

tenacity of his resistance only fueled Shirone's determination.

Then...!

He ceased the Photon Cannon barrage and switched to a laser. A single red beam struck Dante's magic circles. Finding it weaker than expected, Dante snorted and began repairing his magic circles.

Within moments, the dozen magic circles were fully restored.

But then, Dante's expression twisted strangely. Unlike before, he sensed something, an energy even more potent than the Photon Cannon.

"W-What the...!?"

The moment Dante gasped in shock, Shirone poured his entire focus into amplifying the laser.

The laser's beam began to thicken rapidly.

Finally, as all the power drawn from the infinite realm was unleashed, a massive crimson flash swallowed Dante's position whole.

The students gulped as they saw Dante's shadow writhing as if consumed by flames.

When the laser finally thinned and vanished, Dante stood motionless, his arms shielding his face. Not a trace remained of the defensive magic circles that had once blocked the Photon Cannons.

Shirone landed across from him. Slowly lowering his arms, Dante glared at Shirone, grinding his teeth.

"Damn it...!"

His knees buckled as if shattered, slamming into the ground. He had tried desperately to endure, but the Photon Cannon's destructive force was unstoppable. The anti-magic shockwave searing through his brain was unlike any spell he had ever faced in Icheonban.

"This can't be... Dante's been brought to his knees again."

If the first knockdown could be dismissed as Shirone catching him off guard, this one was undeniably a difference

in sheer skill.

And that made the outcome all the more shocking to the students.

Even among the faculty, murmurs rippled through the crowd. Who could have predicted that Shirone, a student who had only studied magic for a year would knock down Dante, the kingdom's top-ranked mage, not once but twice? Ethella spoke up.

"His personality is sharp, but his magic is surprisingly heavy. The lack of finesse is a weakness, but his raw destructive power more than compensates."

A mage's spells revealed their nature, especially for an Unlocker, whose magic manifested through unique circuits. Ethella's praise made Thadd's mouth watered.

Though he wasn't particularly fond of Shirone personally given how he monopolized the affection of female students, he couldn't deny his skill.

"Well, he is serious about everything."

Dante's second knockdown only stoked the students' fervor higher.

Chants of Shirone's name filled the air, the echoes feeding back into the rising excitement.

Nade blinked rapidly.

"Was Shirone's magic always this... brutal?"

Iruki shared the thought.

"Maybe he was holding back before. Or he's playing psychological games. Either way, he's changed since last semester. Something must have shifted in him."

Amy, resting her chin on her hand, smirked.

"Well... he's been through some rough times."

Shirone had fought tooth and nail against the Parrot Mercenaries on Galliant Island. In Heaven, he had faced countless foes who transcended humanity.

If he were the same as last semester, that would have been strange.

"Good heavens... Dante... How is this possible...?"

Reporter Killine was stunned by the result. Beyond Dante's undefeated record, no student had ever forced him to his knees so decisively.

Shirone? How has a kid like this never been featured in a magazine before?

According to his research, Shirone had only attended the magic academy for a year. If true, he hadn't even had time to stand out long enough for interviews.

When Killine first heard that, he hadn't believed it. Or rather, even if it was true, he assumed Shirone was just some overhyped student from a mediocre provincial school. But here he was, utterly dominating Dante. A rookie who had appeared like a comet.

Dante slowly rose to his feet. Unlike after the first knockdown, his face betrayed no emotion.

"A second knockdown. First time for me."

He spat out the words and shook his head. Counting them was meaningless now.

Because Shirone himself was unprecedented.

Offensive specialists were usually the easiest and most enjoyable for Dante to dismantle. But against someone with this level of brute force, the tables had turned.

A bitter smile curled at Dante's lips. He never thought he'd have to use this magic circle before even joining the graduating class.

He had never cast it in an official match. And even counting unofficial bouts, only twice.

The only ones who knew that those two instances had been against an active 9th-class mage and a 70 strong B-class bandit group were Closer and Sabina.

"My apologies. It seems I underestimated you."

At that moment, an enormous magic circle glowing crimson, engraved itself around Dante. Its clarity dwarfed any instant magic circle, and its size was tenfold.

Siena confirmed that Dante's mental energy gauge had suddenly dropped by more than half.

The vast reserves that had shown no sign of depletion throughout the battle, now half gone in an instant. She couldn't begin to guess what kind of magic circle demanded such a cost.

"Central Operation Magic Circle: Pascal."

As Dante murmured the name, the colossal circle flared red, and over a hundred smaller magic circles materialized simultaneously.

Shirone was stunned. Each circle was charged with a different spell, it felt like facing a hundred mages at once.

"Immortal Function. I mocked it, but it's definitely impressive. The insight of an Unlocker, I suppose?"

Shirone had no breath to answer. Whatever this was, it was on a completely different level from instant magic circles. If he didn't analyze it quickly, the tide would turn against him.

"Now, let me show you what I have."

Dante extended his hand, and from the hundred circles, a deluge of spells erupted.

Wind Cutters, Fireballs, Lightning Bolts, Ice Spears, and even Photon Output devoid of physical force.

Shirone was spellbound by the spectacle.

The most shocking part was that over ten different types of magic were being cast simultaneously.

Even Iruki, a Savant, could only manage two spells at once with his Double Spirit Zone. This felt like a dream.

Nade bit her thumbnail.

"It's... parallel circuits."

Mark turned to her, wide-eyed.

"Huh? Parallel circuits? Those magic circles?"

"Magic demands extreme focus. Casting one spell leaves no room for other thoughts. But Dante's circles each have independent circuits."

"Is that even possible? Without multiple brains, you can only sustain one magic circle per circuit. Even passive spells are constructed sequentially."

Nade pointed at Dante's Pascal.

“That’s exactly it. Dante created another brain. That central magic circle, it’s converging his circuit and distributing it in parallel.”

Nade’s guess was correct. Pascal was a magic circle that stored a mage’s circuit in a virtual memory, processing it through parallel computation.

With Pascal active, Dante was no longer defensive. Instead, he annihilated his opponent with overwhelming firepower. As if to prove it, every basic spell taught at the academy was now surging forth.

Shirone didn’t relent. Creating virtual memory to unfold serial thoughts in parallel was a marvel.

However, strictly speaking, parallel circuits weren’t inherently superior. If it is really a parallel circuit, then the individual power is bound to be weaker.

The fact that Dante’s spells were all basic-tier was a proof. I don’t have time. I have to end this now.

His time sustaining the infinite realm was running out. If he was going to crush Dante by sheer force, it had to be now.

Shirone fired a Photon Cannon with all his might, but the moment it crossed a certain point, its speed began dropping drastically.

The near-light-speed photons slowed to a crawl, and Shirone scanned ahead. Then he realized.

The hundreds of magic circles Dante had deployed were forming small clusters, exerting influence over specific spaces.

If the clusters were connected into virtual planes, they formed cube-like structures, a three-dimensional mansion, each activating a unique spell within.

Nade shouted in disbelief.

“A 3-D Mansion? A student is pulling that off!?”

Dante had assembled two-dimensional magic circles into a three-dimensional structure.

Shirone’s Photon Cannon had entered one such mansion, a space simultaneously governed by six Slow magic circles,

each 5 meters apart.

In terms of how many circuits with different functions could be integrated into a confined space, a 3-D Mansion was able to shatter the limits of planar arrays, achieving staggering efficiency.

Chapter 250: System Operation (3)

Shirone finally halted his assault. While parallel circuits alone weakened individual spells, assembling them into a mansion structure allowed for amplification power unmatched by serial casting.

Moreover, the nature of three-dimensional circuits meant their distribution patterns appeared differently depending on the observation point. Thus, it was impossible to discern which six magic circles formed any given mansion.

It was like trying to recognize a shape drawn in dots on a flat page, it's simple when two-dimensional, but incomprehensible when rendered in three dimensions.

"How about it, Shirone? Still think you can dodge?"

The moment Dante spoke, six air-attribute magic circles shifted, trapping Shirone in a Pressure Mansion.

"Ugh!"

The instant Shirone felt the weight crushing his spine, a bluish bolt charged at the core of the Electric Mansion hovering above Dante's head.

A searing beam of electricity shot forth, scorching the air in its wake with a crackling discharge.

No matter where Shirone evaded, the attack pursued him.

This was because the Photon Mansion's output tracked his coordinates in real time.

"Ah..."

Shirone's mind grew distant. This no longer felt like fighting a person. It was like battling a warship armed with countless weapons.

He rolled across the ground to avoid the Ice Spear hurtling down vertically. As the world spun, he heard the sizzle of

burning earth. The moment he twisted mid-photonization, an Atomic Bomb detonated nearly on top of him.

The students were dumbstruck by Dante's overwhelming firepower.

"Good lord... What kind of magic is this?"

Even Mark found it unbelievable. Though Pascal handled parallel processing, the human brain still governed the whole system. Managing hundreds of magic circles was beyond human capability.

Iruki turned to Nade. His unusually grave expression suggested he'd already pieced it together.

"Nade, say something. I'm honestly lost here."

"That's... an automaton."

"Automaton?"

"An automated mechanism. Like interlocking gears, they turn the first, and the last outputs a fixed value. A simple concept, but scaled to astronomical proportions, it can achieve seemingly impossible tasks. Tracking Shirone's coordinates with Photon Output, swapping mansions at high speed... that sort of thing."

Shirone was experiencing the automaton's lethality firsthand. No matter how he countered, the self-calculating system of automaton was an impenetrable fortress.

Though the spells were basic, their mansion-enhanced power was anything but. After dodging the barrage, Shirone scrambled to locate Dante, but he was buried under hundreds of circles, can't be seen.

The floating magic circles felt like the gaze of a monster with hundreds of eyes.

"Grrr...!"

A shiver ran down Shirone's spine as he wildly fired Photon Cannons. The automaton reacted instantly. A Lightning Cannon, fully charged in the Bolt Mansion, shot forth, its blinding discharge tearing through space and popping the Photon Cannon like a balloon.

The Lightning Cannon grazed Shirone's side, and that alone triggered anti-magic. Staggered, he was bombarded with every spell the automaton could unleash. Countless spells razed the entire vicinity.

Pascal, having exhausted its available energy, emitted a grotesque whine before shutting down. As the smoke cleared, Shirone emerged, clutching one shoulder. Then his knees buckled, and he crashed to the ground.

"H-He's down! Shirone's down this time!"

A single knockdown wasn't the issue. The anti-magic direct hit meant Shirone's endurance had cracked, and that signaled the end of Immortal Function.

"Truly remarkable."

Even Alpheas couldn't help but impressed this time. Dante's system, a parallel magic circles Pascal, power-amplifying 3-D Mansions, and now automatic system via automaton, was a masterpiece pushing the limits of functionality.

To integrate automaton into information magic... Few professional mages could attempt such a feat. No. Even for Dante, the kingdom's top talent, this was beyond student-level capability.

Unless one assumption held true.

"Is he using binary?"

Olivia stayed silent. But Alpheas understood. He had to be using binary. Only one race came to mind, beings who wielded a magical system of 1 and 0.

"Since when... has Dante learned the dragon's tongue?"

A smile curled Olivia's lips. If he'd already guessed, there was no point hiding it.

"What's wrong? Dragon magic is binary-based, but it's not exclusive to dragons."

"Humans can comprehend binary. But wielding it at the level of language is another matter entirely."

Suddenly, Alpheas realized.

"Don't tell me... he was born with it?"

“I didn’t believe it at first either. But it’s true. Like Shirone’s insight or Iruki’s Savant Syndrome, Dante’s information-processing ability is innate.”

Olivia recalled her first meeting with Dante ten years prior. During her tenure as headmaster of the Royal Magic Academy, Olivia received an invitation to a tea party at a social gathering in Baschka.

The hostess was Bianca, matriarch of the Airhaine family. Six women were present, all married except Olivia.

The noblewomen sipped imported tea and exchanged pleasantries.

Olivia participated in topics that interested her, but as always, the conversation inevitably turned to children.

Bianca sighed heavily.

“It’s been dreadful. My youngest just submitted a leave of absence and came home.”

“Oh? Dante’s such a model student, though. Did something happen at school?”

Bianca shook her head, her expression dark.

“I don’t know. He won’t speak at all these days. He came home with bruises on his face, saying he’d fought with his friends. From what I gathered, it sounded like several of them ganged up on him.”

The noblewomen’s faces flushed with indignation. The thought of their own children suffering such treatment made their hands tremble with fury.

“You just let that slide? You must report it to the school at once.”

“I did go to the school. But what I heard there was shocking. They said Dante hadn’t spoken a single word to his classmates. No matter how they tried to engage him, he wouldn’t even look at them. His homeroom teacher thought he’d gone mute at first.”

“Oh dear... Could there be some underlying reason?”

“No matter how much I ask, he won’t tell me. I went there ready to demand justice, but I left feeling like the sky had

fallen. In the end, I just brought Dante home.”

Olivia paused mid-sip. As someone without children, she had stayed silent, but a possibility had just occurred to her. Bianca rested her chin on her hand and continued.

“Haa... So now he’s withdrawn from school, and I’m keeping him at home. But what worries me is that he just sits in the garden all day, staring at the ground. He won’t answer no matter how much I ask why. I have no choice but to watch over him helplessly.”

The woman beside her took Bianca’s hand.

“Don’t worry too much. Dante’s only ten. It’s an age when thoughts start to weigh heavily. Noble children hit puberty much earlier than commoners, you know.”

“If only it were that simple...”

Bianca had no way to soothe her distress.

Dante had been a prodigy since childhood, bearing the family’s highest hopes. Who would have thought such a precious child could cause her this anguish?

The noblewomen offered their sympathies. Though not all were sincere, as mothers themselves, they understood her pain all too well.

Olivia set down her teacup and murmured under her breath.

“Overflow...”

Bianca turned to her.

“Pardon? What did you just say?”

Olivia snapped back to attention. As an educator, she knew how dangerous it was to evaluate a child in front of their parents.

But with all eyes now on her, retreating would be difficult. Especially before noblewomen who couldn’t bear unanswered curiosity.

She feigned nonchalance.

“Ah, I was just thinking it might be Overflow.”

“Overflow? What’s that?”

“Well, it’s rare, but it sometimes happens when a child awakens too young. Or rather, it’s more psychological than

physical factor. Their existing worldview collapses, and they begin to perceive a reality different from ours. Usually, they're plagued by extreme fear."

"So you're saying my son is ill?"

A cold sweat trickled down Olivia's spine. A misspoke here would brand her in social circles and haunt her with gossip for years.

"No, it's not an illness. It's something that often appears in prodigies. We have quite a few such children at the magic academy."

Reluctantly, Olivia invoked the one word no parent could resist. Magic.

As expected, Bianca and the noblewomen exchanged glances, their interest piqued.

Was there anything more thrilling to a parent than hearing their child called a genius?

Olivia was spared further embarrassment, but the price was steep.

Bianca, brushing aside the others, leaned in as if demanding a private audience. She bombarded Olivia with questions.

Was Dante truly a genius? In what field? How should he be educated if so?

Olivia gave vague answers, careful not to commit to anything definitive.

If it were that easy to diagnose, geniuses suffering from Overflow wouldn't meet such tragic ends.

"So... so my Dante really is a genius? Hmm... it does make sense. He's always been extraordinary. And genius children often struggle to fit in, don't they? That must be why Dante couldn't connect with his friends."

Olivia longed to leave. She couldn't bring herself to say this was merely a possibility to Bianca's face.

Before she could excuse herself, Bianca struck first.

"Would you... be willing to speak with Dante?"

"Right now?"

This time, Olivia couldn't hide her reluctance. She had no desire to play teacher at a social event.

What if the boy turned out to be utterly unremarkable? How would she handle the fallout?

Bianca, nicknamed the socialite, couldn't have missed Olivia's hesitation.

With resolve, she stood and pressed her request again. This time with the perfect decorum expected before her peers.

"Please. You are the headmaster of the Royal Magic Academy. If anyone can uncover Dante's hidden talent, it's you. He's in the garden of the annex right now."

Cornered, Olivia had no choice but to agree. She exhaled and rose from her seat, but not without securing an insurance policy.

"Very well. I'll speak with him. But don't jump to conclusions. If it is Overflow, it will require long, careful guidance."

"Of course, of course. I leave it in your hands."

Olivia made her way to the annex to meet a child she'd never seen before.

True to its status as the 20th wealthiest family in Tormia, the annex rivaled a nobleman's estate.

A vast lawn, fragrant with spring, stretched like a sports field, beyond which lay a dense forest.

Dante sat at the forest's edge. Olivia observed him from a distance and sighed again.

Perhaps, as the noblewoman had said, it was merely early puberty. But she was certain it was Overflow. Twenty years as an educator had honed her instincts.

Chapter 251: System Operation (4)

Truthfully, Overflow wasn't anything extraordinary. To the average eye, it might seem like the eccentricity of a genius, but at the Royal Magic Academy, such children were a dime a dozen.

Only those who stood out among them, who clawed their way through the brutal competition, could even hope to be called prodigies. That was the nature of the world of talent. Still, having taken on the task, Olivia couldn't half-heart it. She approached Dante with the smile that had charmed countless students.

"Hello. You must be Dante."

Dante didn't answer. He didn't even lift his head. Olivia studied the storm-cloud gray of his hair, then sat across from him, lowering herself to his eye level. This wouldn't be easy.

The boy was still staring at the grass beneath him.

What is he seeing?

Olivia tilted her head, mirroring him.

It was just ordinary grass, no buried treasure, no hidden corpse.

Then, with patient scrutiny, she noticed the small existence concealed within the scenery.

A procession of ants.

Is he interested in insects?

"Do you like ants?"

"..."

As expected, no reply from him. But Olivia didn't press. Having taught students as young as four and as old as thirty, she knew how to handle this.

"I don't like ants. They're creepy. If they get into the house, they'll gnaw on even expensive furniture."

She rambled on with meaningless chatter.

"When I was little, I saw ants swarming over a dead earthworm. Ugh. Ever since then, they've scared me. You know how they crawl all over you if..."

"It's not the ants."

Dante spoke for the first time.

Olivia smiled inwardly.

Whatever awakening had triggered his Overflow, he was still just a child. Now that he'd broken his silence, he wouldn't stop until he'd confessed everything.

"I'm watching the channels."

"Channels?"

Dante pointed to one of the ants weaving through the grass.

"This ant is 1011001. That's the name I gave it. Its movement radius is four meters. It's a patrol, circling the perimeter to secure the territory."

Olivia studied it closely.

Despite its grand name, 1011001 looked no different from any other ant.

Dante gestured to another climbing a bent blade of grass.

"This one is 1010111. It moves vertically. Its role is to climb plants and collect moisture. Here's 1010101, the same role. And 1101001 too."

Olivia was at a loss. She couldn't tell if he'd memorized their names or was making them up on the spot to toy with her.

"Each ant fulfills a purpose. Together, they activate the whole. That's what a channel is."

If Dante could truly read channels, perceiving not form but flow, then distinguishing the ants' names wasn't entirely impossible.

But was it really possible?

Strictly speaking, everything in the world was a channel.

If he could deconstruct an ant colony into units of information, there'd be nothing in this world he couldn't

analyze.

As her eyes adjusted, Olivia noticed the teeming ants everywhere.

A four-meter radius was practically an ant farm.

A shiver ran down her spine, but curiosity about Dante outweighed her disgust.

“So you can read channels?”

Dante lifted his head. For the first time, Olivia saw his face. He was a handsome child. One eye was bruised a livid purple, likely from the beating his classmates had given him.

“That must have hurt.”

“It’s fine. I don’t have to go to school anymore.”

Most teachers would coax him back, invoking hollow notions of socialization. Even without that, society’s common sense dictated he should face his problems, not run.

But Olivia didn’t persuade him. This child was special. Her intuition as an archmage told her so.

“Why didn’t you interact with your classmates? They said you didn’t speak a single word.”

“If nothing can be conveyed, silence is no different from speech. There was no reason to speak, so I didn’t.”

Dante grimaced, recalling the past.

“My classmates talked too much. But it was all noise. Ants are different. They each have a purpose. Even the ones that seem purposeless support another’s purpose.”

Now Olivia was certain. This was Overflow.

Delve deep enough into anything, and a world beyond common sense reveals itself.

Dante had simply entered that world too soon.

“This ant is 1010110. It just follows 1010111. But it’s crucial. Because it’s a channel. If no one followed 1010111, nothing would be transmitted. Look closely. Most ants exist solely to maintain channels. Only a rare few perform specialized tasks. Can you tell?”

Olivia smiled awkwardly and shook her head.

Even as an accomplished mage, she couldn't distinguish the roles of every ant in the colony.

"If you watch long enough, you realize something fascinating. All channels are connected. For example, this ant, 1111, just follows others to maintain the channel. But astonishingly, it's involved in nearly every channel. If it were gone..."

Dante pressed his index finger down, crushing 1111. Olivia frowned. But moments later, sensing the shift in the colony, her eyes widened.

The ant procession collapsed, scattering in disarray. Lines dissolved into chaos, rendering channels meaningless.

The boy watched the ant kingdom's collapse with gleaming eyes, a smile of eerie purity on his lips.

Olivia shuddered. The ant he'd crushed wasn't a soldier or anything special.

Eliminating one ant shouldn't collapse the system.

Or so she'd thought until now. But Dante's actions defied her understanding.

A blind spot in an invisible system.

Every variable triggered by 1111's demise, calculated perfectly in Dante's mind.

He understood the ant kingdom's system better than the ants themselves.

Looking up at Olivia, Dante smiled.

"The queen would starve to death."

Another Sky (1)

Olivia watched Dante, now grown over eight years, with a tender smile.

"Dante has eyes that can read channels. And through training, he's sharpened them further."

Shirone, with his Immortal Function closed, was too busy dodging barrages to think straight. With 86 mansions constantly shifting their structures, he had no room for distraction.

Dante, meanwhile, was at ease, having entrusted the battle to his automaton. He could've sat down and read a book if he wanted.

But I should return the favor.

Dante levitated above the Pascal magic circle. As he advanced slowly, the hundreds of linked magic circles moved in sync, pressing toward Shirone at the same speed. As if an entire space were displacing itself.

Every time Shirone moved, spells rained from all directions like rotating artillery.

It felt like fighting an army, a massive force tearing through his Spirit Zone.

Iruki's face twisted in frustration.

Damn it! How is this even possible...?

He couldn't think of a way to counter Dante's system.

Shirone hadn't taken a fatal hit yet, but evading an automated machine indefinitely was impossible.

Shirone knew it too. But he had no choice. And it wasn't completely hopeless.

Only one way to find out.

He lunged toward Pascal's core, testing a possibility. The mansions move quickly and intensified their firepower, but Shirone only chained his teleportations faster in response. He had to keep moving.

He had to assimilate into Dante's channels.

Soon, murmurs spread among the students. Though imperceptible at first, Shirone's movements were gradually syncing with Dante's system.

Nade shot up from her seat.

"Teleportation! That's how!"

Iruki smirked as if struck by revelation.

"Teleportation is information. He's blending into Dante's system to collapse it from within."

The Icheonban bracelets grew hotter, a proof that Pascal was overloading trying to track Shirone's movements.

Siena noted how Dante's mental energy gauge dropped faster the more complex Shirone's maneuvers became. Is the outcome still uncertain?

Alpheas exhaled sharply, a faint thrill running down his spine.

Dante's ability is formidable. But insight... that's the terrifying talent that can help him reach the pinnacle of the world.

In mere moments, Shirone had perfectly pinpointed Pascal's weakness. Dante's automaton was flawless, but perfection was a concept no human could truly embody.

The sole flaw in Pascal's immaculate design.

It was Dante himself.

"I'd love to praise Dante for his flawless design. But he's still young. His mental stamina can't keep up with his technique."

Olivia couldn't deny it. She'd known Dante's weakness all along, if it could even be called one.

Youth wasn't a sin.

Dante would grow stronger in the future. One day, he'd eventually reach a level where he can sustain Pascal indefinitely.

But that was no excuse. His opponents were in the same position.

Besides, Dante's endurance was already peerless among his age group.

His only miscalculation in this duel was facing Shirone, whose endurance defied all comparison.

Perhaps... they met too soon.

It pained her that one of them would have to shoulder defeat.

No. It's the same for everyone. There's no right time.

The duel had already begun. There was no turning back.

And cold analysis still gave Dante over a 70% chance of victory.

Pascal might only last another ten minutes, but Shirone surviving five more inside Dante's system was unlikely. Olivia spoke.

"Even so, Shirone can't win. Not to underestimate him, but their talents are incomparable. He lacks the means to destroy Dante's system."

Alpheas didn't argue. From his perspective, Shirone still had no advantage.

Yet, the boy made him hope anyway.

There's something I'm missing, isn't there, Shirone?

Shirone darted across Icheonban's entire arena. In the process of avoiding Dante's barrage, he was battered by countless spells, but he adapted with each failure every time. Iruki was the first to realize.

"He's done it. He's fully synchronized."

At first, no one understood. But ten seconds later, murmurs of astonishment spread.

Amid the endless artillery storm, Shirone was moving around freely, as if the mansions themselves stepped aside for him.

Of course, there was no actual link between him and Pascal, it was just an illusion. Nevertheless, this scenery have only one meaning.

"Shirone's perfectly deciphered the automaton's patterns."

Chapter 252: Another Sky

(2)

Mark alternated between staring at Shirone and Iruki, barely containing his excitement.

“Shirone’s got the upper hand now, right? Right?”

“It’s neck and neck. If this drags on, Pascal will overload. If Shirone lasts that long, the match resets. Dante would lose his strongest weapon.”

Mark was on the verge of tears from sheer joy.

Just moments ago, he had thought that Shirone’s defeat was inevitable. He had even thought that merely holding his own against Dante, the kingdom’s top prodigy, would’ve been impressive enough.

Yet Shirone had defiantly turned the tide.

“As expected from Senior Shirone. You’re saying that he surpassed even Dante in information processing?”

Iruki didn’t answer.

When Mark turned his head in confusion, he saw all the upperclassmen watching the duel with grave expressions.

Iruki kept scratching his chin.

Shirone had deciphered Dante’s system, but how is that possible, he couldn’t figure it out.

If the automaton were this easily analyzed, Shirone wouldn’t have struggled so much from the start.

Amy gave up trying to figure it out herself.

“How did he parse the patterns? Honestly, I can’t even grasp how Dante’s automaton functions. I don’t have the slightest clue. Nade, what about you?”

“Same for me. It’s not that it’s complex, it’s just too vast. You can’t picture an elephant by looking at just its leg.”

Amy thought the analogy was perfect.

“Exactly. This system wasn’t built just to counter Shirone. Its adaptability is insane. How could Shirone possibly read the entire thing?”

Iruki offered a hypothesis.

“Maybe it’s not mathematical.”

Mark tilted his head.

“Not mathematical? Then what is it?”

