# 60 - First Meeting

“……♪”

In the end, Asel walked toward the dormitory with Ena. He had tried to persuade her in every way possible, but it was impossible to break Ena's stubbornness. Once a mage set their mind on something, they would never waver. How much more resolute would a grand mage be?

So, Asel gave up on convincing her. Instead, to avoid drawing attention from others, he cast a layered recognition-inhibiting spell and walked toward the dormitory. Ena seemed satisfied with just that, humming a little tune.

Asel looked down at her, chuckling softly before turning his head away.

Yes, they had known each other since they were both young and inexperienced; surely nothing would happen. His master would have no particular thoughts on the matter, so all he needed to do was be careful.

With that thought in mind, he walked alongside Ena.

Before long, they arrived in front of the dormitory. The atmosphere of Wiesel, which he hadn’t seen in a while, was not so different from what he remembered. However, the lack of people was the same, giving it a rather desolate feeling.

Once the midterms began and a significant shift in grades occurred, this place would likely become quite crowded. Until then, it would remain quiet.

“Hmm….”

At the entrance, a maid was sweeping the floor. She had a plain appearance. As she hummed softly, she meticulously swept every corner. Asel avoided her and entered the dormitory.

The first-floor hall, which he hadn’t seen in a while, revealed Lacey, the head maid, sitting at a table and looking over some documents. She seemed displeased about something, her brows slightly furrowed. Ena looked at her and muttered softly.

“……She’s pretty.”

“Master is prettier.”

Asel replied without thinking, then suddenly turned to her, worried that she might feel uncomfortable with the unexpected compliment.

“……R-really? Thank you….”

But Ena showed no sign of displeasure; instead, she murmured in a voice as small as an ant, covering her flushed face with her hair as she quickly headed toward the stairs. She seemed to be in a good mood, judging by her gait. Asel let out a sigh of relief and called out to her.

“My room is up the opposite stairs!”

“…….”

Tap, tap, tap.

Ena turned toward the opposite stairs.

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As he placed his hand on the mana-pattern recognition lock, a clicking sound came from beyond the tightly shut dormitory door.

It was the sound of the lock being released. Asel immediately opened the door and stepped inside, with Ena following closely behind.

The dormitory room he returned to after a long time was not much different from before. Thanks to the various life magic spells he had lazily cast, they continued to operate. The warning spells still seemed sturdy, indicating that no one had attempted to forcibly intrude.

His worries about Grace barging in drunk were completely dispelled. Asel tossed his coat and tie onto the sofa and smiled at Ena, who was exploring the room.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Yeah. Water would be fine.”

“Just a moment.”

Asel left Ena, who was barefoot and wandering around, and went to the kitchen to grab two cups of a suitable size.

He activated Water Flow Magic inside them, filling them with water until just before they overflowed.

Before long, the cups were filled with water that sloshed gently. Asel used telekinesis to carry them and plopped down onto the sofa.

At some point, Ena, who had taken off her coat, approached and carefully settled beside him.

Perhaps because she was barefoot, her tiny wiggling toes were fully visible.

Asel chuckled and handed her a cup. Ena accepted it with a small smile.

“Thank you.”

Asel didn’t respond verbally. Instead, he smiled back and drank the cold water.

As the cold liquid slid down his throat, he felt a sense of calm wash over him. He looked up at the sparkling ceiling and took off the glasses he had been wearing all day. Instantly, a sharp pain shot from his eyes to his brain.

But it was better than before. Back then, it had been hard to even open his eyes; now, it was bearable.

It was probably because the number of open mana eyes was gradually decreasing.

‘All the mana eyes corresponding to the series have disappeared, and now what remains are only those related to formulas or mana.’

He had already grasped the effects of the mana eyes. However, he hadn’t chosen which one yet. Choosing one meant that the effects of the other mana eyes would continue to flicker in his mind. Ideally, he wanted to bundle them all together and create a new mana eye, but that wasn’t so easy.

So, he needed a little more time. To combine the mana eyes into one, he would have to look into a mirror, explore the mana eyes, and extract the intricacies contained within. It was a time-consuming task, accompanied by considerable pain.

Yet he had no intention of giving up. The desire to choose just one had long since flown away. This was a rare opportunity. He wanted to indulge a little.

Asel thought this as he put his glasses back on. The pain subsided, and his vision became clear again.

“……Does it still hurt?”

Ena, who had been watching him intently, asked. Asel smiled wryly and shook his head.

“It’s much better than at first. I think I’ll be able to open my mana eyes before the temporary leave is over, and it should heal nicely.”

“That’s a relief. If you need help, just say so. I’ll be here to help anytime.”

“Sure.”

Asel replied with a smile and adjusted his seating before continuing.

“By the way, I’ll just go down for a moment. I need to inform the head maid that I’ve returned.”

“Ah… okay? Got it. I’ll be washing up.”

“Yes. You can wear anything from the closet in the bedroom… Ah, you can just clean the clothes you wore with magic.”

“Ah, no. I’ll wear your clothes. Just wash this one.”

Ena said, shaking her shirt in her hands. Asel nodded.

“Understood. Do as you please. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay. Come back quickly.”

“Yes.”

Asel replied with a smile and left the room, heading down to the first floor of the dormitory. At that moment, he encountered someone coming up the stairs.

“……Ah!”

A girl with striking ash-gray hair and blood-red eyes. Two sharp fangs glimmered between her slightly parted lips, and her skin, pale to the point of being translucent, sparkled in the light.

She was a girl with a face that could be adored anywhere. Asel grinned and waved at her.

“Elena.”

“Asel!!”

Elena rushed toward Asel, tears streaming down her face. Asel was taken aback for a moment, and before he knew it, she had tightly embraced him, looking up at him with a wet face.

“I heard the news. You were in so much pain, right? Ugh… you’ll be okay now….”

“Uh… yeah.”

Asel scratched his cheek with a sour expression while looking at the top of Elena’s head. He had expected her to show some intense reaction, given her usual emotional nature, but he hadn’t anticipated her to cry. He never thought she would be that empathetic.

‘It would look strange if I started crying here too.’

Asel did cry when he was sad. He wasn’t a cold person with dried-up tear ducts. But this wasn’t a particularly sad situation, and he lacked the empathy to shed tears in resonance with Elena’s emotions. It was a very mage-like thing to rely more on reason than feelings.

So, after a moment of thought, he acted on the rational response he had come up with. He gently patted Elena’s back, waiting for her to calm down. As a result, Elena clung to him even tighter, crying even more sorrowfully.

“Cough.”

The strong pressure on his abdomen made Asel exhale sharply. He could distinctly feel his clothes getting wetter.

Clearly, it was Asel who had come back injured, and it was also Asel who needed comfort. Yet, somehow, in this situation, it felt like Elena was the victim. Asel felt a strange emotion as he stroked the back of Elena’s head.

While he was doing that, suddenly, Elena’s body was pushed back. Asel turned to see a girl pulling her from behind, and he couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“Ugh…?”

“What do you mean ‘ugh’? Get a grip. Anyone would think you’ve just come back from the dead.”

With hair that looked like it was made of melted gold and pink eyes, she was smaller than Elena but had the strength of a warrior that matched her size.

Ellen sighed deeply and loosened her grip on Elena. Elena wiped her tear-streaked face with her hands and sniffled.

“Ugh… that was touching… I’m crying…”

“No, you should be welcoming him with a smile at a time like this.”

Ellen said that and then grinned, extending her hand toward Asel.

“You’ve been through a lot.”

“……Yeah.”

Asel smiled back and took her hand. At that moment, Ellen suddenly pulled Asel in for a strong embrace, just like the northern warriors did. Then, standing on her tiptoes in an awkward position, she patted Asel’s back and whispered in his ear.

“Welcome back.”

Instead of answering, Asel smiled warmly and patted her back. Ellen released him with a satisfied expression. Elena, who had almost wiped away all her tears, looked at her and pouted her lips.

“You cried too! Your eyes are red!”

“Don’t slander me.”

“Ahhh!!”

Elena bared her fangs and threatened Ellen. Ellen lightly ignored her, and Asel burst into laughter at the scene.

As if reacting to the commotion, Sierra walked up from the bottom of the stairs. She widened her eyes and covered her mouth with her hand upon seeing the three of them gathered together.

“Asel… Young Master?”

“Ah, Sierra.”

“You’ve returned. I heard the news that you survived… but I thought you would need to recuperate for a while. I didn’t expect you to come back so soon.”

“I’ve already recuperated.”

“Is that so?”

Sierra approached the three of them and asked.

“By the way, where did you come in from? I was just on the first floor, and I didn’t see you enter, Young Master Asel.”

“I came in using magic.”

“Oh, magic.”

She nodded. Those unfamiliar with magic tended to accept it when they were told it was due to magic.

“Then are you going to stay in the dormitory from today? Or are you just stopping by?”

“I plan to stay.”

“In that case, I’ll clean up right away. If you could wait outside for a moment, I’ll tidy things up nicely.”

“Oh, it’s already been done with magic, so there’s no need. I’ll just accept your goodwill.”

“Is that so… then what about laundry?”

“That’s also done with magic.”

“……You’re quite the all-rounder. I see why mages don’t keep maids.”

Sierra grumbled softly. Asel smiled wryly and replied.

“That’s probably not the case. My master has maids in her mansion.”

“……Y-your master?”

“……? Yes. Why do you ask?”

Asel tilted his head, looking at Sierra, who suddenly averted her gaze.

Glancing sideways, he noticed that Elena and Ellen were also avoiding eye contact with awkward expressions.

He quickly realized the reason.

It was probably because of Ena’s academy destruction incident. It was such a blatant act of destruction that anyone related to the academy would surely know her name. There were even quite a few people who had witnessed her prowess up close. It seemed that the three of them were among those witnesses.

“She’s usually very kind and cute. You don’t need to be too scared.”

“……I did think she cared a lot for her students.”

“She does.”

Asel continued speaking while looking at Sierra, who cleared her throat.

“Ah, by the way, I wanted to ask something. Would it be possible for me to stay in the dormitory with a friend until the academy leave is over?”

“Hmm… normally that wouldn’t be allowed, but… since there aren’t many people residing in Wiesel right now and there’s nothing special on the academic schedule, I think I can permit that much under my authority.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“It’s nothing. But may I ask who will be staying?”

Asel smiled and replied to Sierra’s question.

“My master.”

Suddenly, Sierra’s expression froze.

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At that moment, while Asel was talking with the three people below.

Ena, who had suddenly knocked on the door, burst into the dormitory and narrowed her eyes at the red-haired woman standing beyond it.

“Who are you?”

“Uh….”

“Who are you to come to my student’s room? I won’t allow it.”

Grace, seeing her familiar face, was at a loss for words. Only one thought occupied her mind.

‘Why are you here?’

She had knocked on the door, hoping to sense some presence inside. But an unexpected person had suddenly appeared.

It was enough to drive her mad.

# 61 - First Meeting (2)

Grace and Ena's bond wasn't that deep. They had been on the battlefield together many times, but that was about it. They weren't particularly close, nor did they share many personal conversations. They simply treated each other as comrades belonging to the same unit.

Back then, that was the natural thing to do. The battlefield was a place where comrades who were just beside you could die in the blink of an eye. Rather than building unnecessary attachments and becoming mentally exhausted, it was better for everyone to remain in a businesslike relationship. Both Grace and Ena were practically experts in that regard.

However, the two were slightly different.

Grace didn't initiate conversations with anyone other than Asel. She would say only what was necessary and leave. On the other hand, Ena, while not giving her heart to others, would persistently pry into anything she was curious about.

Asel was one of those targets.

"Hey. How do you cut magic? And how did you twist the Formula with a sword?"

"...I just did it because I could."

"What does that even mean? Explain it in a way I can understand."

"I don't know what you're talking about, coming here all of a sudden, but what I explained is all there is to it. It's like how a person doesn't calculate how much air is around them and how much to inhale before breathing. I just did what I could based on instinct."

"So, you're saying you're a genius."

"..."

Their conversation ended with Asel's silence. After that, the two never spoke again, because Ena died in the battle that followed immediately after.

In a situation where everything was disadvantageous, she single-handedly held back the massive army, postponing the destruction.

That's why Grace had relatively good feelings toward Ena. If she didn't think well of a hero who sacrificed herself, who else would she think well of?

It was also why she felt relieved after learning that Asel had become Ena's disciple. She believed that she could be trusted and that her skills were outstanding, so she would be able to polish the gem that was Asel well.

