# 80 - Life Game

[In fact, dark magic is similar to the act of unleashing one's own thoughts and ideologies in a world created by the gods. Because of this, it has been rejected by the church, labeled as heresy, and expelled from the society of other magicians. Of course, the rejection by other magicians is due to the faults of the dark magicians themselves, but if the church had not initially ostracized us, we would not have gone astray in the first place.]

Asel lightly flipped through the preface filled with excuses. However, no matter how many pages he turned, the lamentations of the dark magician did not end.

Just how much resentment did he harbor? He cursed the magicians, cursed the church, and even lumped together the other dark magicians to insult them. It seemed he had suffered a lot in his lifetime.

That said, the author of the magical book probably did not lead a clean life either. The mere fact that the book he had kept was now in Asel's hands painted a clear picture. He must have been caught while conducting research on citizens and hunted down.

So, Asel did not feel any particular sympathy. He merely frowned and quickly flipped through to the middle of the book.

[What a self-absorbed personality to an extreme degree. And the blame he places on others is enough to grind teeth. He is exactly the type of person I dislike.]

Bored, Aleph evaluated the author of the magical book. Asel chuckled and agreed with her words.

Fortunately, as he passed the middle section, there was a detailed explanation about dark magic. It was quite lengthy, but summarizing it was not particularly difficult.

Electrification Art is the magic that converts the mana in the core reactor into lightning. It is a magic that carefully adjusts the form, projection speed, direction, and power through formulas. Other magics were not much different. First, one learns the formula, realizes their uniqueness, becomes a grand magician, awakens their imagery, and then opens it.

However, dark magic was the exact opposite. First, one had to awaken their imagery to some extent before they could use basic dark magic.

This was because the boundary line between the world and oneself had to be clear above all else. Imagery was the most fundamental aspect of that.

“Hm.”

Of course, Asel could easily handle the magics in the book. When he tried to activate one as a test, it manifested immediately without any hindrance.

[First Commandment]

[I stand alone in this world.]

Kwah-zzzz-zzzz!!

The moment the formula was activated, a black mass sprang forth from the air, opening its mouth wide and swallowing the air. Then, as if nothing had happened, it dispersed into smoke. Asel retracted his outstretched hand, clenching and unclenching his fist while letting out a low sound.

The consumption of mana was significant. It was likely a side effect of forcibly using magic derived from the imagery of the dark magician who authored the book. The cost of mimicking the imagery took away half of the mana in the core reactor. Despite being significantly less powerful than high-level electrification art, the amount it consumed was greedily excessive.

At this rate, it would be impractical to use in actual combat. Ultimately, one would have to awaken their imagery to a certain degree before they could properly handle dark magic.

[Master, it’s time.]

While he was lost in thought, Aleph suddenly spoke up. Asel glanced at the clock he had placed in the corner of the table and stood up.

“Has it already gotten this late?”

[Please take care.]

Asel heard Aleph's farewell as he extinguished her consciousness. He then changed into more comfortable clothes after taking off his shirt and left the dormitory. After walking a bit, he spotted Elena sitting on a bench. Asel approached her from behind and tapped her shoulder.

“I’m here.”

“Oh, Asel!”

Elena turned her head back and smiled brightly. Asel leaned over the bench, letting his body droop.

“You didn’t wait long, did you?”

“No! I just got here too! By the way, how’s your neck?”

“Oh, my neck…”

Asel scratched the mark left by her fangs with his finger, forcing a bitter smile.

It was a week ago at the clock tower. Fortunately, no one else had discovered it, so there was no need for punishment, but the events that took place with Elena that day were still vividly etched in Asel's mind.

He remembered how long Elena's vampiric act had lasted, and when she licked all the blood from her lips, Asel's face had been much paler than hers. The floor had been soaked with blood.

If Elena hadn’t urgently given him a transfusion, Asel would have collapsed from anemia right then and there.

“I’m fine. My body is okay too.”

Fortunately, the blood that had been lost had long since regenerated in his body. There were still traces on his nape that hadn’t completely faded, but they weren’t noticeable enough to be a problem. He could cover it all just by wearing the academy uniform.

“I’m glad.”

Elena giggled as she stood up from the bench. Her unique sweet scent wafted through the air.

“Then let’s go today too! Three laps today!”

“……That’s one lap more than yesterday.”

“Come on, my stamina has improved. So we have to do one more lap.”

Elena stood on the walking path, bouncing on her feet as if urging him to hurry. Asel smiled bitterly and stood beside her.

Asel had three wishes he had to grant in exchange for borrowing Elena’s money.

One of them had been used for the blood transfusion. The other had been used for running together every morning and going to school together. Thanks to that, she only had one wish ticket left. It was diminishing faster than he had expected.

This was a boon for Asel. As for Elena… judging by her bright expression, it seemed she felt she had used her wishes quite well.

He wasn’t sure if she enjoyed seeing his face every morning or if she was just happy to have someone to run with, but honestly, it didn’t matter much to him. It was enough that he could replenish his stamina, which had been lacking. He couldn’t keep up with Elena’s pace, but he felt his stamina improving day by day, which gave him a sense of fulfillment.

“Ready….”

Elena looked at Asel with a sly smile.

“Go!”

“I feel like I’m going to die…”

“Why again?”

Celine sat on the sofa, swinging her legs and making all sorts of faces. Asel sipped his coffee while indulging her complaints.

“No, the role I’m assigned. Isn’t this too much activity? There are scenes where I’m waving a sword in the middle and scenes where I’m running around. I’m supposed to be a wicked noblewoman. Why do I have to move so much? I should be the servant!”

“That’s a derogatory remark against nobles.”

“Nonsense!”

Celine kicked Asel’s shin with her toes. Naturally, the shield that manifested as if it were a matter of course nullified her attack. After a few exchanges, Celine couldn’t even touch Asel’s body.

“Clean this up!”

“No, my lady. If I use that method, the princess will execute us.”

Asel read the script in a stiff tone, causing Celine to pout and wipe the sweat from her forehead.

After regular classes ended, it was time for the club. With midterms over and preparations for the performance just before finals underway, the theater club was in full swing. The two, chosen as the villain couple solely based on their looks, faced each other and recited the lines they had memorized. Both were magicians, so their memorization skills were exceptional.

“Shut up, Marcel. Don’t you know that if we fail this time, we’re already dead? Don’t stop me.”

“My lady, let’s just kill that damn commoner girl instead of the princess. Isn’t it because of her that our plan failed? I’ll hire an assassin to take her head, and you can take care of the aftermath.”

“Oh! That’s a great idea, Marcel. Come to my chamber tonight. I’ll treat you well.”

“Thank you, my lady. Hahaha!”

“Oh ho ho ho!”

“……What are you two doing?”

Suddenly, Saya, who had tied her hair back for ease of movement, appeared. She wiped the sweat from her face with a towel, looking down at the two with a disapproving expression. Celine rolled her eyes, staring at Saya’s chest, which was glistening with sweat.

“Oh, woe is me! Why didn’t I get such monstrous breasts! Where did my mother’s genes go?”

“……What are you talking about all of a sudden? Are you crazy?”

“Leave her be. She’s moved so much that her brain has melted.”

“Oh, woe is me!”

Saya looked down at the deranged Celine with a disgusted expression, then sighed deeply and sat next to Asel, keeping a slight distance as if afraid of any sweat smell. Though not as much as Celine, she too had a considerable amount of activity in her role.

Asel had less to do compared to the two. So, with the stage still far away, he focused on reading the script to enhance his emotional understanding and character comprehension rather than moving around to match the rhythm.

“Is it going well?”

Saya asked. Asel smiled bitterly and shook his head.

“He’s an aristocrat steeped in authority. There’s too much distance between us. Honestly, I’m not really immersed.”

“There’s still plenty of time until the performance. Take your time. I’m doing the same.”

“Right,”

Asel took a sip of his coffee, then leaned back against the sofa.

“By the way, how’s business at the guild these days? Is it going well?”

“Well, it’s the same as always. Selling reserved items, investing, supplying ingredients… It’s not too busy. So if you need anything, feel free to drop by.”

“Just saying that is enough, thanks.”

“I mean it. I’d even consider giving it for free, so come by whenever you want.”

After saying that, Saya seemed to recall something and turned to Asel.

“Speaking of which, we recently brought in a new product. It’s something that was trending in the neighboring kingdom, and we managed to secure an exclusive contract to introduce it to the empire. The response has been really good. We’ve already made several hundred gold in profit.”

“Hmm… really? Is it a magical artifact?”

“No, it’s a board game.”

“……A board game?”

The familiar term popped out, resonating with Asel, who had memories of his past life. He tilted his head slightly, frowning. At that moment, Celine suddenly spoke up.

“Isn’t that the one where a bunch of people sit around and roll dice to do various things?”

“Yes, that’s right. You know it well?”

“I saw the seniors playing it briefly when I was at the Magic Tower. But it all looked boring, didn’t it? And it became a hit?”

“The new board game has simple magic added to it. Thanks to that, the immersion has greatly increased, and its popularity has soared as well.”

“Oh… they added magic?”

Celine’s eyes sparkled as she sat up.

“What’s the name of the game?”

Saya replied with a vague smile.

“It’s called Life Game.”

# 81 - Life Game (2)

“So.”

Grace sighed deeply as she gazed seriously at Asel.

“Did you call me because of the board game?”

“Yeah.”

Asel nodded while setting up the board game on the table. Grace openly displayed her disappointment. Regardless, Asel and Saya laid out the board and placed the player tokens at the starting point. They also sorted the various cards by type. Grace sighed again as she watched them.

Asel’s dorm room. Despite the flurry of excitement that came with the unexpected call, where she had chosen her clothes and even put on makeup, the actual purpose was a board game. It was bound to disappoint Grace, who had been soaring on the wings of imagination.

Isn’t it obvious? If her ex-husband, who had never been around even after days of searching, suddenly called her, it was only natural for her to rush over like a dog. That was how Grace understood it. While it was important to pick up opportunities both inside and outside the academy, Asel’s call was far more significant.

This was the reward. She hugged her knees and let out yet another sigh.

“You don’t look too happy.”

Ellen, who had been watching, sat down next to Grace and spoke.

“It seems like you’ve been wandering outside the academy for the past few days. Did you not achieve much?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Hmm. Is that so?”

Ellen replied while glancing around. Everywhere she turned, there were people bustling about.

“What kind of card is this?”

“It’s a card that determines the play concept.”

Saya and Asel were setting up the board game on the table. Elena stood behind them, sucking on a blood pack, while Celine lay on the floor, sketching constellations on the ceiling.

There wasn’t a single calm person in the room. Celine muttered, “This is Orpheus. This is Betelgeuse,” while waving her hands, and Asel was learning the rules of the board game from Saya. Elena had been fixated on Asel’s neck for a while now.

The only calm ones were Grace and Ellen. Thanks to that, the quiet conversation between the two didn’t reach the others.

“Grace, do you perhaps like Asel?”

“Yeah.”

The answer came immediately. Ellen smiled bitterly as she took off her school uniform jacket.

“I thought so. Every time we ran into each other, you’d ask where Asel was and talk only about him... I couldn’t help but know.”

“I didn’t really plan to hide it. But why do you ask?”

“I can help you.”

Ellen turned her head toward Grace, wearing a confident expression. In contrast, Grace’s face looked uneasy.

“...Suddenly?”

“Isn’t it natural to help a friend with their romantic endeavors? I don’t think it’s surprising.”

“No, that’s true... but it’s so out of the blue.”

“To be honest, I found the role of the protagonist’s helper in a novel I recently read to be really fun.”

Ellen stood up, gazing at the now-set board game.