Iruki frowned, searching for the right word.

“Instinct, maybe?”

“Instinct? Like intuition?”

Mark was floored. Dante’s system was the pinnacle of cutting-edge information magic. If intuition alone could unravel it, what was the point of rigorous study?

But Iruki was serious. No matter how he looked at it, that was the closest answer, and it wasn’t as simple as Mark thought.

“Instinct isn’t superstition. Rather, it’s the evolved form of inductive reasoning.”

You don’t need to count every person’s eyes to prove humans have two. Most people, seeing their family and friends don’t have three, confidently conclude humans have two.

Amy nodded.

“Shirone’s insight is transcendent. He understands the whole from fragments. But even that has limits. He still needs a certain of information to make it possible.”

Iruki added.

“But exceptions exist. The quality of data matters. You can’t picture an elephant from its leg alone, but if you’ve seen its skeleton, you can guess its general shape.”

Nade agreed.

“Shirone must’ve gathered critical information by infiltrating and risking his life inside Dante’s system. That’s how he analyzed the whole thing.”

Mark recalled Headmaster Alpheas favorite saying, *“Insight is faster than effort and more precise than knowledge.”* If

Dante could read channels, Shirone possessed insight that pierced through all things.

With every move Shirone made, the Icheonban bracelets grew hotter. Even with safety measures, wearing them much longer would give first-degree burns.

Dante was stunned to see Shirone survived five minutes inside Pascal's system.

It was an automaton that crushed any opponent with its firepower within five seconds.

This was the heart system of a man-made hell.

Yet Shirone moved through it like it was his backyard playground.

How? How is he so unshaken?

Insight, as the ultimate form of inductive reasoning, doesn't give a hundred percent accurate answers. The more uncertain the future, the greater the anxiety.

But Shirone never lost his calm. His mind, unwavering as diamond, remained unchanged in any situation.

As Pascal neared overload, Dante's nose stung. If this continued, the magic circle would self-destruct, and take him with it.

But he didn't stop.

Below the cliff's edge waited the first defeat of his life. Each victory had sharpened the blade in his heart. And now, a single loss would cut him down.

I can't lose!

Dante accelerated Pascal's processing speed.

Stepping into uncharted territory, another wall crumbled, revealing a breathtaking new world.

The light of Pascal's magic circle blazed brighter, and the speed of the mansion became even faster.

A torrent of binary code carved through his mind like a raging river.

Students immediately noticed the change of Pascal. At least twice as fast as Shirone's speed. Functions once two beats behind Shirone now matched his speed.

Dante was confident.

I can do this! I can go further!

Pascal didn't need to process everything in parallel. By focusing on critical operations, localized efficiency could be multiplied several times.

Slow Mansion first. Then Fire, Bolt, and Press, in that order.

Dante prioritized specific addresses among the cells listed in Pascal's memory, jumping from the 352nd operation to the 2,987th. Soon, he was leaping from end to end in a single bound, until a deafening roar erupted from the Pascal's magic circle.

This is it! Exactly what I wanted!

Dante felt the euphoria of his consciousness taking flight.

He could no longer see Shirone, and he could no longer hear the roar of artillery from the battlefield. Only an infinite stream of 1s and 0s flooded his mind.

Olivia trembled with awe.

Dante...

She'd always known he'd break through. She just hadn't expected Alpheas' disciple to be the catalyst.

Now, having reached the realm of localized computation, Dante had undergone a metamorphosis as stunning as a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

"Ouch."

Dante lifted his finger from the crushed ant. The one that had bitten him writhed before tumbling to the ground.

Olivia glanced at the fallen insect and asked.

"Oh dear. Did it bite you? Does it hurt?"

"Haha! It's fine. It happens all the time."

Sucking on his finger, Dante watched the ant. The 1111, who had lost its purpose, seemed to realize the kingdom was collapsing, circled aimlessly in confusion.

"All channels are connected. If one breaks, everything collapses. But..."

Gently picking up the frantic ant, he surveyed the chaotic kingdom. After careful observation, he placed 1111 back

somewhere, and stability gradually returned.

He didn't stop there. Deploying a few more ants at key points, he rebuilt the crumbling kingdom into a solid system.

Olivia watched in awe.

"Hehe! Sorry, little guys."

Dante beamed up at her.

"It's okay now."

Olivia studied him with a faint smile, peering into his clear, transparent eyes as if searching for something. Finally, she made her decision.

"Dante, how would you like to learn magic?"

That day marked the beginning of their bond.

Never once since then had Olivia doubted Dante would become the kingdom's greatest mage.

He wasn't just a machine processing data. He was a human, capable of shattering any limit.

Shirone was remarkable, but no one in their generation could defeat Dante now that he'd broken through his wall.

"Ghhh...!"

Dante strained to maintain his sanity. His processing speed had accelerated to a degree beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

Spells from the 86 mansions now fanned out in all directions, rendering even evasion meaningless.

A single misjudgment from Shirone would end the match.

Yet even the students couldn't predict the outcome anymore.

Dante's mental energy dwindled rapidly, but Shirone had already chained over 2,000 Teleportations.

Damn it! Why won't it just hit!?

Dante was baffled.

Even Pascal's function at maximum output. Shirone still weaved through the system. His thoughts clearly accelerating in sync with Dante's accelerated computation.

Dante's senses were fully open now, but he couldn't tell which is sight or sound.

It was exhilarating.

Shirone's information merged with his, creating a unity of mind and body.

Ugh! Not like this with another guy!

Regardless of his feelings, Dante tasted euphoria. His reaction speed reached unprecedented heights as Shirone's signals flooded in, dissected into raw information.

They were conversing in pure existence, no lies, no truths, just unfiltered exchange. In that moment, both of them shuddered. Lightning filled their vision, as if they'd become electricity themselves.

The ultimate talents of induction and deduction conveyed to all who watched through magic. The students watched the battle between the two of them, unblinking.

Combat was collision. Yet now, they moved as if dancing, a choreography of spells and knowledge mixed into one.

Alpheas smiled faintly.

"To know what's right, one must take the long way round.

Conviction, doubt, then conviction again, only then does the mind settle in the flesh. Let them agonize freely. After all, isn't this another sky?"

Olivia's gaze steadied.

The Icheonban combat simulator was meant to give students a taste of real battle in advance, a stage to flaunt their superiority.

But was that truly what its creator, Jacobin, had intended? Perhaps he'd simply wanted to grant them the freedom to fail.

Olivia clenched her fists on her knees.

Alpheas' philosophy certainly wasn't wrong. But she refused to compromise now. In battle, only the victor will be remembered in history. Dante had to win. He was the pride of her teaching career.

The information exchange between Shirone and Dante escalated to extremes. The students frantically shook their scorching bracelets.

86 mansions and a single streak of light.

Watching their hundreds of information exchanges per second created from their combination, made the world seem to spin.

Maria's eyes glistened. Talents beyond human limits. When two such beings get entangled, this kind of absurd spectacle unfolded.

"Senior Dante... is incredible."

Mark turned to her, startled. He'd assumed she'd root for Shirone. After the humiliation she'd suffered from Dante's faction, forgetting was impossible.

"Maria, what are you saying?"

"Today's duel... will go down in history."

Mark realized something and fell silent. She was right. This battle between Shirone and Dante had long surpassed a mere training exercise.

"I used to hate competition so much."

Mark knew that too. She'd once been so crushed by its pressure that she couldn't even activate the Bridge of No Return's mechanisms.

"But now... I think it's really a wonderful world. Shirone was just a genius. All I had to was admire him without a thought. But Dante... he's making Shirone fight with everything he has."

Mark studied her with aching sympathy. Her emotions resonated painfully within him.

He felt the same. But that shouldn't happen. Keep dwelling on it meant he'll never standing up again.

Maria lowered her head sadly.

"I'll probably... never experience anything like that in my life."

Mark gritted his teeth. Shirone's appearance embodied his ideal of a mage.

What did it feel like? To show off his talents on a celestial stage. To grapple with the ultimate rival and fall together into hell's depths.

He couldn't imagine it, but it must be the purest ecstasy a mage could know.

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Tears welled up in Mark's eyes, but he refused to let them fall.

"We can do it too."

Maria turned to him, slightly surprised.

"I'll keep pushing myself. Until I can challenge our seniors. I might not win, but I'll make them fight me seriously. So don't talk like that. One more word of weakness, and I won't walk with you anymore."

"Mark..."

Iruki chuckled softly.

"There's no such thing as talent in this world."

Both Mark and Maria turned to him.

"To be precise, there's no talent you can put a name to. A madman can't do math, but he could become the greatest painter. Magic encompasses all fields. Shirone's insight, Dante's information processing... none of that guarantees their future. You don't need to envy what others have. If you refine what's uniquely yours, you might even surpass Shirone someday."

"W-We weren't thinking that...!"

Mark waved his hands, face red. Defeating Shirone was something he'd never even dreamed of it.

But hearing this from someone the world recognized as a genius reignited his confidence.

For the first time, Iruki truly felt like an upperclassman.

Dante grimaced as the flood of information surged.

Sequences of 0s and 1s flashed through his mind at light speed. Pascal's information, now intertwined with Shirone's.

I can do this! I'm catching up!

He began gaining the upper hand in speed. This was the difference between living beings and a machine. Living stamina wanes gradually, but an automaton functions at full capacity until the moment it self-destructs.

The students watched as Pascal's offensive spells gradually ensnared Shirone. His Teleportation radius shrank, in ten seconds, he'd be trapped in a zero-movement zone.

Yet Siena still couldn't predict the outcome.

Shirone's options were narrowing, but Dante's mental energy was nearly depleted.

Can Dante hold on?

She stared intently at the dwindling gauge.

He can. If this continues, Dante wins.

Though part of her rooted for Shirone, Dante had earned this victory. His automaton's responsiveness rivaled even professional standards.

Five seconds. Four.

The moment when Shirone was checkmated was approaching.

The barrage of Wind Cutters tightened, and the Electric Mansion's fully charged bolt awaited release.

The moment when Shirone's escape routes severed completely came.

In an instant, Dante located the Electric Cannon's memory matrix and transmitted it to Pascal.

Now!

The very instant Dante thought it...

Now!

...Shirone also thought the same.

As the Electric Cannon's energy filled the mansion, a flash of light concentrated before Shirone's eyes.

Dante smirked. No matter how strong a Photon Cannon was, a full-powered Electric Cannon would overpower it and dominate the space.

That was when Shirone unleashed his ultimate spell.

Shining Impact!

The photons compressed with unified polarization exploded. Into Dante's mind, flooded with 1 and 0, surged a singular, overwhelming signal. Pure, unbroken 1.

The simplest, yet most unprocessable volume of information.

Pascal overloaded and the automaton froze. The students gasped. By detonating light itself, Shirone had paralyzed Dante's system.

A gambit that wouldn't work twice. Clearly, he'd saved this one chance for this exact moment.

Dante's mind was as pale as the afterglow of Shining Impact. A near one-second gap occurred in processing thousands of information per second was catastrophic. He covered his face with his arms. Predicting the next attack was impossible.

Yet Shirone didn't move. Focusing his mind, a vivid light bloomed before him, tracing a colossal circle. It was the angelic magic circle. Halo, the circle he had honed through relentless lifting training.

Nade shot to her feet.

"Ataraxia!"

Shirone's ultimate technique had arrived. But Nade's expression soon twisted in confusion.

Even if the halo formed, information integration was another matter. Requiring a full minute, it was still unfit for live combat.

Iruki grimaced.

"This is worst possible move."

When Nade nodded silently, he added.

"But the only one possible move left. He's done everything he can. If not now, Ataraxia will never activate."

Dante barely clung to his fading consciousness. He hadn't anticipated light itself being weaponized to cripple his system.

But there will be no second chance.

Shirone, too, had exhausted every strategy and was now making his final, desperate stand. As the automaton rebooted its function, the mansions pivoted toward him in unison.

Despite the looming threat of the floating magic circles, Shirone focused solely on constructing the Halo. Pale light arced along the circumference of pi, returning to its origin. At last, the angelic spirit, Halo, shielded him like a fortress. “Ugh...! What the...!?”

Boyle clutched his head and cried out in agony. Summoners’ perception differed from other mages. To him, who could easily detect even a millimeter’s error, the perfect halo was a sensory violence.

Iruki instantly understood upon Boyle’s condition. This was an assault on the microscopic realm, imperceptible to ordinary senses.

To me, it’s just a circle. But what about Dante, who instinctively reads information entropy?
“Ugh!”

As predicted by Iruki, Dante’s veins bulged in torment, suffering. The inflicted mental shock causing Pascal’s functions to decreased significantly.

Damn it! Why now of all times? What the hell is that circle!? Iruki clung to a sliver of hope. Shirone had clearly planned this, timing Ataraxia perfectly.

But would it be enough?

Boyle had already recovered from the shock. Ironically, it was because his skills were inferior.

Amy recalled their time in Heaven.

I see. So that’s why Baal’v...

Ataraxia was a spell that could delivered greater shock the higher one’s mastery.

Now she understood why the two-horned Mara had recoiled before Shirone’s Halo in Heaven.

Then who here would suffer the most from its emergence?

Amy's gaze found Olivia. As expected, her shoulders were trembled.

What is that...?

Olivia bit her lip.

At the pinnacle of human sensory perception, she nearly lost consciousness just seeing the Halo.

Though her archmage-level mental fortitude held, even a momentary lapse at her level was fatal. This level was beyond Shirone's current capabilities.

An impossible circle within human realm. What is he trying to contain within a space that meant to hold the entire world?

Ataraxia's concept began assembling within the Halo.

Multicolored rays showered from the halo's outer rim, etching ripple-like patterns across the magic circles.

Olivia found this phenomenon equally incomprehensible.

Magic circles that she know couldn't receive external information, yet here it was. The integration speed close to the speed of light itself, creating optical illusions.

This makes no sense...

Olivia's eyes widened in shock as she realized that much. If the integration was truly close to the speed of light, any magic circle should be complete instantly. Yet after ten seconds, not only was it unfinished, but rather, it was accelerating.

This is dangerous.

Dante reached the same conclusion. A colossal conceptual framework. If he just leave it like this, his hard-won advantage would vanish.

"I can't let this slide."

He activated the Electric Mansion. Lightning, white and blue intertwined, crackled forth like splitting timber.

Shirone barely dodged. Ataraxia wasn't even half-complete. Furthermore, the fully restored functions of automaton resumed its barrage.

Amy winced in regret. As expected, live deployment in actual combat was premature. In the end, Shirone had wasted his last chance with the Shining Impact.

“...Huh?”

Then at that moment, her eyes sparkled. Iruki and Nade also stared in disbelief as they watched.

The Halo continued integrating information. But it was impossible. Shirone was still flying around to avoid the saturation.

“What? How!?”

Iruki’s mind raced. Could one simultaneously teleport and operate a magic circle? Shirone wasn’t a Savant like him, nor did he have Dante’s Pascal.

Parallel circuits? No, an illusion of parallelism?

Then lightning struck his thoughts.

“That’s it!”

“Iruki, what’s happening?”

Unable to contain himself, Iruki shouted.

“Time division! He’s doing time division!”

Nade slapped her knee.

“Of course! That’d work!”

“Time division? So Senior Shirone can use two spells at once?”

“He’s splitting operations by time units. Switching between Circuit A and B at insane speeds, ABABABAB, that’s how it is. Then it creates the illusion of simultaneous casting.”

Mark gaped. Though he’d divided time into 10,000ths on the Bridge of No Return, alternating circuits was another level entirely. Only Shirone’s preternatural insight could achieve this rather with knowledge.

For the first time since the duel began, Olivia felt excitement.

Using time division. This was a technique that only a handful can manage this, even among the highest-ranking mages. So Shirone’s evolving too?

She shot Alpheas a glare with sharp look in her eyes, then opened her eyes in surprise.

A violent aura was rushing through Alpheas' expression. The corners of his mouth were torn all the way down to his ears and he couldn't close them.

Kukuku. Now you're acting like myself, Shirone.

Even Alpheas hadn't anticipated this. He felt like wanted to give a standing ovation.

When first hearing of Ataraxia, he'd estimated four years minimum of train. He thought that no matter how fast it was, Shirone would need to train that much to be able to use it in real combat.

Yet Shirone had done it in just four months.

Time division halved integration speed of the information, but compared to being defenseless building magic circle for a full minute, it was no drawback at all.

More than anything, he wanted to see how powerful it would be. Just imagining the destruction from two minutes of light-speed information integration made electricity course through his veins.

Just a little bit, just a little bit more...!

Shirone juggled circuits with everything he had. Time division felt like mental acrobatics. If he missed even a moment of the afterimage of his memory, everything would collapse.

Evading Dante's attacks in this state wasn't easy. But he didn't want to lose. The title of the best in the kingdom meant nothing for him. He felt a sense of urgency that if he couldn't defeat Dante here, he'd never able to move forward.

Dante's heart was so anxious with frustration. The automaton speed seemed on the verge of catching up to Shirone, yet never quite did.

Damn it! What's happening!?

When would that magic circle activate?

If only he could figure that out, he could devise a strategy, but even as an information magic specialist, this configuration defied his comprehension. It didn't make sense that such combination was possible, but more than anything, the sheer scale of information was too great.

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As Ataraxia's integration surpassed 50 percent, students cried out in pain from their scorching bracelets.

Mark frantically shook his wrist and asked Amy.

"Senior! These are definitely safe, right?"

Amy wiped cold sweat.

Honestly, she wasn't sure. Even when the most flashy magic spells used in graduation duels never made bracelets burn this intensely. Icheonban clearly couldn't handle Ataraxia's amount of information.

"I have no idea. They might explode, so be careful."

"T-That's..."

Nevertheless, Amy kept watching Icheonban. Even if the bracelets detonated, she'd determined to see this through. Inspired by a senior, Mark steeled himself. What were burns compared to witnessing clash of geniuses of the century in the first place?

Then at that moment, surprisingly, Dante deactivated his automaton. If this continues, it would let Shirone complete his magic circle, breaking the stalemate.

Iruki was purely impressed.

"Brilliant. He's reading even the battle's channels."

Abandoning a winning strategy is agony. Observers can critique easily, but when your all is at stake, inertia isn't so easily to overcome.

Yet Dante shattered it.

Knowing being swept up in the opponent's flow was the most fatal thing in battle, so he plunged into the unknown again. This decision alone proved his genius.

Damn it! I'm absolutely won't lose after coming this far!

Dante reconfigured his Spirit Zone into sniper mode. A hundred amplification circles fanned out before him. A hundred degrees of ultra-precise serialized magic circles. The magic circles spun and tightened around an imaginary line.

Not even a millimeter of error is allowed in the smooth serial structure, which is solely concerned with amplifying power. With the automaton gone, Shirone focused solely on Ataraxia. However despair crept in his mind.

If it is as he planned, victory would have been within his grasp. Yet Dante created another variable.

Magnificent, Dante. Though I'd have done the same...

Now it was a race to complete their circles.

Dante's hundred magic circles would activate faster, but Shirone's time division had already integrated 70 percent of Ataraxia's information.

A smile formed on Dante's lips. Even though hundreds of magic circles had vanished, Pascal was remained.

"This is the difference between you and me."

Shirone looked down, realizing the fact that he had overlooked. A Spatial Movement magic circle glowed beneath his feet before he knew it.

His body sank into the ground, only to plummet headfirst from the sky back to the same spot.

"Damn! That's cheating!"

Nade slammed his fist down in anger. Dante could attack while constructing his magic circles.

Of course, hindsight was useless, but to win, Shirone should've definitely anticipated this.

Iruki sighed as if he had given up. Shirone also showed off his top-notch skills. It was just that Dante had one minor advantage.

"It was a good match. I have to admit it."

Nade's fists trembled. He's angry to Dante's perfection, not Dante himself.

"That bastard deliberately chose spatial magic."

“In Icheonban, there is blocking value for active spells. Offensive magic gives Shirone leeway, so he went for physical impact. Worthy of the kingdom’s best defense.”
Meanwhile, Dante’s hundred circles completed. A Fire Strike loaded at the amplification tunnel’s origin.
Dante, who had regained his composure, smiled and said.
“This ends now...!”

His voice suddenly stopped.

The students who thought it was strange followed Dante's gaze. Then, their eyes widened as if they were shocked. Despite Shirone had lost his consciousness, Ataraxia remained in that place.

Ping.

A droplet of information fell into the Halo.

Ping. Ping-ping.

Another. Then two more.

Pingpingpingpingping!

Finally, light began pouring in at blinding speed.

The rotation of the halo became even faster, and a rainbow of light that was too colorful to be seen with the eyes filled the Halo.

Olivia shot up in disbelief.

“Impossible! An information imagining itself!?”

Alpheas was equally stunned. However, given Ataraxia’s origin, this phenomeneon would be natural.

“It’s beyond human logic. A self-thinking information system past critical point. Isn’t it worthy of being called heavenly magic?”

Olivia asked back with a bewildered expression.

“Heavenly magic? What nonsense are you talking about?”

Alpheas was careful with his words. They will learn eventually after this fight, but now, Heaven didn’t matter.

“We have finally reached our destination. This is where the match will be decided.”

As if to tell her not to miss the good show, Alpheas gestured to Icheonban, and Olivia turned her head.

Shirone, who had regained consciousness, slowly stood up. The light before him, who had lowered his head, sank with a bang. A single Photon Cannon formed. A single Photon Cannon crafted from his last shreds of consciousness.

“Damn it!”

Dante barely suppressed his scream as he unleashed Fire Strike. A blazing spear pierced through circles, growing as it advanced.

At that moment, the magic circle was completed in front of Shirone.

Super Magic Amplification Circle, Ataraxia.

Shirone watched the sight of Fire Strike enhanced by the white path toward him... and fired his Photon Cannon straight at the center of the flame.

To all, the photon piercing Ataraxia seemed to move in slow motion.

And at the moment the line was crossed.

Flash!

The world flooded with light.

Everything beyond Ataraxia was swept away in a massive storm of mass.

The instantaneous brilliance registered slowly in perception, as if the very skin of space were being peeled back, revealing folds of air that pushed everything outward.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Simultaneously, a series of glass shattering sounds erupted among the students. Overloaded by information processing, every bracelet's crystal lens burst. The Icheonban shut down, its scenery made of simulation vanished

Like a midsummer night's dream, the spectacle disappeared, leaving only the barren physical blocks behind. No one spoke.

They were too preoccupied processing about what magic they'd just witnessed. Even the teachers had never seen magic of such magnitude before.

All eyes were turned to Shirone and Dante.

The two stood at the same distance as when they'd begun, untouched, and the students murmured in disbelief.

The fact that Dante hadn't collapsed was the anomaly.

Shirone's spell had been unstoppable. The sheer amount of information exceeding Icheonban's memory proved it. If this had been a real battle, Dante would've been erased without a trace.

But this was Icheonban, and Dante remained standing.

Even at 50 percent synchronization, anti-magic should've knocked him unconscious.

Perhaps Icheonban's system had crashed before the impact landed. If so, declaring a winner and loser would be forced.

Given this was a student duel, the faculty had a high possibility of ending this situation with a beautiful draw.

But that wasn't what Shirone's friends, or any students as a witness of this battle so far, wanted.

Shirone and Dante had fought a historic battle.

It was a selfish thought, but the students wanted their memories to have a definitive conclusion.

Gasping for breath, Shirone glared at Dante. With the Icheonban gone, he could only watch, in fact, he was too exhausted to do more than breathe.

"Haha..."

Dante let out a hollow laugh. However, he was so exhausted that he choked his own voice. He staggered forward, only to freeze after three steps.

A whisper slipped through his parted lips.

"You..."

At that moment, blood gushed from his nose. Then his pupils gradually dulled, and like a falling oak, he collapsed face-first onto the ground.

Iruki's voice trembled.

"It landed. The anti-magic hit before the system shut down."

Though his voice was quiet, his words spread through the crowd like telepathy.

"He lost? Dante lost, right?"

“Looks like it. Dante... that Dante was defeated.”

As if under a collective spell, the students erupted cheered. The sound waves of the voices mixed together, causing the air in the hall to vibrate powerfully.

“Shirone won! Shirone beat the kingdom’s greatest, Dante!” Mark’s senses snapped back into his body, having flown to the end of the sky. As the cheers sank in, his tension seemed to ease, but then another emotion pounded in his chest.

This was the moment Shirone crowned as the kingdom’s top star.

“Aaaah! Senior Shirone won! Who’s the best now, huh? Come at us! Anyone else wanna try!?”

Mark celebrated as if he’d won. The icy glares from Dante’s friends nearby meant nothing, as his adrenaline had long since burned away such trivial thoughts.

Killine muttered, dazed.

“Good heavens... Dante...”

An unbelievable outcome. Yet Dante’s face planted on the cold blocks was undeniable proof.

473 matches. 472 victories.

And 1 defeat.

It was Dante’s first loss since entering the world of magic, and the end of a decade-long unbeaten streak.

Amid the roaring crowd, Olivia remained seated, her expression unreadable.

She was worried for Dante, but neutrality was paramount.

When Siena looked at Dante and signaled he was okay, Olivia finally exhaled a small sigh.

So Dante lost.

She’d never doubted his victory. Yet now, strangely enough, when he actually lost, she felt no turmoil.

Perhaps it didn’t feel real yet, or perhaps the duel had been too magnificent to resent.

I must concede. Dante gave his all. Shirone was stronger. That’s all. But...

That final spell casted by Shirone. What on earth was the power of that magic? Its essence resembled Shirone's signature Photon Cannon.

Yet, it was nothing like a Photon Cannon for certain.

Even she, a specialist in verbal magic, would struggle to unleash such force deliberately with her mind. Forget the power, the problem was the amplification power defied any reason. Elevating a student-level Photon Cannon to archmage-class was impossible even for her.

She glanced at Alpheas. As expected, only silence came from him, which confirmed he'd known all along.

Had he anticipated this clash with Dante because he wanted to witness a miracle would happen with that sliver of chance? Like a child rubbing his hands before a fascinating toy.

You old fox. You've completely outplayed me, right?

Olivia gritted her teeth with an indignant look. However Alpheas, whom she'd expected to gloat, remained lost in thought for along time, with his lips sealed.

Was it always this powerful?

Ataraxia, Super Magic Amplification Circle.

He had heard tales to some extent of Shirone's exploits, but seeing it with his own eyes dwarfed his imagination.

Moreover, this duel was sanctioned by the Royal Faculty Association. Reporters and recording devices were present.

There's no way for the royal family wouldn't move.

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If they possess Ataraxia, the prestige of Alpheas Magic Academy will skyrocket overnight. With Olivia's power added to the equation, they could even topple the Royal Magic Academy's supremacy.

Having followed this line of thought, Alpheas spoke quietly. "Thadd."

Thadd approached and bowed his head.

"Yes, Master."

