusted with this matter, I express my gratitude to Wiheim in the name of the Empire."

"That's enough. More than that, can we go back now? I'm a little tired from killing the Nom playing around near Wiheim and helping out here."

The place where Ena and Irina were currently was a lawless zone near the Empire, but they were not here from the beginning.

They had dealt with the Nom around the city with the wizards of Wiheim, and at the Empire's earnest request, only the two of them had been dispatched additionally. They had received compensation, so they did the work, but they wanted to go home as soon as possible.

Both of them had a mountain of things to do back in Wiheim. Irina had to participate in a project being carried out by the Alliance, and Ena had to see Asel's face a little before leaving to find information about the Demon of Gluttony.

Neither of them was very free. So, they blatantly expressed their desire to disband.

The Empire's instructions had already been completed, and there was also an order not to offend the Archmage, so the knight readily nodded.

"I understand. Do you have any intention of attending the banquet held in the Empire?"

"No."

Ena answered. She put away the letter with an indifferent expression and adjusted the slightly disheveled position of her hat.

"......?"

At that moment, she realized that Asel was sending something to her.

It was a sudden connection. Ena felt the afterglow of a teleportation Formula from the faintly felt resonance of Mana. And then she smiled softly.

"Asel wants to come to me."

She looked at Irina with a triumphant expression. Irina, as if to say 'so what,' puffed on her smoking pipe and blew out smoke.

"He said he wanted to see me, but I guess he couldn't stand it. You were wrong."

"What are you talking about? Didn't you push him?"

"No. Shut up."

"Can't you be nice to me like you are to Asel?"

"Become my disciple."

"How creepy."

Ena ignored Irina, who was starting to stroke her arm, and immediately responded to the magic Asel was sending. Then, the subtly felt resonance changed clearly, and Asel suddenly appeared in front of Ena and collapsed to the floor.

A strong smell of blood overwhelms the surroundings.

"Cough...! Ugh...!!"

Asel, who collapsed upon arrival, gasped for breath and vomited blood. The backlash from pretending to be okay in front of the Necromancer and the magic he forcibly manifested gnawed at his body. Blood streamed from his mouth and ears, and his pierced hands trembled.

"Draw swords!"

The knights, mistaking Asel's appearance for a demon worshipper's surprise attack, drew their swords at the same time. But Irina hardened her expression fiercely and projected Mana towards them.

"Stay still. Unless you want to die."

"Ms. Yeonhwa...!"

"It's not what you guys are thinking, so don't move."

Irina said so and examined Asel's condition.

"...Keuk... Keueu..."

A half-cut ear. Clothes and face covered in blood. Chunks of organs smeared around his mouth. Violently torn hands pouring blood and broken wrists. An upper and lower body dyed red because of the bleeding from his back.

With a normal mental strength, he would have fainted from shock and died long ago. It was strange that he was alive.

In other words, it meant that it would be strange if he didn't die right away.

Figuring out where and what happened was a matter for later. Irina quickly regained her senses and poured the recovery potion she had in her arms all over Asel's body. At the same time, she shouted at Ena, whose lips were trembling.

"Ena!"

"Uh, uh..."

"Ena, you crazy bitch! Get a grip and move quickly! Are you going to kill your disciple?!"

Disciple. Death.

Those two words consumed Ena's mind. Something that should never happen had struck reality.

Asel's figure was reflected in her blue eyes. A precarious appearance as if he would die at any moment. Just looking at it made her breath catch and her mind go crazy. Her reason as an Archmage was useless. Her brain became hot, and her tear glands functioned as if they were broken.

Where, where did I make a mistake? Did I make a mistake in the process of resonating with Asel's Mana? Or why was Asel so hurt? Where and what was he doing?

Why?

Why?

"Why?"

"Ena!"

The question was cut off by Irina's voice. Irina grabbed Ena by the collar and met her gaze head-on.

"I understand that it's shocking, but if you want to save your disciple, get a grip quickly. Unless you want to cry at the funeral!"

With her shout, light returned to Ena's pupils. Her mind, which had been hazy like fog, became clearer than before. She bit her lower lip so hard that it tore, and hugged Asel's body tightly.

It's cold. It was clear that life was leaving. Tears flowed from her tear glands, which she thought had dried up long ago.

Ena didn't even realize that her lips were bleeding from biting them too hard, and she became a streak of lightning and disappeared with Asel.

"...Ha, shit."

Irina spat out a curse after confirming that sight.

Asel, who was a precious existence to her, who had no disciples, had returned as a corpse.

Anger boiled within her.

Her appearance was always sudden like that.

A capricious personality that moved by lightning and acted arbitrarily. A strange human who suddenly came and asked for information about demons or asked about the locations of demon worshippers they had found out.