"..."

But she hadn't anticipated this.

"Who are all these kids?"

"They're my friends I made at the academy."

Inside Asel's dormitory room. Grace, Ellen, and Elena were sitting on the large sofa, and Asel and Ena were sitting opposite them. In a formation that resembled a confrontation, Grace swallowed hard.

While she was organizing her thoughts, receiving Ena's expressionless gaze, Asel, who had returned with the two, had created this situation in an instant. It was fortunate that he didn't seem to be in pain, but she couldn't simply celebrate his return because of Ena, who was standing firmly beside him.

She wanted to check his condition by mobilizing all sorts of means, but she had no choice but to back down at Ena's expression, which seemed to say she would bite anyone who came close.

Before the regression, it might have been different, but the current Grace couldn't even reach Ena's toes. If they fought, she would turn into ashes and be blown away by the wind before she could even draw her sword. Grace knew her place very well.

"Friends..."

While Grace was having complicated thoughts, Ena also narrowed her eyes and looked at the three people sitting opposite her. One blonde woman with a sharp impression, one vampire who looked like a puppy, and one woman with red hair.

Each of them possessed extraordinary Aura. They were just not able to unleash their potential yet because of their age, but if they had the opportunity, they were all talents who could grow explosively. It wasn't for nothing that they had entered the academy. They were worthy of being recognized as Asel's friends.

However, there was one very big problem.

'Why are they all girls?'

Ena didn't know much about the creature called men. But she knew that the beings they called 'friends' usually meant other men. There were occasionally people who made female friends, but generally, their number didn't exceed that of the same gender.

But... right now, there were only women in front of her. For some reason, that grated on Ena's nerves. The emotions that had been excited until just now quickly subsided, and something sticky was slowly rising up.

However, she didn't show it. Even if she didn't like it, they were Asel's friends for now. It was right not to do anything that would make him dislike her.

"...Ena Renatus. Asel's teacher."

She introduced herself with an indifferent expression. In response, the three also revealed their identities.

"I'm Ellen Hargelin. I've been with Asel since the entrance exam, and as the eldest daughter of the Hargelin family, I've volunteered for Labyrinth explorations several times. I plan to participate in the upcoming vacation as well."

"I, I'm Elena von Valdemia! I'm a princess of the Valdemia Principality, and, um... I can use Blood Manipulation Technique!"

"...Grace Bydel. I use Space sword."

"Space sword?"

Ena reacted to Grace's words. She let out a groan once and then pursed her lips as if recalling something.

"Bydel... Ah, I remember. The family founded by that eccentric who combined swordsmanship with the power to manipulate space. I'm sure the surname he received was Bydel."

"That's right. Now, the swordsmanship is only passed down through Bloodline Inheritance."

"I see."

Ena glanced at the sword leaning diagonally beside Grace, but soon lost interest and put on a nonchalant expression again.

There are only two ways to manipulate space. Either interfere with the laws of the world using Formula, or directly tear it apart with force.

The Bydel family chose the latter. They interfere with the points, lines, and surfaces that make up space through Aura, and directly cut through them to ignore the laws of physics.

It was impossible without innate Mana sensitivity, spatial perception, and the unique chaotic Mana that flowed through their blood. That's why only the Bydel family can use Space sword.

Of course, not everyone with the surname Bydel can wield Space sword. Only a few of them, those with the talent, can cut through space with a sword.

Ignoring the distance to the opponent and launching a strike, or the sword strike landing in a completely different place from the trajectory of the sword swing, etc. Their swordsmanship, characterized by unconventionality and chaos, was quite difficult to deal with from the opponent's perspective.

But Ena didn't particularly like Bydel's swordsmanship. Manipulating space could be done with magic, and tearing it apart directly was an inefficient method. She wondered if there was a need to insist on such a crude method.

It might be different if the amount of Aura consumed could be adjusted, but well. It didn't seem like only warriors could do such a high-level technique. Even if they could, wouldn't they have to be at least Masters?

Ena thought so and leaned her body against Asel's shoulder. Asel, without thinking, tilted his body slightly to make it easier for her to lean on him. Grace, who witnessed the scene directly, widened her eyes.

"...Huh?"

Extreme cognitive dissonance ran rampant in her brain. Ena, who hated men, was holding Asel's hand and placing it on her head. She looked like a cat begging to be petted. From her slightly melted expression, you could feel her pleasant emotions.

Looking at it from any angle, she was like a female...

'...No way.'

Grace erased the thought that came to her mind for a moment and forced a smile.

There was no way Ena would do that. She was a woman who avoided physical contact as much as possible, regardless of gender. It was a bonus that she showed a dislike for men even more.

There was no way she would enjoy Asel's touch, even if he was her disciple.

There was no way—

"Do it harder."

"You'll fall asleep if I do that."

"Then you can just take me to bed."

The conversation that followed pierced Grace's heart. Suspicion soon turned into certainty, and something sticky in her heart opened its eyes. The emotions that she had been deliberately suppressing since the regression flooded in an instant, like a dam collapsing.

Once she realized it, she could see things. The shirt that Ena was wearing. Looking closely, it wasn't her size. It was too big for her small frame, leaving one shoulder exposed, and the bottom of the shirt reached above her thighs, covering her underwear.

There was no need to think about whose shirt it was. Grace twitched her lips and alternately stared at Asel and Ena. She read some strange current flowing between them.

Elena and Ellen were the same. The two exchanged glances and then awkwardly smiled and got up from their seats.

"By the way, it's quite late. We'll be going now. The conversation was enjoyable, The Beginning."

"I, it was fun! I'll go first!"

"Yeah."

Ena waved her hand roughly at the two who greeted her and answered. The two also said goodbye to Asel, saying they would see him tomorrow, and quickly left the room. After that, only three people were left in the room.

Asel, who was waiting for midnight to pass so that Aleph could be active again, and Ena, who simply liked his touch. And Grace, who was controlling her sticky emotions. They were in the same place, but their thoughts were all different.

Before long, Grace got up from her seat. She looked down at the two with an expressionless face, and then smiled and fixed the sword she had loosened on her waist.

"I'll go too. It was nice seeing your face after a long time, Asel. See you tomorrow."

"Okay. See you tomorrow, Grace."

Asel replied with a smile. Grace also politely greeted Ena and left the dormitory. The dark hallway welcomed her.

"Hoo..."

Grace took a long breath and stared out the window. The dark forest was faintly illuminated by the moonlight, and the constellations in the sky sparkled beautifully. She thought as she looked at the scene.

In fact, she had no intention of obsessing over Asel in this iteration like she did in the previous one. She suppressed her greed as much as possible, and forcibly controlled her desires that kept springing up. Whenever unhealthy thoughts came to mind, she would use self-hypnosis to control her emotions, saying that she wouldn't do that this time.

All of that was possible because there were no competitors. Grace realized that now. She also clearly realized how arrogant that thought was. She was wearing clothes that didn't suit her from the start.

'There are already many women around Asel.'

Once she realized it, she could see things. In a situation where not only Ena but also potential threats were distributed everywhere, she couldn't afford to be indecisive.

Otherwise, she would be abandoned. Asel would be laughing and chatting with other women and going to buy rings, and she would have to suck her fingers and writhe in agony.

She didn't want that. She would rather die.

So, this time too, she had to be the one laughing at the end, no matter what. The process could be ugly and dirty, but it didn't matter as long as she was the one laughing at the very end.

Fortunately, she had experience. So, pushing away and disposing of the bitches who gathered around Asel wouldn't be that difficult. It was enough to just recall what she had done in the past.

She thought so and turned her head with an expressionless face.

"...I'm going to win this time too."

Her voice was filled with sticky emotions.

# 62 - Academy Reboot

Everyone had left the room. Asel and Ena chatted for a while, and as the moon began to wane, they went to bed.

Since there was only one bedroom, a somewhat awkward situation arose, but they agreed that Asel would sleep on the living room sofa.

Although it was a sofa, it was a top-quality item provided by the academy. It was more than enough for sleeping and even playing on. In the first place, Asel had often fallen asleep on the sofa while reviewing research materials in the living room. There was no reason to hesitate now.

"Still, this is your room, so shouldn't I be the one sleeping in the living room?"

"It's okay. Don't worry about it and sleep comfortably."

Ena looked apologetic, but Asel's attitude was firm. So, Ena reluctantly climbed onto Asel's bed and lay down. She pulled the blanket over herself, turned to her side, and buried her face in the pillow.

"......"

Then, Asel's scent wafted faintly. His traces were deeply embedded in the blanket, the pillow, and the entire bed. Ena unconsciously indulged in the fragrance and curled up her body.

It felt as if she was being embraced by Asel. She often hugged him, so Ena knew how cozy his embrace was, but she had never been hugged tightly on the bed. As a result, her imagination began to run wild.

Ah, Asel, even so, isn't this a bit much? Why are you worrying about such things between us? No, but still... Push me away if you don't like it. It's not that I don't like it... it's just embarrassing. I like it. Haaah...! I don't dislike it either...! Then isn't it okay? It is, but...! Ugh...!

"Asel...! No...!"

"Yes? Did you call me?"

"Hiyat!"

Ena returned from her fantasy to reality at Asel's sudden voice. She jumped up from the bed like a fish leaping out of water, and gasped for breath as she saw Asel's face peeking through the doorway. Asel made a bewildered expression as he looked at her.

"Um... I'm sorry. I seem to have startled you."

"Ah, no! I'm more sorry!"

"......? What are you sorry for?"

"Th-th-there's a reason. More than that, why, why did you come?"

Ena asked, trying to hide her embarrassment and heightened emotions. Asel scratched his cheek and replied.

"I came to tell you not to press the button next to the bed... but I suddenly heard my name."

"Ah, is that so? Okay. I won't press it."

"Yes. Then sleep well."

"U-um. Good night."

Asel bowed his head to Ena's greeting and left the room. Ena, after confirming that his presence had faded away, let out a sigh of relief and slumped onto the bed. Then, she tried to calm her flushed emotions as quickly as possible, took a deep breath, and lay down in a proper posture.

All the sleepiness had vanished due to her pointless fantasies. In order to fall asleep as quickly as possible, she erased all distracting thoughts and counted sheep running around in her head. As she did so, the image of Asel tending to the sheep naturally came to mind. Perhaps because she was buried in his scent, the image of the sheep soon changed to Ena herself.

"......!"

Her eyes widened. Her cheeks were flushed red, and she felt momentarily dizzy from the scent rising from the shirt she was wearing. The smell became even stronger each time she stirred.

"Ugh..."

In the end, she spent a long time awake that night, and only after casting a sleep spell on herself was she able to fall asleep.

In her dream that day, Asel was waiting for her on the bed.

Immediately after entering the bedroom, Asel went to the laboratory and turned on the light instead of going straight to sleep.

Light entered the dark laboratory, making it bright. Asel glanced over the various Formula written on the papers hanging on the wall, and then supplemented the Shadow Magic hanging on the window. Then, the slightly blurry shadow turned black and covered the window.

Shadow Magic had the characteristic of becoming stronger in dark places. Therefore, when the surroundings suddenly became bright like this, there was a disadvantage that the output of the magic decreased. It was a troublesome part in many ways to use in actual combat, but it was not a big problem as long as it was supplemented in terms of daily life.

Asel stared at the darkened window and sat down in his chair.

"......It's a little cold."

The season was already entering springtime. It had been quite a while since the temperature had warmed up, but the remnants of winter still remained. But before he knew it, that feeling had disappeared long ago.

However, it was still chilly in the early morning. Even though the biting cold had disappeared, the air was still cold and the blowing wind was stinging. Even without opening the window, the aftermath came into the room.

He had cast a spell in the bedroom to maintain an optimal environment without being affected by the outside, but not in the laboratory. Except for the defensive Formula, no other magic was installed, so it was directly exposed to the external environment.

It was what Asel intended.

A slightly colder environment than a warm one was more helpful for brain activity. Now was a time when it was easy to create such an environment without the help of magic. So he didn't use any magic.

Perhaps he would install magic here when summer came.

Asel was thinking about such trivial things, and put Aleph on the desk. Then, he put his hand on the old cover and slowly poured Mana into it.

Aleph's activity level would probably be reset after midnight.

As if to prove it, Aleph greedily craved Asel's Mana, but the extent was not as excessive as before. It was not that it was not a burden to Asel, but even so, the Mana that went into Aleph was not enough to worry about.

[Aleph revives.]