"Retrieve Icheonban's black box immediately. It must not fall into anyone's hands. And ensure its destruction happens before Shirone's eyes. He must witness it being destroyed."

"Understood."

Without protest, Thadd bowed deeper.

His own bracelet's crystal lens had shattered too.

He had a feeling that this was unprecedented in Icheonban's history, a sign things might be graver than anticipated.

Of course, the bigger the incident, the more the school's name would spread, but with Alpheas' orders, personal considerations were irrelevant.

Olivia's sharp gaze softened into puzzlement.

She'd long known him to be uncompromising, but this level of obstinacy was unexpected.

"Are you sure? The black box contains everything from this duel. Not only Dante's Pascal, there are also Shirone's magic circle. Just copying it would be invaluable. Even if the kingdom tightens security, they'd pay a fortune to obtain it."

Her probing earned no hesitation from Alpheas.

“It belongs to Shirone. No one accesses that data without his consent.”

“He might give consent. Think about it carefully. This could elevate our school’s standing, and more importantly, it will advance magic society. Shirone himself has benefited from generations of geniuses work.”

Olivia seems didn’t wrong at first glance. Without noble sacrifices, challenges, efforts, and brilliance passed down from the predecessors, human magic wouldn’t have progressed this far.

Which was why Alpheas had once submitted his quantum theory that revolutionized photon magic to the kingdom, like an offering.

Yet his stance remained unshaken.

“Shirone can choose whenever he wishes while he lives. But not now. Let him decide when he feels the need. Presenting it like this would be no different from coercion.”

Olivia clicked her tongue. Stubborn as ever, truly a top-notch, then and now.

Though... that’s why I admired him.

The duel had ended, yet none of the student left.

They awaited the climax. It was to watch Dante kneeling before Shirone.

But the defeated Dante, even under the teachers’ healing magic, remained unconscious.

Sabina shook her head, voice trembling.

“Dante... lost? No, this can’t be. He’s crushed countless powerhouses so far, but his unbeaten streak can’t be broken at some backwater school.”

“Sabina, calm down. Let’s just be glad he’s unharmed.”

Closer steadied her, but Sabina, with emotions boiling, couldn’t accept reality.

Don’t you have days like that in life? Some days defied all logic, where impossible variables piled up until everything unraveled.

For Dante, today was such a day.

"Dante is invincible! His sync rate was only 50 percent! At the Royal Academy, he's fought at 100 percent! There's no way he'd lose to some country bumpkin like that!"

"Tch. Still just a simulation."

Sabina whirled toward Canis.

"What did you say?"

"Dante has never fought a giant. Or an archangel."

"Are you mocking him? I won't tolerate...!"

"I'm asking you, has he ever bet his life against an unbeatable foe? It doesn't matter if you've fought in Icheonban or your sync rate is 100 percent. Real battles aren't like this."

Sabina gritted her teeth.

Amy cut in.

"Dante doesn't know how to fight in real combat. Of course, he's skilled enough for it. But Shirone, he's always fought with his life on the line to get to this point."

Canis nodded.

"Icheonban mimics reality, but it isn't reality. That kind of thing isn't fun. Do you know what it means to risk your life? When you're standing on the borderline between life and death, your thoughts stop and you only want to live. Fighting through that and keep your reasoning, that is the real combat."

Sabina seethed like a child. Having been lynched by Nade, she understood what Canis talking about.

However, they didn't know what kind of determination Dante had in this fight.

Mock the simulation all you want. Dismiss it as fighting only winnable battles. But there's one fact remains unchanged. To Dante, Icheonban was his everything.

Tears welled in Sabina's eyes.

"No. That's not what I mean. Dante... Dante really did fight for his life."

Silence followed for a while. Even Shirone's friends had no desire to mock them now.

Truthfully, a semester of their antics couldn't be forgiven so easily with this.

But Dante was strong. It was fun to be a comrade competing on the same line. Although he lost to Shirone, he ended up saving his friends' face and falling down.

The awkward silence broke when Dante finally stirred.

The excited chatter died instantly as all turned their eyes turned to Icheonban in unison.

Sabina and Closer winced. They would have rather he stay unconscious until nightfall, but the kingdom's top defender recovered as swiftly as he guarded.

As Shirone approached, the crowd held its breath. Dante, struggling to look up, gave up and hung his head, as if it was no longer possible. Then, he began muttering something under his breath.

Shirone waited silently.

Finally, Dante fell silent and lifted his gaze again.

No more information exchanges. Winner and loser had been decided, only the spoils remained.

"Kill me."

Dante made a shocking declaration.

Shirone stared him with his lips pressed tight.

Murmurs spread here and there. No one expected him to choose death over kneeling.

Calls of saying Dante was immature and his unmanly stubbornness floated about.

But Sabina knew. His words were neither stubborn or childish.

"I will become the greatest mage. To do that, I must train in Icheonban as if it were real combat."

"But Dante, no matter what, Icheonban is still a simulation. There are judgments, limitations, it can't be the same as real battle."

Sabina could never forget those words Dante had spoken long ago.

“True. But training like everyone else won’t make me an Archmage. So I’ve decided, if I ever lose in Icheonban, it will mean my death.”

Of course, he had been young.

Sabina had thought it was just a dramatic vow before a match.

But as time passed, she realized he meant it.

In 150, then 200 battles, there were countless moments where he could have lost.

Yet Dante always emerged victorious.

By the time he surpassed 400 matches, those words must have become a blade pressed against his own throat.

And as a result, he grew stronger, achieving the miraculous record of 472 wins out of 472 matches.

Alpheas sensed something amiss.

“To think he carried such resolve...”

He glanced at Olivia, but she shook her head, equally blindsided. That an 18-year-old would stake his life on these duels was beyond expectation. Noble as his ambition was, this was too extreme.

Then it struck him.

Because he is only eighteen, the weight of maintaining his title must have been crushing.

Featured in magazines, revered by students, defeating rivals... how could that bring only joy?

Alpheas bore some responsibility for Dante’s extreme choice.

Dante, still unwavering, repeated.

“Kill me. I have never imagined losing to anyone. This defeat is mine. If you won’t dirty your hands, then I’ll do it myself. But I won’t kneel to you.”

Shirone sighed, bowing his head.

Dante was gravely mistaken. It’s up to him to decide how to handle his life, but voicing such thoughts only wounds some and enrages others.

“You lost... so you’ll die?”

"Yes. That was my resolve entering this duel."

"Why? Who do you think you are?"

The student's eyes widened in surprise. Dante flinched at the humiliation, but the one who was the most emotional at this moment was Shirone.

"You demand others kneel so easily, yet you won't do the same?"

"Don't be absurd. I did stake my life. I'm offering to disappear for what could've been my lifelong rival."

"You think you're so great?"

Dante's face twisted. Although he defeated, he'd fought honorably. He expected Shirone to understand his feelings.

"I lived up to being called the kingdom's top talent. Of course, not that I'm making excuses. But you didn't beat me easily, don't you?"

"Top talent in kingdom? Then what can you do? Stop a war?"

"What?"

"If you're so great, then try to change even one small thing. But you can't. So why bet your life on a trivial loss?"

Dante's expression distorted, but Shirone continued to lash out regardless.

"War, famine, civil war, you can't stop anything. So what? The best in the kingdom? You're great?"

Dante was out of breath. Each word stabbed his mind, chest, and heart like a knife. He was falling. Something fundamental within him plunging into the abyss.

"Even if you die, the world won't change. No one will care about you."

Dante couldn't take it anymore. If this continued, he'd hit rock bottom.

"Shut up! One win and you're arrogant now? Do you want to fight for real?"

"Dante."

Shirone looked at him with pity.

"You're just human."

Dante's face turned pale. He felt like something that his surrounding shell was being shattered.

Suddenly, Canis' words returned.

"You'll learn how it feels to be stepped on to the bottom of the ocean, as deep as you can imagine."

Canis wasn't trying to provoke him from the beginning.

Those words were unvarnished truth.

"Not even an Archmage, no, no one can change the world alone. You're just human. That's why you don't have the right to die."

The students stood solemnly silent. Even those who had mocked Shirone as a coward for refusing to fight now understood.

The kingdom's top talent.

A dreamlike title for any aspiring mage. Yet from afar, it was just another human-made concept, lesser than humanity itself.

"That boy...?"

Olivia turned to Alpheas. Shirone's records would detail his background, but she sought something deeper.

Finally, Alpheas revealed the truth.

"Shirone... met Miro. And Archangel Ikhael in Heaven."

Olivia's eyes widened.

Alpheas nodded with a bitter smile.

"Yes. He is among the few who know the truth."

Olivia fell into deep thought.

Even now, this world is sustained by a single mage.

Knowing that fact, all the things of human affairs must have seemed even less important to Shirone.

"He's strong. Most people would have been despair or break."

"He wasn't always like that. He was a shy, quiet boy."

Alpheas recalled the day he met Shirone. A twelve-year-old boy who pressed against the courtyard wall, eavesdropping on his lectures. Now, that boy had grown into a prodigy worthy of the kingdom.

Chapter 256: Another Sky (6)

“Competition isn’t just a system to determine first place. It’s a process of discovering oneself through numerous philosophical collisions. Obsessing over rankings is foolish.” Olivia looked at Dante with pity.

There was no falsehood in Shirone’s words. Changing the world was an entirely different matter from topping a magic academy.

Even MacLaine Goffin, the one regarded as history’s most powerful mage despite his existence being unverified.

And his chosen successor, Adrias Miro.

Even they had to make immense sacrifices to protect this world.

“Can Dante become strong like Shirone?”

“Everyone will grow stronger. Every student here.”

Olivia closed her eyes.

This marked the end of the duel—and the final chapter of her long, tangled history with Alpheas.

“I’ve lost. I’ll resign as headmaster and leave the school.”

Alpheas grinned slyly.

“You could always stay, you know?”

“What nonsense is that? My term is ending soon anyway.”

“Stay here and help me out. I’m getting too old to manage alone. To put it plainly, I’m asking you to become this school’s vice headmaster.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed to slits.

She was asked to become the vice headmaster after having served as the headmaster of the Royal Magic Academy. And under the terribly hated Alpheas.

She had planned to bury it all. She was going to move on, knowing she could never outmaneuver this old fox. Yet Alpheas seemed determined to torment her to the very end.

Of course, she understood his intention. Having Jerome Olivia as vice headmaster would instantly elevate the school's prestige. Moreover, the reforms she'd implemented during her tenure were substantial.

Which is exactly why she must refuse.

She wouldn't fall for his scheme of chasing both reputation and capability at once.

"Vice headmaster? Have you lost your mind? Why should I do you any favors?"

Without hesitation, Alpheas played his trump card.

"That night... when you came to me..."

"Stop! Please!"

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut and shouted.

How can anyone be this cruel? What grudge did he even hold against her?

When he'd suddenly appeared after over a decade of silence, she had thought it was her chance for revenge.

Now, her greatest regret was not turning him away that day when he came to see her.

Tears glistened in Olivia's eyes.

"You... are truly selfish."

Alpheas set aside his joking tone and spoke seriously.

"Don't go. Stay with me. When we have time, let's drink tea together and tend to the flower beds. And... say hello to Erina as well."

A flicker of resentment rose in Olivia's eyes. He knew full well how she felt, yet he was asking her to greet his late wife.

Why did she have to endure such humiliation?

She had merely loved him. What had she done wrong for this man to drag her to the depths of hell?

"You really...!"

Olivia, about to raise her voice, stopped when she saw the look in Alpheas' eyes. There was something different in his gaze, unlike before.

"You... don't tell me...?"

Alpheas shook his head. He knew Olivia would be disappointed, but he couldn't hurt her twice.

Yet it was also true that he wasn't the same as he had been thirty years ago. Maybe that was it.

"Don't misunderstand. Yes, I know what you're thinking, but honestly, I'm not sure myself. I might never be able to let go of Erina until the day I die. I can't promise you anything."

Olivia's eyes cooled slightly. But not as much as before.

"Then why are you doing this? What can you possibly gain from me while still holding your dead wife in your heart?"

What, physical comfort? Now that you're older, does loneliness gnaw at your bones?"

Alpheas looked up at the sky.

"Maybe so. It's not a rational conclusion. I just felt that if not now, I might never get another chance. That's all."

Olivia wore a dazed expression. Alpheas gave an awkward smile, knowing himself how absurd it sounded.

"Is this a bit selfish?"

Olivia shook her head.

"No. Do you know what true selfishness is? This is the first time you've ever been honest with me about your feelings."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. That's how it was back then.

You know that I had no choice."

Olivia exhaled deeply, lost in thought.

"So what exactly are you asking me to do? Hang onto you again at this age? Just on the off chance you might accept me one day?"

"I still don't fully understand my own heart. No matter how long I live, I don't think I'll ever figure this out. But I'll try."

Olivia forced back the tears.

She should have been furious at such a selfish proposal, but the moment she heard him say he would try, she felt her

anger fading away. The realization made her feel pathetic and wretched.

Olivia let out a long sigh. She could understand Alpheas' words, at least a little. Honestly, she didn't want to live calculatingly either, not at this point.

A 2nd-class Archmage. With nothing left to achieve in life, what was there to fear?

She could simply surrender to her emotions and let time carry her along. She was old enough to do that.

"Show me the library. Let's have some tea first."

This time, it was Alpheas who looked surprised. His wife lived in the library. He already knew Olivia was foolish, but he hadn't expected her to let go of everything again.

Reading his thoughts, Olivia wagged a finger.

"Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean I'm accepting your proposal."

"But why the library of all places?"

Olivia recalled an incident from long ago. The memory of defacing Erina's portrait in front of Alpheas still haunted her like a nightmare.

"I... have an apology to make to Erina."

A smile finally spread across Alpheas' face.

"Of course. Shall we go, then?"

As Alpheas rose first, Olivia glanced at the other professors, cleared her throat, and followed meekly behind.

The professors were utterly baffled.

Though they hadn't caught the details of the conversation, they had expected at least one of the two to meet a grim fate after the duel.

But after pitting their students against each other in a life-or-death battle, the two now walked side by side toward the library, leaving them speechless.

Meanwhile, Killine, who had been riding high on Dante's interviews, was in despair. While one could say a new star had been born, the problem was her own future.

Up until now, she had monopolized Dante as a star, but now he had fallen, and the world belonged to Shirone.

Countless reporters would soon swarm to secure interviews with Shirone, and the competition would be fierce.

And of course, their first target for elimination would be her. Killine's eyes gleamed as she racked her brain. In this situation, her only option was to make a big gamble and lay the groundwork for the future.

While everyone else scrambled for Shirone, she would bet the opposite way and aim for an exclusive scoop.

Killine approached the video archivist. But when she arrived, the recording device lay toppled on the floor.

Staring in disbelief, she asked coldly.

"What happened? Why is this thing on the ground?"

"Uh, well... all the bracelets were destroyed. The recording device is linked to them. It needs them to capture the battle footage. Then, at the end, it just... blew up and collapsed."

The archivist shrugged as if to say it was beyond his control. Killine nearly unleashed a torrent of curses but took a deep breath to steady herself.

The Obscura was a sensitive device, prone to breaking even from minor shocks.

"Hurry and check the Obscura! Without it, we have nothing to publish."

"Ah, right away."

The archivist opened the main unit and inspected the interior.

After rummaging inside for a while, he sighed in relief and turned back.

"It's fine. The Obscura is intact."

Killine's heart rate finally returned to normal.

"Whew, that's a relief."

Siena, having safely dismissed the students, approached after finishing her duties.

"What's going on? Is there a problem?"

The archivist laughed sheepishly.

“Ahaha, well...”

Killine suddenly cried out.

“This can’t be!”

It was a reporter’s instinct in action.

When the archivist and Siena turned to her with puzzled looks, she put on a sorrowful expression.

“The Obscura is cracked. A damaged Obscura can’t replay footage. In the end, we couldn’t capture anything.”

Siena also sighed in disappointment. Today’s duel had been of such high caliber that it could have served as invaluable teaching material for countless students.

The destruction of the Obscura containing Shirone and Dante’s battle was a loss not just personally, but for the entire kingdom.

Yet, in a way, it was also a relief.

She had heard that Headmaster Alpheas had ordered Thadd to destroy the black box.

Of course, the Obscura only held simple recordings, but since things had turned out this way, strict enforcement was for the best.

“Oh dear, what a shame. My condolences.”

Siena offered half-sincere, half-feigned words of comfort before leaving.

Once she was gone, the archivist stared at Killine as if to ask what her game was.

But nothing else mattered to her now. Only one thought filled her mind.

She would always remain at the top reporter of the Faculty Association.

Heh heh heh! An exclusive, an exclusive!

The Truth Revealed (1)

A week had passed since the duel between Shirone and Dante.

Olivia was still serving as acting headmaster, and rumors had begun to circulate that she would return as vice headmaster starting next semester.

For the students, it was shocking news.

Olivia was a 2nd-class Archmage.

Had she been returning to the Royal Magic Academy, it might have been understandable, but no one could have imagined her working under Alpheas.

Yet if the rumors were true, it was genuinely thrilling.

With the respectable Alpheas at the helm and Olivia, the kingdom's finest instructor, joining the school, its prestige would skyrocket.

Perhaps that was why, despite the semester being only a month away and the usual restlessness setting in, the students' enthusiasm for their studies remained high.

Olivia often took walks with Alpheas.

The two still clashed like fire and water, their opinions never aligning, but no one had seen their arguments escalate into anything serious.

Olivia would flare up like flames, only to fall silent the moment Alpheas spoke, as if doused with cold water.

Based on this, both faculty and students were convinced Olivia must have some weakness Alpheas was exploiting.

Today, too, Olivia strolled leisurely around the school with Alpheas.

With most of the semester's curriculum already revised, it was only the teachers who remained busy.

"I'm planting roses here."

Olivia stretched her arms out as if measuring the width of the flower bed.

Passing students greeted her.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster Olivia!"

She welcomed them with a warm smile.

"Ah, classes all finished?"

"Yes. We're heading to the library now."

"I see. But isn't this the practical training period? Shouldn't you be at the training grounds?"

"Ah, we had Icheonban class today. We're adjusting our stamina. Honestly, we didn't realize it before, but now that

Icheonban is part of the curriculum, it's overlapping with training sessions and making things tough."

"That does sound challenging. I'll bring it up at the faculty meeting."

"Eh? Really? Thank you!"

The students practically skipped away in delight, disappearing toward the library.

Rather than clinging to lofty philosophies, Olivia's teaching philosophy prioritized efficiency and swift adaptation.

"Headmaster!"

Thadd came running from a distance, shouting. His expression suggested some major crisis had erupted.

But Alpheas and Olivia, having weathered countless storms, didn't fret prematurely.

"What is it, Mr. Thadd?"

Panting, Thadd swallowed hard before pulling out a magazine tucked into his waistband.

It was Spirit, the faculty-published journal.

Olivia belatedly grasped the situation.

Of course, with the kingdom's greatest prodigy, Dante, defeated by an unknown student, it was obvious how exaggerated the coverage would be.

Chapter 257: The Truth Revealed (2)

“Come to think of it, today’s the publication date. I trust our school’s story was covered well?”

Olivia asked as she took the magazine.

When the words “our school” left her lips, Alpheas smiled contentedly.

But the pleasant atmosphere vanished the moment they saw the cover.

The headline article bore shocking content.

Exclusive! Interview with Shirone’s Parents!

The Student Who Defeated Dante is the Son of a Hunter?

Olivia tilted her head in confusion.

Not Shirone himself, but an interview with his parents? And what did they mean by “son of a hunter”?

Killine had a ruthless streak, but she wasn’t foolish enough to publish such a blatantly distorted article.

A cold sweat ran down Alpheas’ spine.

This wasn’t distortion, it was the truth.

Only a handful at the school knew of Shirone’s origins.

Of course, if Killine had set her mind to digging, uncovering it would have been trivial. Against a professional reporter’s investigative skills, Shirone’s parents wouldn’t have stood a chance.

Olivia flipped open the magazine and skimmed the article rapidly.

It detailed Shirone’s defeat of Dante, complete with photographs.

They’d been told the Obscura was destroyed... clearly, that had been a lie.

Yet the article itself wasn’t false.

There were limits to sensationalism; had this been fabricated, expulsion would have been inevitable.

Is this true? Shirone... son of the hunter?

Olivia turned to Alpheas, her gaze demanding an explanation.

Alpheas nodded with a bitter expression.

"It's true. Shirone is the son of a hunter. But he was admitted through a special recommendation from the House Ogent. Even the faculty didn't know. Thadd was unaware as well."

Olivia's face betrayed her disappointment.

"That's not the point. Why did you hide it from me? At the very least, as headmaster, I should have known."

Alpheas, too, had his grievances.

No one knew better than him that Olivia was discreet and tight-lipped. The problem was, he hadn't anticipated this situation.

"It wasn't about hiding it. I didn't even have it on my mind. It's been a year, and no one ever questioned Shirone's background."

As Alpheas spoke with a pained expression, Olivia stopped blaming him and fell into thought.

Shirone's personality was indeed unique. It was true that being around her made one indifferent to her origins.

But in crowded places, anything could happen.

"Honestly, you're hopelessly naive. No matter how many allies Shirone has, there will always be envious students. You should've been more cautious. Had I known, this wouldn't have happened in the first place."

For once, Alpheas had no retort.

He excelled at nurturing students but had no talent for politics.

Olivia crossed her arms, deliberated, then made a decision.

"Mr. Thadd."

"Yes, Headmaster."

“Summon Killine immediately. Tell her to come to me the moment she receives the message. If she doesn’t arrive within 24 hours, I’ll seek her out personally.”

“Understood.”

Thadd bowed his head and turned away.

The revelation of Shirone’s origins sent Alpheas Magic Academy into an uproar.

While the faculty was shocked, it was inevitably the students who gave voice to the turmoil.

Olivia’s prediction had been precise.

Though it seemed everyone adored Shirone, a small but undeniable faction had existed all along. The students who, swept along by the popular tide, had kept their resentment silent. They were the type who envied Shirone’s talent.

And now, with this scandal breaking, they pounced on him like fish to water, eager to tear her down.

The school cafeteria bustled with students after classes.

Though part of the crowd’s leisure came from the advanced class’s practical exams having ended, the real reason for the gathering was the unsuitability of the library for discussing the scandal surrounding Shirone.

Particularly vocal was a middle-ranked group from Class Four, who occupied a corner table and tore into Shirone with the fervor of paid hecklers.

“Tch! Does this even make sense? We’ve been attending school alongside a commoner.”

“Not just any commoner. He is the son of a hunter. How degrading.”

“No wonder he sometimes seemed so dull. Blood tells, after all. He’s only been learning magic for a year, no wonder he couldn’t even cast basic spells.”

Of course, they deliberately ignored one fact.

That same Shirone had, in just a year, risen to become the best in the advanced class. No, the best in the kingdom.

They all sensed the contradiction, but none dared voice it.

What they wanted wasn't truth. It was Shirone's complete downfall, no matter he's genius or not.

Closer, leaning against the vending machine, watched their antics with a scoff.

"What a circus. Even without Shirone, these lot would never come close to the top."

Sabina, too, disliked the spectacle of people whispering in corners.

True, Shirone was like her enemy, someone she could never like. But the pride of having faced the best head-on made her reject any comparison to them.

"Dante, what do you think?"

"About what?"

Dante paid no attention to the slander, his eyes fixed on the menu above the vending machine.

"About Shirone. Isn't it shocking you, that he wasn't nobility."

Dante blinked, then turned to his friends.

"Hey, what are you all drinking?"

Sabina raised her hand.

"Orange juice for me. My skin's been dry, I need the vitamins."

'Yeah? Then I'll take an iced coffee. What about you, Closer?"

Closer stared straight at Dante.

The day after his defeat in the Icheonban duel, Dante had skipped class to rest. Officially, it was because the school had granted him leave. Anti-magic had taken its toll. But in truth, the wounds ran deeper than the body.

Yet when he returned the following day, he carried himself as if nothing had happened.

Naturally, all eyes were on him, but he attended lectures with the same detached calm as always.

Dante... are you really okay?

Closer couldn't fathom his thoughts.

If he planned revenge, he would be preparing for a rematch. If he acknowledged Shirone, he would have left the school already. With the semester nearing its end, it was time to pack up regardless.

But Dante said nothing of his plans.

“Um, Senior Dante...”

A girl from Class Five approached, her cheeks flushed.

“Yeah?”

Dante turned, the straw of his iced coffee between his lips.

“That duel... it was really impressive.”

Closer and Sabina’s hearts sank.

Even if she lacked tact, this was beyond thoughtless to bringing up what even the involved parties avoided.

But the naive girl seemed to believe sincerity excused any remark.

“Even if you lost, I don’t think you were defeated. You know how it is, an eternal rivals, right? Next time, you’ll definitely win.”

Sabina subtly studied Dante’s expression.

Contrary to expectations, he showed no particular emotion.

After a slow blink, he replied as if it were nothing.

“Sure, thanks.”

Dante’s friends were stunned.

This was the same Dante who had once believed a single defeat meant death. His calm reaction was downright abnormal.

Has the shock of defeat messed with his head?

The girl, flustered by his gratitude, scurried back to her friends in excitement.

Then, all the students were looking at him. The conversation suddenly stopped and the cafeteria was quiet.

Only then did Dante realize every eye fixed on him. He glanced around indifferently before taking another sip of his coffee at an empty table.

Closer slammed an identical iced coffee Dante had ordered onto the table and dropped into the seat across from him,

hissing under his breath.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Shirone. It’s weird that you’re not saying anything about this.”

“What is there to say?”

“Fine, forget Shirone. But after a duel like that, you should at least have some reaction. Are you seriously just going to roll over? You need to reclaim your title as the kingdom’s top student.”

Dante let out a dry, humorless laugh.

“The kingdom’s top student? Hmm...”

Frustrated by his lukewarm response, Closer thumped his chest.

There was no doubt that Dante had fallen into a severe slump.

The shock of losing to Shirone had drained him of all drive and passion.

“You’re really...!”

Just as Closer raised his voice, the cafeteria door swung open.

Coincidentally, it was Nade and Iruki.

Naturally, the students’ attention shifted to them.

Here were two of the key figures from the three-week duel, reunited.

It was a shame Shirone was nowhere to be seen, though some people thought it made sense. Just how he could possibly walk around with his head held high.

Every student in the school outranked him.

They were nobles; he was a commoner.

By social norms, even if they ordered him to lick their boots, he’d have no right to refuse.

Of course, as intellectuals, they knew that wasn’t right, but they had no intention of relinquishing the privileges they were born with.

Sensing the odd tension, Iruki scanned the room and locked eyes with Dante.

Dante didn't look away from him.

The students held their breaths, waiting for the confrontation. But Iruki's words, when they came, were disappointingly mundane.

"You're here? Surprising. I didn't think you'd bother with a place like this."

Dante raised his coffee.