“I wanted to try it too.”

“...?”

Grace looked up at Ellen with a ‘what nonsense is this?’ expression, but since she said she would help, there was no need to decline. She smiled and nodded.

“Okay, I’ll count on you.”

At that moment, Asel clapped his hands, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Alright, everyone gather around. Let’s play a game.”

Whoosh!

The board game, infused with Asel’s Mana, shimmered with a radiant light.

The moment Asel heard about the board game from Saya, he didn’t look back and said, “Let’s do it right now.” Thus, the board game party was formed. The group consisted entirely of Asel’s acquaintances.

There were a total of six people, all women except for Asel. Celine looked at him with a strange expression, but Asel didn’t even glance her way.

“Here’s the rulebook. Everyone, take a look.”

As grand as the name “Life Game” was, the rules were quite complicated.

First, when the game starts, players draw one [Start Card] each. Based on the traits written on those cards, they must live from youth to old age.

The traits were quite diverse. The number of cards was far greater than the participants, and some had bizarre contents.

Ellen’s draw was one of those.

“You are a cat beastman. Your action speed is faster than others, and you can make quick judgments. However, you must end every sentence with ‘meow’...?”

“Meow?”

“That’s what it says, meow?”

“?”

“Meow?”

Ellen, whose speech was forced, looked around with a flustered expression. Celine and Asel, who already knew the board game was enchanted, burst into laughter. Ellen turned red and shouted at the two.

“D-Don’t laugh, meow!”

“Gahh! I feel like my stomach and cheeks are going to split!”

“C-Celine, meow!”

“Yes, heh, Ellen the cat lady. S-Seline the cat is here.”

“Eek, meow!”

As the usually composed Ellen suddenly turned into a flustered cat, laughter quickly spread to the others. Elena, who was usually close to her, was nearly rolling on the floor with laughter.

However, the card she drew was no joke either.

“You are a princess of the kingdom. You have more money than others and are steeped in authority. Your speech becomes commanding?”

“Oh, let’s hear it.”

“How dare you! If you wish to speak to me, you must use honorifics!”

“Oh, like this?”

“W-What is this? I don’t like it! Bring me cake and wine at once!”

“What are you saying?”

Everyone drew their starting cards. The traits they listed were as follows.

Ellen was a cat knight, Elena was a princess, Celine was a saint, Saya was an alchemist, Grace was a duchess, and Asel was a mercenary. Among them, Ellen and Elena, Celine, and Asel had their speech forced. Celine and Asel were still relatively better compared to the other two.

“Now that we’ve drawn our starting cards, shall we determine the order? Please draw one number card each.”

The number cards had numbers from 1 to 6 indicating the order.

Asel was first. However, before rolling the dice, there was one more card to draw at the start of the game.

It was the [Parent Card]. Asel read the short description on the card he drew and frowned.

“You are an orphan. Damn it, even here I’m an orphan. Am I always going to be an orphan?”

“Brother! Isn’t that a bit harsh?”

“What of it? This is the concept, right? Do you want to die?”

“W-What do you mean?”

Anyway, being an orphan meant he didn’t have to send money home. Instead, the initial difficulty of the game rose sharply.

“Here I go.”

After drawing the card, he moved his token according to the number rolled on the dice.

On the board, each space was labeled with [Event], [Happiness], [Misfortune], [Incident], and [Romance]. The space Asel landed on was Misfortune. He frowned as he drew a Misfortune card for the mercenary role.

“You have been betrayed while handling a commission and lost your left arm. If you encounter the ‘Saint’ among the participants, you can recover. Until then, you must live as one-armed.”

“Damn it.”

What Asel meant to say was, ‘Oh, I’m screwed,’ but what actually came out was a string of curses. Similarly, what Celine intended to say was ‘Serves you right,’ but it came out as a benevolent voice after filtering.

“You have been punished by divine retribution. How unfortunate.”

“Shut up, you damn praying woman.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll, heh, heal you when I see you.”

“Uh? You’re splitting, huh?”

“Next is my turn.”

Celine made the sign of the cross with one hand and gently rolled the dice. For reference, the parent card she drew was also an orphan.

“It’s an incident. Let’s check it out.”

She hummed a tune as she drew the incident card for the saint role and revealed it to everyone.

“You, who are reckless, have received a home confinement for several days as punishment for trampling the garden’s flowers, despite the high priest of the order warning you. The number on the dice you roll will determine the number of confinement days.”

“Hmm. So that’s how it works.”

“If a high number comes up, you’ll be confined for a long time, meow?”

“Excuse me, cat sister. Could you please keep your mouth shut for a moment? I feel like I’m going to burst out laughing again.”

“...What kind of saint is this? Isn’t she just a wicked woman? Making remarks that discriminate against species.”

“Pfft!”

Celine burst into laughter as she rolled the dice.

She rolled a 6.

“You, who have received the highest punishment, cannot move for the next three turns.”

“Oh, my God! How could you give me such a trial!”

What was meant to be ‘Damn it’ came out in a much more refined manner. Ellen laughed at her as she drew her parent card. Unlike the previous two, her card read, ‘Parents who freely let their child go.’ The effect was to move one space more than the number on the dice.

“Here I go, meow.”

Ellen rolled the dice. The number was 3. Adding 1, she ended up in the same position as Asel. She chewed her lips and drew a Misfortune card.

“You have been falsely accused and chased out of the village by a friend you trusted. The effect of the parent card is nullified.”

“Meow? What is this, meow?”

The moment Ellen said that, clear letters suddenly surged from the center of the board game.

“You have encountered another participant in the same position. Event occurs. Please roll the dice and move together by the number rolled.”

“Oh, so this kind of thing exists, meow.”

“Hurry and roll.”

“Got it, meow.”

Ellen immediately rolled the dice and moved the same number of spaces as Asel.

“Meow?”

It was a Romance space.

Ding ding!

With the beautiful sound of a harp, the letters that had surged transformed.

“In their childhood, two people who were wounded fatefully met. Realizing that they could heal each other’s wounds, they fell in love and became engaged despite their young age. They became a community of fate and parted, promising to meet again in the future, holding each other close.”

“Gasp, meow!”

“Next time the two meet, a marriage event will occur. If the genders of the two participants are male and female, the female participant will become pregnant. Don’t worry, it’s not a real pregnancy.”

As the following sentence made Ellen’s face turn red, she covered her mouth with her hand.

“P-Pregnant...?”

Grace glared at Ellen with wide-eyed suspicion. Elena, with a blank expression, also looked at Ellen’s lower abdomen and ground her teeth. At that moment, Ellen felt an inexplicable fear.

“Don’t threaten my woman, unless you want to die.”

The words ‘Why are you all acting like this all of a sudden?’ came out of Asel’s mouth, seriously distorted.

“...Hah!”

“...She’s mine, commoner.”

The faces of the two grew even more menacing.

“Meow, meow...!”

# 83 - Joint Training

“Your Majesty. Here is today’s new corpse.”

The shattered throne. The ruined palace. A space filled with blood and flesh, where decayed bodies rolled on the floor. A corpse, devoid of anything above the neck, pointed at the dismembered priests of the order and spoke.

The reason she could speak despite lacking vocal cords was simple. Before becoming a corpse, she had been a wizard who mastered the scale formula. Fortunately, she had her brain transplanted into her abdomen, so producing a voice through magic was not difficult at all.

She extracted the stone powder that had entered her exposed throat with her fingers and knelt before the man sitting on the throne.

“Please use it freely.”

“You bastard!!!”

One of the priests, whose limbs had been severed, shouted.

Not all members of the order awaken their divine power. In fact, only a few possess it and can wield it. However, once awakened, the faith of the believer circulates their body and mind for nearly eternity, until their faith runs out.

That process even postponed death.

The ability to scream normally while blood gushed from severed limbs was largely due to that divine power. Blood, almost equivalent to the gushing blood, was generated from the marrow. Thus, the priest did not lose consciousness and could still retain a functioning mind.

It was no wonder that the holy knights were called cockroaches. Their ability to reattach or regenerate limbs in an instant while charging forward resembled an army from hell. The holy knights of the order being likened to the army of hell was indeed ironic.

However, unlike them, the severed limbs of the priest did not regenerate. Blood simply poured from the crimson stumps.

The reason was simple.

The horrific foul energy continuously burned the severed stumps. There was only one being in the continent powerful enough to consume the priest's divine power.

The Corpse Lord, Zervil.

“How many times have I told you?”

The man sitting on the throne tilted his head and spoke.

“I said I would kill everyone who enters my territory. I believe I warned the order as well?”

“Do you think we would listen to the words of an evil corpse sorcerer! For the sake of our brothers and sisters who fell victim to you, we will surely cut off your head!”

“Ha... It’s always the same repertoire. Do you have any idea how many times I’ve heard that line?”

Zervil reached into the air and moved his arm as if stirring water. Suddenly, chunks of flesh fell from the air and soon formed a massive sphere of corpses. The priest’s eyes widened at the sight.

* Ah, ah... Bishop...
* Oh God, please grant us rest...
* Die, die, die, die, die-

Hundreds of heads sprouted from the sphere. Each one belonged to the priests of the order. Blood flowed from their hollow eyes, and they either cried out to the divine or spewed curses. Unlike the hundreds of heads, only one round body existed, and a large heart throbbed fiercely within it. Each time it pulsed, blood flowed from hundreds of mouths.

In an instant, a red feast soaked the floor. Zervil stepped on it as if it were a carpet, staining his black shoes bright red. Unable to hold back any longer, the priest screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Zerviiil!!!”

“I gave you a chance.”

Zervil manipulated the tiny chunks of flesh within the blood as he spoke.

Squish, splat!

“Personally, I don’t like killing priests either. But what can I do? I have to deal with the ruffians who enter my home. I don’t care about your extermination or whatever.”

“You are, you are! You are a villain who goes out of your way to kill even those who don’t step into your territory! Don’t justify your actions with such trashy words!”

“Well, I admit that. But what of it? I’ve never thought of myself as a good person or a saint. Killing those who don’t come into my territory? Sometimes I did it out of boredom, and sometimes I did it to replenish my corpses... that’s just how it is. Meaning? Do I really need to give it any?”

The writhing chunks of flesh transformed into a massive scythe. Zervil picked up the scythe and walked toward the crawling order like a bug.

“Let’s be honest. You came here to kill me to boost your performance, didn’t you? You were flattered for being strong in the order and got cocky, leading your gang here, right? Is it really for a noble purpose that you came here?”

“What gives you the right to judge my intentions! I was the vanguard! The vanguard dispatched to exterminate you!”

“Oh, really?”

Zervil grinned as he rested the scythe on his shoulder, bending down to look at the priest.

“But what can I do? I’m a free spirit, so it’s hard for me to accept your noble intentions as they are. In my mind, you will be remembered as a priest consumed by selfish desires. That means you’re a fool.”

“You bastard!!!”

“That’s a common symptom of a drug addict. If that’s the case, then treat yourself.”

Zervil did not listen to the priest’s response. Instead, he stabbed the heart with the scythe, bursting it, and divided the corpse into head, chest, abdomen, and waist. No matter how formidable a believer was, they could not survive being cut into four pieces. The life force drained from the priest’s corpse in an instant.

“You can eat it, Katarina.”

Zervil handed the rolling head to the scale sorceress. The scale sorceress accepted the head with a voice filled with ecstasy.

“Thank you.”

“Hmm. You worked hard, so you should eat this much.”

“...Your tone seems to be wavering. It seems the effects of the drug are wearing off.”

“Oh, really? It’s probably because I took a suitable drug. This time, I’ll have a high-quality one. So, Katarina, hurry up and eat too.”