Soon after, Aleph opened its eyes, unfolding a blank page. Asel poured cold water into a cup he had placed on his desk and said.

"It was right that it resets after midnight. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to be 24 hours after the activity level is exhausted."

[Didn't I explain it to you?]

"You just said what you had to say and disappeared back then."

[Ah ha.]

Drinking the cold water made him feel energized even though it was early morning. Asel tore off a few papers hanging on the wall and placed them on the desk.

[Then, I will give you a proper explanation on this occasion. The total time I can be active is 30 minutes, and this time will increase as you use me for a longer period of time.]

"You couldn't even stay for 30 minutes yesterday."

[That's because I used most of the absorbed Mana to register and remember Master's Mana. It's not like that now. This Aleph is now in perfect condition. Ask me anything.]

"Okay, well. Let me ask you something I'm curious about before experimenting."

Asel continued, sorting the Formula written on the paper by type.

"First of all, the 'Acclaim of Lightning'. Is it okay to take this right away? Or do I have to go through certain conditions like the Thunderclap Herb?"

[You can just eat it. However, if you drink it on a day when lightning pours down like rain, in a high place, you can resonate with the naturally occurring lightning and gain more Thunderous Energy. It is not a recommended method for ordinary people, but Electromancers can get more help from this.]

"Hmm... is that so?"

[Yes. In addition, the 'Acclaim of Lightning' has a side effect of cleanly healing wounds or diseases all over the body the moment you drink it. So in the past, it was a potion that many people were looking for. However, after the only person who could make it passed away, it seems to have been forgotten and is not well known now.]

"It heals wounds? There wasn't such a Formula or Mana."

[Perhaps it is an effect that occurs because there is Unicorn horn powder among the ingredients needed for production. It is more in the realm of Alchemy than Formula or Mana.]

Unicorn. It refers to a divine beast commonly called a unicorn. It is not a creature that can be seen so often now or in the past, and because it is an animal that likes pure and innocent people, its awareness was much higher than other divine beasts.

This awareness also applied to the same divine beasts, so there were stories that if you killed a unicorn, other divine beasts would chase the killer to the end and tear them to pieces. There were also actual records of this.

Nevertheless, there were still many people who tried to find unicorns. This is because there is a legend that drinking the blood of a unicorn will grant eternal life.

Not only the blood, but other parts of the body also benefited humans, so the value of a unicorn was unimaginably high. Even the fur that was occasionally put up for auction was worth hundreds of thousands of gold coins.

If that was the case for just the fur, what would be the value of unicorn horn powder? Asel could not even guess the value of the potion on the desk.

'......Should I sell it?'

Asel thought so for a moment, but soon shook his head and carefully put the 'Acclaim of Lightning' in the drawer.

There was no reason to sell an item that would help him rise in rank. He might if he was short of money, but thanks to the support of Ena and Wiheim, his life was only abundant. Unless he was going to quit being a wizard, it was right to leave this alone and take it where lightning strikes.

More than that, a day when lightning pours down like rain. It didn't seem like what Aleph said just meant a day with a lot of thunder. Asel asked Aleph about this fact, and Aleph agreed.

[There is an area called 'Carved Cliff' in the Kingdom of Bischoff in the west of the continent. When summer comes, lightning strikes the top of the cliff non-stop for several months. The people of the Kingdom of Bischoff know that summer has begun by seeing the feast of lightning.]

"Kingdom of Bischoff... that's where the Hargelin family is."

[It is one of the nobles representing the kingdom. It is also a family that has produced many warriors thanks to their innate brute strength.]

"Should I visit once during vacation?"

Asel muttered to himself, and then poured Mana into the Formula that had been distributed. Then, colorful patterns and lights floated above each Formula.

It meant that it was working normally. He nodded and turned off all the activated Formula.

The experiment was ready. Asel placed Aleph on the fixture, and to prepare for any possible situation, he plastered all kinds of defensive Formula on the laboratory and his body. Aleph watched the scene and asked.

[Master, may I ask what you are trying to do?]

"Ask away."

[What are you trying to do?]

"I'm just trying to see if you can help in combat."

[It is possible. However, the magic that can be used is limited to Electrification Art depending on Master's aptitude.]

"Who said my aptitude is only for Electrification Magic?"

[Huh?]

Aleph expressed doubt, and Asel smiled and sent Flame Property Magic into Aleph.

[You had dual attributes? This is another amazing thing.]

Next, he poured Mana that had undergone property changes such as Water Stream, Wind, Freezing, Earth, and Shadow in order.

[Oh. Master, something is wrong. It seems that there was a mistake in the process of reading the Mana.]

"I don't think it's a mistake?"

[Then does that mean that all of this is Master's Mana? Does that make sense? Even the multi-attribute holders who existed historically basically did not exceed three magic systems that they could use. But this is.......]

Asel burst out laughing at Aleph's words.

It was just a simple sentence without a face or voice, but for some reason, he felt like he knew what Aleph was feeling. When he first touched her, she was only expressing Electrification Property Magic, so it was no wonder she was surprised.

Asel finally asked, putting in his fluid, pure Mana.

"How is it?"

Aleph was silent for a moment, and then replied in large letters.

[I'm blown away.]

Asel burst out laughing at the cheap expression.

# 63 - Restarting the Academy (2)

Asel's Mana is fluid. Rather than a smooth flow, it feels like a change in properties occurs according to his will. Of course, the flow is smooth as well, but the characteristic of being able to change properties freely is what defines his Mana.

Considering that there are times when the Mana acts against its master’s will, this is a highly advantageous trait. It is an absolute Mana that is not influenced by others and follows only the commands of its master.

Even for a grand sorcerer, manipulating Mana like this is not an easy task. Asel's talent easily surpasses such hierarchical differences. It would be enough to make wizards who struggle in the 5th and 6th tiers for decades foam at the mouth.

It is no wonder that the 5th and 6th tiers are called the graveyard of wizards. While it is possible to perform adequately at that level, if one is satisfied with that, they would not have become a wizard in the first place.

The desire for advancement in tiers is as high as the thirst for knowledge and exploration. This is why there are not a few wizards who seek to ascend tiers through human sacrifices or sinister rituals. It is likely that the perception of wizards today has been greatly influenced by such fallen wizards.

Proper wizards are mostly affiliated with some organization or are sitting alone in a study conducting research. The rumors of mad wizards are just a small minority, but that small number has been frequently exposed to the outside, leading to a shattered perception.

Just Asel alone has already met Zervil and Virsia. Each one of them is a monstrous being, and the magic they used still vividly remains in his mind.

If by any chance he were to meet them again, continuous research was essential to avoid being powerless. The research through Aleph was part of that effort.

[Burning Flame]

On a blank page, Aleph directly inscribes the Formula, consuming Asel's Mana to manifest the magic. Then, a fireball the size of a fist rises above Aleph. Aleph spins it freely and says,

[There are no hindrances to the manifestation of magic. It’s quite a fascinating thing. Even for me, when borrowing the master’s magic, I had to endure some discomfort.]

Asel ignored Aleph's admiration and tried to move the fireball himself. Fortunately, thanks to the fact that the Mana used for the magic manifestation was his, the fireball flew through the air according to Asel's will, emitting heat.

‘Even if I manifest the magic inscribed in Aleph beforehand, direct manipulation is possible.’

While it is possible to manipulate the magic with Aleph's will, it would have been quite troublesome if she had stopped operating while the magic was still active. Fortunately, it seemed there was no need to worry about that. This means there is ample room to actively use Aleph in combat.

The proxy casting of defensive formulas, as well as dual casting, would now be as easy as breathing.

In the battle with the Doppelganger, he had no choice but to take the front line, but with Aleph's help, he might be able to share the front line with warriors and engage in offense and defense according to his will. It already seemed possible, but it was clear that the difficulty would drop significantly.

“Good.”

Asel smiled and said this, continuing to manifest the Formula until Aleph's Mana was completely consumed. Despite her activity level dropping sharply, Aleph did not show any dissatisfaction, seeming excited to follow his commands as she could unleash magic indiscriminately.

As a result, it was concluded that Aleph could use a total of 7 spells in a day without any hindrance.

All of them were based on lower-tier magic. It was not impossible to go beyond that, but if that were the case, it would be much more advantageous in combat for Asel to directly manifest mid-tier magic and let Aleph assist with the rest. Unless in special circumstances, there seemed to be no need to expect mid-tier or higher magic from Aleph.

[If I ask just one more question, it seems that all of today’s remaining activity will be consumed. Do you have something you wish to ask?]

After all the research was done.

With only the minimum power left, Aleph cautiously asked. Asel brushed off the remnants of electric Mana in his hand and pondered deeply. Then, he opened his mouth in a nonchalant voice.

“What benefits can I gain by continuing to attend the academy? Which is better compared to wandering the continent?”

As described, the desire for advancement in tiers is as intense as the thirst for knowledge and exploration for wizards. Asel was no exception.

Reaching the 6th tier at an unprecedented speed in history.

It was not about age. Officially, he was the first to achieve the 6th tier just 9 years after entering the world of magic.

However, Asel had not progressed any further at this point and remained stagnant.

He knew it was greed. To feel anxious about looking up at the 7th tier just shortly after achieving the 6th tier. It would be laughable enough for the seasoned wizards of the Magic Tower to hit him on the head and tell him to stop talking nonsense.

No matter how much innate talent one possesses, there are limits. Even the most renowned geniuses took a long time to achieve the 7th tier from the 6th. Asel had not even spent a fraction of that time.

Instead of feeling anxious, he had enough leeway to live in gratitude for what he had been given.

But Asel could not be satisfied.

It felt like he could reach it with just an outstretched hand.

He did not aspire to become a grand sorcerer. That distant realm was still beyond his grasp.

But the 7th tier felt right in front of him. He just couldn’t grasp it, as if blocked by an invisible veil.

That is why he felt anxious.

It was not yet severe, but no one knew what would happen in the future.

Thus, he had been contemplating recently. With the academy on break, he had ample time to think about the future.

Should he prioritize stability and remain at the academy, or should he drop out and wander the continent, skirting the edge of life and death?

He thought lightly about it and asked Aleph.

“……?”

However, after a long time, there was no response from Aleph. Asel wondered if she had exhausted her Mana in that brief moment and reached out to her.

At that moment, letters began to slowly appear on the previously silent page. As Asel looked down at it, his brow furrowed.

‘……The handwriting is different.’

The sharp letters inscribed on the blank page were unlike Aleph's usual rounded handwriting.

It was like the writing of a dry branch struck by lightning. Thin and sharp. The sizes were jumbled, and the letters were so messy that they were hard to decipher, completely contrasting with the intelligent appearance Aleph usually displayed.

“……Aleph?”

He called her name with a glimmer of hope, but there was no response. The shattered handwriting continued to be inscribed on the page. As Asel sensed something was amiss and stood up.

[The Tomb of the Sage.]

The haphazardly written letters aligned in a single line. Asel realized that it was a feast of numerous words and frowned.

[The Root of Creation. The Beginning of All. Fate. Connection. The Reversed Disciple. The Milky Way. The Star Cluster. Distribution.]

“What is this…….”

[The Child with the Sword. The Woman Stained with Blood. The Girl Swallowed by Destiny. The Bewitched Fox. The Gift. A World Beyond Counting. Hundreds of Millions of Lives.]

[And the Direction You Shall Take.]

Crackle!!!

The moment Asel read the last word, a black current flared up above the book.

In the blink of an eye, the current burned only the letters that had been written and vanished without a trace. Asel was not even given a chance to do anything.

“…….”

The situation felt bizarre to the point of being grotesque. But instead of panicking, Asel tried to calm his mind and observe the current situation.

Suddenly, Aleph had stopped functioning. The intervention of an unknown entity. A feast of words whose meanings were unclear.

And the black lightning.

“…….”

Asel's mind raced furiously. The ‘something’ that had descended, consuming all of Aleph's remaining Mana. It was clear that this entity, whether friendly or hostile, had conveyed some message through Aleph.

The fact that it spoke only in words rather than complete sentences was likely because the Mana embedded in Aleph was running out.

Given that it had only reacted when he asked about the academy, there must have been a trigger. It was more plausible to think that it had been watching this place and was waiting for some device hidden within Aleph to activate rather than having been observing continuously.

It might not be the case, but it was undoubtedly a fact that something unknown had reached out to him.

Neither Aleph herself nor the Demon of Knowledge who created her was responsible. The Demon of Knowledge had long since perished, and the atmosphere and Mana felt nothing like hers.