But a person who was quite cute in appearance and sometimes looked sorry when she got really angry, so she couldn't just hate her. A wizard, but a unique type of long-lived species who didn't show much animosity towards priests either.

Ena Renatus.

Thanks to her, even if she burst into the cathedral, no one really hated or disliked her. Rather, the old priests often brought her cookies or cakes and chatted with her. The young and faithful believers were the same.

So, while praying, they smiled bitterly at the sound of thunder, which was now so familiar that it felt friendly.

As far as they knew, there was only one person who could drop lightning in the clear sky.

As if to prove that expectation, the door to the prayer room burst open and Ena ran inside. The Archbishop, who was presiding over the prayer, tried to scold her with a smile, but he quickly ran out after seeing the young man in her arms.

The eyes of the believers who were praying turned to Ena, and Ena, without even noticing their gazes, cried to the Archbishop with tears in her eyes.

"S, save him. He's my disciple. Please, please save him. I'll kill if you tell me to kill. I'll destroy if you tell me to destroy, so please... please save my disciple just once..."

"...Heo."

The Archbishop let out a pitiful sigh.

To think that Ena would show such a broken appearance. Even he, who prided himself on knowing her for a long time, was seeing such a precarious mental state for the first time. That meant that the existence of a disciple was more precious to her than anything else.

It was something to celebrate that someone precious had appeared to her, who had acted like she would live alone her whole life.

But the situation was not favorable. The Archbishop checked Asel's condition after confirming that priests with knowledge of medicine were approaching. At the same time, he manifested Holy Power.

Woong.

The golden energy that bloomed from his hand gently permeated Asel's entire body. Then, his panting breath gradually returned to normal, and some of his external wounds began to heal.

But it was not complete. The Archbishop groaned and said to Ena.

"He was attacked by a fairly high-ranking Necromancer. Thanks to that, it is impossible for me to heal this brother at once with my level. It seems that our clergy members will have to take turns watching the progress for a few days."

"Does that mean he has to be hospitalized?"

"Yes. For now, there are a few empty rooms in the cathedral, so you can use them."

"Ah, I understand. I'll give you a hundred or a thousand gold coins for the cost, so, please, just save Asel."

"I will not accept money. It is natural to treat a patient in front of you."

The Archbishop said so sincerely and ordered a nun to guide Asel and Ena to a clean, empty room. Ena followed her into the room, fidgeting.

The nun took off Asel's blood-soaked clothes, wiped off the blood stains on his body, and changed him into suitable, pure white clothes. Then, she laid him carefully on the bed.

"I will wait here in case of an emergency. Is that okay?"

The nun asked, covering Asel with a blanket. Ena nodded once, grabbed Asel's cold hands with both hands, and pressed her skin and lips against them as if trying to blow her warmth into them.

Not stopping there, she moved her hands to his forehead, cheeks, and neck, continuing to convey warmth. Until the tears that dripped down pooled on the floor. Until Asel regained consciousness.

For a long time.

# 49 - Sanctuary (3)

A sudden emergency alarm echoed through the Academy's medical wing. Startled by the unexpected noise, all personnel, including the sleeping medical professors, hurriedly returned to the medical building to identify the source of the alert. They all wore strange expressions.

"This is… the place we used as a casualty reception center during the Combat Department entrance exam."

The professor muttered.

An Academy map was displayed in the center of the medical wing's emergency room. Three red lights blinked at the entrance to the southern forest.

The lingering Mana of the alarm spell was too strong to be a malfunction. Someone had sent the signal with a clear intention.

It was absurd. The magic used during the entrance exam was no longer in use.

But for that magic to suddenly activate now? It wasn't some tool made by a mediocre magician. The more plausible explanation was that the remaining Mana from that time had reignited.

However… the professor had a feeling that this incident was not so simple.

It was a matter of intuition. All her senses, honed on the battlefield as a healing mage, were telling her to head to that forest immediately.

Her intuition, honed over many years, had never lied to her. With a stern expression, she addressed those gathered in the emergency room.

"Let's go. Prepare everything."

And so, the medical wing students, professors, and assistant professors began their march in the middle of the night. Fortunately, the distance between the medical building and the Academy's southern forest was not far, and they arrived shortly.

They pushed back the darkness with lanterns and basic Radiance Magic. At the end of their path, they found three people collapsed in a wretched state.

Quill, unconscious with his organs spilling from his side; Warren, heaving and coughing up blood; and Saya, vomiting blood with a spear lodged in her abdomen.

Not one of them was unscathed. They were all critically injured, on the verge of death. It was fortunate that none of them had lost any limbs, but even so, there was no room for complacency. If they weren't treated quickly, they would die from excessive bleeding or shock.