“Yes.”

Katarina replied with a slight bow and then peeled the skin off the priest’s head, splitting the skull to extract the brain and its fluids. She then split her abdomen and poured it all inside.

Katarina’s brain resided inside her stomach. Naturally, there was gastric acid in her stomach, and the acid continuously dissolved her brain. If she did not periodically ‘consume’ her brain, it would dissolve, and she would no longer be able to think normally.

The reason the corpse had gastric acid was that she actively used acid. Most people do not think that gastric acid would reflux beyond the exposed throat. That’s why it could become a weapon.

“The priest’s brain is indeed delicious. It exceeds my expectations.”

Katarina said with satisfaction as she returned the organs spilling from her split abdomen. Zervil smiled as he attached the head, now devoid of a brain, back to the corpse sphere.

“That makes about three hundred.”

He shook off the blood on his hands, stretched, and plopped down on the priest’s chest. Then he pulled out a pouch of drugs from his pocket and sprinkled it into his nose and mouth.

“Hmm.”

The sweet and bitter taste of high-grade drugs massaged his brain. Zervil felt the pleasant degradation of his body while recalling the saint and Birsia he had seen a few days ago.

“I wonder how they are doing.”

The saint’s declaration to close the heavens. The wizards and parasites living in the shadows, declaring their intent to wage an extermination war against the great wizard in the light, piqued Zervil’s interest, but it did not go beyond that. He felt no need to kill Ena.

So he did not participate.

However, separately, he was curious about how far the collaboration between the two would extend. Just how far could an eighth-tier necromancer and the demon saint go against a great wizard who wields lightning? Killing? Sealing? Or turning him into a puppet? Or just draining his power and turning him into a backroom old man?

As he thought that, the Disciple of Creation at the academy suddenly came to mind. Zervil grinned widely as he lay back.

In fact, he was personally more interested in Asel than Ena. The one he had randomly encountered during her childhood, who had been nothing, had become a remarkable wizard to the extent of being the disciple of a great wizard.

It was even stranger not to be interested. And the principle that governed Zervil’s actions was largely based on interest and curiosity. He was more faithful to the basic desires of a wizard than any other wizard.

“Hmm. It can’t be helped.”

He muttered as he sprang up.

“Since everyone else is focusing their attention on the Beginning, shouldn’t I balance it out?”

A scale tilted to one side. Zervil resolved to personally balance that scale. He decided to pour as much attention on Asel as others did on the Beginning.

“Let’s go, to the academy!”

He shouted with a bright smile.

In the palace, devoid of any living beings, thousands of corpses responded to Zervil’s will.

“This is the place. This is the last place the ‘Saint’ visited.”

The holy knight clad in pure white armor spoke. Her name was Yuphia. She was one of the most esteemed believers among the holy knights. Ena passed her with an expressionless face.

A restaurant located in the imperial capital. A high-end restaurant usually visited by nobles or the owners of the target group. Within the towering skyscraper, which symbolized that authority, a thick stench of blood wafted through the air. Ena grimaced and smashed through the firmly closed door to enter the establishment.

* Kyaaaah!

At the same time, a centipede let out a horrible scream and charged at Ena.

It was not an ordinary centipede. It had a horrific appearance, resembling dozens of people connected together, and it split its mouth wide open, flicking its sharp tongue.

Ena effortlessly burst the centipede with a light flick of her hand.

Then, from the exploded blood, bones, muscles, and organs, hundreds and thousands of parasites surged forth all at once. Ena clicked her tongue and filled the space with a white lightning bolt.

Zzzzt!!

The lightning racing through the space tore apart the parasites one by one. In an instant, nothing remained on the first floor of the establishment. Only ashes faintly scattered in the wind.

Ena let out a deep sigh and began to ascend the restaurant. In the process, she dealt with the ‘infected’ that charged at her one by one. Each time, memories of the past would unwittingly resurface.

A man who came to the kingdom. The king who greeted him. Two girls sitting and gazing at the outsider with interest. The crown prince, trying hard to maintain a solemn expression. Other siblings suppressing their laughter at him.

“......”

The crumbling palace. The queen bathed in blood. Boys and girls tearing into human flesh. Herself fleeing, abandoning her teacher. Blood relatives bursting into madness. The infected king and citizens. The revealed demon.

The powerless me.

The teacher who never showed her face until the end.

Zzzzt!!

* Kweeeek!

The surging lightning cleaved through the body of the infected. However, the creature did not die and split apart, crawling on the floor and ceiling like separate entities. Ena clicked her tongue and incinerated the crawling upper and lower halves without leaving a trace.

Finally arriving at the top floor. The holy knights who had followed her belatedly trailed behind, and she fixed her cold gaze on the table placed in the center.

Unlike the other places, which were all drenched in crimson, the table was purely white.

[It’s been a while, Princess.]

Familiar parasites were forming letters in a cluster.

[If you can read this, it means you have come to this place. Ah, I will correct the title. You preferred the term ‘royal daughter’ over ‘princess.’ Your still pure face remains in my memory.]

“Beginning, what is this...?”

[It’s quite unfortunate. The child who used to smile brightly while seeking praise from the teacher has become such a dry person. How sad would the teacher be to see you like this, having sacrificed for you? Ah, have you perhaps already forgotten the feeling of sadness?]

Despite Yuphia’s murmurs, the movements of the parasites did not cease.

This was not a conversation. It was merely a one-sided communication.

Nevertheless, Ena clenched her fists and muttered absentmindedly.

“......Saint.”

[Anyway. Let’s get to the point. The lord you killed, our savior, is actually not dead. He successfully transferred his consciousness into the Labyrinth. If his consciousness grows normally, he will be resurrected through the corpses remaining in the fallen kingdom. This is a certain proposition. There is no margin for error.]

“......”

[However, if you break through the Labyrinth and destroy or weaken my lord’s consciousness, resurrection will not occur. How about it? Simple, right? It should be easy for your head to understand.]

Ena remained silent.

[Does it seem like a trap? Yes, it is indeed a trap. But what can you do? If left alone, the demon will resurrect, and someone like you, a vengeful spirit, won’t just sit back and let it happen? You will inevitably go to the Labyrinth. You have been led to this point and cursed to do so. As you know, when a demon worshiper is born among the Changsheng clan, a curse activates that requires the bloodline to kill the summoned demon. You are not exempt from it. Unless it’s Lady Birsia, who severed the connection of souls.]

“......”

[So, welcome. I will be waiting in the Labyrinth. The one and only missionary and saint of the Magic Kingdom.]

With those words, the parasites began to commit suicide simultaneously. The letters crumbled, and bright red blood drenched the table.

“......Ha.”

The corners of Ena’s mouth twisted into a grimace.

[Joint Year Group Duel Tournament Bracket]

One day. A poster suddenly appeared in the academy hallway. Asel, who was moving to the classroom where the next lesson would take place with Elena, paused for a moment to scan the bracket.

The duels would continue for three days. Asel was scheduled for a duel on the second day.

[First-year Magical Department Top Student Asel] - [Second-year Overall Top Student Harmon Yankov]

The opponent was the strongest of the second year.

# 84 - Joint Training (2)

Hamon Yancov.

The rightful heir of the Yancov family, and the top student in the Knight Department among the second-year students, boasting overwhelming strength.

Rumor had it that Hamon's skill was close to Master level. In terms of a mage, he was a high-ranking 6th Circle mage, a talent who could easily hold his own on the battlefield. He hadn't yet stepped into the early stages of Master level, comparable to the 7th Circle, but he was the kind of talent who would likely achieve it by the time he graduated.

In layman's terms, he was a monster. Just as Asel showed tremendous talent in magic, Hamon was a collection of talents with a knack for martial arts.

Perhaps that's why, after the match schedule was released, many people were talking about their duel.

"A duel between the top students of the first and second years. If you think about it, isn't it like the representatives of the golden generation fighting?"

"You could say that."

"It's surprisingly true that no one is interested in the duels of the third and fourth years. Is this right? Shouldn't the seniors establish their authority?"

"If you do that, you'll be called the mediocre generation."

"How sad."

The third and fourth years mostly talked like this. They were interested, but only to that extent.

However, the first and second years, the main subjects of the duel, were mostly fired up. It was literal.

"Down with the freshmen! Down with the magic users!"

"The truth that swordsmen are superior to mages is written on the murals of the Magic Kingdom. No rebuttals accepted. Get lost, all of you."

"Hamon Yancov, is he a god?"

"You crazy bastards."

Hamon said the last words himself. He barged into the first-year Magical Department classroom, knocked out his classmates one by one, apologized to the professor and the first-year students, and disappeared.

'Youthful.'

Asel watched the scene and burst into laughter without much thought.

But as always, there were people who distorted the truth.

"Asel laughed! He laughed because he was pissed!"

"What."

In fact, Asel didn't have many friends at the academy. Most of the people he knew were those he had been involved with in some incident. Only Grace and Celine were simply friends. The rest started their friendships through entrance exams, assignments, and so on.

Other friends besides them? None. Unfortunately, Asel wasn't someone who actively made friends.

Moreover, after class, he would immediately lock himself in his dorm to study magic and wouldn't come out. He even installed double and triple layers of magic to ignore all noise and vibration to avoid being disturbed.

Thanks to this, Asel's reputation was twisted in a rather bizarre way. It was said that he had become obsessed with magic after encountering a necromancer during a group assignment. He was only kind to those he had befriended before, and endlessly cold and aloof to the rest! A model mage!

That was Asel in the eyes of the first-year students. And he was looking down at Hamon and laughing.

What did that mean?

"Asel laughed while looking at Hamon! He's decided to kill him! It's war! It's waaaaar!"

"What? War?"

"Is it a fight? Is it a fight? Is it a fight? Is it a fight?"

One of the students who happened to see Asel's smile spread the rumor. And the rumor spread rapidly in all directions like lightning. Thanks to this, Asel currently had the frame of 'a crazy bastard who's going around saying he's going to half-kill a senior' at the academy. It was a glorious title that no one else at the academy had ever received.

"Ah."

Of course, the person in question didn't like it. Regardless, the freshmen, who wouldn't miss an event in their boring academic life, immediately gathered in droves and waved homemade signs outside the window of the practice room where Hamon was teaching.

[Down with the second years!]

[Asel: Hamon Yancov? He was the weakest of those I've faced.]

[Mages are far superior beings to ignorant warriors, and this is depicted in the murals of the Magic Kingdom. Rebuttals accepted. Come at me, you bastards.]

Thanks to the unexpected protest, Asel's title was elevated to another level.

In short, he became the worst son of a bitch who declared he would kill his seniors. Nevertheless, the seniors didn't harass him because of the pure white lightning that still didn't seem to disappear from the sky. The overwhelming violence ironically took away their violence.

Conversely, it gave Asel violence. He sat in the club room, sipping the tea Reine had made for him with a constipated expression. Reine was trembling and stuttering.

"D-does it suit your taste? I-I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable by making it for you..."

"...Please don't act, Reine."

Asel said with a sigh. Only then did Reine burst into laughter and straighten her posture.

"I was found out. But the rumors are so wild these days~ I heard that you're grinding your teeth to kill our top student, so naturally, I, as a fellow second-year student, can't help but be scared~"

"I have no intention of killing him, and I'm not grinding my teeth either. Why are you doing this when you know that, really."

"It's fun."

Damn it.

Asel put down his teacup and leaned back in his chair. At that moment, Celine, who had finished her body acting practice, flew next to him. Asel naturally caught her with telekinesis.

Celine, who landed softly on the sofa, immediately began to grumble.

"I'm dying! I'm dying! It's hard!"

"You chose this club. Endure with evil and grit."

"Then die!"