An intrusion by an unknown third party. Whether it was a high sorcerer, a demon, or some other transcendent being was beyond his guess.

“…….”

He had asked a question to find an answer, yet his head only became more complicated.

Asel's gaze sank deeply.

“The reason the once-mighty Magic Kingdom fell was entirely due to the luxury and corruption of the royal family. However, the real reason was the royal family's demon summoning ritual.”

A week had passed, yet Asel still had not obtained a clear answer. He pondered alone about the words left by the suddenly intervening entity, what they meant, but no suitable answer came to mind.

Aleph also could not provide a satisfactory answer. In the first place, she was unaware that her consciousness had vanished.

“The fallen royalty engaged in corruption and abuse of power, bathing in blood or consuming human flesh. They committed a variety of bizarre acts. All things that demon worshippers would do. Yes, in reality, they worshipped demons.”

What had he seen back then? What kind of entity had reached out to him through Aleph without directly appearing? How high must this being be that even Aleph, created by a demon, could not sense its presence?

What connection could there possibly be between the academy and that entity that made the trigger related to questions about the academy? It was too exquisite to dismiss as mere coincidence.

“……Celine.”

No matter how much he racked his brain, he could not find an answer. Asel let out a deep sigh and rested his chin in his hand, a complicated expression on his face.

“Asel!”

At that moment, Celine, who had been sitting next to him, grabbed his shoulder and shook him. Thanks to that, he snapped back to reality and turned to Celine.

“What?”

Instead of answering, Celine cautiously pointed her finger at the podium. Asel swallowed hard as he saw the history professor standing at the end.

In an instant, he coughed loudly at the mention of the case.

The professor smiled at the sight.

“You seem to have a lot on your mind? You've been staring blankly at the window for a while now. I’ve given you hints several times.”

“Cough……! S-sorry…….”

“It's okay. Your head might be a bit cluttered. After all, it’s been a while since that incident.”

The first day after the temporary break from the academy. A history class held in a chaotic atmosphere without distinguishing between departments. If it were a novice professor, they would be swept away by the atmosphere and unable to do anything, but if a seasoned professor leads, a different dynamic is created.

“Shall we end today’s class here? It’s almost time to finish anyway.”

Professor Weller, the history major, said this as he closed the book. Then, sounds of students releasing the breaths they had been holding could be heard from all around.

Professor Weller's class was known for being easy to listen to and interesting, but it was equally infamous for inducing a strong desire to sleep. Perhaps the students who had been battling the onslaught of sleep were finally liberated.

Weller smiled as he watched the students who followed him in closing their books and stretching.

“Although the atmosphere at the academy is chaotic, I hope everyone works hard. Prepare well for the midterms and the inter-class competition coming up next month. Today marks the start of club membership for first-year students, so don’t forget to join a club that suits you. Class dismissed!”

As Weller finished speaking, he exited the classroom. Asel waited until she was completely out of sight before closing the book he had been reading and exhaling deeply. Celine, who had also closed her book, turned to him and asked.

“What were you thinking so hard about that you couldn’t even hear the professor calling you?”

“I was just pondering a few things.”

“What is it? Tell me everything honestly, big sister.”

“Big sister? What nonsense is that?”

Asel chuckled and stood up, with Celine following closely behind.

“By the way, I heard you were really worried. I heard it from Elena.”

On the first day the news of Asel's disappearance spread, Celine was the only one who went around to find professors, arguing for the validity and inappropriateness of the current situation, and even knocked on the dean's office door. She even went so far as to hire mercenaries to form a search party to find him.

Although her efforts ultimately came to nothing, it was a fact that he was grateful for her concern. However, Celine seemed embarrassed by that fact, avoiding Asel's gaze as she muttered.

“Why is she going around saying that? Making me look bad.”

“Thank you.”

“Forget it! By the way, have you decided which club you’re going to join?”

“Ah…… the club…….”

Asel scratched his head and trailed off.

He had known about the existence of clubs for a while, but he had been so busy recently that he hadn’t thought about it at all. With so much on his mind already, he didn’t have the capacity to worry about clubs.

Not joining a club was not an option. No matter how voluntary the activity may seem, it is technically part of the academy's curriculum. With many academic schedules filled with fighting and bickering, there is a deep intention behind it that students should build their general knowledge in clubs. Therefore, all students, regardless of their year, were required to join a club.

From Asel's perspective, it was just a nuisance, but Celine seemed to be looking forward to it, her face brightening as she crossed her arms.

“I knew it would be like this. You only know about magic, don’t you?”

Celine said with a smile before Asel could even respond.

“Come on. Let’s go on a tour together.”

Author's Note (Author's Afterword)

I recently started playing Monster Hunter, but every time I try to catch that Gore Magala, I feel like all my hair is going to be pulled out. I want to include it in my work and slaughter it.

Still, the game is fun, so for those who haven’t played it, I highly recommend it.

Anyway!

I have a family event tomorrow, so I plan to take a day off. Please show me your understanding.

Also, I have reserved an illustration that I will start working on in mid-April, so please look forward to it.

Have a great day!

Thank you!

# 64 - Reactivation of the Academy (3)

“We engage in activities that calm the mind.”

“…….”

“First, we dilute the ink in a bowl and write with a brush. This way, we can relieve the stress accumulated from our studies and also nourish our minds.”

“I’ll look for another place.”

“Oh, no! At least try the experience!”

Celine shook off the hand of her senior who was trying to hold her back and left the calligraphy club room with Asel. Although a pitiful voice called out from behind, she ignored it with a nonchalant expression and turned to Asel.

“Once we visit the drama club, we’ll have done everything.”

By now, it was around evening. It had already been about three hours since classes ended with history. She was starting to feel hungry, and her stamina had been quite depleted from wandering around so many clubs. There were times when she had been held up for several minutes, trying out activities, so she was now at the point where she wanted to sit down and rest for a moment.

Even Asel, who considered himself to have a fair amount of stamina for a sorcerer, couldn’t hide the signs of fatigue on his face. However, Celine, who usually displayed a poor level of stamina, was still brimming with vitality.

Was it that she consumed less energy when engaging in activities she enjoyed?

There were occasionally people like that. At first glance, she seemed to have been looking forward to the club activities, but now that she was going around checking them out one by one, it was impossible not to feel energized.

Still, seeing her in such a good mood didn’t make him feel bad at all. His stamina was running low, but he could still manage. So Asel smiled wryly and nodded.

“Let’s go, drama club.”

“Come on, this way. If you turn the corner and go down to the basement, there’s a theater. The clubroom is behind it.”

A theater in the basement.

Asel recalled the considerable-sized theater he had seen while wandering around the academy alone and let out a low sound.

The academy had quite a few facilities. The theater was one of them, used by drama club students or for performances by invited external troupes.

A wide stage, an audience area that could accommodate many people, and various devices to illuminate the stage. What Asel had seen was an empty theater, but its grandeur was still conveyed. Even Asel, who had seen plays frequently in Wiheim, couldn’t help but be amazed at its scale. A drama club that regularly rented such a place was indeed more interesting than the other clubs he had visited so far.

“If you go straight from here… there it is!”

As they walked while talking, they soon arrived inside the theater. Celine, who had been walking along the outer path, spotted a door at the end and shouted. Then she hurriedly walked over, looking back at Asel.

“Hurry up!”

She looked much more excited than when they were checking out other clubs. It was probably because she had had her heart set on this place from the beginning.

Asel chuckled and followed closely behind her. Celine poked him in the side with her finger and then knocked on the door of the drama club room.

“Come in~”

The response came immediately. Celine cleared her throat and cautiously opened the door to enter.

“Welcome~ Are you a prospective member? Or just observing?”

Since it was late, the drama club room was not very crowded. A relaxed-looking female student waved at them and spoke. Celine replied in a confident voice.

“For now, I’m just observing. I plan to apply tomorrow after looking around today.”

“Hmm… I see. You’re quite cautious, huh? Are you from the Magical Department?”

“Yes. I’m Celine, a first-year.”

“I’m Asel.”

Asel bowed his head in response to Celine’s introduction. The female student exclaimed and clapped her hands.

“Oh my, the Asel from the Magical Department? The disciple of the great sorcerer who shook the academy?”

“……Yes, that’s correct.”

“Oh my, oh my. A celebrity has come. Are you doing well? It’s been quite a while since that incident, hasn’t it?”

She stood up and asked. Asel nodded with a somewhat awkward expression at her unexpectedly friendly demeanor.

“I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.”

“No need to mention it~ From what I’ve heard, you’ve been through a lot. An 8th-tier Necromancer isn’t something you come across every day, and just surviving that is a miracle. You’ve done well~”

Her speech was unusually drawn out. However, rather than being bothersome, it was rather pleasant to listen to, perhaps due to her gentle voice. She gave off a feeling of being as accommodating as her appearance suggested.

For some reason, Evelyn, who had been left behind at the mansion, came to mind.

“By the way, it’s a bit awkward standing here talking, so why don’t we sit down? Come over here~ Do you prefer coffee or tea?”

She pointed to an empty sofa. The two of them sat down and answered.

“I’ll have coffee.”

“Me too.”

“Got it~ Just wait a moment~”

She began to make coffee in the corner of the club room while humming a tune. First, she poured hot water over a cup and took out the coffee beans to grind them herself. Asel watched the scene in admiration.

It wasn’t that she made coffee well. Both the creation of the water and the grinding of the beans were done through magic. She formed boiling water with basic magic and created a high-pressure stream with the remaining mana. Then she simply put the beans in and ground them.

It was quite a systematic use of mana. Contrary to her gentle appearance, the magic she used belonged to the more aggressive side of the Water Flow Magic. Considering that most of the Water Flow Magic Asel had seen was focused on defense, this was quite unusual.

‘Is she affiliated with the Cordelia Magic Tower?’

The Cordelia Magic Tower primarily dealt with Water Flow Magic. Unlike other towers that pursued only one path, it was a unique organization that continued to research Water Flow Magic by dividing it into defensive and offensive branches. She was probably part of the faction that studied the offensive side.

Currently, the only Water Flow Magic that could be learned outside of a magic tower was defensive magic. It seemed that the characteristics of Water Flow Magic, which were widely known, were defensive and passive, which was why only that knowledge was shared from the tower.

Thus, there was no need to doubt her affiliation.

She was the first magic tower sorcerer Asel had seen since Celine. He focused on remembering the formulas she demonstrated with sparkling eyes.

“Hey, you’re going to poke a hole in Reine’s back at this rate. Why are you staring so hard?”

At that moment, a cheerful-looking man sat down across from them. His bright blonde hair sparkled under the lights, and his inorganic blue eyes clearly reflected their faces.

He smiled widely and continued speaking.

“Or what? Did you fall in love at first sight? Is that your type?”

“…….”

“……If you stay silent, I’ll feel even more awkward. You two are such boring juniors.”

He said this and picked up a snack from the table, crossing his legs.

“I’m Wyman Ormond, a third-year from the drama club. You came to observe, right?”

“…….”

“Hey… guys? That was just a joke, can you please respond? If you keep this up, I’ll look like the bad guy.”

“Stop bothering the freshmen and come out, Wyman. Why are you acting like a slacker?”

Reine, who had brought the coffee, sat down next to Wyman and spoke. Wyman replied with a look of grievance.

“I’m playing a third-rate villain this time. I have to practice like this even in my daily life…”

“If that’s the case, you might as well practice by looking at the script. And when are you going to practice your swordsmanship? You know there’s a year-end competition next month, right? What if you lose to a junior?”

“Ah, stop nagging! Take care, juniors! I’m off to practice!”

Wyman suddenly appeared and then suddenly disappeared like the wind. Asel watched his retreating figure and accepted the coffee that Reine handed him, bowing his head.

“Thank you.”

“No problem~ Since you came all this way, I should treat you to this much~ By the way, as for observing… there’s still a lot of time before you get on stage, so there’s not much to show you. Do you want to watch our members practice?”

“Yes, that sounds good!”

Celine replied. Reine looked at her with a fond expression, and after chatting until she finished her coffee, she stood up.

“Then let’s go. I’ll show you around.”

What is the soul? Is the essence of a person made up of the body or the soul? How can one even define the soul? Is it a free spirit trapped in the prison of the body? Or is it an intangible energy that is reconstructed according to the body?

Necromancers believed that the soul was the essence of existence. Therefore, they manipulate the souls of the dead to produce powers similar to those when they were alive or undergo modifications to gain even greater powers. The body was a prison that contained the limits of the soul, so they believed that once it was gone, there would be no limits to their power.