"I'm thirsty. What about you?"

Iruki had always been peculiar about food, he avoiding anything unnecessary unless it was something special. He believed it would dull his brain.

As a child, his classmates had found him strange, but Dante had seen the logic in it.

Even now, he remembered Iruki's habits after quite some time had passed.

Iruki shrugged and headed for the vending machine.

"Since Shirone skipped dinner, I wanted to buy something for him."

Dante nodded in understanding.

"Right. How is he?"

"Eh... fine, I guess. A little shaken, though."

"Really? That's unexpected."

Dante meant it.

During the Icheonban duel, he'd experienced firsthand the sheer scale of Shirone's intellect while exchanging information at light speed. He thought that Shirone would never be the type of person to shut himself for something like this.

"Well... a family means everything to him. He's just so pissed that Killine interviewed his parents without permission."

Dante pictured Killine.

Of course she'd go that far.

Knowing the school was in an uproar, Shirone's parents must be drowning in guilt.

That was what Shirone hated, and why he was likely waiting for this storm to pass.

"Hey, Iruki, you're still hanging around Shirone in this situation?"

James, one of the boys badmouthing Shirone earlier, shot to his feet and pointed at Iruki.

The middle-ranked group wanted Dante and Shirone's factions at odds. If they exhausted fighting each other and destroyed themselves, it might create an opening for others to rise.

But with no clash happening, James decided to provoke Iruki himself.

"You're a Mercodine, one of the top family in the kingdom. Don't you feel betrayed? Shirone's far beneath you, yet he pretended to be your equal. And now you're running errands for him?"

Iruki wagged a finger, almost proudly.

"Why would I? First, Shirone's my friend. Second, he's hungry now. And third, we already knew about his background. Isn't that obvious since we are friends?"

"W-What?"

James gaped, bewildered.

It was possible Shirone might have told them, because the trio had been so inseparable. But even if he had... how could they still be friends?

Chapter 258: The Truth Revealed (3)

Nade stepped forward. Though he was the type to get along with everyone, he couldn't stay neutral when Shirone was in this position.

"Enough, all of you. I get that Shirone being a commoner is shocking, but it's not like he deliberately lied. If anyone had asked him, he would've told the truth, that's just how he is. Attacking a fellow student over something unrelated to academics isn't right."

"Academics? Don't give me that! A commoner is a commoner! Do you befriend commoners outside school? Of course not! You come from a family that has commoners serving you hand and foot, how can you just accept Shirone like this?"

Nade sighed.

There was no reasoning with them. No amount of persuasion would work.

Of course, James had a point, and he could somewhat understand their frustration.

But what could he do? Shirone was already his dearest friend, and he couldn't bear to see him hurt.

James, realizing Iruki and Nade were hopelessly devoted to Shirone, redirected his focus to Dante.

"Dante! You say something. Out of all of us, you should be the one angriest! You being humiliated by a commoner like that!"

Dante gave him a look of utter disbelief.

"Does anger care about commoners or nobles? I lost, that's all there is to it."

It was the first time he'd openly addressed the duel, yet his tone remained detached.

James finally grasped the situation.

Neither Dante's group nor Shirone's had any interest in engaging with the mid-rankers.

They were badmouthing, so desperate to drag Shirone down to their level that they refused to face reality.

James lowered his head and trembled, then couldn't hold it in any longer and snapped.

"So that's how it is? You're all just clinging to Shirone now because no one in this school can beat him, is that it? You think siding with him makes you look impressive? There's no difference between you and me, we're all just losers in the end!"

Dante swirled the ice in his coffee.

"That's a bit too much. I'm the one who lost, so why are you worked up?"

"You're the one who should stop pretending! Just admit it. How can you act so unaffected after getting crushed miserably like that? Tell me! You were beaten unconscious by Shirone, what the hell goes through your mind?"

"These little shits just keep asking for it!"

Closer finally lost his patience. Before Dante's defeat, these kids wouldn't even meet their eyes, but now they were running their mouths unchecked.

"Enough. Let it go."

Dante stopped him, then tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling. After a long pause, he spoke slowly.

"What if... I'd simplified the automaton's design a little more?"

James' face twisted in confusion.

"What? What kind of nonsense is this?"

"Pascal's circuits should've been a little more intuitive. For example, like separating roles, attack for attack, defense for defense. Maybe there were too many basic spells? If I'd

dropped Fireball and just used Wind Cutter, my mobility would've increased."

The students stared blankly as Dante rambled on.

Iruki and Nade listened intently.

Certainly, that approach might have shifted the duel's outcome.

James, meanwhile, clenched his jaw tightly, and his body trembling with rage.

Dante stood up with his coffee in hand, and walked toward him.

"If you ask me what I'm thinking about right now, there's nothing but magic. Because this is a magic academy. So what about you? What does Shirone being a commoner or noble have to do with your magic?"

James' face turned beet red.

As shame crashed over him like a tidal wave, he wanted nothing more than to kick the seat and flee right away.

But he couldn't disgrace himself in front of the underclassmen.

Cornered by logic, he resorted to stubbornness.

"S-Shut up! And what about you? You didn't even kneel to Shirone! All that big talk about dying, yet here you are, still alive!"

Closer's eyes turned icy.

"James, do you want to die?"

James flinched, but it was too late to take back his words.

Besides, Closer had already been beaten by Iruki, so he wouldn't resort to violence here.

"It's the truth! Admit it! You're just a hypocrite, aren't you?"

Dante fell silent.

Not because he was deep in thought, he was simply waiting for Shirone's voice in his head to finish.

"Well..."

He shrugged.

"Turns out I don't want to die. Dying is scary."

"W-What?"

Iruki burst out laughing.

He wasn't making fun out of him.

Of course dying was scary for anyone. That was just a human are, as Shirone had said.

He didn't like Dante, but he appreciated his automaton-like bluntness.

"I did fight ready to die. But when it came down to it... I couldn't. That's all. Doesn't mean I'll kneel, though."

James lost it.

He couldn't comprehend Dante's group or Shirone's. To him, they were all lunatics.

"Hah! I get it now. You losers! You've all submitted to Shirone! You never had the guts to die in the first place! Why don't you just crawl back to your precious Royal Magic Academy?"

Closer seriously considered reducing James to a pulp. Truthfully, he'd been too demoralized after the defeat to bother with fights. But letting this insult slide was impossible.

"Dante, don't stop me this time."

Closer cracked his knuckles, stepping toward James.

Yet again, Dante held him back.

"Let it go. This is just the fate of losers. No way to prove it anyway."

Closer made a face like he might explode from frustration.

"Dante..."

But Dante truly didn't mind it.

James' words were just noise, an empty, meaningless chatter.

Hadn't he left school as a child precisely because he despised kids who, with no introspection of their own, passionately meddled in others' affairs?

Dante answered James' outburst with a smile.

"And James, I won't be returning to the Royal Magic Academy. I'll keep attending Alpheas Magic Academy and graduate here."

Closer, momentarily forgetting his earlier frustration, widened his eyes in surprise.

It was a sudden declaration, considering he hadn't breathed a word about his plans until now.

Sabina asked in disbelief.

"Dante, are you serious? Headmaster Olivia hasn't even confirmed she will accept the vice headmaster position yet."

"That doesn't matter. As long as Shirone is here, of course I will stay too."

A gleam of excitement lit up Closer's eyes.

"So you're planning a rematch? Good! When are you going to do it?"

"That's not for me to decide. I lost, so I don't want to force it. But I still have one chance left to redeem myself. I can't just abandon that opportunity and transfer."

"Huh? What opportunity?"

Dante turned back to Iruki.

"The graduation exam. No magic school student can avoid it. And Shirone will take it too, of course."

Iruki nodded as if it were obvious.

"Naturally."

Dante finally felt unburdened.

Though there were still variables to consider, declaring his intentions outright left him strangely refreshed.

As Shirone had said, he was only a human. There was no need to obsess over trivial win rates.

He would start anew from here.

"Closer, I'll take the graduation exam here. And I will surpass Shirone to graduate as the top student."

Closer flexed his muscles and roared enthusiastically.

"Good! This time, you will win! Let's start a special training today!"

Nade tugged Iruki closer and smirked.

"Hah! You think first place will be that easy? You think we will just sit back and watch?"

Dante nodded in acknowledgment.

Nade and Iruki were, in truth, his rivals just as formidable as Shirone.

“Fine, bring it on. First place will be mine either way.”

Dante even addressed James, who stood frozen like a sack of grain.

“You should prepare hard too. After all, you can’t become a mage without graduating, right?”

James didn’t answer. He just hung his head and shuffled out of the cafeteria.

The students who had been badmouthing Shirone exchanged uneasy glances before slinking out after him.

With Shirone’s group alone being overwhelming, and now Dante’s group joining the competition for the advanced class’s top spot, their future already looked bleak.

Dante tossed his empty coffee cup into the trash and headed for the door.

“We’re leaving. Tell Shirone that I won’t lose next time.”

Iruki snorted.

“Why not tell him yourself?”

Dante paused briefly, glancing at the ceiling.

“Sure, maybe. Later, when I have time.”

Then, as if nothing had happened, he pushed the door open and left.

His unflappable, carefree nature seemed innate.

Just then, the door swung open again and Sabina strode in.

She glared at Nade, chewing her lip before marching forward with resolve.

Now that Dante had declared his comeback, she had to overcome her fear of Nade.

When Sabina’s eyes blazed, Nade leaned back slightly.

He knew Sabina had been terrified of him ever since the lynch incident. While the insult to his family had been real, he had felt guilty about instilling such mortal fear.

“N-Next time... I won’t hold back.”

It must have taken immense courage for Sabina to say even this.

Nade decided to forgive her.

Though he had little interest in the mage certification, he wanted a fair competition until graduation.

Nade smiled and said.

“Sure, let’s have a proper match next time.”

“Hmph.”

Sabina flushed and bolted out of the cafeteria, her heart pounding with triumph.

Iruki stared blankly at her retreating figure.

“What was that about?”

Clueless about the context, he couldn’t grasp the meaning behind their exchange.

Even Nade, who normally would have explained first, kept his mouth shut.

“What? What’s going on? Wait... do you and Sabina have something going on?”

Nade flinched and waved his hands.

“No! Sabina is just... ugh, never mind. It’s complicated.”

Seeing he didn’t want to elaborate, Iruki dropped the question.

Whatever was between Sabina and Nade was their own business.

Though personally, he’d support it. He didn’t like Sabina, but if it helped dispel the ghosts which reside in Nade’s heart, it was fine by him.

“Alright. Anyway, let’s grab the food and go. Shirone’s waiting.”

The Supernatural Psychic Science Research Society.

Alone in the research room after his friends had left, Shirone sat lost in thought.

The latest issue of Spirit magazine, brought by Nade, lay on the sofa, with its pages open to the interview with his parents. His gaze lingered on the printed words.

“Haa... Why...?”

Shirone couldn’t believe what had just happened.

Of course, he wasn't ashamed of being a commoner's child. And he was proud of being the son of his parents.

But he was old enough now to understand how the world worked.

At magic school, he had been fortunate to have discerning friends, sparing him from any real crises. But the world outside wouldn't be so kind.

He wanted to see his parents. How must they be feeling right now?

His father, at least, would have known that revealing their son's background wouldn't end well.

How had Killine even gotten them to talk?

If coercion had been involved, Shirone would never forgive her.

I hope Mother doesn't get hurt...

Now that the article had been published throughout the kingdom, he could submit a leave of absence at any moment, and it would likely be approved without question. And above all, Headmaster Alpheas would surely treat this as if it were his own concern.

Chapter 259: The Truth Revealed (4)

However, Shirone shook his head.

Less than a month remained until the end of the semester. The practical exams had passed, and all that remained were the theoretical ones.

Since he would be entering his graduating class next semester, this period was the only time he could reinforce the basics.

That was the rational judgment, but his emotions refused to follow reason.

Though Shirone was someone who rarely wavered in any situation, there was no way he could concentrate on his books when his parents were involved.

It was for that reason he had come straight to the research society after class, lost in an endless stream of idle thoughts.

Nade opened the door to the research club and walked in.

"Hey, Shirone, we're here."

Iruki placed a bag of bread on the table and sat down across from Shirone's sofa.

"We brought something to eat. You must be hungry, so have some if you feel like it."

"Yeah, thanks."

"We ran into Dante at the cafeteria."

"Really? How is he?"

"How do you think? He's totally fired up. Seems like he's planning to stay at the school. He said he's going to beat you in the graduation exam and graduate as the top student. I told him to say it to your face. He's going to

declare war soon, so you'd better start thinking of a line to hit him back with."

Even in his troubled state, Shirone burst into laughter. That was Iruki for you, thorough to the core. Now that Dante's group had risen as rivals, he was already preparing for battle.

"Alright, I'll think of something. You're the reason I'm laughing now."

At Shirone's words, Iruki gave a bitter smile. As expected, even if he didn't show it, it was clear he wasn't feeling well inside.

While worrying about how he might ease Shirone's heart even a little, Nade recalled a certain rumor and spoke up.

"I heard something this afternoon. Apparently Headmaster Olivia called in Killine. She's probably going to come up with some kind of plan. Don't worry too much."

"Yeah..."

Shirone had also heard the rumor that Olivia might remain at the school.

But since everything had already blown up, it was uncertain just how much help she could really be.

What frustrated him most was his own helplessness.

Rumors, by nature, have no substance, so one cannot fight and defeat them, nor shackle them in chains and throw them in prison.

All Shirone could do was hope this wind would pass without stirring up any storms.

Summoned, Killine caught a carriage that night and arrived in Creas.

Olivia held one of the highest-ranking positions in the faculty as the Auditor, so a clumsy response could spell disaster.

With only the bare essentials packed, Killine picked a random inn to get some sleep, then headed for Alpheas Magic Academy early the next morning.

Students who recognized her whispered among themselves. It was clear that the article interviewing Shirone's parents had caused a stir. Regardless of how they felt about Shirone, there was no student here who would look kindly upon her. Killine sensed today would be no easy task.

It doesn't matter. I was prepared for this anyway.

By revealing Shirone's background, Dante's star image had been preserved.

Not only had she outmaneuvered the other correspondents still scrambling for a new rising star, but she had also secured her own livelihood.

Olivia likely wanted Dante to succeed as well.

With her social standing, she wouldn't tolerate a sensational article without at least a reprimand or two, but the matter would be settled with a few stern words.

Killine straightened her clothes and stood before the headmaster's office. Clearing her throat, she announced herself in her usual bright voice.

"This is Killine."

"Come in."

Olivia's voice was the one thing Killine envied most as a correspondent.

If the gods allowed her to choose, she would forsake the rank of 2nd-class Archmage for that voice without hesitation.

But today, it felt off.

As a master of word magic, Olivia's voice carried a unique power that pierced the human heart.

From the sound of it, there was nothing kind in her tone.

When she stepped into the office, Olivia was seated with a cold expression. Unusually, former headmaster Alpheas was also present, and across from them sat Shirone.

"Hello, Ms. Olivia, Mr. Alpheas. Ah, and you too, Shirone. How are you?"

Killine met the eyes of all three as she greeted them cheerfully.

None of them responded. Olivia, in particular, didn't even offer her a seat.

"This article... can you explain it?"

Olivia threw the magazine at Killine's feet.

No one would feel good seeing their own article tossed to the floor.

But Killine didn't let it show. The atmosphere was far worse than she'd expected.

"Delivering the truth is both the duty and calling of a correspondent. Is there a problem with that?"

A furrow formed between Shirone's brows.

A correspondent may have the duty to report facts, but that doesn't mean they alone have the right to define what values are worth protecting.

Even if the line could not be drawn clearly, with duty comes responsibility.

Killine, acting as though she had nothing to be ashamed of, held her head high and withstood their gazes.

How many times had she faced pressure like this while covering aspiring mages?

High-ranking nobles had tried to bribe her for favorable articles, and once, an unknown group had stormed into her house and wrecked the place completely.

She had overcome all those hardships to arrive at this point. And of all people, Olivia understood those circumstances better than anyone.

Having endured the threats of countless rivals to turn Dante into a star, there was no way Olivia could simply cast her aside now.

"Of course, I anticipated that Shirone's interview would cause some social stir. But Olivia, it was inevitable. I merely transcribed the interview as it was. It's not my fault that Shirone's background is different from others."

Olivia gave her a gentle, smiling glance.

Was that the end of it? Killine truly believed so for a moment.

But the smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“You’ve grown, Killine.”

Killine’s face stiffened.

“When you first joined the faculty council, you were just a nervous little girl who couldn’t even speak to me. And now, you not only think you’re my equal, you try making jokes...”

Killine sensed that things were taking a dangerous turn, but she too had her livelihood on the line.

She would rather to die here than watch a decade-long career vanish into thin air.

“Heh, is that so? It’s been so long, I hardly remember. Come to think of it, you must’ve aged quite a bit yourself, Olivia.

You never used to speak so coarsely. I guess life does wear you down.”

Their gazes clashed like steel on steel.

Alpheas, unable to watch any longer, finally spoke.

“Ms. Killine, no matter how important an article may be, recording a person’s life comes with responsibility...”

“You stay out of it.”

Olivia cut him off.

What a clueless old man. How did he expect to persuade someone as venomous as Killine with ethics?

Even speaking informally in an official setting was part of Olivia’s calculated pressure.

Alpheas fell silent in embarrassment, but the impact was unmistakable.

Killine still wore a smile, but her face had gone pale, as white as a sheet.

“Are you insane, Killine?”

Killine couldn’t breathe. Her heart, in contrast, was racing, pumping oxygen wildly through her veins.

Even a child would know that if Olivia truly meant to crush someone, there was no resisting her.

She didn’t understand why Olivia was going this far.

This, too, had been for Dante’s sake. And up until now, Olivia had silently condoned such tactics.

"I apologize if I was disrespectful. But Olivia, this was something that couldn't be helped. Even if you're the auditor of the faculty council, you can't place political pressure on a journalist. If word of that got out, I wouldn't be the one in trouble."

Killine's point had some weight.

No member of the faculty council held the authority to alter the content of a correspondent's article, as long as it was factual and legal.

The only exceptions were under martial law declared by the royal family, or in cases where illegal acts were discovered in the article's creation.

"No, Killine. The one whose life as a correspondent ends here is you. How exactly did you get that interview with Shirone's parents? According to Shirone, his parents would never disclose something like that so carelessly."

Killine flinched slightly.

She hadn't expected Olivia to pursue that line of questioning so persistently and had let her guard down.

Of course, she hadn't threatened or coerced anyone. She'd merely taken advantage of a parent's natural worry for their child.

"Well... I kept asking, and they eventually answered. Maybe they got nervous when they heard it was for an interview. You know how it is, there are lots of people like that."

Olivia gave her a smile of utter disbelief.

"Killine, do you think I don't know you?"

Killine pressed her lips tightly together and glared bitterly at Olivia.

Olivia knew her methods down to the marrow. They had worked side by side for ten years to make Dante a star. Which made it all the more unjust. If anything, she deserved a medal, but here she was, dragged in for punishment. It made her want to cry.

"He's just a powerless commoner obsessed with the magic society. Emphasizing a single point was probably all it took.

The faculty council. You used Shirone's student status to dangle the authority of the faculty council, right? Any parent would feel pressured to consent. They'd believe their child's future was finished if they got on the council's bad side."

Shirone's eyes widened.

If she had truly cornered his parents like that, it was unforgivable.

Killine felt like a rat trapped in a dead-end alley. Olivia had clearly come here today to bring her down.

But there was still one card left.

It was self-destruction.

Casting off her mask of composure, she looked up, eyes brimming with tears and a pitiful expression.

"Yes, that's what I did. But so what? You know how it works, Olivia. That's how it's done. If I can't even do that, how am I supposed to write anything?"

There was an unspoken threat in Killine's words. What does she meant was it's the same as Dante.

But Olivia didn't even twitch an eyebrow.

Sure, if you dug deep enough, Olivia might have her own faults.

But assuming the Auditor of the Faculty Council, a 2nd-class Archmage of the Red Line, was on the same level as Killine, that was a mistake.

"Killine, I'm not blaming you as a correspondent. I'm punishing you for betraying the trust I placed in you for so many years."

Killine felt as though her heart were collapsing in on itself.

It was a dare. A threat to see who would survive if they tore each other apart.

If it had been someone like Alpheas, she wouldn't have feared a thing.

But Olivia understood the ways of the world and wasn't above being pragmatic.

With such brilliance in her mind, there had never been a chance Killine could rival her from the beginning.

“And what exactly did I betray? Let me be honest. I thought you’d be pleased with this. Dante lost. I wanted your student to succeed, Olivia. That’s all.”

Only then did Olivia’s expression finally soften.

She had stripped Killine of her pretense down to the last layer. Now they could speak honestly.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but that was presumptuous.

And you weren’t doing it for me, you did it for yourself.

Without Dante, your place in the council is unstable. But not for me. Dante may have lost, but Shirone won. And Shirone is also my student, so there’s nothing to lose.”

“What? What did you say?”

Killine looked genuinely dumbfounded.

How could Shirone be her student?

She glanced at Alpheas, but even he looked puzzled and clueless.

“Shirone is your student? But Olivia, you’re a temporary hire. I thought you were stepping down as headmaster soon.”

“I was going to, but I’ve changed my mind. I’m staying at Alpheas Magic Academy. Starting next semester, I’ll be taking the position of vice headmaster. Which means you’re now the traitor who tried to ruin the future of my student.”

Killine’s eyes still darted, bewildered, unable to comprehend what she’d just heard.

Chapter 260: The Truth Revealed (5)

Even ten years ago, she had been the headmaster of the Royal Magic Academy, yet now she was entering a provincial school as its vice headmaster.

She wasn't the type to lie to a correspondent's face, so it had to be true.

But why? Why on earth would she make a choice that would destroy the career she had built so triumphantly over a lifetime?

What was it about this school?

Even Alpheas felt a twinge of doubt.

Though they had grown closer recently and reconciled their past conflicts, she had always refused the idea of taking the role of vice headmaster.

"Olivia, you..."

"Just hold it. We can talk about that later."

When Olivia gave him a frustrated look, Alpheas quickly shut his mouth.

In that moment, Killine's eyes flicked rapidly, calculations of pros and cons racing through her mind.

A trivial misunderstanding had led to this crisis. Or... could it really be called a misunderstanding?

It was just Olivia being capricious.

But if a 2nd-class Archmage was being capricious, one had no choice but to comply.

Killine dropped to her knees and bowed to the floor in a panic.

"I'm so sorry! I overstepped my bounds and made a mistake. I should've informed you ahead of time, but I had no idea you were thinking that way..."

All she could do was beg.

When Olivia had a rational justification to crush someone, she became the most terrifying person in the world.

Hundreds of her former students now held positions of power across society. With just a word from her lips, Killine could not only be barred from the faculty council but also be permanently exiled from the professional world.

"I'll publish a correction article immediately. Please... just one more chance! I'll do whatever it takes to fix this."

Olivia let out a long sigh.

If it were that simple, she wouldn't have let things escalate to this point in the first place.

The magazine had already circulated through the world.

Retracting every copy was impossible. And even if she could, she couldn't erase the memories of the readers.

"A correction article would only blow it up further. Don't stir up unnecessary controversy."

"Then what should I do?"

Killine lifted her tear-streaked face.

The woman who had entered with her head held high was now, in just ten minutes, reduced to the trembling rookie correspondent she'd been when she first joined the council.

"For the next two months, run a series of special features.

Divert attention with provocative stories like corruption in the schools, teachers abusing students, organ trafficking on the front lines of the magic society. I'll give you the sources. But the names Shirone and Dante must never appear in the magazine again."

"Yes, absolutely. I'll do exactly that."

"And... apologize to Shirone."

Still kneeling, Killine turned toward Shirone.

Shirone's face clearly showed his tangled emotions.

He was angry, yes, but seeing Killine, who had fought to protect her own livelihood and now bowed her head in surrender, evoked a certain pity.

Perhaps because she was an adult. For adults, one mistake could destroy everything.

"I'm sorry. I'll do anything to make it right. Please, just give me one more chance..."

Shirone didn't want to hear it.

He wanted to shout that she shouldn't have done it in the first place, but that, too, felt meaningless.

Seeing someone fifteen years his senior crawl forward on her knees, forehead pressed to the ground, it was too humiliating to even look at.

"It's fine. Just go. It's already done. Nothing can undo it. But if there's ever a chance... I hope you'll apologize to my parents."

"Yes, I'll visit them right away. I'm truly sorry."

Olivia gave a faint, bitter smile.

All students were similar in that way, but Shirone, in particular, was earnest to a fault. A clever student wouldn't have dismissed Killine so coldly.

Well, he's a boy far removed from things like ambition or greed.

Those who had awakened the Immortal Function often thought in abstract, metaphysical ways. They lacked worldly desire, pursued ideals, and showed an intense curiosity for realms beyond imagination.

Whatever Shirone's temperament, Olivia didn't want to discard Killine.

Even in a monarchy, the power of the press couldn't be ignored, and Killine was smart.

And in the world of correspondents, she had high reputation. It's beneficial to keep her close than raise a replacement from scratch.

"Killine, you're a capable woman. Just make sure this never happens again. When this is all over, let's have dinner sometime."

"Thank you! I swear nothing like this will ever happen again!"

“Good. Off you go.”

Killine bowed repeatedly as she backed out of the room.

With that, Alpheas and Shirone had little else to say.

They had chosen the best solution available and, since Killine had been made to feel like she’d gone through hell, their anger had been somewhat soothed.

Olivia turned to Shirone.

“I’m sorry, boy. This was my mistake. Well, technically, this old man’s mistake.”

Alpheas coughed awkwardly into his hand, embarrassed.

Shirone forced a smile.

Not all emotions had been resolved, but for someone with no one to lean on, the presence of Olivia and Alpheas was a great comfort.

Alpheas tried to reassure Shirone.

“This too shall pass quickly. The final exams are just around the corner. Don’t think about anything else, just focus on the test. If you do, everything will return to normal.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be going now.”

Shirone sincerely expressed his gratitude and left the headmaster’s office.

The central players in the incident had departed, but a heavy tension still lingered in the room.

Olivia closed her eyes and sank into thought. Then, looking at Alpheas, she asked.

“Do you really think so?”

Alpheas didn’t answer.

If the matter were trivial, time might be the cure. But

Shirone’s situation was different.

It wasn’t about his low birth or whether he deserved to be in a magic school.

“We can only watch and wait. Maybe... nothing will happen at all.”

“Maybe. But...”

Olivia let her words trail off.

As Alpheas said, talking about it now wouldn't change anything. All she could do was pray that the terrifying bomb hidden within this incident never rose to the surface.

The final exams had ended.

Last semester, the end of exams had marked the beginning of vacation, but in the second half of the year, one more event remained.

It was the graduation exam for the graduation class.