This time, the target of 'die' was different. Asel lightly dodged the punch flying towards him and leaned forward.

"Reine, are there any second-year students who have bad feelings towards me?"

"Hmm... I don't think so? You don't have any contact with them in the first place."

"Then why are the rumors like this?"

"No, this rumor is entirely the fault of the first-year students..."

"Strictly speaking, the second years started it first."

"Hamon himself stepped in and ended the second-year incident as a simple happening. Not the first years."

"No, I don't have anything to explain in the first place. Why would I explain something I didn't do?"

"Because the public's opinion is different?"

"..."

He had nothing to say. Asel sighed and leaned back again. Celine, who had roughly wiped off her sweat, lay down with her head on his thigh.

"So what are you going to do? Are you really going to kill him?"

"Are you crazy?"

"I think it's too harsh to say 'are you crazy' to a frail girl."

"Be quiet."

Asel grabbed Celine's lips and made them into a duckbill. Celine struggled, making a 'brrr' sound, but he neatly ignored her and fell into thought.

"If you need someone to spar with, come to the Aurora Magic Tower. There are plenty of people who will spar with you."

"What."

Reine reacted. She widened her eyes and turned to Celine.

"C-Celine. Do you know what it means for a mage affiliated with the Magic Tower to invite a mage who isn't to the Magic Tower...?"

"...? I don't know. My seniors or teacher didn't tell me that?"

"Why, why...?"

"I don't know either... But why? Is there a reason why I shouldn't invite him?"

Celine asked back with pure curiosity. Reine wondered how to answer here.

"Ah, it's nothing~"

Her hesitation was short. She smiled vaguely and sipped her tea.

Sometimes you have to face problems directly and solve them. So instead of telling him about the rules of the Magic Tower, Reine vaguely glossed over it and left her seat. Asel and Celine greeted her as she left the club room, then plopped back down on the sofa.

"So what are you going to do? Are you going to go to the research club? Or are you coming to the Magic Tower?"

"The Magic Tower isn't on the academy grounds."

"Hehehe, of course it is! The academy branch that was built a long time ago is still there. There are a lot of people too."

"...Really?"

Asel muttered with a tempted expression. Celine whispered, scratching his hand with her fingers like a succubus.

"Come to the Magic Tower. I, huh? I made a name for myself in the Magic Tower, you know? My teacher is also a great person. So come. I'll definitely treat you well."

"..."

Asel pondered in silence for a moment, then opened his mouth.

# 85 - Monster Research Club

Monster Research Club.

Despite its simple name, the size of the clubroom they used was quite vast. Combined with the underground facilities, it could easily be compared to an entire building.

This was only natural. To study monsters, we needed to contain them, and since each monster varied in size, our containment methods had to be just as diverse. From small glass vials to entire rooms, there was a wide range of enclosures. With dozens of such creatures, it was no surprise that the clubroom was large.

“Let’s go in.”

Asel said to Celine. With that, the two entered the building marked with the sign "Monster Research Club." At the same time, the smell of various reagents assaulted their noses. The sounds echoing from all directions were just an added bonus.

“Subject 25. Failed administration of sleeping agent. Physical restraint is underway.”

“Subject 241 is currently trying to break our enclosure. I’ll go hit it.”

“Subject 51, commonly known as the Child of the Desert. Currently building a castle with sand. Once the castle is complete, it will connect with another castle in the desert, so it needs to be destroyed beforehand. I will deploy Senior Justina.”

“Subject 11… 1151st poison administration experiment… No reaction…”

Students wearing white lab coats over their uniforms quietly conversed while holding communication magical artifacts. Asel and Celine stood there, mouths agape at the scene, which was entirely different from what they had imagined.

‘…Isn’t this already beyond club level?’

A mirror-like magical artifact reflected them. Students dressed like researchers stood in front of it, exchanging opinions or responding to news coming from the enclosures, coordinating the situation.

What they had expected to be merely observing monsters in cages was instead a systematic research facility. It seemed more credible to think of it as an institution directly established by the Empire rather than a club. Just as Asel let out a hollow laugh, a student sitting in a chair sipping coffee noticed the two and tilted their head in curiosity.

“Who are you?”

“Oh.”

Only then did the two regain their composure and bow their heads toward the student who had asked the question.

“I’m Asel, a first-year student. I heard that I could fight monsters here, so I came to visit.”

“I’m Celine, also a first-year. My purpose is the same.”

“Hmm. I see.”

Even after realizing that they were both first-years, she did not stop using formal language. Instead, she adjusted her slightly askew glasses and placed her coffee cup on the table.

She let out a vague smile.

“That’s good. Voluntary test subjects like you are always welcome.”

“…Thank you?”

“No, thank you. We are the ones who should be grateful. Now, please follow me. I will show you the list of monsters right away.”

“…”

Without even introducing herself, she immediately stood up with a stack of documents and gestured for them to follow. Asel and Celine exchanged glances for a moment before moving to follow her.

The speed of events was almost like the speed of sound.

“We never turn away voluntary test subjects.”

Her name was Asila Safia. She was the heir of an alchemist family that had been conducting extensive research on monsters and the next head of the family. She was also a fourth-year senior who served as the head of the Monster Research Club.

However, there was nothing in her appearance that resembled a senior. She had a hunched neck, sunken shoulders, and a curved spine. Dark circles hung heavily under her eyes, and her eyelids were half-closed. To top it off, her blue hair was unkempt and messy.

No matter how you looked at it, she resembled a typical researcher. The only thing that symbolized her as a student was the uniform she wore under the white coat. While her appearance was quite beautiful, the other flaws overshadowed her charm, leaving only concern for her health.

Regardless, Asila smiled as she handed out the documents one by one.

“We study the ecosystems of monsters and how to handle them beneficially, or methods to use them in warfare. We are also conducting research on various ‘reactions.’ Death is one of them.”

“…”

“There are some monsters that are usually docile but go berserk only during combat. Naturally, for someone like me, who can only shout ‘Help!’ during a fight, obtaining their combat information is nearly impossible. Most of the other members are in the same boat.”

Asila continued speaking while bowing her head to a student who greeted her.

“Recently, more students from the Combat Department have joined the club, so the situation has improved somewhat, but we still lack combat personnel. Therefore, if an outsider comes to fight, we accept them without question. Unless it’s a special case, of course.”

“…Special case?”

“Well… it’s nothing serious. It’s only when someone has a reputation that’s hit rock bottom, lacks ability, or when there are no more monsters to gather information on regarding combat or death. Only then do we issue a summoning order. You two don’t fall into any of those categories, so you can rest easy.”

Asila said this while handing a stack of documents to Asel.

The materials contained information about various monsters. From insignificant monsters to those that were difficult to deal with, the variety was vast. Celine muttered one of the names.

“…Star Child?”

“It’s a monster that can only be found on nights when the Milky Way is clearly visible. It has a human-like appearance, but instead of a head, there’s a planet floating above it. It’s strongest at midnight, and during the day or on nights when the stars aren’t visible, it can’t do anything and just lies on the ground.”

“…”

“Even when it’s strong, it’s not that strong. However, you need to be careful when the two Milky Ways intersect. It becomes twice as strong then.”

“It’s similar to a Stellar Rank Sorcerer.”

“Yes. But this creature can’t do anything against a Stellar Rank Sorcerer and just dies. Maybe it recognizes the head as a star, so when a Stellar Rank Sorcerer goes ‘pop,’ it just dies.”

So, on nights when the Milky Way rises, we usually call in a Stellar Rank Sorcerer student to give it a good scare, Asila added. Celine’s eyes sparkled as she eagerly read the information about the Star Child. Asel handed her the paper entirely and skimmed through the other monsters.

Asila stood next to him, chattering away about each monster Asel’s gaze landed on.

Keeeeek!!

As they walked, a sudden shriek erupted from the side. Asel instinctively stacked Shields and quickly turned his head, gathering Mana. Asila watched him in admiration.

“Oh… your reaction speed is comparable to that of a decent warrior. I’m honestly impressed.”

“…I’m surprised too. What was that sound?”

“Oh, it’s nothing serious.”

Asila smiled and pressed a bright red button attached to the wall.

With that, the wall made a grinding noise and rose, replaced by a large glass panel. Asel stared through the glass at a massive cephalopod with three severed legs, screaming in agony. It had horns resembling a crown on its head, and from its blood-red eyes, a high-pressure stream of blood shot out like a laser. In contrast, green blood flowed from its severed legs.

“This is a monster called the Usurper Octopus. It’s the name given to the strongest giant octopus that inhabits the sea. Naturally, the horns that sprout like a crown have a significant impact on its name.”

“…”

“Its characteristics include high-pressure blood spray, high-frequency sound generation, invisibility, and legs with teeth. It’s not weak, but it’s not that strong either. However, it’s a rare breed, so it took some effort to bring it in.”

Asila’s voice continued, but Asel was more focused on the battle happening inside the room.

The face of the woman fighting the octopus was familiar to him. Without realizing it, Asel muttered her name and narrowed his eyes.

“…Grace?”

Swoosh.

A dark aura emanated from Grace’s sword. With a blank expression, she wiped the blood from her cheek and stepped forward. In response, the octopus fired another high-pressure stream of blood.

Swoosh!

As expected, it was split by Grace’s blade. The stream of blood that had been flying straight was torn apart in all directions, and Grace, closing the distance in an instant, swung her sword at supersonic speed. The octopus’s head and legs separated, turning it into a mere octopus.

Blood burst forth, and heavy organs fell to the ground with a thud. Grace took a few steps back, shaking off the squishy flesh that clung to her clothes. Then, as if talking to someone, she stared into the air and moved her lips.

At the same time, she cast a brief glance toward the glass. In that moment, Asel’s eyes met hers.

“…!”

Grace’s eyes widened. She seemed to shout something into the air before quickly throwing herself through the door behind her. The only thing visible was her flowing red hair.

“…”

The isolation chamber was left with only the corpse of the octopus. Asila shrugged her shoulders and pressed the button again, returning the glass to the wall. She then said,

“There’s no reason not to kill it just because it’s rare. In fact, because it’s rare, we need to observe its behavior closely when it dies or during combat. We need to create a manual for when we encounter it by chance.”

“…Did Grace come here for combat like I did?”

“No. She belongs here. As you can see from her wearing a lab coat.”

Asel nodded as if he understood.

He had wondered which club she had joined, but it seemed she had been part of this one from the beginning. While it didn’t quite fit the image of a researcher, she must have had her own reasons for joining.

It was impossible to judge the mind of a time traveler carelessly.

“Oh, Asel!”

A moment later, Grace appeared at the end of the hallway with a bright smile. She stood in front of Asel, waving her hand cheerfully.

“Hi! What brings you here?”

“I just wanted to gather some combat samples before the joint training. By the way, that was quite impressive just now. Is that speed what you get when you go all out?”

“Ah… ahaha, I’ve had a bit of a revelation recently…”

Grace referred to her exclusive experience outside the academy as a ‘revelation’ and then noticed Celine, who had followed closely beside Asel, and her expression suddenly turned cold. Celine, who had been oblivious, tilted her head at the sudden change.

“What? Do you have something to say to me?”

“…No, I was just wondering since you were hanging out with Asel.”

“What, you think I might date him? Ha! Nonsense! We’re just friends, friends. Developing beyond that? Ugh. That’s ridiculous.”

“I’m the one who should be saying that.”

Asel inserted telekinesis magic into Celine’s head. In an instant, Celine’s head caved in, and she let out a strange sound as she bent forward.

“Plllleeeek!”

Asel purely admired.

“Wow, what was that? That voice just now was really ugly. Is that even a voice that can come from a human? It’s quite impressive.”