On the other hand, corpse manipulators believed that the body was the essence of existence. Their actions of resurrecting already dead corpses to produce the same or even greater powers may seem similar to those of necromancers at first glance, but the underlying principles were entirely different. Since the soul had departed from the body, they believed that filling that void with foul energy would grant them even higher transcendence.

Similar yet different. The same yet wrong.

Thus, the two sorcerers generally did not get along well.

Bircia and Zervil were no exception.

In the imperial capital. A vast city filled with buildings, luxury, and intrigue, the best city on the continent.

Inside a rather upscale restaurant. Zervil, wrapped in a magic-inhibiting spell, opened his mouth as he looked at Bircia sitting across from him.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Have you been well?”

“Shut up. Your mouth smells like rotting corpses.”

“Oh dear. Despite appearances, I do take care of myself. My apologies.”

Zervil shook his head with a bitter smile at Bircia’s curt response.

His personality changes depending on the grade of the drugs he consumes. If he takes cheap drugs, his brain slows down a bit, but he becomes aggressive. If he takes high-quality ones, he becomes calmer than usual, and the power of his magic doubles.

Currently, Zervil was in a state where he had consumed the highest grade of high-quality drugs. He was calm enough to overlook Bircia’s disdainful attitude.

He looked most similar to the Zervil from years ago, before he changed his body into that of a corpse, when he could still call himself ‘human.’ Bircia momentarily overlapped his image with that of Zervil from years ago and clicked her tongue.

A gentleman yet cruel, merciful yet alien sorcerer. A madman who abandoned his humanity in pursuit of transcendence, seeking to challenge divinity by making himself a sacrifice. The perpetrator of an unprecedented massacre in history.

Despite his neat appearance, he was a man who had been rotten from the start. Similar to Bircia, yet with a different feeling. That was why Bircia, regardless of the magic system, did not particularly like him.

Had it not been for the ‘saint’s’ call, she wouldn’t have met him like this. She sighed deeply while pressing her hand against her aching shoulder.

Then Zervil glanced at her shoulder, wrapped in bandages, and burst into laughter.

“Still not healed? You must have been hit by quite a powerful spell.”

“I was hit by my own magic. I didn’t expect the artifact to reflect the attack.”

“Then you should be more careful. I told you, it’s fine to toy with your opponent, but you need to thoroughly stomp them down first, right? I don’t know who got you, but you won’t tell me even if you die, so I don’t know their capabilities, but there’s a saying, isn’t there? What was it… a cornered rat bites a cat?”

“I’m not particularly fond of that proverb.”

Bircia leaned back against her chair, exhaling deeply. Although a feast was laid out on the table, she didn’t touch it and stared at the empty seat.

The saint, who was the reason for the gathering, had yet to arrive. She knew he was busy with personal matters, but she couldn’t help but feel displeased. She crossed her legs and muttered in an irritated voice.

“Damn it… when is he going to show up?”

“He’ll come on his own. Just eat. It would be a waste to leave it.”

“I wouldn’t eat this cheap food even if you gave it to me.”

“Oh… royalty really is different. Your taste is quite picky.”

“Royalty, huh…”

Bircia spat that out, then smiled and looked back at Zervil.

“So, how’s it going with digging into my brother’s disciple?”

“It’s going well. Our loyal demon-worshippers are bringing in good information.”

“…….”

“Fortunately, it seems to be the person I’m looking for. I didn’t expect them to have grown this much; it’s quite a nostalgic feeling. How regrettable it would have been if I had killed them there.”

“So? You’ve obtained the information, so what are you going to do? Is that it?”

“Of course not. Since I let them go, I need to see the results of their growth myself.”

Zervil smiled and continued.

“I’m thinking of launching a proper attack.”

“……That’s very much like you.”

“Thank you for the compliment. By the way, what about you? The plan to eradicate the royalty. When do you intend to finish that? Ena is still walking around just fine. When are you going to kill her and when do you plan to reap the rewards?”

“I came here for that.”

Bircia turned her head toward the approaching presence and spoke.

“The saint said he could help me.”

Where her gaze was directed.

A man dressed in a white priest’s robe, with red hair flowing in the wind, was walking toward them. Bircia looked at him with a disgusted expression and clicked her tongue.

Though he appeared as one, what constituted him was not one. A being who serves the demon of parasites and has directly received its grace. Calling himself a saint, he was a colony of hundreds of thousands of parasites, each with its own separate consciousness and actions.

[It’s been a while, everyone.]

The one responsible for the downfall of the Magic Kingdom smiled at the two.

From the corners of his mouth, parasites that resembled spiders crawled and clung to him.

# 66 - The Eye of Omnipotence

The news that Asel was on the brink of death naturally reached Evelyn as well. However, it wasn't immediately after the event. Ideally, she should have been informed right away, but Asel had asked to relay the news only after everything was over, so the letter had only just arrived now.

Evelyn had faced all sorts of adversities alongside Asel. Naturally, there had been many times when they were in so much pain that they felt like they might die, and she knew what emotions they had felt during those times.

That was why she made such a choice. It would surely be better to convey the news after everything was over rather than live each day in anxiety, wondering whether he was dead or alive.

Even now, she did not regret that choice. However, it seemed that Evelyn had a slightly different perspective.

[Why would you do something so reckless! I sent you to the academy, and instead of studying, you're just fighting!]

It was an unintended battle. From the start, it had been one-sided. The semester had just begun, and there was nothing to study or do.

[If you die, I’ll follow you to the afterlife. I’ll pull out all your hair, so you better be ready!]

“...I’m not planning to die.”

Asel muttered this as he continued reading the letter. Most of it was filled with worry and comfort. At the beginning, she had written harshly, but in the middle, there were smudged letters, as if she had shed tears. It was a glimpse of her fragile nature.

As he read through the letter, he soon reached the final paragraph. He chuckled as he read her crooked handwriting.

[I heard you’re all better now, but just in case, I sent you some medicine! So take it and get your strength back! You have to come down during the break! I have a present for you, so look forward to it!]

Was the exclamation mark at the end of each sentence for emphasis, or was it just a habit? Whatever the reason, it was cute enough not to bother him.

[Chirp!]

When he looked up to meet the sparrow's gaze, it opened its abdomen and poured out various forms of elixirs. Each one was of high quality. They were probably made by a famous apothecary in Wiheim. He recognized a few familiar items among them.

“Thank you.”

Asel said this while petting the sparrow's hard head. The sparrow tilted its head, adjusting its angle to make it easier for him to pet it. This indicated that its sense of self had developed quite well. Although its form was unusual, it seemed there was nothing wrong with it.

‘It can’t be a new prototype… Could it be that my sister made this herself?’

He already knew that Evelyn was studying Magical Engineering. However, he thought she hadn’t been at it long enough to create anything complex. Had she grown enough to be able to make a Messenger bird already?

Asel asked the sparrow about it, and it vigorously nodded in affirmation.

This made Asel burst into laughter.

Both siblings had exceptional talents. What kind of parents would want to sacrifice such children? Did they know about their talents and still intend to offer them up?

‘That can’t be it.’

Asel shook his head as he recalled the vague memories of his parents. They were a couple with no knowledge of magic or engineering. There was no way they could have recognized talent. They were just scoundrels.

“Did you finish reading the letter?”

Ena asked as she watched Asel neatly fold the letter. Asel nodded while putting one of the elixirs with awakening effects into his mouth.

“Yes. I’ll send a reply right away.”

“Okay. Take your time.”

Ena replied as she tied her hair back tightly. Asel took out a suitable piece of stationery and quickly began to write.

Before long, the letter was complete. Asel folded it twice and placed it into the sparrow's abdomen. Despite its small size, it had a decent capacity, and the letter slipped right into the storage compartment. He tapped the sparrow's small head to replenish its used Mana and smiled.

“Thank you for your help.”

[Chirp chirp!!]

The sparrow replied loudly and immediately flew toward the sky. As the sparrow disappeared at subsonic speed, its trajectory was etched in the air. Asel looked down at the now-empty training ground and closed the window. Ena approached him.

“Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s start right away.”

There was no need to ask what they were starting.

After nodding once, Asel squeezed his eyes shut and slowly opened them again. His pupils were now tinted with a color similar to the sky.

It was a significant change from his usual dark eyes. Inside, Mana swirled in a spiral.

The intense flow was so vivid that it could be seen from the outside. This was a common characteristic of the activated Mystic Eye.

The Mystic Eye, which filtered through dozens, even hundreds of possibilities, had now produced this final result.

The functional Mystic Eye.

From the moment it was activated, it possessed the insane ability to ignore all external sorcery damage and instead use it as its own power. With this, Asel gained an overwhelming advantage in battles against sorcerers.

It was a Mystic Eye so powerful that it could be considered impossible to designate a specific ability. From the moment it was activated, it could nullify not only magic but also sorcery, blood arts, and even Hetero abilities.

Of course, there were costs. There was a short time limit of five minutes, a continuous headache, and if the opponent was a high-ranking sorcerer who had mastered Imagery, the Mystic Eye would extinguish with just one spell.

Even when he tested it with Ena, her lower-level magic, infused with Imagery, had forced the Mystic Eye to deactivate.

Yet, despite that, it remained an insane ability. Nullifying a high mage's attack without any cost even once would provide a significant advantage in battle.

While there was a time limit, using it beyond that would lead to the eyes, brain, and Mana Core being fried, leaving him with no way out.

So, to extend this time as much as possible, he had been conducting ongoing research with Ena for several days.

“How much Mana did you reduce?”

“...About half.”

Ena asked while staring directly into Asel's eyes, and he answered with a slight frown.

The moment they leaned in even slightly, their lips were close enough to touch, but both were so consumed by their curiosity as mages that they felt no embarrassment about the act.

Thump thump thump thump!!

For some reason, Ena's heart seemed to be racing wildly, but Asel had no time to notice.

As the moment passed, the Mystic Eye had been activated for over five minutes. The research to reduce the amount of Mana consumed during activation, significantly lowering its performance while extending its duration, had yielded considerable results.

When they first tried reducing it by 10% or 20%, the time extension barely reached a few seconds, but reducing it further had increased the duration to minutes.

Ena tried her best to ignore her pounding heart and asked Asel.

“Shall I go?”

“Yes.”

As soon as she heard Asel's answer, she unleashed a shock spell from her fingertip. It was a simple lower-level spell that stripped away Imagery and Uniqueness. The moment it touched Asel's body, it vanished like it was burning, and Asel's Mana increased. He exhaled deeply and nodded.

“This time it’s a mid-level spell. If it’s too much, tell me right away.”

Ena created a white flash at her fingertips. Then, she carefully tapped Asel's chest. Again, the magic disappeared, and Asel's Mana increased. However, at that moment, Asel squeezed Ena's side with his hand while closing his eyes tightly.

“Eep!”

Startled by the sudden touch, Ena gasped, and Asel, enduring the burning sensation, spoke as if he were spitting it out.

“I don’t think I can use it for more than eight minutes. Otherwise, my eyes will melt.”

“Oh, okay. Just a moment.”

Ena quickly composed herself and placed her hand over Asel's eyes. Instantly, the wild Mana that had been rampaging like a runaway horse calmed down, and the burning sensation gradually subsided. Asel exhaled deeply and slowly opened his eyes.

His blue-tinted pupils had returned to their usual black. Ena, unable to meet his gaze, turned her head away and spoke.

“Even if I reduce the Mana consumption by half, I can still block up to mid-level spells. High-level spells, though…”

“It’ll be difficult. It might be different if the hierarchy increases, but for now, this seems to be the best we can do.”

Asel smiled with a rather satisfied expression and released his grip on Ena's hand. A sound of disappointment escaped Ena's lips, and he thought as he stroked his lips with his hand.

‘If I go all out, I can defend against all attacks except those infused with Imagery for five minutes. Reducing the Mana consumption by half extends it by three minutes, but I can only defend against mid-level spell attacks.’

It was a disappointing result, but Asel was somewhat satisfied. There was still plenty of room for further exploration, and since the Mystic Eye itself grows according to the user's level, he had not yet reached its peak.

Even so, this was its performance.

Except for high mages, Asel would be invincible against sorcerers for the next five minutes.

There was no doubt that it was an ability that ranked among the highest of Mystic Eyes. He whispered to Ena, who had helped him with his research, with a smile.

“Thank you, Master. I received a lot of help thanks to you.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m glad.”