As it was the biggest festival in the magic school, attended by all students, the atmosphere throughout the campus was lively and electric.

Shirone's final exam results placed him sixth in Class Four. First was Dante, followed by Sabina, Closer, Boyle, and Pandora in order.

Below Shirone were Iruki and Nade.

Having significantly strengthened his weakest subject, his endurance, over the past year, Shirone was satisfied. In contrast, Iruki and Nade, shocked by their low scores in the written exam, had seemed dazed for quite some time.

When practical exam scores were added to the total, Shirone's overall ranking soared to third place.

Dante held the top spot overall, with Iruki in second. Still, having defeated Dante in the duel at Icheonban, many students slightly leaned in favor of Shirone as the top candidate for graduation honors.

However, his reputation had declined.

Since his origins had been exposed, students who once followed Shirone began to drift away, one by one.

Some of them even openly spoke to him with derogatory remarks.

Each time, Shirone was hurt, but he never let it show.

Killine kept her promise and never published another article about him in Spirit magazine.

According to Olivia, she had visited his parents and begged for forgiveness on her knees.

Everyone experiences a day where they fall into the mire at least once in their life, Shirone thought. This, too, was just a passing wind.

It could have ended that way.

But the single article about Shirone that had been published in Spirit returned like an overwhelming storm no one had foreseen.

Fifteen days before the graduation exam, an incident shook the magic school.

Clack! Clack!

Nearly forty knights, fully armed, marched through the noble district of Tormia. They were soldiers escorting a single carriage.

The carriage, adorned with golden crowns, was large enough to eat, sleep, and relieve oneself inside.

Even the most prominent nobles did not dare frown at the sight of the armed procession claiming the road.

Naturally, the guards stationed at the school gate were gripped with fear, their nerves reduced to dust.

When the carriage stopped in front of the school gates, the entire security system descended into chaos.

The head of security came rushing out in a frenzy. After reading a document handed to him by the lead knight, he turned even paler than when he had run out and bolted toward the headmaster's office.

"Headmaster! Something big has happened!"

He didn't even wait for a response, he knocked and opened the office door in one motion.

Olivia's expression twisted. She hated those with no manners.

But when she saw the nearly fifty-year-old head of security looking on the verge of tears, she decided to set her irritation aside for now.

"What is it?"

"Um, well... someone's here to see you... No, please look at this!"

Instead of explaining in words, the head of security placed the document on her desk.

Olivia, more curious than alarmed, picked it up and began reading carefully.

“Haa...”

She put the document down again and pressed her forehead with a sigh.

“W-What should we do? Should we let them in?”

“Of course. How could we possibly turn them away? Escort them here. I’ll come out to greet them as soon as I’m ready.”

“Yes, understood!”

The head of security didn’t even bow as he ran off.

Olivia considered chasing after him just to scold him, but she couldn’t really blame him. His legs were probably shaking, and his mind was likely blank.

“In the end... something happened.”

She leaned her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her hand.

Though she had feared this day would come, she hadn’t imagined the visitor would be this formidable.

Well... it’s only natural they’d have to act, after reading that article.

Perhaps, for Shirone, this would turn out to be a good thing? Given his disposition, he might be utterly horrified, but in terms of his future, of his life, it was undeniably close to a blessing.

“In any case... I need to go out there.”

Olivia quickly changed her clothes and stepped out of the headmaster’s office.

As the carriage, large as a house, crossed the school courtyard, students stopped in their tracks to watch.

The sheer size of the carriage was astonishing, but what truly shocked them was the sight of armed soldiers entering the school grounds for the first time.

“What the...? What’s going on?”

“Is there a war or something? Why are there knights at our school?”

Murmurs and whispers spread from all directions, but the knights didn’t so much as glance at them, continuing their march with unwavering focus.

At last, the carriage came to a halt at the central building of the school.

The knights, as if ready to draw their blades at the slightest hint of danger, kept their hands resting on the hilts of their swords and scanned their surroundings with sharp vigilance. Students, having heard the rumors, began to gather one by one. Before long, the area around the carriage swelled with hundreds of onlookers.

And yet, the carriage remained utterly still, as if nailed to the spot.

Having received Olivia’s message, Alpheas arrived first to greet the visitors.

But even with the appearance of the former headmaster of the school, the knights did not lower their guard.

“Headmaster, what’s going on? Did something happen at school?”

Alpheas had no words for his students.

He had been skeptical even after receiving Olivia’s message, but now that he was seeing it with his own eyes, the situation was far beyond anything he could have imagined.

Atop the carriage roof, adorned with a golden crown, stood a lion sculpture carved in gold.

There was only one nation on the continent that used the lion as its emblem.

Alpheas, having only just arrived, had yet to hear the full story, but if they were here, the reason was beyond obvious. Shirone.

The mistake Killine had made had, in the end, led to this.

No... can I even call this a mistake? Perhaps, for Shirone...

At that moment, the carriage door flung open, and an elderly man with piercing eyes stepped down. As the knights parted to either side, he walked forward with his lips pressed stubbornly shut.

Though age had made his steps unsteady, the sharpness in his expression was unmistakably fierce.

Once beyond the protective ring of knights, he scanned the gathered students with a steely, arrogant gaze, then pulled a scroll from within his robes.

The scroll, too, was of the finest quality, its edges trimmed in gold.

“I am Ordoss, Administrative Officer of the Kazura Kingdom and an envoy bearing the command of the King!”

Chapter 261: The Truth Revealed (6)

The students instinctively stepped back.

The voice of the elderly man, who looked like he might climb into a coffin by tomorrow, boomed louder than a young man's shout.

But once they understood the meaning of his words, even that surprise paled in comparison.

The Kazura Kingdom was located to the north of the Kingdom of Tormia.

What reason could an Administrative Officer of the king, not to the Royal Academy but to a provincial school, possibly have for coming here?

That question was answered in the next declaration from Ordoss.

"Is Arian Shirone present here? If so, step forward and receive the king's decree!"

The students, as though called to fulfill some duty, all began looking for Shirone.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

Once the initial shock passed, confusion set in. Why would a royal emissary from the Kazura Kingdom be seeking out Shirone?

Alpheas turned to a nearby student and spoke.

"Could you go find Shirone? It seems this is a matter of some urgency."

"Sorry? Ah, yes!"

The student took off at a sprint in search of Shirone.

Of course, there was no way to know exactly where he was, and on a campus this vast, the chances of finding him

quickly were slim. Still, overwhelmed by the moment, his legs moved before his thoughts did.

“Arian Shirone! Is Shirone not here? This is order of the king! He must come at once to receive it!”

Ordoss shouted at the top of his lungs, as though deeply dissatisfied with the delay.

Of course, as an envoy of the Kazura Kingdom carrying out the king’s command, his authority was absolute in this setting.

No matter how respected Alpheas was within the magic society, that position was granted by the nation. No institution could stand above the state.

And this was no mere official, this was effectively the voice of a foreign monarch. The noble-born students, who had studied political theory to exhaustion, didn’t dare utter a sound.

“Shirone! Why is he not coming forth at once!?”

“I’ve brought Shirone.”

A clear, beautiful voice cut through Ordoss’s metallic bellow.

It was Olivia, the current headmaster of Alpheas Magic Academy, walking forward with Shirone’s hand in hers.

Since he always stopped by the Supernatural Psychic Science Research Society after classes, he had not been difficult to locate.

Iruki and Nade followed close behind.

Shirone looked around with a bewildered expression.

Nearly the entire student body had gathered. At the front stood a massive carriage and guards who radiated strength at a glance.

On the way over, all Olivia had told him was that someone was looking for him.

“Shirone, go to that man. He is an envoy from the Kazura Kingdom.”

“Excuse me? An envoy?”

Only then did Shirone’s eyes go wide as he looked up at Olivia.

He had come to trust her ever since she had helped him through the chaos Killine caused, but hearing that man was a royal envoy were enough to make anyone uneasy.

Olivia gave his back a reassuring pat.

"It's all right. You'll understand once you go."

Trusting her, Shirone took a deep breath and approached Ordoss.

Ordoss fixed him with a hollow stare.

Though his eyes seemed sunken, the intensity pierced Shirone's brain. Shirone had the strange feeling that he couldn't possibly tell a lie.

As that thought crossed his mind, Ordoss asked in his trademark metallic tone.

"Are you Arian Shirone?"

"Yes, I am."

"To speak falsehood in this presence is to defy the Kazura Kingdom! I shall ask again, are you truly Arian Shirone?"

"Yes! I am!"

The words escaped Shirone in a shout, before he even realized it.

He didn't know why such volume was necessary for a conversation at such close range, but one thing was certain, it was effective.

His mind went blank, and the answer leapt from his lips as if under hypnosis.

Ordoss extended his hand behind him toward his aide.

The aide handed over a scroll sealed with the royal insignia, which Ordoss unfurled with exaggerated flair before raising his chin and proclaiming.

"Arian Shirone! Before I deliver the king's decree, I must ask several questions. Know this, should you lie or give false testimony, it may cost you your life. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

Ordoss's tone, threatening a man's life before even stating his purpose, was difficult to stomach, but as it was a royal command, there was no room to object.

Besides, Shirone had committed no crimes. He had nothing to fear.

“Arian Shirone. Are you the son of a hunter who resides halfway up the Valley of Dawn?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Are you the boy taken in from the stables by Arian Vincent and Arian Olina?”

Among commoners, surnames bear little weight.

Vincent and Olina shared the same surname simply because they were of the Arian people. A minority group not widely known to the general public, but any ethnologist would immediately recognize them as commoners upon hearing the name.

In the end, there was not even the slightest trace of consideration in Ordoss’s words toward Shirone.

There was no need to add that he was a child picked up from a stable, everyone in the kingdom already knew Shirone was of common birth.

“Yes, that is correct.”

Shirone replied with a sigh.

He could feel the scornful stares of his fellow students, but he had already braced himself for it.

Still, Ordoss seemed like a man who simply could not stand not humiliating Shirone, he persistently emphasized only the most degrading details.

“At two months of age, you were raised by the hunter Vincent, who lived near the mid-slopes of the Origin Mountains, in the Thorn Mines region. You were abandoned in a stable. From then on, you learned hunting skills under your father’s guidance. Later, you served for two years as a house servant in the House Ogent and were granted guest status, allowing you to enter the magic school. Is all of this true?”

Someone among the students burst into laughter.

“Puhahaha! A house servant!”

The laughter quickly died down as surrounding gazes focused in, but it was clear others were snickering internally. A “house servant” in a noble family meant little more than someone who scrubbed floors.

Nade scanned the area, trying to memorize the face of the student who had laughed just now.

Iruki, too, wore a sour expression, clearly offended by Ordoss’s words.

Shirone let out another sigh.

At first, he had been too dazed to think clearly, but by now, he fully understood the situation he was in.

Everyone was mocking him.

Just a short while ago, these were the same classmates who had laughed and chatted with him, but now they looked at him as if he were filth.

“Answer me, Shirone! Is all of this true?”

“Yes... it is true.”

The moment Shirone answered, murmurs erupted among the students.

Most were laced with ridicule and derision; only a handful regarded him with sympathy.

Among those few, standing at a distance from the crowd, were Canis and Arin.

“That’s surprising. I didn’t expect Shirone to be a commoner.”

“Hmph. So what if he is? Nobles are always unbearable. All they know how to do is flaunt their family name.”

Canis and Arin had no parents either. Abandoned in early childhood, they had grown up in the shadows of the capital, in the slums of Radum. It was only natural they would resent the nobles who mocked Shirone.

“Still, not everyone’s like that. Iruki and Nade aren’t. Even Dante’s group looks pretty uncomfortable. Dante especially, that’s unexpected. I thought he hated Shirone.”

Since Arin had the ability of supernatural perception, it was likely true.

Canis scowled at Dante and muttered dismissively.

"Tch. What does background matter to someone obsessed with magic? That's how a real mage should be. No... actually, that's annoying too. Born with a silver spoon and playing the part of a saint? Spare me."

Arin gave a faint chuckle.

At least Shirone had the title of commoner, while she and Canis were just rootless bastards. Harsh as his words were, Canis had clearly been shaken by Dante's attitude, which treated people based on magic alone.

"Hey... Amy's here too."

Arin pointed to two girls rushing breathlessly toward the crowd, Amy and her close friend, Serielle.

"Amy, what on earth is going on?"

Even while catching her breath, Serielle didn't stop talking for a second.

The student tasked by Alpheas to find Shirone had first gone looking for Amy, widely known as his romantic partner. Naturally, Serielle had followed, unwilling to miss such a shocking turn of events.

"I don't know! We'll figure it out when we get there."

Amy and Serielle pushed through the crowd.

With Shirone's official lover making her entrance, the students parted without resistance.

"Shirone! What in the world...!"

Amy trailed off mid-sentence as she emerged from the crowd.

Dozens of knights stood guard with fierce expressions, while an obstinate old man was barking accusations.

Shirone stood with his head slightly bowed, listening attentively to the man's words, as if awaiting judgment for a crime.

Ordoss's public shaming of Shirone only grew worse.

He started by reciting details from the magazine article, then moved on to personal anecdotes gathered through private channels.

Tales of his days in the slash-and-burn village, of wandering the mountains for days in search of a single meal, everything was laid bare.

To the students, it was all new and absurd. And that made Shirone's status as a commoner all the more tangible.

The scroll in Ordoss's hand contained nothing but the king's decree.

But by now, one had to acknowledge the sheer effort it took for him to memorize 18 years of Shirone's life in such detail. As for Shirone himself, he was on the verge of mental collapse.

Having the most intimate secrets of his life exposed in front of classmates he had spent the past year with, it was worse than being stripped bare.

"Are all these details true? Answer me, Shirone."

Shirone was so overwhelmed he didn't even realize his fists were clenched. By the time he came to his senses, he was on the verge of exploding.

He forced himself to calm down and, as if in resignation, gave a small nod.

"Yes... they're true."

The students erupted in laughter.

With such ludicrous questions being hurled, no one held back anymore.

It wasn't even particularly funny. But to children raised in noble houses, the past of the top student in the advanced class was hilariously entertaining.

Serielle looked at Amy with worry written all over her face. She, too, had first learned of Shirone's background from the magazine.

Honestly, it had been a huge shock. She had felt hurt that Amy hadn't told her something so important.

But Serielle had decided to choose what would bring her happiness.

She couldn't bring herself to hate Amy and Shirone, there were too many precious memories shared with them.

For the other students, though, there were no such memories.

To them, Shirone was an unreachable genius. At best, a nuisance they wished would just disappear from their lives under the weight of some misfortune.

“Amy...”

Amy finally snapped.

“You bastards! What’s so funny?”

Rolling up her sleeves, she stormed toward the students. She was furious even at Shirone’s friends, who stood by watching and did nothing.

At that moment, Ordoss proclaimed the royal command.

“Arian Shirone! Kneel and receive the decree!”

Amy froze in place, while Shirone lowered one knee to the ground and turned his ear to the scroll.

Ordoss, as if he had only been whispering until now, shouted so loudly it felt like the sky might split.

It very nearly did.

“By the command of King Orkamp IV, King of Kazura! The life history of Arian Shirone matches what has been recorded within the Kazura Kingdom! Thus, there is strong reason to believe that you are the First Prince, who fled during the kingdom’s crisis eighteen years ago! Therefore, the kingdom summons you. Come forth without delay and prove your right to the title of First Prince! Thus commands Orkamp IV!”

Iruki and Nade shouted in unison.

“Whaaaaat!?”

The rest of the students were no less stunned.

When the royal envoy had started interrogating Shirone about his past, most had assumed it was some kind of recruitment offer.

Rare, but not unheard of, governments sometimes scouted talent from other nations.

But Shirone is a royalty. He is also the First Prince, a direct heir to the throne.

Chapter 262: The Truth Revealed (7)

The students who had once slandered Shirone now whispered among themselves, their faces pale.

“What’s going on? Why Shirone of all people?”

“I don’t know. The First Prince? Of the Kazura Kingdom?”

“Well... if you think about it, someone with talent like Shirone couldn’t possibly be just a commoner.”

That one remark struck everyone’s nerve, and everyone fell silent.

In hindsight, it made sense.

There’s no rule that a genius can’t be born into a commoner’s household, but talent is often hereditary. Most of the students themselves had inherited their gifts from their parents.

Only now did they realize the truth they had overlooked.

Just because Shirone was raised by commoners didn’t mean his bloodline was common too.

No, even if his biological parents had truly been commoners, they wouldn’t have hidden away deep in the mountains just to abandon a child.

“Hey, what do we do now? The Kazura Kingdom is an ally of ours, right? What if Shirone really becomes king? What if he turns on us or something!?”

“Y-You idiot! It’s not even confirmed yet! Don’t jump to conclusions!”

“Not confirmed? You really think the kingdom would make such a grand announcement without doing a thorough investigation? What we’ve heard is probably only part of it. They must’ve verified it over and over again, that’s why Kazura sent an envoy.”

That, indeed, seemed the most likely explanation. This wasn't just any place, it was a royal proclamation, delivered under the king's seal. If Shirone weren't truly the prince, it would be a national disgrace.

The very fact that it was made public meant the high ranks of Kazura's leadership were already over 99% certain.

"I don't know! Damn it! This is a disaster!"

Nade glanced at his panicking classmates with quiet satisfaction.

Of course, Shirone wasn't the kind of person who would seek revenge, even if he did become king.

No, if he truly became a royalty, he would probably care even less about such petty matters, unless he was some tiny-minded tyrant, which he wasn't.

But still, for those who had wronged him, there could be no peace of mind. That's human nature.

Even 1st-class nobles lived on the king's grace.

There were families in the world with transnational power, yes, but most were nothing more than royal subjects.

And now, Shirone stood on the edge of royalty. For the students, it was as if a hand was pressing against the backs of their necks. Itching, heavy, and impossible to ignore.

"Answer me, Shirone! It is the command of the king!"

As Shirone hesitated to give a definitive answer, Ordoss shouted again.

But Shirone truly didn't know what decision to make.

All he had done was face Dante in a duel.

That had been picked up by Killine's pen, published in an article, and spread across the kingdom.

That was as far as Shirone had imagined things going.

Never had he dreamed that his biological parents would see the article and come looking for him.

Let alone that they would be royalty, not just any nobles. It would have been strange not to feel as though his brain were shutting down.

Shirone looked around, searching for someone who could explain what was happening.

Most of the students had blank expressions. Even Nade and Iruki had no advice to offer.

What could a friend possibly say when one's real parents came forward? Especially when it was a matter of bloodline, the blood of royalty.

Alpheas looked back at Olivia.

He had expected that Killine's article might spark some waves, but this was far beyond what he'd anticipated.

"The Kazura Kingdom... Among the list of possible candidates, they were the biggest fish."

"And all the more credible because of it. Even I could tell Shirone's talent was something extraordinary. I thought his real parents might come forward after reading that article... but I never imagined royalty."

Though she hadn't told Shirone, several noble houses had discreetly inquired about him after the article came out.

Due to the frequency of political marriages, it was surprisingly common for noble families to have illegitimate children.

Most of them didn't care about the children they abandoned, but if the child turned out to be a once-in-a-generation genius, the story changed.

Even if the details didn't perfectly align, nobles had the arrogance to believe that such talent must be their own blood.

"Eek! Oh my gosh! Shirone is a prince!? This is exactly like the story I imagined! Amy, look! I've got goosebumps!"

Serielle had already drifted into another world.

Shirone was a prince.

Wasn't this the kind of romance no book could ever truly replicate?

"Wait a second...? That means..."

Serielle suddenly froze, eyes wide, and turned to Amy.

"Amy! Does this mean you're going to be a queen!?"

“Shut up! What are you even talking about!?”

Amy silenced her with a glare.

In the middle of all this chaos, Serielle’s chatter was no better than noise.

Whether Shirone was royalty or not didn’t matter. What mattered was that he was confused and hurting, standing on the edge of a life-changing discovery.

Shirone met Amy’s eyes.

Seeing the expression on his face, one that looked like he might cry, Amy’s own eyes softened with sympathy.

It was the king’s command. He had no choice but to obey.

Shirone knew that. What he needed now was the conviction that he was making the right choice.

Amy nodded to him.

Shirone stared at her a moment longer, as if asking again with his eyes. Only when he saw her smile did he finally turn back to Ordoss.

“Yes, I will answer the king’s summons.”

Ordoss, as if it were only natural, stepped forward toward him.

“The laws of the royal house are not the same as those of the nobility. And Kazura’s laws are especially strict. Mind your conduct. Complete the withdrawal process from the school, and then bring the parents who raised you.”

“Uh? Right now?”

“What’s the point in asking? It is the king’s command! The sooner you depart, the better!”

Shirone’s vision darkened.

He had never even heard of the laws of the Kazura Kingdom, and now he was expected to take a leave of absence from school and return home without warning, it was all suffocating.

Most of all, no one had explained what procedures awaited him once he entered the kingdom.

Even if they wouldn’t give him the full story, shouldn’t he at least be told the basics so he wouldn’t make a mistake?

“Um... If you could just give me a little more time...!”

“Impudent wretch! Are you defying the king’s will!?”

Shirone clamped his mouth shut.

What hurt more than anything was Ordoss’s attitude.

As the kingdom’s Administrative Officer, some degree of imperiousness was understandable.

But what truly wounded Shirone’s heart was the royal decree written on the scroll.

If they were truly his biological parents... they should not have summoned their child after eighteen years in such a manner.

He didn’t expect an apology, but if they felt even a shred of remorse, shouldn’t they at least show some consideration?

At the very least, for the sake of the parents who had raised him in their place.

Alpheas nudged Olivia in the side.

“You’ll have to step in again. This won’t go anywhere at this rate.”

“...Hmm.”

Olivia had already been preparing to intervene if necessary.

The Kazura Kingdom was stricter than Tormia because it had only gained independence a hundred years ago.

Still, for someone supposedly here to retrieve a blood relative, Ordoss’s demeanor was excessively harsh.

It likely wasn’t the king’s intention.

If anything, it was probable the royal family had ordered that Shirone be treated with care. Which meant Ordoss’s nature was simply what it appeared to be.

Such rigidity might be useful in bureaucratic duties, but treating a potential prince with this kind of bluntness was, at best an upright, and at worst, an arrogance.

“Then please grant just one day. My parents know nothing of this. I’ll need at least that much time to persuade them.”

Ordoss’s face flushed red.

He was notorious for his foul temper, but even in his own country, he wasn’t known for being this stubborn.

But here he was in Tormia, a rival in the guise of an ally, and standing in the center of a magic school under the watchful eyes of aristocrats.

To back down now would tarnish Kazura's image.

Regrettable as it was for Shirone, Ordoss was simply doing his duty for his homeland.

Besides, Shirone's parents were commoners.

If they had been nobles, that might be one thing, but taking time to retrieve mere commoners? That would be an affront to his pride.

"I won't allow it. The king's command is absolute! Therefore, you must..."

At that moment, a voice rang out from the school gates.

"We have already secured the identities of Shirone's parents."

As the students turned and the crowd parted, Shirone's eyes widened.

Someone he hadn't expected at all was walking toward them.

Before they could even wonder who she was, the students were already captivated by her beauty.

A slim figure, a small, elegant face, bold and defined features, and flowing waves of sea-blue hair that curled perfectly with each step.

"Wow, she's gorgeous. Who is she?"

"Huh? I know her, she's that famous musician in the kingdom!"

Shirone stared blankly at her.

It was Ogent Reina, Rian's older sister.

At her side stood Deputy Butler Temuran, his eyes sharp and cold.

Reina made direct eye contact with Shirone but strode past him without a word, heading straight for Ordoss.

"Greetings, Sir Ordoss. Your reputation precedes you."

Ordoss was irritated that his business had been interrupted.

But Reina's noble air, in both appearance and demeanor, made it impossible for him to raise his voice.

"And who are you?"

"I am Reina of the House Ogent. I've come as the proxy of House Patriarch Ogent Bischoff and as Shirone's legal guardian."

The Ogents were a well-respected martial house. Ordoss had at least heard the name.

And if she spoke as the patriarch's official representative, he couldn't maintain the same curt tone as before.

"Very well. Then let us discuss the process of transferring custody of Shirone. First, we shall..."

"First."

Reina cut him off.

"We request a three-day preparation period. Shirone is a guest invited by the kingdom and has not yet been taught Kazura's court etiquette. Head Butler Louis of the House Ogent departed for Kazura just yesterday. If procedures are handled from that side, no time will be lost. In the meantime, we will instruct Shirone in the formalities. All further matters concerning Shirone will be handled exclusively through the House Ogent's dedicated team."

"Hmm."

Ordoss fell silent, lost in thought.

He had tried to secure Shirone quickly through personal leverage, but now that a legal representative had appeared, authority alone would no longer suffice. From now on, it will be a diplomatic issue.

In any case, since the House Ogent offered to prepare, he would return and handle the administrative process with this Louis fellow.

"Very well. I'll leave this matter in your care. If anything arises, consult with my deputy, Daltos. I will return to Kazura and relay your message."

"Yes. I'll see you again at the palace."

After the formal farewells, Ordoss boarded his carriage.

Just as when he had arrived, the knights pivoted with dramatic precision and escorted the carriage as it slowly disappeared from view.

Shirone stood speechless at the whirlwind of events that had just unfolded. Then, when he saw Reina, tears welled up in his eyes.

He had been so overwhelmed by Ordoss's domineering presence, but now, Reina's appearance felt like salvation.

"Sister Reina..."

He called to her, but Reina remained locked in discussion with Temuran, her expression serious.

She pointed to some documents, gave orders, and Temuran nodded and stepped back.

Only then did Reina turn and walk toward Shirone.

As the distance between them closed, the sternness on her face faded, and her usual radiant smile returned.

Reina winked and spoke in her familiar, cheerful voice.

"It's been a while, Shirone. Have you been well?"

House Ogent's Circumstances (1)

Four days before Ordoss arrived in search of Shirone, Reina visited the Kaizen Swordsmanship School, where Rian was enrolled.

In her hand, she clutched a crumpled midterm report card, and her face was brimming with fury.

After completing the formalities for a consultation, she headed straight for the faculty office and finally found the person she was looking for.

It was Quan, Rian's personal instructor.

Though he had once made a name for himself on the battlefield before suffering an injury, Reina's current mood rendered such accolades completely irrelevant.

How could it be that Rian ranked at the very bottom?

She had held back her anger when he returned from gallivanting around Galliant Island, claiming his swordsmanship had advanced, but the school's evaluation had been merciless: a failing grade, plain and simple.

Chapter 263: House Ogent's Circumstances (2)

Quan was in conversation with a female instructor, one whom Reina recognized by reputation.

It was Kiyora Ellis, a renowned surgeon in the kingdom. Her specialty was nerve reconnection, a field so advanced that only true geniuses could hope to master it, even among surgical disciplines.