“Die! Dieee!”

“I dodged it.”

Asel lightly deflected Celine’s flailing punches with his Shield and turned back to Grace.

Grace was murmuring softly, looking back at Celine with a cold expression.

“…This seems to be the most dangerous place.”

# 86 - The Enlightened One

“Honestly, Asel, there aren't that many monsters that match your level.”

Grace naturally joined the group. She clung to Asel while tying her hair back. It was a bit uncomfortable to move, but knowing Grace's feelings, Asel didn't push her away.

“Well, since we're in a club, there are some, but if we go by ratio, there aren't many. At best, we have 'Crawling Wretch,' 'Millennia-old Abomination,' and 'Enlightened One' as the main options, right?”

“...All of their names sound unusual. Who decides the names of these monsters?”

“A group called 'The Library.' Anyway, this isn't important, and personally, I recommend the Enlightened One. It has the ability to grow stronger according to the opponent's level. Sometimes it does spout strange things, though.”

“Hmm.”

Asel let out a sigh while reading the material on the Enlightened One.

Its appearance is similar to that of a human. It wears a black robe that covers its entire body, and where its face should be, there is a swirling black shadow. The danger level was marked from the lowest to the highest. This was likely due to its ability to grow stronger depending on the opponent.

“I have a question. When you say it grows stronger depending on the opponent, does that mean it literally gets stronger? Or does it enhance physical abilities or magical abilities?”

“If the opponent is a warrior, it enhances physical abilities; if a mage, then magical abilities. That's how it works.”

The answer came from Asila.

“It’s quite a fascinating monster. It’s a rare breed not even listed in the ancient monster compendium. Elves captured one that was lurking near the World Tree, and the headmaster brought it in for research, but there was no information about it at all. So we are continuously studying it.”

“...Is it not dangerous?”

“It’s fine. In fact, it’s better to keep it here than in a specialized research facility. Since it grows stronger the stronger the opponent, it’s easier to control here, where there are more students than in the imperial capital, which is filled with all sorts of monstrous personnel. Professional researchers also come here regularly. It doesn’t show any aggression to begin with.”

“I see.”

Asel replied and immersed himself in the material about the Enlightened One.

It has no gender. Its voice seems to be a blend of voices from all age groups, and its physique resembles that of an adult male. Occasionally, strange phrases it mutters are all recorded on one side.

[Countless cycles of reincarnation. Thousands of regressions. Failure. Failure. Failure. Failure.]

[I offer, here, life, and I ask for a response, I will plant a tree here.]

[I’m sorry. No. I’m sorry. I believe in my students. I’m sorry. I love you. I’m sorry. Please grant salvation. I’m sorry. Become a demon. I’m sorry. Teacher. I’m sorry. I bet on you. I’m sorry. Stand tall. I’m sorry. May our deaths be worth something. I’m sorry.]

[I’m tired now.]

[I could never have been a great person. It was nonsensical from the start.]

[But if not me, who would do this? I cannot betray those who believed in me and died.]

[Cut the soul. Distribute it. Thus, open a new world.]

[Create countless possibilities for a single possibility. Open hell.]

“......”

A feast of countless sentences. The time it took for the monster to utter these sentences varied; sometimes it was just a few days, and other times it stretched over years. The longest gap between sentences was thirteen years.

At first glance, these sentences could be dismissed as mere ramblings. They sounded like the mutterings of madmen one might hear while walking down the street. But the moment they were meticulously recorded and lined up, the monster's murmurs became substantial evidence.

At least, it was so for Asel. He narrowed his eyes and desperately racked his brain.

‘Countless cycles of reincarnation. Thousands of regressions.’

The significant words written about Aleph.

‘Create countless possibilities for a single possibility.’

A phrase that seemed to signify the demon of possibilities.

These were merely flowing pieces of evidence. A delicate array of words that would be impossible to connect without deep thought. Asel felt as if a puzzle was assembling in his mind as he looked at them.

“......”

Monsters are not naturally occurring life forms. They reproduce, but they have no purpose in killing. They seem to be born solely for that. They kill, kill, and kill again. They are fundamentally different from other life forms that kill for survival.

Why does this happen? The reason is simpler than one might think.

Monsters are byproducts of demons. They are the vanguard sent by demons to annihilate the sentient beings that exist purely on this land. That is what monsters are. Therefore, they do not eat, do not sleep, and only crave blood and flesh.

This is why some refer to monsters not as monsters but as aberrations. They possess bizarre and unique natures that are entirely different from the native creatures of the continent.

The monster named the Enlightened One was no different. As a being born of monsters, there must be a demon that serves as its foundation. Asel instinctively felt that it was the demon of possibilities. Once the word possibility came from its mouth, there was no doubt.

And the being derived from the demon of possibilities had spoken the words recorded about Aleph. More than a decade ago.

What does that mean?

‘......The one who left words in Aleph was the demon of possibilities.’

Asel's gaze sank deeply.

Demons cannot interfere with the mortal realm unless they descend. The gap between the hell they inhabit and reality is far too vast. They can diminish their very existence to descend, but even if they do appear, all they can do is breathe; nothing more. The cost of diminishing their existence is a power lesser than that of a bug.

Thus, he had not expected it. That the one who left words in Aleph could be a demon.

Even now, that thought remains unchanged. However, if the opponent is not in hell but in another space, the situation changes.

‘The sage said that the demon of possibilities exists in the null space. Not in hell.’

The null space is an unobserved world. It is the gap between reality and the other world, also known as the void space.

If it is nesting in such a place, it might not be impossible for it to interfere with the mortal realm. After all, space mages also manifest formulas through the void space, so it would be wrong to think that demons cannot do so. There are always exceptions.

‘If it really was a demon that conveyed a message to me...’

What could its intention be?

“Asel, look over there. The scarecrow is fighting.”

Demons are incomprehensible beings. They deceive, devour, erode, and corrupt humans. A series of messages sent by such beings. The sage said that the demon of possibilities desires the salvation of humanity, but can the ‘salvation’ spoken of by a demon truly be the same as the common understanding of salvation?

“Asel?”

A failed transcendent is trapped in their own world. Unable to endure the collapse of the concepts and imagery they have forged, they create a world and transform into a demon. Can such a being genuinely desire the salvation of humanity?

“Hey!”

In the midst of his thoughts, Celine punched Asel in the side. Caught off guard, Asel let out a gasp and staggered.

“Ah, ugh...”

“Oh?”

“...What are you doing?”

Asel was surprised, Celine was surprised, and Grace was angry.

“Asel, why did you hit me? Who do you think you are?”

“No, I didn’t expect to get hit either! That thing blocks all my attacks with its shield all the time!”

“Is that an excuse?”

“Enough, I’m fine, so just stop.”

Ugh.

Asel pressed his aching side with his hand and spoke.

Did she put mana into the hit? The pain was more intense than he expected. If it had been an attack filled with intent to kill, he could have instinctively blocked it, but since it wasn’t, he couldn’t react. The organ that was precisely struck screamed in agony...

“I-I’m sorry.”

Celine apologized with a slightly flustered and remorseful expression. Asel smiled and straightened his posture.

“It’s fine. I hit you a lot too, anyway.”

“...Still...”

“If you’re really sorry, roll around once here, then roll three times sideways and do a somersault to apologize. Then I’ll accept it.”

“Do you want to die?”

“No.”

Asel lightly brushed off Celine's threat and stroked Grace's hair. Grace instinctively rubbed her head against his hand.

“Thank you for worrying about me. But this is nothing, so you can just laugh it off.”

“Yeah...”

Grace trailed off, closing her eyes. Asel continued to play with her hair until she was satisfied, then turned his head toward the scarecrow that Celine had mentioned.

A scarecrow made of straw. However, it looked more like a doll than a scarecrow. It had no face, but it had hands, legs, and joints, all made of straw.

In its hand was a heavy wooden sword, and across from it stood a man with light purple hair. He held a dagger in his left hand and a steel sword in his right, exhaling deeply. Drops of sweat fell from his damp hair.

“I’m Hamon Yankov.”

Asila explained. She chuckled and straightened her bent waist. The cracking sound echoed loudly.

“He has been visiting here every day since a few days ago. It probably started the moment the matchups were announced. He doesn’t want to lose to you.”

“......”

“People call him a genius. Yes, he is indeed a genius. However, he is a genius who works hard. When he lost to you, he probably didn’t want to make excuses like, ‘If I had just trained normally, I would have won,’ ‘I was unlucky,’ or ‘If I had given it my all, I would have won,’ so he’s working hard like this.”

Training to avoid losing, and at the same time, training to not feel ashamed when he loses. Isn’t it ironic?

Asila added that and turned her body. Asel glanced at Hamon for a moment longer before turning his head. In that brief moment, Hamon and Asel's eyes met.

It was Hamon who greeted first. He received the scarecrow's strike while showing a faint smile toward Asel. Asel nodded in response and followed Asila as they walked.

The proper first meeting was made in that short time.

‘Later.’

There would be a proper meeting before the duel began. Asel thought that as he strolled down the corridor with the three of them.

“I’ll step out for a bit. Is there a Burumi? I think it’s nearby. I’ll go take a look! If I finish first, I’ll wait outside the club building!”

Celine stepped away from the group. Asel saw her off and moved deeper into the building.

Before long, they reached the end of the corridor. Asila pressed a button that was hanging alone on the wall, leaving Asel and Grace behind. As before, one side of the wall opened, revealing a glass isolation chamber.

“......”

A dirt floor. Walls and ceilings filled with various isolation magic.

Below that.

-.......

A man in a black robe was planting something into the ground. As soon as his hand touched the floor, black saplings sprouted from the dark soil. None had grown. They were everywhere, like weeds, filling the space with saplings.

The dirt floor had become so barren that there was hardly any room left to plant more saplings. Yet, he continued to plant saplings through a tiny gap, as if there was a reason he needed to plant trees here.

If those saplings appeared to resemble black lightning, would that be an illusion?

-Omnipresence. Attempting to shape the world with hundreds, thousands of saplings. Truly, it is arrogance.

The monster suddenly spoke.

-Then what is arrogance? If one says they can do what they can do, is that arrogance?

-Then you are the arrogant one. You have taken the seeds of over a hundred million lives to plant a single tree, nurtured it to bear fruit, and mocked the world while collapsing the timeline. You were able to do that. Thus, you achieved it. You cannot be anything but an arrogant one.

In the next moment.

-Then what about you?

The monster abruptly turned its head and gazed at Asel and Grace. In the blink of an eye, it approached the glass, looking down at the two with its undulating shadow and spoke.

-He who inherits the primordial existence. And he who sealed himself for others after traversing through thousands of times.

It was a tone that seemed to mock.

-The misfortune you created, has it been rewarded? Have your countless sacrifices and devotions been in vain?

Derived from demons.

Monsters.

Aberrations.

And.

-Has the world been saved?

The Enlightened One posed that question.

# 87 - The Enlightened One (2)

Has the world been saved?

With those words, the enlightened one said nothing more. He simply stared at the group for a while, then turned and resumed planting the saplings.

"Hmph, still fond of Zen riddles, I see."

Asilla said. Asel quietly organized his thoughts while watching the enlightened one's back.

'An ancient being. One who sealed himself.'

Who does that refer to? Are the two the same person? Or different people?

Was there a reason he stared at Grace and me? Did the enlightened one say those words just now, or did the Devil of Possibility say them?

"……."

Countless thoughts chased each other's tails. Asel narrowed his eyes and stared at the sapling the enlightened one was planting.

"Has the world been saved? Surprisingly, the enlightened one's taste isn't very girlish, is it?"

"……?"