Ena replied and then awkwardly got off Asel's lap, smoothing out her wrinkled shirt.

Asel's shirt, which now felt like everyday wear. Originally, it would have been filled with only Asel's scent, but now, Ena's fragrance had begun to mix in.

The shirt Asel was wearing had also belonged to Ena just a few days ago.

She had magically cleaned the clothes she wore, but she hadn’t erased her own scent, so now Asel's body was distinctly infused with both his and Ena's fragrances.

Ena felt a small sense of guilt and satisfaction at this fact.

What could be the reason? Where was this feeling coming from?

It was now a question that was beginning to take shape. A feeling Ena had never experienced throughout her life. She had started to realize this fragment of emotion, though she wouldn’t show it.

‘...What should I do, really.’

She couldn’t keep denying her feelings forever. It might be better to face her inner self and gain a complete understanding. Then, interacting with Asel would become much easier than before. Irina’s comment about considering their ages lingered in her mind for some reason, but… honestly, she didn’t care about that.

‘Right, for the next week, I’ll focus on my inner self rather than magic. I was told by my teacher to manage my emotions well.’

With that thought, Ena nodded her head resolutely, her mouth pressed shut. Just as Asel tilted his head at her cute appearance, something flew in from outside the window and landed.

“...?”

It was a Messenger bird. Unlike the sparrow that had come before, this one took the form of a falcon. It pecked at the glass as if asking to have the window opened. Asel glanced at Ena, who was making a fuss in her seat, then stood up to let the Messenger bird into the room.

[......]

The falcon, without making any sound, calmly retrieved a piece of paper from its feathers and placed it on the floor. Then, as if it had no lingering attachments, it flew away vigorously through the open window.

It was an absurd situation considering that Messenger birds usually wait until the recipient has finished reading the letter. Asel let out a hollow laugh as he watched the falcon soar into the sky, then picked up the letter that had fallen to the floor.

On the luxurious envelope, someone’s name was written in clear letters.

[To Ena Renatus]

It was a letter addressed to Ena. Asel immediately handed the letter to her.

“Master. A letter has arrived from Wiheim.”

“...From Wiheim?”

Ena, who had been wearing a foolish expression, suddenly stiffened at the mention of Wiheim. She clicked her tongue and tore open the envelope Asel had handed her, then began to read the contents inside.

“...Hah.”

The corners of her mouth twisted upward.

# 67 - The Simple Labyrinth

The day after receiving the letter. Ena hurriedly finished her preparations to return to Wiheim. She wore the shirt and robe she usually donned, pulling her stiffly brimmed hat down low. Because she had been preparing since dawn, Asel was able to watch her leave.

It was a sudden return. Ena, who had acted as if she would stay here indefinitely, was now leaving because of just one letter. What could possibly be written in that letter to make her leave so urgently? Even when he asked, she didn’t provide a clear answer, leaving Asel feeling frustrated.

“Family matters.”

No matter how much he pressed, that was all he got in response.

‘Family matters.’

Asel had known for a long time that Ena had no parents. Considering her age, it was to be expected, but she belonged to a long-lived race. Therefore, even excluding the realm of a grand mage, her parents must also have been long-lived. If not, Ena couldn’t possibly be a pure-blood of that race.

Thus, her parents would also have to be free from the constraints of time. If such individuals currently did not exist, what could that mean?

They had been killed. Or perhaps they had committed suicide.

Either way, it wouldn’t have been a good thing for Ena. If she mentioned family matters, it was highly unlikely that it was merely a pretext.

“......”

Suddenly, the face of Vircia, who had called Ena her sister, came to mind. A grand mage like Ena, but on a different path. A being standing at the opposite end. Surely, she must occupy a part of Ena’s complicated family history.

...So many thoughts arose, yet nothing was clear. Asel sighed deeply as he looked down at Ena approaching him.

“I’ll be back.”

“Please don’t get hurt.”

“If I get hurt, a whole city would have already been destroyed.”

“...That’s true, but it’s still a fact that I’m worried.”

Instead of answering Asel, Ena smiled softly and opened her arms. Asel realized what she wanted and broke into a smile in return.

Tightly.

Asel gently embraced Ena’s wide-open arms. Ena rested her chin on his shoulder and whispered softly in his ear.

“Don’t get hurt either. Let’s go to the sea together when the break comes.”

“Are we going on a trip?”

“Yeah. Just the two of us.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Ena smiled and lightly kissed Asel on the cheek. Then she gently pushed him away and threw herself out of the open window.

Swoosh!!

Her body became a white bolt of lightning, slicing through the sky. Asel stood by the window, watching her figure until he bitterly smiled and headed to the bathroom. The person who had always been by his side was gone, but still, a new day began.

It was the second day of the academy’s opening.

“I’ll join!”

The day after the club tour. Celine took Asel with her to the theater club room once again and shouted that. Reine smiled brightly and handed them the membership forms. The content was quite simple.

Aside from the restriction that they wouldn’t leak the play’s content outside the club and wouldn’t disclose their assigned roles to others, there weren’t many limitations. Celine immediately took out a pen from her pocket and signed the membership form, and Asel also grinned as he inscribed his name.

Honestly, there wouldn’t be much problem with any club. Since there were designated activity times, they could easily secure enough time for magic research or experiments. In that regard, the theater club was a pretty good choice.

It was quite an active club, but aside from club hours, the practice was voluntary, and the atmosphere was friendly. There was hardly any bullying from the seniors, so there was no pressure. The gender ratio was also decent, so compared to other clubs where there were mostly girls, there wouldn’t be any feeling of being overwhelmed.

In simpler terms, it was a place where they just had to do their part. Asel smiled as he handed the completed membership form to Reine.

“I’m done.”

“Thank you~ Now you’re a proper member of the theater club. If any other club members bully you, just tell us right away! We’ll smash them!”

Reine said, clenching her fists. Asel burst into laughter, and in response, Celine handed her completed membership form to her as well.

With that, their positions were set.

At that moment, Reine nodded with a sly smile. Simultaneously, five seniors appeared from behind the sofa where the two were sitting. They placed their hands on Asel and Celine’s shoulders, their expressions clearly showing excitement as they spoke to Reine.

“Senior, they’ve become new members, right? Can we hold the initiation ceremony?”

“Proceed.”

“Yay!”

Reine replied with a grin like a dark figure. Then the five cheered and forcibly pulled the startled two to their feet.

“Hey! You come out too!”

A girl with a sharp voice shouted, and from the corner, golden fox ears perked up. Asel recognized the owner of those ears and absentmindedly muttered her name.

“Saya?”

“Oh, long time no see, Asel.”

Thud, thud, the sound of footsteps echoed as Saya emerged from the corner.

It wasn’t her footsteps. It was the sound of a muscular woman who was lifting her up. Taller than Asel by a head, her pumped muscles seemed to writhe as if alive. She was an impressive woman with a short skirt that contrasted with her grotesquely heaving chest muscles.

“You’re too light. Eat more.”

She said, flexing her thigh muscles. Saya, looking embarrassed, covered her face with her hands and muttered.

“I had two bowls for breakfast…”

“Eat five bowls!”

“That’s monstrous, Senior Hargelin!”

Unable to hold back, Saya shouted. Asel tilted his head, recalling the name of the giant.

“...Hargelin?”

A familiar family name. It was the same surname as Ellen’s. But unlike Ellen, who was petite to the point of being diminutive, she had a body that could easily be compared to an orc.

Was it really the same bloodline? He couldn’t help but doubt it.

“Hmm? It seems you know me.”

As if confirming his reaction, she set Saya down and walked toward Asel. Asel looked up at her with a puzzled expression and replied.

“I’m acquainted with Ellen. So I must have unconsciously mentioned the family name. I apologize.”

“No, that’s not a problem. I’m not the type to get angry over a noble’s surname being mentioned carelessly. But Ellen…”

She bared her teeth in a cheerful smile.

“To think our cute youngest is friends with you. This is quite a celebration. The child who used to follow me around calling me ‘sister’ has already entered the academy.”

“...Is she your biological sister?”

“Of course. She’s the youngest of our family. I have a picture. Would you like to see it?”

Without waiting for Asel’s answer, she pulled out a small photo from her pocket and showed it to him. Asel chuckled as he looked at the Hargelin family members in the photo.

Each one of them had an impressive physique. To exaggerate a bit, one could believe they were an orc family, as they all boasted robust bodies.

Among them, only Ellen stood out as small. Hanging on the shoulder of a man who looked like her father, she wore a bright smile, appearing still somewhat naive, but her height looked no different from now.

“It’s already a five-year-old photo. Those were nostalgic days.”

She said, wiping away a tear.

Five years ago. Had Ellen not grown since then?

Just as Asel burst into laughter at the thought of Ellen’s frail body, the woman in front of him suddenly hardened her expression and placed a large hand on top of Asel’s head.

“You. You’re not imagining something strange, are you? You’re not thinking of teasing our youngest, are you?!”

“...I thought she was cute.”

“She is cute. You have good eyes.”

She smiled, withdrawing her hand from Asel’s head. Then she put the photo back in her pocket and looked down at Asel.

“She’s particularly sensitive. Now that you’re friends, you must take responsibility for her until the end.”

“You seem to cherish her a lot.”

“There’s no reason not to cherish my sister.”

Asel chuckled at her sincere answer.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Great! Then shall we go for the initiation ceremony!”

She lifted Asel high and shouted. Just then, Saya and Celine were also grabbed by other members and dragged out of the club room.

“W-What’s the initiation ceremony? Where are we going?”

“Ugh, I feel sick from being held for so long…”

Ignoring the grumbling Saya and Celine, they followed the giant out of the club room. The giant turned to Reine and shouted loudly.

“Reine! We’ll be back!”

“Fufufufu…”

She let out a dark smile.

The giant’s name was Roger Hargelin. He was the top student of the third-year knight department and one of the rumored strongmen who could wield a massive greatsword as if it were part of his body. His rank was Intermediate Expert, but thanks to the Hargelin family’s unique brute strength, he was capable of fighting even against Advanced Experts.

He seemed to have quite a reputation, as Leonah chattered away to Asel, who was perched on Roger’s shoulder.

“Despite his fearsome appearance, he takes good care of his juniors. Unlike typical nobles, he cherishes his family dearly. There’s no need to be scared.”

“Hahaha! You’re openly gilding my face! Leonah, think about what you want to eat for dinner tonight! I’ll treat you!”

“Oh yeah!”

Leonah jumped up and down in joy. Asel chuckled as he looked down at her.

Behind the leading Roger, he could see Saya and Celine walking with their arms held tightly.

The atmosphere wasn’t too harsh. Saya was earnestly answering a senior’s question about the latest cosmetics, while Celine was explaining the ecosystem of the Aurora Magic Tower to another senior mage.

It was quite a friendly atmosphere. Everyone’s expressions were bright.

Though they called it an initiation ceremony, it seemed they wouldn’t be doing anything too brutal. Only then did Asel relax his expression and slump against Roger’s shoulder. He then gazed at Saya’s face, lost in thought.

‘Is this the first time I’m seeing her since the group project?’

After forcibly evacuating everyone due to Vircia’s attack, he had heard that they were lying in the academy’s infirmary. However, he hadn’t visited, so today was the first day he was seeing her since then.

The reason he hadn’t visited was simple. He thought he would go later, but after getting into serious research on magic, he forgot. As a result, when he hurried to the infirmary, she had already been discharged for a long time.

That said, it felt a bit awkward to go all the way to the dormitory, so he thought he would talk to her when they met later, and that thought had continued until now. Since their departments were different, they hadn’t had the chance to run into each other at the academy.

Still, he was glad to meet her like this. He never dreamed she would choose the theater club, but considering her beautiful appearance, it wasn’t entirely out of place. Perhaps she chose it to engage with popular culture as a merchant.

Whatever the case, it was all good.

Her previously gaping wound in her abdomen seemed to be fine. It didn’t appear to be an injury that would be impossible to recover from. That was quite a relief.

However, aside from that, Saya seemed to feel a sense of guilt toward Asel. Whenever their eyes met, she would bow her head as if she were a sinner. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand, so Asel sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

‘I don’t really plan to say anything.’

There’s a saying that even a brush of clothing can create a bond. In a similar vein, Asel intended to maintain his connections with those he met during the group project. However, given how Saya was acting, it seemed he would have to keep his distance for a while.

Ultimately, it was a problem that time would solve. Perhaps it could be resolved during this initiation ceremony.

‘I hope it’s as soon as possible.’