But Reina, now beginning to lose faith in Kaizen altogether, couldn't help but wonder if even that acclaim was exaggerated.

If nerve reconnection were truly possible, why then did Quan still limping on one leg?

Quan said something with a cold expression, and Ellis covered her mouth and laughed.

"Ahaha! So you just ate and walked away? Gods, you really are something."

"Shut it. If you pull that again, I'll kill you."

Ellis patted his back playfully.

"Oh, don't be so grumpy. You've grown old without a woman, so obviously your childhood friend has to step in. Besides, if we're talking about Olipher Siena, she's a perfect match as a bride."

Quan recalled the events of a few days prior.

He'd gone out, told there was an important meeting, only to find himself at a blind date arranged by Ellis.

The woman was Olipher Siena, a mage currently enrolled at Alpheas Magic Academy.

But from the start, it was doomed. She, too, seemed to have been coerced into attending by her family.

She wasn't the kind of woman to let her feelings show, but if she had liked him, her eyes would have revealed something, wouldn't they?

"She was a good person. Cultured, too."

"Oho?"

Ellis was genuinely surprised.

Not once had Quan ever complimented a woman before. In his youth, he'd been obsessed with the sword, and after losing his Achilles tendon, he hadn't shown interest in anything.

To hear him say someone was "a good person" was, in effect, the highest praise.

"You liked her, didn't you? Then let me reach her out again..."

But when a dangerous glint passed through Quan's eyes, Ellis instinctively flinched.

This was not a moment to push him further.

Still, she couldn't help but feel pity for her friend.

If he really had liked Siena, he should've made a move on the spot. But that just wasn't the kind of man Quan was.

Don't tell me... she rejected him because of his leg?

The House Olipher was known for their refinement, but one never knew.

From what she'd heard, the woman had looked like she'd been forced into the meeting, and love, more often than not, was ruled by emotion, not logic.

What's the big deal about a limp? She really doesn't know how to pick a man.

Even Ellis couldn't fix Quan's leg. It wasn't just torn, it had been ripped clean off.

When he returned from war with his leg in that state, she had cried for days, helpless in the face of her own powerlessness.

Before he earned the nickname Death Magician, Quan had been revered as the incarnation of the sword. For a man like

that to lose his leg, how crushing must the despair have been?

A year later, Ellis had offered him a teaching position at the sword school. And she'd vowed to herself: no matter how long it took, she would find a way to heal his leg.

That's why she couldn't help but hate Siena.

She'd never seen the woman's face, but surely, as an ice magic specialist, she must've radiated a frosty air.

Who the hell does she think she is, rejecting Quan? Her taste in men is garbage.

"Hey, Quan, could it be that woman...?"

Reina cut Ellis off and stepped forward.

"Professor Quan!"

Quan gave Reina a cursory glance and asked indifferently.

"And you are?"

"I'm Reina, Rian's older sister. We had a meeting scheduled for today."

Quan sipped his coffee and gave a slight nod.

"Ah. Right. I vaguely recall something like that."

Reina was speechless.

A teacher acting like he could barely remember a parent-teacher meeting? Unbelievable.

This kind of half-hearted instructor would never be able to see Rian's true potential, that's why he gave him a failing grade.

Ellis quickly brightened and stepped in with a welcoming tone.

"Oh, is that so? Rian is such a kind and righteous boy. Come, come! Please, have a seat. Would you like some coffee? Or perhaps a different tea?"

Her gentle demeanor helped Reina try to calm down, though it was a struggle with Quan fanning the flames of her irritation.

"So, what brings you here today? Rian doesn't seem to have any real issues. Still clueless, does nothing but strength training, and yep, still dead last. Hahaha."

As venom crept into Reina's gaze, Ellis, who had been watching her closely, wisely slipped away. From experience, she knew that in moments like these, the best strategy was to leave immediately. Reina told herself to be patient just once, and held out the report card.

"Here. Take a look at this."

"Rian's report card. Ah, yes, the last place report card."

"From what I've heard, Rian's skills aren't inferior to the other students. Then why did he fail? I'd like to hear your explanation."

Quan said, as if it were the most trivial thing in the world.

"It's because he can't use Schema."

Reina was dumbfounded.

"Even so, how can you justify failing him? I can use Schema too! But if I fought Rian now, I'd probably lose! How can you judge a student on just that?"

"If you'd learned swordsmanship, Ms. Reina, you would've beaten him."

Reina was at a loss for words.

In the end, that was the reality. For a swordsman, especially one who may someday lead hundreds or even thousands of soldiers, knowing Schema was essential.

"Still... to give him a failing grade..."

Tears welled in Reina's eyes.

Rian was her youngest brother, whom she'd practically raised with her own hands after their mother passed away when he was young.

While his older brothers rose through the ranks with ease, Rian remained stuck at the bottom.

Just imagining how frustrated he must feel made her heart ache.

They say a man is weak to a woman's tears, but that didn't apply to Quan.

"He has no talent. At this rate, he won't even graduate. And even if he did, who would hire a swordsman who can't use

Schema? He might land a job guarding some nouveau riche merchant, at best. I've heard he's dabbling in some nonsense called Imaginary Schema lately, but from what I've seen, it's a dead end. He has no sense for the sword." Reina slammed her palms on the table and snapped back. "I looked it up, too! Imaginary Schema! It may not be academically proven, but there's real potential there! According to the books, it's connected to Divine Transcendence..."

"Ah. Divine Transcendence."

Quan cut her off.

The last shred of composure vanished from his face, and a faint air of menace crept into his eyes.

Divine Transcendence.

Transcendence of the body? How preposterous is that?

"Do you see my leg, Ms. Reina? I limp, yes? My Achilles tendon was severed. That's why I fear. The body is like a machine. Without the parts, it doesn't function. If Divine Transcendence were possible, I wouldn't be limping like this. Imaginary Schema is nothing more than a diagram that stimulates the brain. It's not some kind of magic."

Reina didn't want to continue the conversation. She couldn't leave her brother in a school like this.

"I'll process a transfer. I'm taking Rian with me. Handle it now, please."

"What makes you think things will be different at another school?"

"I don't believe that's your concern anymore, Mr. Quan.

Whether we roast or boil him, our family will take care of it."

With that, Reina declared her decision and turned away.

The teachers who had been watching from a distance shook their heads. This was already the seventh time a parent had transferred a student after clashing with Quan.

Quan muttered behind her departing figure.

"I do think he deserves to be watched a little longer."

Reina's steps suddenly froze.

She turned, wide-eyed, and saw Quan scowling as he added. "If we're being as generous as possible, that is."

The teachers were stunned.

Not once had the notoriously ill-tempered Quan ever tried to stop a departing student.

Reina returned to him, grasping at the thinnest strand of hope.

"So... does that mean there's still a chance?"

Quan scratched his head in irritation.

"Look, Ms. Reina. I know you are as an exceptional musician. But swordsmanship isn't an art, it's a brutal, utilitarian skill for killing. Sword philosophy, sword beauty, all that is reserved for those who reach the pinnacle. Rian has no real talent. But if it's with Imaginary Schema... perhaps, it's possible."

"That's exactly what I've been saying! So why did you lie earlier?"

Quan sighed.

"Imaginary Schema belongs to the realm of willpower. It can't be measured, but any veteran swordsman who's been on the battlefield has likely experienced it at least once. I believe it exists. But precisely because of that, no one can force it. What Rian needs is to run more, swing more."

"So you gave him last place on purpose? Just to make him push harder?"

"If you want to put it simply, sure that is."

Reina shook her head in disbelief.

"You think that's a valid reason? What about his grades? Even if he graduates, how can someone with the lowest marks ever become a commander?"

Quan picked up Rian's report card from the table.

Beside the word "last," various test results were listed.

"What exactly is the problem? Right now, Rian produces 1.8 times the muscle strength of students who can use Schema. In particular, his dominant arm, the right arm, shows 3.7 times the average. That's highly unusual, and the school is

monitoring it. It seems he awakened to something over the break..."

Reina recalled Rian boasting wildly after returning from Galliant Island.

If Quan was speaking this seriously, maybe her brother hadn't been bluffing after all.

"For a swordsman, that's all that matters. Grades don't guarantee a warrior's survival. The enemy doesn't spare the valedictorian and kill the one who ranked last on the battlefield."

Reina finally began to lower her defenses.

"B-But what if Rian becomes discouraged...?"

Quan gave her a disappointed look.

Of course, how could someone who spends her days playing music understand the heart of one who wields a blade?

"Ms. Reina, if he were the kind of person who'd give up over grades, he wouldn't even be capable of Imaginary Schema. He wouldn't have trained enough to reach this level of strength. These numbers are the product of pure, relentless effort. I don't know how well you know your brother, but right now, he's pushing the limits of the human body every single day. Dissecting himself as if he were someone else's experiment. You can't begin to imagine how agonizing that is. To someone who's living in hell day after day, do you really think rankings mean anything?"

Reina blinked.

She hadn't known. He had never shown it. Rian had always just seemed like her childish, carefree little brother.

Quan handed the report card back to her.

"Ah..."

As she received it, Quan turned his back.

"Do as you will, take him or don't. But I advise you not to inflate his head with fantasies about Divine Transcendence. That's the only path left for him to make a living by the sword. And unless you're ready to suffer the same pain on his behalf, you'd best keep quiet."

Reina looked down at the report card.

Last place.

But beside it were the numbers. Cold, hard evidence of the effort Rian had poured in.

She could almost see him, swinging his sword until his muscles tore, just to gain a fraction of a point.

Clutching the report card in both hands, Reina bowed deeply to Quan.

"I leave Rian in your care. Please continue to guide him."

Kuan gave no reply. He simply narrowed his eyes.

Reina stepped out of the faculty office feeling lighter than she had in a long time.

Up until now, thoughts of her younger brother had weighed heavily on her heart, but today's meeting had given her a glimpse of hope, and for that, she was grateful.

Yes... if a man sets his mind to something, he should see it through to the top. If it's Divine Transcendence he's aiming for, then maybe... maybe he could even reach the rank of Master Swordsman.

Her heart fluttered with anticipation, but she didn't forget Quan's advice.

Never let it show in front of Rian.

For someone enduring grueling training every day, even words of encouragement might be enough to break his resolve.

Chapter 264: House Ogent's Circumstances (3)

Since she was already at the school, Reina figured she might as well buy her brother a meal for the first time in a while. Lately, he'd been spending time with a girl named Tess, and that, at least, was something Reina approved of. They had only met once, but Tess had a gentle nature and seemed like someone who could handle Rian's stubbornness.

When Reina arrived at the training grounds, she saw Rian in the midst of sword practice.

She'd heard he continued training even during lunch now, thanks to the lunches Tess brought for him.

He was beating a training dummy with a wooden club, and even from a distance, she could sense the intensity radiating from him.

Tess sat on the grass, sipping water, her gaze fixed on the club that Rian swung with explosive force.

Ever since returning from Heaven, he had pushed the limits of his training. Now, it seemed he spent more time moving than resting.

Tess picked up the Spirit magazine Rian had tossed aside. It contained the article about Shirone, who had defeated the kingdom's most celebrated star, Dante.

He had read it so many times that the parts mentioning Shirone were worn thin, the ink fading.

The following pages contained an article about Shirone's parents, but after a brief glance, he hadn't looked at it again.

Lian... this must be hard for you.

Tess understood what drove Rian in his training.

He was Shirone's sword. That much had been clear when he returned from Heaven. The resolve in his eyes had spoken volumes.

To someone like him, Shirone's success was surely a source of immeasurable joy, but his own sense of inadequacy must have grown twice as heavy.

The fact that his training load had increased by 1.5 times since the day after reading the article was proof enough. For an ordinary swordsman, a 1.5-fold increase might be considered pushing the limit. But Rian was an exception. Even under normal circumstances, he was constantly testing the boundaries of human endurance. For him, an extra 1.5 meant an outright murderous schedule.

And yet, he did it.

It was a phenomenon no talent could explain, something uniquely to Rian.

Tess watched the arc of Rian's strikes and found herself awestruck.

It was as if he poured his very soul into every swing.

He's strong. Honestly, even if I fought him with Schema, I'm not sure I could handle it...

But Rian's thoughts ran in a different direction.

No. This isn't enough to bring him down.

He wasn't even looking at the dummy.

He was staring at the phantom image of Ymir rising behind it.

Though small for a giant, Ymir's strength had left a deep scar in Rian's bones.

"Raaaaaagh!"

Rian brought the club down with all his might.

It was a custom-made club, weighted to match the greatsword his grandfather had passed down. Yet in his hands, it seemed no heavier than a switch.

No! No! No!

When he first started dummy strikes, every swing had made him want to die from the pain.

But now, that pain had been replaced by thirst, a desperation to go faster.

Why couldn't he move more quickly? How had he managed to cut Ymir's arm?

In that moment, an illusion took hold of him, he saw all his attacks shattered by a single blow from Ymir.

A massive fist flew toward his face.

Ymir roared.

That's not it!

"Raaaaaaagh!"

Rian slammed the club straight down.

The dummy shattered from the top, splintering into pieces from its very core.

"Whoa..."

Tess's eyes widened.

It wasn't the first time Rian had broken a dummy, but this blow felt different, subtly but clearly.

Rian, too, sensed it. He stood frozen in the same posture, letting the sensation sink in.

He had to absorb everything, every feeling.

A gifted swordsman might gain insight without ever trying.

But for Rian, there was only one path: to learn with his body.

"Rian! Your sister's here!"

At Reina's voice, Rian's face twisted with annoyance.

It was a relief he had just managed to grasp the sensation.

Had she called a moment earlier, it all might have slipped away.

"What is it? Why'd you come to school all of a sudden?"

Before Reina could answer, Tess rushed over.

Scoring points with her future sister-in-law was one of the first things she'd read in a recent relationship advice column.

"Hello."

"Yes, Tess. Long time no see."

Rian pressed again.

"So what's going on?"

“Uh, well...”

Reina trailed off.

After getting Quan’s advice, she knew saying it was about grades would backfire. But she hadn’t come up with a good excuse either, and time was dragging.

Then, suddenly, a shout rang out from outside the training grounds.

“Attention!”

Rian, Tess, and Reina turned toward the entrance.

Ogent Clump, Rian’s grandfather, was approaching, trailed by the school’s instructors like ducklings.

A certified 3rd-class swordsman had come to the school.

Naturally, the instructors, who were also swordsmen, were scrambling.

But for Rian and Reina, it raised different concerns.

Clump was nearing retirement, but he still held considerable influence within the military.

For him to visit the school personally meant something serious was happening.

Rian and Tess immediately stood at attention.

Even family ties meant nothing here, students of the swordsmanship school stood at the bottom of the military hierarchy.

Failing to show proper respect to a commander like Clump could lead to real military discipline.

“At ease.”

At his order, Rian and Tess relaxed their stiff shoulders, just barely.

Clump looked around the training grounds. With it being lunch, only Rian and Tess were present.

“Training during lunch? A fine attitude.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Tess straightened up again as she replied.

It was only her second time meeting Clump. The first had been when she was invited to dinner at Reina’s home.

He had seemed genial back then, fitting for a man of great strength, but here and now, she couldn't afford to act casually.

The instructors standing behind him held their breath, unsure of how this would unfold.

Clump studied Rian's stance carefully.

He knew the boy had placed last on the midterms. When Reina had thrown a fit about it, Clump had simply laughed it off.

What mattered more to him was Rian's unyielding will, not how high he will climb. That, he believed, was the boy's greatest weapon.

But upon seeing it in person, Clump's expectations proved mistaken.

He took the club from Rian's hands and gave it a few experimental swings.

Hmm, he muttered, falling into thought. Then he reached out and began kneading Rian's shoulder and arm.

At some point, his hand paused. His eyes lit up.

"This club weighs the same as the direct sword of the House Ogent. You've been swinging it until the dummy breaks?"

"Yes, sir."

Clump let out a short laugh and handed the club back.

"Truly an idiotic method, just like you."

Rian's lower lip jutted out slightly in protest.

Were this not school, he might have shown his grandfather what the youngest could really do, but here, rank reigned supreme.

"Well... suit yourself. It's your life."

"Yes, that's what I intend to do."

Rian's curt reply stayed just within respectful bounds, and Clump chuckled, shrugging his shoulders.

For some reason, he looked quite pleased.

He glanced around at the instructors and nodded, as if to say they'd taught well. Only then did the teachers finally exhale in relief.

Reina, too, could now guess what her grandfather had seen in Rian.

As she thought that, she cautiously glanced at Quan. Sure enough, he was watching her with that ever-prickly gaze. Feeling a touch embarrassed, she turned her head away with affected indifference.

At any rate, she was relieved that Rian didn't seem to be frowned upon by the swordsmen around him.

Clump shifted his focus from Rian to Reina and approached her.

"There you are. They said you'd come here when I was looking for you at the capital, so I came straight away."

"What? You came all the way here for me? Is something wrong?"

Clump gave a sideways glance at Rian and subtly signaled for them to speak in private.

The reason for his visit had to do with classified intelligence about Shirone that had arrived from the Kazura Kingdom just days ago.

Rian had sworn a knightly oath to Shirone, so he had every right to know, but Clump wanted to stop him.

This wasn't an opponent he could meet with hot blood.

Calm, level-headed Reina was the better fit for this.

Clump led her to the shade of a nearby tree.

Rian frowned at being left behind but quickly dismissed it.

His grandfather and sister were busy people from the royal capital, something important must have come up.

When Reina heard about Shirone's situation, her eyes went wide.

"What? The First Prince of the Kazura Kingdom?"

"It's not confirmed yet, but all signs point to it. From what I've heard, they're almost certain. The circumstances, the timing, the location of the escape, they all match. Shirone is the only child ever reported abandoned near the Valley of Dawn."

Reina fell silent for a long time, sorting through her thoughts.

But this wasn't the time for complex what-ifs. The decision had already been made. What mattered now was the next step.

"So... I want you to go to the main estate. Take Shirone to the Kazura Kingdom. You're the only one who capable, really."

Reina thought so too.

In the House Ogent, a house of swordsmen, she was the only one with a wide social reach as an artist. She was also a member of the elite Circle of Ninety-Nine Artists, with a powerful network.

Still, she worried about Rian. If she went ahead with this behind his back, he would be deeply disappointed if he ever found out.

"Shouldn't we tell Rian?"

"No. I think you understand that the situation is too delicate. One wrong move could ruin everything. And you know what he's like, he's too hotheaded."

"That's true."

This was an audience with a king in a foreign land. Reason had to take precedence over emotion.

And Rian... was the definition of emotional when it came to Shirone.

"Understood. I'll keep it from him and go."

"The date and route of the audience were delivered by intelligence dispatch. You mustn't speak of it until you reach Creas. Not even Shirone can know."

International affairs always involved covert channels. But those with the authority to confirm the truth behind such intelligence were few and far between.

Conspiracy theories existed precisely because of the secrecy of this shadow diplomacy.

In some ways, it was like children playing house. But when that play happened at the scale of kingdoms, the stakes

were vastly different.

Even the location of a foreign envoy's lodging could become the spark of war. Confidentiality was everything.

"The meeting place is Alpheas Magic Academy. Fifty armed guards will accompany the envoy, and Ordoss, the Administrative Officer of Kazura, will act as royal envoy to meet Shirone. We've sent a response on our end, but from here on, it's all maneuvering. They'll likely try to take Shirone before we arrive. You'll need to move quickly. I'm counting on you to buy us time."

Reina, feeling the weight of her task, nodded solemnly.

"Yes. I understand. I'll prepare immediately and depart."

Kazura Kingdom (1)

The three-day preparation period requested from Ordoss had come to an end.

Shirone rode with Reina in the carriage back to the school, undergoing a series of tests on royal court etiquette along the way.

"What's the first thing you do at the start of an audience?"

"Kneel, lower your gaze by 45 degrees, place your hand over your chest, and announce your name and title. Then say, 'I answer Your Majesty's summons.'"

"What is the officially designated morning time in the royal capital?"

"Thirty minutes before the lunch bell rings."

Reina nodded in satisfaction.

"Good, very good. Impressive, isn't it?"

"Hehe! It was easier than I thought, since a lot of it is similar to the Tormia Kingdom."

Though separated by time, Tormia and the Kazura Kingdom were sibling nations that had split from the Yakma Republic. As a result, their cultures and lifestyles weren't drastically different.

Of course, from Shirone's perspective as a non-noble, there was still a lot to memorize.

But Reina wasn't worried.

He had been a bright child from the start, and she believed he could handle it, and indeed, in just three days, he had memorized and internalized all the formalities.

Still, Shirone didn't seem entirely at ease.

"What if I mess up? I mean... the rule about thirty minutes before lunch feels kind of vague."

Reina reached out and patted his head.

"Don't worry. Even nobles get that one wrong a lot. Sure, it's best to stick to it, but you're not going to be thrown in prison for mistaking the time."

Chapter 265: Kazura Kingdom (2)

Even after arriving at the school, Shirone and Reina continued chatting as they walked toward the dormitory. When Reina teased him with a mischievous joke, Shirone's face turned red. Reina burst out laughing again, finding his reaction adorably endearing.

Male students glanced at Shirone with envy.

Reina was not only stunningly beautiful but also a celebrated pianist idolized by the nobility.

With such a woman walking arm-in-arm with Shirone, his stature seemed to rise by association.

Amy and Serielle, who were on their way to greet Shirone, stopped in their tracks when they saw the two walking together.

Although they had intended to meet him at the dorm, seeing the two so affectionate made it difficult to interrupt. Amy already knew that Reina was Rian's older sister. Still, the mood between her and Shirone now was completely different from three days ago.

At first, they had seemed a bit awkward with each other, but now they were not only close, they were practically pressed together as they walked.

Serielle clutched Amy's shoulder in a flurry of excitement.

"Oh my, oh my! Amy, do you see that? Are you sure there's really nothing between them?"

"How would I know that? She is Rian's sister, so maybe they're just close. Didn't they probably live together when Shirone was a servant in their house?"

"Nope, not quite. I looked into it. During the year and a half Shirone served as a house butler for House Ogent, Reina

was actually apprenticing under a famous pianist and away in training. They wouldn't have had time to grow that close. So the fact that they're this friendly in such a short time means... Could it be?"

Amy shoved Serielle forward.

"Ugh, enough. Let's just go."

Judging by the fact that Serielle had even looked into their past, she was clearly very curious about the relationship between the two.

Amy didn't feel great about it either. But right now, Shirone's situation took priority, so she held back her emotions and followed.

Normally, women weren't allowed inside the boys' dormitory, but this was a special occasion. The event of Shirone possibly being revealed as the first prince of Kazura Kingdom was enough to override any school regulations.

Outside the dorm, a carriage from the House Ogent was already waiting.

Teachers chatting near the entrance merely nodded casually when Amy and Serielle greeted them, then returned to their conversation.

Even before they reached Shirone's room, Reina's laughter rang out from inside. Amy's chest ached at the sound, but she ignored it and kept walking.

When they entered the room, Iruki and Nade were chuckling, while Shirone and Reina were dancing together, arms entwined.

It looked like she was teaching him a dance in preparation for a royal ball. That might have been all it was, but seeing Shirone's flushed face made something twist in Amy's gut. Shirone's dancing was stiff and awkward.

It was hard to believe that the kingdom's top aspiring magician could have such poor motor skills. It was clearly Reina's gentle gaze that was freezing him up.

"Ah, A-Amy."

Noticing her entrance, Shirone quickly broke away from Reina's arms.

Amy walked in as if she hadn't seen anything. Iruki and Nade gulped nervously but she ignored them completely.

Reina raised her hand with a charming smile.

"Oh my, Amy's here. Hello."

Amy gave a polite and formal greeting.

"Hello. Today's the day of departure, right?"

"Mm-hmm. I was doing one last rehearsal with Shirone.

Turns out he's not much of a dancer."

Shirone waved his hand, flustered.

"No, that's only because I was nervous...!"

Reina covered her mouth and laughed.

"Hohoho! Nervous? Could it be because you were practicing with me?"

Shirone hesitated, unable to answer, which made Amy burn with irritation.

Even if it was a fake relationship, they were officially a couple. Reina had been told as much too. Shirone should have at least shown some consideration.

Instead, he stuck to Reina like glue.

There seemed to be some special connection between them, but what it was, Amy didn't know and didn't want to know.

Trying to push the thoughts away, Amy asked Shirone.

"Are you all packed?"

"Yeah. But I'm worried. I feel like I'm going to mess up."

"What's there to worry about? They'll laugh off small mistakes."

In that brief moment, Amy caught the flash of tension in Shirone's eyes.

She had thought he was just dazed because of Reina, but he did seem to grasp the weight of the situation.

On the surface, it was just a matter of birth parents finding their child. But when you looked deeper, a lot didn't add up.

Reina patted Shirone's shoulder to reassure him.

“It’ll be fine. Since the Kazura Kingdom announced it publicly, there shouldn’t be any hidden dangers. Kazura isn’t even that powerful compared to Tormia, and our family won’t just stand by and do nothing.”

Just hearing those words seemed to calm his nerves.

Reina was sharp and well-versed in the power dynamics between royalty and nobility. She had a clear grasp of political affairs.

With someone like her guiding him, nothing strange was likely to happen.

“Okay. I’ll trust you.”

Shirone answered with a smile, and Reina, pleased, stroked his head.

Then, as if she’d just remembered something, she turned to Amy. As expected, Amy’s expression was far from bright.

I do feel a little sorry for her.

During the three-day prep period, Reina had carefully assessed the people around Shirone.

Overall, he had good relationships with his friends. Iruki and Nade especially seemed like strong future allies in his life.

The problem was Shirone and Amy’s relationship.

They said they were lovers, but their conversations told a different story.

Real couples usually had a certain intimacy about them. But there was none of that between Shirone and Amy.

And yet, they’d been pretending for over a year.

Unless they were both masters of emotional tightrope walking, such relationships usually end in either a breakup or something real.

Reina had seen it happen countless times, a relationships that, given enough time, simply faded into ordinary friendships.

From her point of view, Shirone and Amy were nothing more than that: just friends.

Of course, there was always a chance that something could ignite and burn passionately between them, but judging by

their personalities, that likelihood seemed very slim. It made her restless, her tongue itching to say something, but at the same time, just imagining the two of them ending up together made her irrationally irritated. The urge to help evaporated completely.

She knew, deep down, that this too was a kind of jealousy. Still, she found a way to justify ignoring it. If there's no real rival, there's no need to care.

Hmph, come to think of it, I'm not really one to talk either. Checking the time, Reina turned to Shirone.

"Then let's head out. We've got to pick up your parents too, so we'd better get moving."

Amy stepped forward.

"Wait. Let me talk to Shirone for a second."

"Hm? Just talk downstairs. The carriage still needs to be prepared anyway."

Reina understood the urgency of the schedule. But Amy had something she had to hear from Shirone, directly.