Asilla suddenly blurted out. Asel frowned slightly and turned his head toward Asilla.

"……What does that have to do with anything?"

"……? Why wouldn't it have something to do with it? Has the world been saved? Isn't he subtly saying that he likes strawberries and peaches?"

"What kind of bullsh—"

Asel stopped there, suddenly struck by a hypothesis. He paused for a moment, then spoke again.

"……Then what about you? How do you interpret those words?"

"It means he likes teddy bears, doesn't it? That's how I'd interpret it."

"……."

Asel was silent. Instead, he turned to look at Grace. She understood the meaning in Asel's gaze and said with a somewhat stiff expression.

"……I heard it as a message to go to the World Tree."

That confirmed it.

The words of the enlightened one. A Zen riddle with an unknowable meaning.

It possessed a bizarre characteristic: the content differed for each listener. Just as what Asel and Grace heard was different, and what Asilla and Grace understood was different.

Perhaps the enlightened one's past records, as written in the data, would also appear differently to each person.

How was that possible?

To call it a simple monster's power… the power of perception alteration was too strong. A sentence that sounds and looks different to each person? Even high-ranking Illusionists would need extensive preparation to achieve that. And even then, it would be imperfect, easily shattered by the slightest disturbance.

Could a mere monster wield such power?

"……."

Just in case, Asel activated his Mana Eye. But the enlightened one's words, lodged in his mind, remained unchanged, and the content written in the data was the same.

A power that even the Authority of the Mana Eye couldn't break through.

That meant this was the result of a transcendent's power, far beyond the realm of a great mage.

Perhaps the Devil of Possibility added some of his Authority when creating the enlightened one, making such a thing possible.

"……Hah."

Thanks to the absurd power of perception alteration, it was impossible to know which parts of the enlightened one's words were true, or who the correct recipient was. But was it merely a coincidence that his past statements matched the content written in Aleph, and that he made statements related to the Devil of Possibility, who had the highest correlation?

'If it's not a coincidence…'

……Crackle.

A faint current, so subtle that others would hardly notice, sparked at the tip of the sapling. A sapling barely the size of a weed. A plant of ominous color that would need decades more to become a tree.

'If the Devil of Possibility is trying to tell me something…'

Just in case, Asel channeled a current between his fingers and let it flow beyond the glass window.

At that moment, the black lightning that had been sparking from the sapling writhed even more violently, as if responding to Asel's current. It looked like hundreds of black snakes ascending to the sky. Asel silently watched the spectacle and withdrew his Mana.

'What connection is there between him and me?'

The worry in Asel's eyes deepened.

His thoughts were too complicated, so Asel postponed the battle with the monsters and left the club building.

Grace was waiting for him. She also seemed to have a complicated mind, as she plopped down next to Asel on the bench and let out a long sigh.

"I wonder what it means to go to the World Tree."

Whoosh!!

The sky, which had been clear until then, unleashed a torrent of rain as if it had been waiting for this moment. Opaque clouds covered the sun, stealing away the warmth unique to spring.

A rather chilly wind carried the rain. Asel used Water Flow Magic and Wind Magic to create an inviolable zone around the bench, then answered Grace's question.

"You didn't go to the World Tree in the previous playthrough?"

"No. There was no reason to go. In the first place, the World Tree is the first thing to collapse when devils start appearing en masse. Black lightning strikes it and it just disappears."

"……."

Black lightning.

Asel recalled the black current that had sparked from the enlightened one's sapling and said.

"Do you know who dropped the lightning?"

"No. It's definitely the work of a devil, but none of the devils could control lightning. Until the moment they died, none of them caused black lightning."

"What about the Devil of Possibility?"

"He didn't even participate in the battle in the first place. Whether the devils died or not, he just wandered around the continent."

"……Why would he do that?"

Asel asked. Grace pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I don't know. But someone who encountered him said that he had a very wistful expression. He didn't fight either. He just stood there quietly and disappeared."

He was a strange guy, Grace added.

Asel didn't answer, instead looking up at the sky. The rain, as if venting its frustration, soaked the ground and added moisture to the air.

A long-awaited downpour. It would probably take several more hours to stop. Asel stared silently at the falling raindrops and thought.

'In the end, I think I'll have to meet him directly to find out.'

The connection between the Devil of Possibility and himself. The sage's testimony that he wanted salvation. The words written in Aleph. The enlightened one's statements.

They were points that could be connected, but drawing lines between them wouldn't create a picture. Just as critics offer their own interpretations of a painter's work, but none of them match the painter's intention. Making various hypotheses right now would only complicate things. The human brain is too small to fathom the devil's true intentions.

At least by talking to him, or standing on equal footing, he might be able to understand.

"Asel."

As he was thinking, Grace spoke to him. Asel turned his head toward her.

"Yeah?"

"That… about going to the World Tree. I'm thinking of going, for now? It's best to minimize variables, so."

"Ah… I guess so. It's something that didn't happen in the previous playthrough. You'd want to check it out yourself."

"Yeah, yeah. So, what I'm saying is… could you maybe come with me?"

"……With you?"

This was another unexpected proposal. But thinking about it calmly, it wasn't such a bad proposal.

Grace said that the World Tree was destroyed by black lightning. If that was true, there was a high probability that the same thing would happen in this playthrough.

Black Lightning.

The lightning that flared up when the letters were inscribed on Aleph. The lightning that flared up from the sapling planted by the enlightened one, who was derived from the Devil of Possibility. All of them were inky black. Could the lightning that struck the World Tree and those be completely unrelated?

'No way.'

Coincidences become inevitabilities when they overlap. There was definitely something there.

If there was an opportunity to see those things with his own eyes, there was no reason to refuse. Asel smiled faintly and nodded.

"Okay. Let's set a date sometime."

"……! Ah, okay! Let's go during vacation! Or we can submit a field trip application and go officially!"

"What's a field trip application?"

"An application that allows you to skip classes and wander around outside for a set period! With this, you can leave the academy for at least three months!"

There was such a thing.

"Okay. Whatever, let's go sometime."

"Okay! Look forward to it! I already know everything you like, so I'll prepare properly!"

Asel chuckled at her declaration as she jumped up.

"Okay, I'll look forward to it."

"Yeah! And separately from that, go on a date with me this Sunday!"

"Okay… Huh?"

He answered unconsciously, then realized something was wrong and looked up. But Grace ignored Asel's question and waved her hand with a bright smile.

"You answered!"

She was already so far away that he didn't even know when she had gone that far. Grace skipped and hopped, brushing back her hair, which was soaked with rain.

"Look forward to it!"

"……Hah."

She had the attitude of a pure, innocent child. Asel was about to say something in response, but he just smiled faintly and waved back. Then Grace grinned and turned around.

"Did you wait long?"

Soon after, Celine came out of the building. Asel looked up at her and stood up.

"No. Let's go."

April 10th. Saturday. Around 9 AM.

The rain that had been falling since yesterday had not stopped yet. It had only become stronger. Bluish-black lightning flashed in the clouds, raging as if it would descend to the ground and sweep everything away. It was so fascinating that I sat on the roof of the royal palace and looked down at the lightning.

-What are you doing?

In the meantime, my teacher came to visit. He sat next to me, his face covered with the white mask he always wore, and a black robe draped over his shoulders. I answered with a deliberately curt tone.

-Looking at things.

-Lightning?

-Yes. It's cool.

-You think so too? I think so too.

His voice was very faint. Was it the power of the mask, or was it because he was an old man? I couldn't tell. I didn't even know his age, let alone his gender.

In the first place, he wasn't even a mage hired by my dad. He was just a wandering mage who said I had potential and insisted on teaching me magic. He said that having a place to eat and sleep was enough payment, so my dad accepted him. And so, he became our family.

-Look.

He was a mage who controlled the power of lightning. He wasn't Cromwell. She was making a name for herself on the northern front. This was the center of the continent. There was no way he could be Cromwell.

Even so, he wielded the power of lightning. An unofficial Electromancer. And he was trying to teach it to me.

-What is lightning?

-I don't know. Something violent?

-Violent, yes. At the same time, it shines, flows, and leaves a mark on the world. My lightning focused on flowing. What do you want to do?

He asked in a soft voice. As he conjured lightning that flowed like waves between his fingers.

I answered without hesitation.

-I want to leave a mark.

-A mark?

-Yes. I lived here. I used to live here. The kingdom's cutest princess was here, and she saved you! It would be fun if something like that happened. I think I could laugh even after I die, looking back on it?

-That's like you, you little rascal.

He often stroked my hair. I could feel the affection that couldn't be hidden in that gesture. When he taught me magic, when I was picky about food, when we played together. He cherished me endlessly.

-If you ever take on a disciple in the future.

So, I didn't dismiss his words, even if they were just a joke. That day was the same.

-Cherish them.

-Why?

-Because they will like you a lot.

He said in a rather wistful voice.

-They will probably love you. So you too, cherish and love your disciple. Just like I did.

-Don't I have to get stronger to take on a disciple? I can't even use basic magic yet.

-I'm telling you to do it later.

-Hmph. Then you have to teach me well.

-I will try.

-Then I'll promise too.

That day's promise was made under the thunder and rain.

April 11th. Sunday. 00:00 AM.

A devil descended.

"Are you really going in alone?"

Yufia asked. Ena had given the same answer several times.

"Yes."

"It's dangerous. You know it's a trap. If something goes wrong, there's no turning back. You have a disciple, don't you?"

"Disciple."

Ena murmured the word and smiled faintly.

"Yes. A great child. There's still a lot I need to teach her. I wonder what kind of Imagery that child will have. I hope it's related to me, if possible."

"Then, there's no reason to go in alone, risking your life—"

"It's a story I have to finish."

Ena turned to look at Yufia. Yufia met her blue gaze and shuddered.

"My clan's story. A story that I, as the last remaining royal, must finish. I don't need anyone else's help, or sacrifice. I don't want anyone else to die because of me."

"……The Beginning."

"The reason I didn't inform Wiheim about the Small Labyrinth, and the reason I silenced you, is because of that."

Ena clutched the brooch around her neck. As if it were a talisman.

A simple lucky brooch with no special effects or magic.

An accessory that Asel had given her for the first time, for one person only.

"I won't leave a will. Because I won't die."

"……."

"Wait if you want. I'll be back soon after taking care of it."

"……Please don't die."

In the center of the continent. Right next to the ruined kingdom. Above a pit of immeasurable depth.

At the entrance to the Small Labyrinth, Yufia said. Ena nodded with a blank face.

"Yeah."

Ena threw herself over the pit.

At the same time, her vision was dyed black. A sense of weightlessness enveloped her body, and all sorts of hallucinations pierced her ears.

It was a curse. The cries of the people cursing the kingdom's last princess.

"……."

She endured it. She opened her eyes and ears. She faced their resentment head-on, without turning away.

Only for a moment.

Ena set foot on the ground.

-Kieeeeeeeek!!

It was a floor teeming with parasites. Without hesitation, Ena immediately released her Mana. The lightning that spread from it interfered with physical phenomena and dominated the space. The parasites burst into flames, and applause could be heard from beyond.

"Welcome, Princess."

It was a voice like hundreds of insects crawling.

"Welcome to the Magic Kingdom."

She raised her head. Before her eyes, the kingdom of its glorious days unfolded. But it was only the appearance that was intact. The stench of rot vibrated from within.

Citizens eaten by parasites walked the streets. They tore apart the corpses lying on the roadside, cut off their own arms, and planted them on their heads. Blood and flesh splattered everywhere.

And at the center of it all.

A saint in pure white clothes smiled brightly.

"The person you just killed was a girl named Roa. You remember her, don't you? The girl who made flower crowns in the flower garden every day."