Asel absentmindedly fiddled with the Ice Peony he had slipped onto his left ring finger as he thought that.

“We’ve arrived.”

At that moment, Roger, who had been carrying Asel, set him down and spoke. Asel opened his eyes and scanned the surroundings.

“......?”

His expression changed subtly.

The scent of books brushed against his nose. The sound of pages turning echoed from all around, and various magical books flew through the air, finding their own places. Spirits perched on the bookshelves stared down at those standing on the floor with one eye half-open.

It was an incredibly familiar place. Celine blinked and murmured softly.

“...The library?”

As she said, this was the academy’s public library. A static place that didn’t match the word initiation ceremony. It wasn’t a suitable place to cause a commotion.

‘Surely they’re not planning to make us read dozens of books about plays under the guise of an initiation ceremony.’

Asel thought that and turned to Roger. Just then, a bespectacled librarian approached Roger and whispered softly.

“Y-You’re here for the initiation ceremony, right? Then please hurry… we can’t cause a commotion…”

“Hmm. I know. Let’s do it quickly and get out.”

Roger nodded at the librarian and then led the group down to the library’s basement.

Compared to the upper floors, the number of books on the shelves was fewer, and the content was filled with dull books. As a result, there were far fewer people than on the upper floors.

“Hmm.”

Roger stood still for a moment, scanning the bookshelves, then extended his hand sideways and said.

“To your positions.”

“To your positions.”

The theater club members followed her words and moved in an orderly manner. They each grabbed a shelf and took one book from it, nodding their heads. Then Roger grinned and turned to the three of them.

“Let’s go.”

“What on earth are you planning to do?”

Unable to contain his curiosity, Asel asked. Instead of answering, Roger stood in front of a wall and tapped it lightly.

At the same time, the theater club members pulled out the books they were holding simultaneously,

Creeeak!!!

The wall in front of Roger began to open upwards. As the wall opened like a castle gate, the group gaped, and Roger entered, answering.

“There is a labyrinth that changes its structure every year at the academy.”

“......”

“A labyrinth where the way in and what’s inside all change. It starts every January 1st, when everything is reset, and the first club to find the entrance receives a year-long pass.”

“......This is.”

“This year, we found it first.”

Roger smiled as he sent the three of them forward.

Beneath their feet, a bottomless pit filled with darkness yawned.

“It’s called the Minor Labyrinth.”

She pulled the three of them close and whispered softly.

“We decided to hold this year’s initiation ceremony here.”

“...Wait a moment.”

The moment Celine sensed something unusual in the air and opened her mouth.

“Go and come back.”

Roger threw the three of them over the edge of the pit.

# 68 - The Simple Labyrinth (2)

“Uwaaaaaaak!!”

“Kyaaaaak!”

Celine and Saya screamed as they fell. Asel reflexively spread his wings of flame on his back, but he smirked bitterly when he saw Rozer glaring at him with blue eyes from across the pit.

Although the situation was strange, it was unlikely that they would risk their lives for a mere club initiation ceremony. Nor would the academy have created such a dangerous place inside.

So, despite the grandiose name of ‘Simple Labyrinth,’ the bottom of this pit was likely not that dangerous. Perhaps the academy had created it to foster opportunities or special environments, similar to a training ground.

‘If it’s a Simple Labyrinth, will the environment be similar to a real Labyrinth?’

Asel, who had extinguished his wings and started falling like the other two, pondered quietly.

Asel had heard a lot about Labyrinths.

A bizarre ecosystem that arose above the underground where the Demon of Genesis was sealed. An area divided into layers, with grotesque creatures and natural environments appearing as one descended, a land of death.

No law protected people in that dark underground, and it was an unknown place where one had to rely solely on their own strength and luck to explore.

Currently, entry was strictly prohibited for ordinary people. Even Mana users could not descend below a certain layer if their level was insufficient.

Things were a little different if one belonged to a guild, but in any case, the Labyrinth was a place that was very difficult to leave, unlike how easy it was to enter. The Hargelin family periodically dealt with monsters that crawled out of the Labyrinth, but they did not explore the Labyrinth itself that often.

People died like crazy every time they did, so it couldn't be helped from their perspective. However, they were uneasy about entrusting the lower levels to Labyrinth explorers, so they directly intervened with the support of the kingdom.

‘A crazy place as dangerous as a Demonic Realm. But I heard that the first and second floors aren’t that dangerous.’

How much of the real Labyrinth had the Simple Labyrinth implemented?

Asel curled up the corners of his lips in anticipation and entrusted himself to gravity.

Then, at some point, thud.

At the same time as feeling his consciousness cut off, his eyes snapped open. As soon as he regained his senses, he jumped up and looked around.

“Ugh… my head…”

“Uuurgh…”

The place was similar to a cave overall. The ceiling was low, and the voices of the two people muttering softly echoed through the round space. It was a synesthetic experience that made him feel as if he had entered a giant cylinder. Asel narrowed his eyes, stomping on the hard floor a few times.

‘My consciousness flew away for a moment. Why?’

He had been planning to use levitation magic right before landing on the floor, but his mind had been cut off before he could. Then, when he regained his senses, he was rolling on the floor of the Labyrinth in perfect condition. Without a single injury.

It was ambiguous to say it was thanks to the Shield… The Shield absorbed some of the physical impact, but it didn't completely nullify it. If he had fallen after the floating sensation he had felt earlier, at least some of the Shield should have been broken. But the layers of Shield were in their original state.

Moreover, no matter how much Shield he had, he couldn't have defended his entire body from the fall just now. At least one part of his body, whether it was his limbs or organs, should have been crushed. But there was none of that either.

“…Hmm.”

A rather bizarre form of entry. Perhaps one of the conditions for entering the Simple Labyrinth was to lose consciousness in the middle of falling. If they had imbued a Formula in the falling pit for that purpose and forcibly transferred them…

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

Asel denied the hypothesis that had momentarily come to mind and shook his head.

If he had lost consciousness due to a Formula, he should have noticed the presence of the Formula before that. Even if he had been careless, there was no way he wouldn't have felt the fragments of Mana within his sensory range.

Therefore, it was reasonable to assume that something else had manifested, rather than it being operated by magic or another technique.

If it was the result of a Hetero ability permitted on a racial level, Asel would not be able to notice it in advance unless he saw it with his own eyes. So, if he had to guess, that was the most likely possibility.

“Asel, are you okay? Aren’t you dizzy?”

Just as he was thinking that, Celine, who had been lying on the floor, asked, already standing up. Asel stopped his thoughts for now, patted her back, and replied.

“I’m fine. How about you?”

“I feel like I’m going to die… My vision is spinning…”

“It’s probably a side effect of the process of losing consciousness and regaining it. Let’s rest for a while without moving right away.”

“Okay…”

Celine muttered, leaning her body on Asel’s shoulder. Asel carefully sat her down against the wall and brought Saya, who was also complaining of dizziness like Celine, and sat her next to her. Asel laid down all sorts of magic around them in preparation for any possible situation and leaned against the wall.

How long had it been?

“Simple Labyrinth, you said…”

Celine muttered, tapping her head as she regained some of her senses.

“Why is something like that in the academy? And in the library?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s the creator’s whim.”

“Who created it?”

“It’s not the headmaster at least. The Mana I feel is too murky to be that of an elf.”

Elves inherently possessed a neat aura as pure as they were. But now, what filled this space was quite impure to be called an elf’s aura.

But that didn't mean it was dirty. It was murky ‘for an elf,’ but based on the standards of a typical magician, the Mana was quite pure and clean all around.

The Mana was faint as if it would disappear at any moment, but it was still clearly captured by his senses. Asel had felt Mana with these characteristics before.

The day he first discovered Aleph. The Mana of Cromwell that he had felt when he resonated Cromwell’s Mana with his own to confirm whether her words were false was quite similar in atmosphere to what filled this space right now.

‘But it’s not the same. There’s no way Cromwell created this space. Nevertheless, the fact that the atmosphere is similar…’

Like Cromwell, it was highly likely that it was a trace left by a high-ranking sorcerer who had already died.

As his thoughts extended to that point, the words that someone unknown had told him a week ago suddenly came to mind.

Among them, the Tomb of the Sage, which was engraved first. If that word was telling him that there was a Tomb of the Sage in the academy…

“Saya, do you know anything about where the Sage was buried?”

“S-Sage? There are almost no records of the Sage now, so probably no one knows where he was buried.”

“Is that so?”

Things were gradually falling into place.

According to the records currently remaining, the Sage was said to be proficient in a wide variety of magic. Among them, he was said to be most talented in creating original creation Formula, creating something from nothing. Such a person could have created this space himself and used it as his burial place.

‘Then, were the things that Aleph told me at that time all words that meant things sleeping in the academy?’

It wasn’t certain, but it wouldn’t hurt to consider it as one of the hypotheses.

In the end, to gain certainty, he had to find the Sage’s remains in this Simple Labyrinth. It was impossible to track the Mana, so he would only know by going all the way down the Labyrinth.

A situation where he might be able to gain an unexpected harvest from an activity he thought was just an initiation ceremony.

Asel chuckled and pushed off the ground, getting up.

“Let’s go now. I think we’ve rested enough.”

“Ugh… Okay.”

Celine got up from her seat, and Saya also shook off the gravel on her tail and got up. Asel rotated his stiff shoulders, pulled up his Mana while staring at the endless path.

It was the beginning of a full-fledged Labyrinth exploration.

Labyrinth explorers, apart from the Labyrinth’s notoriety, called it this.

‘A crazy maze.’

A chaotic space where it became almost impossible to find an exit once one got lost. There were many paths to descend the floors, but strangely, there was only one path to ascend.

The Simple Labyrinth also inherited those characteristics as they were. There were many paths to descend, but they had not found a single path to ascend. If they had created an environment similar to the actual Labyrinth, there would definitely be a way to return upwards, but they had not found one yet.

“……”

“……”

One hour into the Labyrinth exploration.

They were not hungry or thirsty yet, but the fatigue accumulated in their bodies remained.

A cave with all sides sealed. The high concentration of Mana filling the place and the occasional bizarre cries were irritating the party’s nerves. They had not yet encountered any Labyrinth creatures, but judging from the fact that the cries were getting closer, it would be soon.

And as expected, something suddenly popped out from around the corner.

-Kkueeeeeeeek.

It generally resembled a larva in appearance. However, all the tentacles covering its body were similar in shape to human fingers. They were made up of two joints, but there was no skin. Only fingernails were dangling at the end of the exposed muscles.

Sharp teeth were densely attached to its round mouth. It looked as if it had evolved to bury its snout in flesh and suck blood.

It would have been less disgusting if it was small, but since it was about the same height as a person, the revulsion soared to his head.

“Ugh, disgusting.”

Celine muttered that and chanted magic over her fist without hesitation.

The Stellar Rank Magic she had learned basically required preheating, but there were no restrictions on the speed of manifestation of the most basic magic.

Woo woong!

Golden Mana condensed according to her will and soon became a meteor, piercing through the larva’s entire body.

[Star Advance]

Kwajik!!

The larva, with a huge hole in its body, collapsed as it scattered greenish body fluids.

It was instant death without even looking. Asel knelt down for a moment and carefully observed the larva that had become a corpse.

Saya asked him in a flustered voice.

“…What are you doing?”

“I was just curious. If the Simple Labyrinth was created by imitating the actual Labyrinth, then the creatures here would not be much different from the real ones. I was just curious how they implemented that.”

“…Your eccentric personality is still the same.”

“It’s a natural sense of inquiry as a magician.”

Asel chuckled and answered that, looking down at the larva’s body fluids that were dripping.

Whether it was acidic or not, there was a hissing sound coming from the floor where the body fluids had touched, as if something was melting.

“It’s a creature called a Finger Worm. Both its saliva and blood are acidic, so it’s a native Labyrinth creature that I recommend killing with ranged attacks if possible.”

“You know it well?”

“To do business with Labyrinth explorers, I thought it would be good to know the basic knowledge. I looked up a lot of related books.”

Celine asked in a surprised voice, and Saya answered calmly. Asel raised his body, which he had lowered, and smirked at the numerous presences he felt from the opposite side.

“Does it also have the characteristic of avenging the death of its kin? They’re swarming over here.”

“The body fluids contain hormones that call their kin, so when one dies, the group rushes over. But they’re not that strong of a creature, so I can clean them up by myself. Shall I do it?”

“No.”

Saya said. Asel shook his head and bent his index and middle fingers.

“I’ll do it.”