"It won't take long."

She didn't mince words. Reina blinked, then shrugged.

"Alright, I'll go down and get things ready. Shirone, come down when you're finished."

As Reina stepped out, Nade and Iruki gave her a polite bow. Whatever charm she had, it had clearly worked on the three fools, they were utterly smitten.

Amy scoffed through her nose and drove everyone except Shirone out of the room.

Shirone, now with his travel pack slung over one shoulder, turned around.

"I'm off, Amy. Good luck with exam prep."

But Amy didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"Something about this feels off. You know it too."

Shirone gave a bitter smile.

"I do... But I don't want to think about it. If they really are my birth parents, then I feel like I shouldn't think that way."

Amy understood what he meant. Everyone focused on the title of Kazura's First Prince, but for Shirone, it was a journey to meet the people who gave him life.

Even if they were truly his parents, that itself was a problem. They had abandoned him. They had carved a wound into his heart that would never truly heal.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"I don't know. Not yet for now. I'll figure it out once I get there, how I really feel. But for now, I don't want to make any decisions."

Sadness and anxiety mingled in Shirone's expression. Amy, who had been quietly watching, gathered her courage.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"It would be much more helpful if I came along. Besides, classes are over now anyway."

Shirone's heart clenched at her offer, but he shook his head. He couldn't steal away the most important time of her life for his own uncertain future.

"It's okay. Reina's with me."

At that, Amy's gaze suddenly turned cold, startling Shirone. Though the chill passed quickly, there was a sharpness in her words.

"Fine. Let's go, then. I wouldn't want to keep Reina waiting."

Amy walked out without another word. Shirone was still puzzled, but his mind was too clouded to consider her feelings properly.

Outside the dorm, Reina was checking the luggage against a manifest with the carriage waiting nearby.

Shirone said his goodbyes as his friends came to see him off. Though it was only a ten-day trip at most, it somehow felt like a final farewell.

Nade grinned.

"Have a nice trip. If you become king, you owe me an extra-large cream bun from the school's cafeteria."

“Haha! Deal. But when I get back, it’ll be break time anyway.”

Reina looked on warmly as Shirone chatted with his friends. Just like Rian, Shirone had changed a lot over the past year. Beating Dante, the kingdom’s top student, was a massive point of pride even within the House Ogent.

Rian’s judgment hadn’t been wrong. And neither had hers. As Reina watched Shirone with a fond gaze, Serielle trembled with clenched fists, fuming.

“Shirone’s so disappointing. This is exactly when a guy should draw the line clearly.”

When she glanced over to Amy for agreement, she was shocked.

Until now, Amy had always brushed things off. But now her eyes blazed, fixed on Reina like a dagger.

“Serielle, I’m going with him.”

Serielle’s face turned pale. Sure, they’d discussed the possibility, but she hadn’t expected Amy to actually go through with it.

“Amy... seriously?”

Her expression turned worried.

In just two weeks, the graduation exam would be held. It wasn’t a time for distractions.

“I’ll be fine. Classes are over anyway. Just think of it as a little overseas trip to clear my head.”

But Serielle knew better than anyone that wasn’t the truth. Still, she found herself a little envious of Amy’s courage to throw everything aside and go.

If she was going, then they should send her off properly. So she wouldn’t look back, and leave with regrets.

Serielle gave Amy a playful shove on the back.

“Go get ‘em. Big sis approves.”

Amy hastily added,

“B-But it’s not because I’m jealous of Reina or anything! I’m just worried about Shirone, that’s all...”

“Hahaha! I know, I know! Who said otherwise? Go show her who’s the boss!”

Buoyed by Serielle’s support, Amy walked toward the carriage.

Shirone, who had just finished preparations, turned around and offered a cheerful farewell.

“Amy, good luck! You better ace that test. I’ll do my best too.”

“Will you move out the way?”

“...Huh?”

Shirone didn’t understand. Then Amy waved her hand to the side as if she was annoyed.

“Move. Ever heard of ‘ladies first’?”

Pushing past him, she climbed into the carriage. Reina looked utterly dumbfounded. Amy slouched into her seat and muttered.

“Hello. I’ll be in your care during the trip.”

“Oh? Where do you think you’re going?”

Reina, now visibly irked, pretended not to know even though she clearly did. She didn’t want to admit this situation with her own mouth.

“Yes, well, I didn’t feel right letting him go alone. I don’t think I’d be able to rest unless I watched over him myself.”

Shirone stuck his head into the carriage, surprised.

“Amy! What’s going on? Are you really coming?”

“Well, I’m already in the carriage, aren’t I? Sit down. We don’t have time.”

Reina felt like her chest was on fire.

Carmis Amy.

She had seemed so cautious and soft-spoken during the past few days, it had been amusing to tease her. But now it was clear. She was just as hot-blooded as Rian.

Reina regretted lighting this fire. But the moment had already passed.

Chapter 266: Kazura Kingdom (3)

“Are you really going to come? I’m honestly gonna be okay.”

Shirone didn’t like the idea of Amy focusing on something else with the graduation exam looming ahead.

Even though she was the top candidate to graduate, anything could happen in a competition. And if, by some chance, she failed, he would feel responsible.

Of course, Amy would never think that way, but from his perspective, someone who wanted nothing more than her success, he felt compelled to stop her.

“This is important for you. Ms. Reina will be busy handling royal procedures, so someone has to escort you properly. What? Do you not want me to come?”

Having Amy accompany him was more reassuring than anything Shirone could have hoped for.

It had been the same when they went to Galliant Island, her abilities made her an unshakable ally.

“No, of course I want you there, it’s just...”

“Then it’s settled. That’s the end of it. I owe you, and this is how I’ll repay you.”

Shirone couldn’t think of anything she owed him, but in Amy’s mind, countless memories surged forward.

It had been Shirone who saved her during the Arcane assault when she was hanging from a cliff. And when she was captured by Cariel in Heaven, she wouldn’t have made it back safely without him.

As Amy insisted on staying, Reina let out a sigh of resignation and gave the driver her instructions.

“Let’s go.”

Putting emotions aside, Amy's presence wasn't a disadvantage at all. In fact, if Shirone was to receive help, it was much better for that help to come from a trusted friend. Still, Reina couldn't help but feel like she'd lost ground from the very start.

Leaning her chin on her hand, she turned to stare out the window, her lips jutting forward in a faint pout.

Amy's smile was visible from there.

The destination of the carriage was the Thorn Mine, situated halfway up the Origin Mountains where Shirone's home was located. During the journey, Reina provided a rough overview of the current political landscape.

Tormia, Kazura, and Yakma had once been a unified nation. However, as the nobility's influence grew, factional strife ensued, eventually leading to a split, and now they exist under a tripartite alliance.

"In a sense, you could call them newly formed nations. Kazura hasn't even been independent for a hundred years. Yakma, in particular, didn't recognize Kazura's separation until recently. There was no war, but it nearly came to that. That was eighteen years ago. In short, as Kazura's internal affairs became unstable, they smuggled the first prince, Shirone, elsewhere."

Shirone felt a slight comfort in knowing that he hadn't been abandoned out of hatred. Given the kingdom's precarious situation, perhaps there was no other choice.

Of course, that didn't erase his feelings of hurt. Yet, with so much still uncertain, he forced himself to ignore the emotions bubbling within.

"I've heard about it too. They say it nearly escalated into a civil war. Yakma had even completed its mobilization. But then..."

Amy trailed off. It wasn't something she could bring herself to say in front of Shirone.

Reina felt the same, but as the leader of their group, she couldn't avoid the topic.

"Yes, the internal conflict ended when King Orkamp IV of Kazura married Empress Theraze of the Kashan Empire." Shirone, having studied history books thoroughly, knew of the event. He just hadn't expected it to become so personal. The Kashan Empire was the dominant force on the continent, occupying a third of the human realm. Moreover, the empire had always been ruled by female emperors.

Empress Theraze of Kashan was said to be so beautiful that no man could resist her.

Yet, she was also a cold-blooded woman who wouldn't hesitate to make any sacrifice to achieve victory.

Such a woman had proposed marriage to King Orkamp of Kazura.

"Orkamp IV probably had no choice. His country was on the brink of collapse. Besides, accepting Theraze meant securing a powerful alliance. In fact, after marrying Theraze, Kazura's politics stabilized rapidly, and its finances strengthened."

It was an unprecedented event, detailed even in history books.

Most notably, Orkamp already had a wife, and Theraze was also married.

"Political marriages among royalty and nobility aren't uncommon, but this case is unique. Theraze with the rulers of Kashan have always been women, and their primary strategy for expanding influence has been marriage.

Besides Orkamp IV, Theraze has three other husbands, all kings of their respective nations. She occasionally visits Kazura and has borne a son and a daughter with Orkamp."

"Did Queen Eliza of Kazura, Orkamp's original wife, have any children besides Shirone?"

"Unfortunately, no. Right after sending her newborn child to another country during the civil unrest, Theraze intervened.

There was likely an agreement prohibiting her from bearing more children. Theraze wants her own offspring to inherit the kingdom.”

Amy sighed.

No matter how royal someone is, using the uniquely human ability of childbirth for political purposes was unsettling.

As a result, Shirone was the sole bloodline of Queen Eliza.

Below him were his half-siblings, born of Theraze.

As Amy’s thoughts reached that point, a realization struck her. She had sensed unease even before their departure.

“Wait a moment. If Shirone becomes Kazura’s first prince...”

Reina nodded gravely, as if that were the crux of the matter.

“Yes, Theraze’s children would be pushed down the line of succession. Conversely, Queen Eliza’s influence would grow stronger. The reason a royal envoy came to the magic school to make a grand announcement is likely related to that.”

Amy furrowed her brows.

Come to think of it, Kazura’s internal affairs had been stabilized a decade ago. If the kingdom had made even a slight effort, finding Shirone would have been easy.

Ultimately, the timing of their search for Shirone was undoubtedly entangled in political motives.

Even if they were his biological parents... the fact that their invitation wasn’t solely out of a desire to see him weighed heavily on her heart.

Ugh, why is everything so complicated? I can’t fathom the thoughts of those in power.

Theraze becomes Orkamp’s concubine, and Orkamp becomes Theraze’s consort.

It was an absurd situation, impossible to chart even in a family tree.

While each was lost in thought, the carriage sped along and soon entered the Thorn Mine.

Once a coal mining area, it was named the Thorn Mine due to the sharp stalactites hanging in its caves, a name that

had become its official designation.

Though now abandoned and sealed off, there was a subtle acridness in the air. Yet, to Shirone, it was the nostalgic scent of home.

Seeing Shirone's tense expression soften slightly, Amy took a deep breath of the pungent air.

Upon arriving at Shirone's house, Amy straightened her attire before alighting from the carriage.

It was her first visit to Shirone's home. Moreover, meeting his parents made her naturally cautious.

Of course, she wouldn't make any mistakes, but the situation was undeniably delicate.

Since Shirone's parents were commoners, Amy wasn't quite sure how to behave around them.

If she acted with too much courtesy, they might feel uncomfortable; but if she behaved too casually, she could come across as arrogant.

While Amy was fretting over such thoughts, Reina was already stepping out of the carriage the moment it stopped. Vincent and Olina were waiting outside, having finished preparing for their departure.

While the deputy butler Temuran inspected the carriage, Reina led Shirone over to his parents.

"Hello. Have you been well?"

"Yes, certainly. Thanks to your care, we've been doing just fine."

Vincent and Olina bowed with as much courtesy as they could manage.

Reina paid no particular mind and moved on naturally to the itinerary.

"We'll head north by carriage and cross the border. We should arrive around midnight. Please bear with us until then. From that point, we'll be under the Kazura Kingdom delegation, so there should be no inconvenience during your stay."

“Please don’t worry about us. We’re just sorry that you’re being troubled on account of our son.”

Reina gave a sympathetic smile. Judging by Vincent and Olina’s faces, it was clear they hadn’t slept a wink all night. Even though Temuran must have explained everything several times, it still wouldn’t have felt real to them.

They had raised a child abandoned in a stable as their own for eighteen years, so how could they accept that the boy’s real parents had suddenly appeared?

And not just anyone, he was the child of a foreign king and queen.

It was a blessing for Shirone, but they were only human. How could they not feel hurt?

And it wasn’t as if they could file a custody suit against a king. Their son was being taken from them, and there was nothing they could do.

“Please don’t worry too much. Nothing is confirmed yet. And even if it turns out they truly are his biological parents, Shirone won’t be swayed. He wasn’t when it came to the House Ogent either.”

Caught off guard by how clearly his feelings had been read, Vincent waved his hands in flustered denial.

“Worry? Not at all! This is a wonderful thing for Shirone. But thank you for being so considerate.”

At that moment, a confident voice rang out from the carriage.

“Hello!”

All eyes turned to Amy, and her face turned red. Seeing Reina chatting with Shirone’s parents had made her anxious, and she ended up stepping in at the worst possible moment.

“And you are...?”

Olina’s eyes sparkled with interest. It was the first time Shirone had brought a girl around his age home.

She was a pretty young lady, with clear, honest eyes.

“Ah, yes. My name is Carmis Amy, a friend of Shirone. I’ll be accompanying him to Kazura. Please look kindly upon me.” Amy bowed awkwardly without meaning to. Her confidence in remaining composed in any situation had shattered to pieces.

Of course, that was just her own perception. Vincent and Olina exchanged smiles, whispering to each other that she seemed like a lovely girl.

Shirone still hadn’t said much. Truthfully, he didn’t know what kind of face to put on in front of his parents.

With the House Ogent, he could firmly refuse adoption. But this time, it was his real parents.

On top of that, they were royalty. It wasn’t even a matter of choice anymore, it felt like he was betraying the couple who had raised him.

Sensing his son’s conflicted feelings, Vincent approached him.

“You alright, Shirone? This must’ve been a shock.”

“I’m okay. Father... I’m sorry.”

“Haha! What’s there to be sorry for? Just don’t make any mistakes at the palace and we’ll call it a win. Temuran’s been teaching you plenty, but royal etiquette’s no easy thing.”

Shirone forced a smile.

“Same here. But don’t worry. Amy’s with me, so I’ll be fine.”

Seeing the opportunity, Amy pointed to herself with her thumb.

“Of course! I’ll be by his side, so you don’t need to worry at all.”

Olina smiled warmly.

“Thank you. Now I remember your name. I heard Shirone’s been receiving a lot of help from you.”

Amy swelled with pride. With the tension gone, her stiff lips moved easily.

“I’ve received a lot of help from Shirone too. Please feel free to treat me casually.”

Reina clapped her hands to recapture everyone's attention. The warm atmosphere was nice, but they really had no time to waste.

If they want to reach the border before midnight, they had to move now.

"Well then, let's head out. Deputy butler, please remain at the estate. As soon as we receive a message from Louis, be ready to mobilize."

"Understood. Please have a safe journey."

And with that, the carriage carrying Shirone and his companions departed for Kazura.

It was a forced march.

After spending more than six hours in a rattling carriage, every bone in the body ached. With a schedule of one hour on the road followed by five-minute breaks, there wasn't even time to soothe the throbbing pain in their backs.

And yet, no one complained.

As the border drew nearer, the pain seemed to fade, replaced by a rising tension that settled over them like mist.

For Shirone, this was nothing short of a grand adventure.

Having heard about the tangled affairs of the Kazura royal family, he knew that even with an escort waiting at the border, it was no time to let his guard down. If the Theraze faction were to act on impulse, they might even send assassins.

Chapter 267: Kazura Kingdom (4)

Shirone opened the window and looked outside. They were deep in the woods. Only the torch mounted beside the driver's seat lit the road ahead. The eerie shadows of trees raced in the opposite direction of their path. It was fortunate that the full moon was out, but soon clouds gathered and veiled even that.

Shirone's unease deepened more.

At some point, the carriage began to slow and eventually came to a halt.

The horses snorted and pawed at the ground, their breath loud in the stillness of the night air.

The driver opened the door and whispered.

"Lady Reina, we've arrived at the rendezvous point."

Reina pulled up her hooded cloak. The others followed suit, covering their faces as they stepped out of the carriage.

They had arrived in a vast plain with an open view of the horizon. Judging by the landscape and tracing it in his mind, Shirone guessed they were somewhere near the Plateau of Dawn, north of Tormia.

It struck him as thoroughly calculated. In a wide-open plain like this, assassination attempts would be nearly impossible. Of course, someone could always dig a tunnel, but those thoughts led nowhere.

The actual meeting spot was 300 meters away, where the silhouettes of the Kazura's escort were just barely visible in the distance.

The head butler of the House Ogent, Louis, signaled with his hand.

Reina returned the gesture, and only then did both parties move to meet at the halfway point.

Louis approached, holding a torch, and bowed to Shirone's group.

"Welcome. We've been expecting you."

"Thank you for your work. I heard everything's proceeding smoothly with the entry procedures."

"Yes, we've detected no suspicious activity so far. But we can't afford to lower our guard. Please, come aboard. I'll explain as we go."

Following Louis, the group moved to a large carriage, the same kind Shirone had seen back at Alpheas Magic Academy.

The commander of the escort unit stepped forward and introduced himself.

"I am Ruzan Godin, and I have been assigned to guard the First Prince candidate Shirone. I understand the situation may feel uneasy, but you need not worry. The escort has been assembled from the most elite talents in the kingdom. We will see you to the capital safely. Please, come aboard."

A soldier wearing a silver sword opened the carriage door.

Shirone was struck speechless before he even entered. A glowing crystal orb was embedded in the ceiling, bathing the carriage in bright light as if it were daylight. It was even equipped with beds and a small kitchenette for light meals.

"You are an honored guests, so I apologize if it doesn't meet all expectations. But we'll have you to the capital in no time."

As soon as Shirone stepped in, he lay on the bed. It was a simple act, but the experience felt foreign just because it was inside a moving carriage.

"Ha ha! Amy, this is amazing."

Amy, sitting on the opposite bed, smiled.

"It's called a house-carriage. It's got shock-absorbing mechanisms, so you can travel for ten hours without a

problem. The upkeep is insanely expensive, but that's royalty for you."

Reina added.

"But the speed is bound to be slower. It might actually be safer to arrive quickly. Either way, we need to stay fully prepared."

Amy raised her hand.

"I'll take the first watch. Mages can stay up for a day without issue."

Shirone shook his head.

"No, let's take turns."

"It's fine. You'll be busy as soon as we arrive, so you should rest now while you can."

Even with guards present, caution was essential. Someone had to remain vigilant. In Amy's opinion, she was the most qualified. Having Shirone's parents stay up all night was out of the question.

Reina furrowed her brows in irritation.

"What, you think I'm useless? I can handle at least a Schema! I used to pull all-nighters when I was an apprentice. Let's just take turns. One person tiring out first won't help anyone."

Amy agreed without protest. Vincent and Olina offered to take turns as well, but there was no way an ordinary person could ride a carriage for 24 hours and also keep watch through the night.

"Please rest. If you burn out already, that's a greater risk."

Reluctantly, Vincent and Olina lay down. Fatigue overtook them quickly, and they fell asleep.

The last bed would be shared among the three in shifts.

Reina and Amy could sleep together, but Shirone couldn't sleep in the same bed with them, so he leaned against the wall and tried to rest.

Time passed.

Though he had fallen asleep while Reina was on watch, Amy eventually approached and gently shook him awake.

"Shirone, if you're still tired, I can take over."

Shirone opened his eyes immediately, without even a stir. Her words meant four hours had passed and it's her turn to take over.

His mind was clear, and his body felt light. He understood now why nobles paid a fortune for these luxurious carriages.

"No, I'm fine. You should rest. Nothing happened, right?"

"Yes. It's almost too quiet that it's unsettling. I was hoping to overhear some chatter from the guards, but they're cautious about Schema, so they haven't said a word."

Shirone nodded and moved to the center of the carriage.

"Thanks, Amy."

"No need to thank me."

Amy crawled toward Reina to get a bit of sleep. But just as she was about to lie down, a thought struck her. She turned her head toward Shirone, still lying face-down.

Shirone chuckled at her cat-like posture.

"What is it? Can't sleep?"

"Well, that too..."

Amy trailed off.

There was something that had been bothering her ever since the Kazura's envoys appeared.

"Shirone, if you really become royalty..."

She hesitated, then finally asked.

"You probably won't study magic anymore, right?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you'll be the First Prince. You'll have to go through royal training. You won't have time to learn magic anymore."

Shirone gave a faint laugh.

So that's what had been on her mind?

Come to think of it, he'd been so overwhelmed, he hadn't really considered how others were feeling.

"Amy, I'm not going to become a prince."

Amy's eyes widened.

“What do you mean? Don’t tell me... you’re planning to run away?”

“If that’s the last resort, then yes, I will. But I’ll try to persuade them first. Even if they’re the ones who gave birth to me, to me, I only have two parents. I’m not going to the capital to become the heir. I’m going to tell them that. I’ll come back home and I’ll return to magic school. Also...”

He hesitated for a moment, then gathered his courage and said.

“I’ll keep the promise I made to you.”

“Shirone...”

Amy was touched, but at the same time, worried.

Up until now, Shirone had always lived true to his beliefs, and it had worked out. But this time, his opponent was different.

Royalty didn’t behave like ordinary people, they were neither rational nor emotional.

They were intuitive beings.

Those who rule the world don’t weigh options, they simply decide. And when a decision is made at a royal level, that simple choice can push history forward or drag it back.

Trying to change such a mindset with words was almost impossible.

And yet, Amy said nothing more.

She wanted the lingering warmth of Shirone’s final words to remain in the air, held inside the quiet of the carriage for as long as possible.

“See you later, Shirone.”

Amy lay down beside Reina and drifted into a light sleep.

Reina gently roused everyone with a whisper.

“Wake up. I think we’ve arrived at the royal capital.”

Rubbing her drowsy eyes, Amy sat up. She peeked through a gap in the window, it was still before dawn.

But the carriage no longer rocked, and the clatter of hooves on what sounded like paved stone echoed clearly.

Shirone opened the window and looked out. Though it was too dark to see clearly, buildings passed by as a proof they had entered the city. Yet not a single light was lit in any home.

A mounted soldier approached and spoke to Shirone.

"My apologies, sir. We're on night patrol. You may not look outside. I'll close the window."

The guard shut the window with a firm snap.

Clicking his tongue, Shirone turned around. Reina and Amy both looked equally baffled.

Amy pouted.

"Hmph! Now that we're in the capital, they act like completely different people."

"We can't jump to conclusions. That's the first time he's spoken to us. We should be cautious in our judgment."

Shirone agreed with her way of thinking.

From here on, it was a tightrope walk. Even the smallest misunderstanding or mistake could place them all in danger. By the time they entered the inner city, the sky had begun to lighten. A soldier knocked on the carriage door and informed them they were now free to look outside.

Shirone felt the unfamiliarity of a foreign land. In Kazura, it seemed even glancing out at night was restricted, possibly even considered spying.

It's definitely more rigid than Tormia. I'll have to stay alert at all times.

The carriage passed over a wide moat that surrounded the capital and entered the inner keep.

Kazura's royal castle wasn't as breathtaking as a palace from Heaven, but its sheer scale was overwhelming.

Halfway across the bridge, a fanfare rang out.

A military band appeared, and lower-ranking officials from the castle stepped out, clapping in welcome.

Shirone turned to Reina in surprise.

"What's going on?"

"Exactly. I didn't expect such an open welcome."

Reina, too, found the reception suspicious. Given that Kazura had grown under Theraze's protection, Shirone was undoubtedly a thorn in the side of her faction. Yet there was no assassination attempt, not even any incident. And now this level of welcome...

Two possibilities came to mind.

Either King Orkamp was staking everything on Shirone's arrival, or Theraze's camp didn't care enough to intervene. Both were plausible, so it was impossible to determine which was true.

She glanced at Shirone, who remained calm.

Despite the tension he must have felt, the unease from their departure had completely disappeared. It was this composure in moments of pressure that Reina so admired in him.

It had been the same within the House Ogent. In daily life, he was as gentle and cheerful as any other boy his age, but when danger struck, he became almost unnervingly composed.

Then again... he's now the most promising aspiring mage in the kingdom.

Though his core hadn't changed, everything surrounding Shirone had. After reading about him in Spirit magazine, Reina had asked a mage she knew what Unlocker meant. It was said to be the highest mental state a human could attain.

Knowing that, she could no longer see Shirone as just a child.

Kazura Castle spanned nearly twenty thousand pyeong, housing over a thousand permanent residents.

Rather than extravagance, its design emphasized defense. Perhaps for that reason, its entrance was narrower than most castles.

But once inside, a grand hall unfolded, enough to make anyone believe they had truly arrived at a royal palace.

They passed a red carpet lined with high-ranking officials standing in strict hierarchical order. At the top of the staircase sat Orkamp IV on his throne.

Though etiquette dictated they not look directly at the king, Shirone's party could not tear their eyes away.

He had the same golden hair as Shirone, and his features were so elegant it was hard to believe he ruled an entire nation. Yet the aura emanating from him was far from ordinary.

A king may be human like any other, but someone who holds the lives of millions carries something undeniably different.

That man...

Looking at Orkamp and Shirone side by side, the blood relation was almost undeniable.

They didn't look unnaturally alike, but considering they'd been apart for 18 years, their differences could easily be attributed to environment.

Shirone and the others carried out the formal greetings according to protocol.

But Orkamp made no response. He simply stared, as if trying to see through Shirone's very soul.

"Raise your head."

Shirone looked into Orkamp's eyes.

The king's gaze pierced through him, stirring something deep in his heart. It was an overwhelming presence that neither swordsman nor mage could exude.

Yet Shirone quickly regained his composure. He had reached a mental clarity that could not be swayed by another's will.

Orkamp's eyes lit up, as if surprised.

Is he really my son...?

Chapter 268: Kazura Kingdom (5)

Orkamp raised his hand in welcome.

“You must be weary from your long journey. Shirone, you understand the reason you’ve been summoned here, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. We’ll discuss the details in a more private setting later. It must have been a difficult trip, give them rooms and serve them a meal.”

The head butler overseeing the affairs of the royal palace bowed deeply.

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Shirone lifted his gaze again and looked at Orkamp.

It was their first meeting as father and son in eighteen years. Yet not a single personal word came from him.

Was this what it meant to be a king? That one had to conceal even personal feelings beneath the weight of the crown?

Perhaps he truly felt nothing for the son he had abandoned. After all, if he had really loved his child, no obstacle would have justified casting him away.

But he had abandoned him and so many years had passed. Whatever reason he had now for calling Shirone back, perhaps it wasn’t even necessary.

With hollow hearts, Shirone and his party followed the head butler out of the grand hall.

The Great Chamber, designated for guests, consisted of rooms shared by two.

Vincent and Olina were placed in one room, while Amy and Reina shared another.

But the head butler made no mention of Shirone's room.
"Lord Shirone will stay in the inner quarters with the royal family."