"Shut up and get ready."

The answer came from Virsilla. She was sitting on a stone bridge next to the saint, and she gazed at Ena as she threw off the robe she had been wearing. Ena also stared at her, sharpening her eyes.

"Hello, little sister. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"……Virsilla."

"You should call me 'older sister'."

Virsilla waved her staff.

"Do we need a long conversation between us? I have to kill you, and you have to kill me. Since we both know each other's circumstances, let's avoid unnecessary words."

"I agree. Since we both know everything about each other, let's avoid small talk."

The saint smiled.

"You kill us and completely eradicate the devils. We kill you, regain the throne of the Magic Kingdom, and resurrect the devils. It's a simple story."

"Yeah."

Ena answered.

"It's a simple story."

She reached out her hand toward the air.

Thud!

A heavy energy raced in all directions. The Imagery of a great mage who had reached the 8th Circle collided with the world. Surging, violent currents occupied all directions, tearing the skin of the saint and Virsilla to shreds. Their existence was shaken just by being exposed to the Imagery.

"You're starting with this?! Hah, you're crazy!"

"Get ready. She's coming."

The Saint and Virsia contorted their faces and formed hand seals.

The three people spoke in unison.

"Mindscape Manifestation."

"Mindscape Manifestation!"

"Imagery."

Ena closed her eyes.

"Manifestation."

FZZZZZZZZZZZT!!

The sky split open.

# 88 - Aurora

Thunder rumbled!

The pouring rain showed no signs of stopping for days. Every time the clouds flashed, lightning struck down, and thick raindrops pounded against the window. Asel sat on the sofa, sipping tea and staring blankly out the window.

A new weekend had arrived. He pressed his fingers against his tired eyelids from staying up all night studying magic, leaning back against the couch. A warm sensation enveloped his entire body.

“…….”

He didn’t particularly dislike rainy days. He preferred it to rain just enough to feel a bit gloomy, but he actually enjoyed heavy downpours that struck with thunder. It was good for deep contemplation, and above all, listening to the sound of thunder made him feel at ease.

It was probably because he had become accustomed to lightning while handling Electrification Art. Hearing thunder at all times made it strange not to get used to it.

Thud thud thud.

The wind blew, causing the window to shake slightly. Rainwater seeped through the cracks, dampening the floor a bit.

Asel cast Protection Magic on the window and gulped down the tea he was drinking. The bitter and sweet taste lingered on his tongue. The sound of the pouring rain, mixed with the occasional rumble of thunder, cooled his mind.

‘This kind of rest is necessary.’

He had been living too busily lately. The density of the new information he had acquired was immense, and he had spent too much time organizing and establishing new frameworks. He had been so mentally heated all day that it was exhausting. The problem was that he hadn’t definitively figured anything out.

“Phew…”

Even when he asked Aleph, he either received vague answers or cryptic responses, leaving him with no way to proceed. It was only natural since she had directly stated that her knowledge of demons had been erased. She knew nothing about the Demon of Possibility.

It would be a lie to say he wasn’t disappointed, but what could he do? In the end, he had no choice but to study demons directly.

It would be best to blend in among the demon worshippers, but for now, he had no way to deceive them. Just showing up and saying he wanted to join wouldn’t get him accepted. It wasn’t even certain that such a group would accept members in that manner.

‘Is there no opportunity?’

He pondered, letting out a low sound, but no sudden ideas came to him. He sighed deeply and ruffled his disheveled hair.

At that moment, someone knocked on the dormitory door.

“Big sister is here. Open up!”

Celine’s voice came from beyond the door. Asel chuckled and opened the door.

There stood Celine, backlit by the rain-soaked corridor window, wearing the Aurora Magic Tower uniform with a confident expression. Asel looked down at her and said,

“Who’s the big sister? I only have one sister.”

“Hey, every guy has at least one stepsister. I’ll gladly be your sister.”

“Get lost.”

“Yes, sir.”

Celine slipped through Asel’s side and entered his dorm room. Then she plopped down on the sofa as if it were her own home. Asel, who had closed the door, looked at her and let out a hollow laugh.

“You have no hesitation about entering a guy’s room alone.”

“Why, are you going to pounce on me or something?”

Celine laughed playfully and sprawled out on the sofa.

“Ah! No, Asel! We’re friends! This is something only lovers do!”

“…….”

“You bad bastard! I trusted you, but you saw me as a woman! Get away! Don’t pull down your pants!”

“If you act up one more time, I’ll reverse all the electrical signals in your body.”

“What?”

Celine immediately sat up straight. Asel sighed deeply and threw on the coat he had carelessly tossed aside.

When talking to Celine, his speech from the days spent in the slums occasionally slipped out. It was a manner of speaking filled with curses and slang, which he tried to avoid using, but he couldn’t help it in front of her. It was probably because she was someone who had lived long enough in the slums as well.

The formation of empathy was truly a frightening thing.

Asel handed her a cup of tea he had brewed earlier and sat down on the sofa.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. But when are you going to the Magic Tower?”

A few days ago, while pondering about a joint training session in the clubroom, Reine suggested visiting the Monster Research Club, and Celine suggested stopping by the Aurora Magic Tower together. After a moment of consideration, Asel decided to visit both.

There was no need to choose just one since time wasn’t pressing.

He had already been to the Monster Research Club. All that remained was the Magic Tower.

There were many wizards affiliated with the Magic Tower in Wiheim as well. The Magic Tower had several main bases. However, he had never entered a Magic Tower himself.

It was a place that thoroughly excluded outsiders, making it impossible to enter unless invited, even for fellow wizards.

Thanks to that, Asel was extremely curious about the Magic Tower he was about to visit for the first time. Wizards were generally like that. They couldn’t help but be interested in the unknown world they had yet to experience.

Celine, being a fellow wizard, understood his feelings. She chuckled and raised her teacup.

“Let’s just drink this and go.”

It took less than five minutes for her to finish her tea.

“I told them I’d go to the Magic Tower today, but I didn’t say I’d go with you.”

Due to the pouring rain, the streets were damp. Streams of water flowed into the sewer, and the occasional pedestrians splashed water from the puddles they stepped in. Asel used Freezing Magic to turn raindrops into ice just before his clothes got wet.

He replaced his umbrella with Water Flow Magic. It was a simple spell that adjusted the water to the same shape as the umbrella to block the rain. Both Asel and Celine were using one. It was a popular spell that all wizards could use.

“Just like you’re interested in the Magic Tower, the Magic Tower is very interested in the Witch Council. It’s only natural since they don’t exchange much. So, I kept quiet to surprise you.”

“Was that really necessary?”

“My choice.”

She said that and began humming a tune as they walked toward the northern part of the academy. It was the commercial district lined with shops for students of the Magical Department.

“You don’t know this, but the wizards from the Magic Tower are very interested in the wizards from the Witch Council. It can’t be helped. That’s the only place that deals with such unique magic.”

“Hmm.”

“Just look at the magic you handle. Lightning, smoke, strange flames… that’s already three, three. It’s amazing when you think about it. You are human, right?”

Asel simply ignored her suspicion and turned his head.

“Are there many people in the Magic Tower?”

“Hmm… Compared to the first Magic Tower in the capital, it’s not many. This is technically a branch, not a tower. Still, the quality is high. There are plenty of people to spar with you.”

“Are there great wizards?”

“Two. There are. One is my master.”

The expression on Celine’s face when she mentioned “master” was warmer than usual. Asel glanced down at her face before turning his gaze to the white lightning etched in the sky.

Even though it had been a while since Ena left, the White Lightning still displayed its might. Looking at it, thoughts of Ena inevitably surfaced.

The sudden letter from Wiheim. Ena, who had disappeared without a trace. He had continued sending letters since then, but no suitable replies had come back. At best, he received a reply saying she was okay. There were no detailed explanations.

‘She should be fine.’

He knew that Ena was one of the strongest on the continent. It was the same for her not being someone who could be killed easily.

But why was it? Whenever he thought of her, an inexplicable anxiety flowed from deep within his chest. The depth of the emotion was too profound to dismiss as mere illusion. His instincts screamed at him to go find Ena right away.

The reason he didn’t was solely because of what Ena had said just before leaving.

-I’ll be back.

She had clearly left a message that she would return. So it was only right for him, as her disciple, to stay here. If Ena asked for help, that would be a different story, but unless that happened, it was clear that showing up uninvited would only be a nuisance. At his current level, he wouldn’t be able to help her at all.

‘So I need to get stronger.’

At the very least, he needed to reach a level where he could protect Ena’s back, which would also help her in her endeavors.

Thus, sparring with the wizards of the Magic Tower was not only for the academy but also for his personal achievement. He knew from experience how beneficial sparring between wizards could be.

“We’ve arrived!”

While he was lost in thought, Celine suddenly stopped in front of a building and shouted. Asel turned his head toward the building she was facing.

[Aurora Magic Tower Academy Branch]

It was written in large letters above the entrance of the building. Asel looked up to check the height of the building.

It was somewhat inappropriate to call it a tower, but it was still a considerable square building.

Beyond the rooftop railing, the light of the revolving stars shone faintly. Various colors of light slid through the raindrops, forming a faint rainbow. Asel stared at the scene for a moment, lost in thought, until Celine’s voice brought him back to reality.

“When the world is dark, the stars shine the brightest.”

As soon as she uttered that, the closed door of the building began to open sideways.

It seemed to be the activation phrase needed for entry. Asel followed Celine, who dashed through the open door, and turned the umbrella back into a stream of water before entering the building. Immediately, the door closed behind them.

“Senpai! Master! Grandma! I’m here!”

As soon as they entered the building, Celine shouted loudly as she walked across the carpet. Asel followed her, looking around.

The Aurora Magic Tower. The stronghold of Stellar Rank Sorcerers. A mysterious group that wielded the power of the stars.

To prove that, a white star floated from the ceiling instead of a light, illuminating the surroundings.

The brightness of the star was very high. Just floating on the ceiling, it was bright enough to light up an entire corridor.

However, looking at it didn’t hurt his eyes. Instead, it felt warm.

“I’m here!”

At the point where the white star ended, a new blue star awaited. It spun gently, radiating a soft blue light as if it were touching a baton.

It was a mystical sight. Asel analyzed the formulas corresponding to each star with great interest.

Stars created not through Radiance Magic but through Stellar Rank Magic.

It looked as if they were orbiting a planetary system. In reality, it had a similar structure.

Asel’s eyes sparkled as he tracked the position of the central star, which would be the core of the planetary system.

And then.

“Shut up!”

Someone suddenly appeared in front of Celine.

An old woman with a wrinkled face and sparse white hair, yet with a straight back, burst out angrily at Celine.

“What are you yelling about in a place like this!”

“Grandma!”

Celine shouted brightly at the old woman. But the old woman swung the cane she was holding vertically and struck Celine on the top of her head.

Thwack!!

An unexpected attack. Celine rolled her eyes and collapsed.

“Gah!”

“Oh dear, when are you going to grow up? Even if this isn’t a formal Magic Tower, it’s a place filled with your seniors! Show some manners!”

The old woman shouted at Celine, who was sprawled on the floor. Celine crawled on the ground, holding her head.

“But everyone here loves me!”

“Oh, what a lamentable thing. It’s truly regrettable. You’re only pretty on the outside. If you were just a little less pretty, you would have been the worst in the Magic Tower. What a lamentable thing.”

“That lamentable thing! Your speech smells like dentures!”

“Alright. Let’s both die today.”

The old woman’s face twisted like a demon as she rolled up her sleeves. Celine crawled on the floor like a bug and hid behind Asel. Then she stuck her tongue out at the old woman.

“Boo.”

“You little brat!”