The professor made a quick decision. She prioritized the transport of the patients over assessing the situation. The assistant professor and students, who had been staring blankly at the three, hurriedly moved them to the emergency room.

The strong smell of blood began to fill the once-peaceful emergency room. One of the assistant professors reported the situation to Friede, and the students lit anesthetic incense to dull the senses of the three.

But the incense was too weak to put Mana users to sleep. At best, it only slightly reduced their pain. It was difficult to achieve anything more.

"W-What should we do?"

"Bring the ampules! First, pull out that spear!"

The professor said, drawing on her unique, pure Mana as a healing mage. The students, who were experiencing the scent of death so closely for the first time, nodded with tension and fear.

No matter how advanced their year, the only injuries they had treated were minor ones sustained during exams. They had only seen critical injuries, where every second mattered, in books. They had no practical experience and had to rely solely on their knowledge.

But they couldn't just stand there. In a situation where they could either save or kill someone with their own hands, no one could afford to stand idly by. They suppressed their trembling hands and moved swiftly according to the assistant professor's instructions.

"…First, cut the spear in half. Then pull it out towards the blade."

"Yes."

The students nodded. They cut the spear with a dagger that had its sharpness enhanced to the extreme with magic, and pulled the spear out as instructed by the assistant professor. Blood and organs, clinging to the spear shaft, came out with it.

"Aaaaaaah…!"

Saya screamed in agony. Although her sense of pain was partially dulled, the sensation of her organs being torn out was accompanied by unimaginable pain.

As the spear that had been preventing the penetrating wound from worsening disappeared, blood gushed out of the hole like a fountain. The bleeding stopped to some extent after a hemostatic agent was quickly administered, but she was still in critical condition. They needed to quickly use a healing Formula to filter out any remaining bacteria or impurities in her body and begin regeneration.

"Everyone who can use magic, draw on your Mana! We'll begin treatment now—"

"A, cough, Asel…"

Just as the assistant professor was shouting, Saya coughed up blood and muttered, struggling to move her eyes.

Everyone's attention focused on her. Saya met the assistant professor's gaze and continued.

"Where… is Asel…?"

"…Ugh."

The sound of birds chirping slowly opened his eyes. His eyelids felt heavy, as if they would fall shut at any moment, and the intense pain throughout his body made him want to faint as soon as he regained consciousness. And why did his eyes hurt so much? It felt like his brain was burning just from keeping them open.

He had an idea of what was happening.

What the Necromancer had said. That it was a sign of awakening his Mystic Eyes. He had been shoving Mana into his eyes constantly, and it seemed that his eyes and Mana had resonated. The result was an incredibly powerful Mana sensitivity that also affected his body.

Unfortunately, it was difficult to infuse Mana into other areas besides his eyes, so he couldn't expect results similar to Mystic Eyes, but this was still a significant gain.

It felt like receiving an unexpected gift. Asel smiled bitterly and closed his eyes.

It was good that his awakening was near, but his body was in such bad shape that even opening his eyes was difficult. Moving even a single finger caused the muscles and nerves throughout his body to scream.

But the fact that he could hear the chirping of birds properly meant that his half-severed ear had been restored.

'My master must have done something.'

Asel sighed in relief and opened only one eye halfway. The pain was too intense to open both.

He had no memory of what happened immediately after the teleportation. After entrusting his body to the magic, he had fainted, and when he woke up, the first thing he saw was a pure white ceiling. Since he could feel everything, it didn't seem like the afterlife, so his master must have healed him.

It seemed that his gamble had paid off. The improvised teleportation Formula he had created on the spot was honestly unreliable, but it seemed to have worked.

He was lucky.

It was a miracle that could only be explained that way. Asel thought so, enjoying the soft sensation on his left hand.

"…?"

After a moment, Asel realized that the sensation was familiar and struggled to turn his head slightly.

In his line of sight, he saw Ena, her eyes wide, holding his hand tightly.

Her cheeks were stained with tears, as if she had been crying for a long time. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks were slightly sunken, as if she hadn't eaten in days.

The cold impression she usually gave was nowhere to be seen. She looked so pitiful that anyone would feel sympathy.

It was only natural. Her student, whom she had trusted and sent to the Academy, had suddenly reappeared half-dead. The emotional distress she had felt while Asel was unconscious must have been immense. The tears she had shed while staying by his side could have filled a pond.

Of course, Asel didn't know all these details, but he was aware that he had burdened Ena. So, with a strained smile, he spoke in a cracked voice.

"It's been a while, Master."

At those words, Ena seemed to choke up, her lips trembling as she brought his hand, which she had been holding, to her cheek.