The moment he spat those words out. Dark blue lightning flashed around Asel.

[Inclined Thunder]

-Kkieeeeeeeek!!

The swarm of larvae that had revealed themselves was swept away by the lightning that was tilted to one side like a scythe and turned into ashes. They disappeared without a trace, without even leaving behind their precious body fluids.

Asel shook off the lightning remaining on the tip of his index finger, turned to the two, and opened his mouth.

“Let’s go. Since we can’t see the way up, let’s go down one more floor for now.”

“What if we can’t come back if we do that?”

Celine asked, avoiding the green blood that had soaked the floor. Asel pointed to the dark ceiling with his hand and replied.

“‘If you can’t find the way up, rather go down. The lower you go, the larger the size of the stairs that can be used to return, so follow these words if you don’t want to eat each other or starve to death.’”

“……”

“Those are the words of the author of ‘Labyrinth Basic Knowledge.’”

The return stairs of the Labyrinth strangely had the characteristic of not going up the floors, but of leading directly to the entrance of the Labyrinth at once. So, if you couldn’t find the small and narrow stairs at the entrance of the Labyrinth, it was better to go down and find the larger stairs, said Ulfric, the author of ‘Labyrinth Basic Knowledge.’

“So let’s go down. We can’t just wander around here forever.”

“…Tell me honestly. You just want to see the creatures that live on other floors, don’t you?”

“We’ve already found the stairs, so it would be better to go that way.”

“Oh, you’re not answering? You’re caught?”

Celine chuckled and poked Asel’s side, who was ignoring her until the end.

Even so, she did not object to Asel’s opinion. She was also an unavoidable magician. She, who was ignorant of Labyrinth creatures, did not want to miss the opportunity to see them with her own eyes.

Thanks to that, only Saya was left floating. To her, who knew about Labyrinth creatures and the basic knowledge of the Labyrinth, this place was just a place to prove her knowledge. In the first place, she was not a magician, so she was not burning with curiosity like the other two.

But she also did not object to Asel’s opinion.

She already owed him her life once. She wanted to be of help to him until the end, at least in this moment of acting together.

If possible, the same would be true even when they were not acting together, as long as he did not push her away.

That would be the only way to repay the debt for her life.

“Saya, let’s go.”

“What are you doing standing there blankly! Saya, right? Let’s go quickly!”

She smiled softly as she heard the voices of the two people calling her.

“I’m coming.”

# 69 - The Simple Maze (3)

The second floor of the temporary Labyrinth.

Just like the actual Labyrinth, the second floor was teeming with an underwater ecosystem. While there were places where one could walk, flowing streams and lakes were far more abundant.

Small carnivorous fish and oddly-shaped merfolk swam through the water, occasionally leaping to the surface to tear off a piece of flesh. Asel quickly grabbed a fish that had jumped out of the water and observed it closely.

Its size was no different from that of an ordinary fish. However, its massive jaws were lined with hundreds of teeth resembling those of a human. Its oral structure was more specialized for crushing than biting. Asel electrocuted the fish, killing it instantly, and then tossed the corpse into the water.

Splash!!

Immediately, other creatures swarmed around the dead fish, and in the blink of an eye, the corpse disappeared, leaving only bones behind. Only the flowing blood stained the water.

“It’s better to avoid the water as much as possible,” Celine muttered. Asel nodded and reinforced the Shield protecting his party.

To ensure safety on the waterway where walking was impossible, Asel plunged his hands into the water, electrocuting all the creatures residing within. In an instant, various life forms floated to the surface. Asel stretched the Shield like a bridge and crossed over the wide lake.

It was a marvel of magical formation. The Shield was one of the most basic defensive spells, but manipulating its shape at will was a challenging task. The simpler the formula, the harder it became to modify it.

Yet, Asel was executing it effortlessly on the spot, even though he wasn’t primarily a defensive mage.

“Where did such a guy come from?”

Even Celine, who had grown up hearing she was a genius at the Magic Tower, found him to be an extraordinary being. Not only did he not specialize in lightning magic, but he was also a multi-attribute user who could freely wield various types of magic.

Every time she witnessed his magic, she felt the vastness of the world. She realized that outside the closed community of the Magic Tower, there were superhumans who could change the world just by breathing. However, rather than despairing at this fact, Celine felt her competitive spirit ignite even more fiercely.

One day, she too would reach such heights. No matter how things were now, what did it matter? If she could see the constellations and wield their power, she had nothing to fear.

Just as the countless constellations in the sky never strayed from their orbits, Celine firmly believed that her genius would never fade. Thus, she could purely admire the performance Asel was showcasing.

Saya, lacking much knowledge of magic, could only feel a sense of awe, thinking, “That’s amazing.”

Swoosh!

When an electric-resistant eel came up to bite his leg, the tip of the Shield bent slightly and shot out like a spear, splitting the eel in two.

It was probably a creature with similar characteristics to an electric eel.

Asel briefly gazed at the spreading blue blood in the water before continuing to move forward. Before long, he was able to step on solid ground. After confirming that Saya, who had been walking at the back, was completely out of the lake, he retracted the extended Shield.

“Hey, look over there.”

At that moment, Celine tapped Asel on the shoulder and pointed with her finger. Turning his head, Asel saw countless merfolk standing guard at the descending stairs.

Not mermaids. Merfolk. They had two legs like a human, but their bodies were covered in colorful scales. Their upper bodies were entirely fish-like.

Their mouths opened and closed, with sharp tongues darting out like spears. With no arms, they likely fought using those tongues.

“......”

Despite their grotesque appearance, the energy they exuded was formidable. Their fighting spirit was so strong that it was incomparable to the finger worms they had dealt with on the first floor. However, they were not beyond what the party could handle. While they were slightly numerous, there were two mages specialized in mass slaughter right here.

Cooking fish was no challenge at all.

“This time, I’ll take care of it.”

But it was Saya who stepped forward. She released her hidden tail, and her eyes turned a turquoise color.

The fox spirit power, permitted only to a select few among fox beastmen. As it was unleashed, the surrounding air became thick and sticky. It felt as if a viscous substance had settled on her skin. Asel looked at Celine, who was sticking out her tongue in disgust, and then spoke to Saya.

“There’s really no need for that.”

“No, the deeper we go, the stronger the creatures will become, so it’s better for me, the weakest in combat, to step in at least until then. Besides, they’re not going to be a significant burden.”

Saya smiled as she watched the merfolk begin to squawk in response to her spirit power. Asel also stepped back with a wry smile.

“Alright. Then I’ll trust you with it.”

“Yes.”

She nodded in agreement and snapped her fingers while looking at the merfolk with their long tongues standing straight. At that moment, turquoise foxfire erupted beside her head. A mesmerizing flame that captivates just by existing. It seemed to have the same effect on the merfolk, as their eyes momentarily glazed over.

-Quack?

-Kerrek! Kyaaaak!!

While some remained clear-headed, many were momentarily entranced. Saya seized the opportunity created by this distraction.

“My children.”

Her voice, laden with spirit power, emerged. The hypnosis, one of the spells permitted to fox beastmen, manipulated the merfolk's brains through her voice.

-Kweeeek.......

As if their vitality had drained away, their bodies slumped. Just as the merfolk who had been holding onto their consciousness tried to wake their fallen comrades by opening their mouths.

“Kill them.”

At Saya’s following command, the slumped merfolk’s bodies stiffened. Then, like dolls with broken joints, they turned their heads and pierced the hearts of other merfolk with their tongues.

Crack!!

It happened in an instant. The hypnotized merfolk advanced, killing their kin en masse. Those who were not under the spell, bewildered, tried to retaliate, but they couldn’t evade the spears of tongues extending from all directions and fell helplessly.

“Wow......”

Blood and grayish flesh splattered everywhere. The perceptive merfolk realized that Saya was the cause of the current situation and charged at her, but they were impaled and killed by other merfolk who threw themselves to protect her.

Before long, when there were no intact merfolk left, the hypnotized ones began to kill each other by piercing each other’s hearts.

Not a single merfolk was left standing on two legs. Only cold, lifeless chunks of meat lay scattered on the ground.

‘More impressive than I expected.’

Asel thought as he looked at the blood-soaked ground.

This was the second time he had witnessed Saya in battle. The first was when they encountered the doppelganger in the nest of Bircia.

At that time, she hadn’t used any spells like hypnosis or charm. She had simply conjured physical foxfire to push back the approaching spirits. Thus, it could be said that this was the first time he was witnessing her true capabilities.

It didn’t feel like she was from the non-combat department when it came to handling spirit power. If she were to incorporate magical engineering machines into combat... she might even surpass the combat power of most students from the Magical Department.

“Is it all done? Shall we go?”

Saya turned to Asel, who was lost in thought. Asel smiled and nodded.

“Good job. Let’s go.”

“You’re more impressive than I thought, aren’t you?”

Celine, who had been standing a distance behind, approached Saya and chattered. Saya chuckled softly and walked forward, burning the corpses cluttering the ground with her foxfire.

As they passed over the heaps of corpses, a deep staircase leading down came into view. Asel shot a bolt of lightning into the dark space.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzz!!

The fiercely blazing lightning raced through the space, momentarily dispelling the darkness. The revealed staircase was not much different from before.

The thick, humid air lay everywhere. Water droplets fell from the ceiling, and a clear, foul malice rose from below. A few ordinary bats were all that occupied the staircase.

The staircase they had seen when descending from the first to the second floor had only added bats. The structure was simple enough that there was no need to move with tension. Of course, that didn’t mean he would let his guard down entirely.

The Labyrinth was a place full of variables by its very nature. A moment of carelessness could lead to losing one’s head, so rushing in recklessly was akin to suicide. Thus, Asel controlled all the darkness on the staircase with shadow magic and created a small light cluster through Radiance Magic as they descended. The two followed closely behind him, remaining vigilant.

Before long, they reached the third floor.

The third floor was almost identical in structure to the second. Countless lakes spread around a small stone path, and a gently flowing river followed the pull of gravity.

The creatures inhabiting it were not much different; the same life forms they had seen on the second floor appeared.

The party wandered around the third floor for a few more minutes before realizing it was not worth exploring and set out to find the staircase. As Asel began to wield lightning in earnest, the beasts could do nothing but burn and vanish.

Before long, they discovered a staircase leading down. They then searched for an ascending staircase but found none, so the party descended once more.

Thus, they arrived at the fourth floor.

This time, a dense jungle unfolded before them. The sweltering heat pressed down on them, and a bizarre-looking monkey perched on a tree looked down at the party.

The natural environment made finding the staircase itself difficult. However, Asel immediately began to channel his Mana.

Exploration could be conducted through corpses without issue. Therefore, it was wise to secure visibility first.

Fortunately, there were many spells in the lightning magic Asel wielded that were suitable for such an environment. He began to chant a spell that would obliterate the area.

[Thunderous Advance]

Boom!!

As he clapped his hands, the sound of thunder echoed from his palms. The sudden, massive noise set the beasts on edge. As the sound reached its range, Asel’s Mana surged forth.

Soon, the Mana transformed into lightning, sweeping away everything in its path.

Crackling!!!

There was no time to resist. The rampaging lightning overturned the jungle terrain itself. Trees burned and vanished, and the dense underbrush turned to ash without leaving a trace.

The creatures were no exception. From monkeys whose spines snapped under the recoil of the lightning to a tiger whose mouth and anus were flipped inside out, all were writhing in madness as they emitted lightning from their bodies. Additionally, a giant drake and an eagle resembling a pterosaur lay scattered, their bodies slashed and torn.

The party briefly surveyed the scene before descending once more.

Thus, they reached the fifth floor of the temporary Labyrinth.

Once again, they imagined a fascinating ecosystem might appear before them, but instead, a mansion revealed itself.

“......What is this......”

Asel muttered in disbelief at the sudden appearance of the mansion. The expressions of the two were no different from his.

A mansion built in a Labyrinth devoid of any lighting. Its size was comparable to that of an academy dormitory. The windows seemed to have black curtains drawn, obscuring the interior, and a sinister atmosphere oozed out from the mansion.

‘The book clearly stated that the fifth floor of the Labyrinth is a resting place.’

Does that mean that ominous mansion is the resting place?

Yet, the atmosphere it exuded and its scale felt far too alien for a mere resting place. It felt as if a mad wizard conducting human experiments might reside within.

As Asel activated his exploration magic with a hint of trepidation.

Creeeak.

“Yawn...... Huh? What are these?”

A shabby-robed man emerged from within the mansion.