The old woman raised her cane and took a step forward.

“Huh?”

Only then did she seem to notice Asel, blinking her eyes as she stared at his face.

“Who?”

“Oh, I’m sorry for the late introduction. I’m Asel, Celine’s friend.”

“Friend? That little brat’s friend?”

Surprise flickered across the old woman’s face.

“Really, you’re friends with that unruly little girl? It’s hard to believe, given how polite your speech is.”

“Grandma.”

“Were you threatened or something? If not, there’s no way a decent-looking person like you would be friends with a crazy girl like her.”

“Grandma, I’m really hurt.”

Celine mumbled something, but the old woman ignored her and looked at Asel with a sympathetic expression.

“If you’re being threatened, nod your head. I’ll half-kill that girl.”

“Haha… that’s not it. We just got along well and became friends. Threatened? Not at all.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm… I’ll believe you for now. You seem like a pitiful young man.”

The old woman clicked her tongue and shook her head.

Then, as if something suddenly occurred to her, she raised her head sharply and approached Asel.

“Wait a moment. Did you come to the Magic Tower because you were invited by Celine?”

“Yes, yes. That’s right.”

“Are you a wizard? I can feel the energy.”

“Yes. I’m Asel, a Stellar Rank Electromancer affiliated with the Witch Council.”

It was the self-introduction he hadn’t had a chance to use until now. Asel felt a sense of pride as he smoothly recited the sentence he had practiced in advance.

“An Electromancer! Are you Ena’s disciple?!”

“Yes. She’s an extraordinary master.”

“They say Ena’s disciples are male!”

“……?”

The point of surprise was a bit strange, but Asel nodded for now.

“Yes, as you can see, that’s correct.”

“Then a ‘male’ wizard came to the Magic Tower at the invitation of ‘female’ Celine!”

“……I don’t know why you’re emphasizing gender, but yes, that’s correct.”

“Oh my.”

The old woman covered her mouth with both hands. Then, with trembling eyes, she looked at the two of them, who were stuck together.

“C-Celine. I knew you were extraordinary, but I never expected you to introduce your husband like this.”

“?”

A question mark appeared above Celine’s head.

“Husband? What?”

“I never thought the biggest troublemaker in the Magic Tower would perform a wedding ceremony at such a young age.”

“W-Wait a minute, Grandma. No, Ermina Beritz, what do you mean? Wedding? Tradition?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know! I understand everything you mean!”

“N-No, you’re the one who doesn’t understand! Just listen to me for a moment!”

“Get! How dare you use foul language in front of your future husband! From now on, cover your vulgar nature with a mask!”

“N-No, Grandma!”

Celine rushed toward the old woman, shouting in a panic.

“I don’t know what’s going on—”

“It’s a celebration! A celebration! The genius of the Magic Tower and the Disciple of Creation are getting married! And she’s even affiliated with the Witch Council? Well done, well done! Choosing someone like him as a husband! Your insight is better than mine! From now on, leave it to me.”

But the old woman didn’t listen to a word Celine said. Instead, she turned her body toward the lobby of the Magic Tower with an excited expression. Then she infused her voice with mana and shouted.

“O stars of the Magic Tower! Listen! Celine, this adorable girl, has invited a man to the Magic Tower! According to the traditions of the Magic Tower, ‘the first opposite sex invited shall be the one to marry!’”

Soon, she dashed madly toward the lobby.

“Prepare the engagement ceremony right now! Hurry! Report to the elders! Tell them Celine has officially tied the knot!”

In an instant, her figure disappeared down the corridor. Celine, her face flushed red, chased after her.

“Damn it, Grandma! That’s not it! Stop it!!!”

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Fortunately, the situation quickly calmed down. The wizards who had come out of the laboratory upon hearing the commotion soon realized it was nothing serious and returned to their places.

However, Celine's crumpled face showed no signs of returning to normal. She glared with an expression that seemed ready to stab her opponent to death.

“Tradition or whatever. There’s no relationship between me and this guy.”

“...That may be true for now.”

“What?!”

“Ugh, no. Anyway, you just have a loud voice. Tsk.”

The 8th-tier Grand Sorceress, Ermina, said this as she abruptly turned her head away. Beside her, a woman with a gentle demeanor smirked.

“Ermina, don’t be like that. I know you care for Celine, but being so standoffish isn’t good.”

“Hah. Care? Who am I caring for?”

“Sigh. Where did the friend who tried to keep Celine from going mad with revenge go?”

She was an impressive woman with flowing blonde hair and jewel-like eyes.

The various constellations embroidered on her pure white robe symbolized her identity. Asel sat next to Celine, gauging her level.

‘A Grand Sorceress. And a top-tier one at that.’

The reason he couldn’t sense the unique aura of a Grand Sorceress from Ermina was that she was thoroughly hiding her presence.

If Asel had focused, he would have seen through it immediately, but he had no reason to do so and let it slide.

In contrast, the sorceress sitting next to Ermina was not hiding her presence at all. In fact, she was actively displaying it. Because of that, a clean and powerful mana dominated the space, making the air feel electric.

Was it to assert authority?

No, that wasn’t it. Asel quickly realized why she was expressing her mana outward.

‘All the stars in the Magic Tower are being controlled by her mana. The glow, rotation, revolution, and resonance—all of it is happening at her command.’

The conclusion he reached after tracing the mana. Asel chuckled inwardly as he looked at the massive sun floating in the air.

The central lobby of the Magic Tower. A vast space reminiscent of a library, with walls entirely made of bookshelves. Like a hotel lobby, sofas were scattered around, and wizards freely searched for books or engaged in conversation in this open area.

Above it all.

A bright yellow sun, high up, was rotating and illuminating the surroundings. Several planets revolved around it.

A miniature planetary system created by human hands.

It was a miracle accomplished by a single Grand Sorceress. Asel’s expression grew serious as he gazed at her.

‘Losing in a fight is a certainty. Then… how far can I go?’

“Disciple of Creation.”

At that moment, she turned her head toward Asel. He flinched and replied.

“Yes, yes.”

“You seem to have quite a strong sense of pride. To immediately estimate a battle with a sorceress you just met. Is that how Electromancers are? Ena was similar.”

“...I apologize. I was rude.”

“Hmm? Ah... Hehe. I wasn’t mocking you. Just pure curiosity. When I met Ena before, she asked me if I wanted to fight her too.”

Like master, like disciple.

She added this while leaning slightly forward.

“I’m Angelica Edelrin. I’m also Celine’s master.”

“Wha—Master?”

“Yes, our disciple.”

Asel ignored Celine, who was clinging to Angelica, and nodded.

“I am Asel, a 6th-tier Electromancer affiliated with the Witch Council. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“6th-tier? That’s one tier higher than Celine. Celine is also called a genius in our Magic Tower…”

Angelica said with a tone of surprise.

Celine buried her face in Angelica’s ample bosom and mumbled.

“That guy isn’t a genius. He’s a monster. He’s been learning magic for less than ten years.”

“Oh my, really?”

“Listen, he’s such a crazy guy that…”

Soon, Celine began to spill information about Asel in his stead.

Starting from multi-attribute magic to unique spells, mana control, and sensitivity. Praise mixed with curses slipped through Celine’s lips.

The person being talked about felt his face heat up even more. Asel cleared his throat awkwardly and sipped his tea. While doing so, Ermina, who also had no one to talk to, spoke to him.

“You said your name was Asel.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Since you didn’t introduce your last name, I take it you’re not a noble. Ah, I’m not trying to insult you. Just an observation. After all, Celine was born in the common district…”

Ermina chuckled and wore a playful expression.

“Personally, I’m curious about your opinion.”

“...? What opinion do you mean?”

“Marriage, you see, marriage. What do you think about getting together with Celine?”

“...”

Asel didn’t answer immediately and glanced at Celine, who was nestled in Angelica’s arms.

Seeing her unresponsive, it seemed she was focused on her conversation with Angelica. However, he noticed that a part of Angelica’s attention had slightly shifted toward him.

She was dividing her cognitive abilities while conversing with Celine. Truly a characteristic of a Grand Sorceress.

After a moment of choosing his words, Asel opened his mouth with a rather serious expression.

“Celine is a wonderful woman. She can be playful, but that’s limited to those close to her. She’s quite cold to those she doesn’t know.”

“Hmm.”

“That may be a flaw, but it doesn’t feel that way to me. In fact, I like that she focuses solely on me. I also appreciate her unique playfulness.”

“...”

“If I were to marry her… I think I could live quite happily. A wife who is like a friend. A smile that she shows only to me. Just thinking about that makes me smile unconsciously.”

Honestly, he had never thought about it like that. Asel’s statements were all improvised.

Wasn’t it natural? Who would imagine marrying a friend in their daily life?

Of course, he wasn’t completely fabricating his words. He had quickly analyzed Celine’s objective evaluation and presented it convincingly.

No matter how playfully Ermina asked, if his answer was too light, his first impression would surely be shattered. He needed to avoid any negative impressions, especially since he would later have to discuss matters related to dueling.

So it was only right to respond as seriously and earnestly as possible. At least, that’s what Asel thought.

“Celine’s talent is extraordinary. She will surely become a Grand Sorceress in the future. I can tell because I dream of reaching the same level. She will definitely become an amazing person.”

“...”

“And to be by her side, I must also become an extraordinary person. However, I am still lacking. I haven’t reached a level that satisfies me. So I would like to avoid getting together with her right away. An engagement might be different, but… Haha, Celine’s opinion is important too, isn’t it? It wouldn’t mean much if I just rambled on.”

Asel scratched his cheek, pretending to be embarrassed.

And then silence fell.

Even Ermina, who had been quietly listening.

Angelica, who had been dividing her cognitive abilities.

Celine, who had been chattering loudly.

All of them stared at Asel with their mouths tightly shut. The moment Asel felt their gazes and became flustered.

“You.”

Ermina swiftly grabbed Asel’s hands with lightning speed. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“You must marry our Celine. Honestly, until just now, it was all a joke. There aren’t many places that still bring up traditions in the Magic Tower these days. Would a progressive place like the Aurora Magic Tower be bound by tradition? It was all just a joke to make her feel better. But this time, it’s not.”

“...Wait a minute.”

“You. You must marry Celine. There’s no one else who can live with such a fool. This is a strong suggestion. You can’t escape.”

“No…”

Asel averted his gaze from Ermina’s intense stare and looked at Angelica as if asking for help.

But Angelica was also covering her mouth with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, how romantic. It’s so romantic…”

“First, just listen to me—”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve figured out how much affection you have for Celine.”

What kind of nonsense was this?

“You said an engagement would be fine, right? I’ll persuade Celine as much as I can, so think about the ring in advance. We’ll hold a grand engagement ceremony.”

Angelica waved her hands, not giving Asel a chance to speak.

“I’ll send a letter to Ena in advance. Don’t worry.”

“Wha?!”

Asel was taken aback.

He could somehow clarify the misunderstandings or coercion between the two. But that was a no-go! He absolutely could not let her send a letter to Ena! If he didn’t want to see the Magic Tower fall apart, he had to stop it!

But Asel’s struggles didn’t reach the Grand Sorceress.

“I’ve sent it. I sent a message to the resident courier in the Magic Tower, so the letter should arrive within a month.”

“Ah, ah…”

“Oh my. How happy must you be that you can’t close your mouth? Ahahaha.”

Asel felt his soul leave his body. With a face full of despair, he turned to Celine. It was a silent plea for help.

“...!”

But the moment Celine met Asel’s gaze, she blushed and quickly turned her head away.

His last hope was beautifully shattered.

“Ah…”

Asel slumped onto the sofa, staring blankly at the void.

This was bad.