Warmth was slowly returning to his hand, which had been cold for over a week. That fact brought warmth to Ena. She couldn't even think of wiping away her tears as she looked up at Asel.

Asel smiled wryly as he looked at her blue eyes, glistening with tears.

"I'm sorry. I made you worry for nothing."

"No."

Ena barely managed to speak. Her voice was full of tears. She stood up and placed her hand on Asel's cheek, forcing a smile.

"Thank you for coming back."

Ena had not left his side for the week that Asel had been unconscious. When his Mana flared up, she directly suppressed it, and when he was covered in cold sweat, she wiped his body herself without the help of magic. She didn't even sleep, fearing that he might suddenly become critical in the early morning.

And she gave him warmth. Until the Necromancer's Mana, which had been consuming his soul, had completely dissipated, she directly touched his skin to extinguish the cold. None of it was easy, but Ena tended to him without any complaints.

It would be a lie to say that it wasn't difficult, but Ena didn't bother to tell Asel that. It was more important to her that he had safely regained consciousness than to receive any recognition.

She didn't care about any reward.

"Does anything hurt?"

Ena asked, wiping away her tears. Asel replied with a playful tone.

"There's nothing that doesn't hurt."

Ena smiled softly at his jest. She gave Asel a short kiss on the forehead and met his gaze.

"It makes me feel a little better to see you joking. I'd like to ask you what happened right away, but… it's more important for you to rest."

Ena stood up and continued.

"Wait here. I'll bring the Archbishop. Stay still."

She said that and opened the door and went outside. Asel replied that he understood, then lay still, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Click.

Then he heard a sound like the door locking.

"?"

Asel tilted his head.

Fortunately, the Archbishop left after telling Asel that he would be fine if he rested for a few more days. Ena seemed relieved at those words and took a long breath, then brought porridge from the dining hall and fed it to Asel herself.

"…I can eat it myself."

"Be quiet. You're whining that it hurts even to move your arm."

"……."

Having nothing to say, Asel obediently accepted the porridge she offered. The porridge, which contained chicken and vegetables, was surprisingly palatable. The tomato juice she brought as a palate cleanser was also decent.

After finishing his meal, he spent the whole day lying in bed. Asel tried to get out of bed to do some rehabilitation, but every time he showed any signs of doing so, Ena used Word magic to make him lie down.

Asel couldn't resist the magic that forced him to stay still.

He tried to resist by finding gaps in the magic from time to time, but then Ena would directly climb onto the bed and lie on top of him. Thanks to the magic that completely eliminated the weight she felt, he didn't feel any pain no matter how much she lay on top of him.

That was the case now. Asel stroked Ena's hair, which was on top of him, and sighed deeply. Ena enjoyed his touch without any particular complaints.

Even when a nun came into the room to use holy magic, she remained unmoved. Rather, she gave the nun a look as if to tell her to leave quickly.

However, the nun was a person who did not tolerate any negligence in caring for patients. She ignored Ena's gaze and carefully examined Asel's condition. Then, she used holy magic on the areas that needed treatment and gradually calmed his heightened pain.

That alone made him feel better. Asel slightly lowered his head towards the nun while still lying down.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. More importantly, how long do you plan to stay there, Ena? The patient is having a hard time."

"Having a hard time?"

Ena looked down at Asel's eyes and asked. Asel smiled bitterly and shook his head.

"I'm fine. Please be comfortable, be comfortable."

"He says he's fine?"

Ena raised the corners of her lips and replied to the nun. The nun sighed deeply and shook her head.

"I'm just saying this in case, but the patient still needs rest. Please refrain from 'such acts'."

"Such acts?"

"I'm talking about sexual acts."

"……Huh?"

Ena's face turned bright red. Regardless, the nun took the bowls and bottles that Ena had brought and added a word as she left the room.

"By the way, this room isn't soundproof."

"Get out."

"Yes. Goodbye."

The nun chuckled and closed the door as she left. Ena glared at the door the nun had left through and twitched her fingers. Pure white Mana threads extended from her fingertips and manipulated the door's lock.

Click.

The door was locked. Ena checked once to make sure it was properly locked, then collapsed back onto Asel's body, covering his upper body. Then she muttered.

"Don't worry about what she said. I don't intend to do that."

"……."

"Asel?"

"Ah, yes. I'm not worried about it."

Asel answered vaguely. Whether there was something she didn't like about that answer, Ena pouted and tapped her forehead against Asel's chest. Asel wondered why his master was acting like this, but he just brushed it off and shifted his gaze.

He saw the firmly closed door in his view.

'Why does she keep locking it?'

Both when she went out to bring the Archbishop a few hours ago and now. Why does she lock the door in a way that can't be opened from the inside?

"……."

An ominous thought began to creep into Asel's mind.