Amy stepped forward, visibly alarmed.

"We weren't told about this, right?"

To be separated in the royal palace where hidden plots might lurk was a dangerous proposition.

But the head butler looked at Amy as though she were the odd one.

"Why, of course. Lord Shirone is to become a member of the royal family."

"That hasn't been officially decided yet."

The head butler frowned.

Such matters were far above the knowledge of a lowly servant.

According to what he'd heard, the verification of the First Prince's identity was mere formality. So he don't know why actually they doing this.

Besides, wasn't Shirone a commoner? If such a blessing had been granted to him, he'd have fallen to his knees in gratitude to the gods.

Yet these people didn't show even a hint of joy. If anything, they seemed burdened and distant.

"What's going on here?"

Administrative Officer Ordoss approached.

The head butler quickly bowed and explained the party's discontent.

Though Ordoss found it displeasing, he didn't consider the situation out of the ordinary. Surely, if they had any sense, they would have familiarized themselves with Kazura's political climate beforehand.

Ordoss turned to Shirone and said.

"There is protocol in the royal palace. Even changing the room of a royal family member can cause considerable uproar. But if you are that uncomfortable, I will submit a request for reconsideration."

Not wanting to cause trouble immediately upon entering the palace, Shirone shook his head.

Though he remained wary of potential dangers, Shirone still wanted to believe that his birth parents would not try to harm him.

If even that trust proved false... then what reason was there to stay here, even if they did share the same blood?

"Understood. I'll go to the inner quarters. But we'll be able to see each other during mealtimes, right?"

Ordoss shook his head.

"Meals will be taken separately. Commoners are not permitted to dine with the royal family."

Shirone's expression hardened.

Vincent and Olina were not just some caretakers, they were the only parents he had ever known, and they had raised him for eighteen years.

Even if royal blood flowed in his veins, there wasn't a single part of him that wished to deny that truth.

Come to think of it, not once had anyone from Kazura expressed gratitude to Vincent and Olina.

Perhaps they thought they hadn't abandoned their child, only entrusted him temporarily to others.

Just as a vassal follows the king's orders, Vincent and Olina's devotion was being treated as a given.

That was something Shirone could never accept.

If his parents were to be slighted in such a way, he'd rather return home this very instant.

"That won't do. Please allow them to dine with me."

"S-Shirone... It's all right."

Vincent said with a thoughtful face.

Having spent his life under the heel of nobles, he knew how dangerous Shirone's request truly was.

But Shirone did not back down.

If there was going to be conflict, better it come now when it could still be used to make a firm stand.

“No. If they can’t attend, then I won’t either. I insist my parents join me at the royal table.”

Ordoss pressed his lips together in thought.

What an impudent child. Did he think that being named the First Prince entitled him to everything already?

Yes, he would become a prince, but that didn’t mean the power structure would shift.

After all, the current First Prince, a child of Theraze, already resided in the palace.

The more Ordoss considered it, the more perplexed he became.

Despite the wide announcement of Eliza’s biological son returning, there had been no movement from Theraze’s faction.

Perhaps they were confident, or perhaps it was an unspoken signal to their operatives within Kazura to act accordingly.

The Empress’s power was immense. Until now, no one had dared form an opposing faction. But now was the time to choose sides carefully.

Still, Ordoss remained skeptical.

Shirone might have made a name for himself at a magic school, but that meant little when compared to the sheer might of Theraze’s children.

“I understand Lord Shirone’s sentiment, but this is not something I can decide. It violates court protocol and could escalate into a national issue. I must respectfully suggest you speak with His Majesty directly.”

Shirone nodded without hesitation.

“Fine. I’ll speak to him myself.”

“Then let us go. I’ll escort you to the inner chambers.”

As he followed Ordoss, Shirone glanced back.

“I’ll be back. See you all soon.”

Reina watched Shirone’s figure recede.

Was he really planning to bring Vincent and Olina to dine at the royal table?

In monarchies, royal etiquette outranked even national law. A perceived insult to the king's authority could shake an entire nation.

This decision, no matter how it unfolded, was bound to bring trouble.

Olina clutched Reina's sleeve and pleaded.

"We're truly all right. I think someone needs to stop Shirone. I want say something myself, but I don't even know where to begin..."

It wasn't just a matter of Olina's lack of education.

Even Reina couldn't understand what exactly was going through Shirone's mind.

"That's odd. He's not the type to be so stubborn."

"Shirone's already begun his fight."

Amy said, prompting Reina to turn to her.

"A fight?"

Amy recalled the conversation she'd had with Shirone.

"Shirone came to the palace because he wanted to meet his birth parents. But he has no interest in succession or becoming a prince. He plans to return to magic school and live with his family. And by family, I mean the two of you here. That's why he won't back down. If he concedes now, he'll be dragged around until the very end. The royal dining table is his first battleground, where he's seizing strategic control."

"My son..."

Olina's eyes welled with tears.

What pitiful parents they were. In such a moment, rather than protecting their son, they were relying on his strength instead.

Truthfully, she wanted to fight too. Regardless of kingship or bloodline, she wanted to look that man in the eye and claim that he was her son because she raised him.

But she couldn't, not because she lacked courage.

It was because they were dealing with royalty. And Shirone... was on the verge of becoming a prince of a country.

Vincent wrapped an arm around Olina's shoulder and said gently,

"Let's trust him. He's our son, a deep-thinking boy. All we have to do is follow his lead."

Olina wiped her tears and nodded.

Theraze's Bloodline (1)

Shirone entered the royal family's inner chambers.

It was like stepping into another castle entirely, vastly different from everything he had seen so far.

The walls were adorned with brilliant golden wallpaper and portraits of royalty, while the floor was layered with luxurious carpets.

He made his way toward Orkamp's chambers, which were located at the farthest end of the palace, making them easy to find.

When he entered the study, he found Orkamp sitting at his desk, deep in thought. It wasn't until a considerable moment had passed that the king realized Shirone had arrived and rose from his seat.

"You're here?"

Though his tone was more emotional than in the Grand Hall, the initial awkwardness still lingered.

"Come with me. Your mother is waiting."

His mother, Orkamp Eliza, Queen of Kazura. Orkamp said nothing more and did not speak a single word during the walk. Shirone, too tense to notice the silence, simply followed. At last, the moment had come to meet the woman who had given him life.

Eliza's room could only be described as the most extravagant and opulent space in the entire Kazura Kingdom. A bed large enough for ten lay in the center, and upon it sat a woman even paler than the snow-white sheets. A queen need not be beautiful, but here she was. And her large eyes brimmed with sorrow.

"Ah..."

Overcome with emotion, Eliza found herself unable to speak.

She rose from the bed and, abandoning all rehearsed words, pulled Shirone into her embrace.

Shirone simply stood there. He felt he should return her embrace, yet for some reason, he could not move a single finger.

She smelled lovely. An elegant, refined scent he had never encountered before. The fragrance of royalty.

But it was not Olina's scent.

"My son... You've finally come. I'm so sorry... Please forgive your mother!"

Eliza's tearful voice tightened Shirone's throat.

There had been a time in his childhood when he resented the parents who had abandoned him. Yet Vincent and Olina had filled that emptiness of blood with overwhelming love.

That's why he now felt guilty, for being unable to speak kindly to Eliza.

"Outside... there are parents who raised me."

Eliza stepped back and looked into his face.

What a beautiful boy. This, too, was the noble blood of herself and Orkamp.

"Yes... but that's no longer the case. I am your mother now. You will become the First Prince and inherit the kingdom. You needn't worry about anything, I will protect you from now on."

Shirone felt a weight press on his chest.

He didn't yet know what the emotion was that stirred his anger, but for the first time, he regretted coming here.

"I want to dine with them. I understand that it may go against royal protocol, but I believe they deserve to be treated with that level of respect."

Eliza looked puzzled and glanced toward her husband.

Orkamp, too, was disappointed by Shirone's words. Was he truly fit to be heir to the throne, if he placed so much importance on a couple of woodland caretakers?

He momentarily questioned Shirone's qualifications but quickly shook the thought away.

If he bore Orkamp's blood, then he couldn't be unworthy.

It was only a matter of upbringing, he had not yet awakened to the nature of a sovereign.

Shirone must become the First Prince. That was the only way to stand against Theraze's growing power.

Annoyance flickered across Orkamp's face as he spoke.

"Must you insist? Meals are traditionally shared among family. I don't like the idea of outsiders intruding. I'll see that they're treated well, separately."

Shirone shook his head firmly, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Eliza.

So this was what it truly meant? That a royal dining tradition held more value than the people who raised him with devotion? Was that why they had discarded him like refuse the moment the kingdom was at risk?

Eliza read the disappointment and despair in his eyes and hurried to revise her thinking. She had agreed when Shirone was sent away, but it had been entirely for Orkamp's sake. What mother in this world would ever want to abandon her child? She had been haunted by guilt her whole life. If Shirone asked for something now, she would give it without hesitation.

"If that's what you want, then so be it. They raised you, of course they deserve at least that much. Surely, that my son wishes it."

Moved by her own words, Eliza once again embraced Shirone as emotion overwhelmed her.

Chapter 269: Theraze's Bloodline (2)

Surprisingly, permission was granted without resistance, but Shirone had expected this outcome from the beginning. Those who have power are free. It had been the same when the House Ogent risked their lives to relocate the Grand Library.

The butlers meticulously sorted books according to strict guidelines, yet the nobles didn't care in the slightest whether the books were lost or not.

Eliza held Shirone tightly, repeating something over and over, but while lost in thought, Shirone heard none of it. Suddenly, Eliza remembered something and sprang to her feet.

"This won't do. I can't dine with my son for the first time dressed like this. Darling, I'm going to change."

"Do so."

Leaving Shirone behind, Eliza headed for the dressing room, followed in line by her maids.

To Shirone, it seemed odd to change clothes just to eat. But just as noble parties required a dress code, for royalty, choosing attire seemed as significant as reuniting with a son after eighteen years.

Once Eliza had left, only Orkamp and Shirone remained. An awkward silence stretched between them, unbroken by any words. Whether he had planned to speak all along or couldn't bear the silence any longer, Orkamp finally broke it.

"Shirone... that's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes. It was given to me by my parents."

Shirone emphasized that it was the name given by his parents. Orkamp might have once given him a name too,

but Shirone had no intention of discarding the name he had grown up with.

"I see. It's a good name."

Contrary to expectation, Orkamp did not say much else.

It occurred to Shirone that perhaps no name had ever been given to him at all. That maybe, from the moment he was growing in the womb, they had already decided to abandon him.

"Do you resent me?"

"I did when I was younger. But now..."

Shirone stopped himself from saying more. To say he was grateful to have been born as Vincent's son instead would have been too cruel.

Reading Shirone's emotion with his usual sharp intuition, Orkamp offered a bitter smile.

"So not anymore, then."

"Well..."

"I understand. Being royalty may seem glamorous, but it's not a pleasant place to be. There are too many responsibilities, too many things one must give up."

"Like giving up on me, you mean."

Shirone's pointed question startled Orkamp, but he quickly composed himself and returned to a calm demeanor.

"I'm sorry... for not finding you."

Shirone shook his head, cutting him off.

He didn't want to hear it.

Or rather, he did, but he knew the words that would come from Orkamp's mouth would not be the ones he longed for. He was certain of that.

"It's fine. You found me now, after all."

Orkamp could feel Shirone's extraordinary nature in his very presence. Though he had lived eighteen years as a commoner, he showed no sign of nervousness even within the palace of a foreign kingdom. He had stood before both king and queen and insisted on his request with an unshakable will.

“Indeed... perhaps blood does not thin with time?”

Concluding as much, Orkamp turned toward his study to proceed with the next steps. But then, remembering that Shirone would be left alone, he paused and turned back.

“Dinner is in thirty minutes. Will you stay here?”

Shirone shook his head. He felt like he might suffocate if he stayed in that room a minute longer.

“No. I’d like to step outside. May I look around the palace?”

This request came with no ulterior motive. For a commoner or even a noble, to be invited to the royal palace was a tremendous honor. Shirone didn’t care about prestige, but it was a rare chance to satisfy his childhood curiosity.

Orkamp nodded with ease.

“Of course. You may look around wherever you like. This is your home now.”

Shirone still intended to return to the magic school. But it was too soon to mention that now, so he simply expressed gratitude and stepped out of the room.

With a flutter in his chest, he walked the corridor. Where should he begin? The armory, the bakery, the chapel, anywhere would do. But what interested him most was the gallery of artworks.

As he reached the corridor’s corner, he spotted an elderly butler and approached to ask directions. But before he could speak, the butler bowed first.

“Lord Shirone, someone is here to see you.”

Shirone’s mood soured instantly.

Under normal circumstances, he would have complied without protest. But having grown weary of the royal family’s high-handedness and self-centered mindset, this interruption displeased him.

“Later. I’d like to be alone for now. His Majesty said I was free to go anywhere until dinner.”

He didn’t know the butler’s rank, but Shirone made no attempt to hide his displeasure. He had already spoken his

mind before the king, so there was no reason to cower before a mere butler.

However, the mysterious butler smiled with a sly expression, as if certain Shirone would comply.

“Of course, you may. But I believe it would be in your best interest to meet this person.”

There was something unsettling in his smile. Shirone forced down his irritation and composed himself. This was a veiled threat. That alone made him curious. Why such urgency before the dinner hour?

“Who is it?”

A sharp glint flickered through the butler’s eyes.

“Lord Theraze Zion. The First Prince of Kazura. At least, for now.”

He emphasized the phrase “for now”. It was meant to imply that the title of First Prince might soon pass to Shirone, but it carried a tone that suggested quite the opposite.

At the mention of Zion, Shirone grew cautious. The Theraze faction was the most dangerous element within the palace. And now, its core had requested a private meeting.

Even Shirone thought it wise to meet him sooner rather than later. Understanding one’s opponent was key to anticipating their moves. Zion must have thought the same, thus sending the butler.

“All right. I’ll meet him.”

“An excellent decision, my lord. This way, please.”

The butler led Shirone toward the eastern wing of the inner palace.

This section housed the royal apartments. Though smaller in scale than the inner chamber where Orkamp resided, it was no less lavish.

In the central hall dividing the wings stood a towering statue of a lion, from which four corridors extended to the north, south, east, and west.

After advancing twenty meters to the east, Shirone stood before a golden-adorned door. When the butler opened it

from the outside, a garden of white marble flooring came into view.

Shirone paused at the threshold to scan the interior.

The garden was beautiful, yet it was also the perfect place to orchestrate something sinister. Though it was winter, the scenery was touched with tropical flair, complete with palm trees reminiscent of the southern isles.

At a table in the center, a pair of siblings younger than Shirone sat sipping tea. On the floor, a sleek black cat and a fluffy white one playfully wrestled.

“Lord Zion, I’ve brought Lord Shirone.”

Zion, who had been watching the cats play, raised his head slightly without turning his gaze.

“Let him in.”

At the command, the butler gave Shirone a mocking smile and gestured him forward.

Chin held high, back straight, Shirone walked in with confidence.

To show weakness from the outset would render any strategy useless. The sound of the butler closing the door behind him was oddly unsettling.

As Shirone approached the table, he disregarded manners and looked directly into the faces of the siblings with a piercing gaze.

So these are...

Theraze Zion and Theraze Uorin.

The current First Prince and Princess of Kazura.

Though they were Orkamp’s children, they bore their mother Theraze’s surname. The reason was simple, Orkamp had lost in the power struggle of their political marriage.

Public opinion referred to it as Orkamp’s humiliation.

Zion finally turned his head to meet Shirone’s eyes. Perhaps amused by Shirone’s stern expression, he let out a teasing laugh.

“Ha! No need to be so tense. I’m not going to bite you.”

Shirone didn't know what Empress Theraze looked like, but if one were to remove Orkamp's features from Zion's face, one might get a faint idea. With cold silver hair, deep double eyelids, and a sharp, feline jawline, he was a handsome youth. That alone hinted at Theraze's legendary beauty. Uorin greeted Shirone with a smile.

"Hello, I'm Uorin. You're a mage, right? I saw you in that magazine."

The white cat leapt onto Uorin's lap. Shirone found himself unable to look away from the fourteen-year-old girl petting the cat.

If Zion's face offered clues to Theraze's appearance, Uorin seemed to embody her spirit entirely.

She resembled Theraze even more than Zion. No, more accurately, it seemed there was almost none of Orkamp's blood in her.

She was a stunning girl, and her beauty carried with it a kind of ethereal, spiritual aura.

Shirone had felt something similar once before when he first encountered Ikhael in Heaven. Never had he thought he'd feel such a thing from another human being.

Uorin tilted her head slightly and looked up at Shirone with uncertain eyes.

"W-Why are you looking at me like that? We'll be family in a few days, and that kind of gaze makes me uncomfortable."

Shirone's face flushed red.

"No, I didn't mean it like that..."

As if nothing had happened, Uorin burst into laughter.

"Hohoho! I'm just joking! I heard you were eighteen, but you're really innocent, aren't you? Come on, sit over here."

Steeling himself, Shirone took the seat Uorin had offered. He had nearly lost control of the conversation, but it was only just beginning.

A servant brought out tea, and the real conversation commenced.

Contrary to Shirone's expectation of a tense psychological battle, Zion seemed unusually laid-back.

He could afford to be still looking down on Shirone.

"If you're not an idiot, then you understand how things work around here. You know the weight of the name Theraze. I called you here to end things cleanly. Whatever my father's intentions were, you'll never become king. So don't go walking around with your nose in the air."

To directly urge a First Prince candidate to give up was as good as publicly declaring his own bid for the throne.

Shirone, who had read countless history books, was all too familiar with how bloody royal succession wars unfolded.

But for once, he was grateful for Zion's directness. After all, he had never had any interest in royal authority.

"Don't worry. I'm only here because I was invited. Once this is over, I'm going home. I have no desire to live here or become king."

"Hahaha! You talk big. That's exactly what the cunning types say before stabbing you in the back. Just like a dirty little mage. Ah wait! You're not even a mage yet, are you? Just an aspiring one."

Uorin scolded him.

"Zion, don't be so mean. Shirone had a tough childhood. For a commoner to enter the magic school is already amazing. And now he's even being recognized as a promising talent."

Unlike Zion, Uorin was clearly friendly toward Shirone.

But to Shirone, her apparent kindness felt more dangerous than Zion's open hostility.

She was Theraze's daughter, after all. There was no reason for her to be nice to him.

Uorin beamed.

"You still seem wary of us, Shirone. That's all Zion's fault. Oh, can I call you 'brother'?"

Shirone was still trying to adjust to the atmosphere.

The Theraze siblings were like heaven and hell, their personalities were completely opposite. Trying to engage

with both at once made his head spin.

“Well, nothing’s been officially decided yet... but I guess it’s fine?”

“Oh, come on. I’ll just call you brother, then. You are older than me, after all. By the way, can you do magic tricks?”

“Magic? Uh, the basics, yeah.”

Uorin clapped her hands with delight.

“Wow! Awesome! You have to show me later! Magic is always so cool. How can fire come out of your hands like that?”

A strange feeling began to take hold of Shirone.

There didn’t seem to be anything calculated in Uorin’s demeanor. She might just be a genuinely sweet, bright girl. But she wasn’t some backwoods maiden, she was the daughter of the Empress. If anything, her intelligence was likely far beyond average.

Then, Shirone noticed something both Zion and Uorin shared.

Neither of them feared anything.

Zion’s blatant hostility, Uorin’s oddly warm demeanor, they were only possible because they carried the power of Theraze behind them.

Chapter 270: Theraze's Bloodline (3)

Uorin glanced at the wall clock, then hurriedly set the cat down and stood up.

"Oh? It's time to eat. Come on, brother, let's go."

Setting down his teacup, Zion also rose from his seat and leaned close to Shirone's face.

"I don't know what you were thinking coming here, but don't expect too much. Unless you want to get hurt."

Shirone didn't even snort in response.

"Let me make it clear, I don't expect anything. I only came here because I wanted to meet my biological parents."

"Hah! Biological parents? Sure, that's important. But do you know? If someone has abandoned their child once, what makes you think they won't do it again?"

Shirone frowned, unable to understand.

"What are you talking about?"

"Pathetic. In the face of power, bloodline means nothing. You don't actually believe your father suddenly wanted to find you for no reason, do you?"

Shirone had already assumed there was some hidden motive behind being summoned after eighteen years. But hearing it outright from Zion struck him harder than expected.

Uorin patted Zion on the shoulder.

"Come on! I said we're going to be late. If we're late, we'll get scolded."

Zion shot one last mocking glare at Shirone before letting his little sister drag him out of the room.

Only once they had exited and left Shirone behind did Zion glance back with a click of his tongue.

“Tch. What a damn unpleasant guy. Especially that look in his eyes, I hate it. It must be from living a lowly life. He should be trembling, and yet he dares to talk back like that.” Uorin tried to soothe her brother.

“Don’t be so mean. I’m happy I have a mage brother now. It’s not like he’s going to be your rival anyway. As long as Mother’s here, Kazura belongs to you.”

“As if I didn’t know that? It’s just that everything he does rubs me the wrong way. I don’t even want to call that man ‘Father’. Orkamp, that bastard. When I become king, I’ll get rid of him.”

Uorin pouted her lips.

In any country, a son talking about killing his father was considered an atrocity. Even more so in the royal palace. If these words leaked out, the entire kingdom would be thrown into chaos.

But Uorin’s response ended there.

After all, they were Theraze’s children.

The dishes laid out on the royal banquet table were so extravagant that not even a commoner dying in a dream of indulgence could have imagined them.

Shirone thought it was excessive to spend this much on something as ordinary as daily meals, but in truth, for the royal family, indulgence was a virtue even if no one actually partook.

A royal must surpass a noble in every detail, no matter how small.

As long as nobles flaunted their luxuries, the monarchy’s absurd and reckless extravagance would remain uncorrected.

Shirone’s group was seated at the far end of the table.

Vincent and Olina, as well as Reina and Amy, all looked pale. None of them had actually believed they would be invited to the king’s table.

It might even be the first time in Kazura's hundred-year history?

The greater the honor, the heavier the weight, and now they could barely tell where the food was going as they swallowed.

The atmosphere at the table was frigid.

Orkamp's pride was wounded by the breach of protocol.

Both Shirone and Zion were still sour from their earlier exchange in the room.

Only Eliza seemed to be in good spirits, pleased with the outfit she had chosen from her dressing room. She wore a dress trimmed in sable fur, with diamonds as her accessories.

Pecking at her food as though trying to deconstruct it molecule by molecule, Eliza suddenly set down her utensils and smiled radiantly.

"We must prepare a room for Shirone, something grand and splendid. With his blond hair, navy blue formalwear would suit him. Ah, and he'll need a carriage. Things will be quite hectic for a while."

Olina's face darkened. Not a single one of those things had she been able to give Shirone.

Shirone, as if making up his mind, spoke firmly.

"I don't need any of that. What my parents have done for me until now is more than enough."

"Oh, how frugal our son is. But as royalty, appearances must be upheld. You can't live as you once did. Let's see... Yes, gold suits you. Or perhaps sapphire?"

"Gold, jewels, none of that is what matters. The people here raised me with everything they had. That kind of love... I wouldn't find it anywhere else."

Eliza frowned. What could possibly be more important than gold and jewels? It was the royal family's duty to enjoy the most luxurious riches in the kingdom, it's not a right, but an obligation.

To her, it was her role to teach the soon-to-be First Prince the duties of royalty, yet here he was reciting sentimentality about a nursemaid's love.

No. Perhaps Shirone was simply too emotional. That must be why he couldn't bring himself to say he would leave those people behind and live a better life.

Eliza turned to face Shirone's parents.

"You must be Vincent, yes?"

Vincent hastily set down his utensils.

"Ah, yes! I am Arian Vincent!"

"You shall be properly compensated. You cared for our son well, and you deserve a reward. Money would weigh too heavily... Dear, what do you think about granting them some land in the Cossent region?"

Orkamp responded with disinterest.

"That sounds fine."

Shirone's frustration exploded. He had come to the capital as they wished. Vincent and Olina were gripped by anxiety at the thought of losing their son. In such a situation, the only gift they could receive was the pride of having raised their child well.

All Shirone had wanted was a single word of thanks from these exalted beings bearing the name of royalty. Was it really so hard to say?

"Wait. Why do you keep talking like that? They raised me for eighteen years. They taught me how to live in place of my birth parents, from when I was a child until now."

Eliza's face twisted. Yes, she regretted abandoning him. But now he kept taking the side of such vulgar commoners, and it grated on her nerves.

"Is the compensation too little? Then how about a small castle along with the land..."

Shirone's voice rose.

"That's not what I meant! Why can't you just say thank you even once?"

Eliza wore a blank expression. For a moment, she wondered if Shirone wasn't in his right mind. Why should royalty thank commoners?

Zion, visibly uncomfortable, spoke up.

"What are you doing, disgracing yourself? Do you think this is some commoner's table you grew up with?"

Shirone glared at Zion. Rage boiled inside, but the prince's words weren't entirely off. If he pushed harder here, things could quickly spiral out of control.

Uorin quickly stepped in to defuse the situation.

"Oh, come on. It just brother is too kind, that's all. I think he values emotion over material things. So to him, compensation that doesn't convey feeling is just a transaction between objects."

At that moment, Shirone found Uorin truly endearing. She had voiced exactly what he had wanted to say, and he couldn't be more grateful.

Catching his gaze, Uorin winked. Then she turned to Vincent and Olina.

"I'm sorry for pushing you so hard. And thank you for raising my big brother so wonderfully."

"N-Not at all... It was nothing..."

Vincent stammered in embarrassment. Never in his life had he imagined receiving words of gratitude from royalty.

Shirone's expression softened. And he began to feel a little guilty for perhaps misjudging Uorin all this time.

Reina, however, was stunned. Uorin was a princess of the Theraze. And in the Kashan Empire, the title of emperor had always been passed down through women bearing that family name.

Zion, as a national king, had his limits. But for Uorin, if she overcame a few competitors, she could one day become empress of the Kashan Empire and rule the entire continent. Politically, it was clear that her power far surpassed that of anyone in Kazura.

It was a shocking event for someone of such standing to express gratitude to commoners. Viewed from another angle, it was a display of imperial charisma in its purest form.

Just as Reina expected, Uorin's words held enormous weight. Having favored Vincent and Olina, Orkamp could no longer withhold his support.

"Perhaps I've been too entrenched in the royal perspective. We are indeed grateful to you both."

Vincent bowed deeply once more.

"N-No... We only did what anyone would."

But in Olina's eyes, a faint trace of anger flickered. A woman's intuition could tell, Uorin's gratitude had been sincere, but Orkamp's was not.

She may not have given birth to Shirone, but after raising him for eighteen years, the son she had come to love was one whose bond had become thicker than blood.

If Shirone could be happy, they could let him go even if he said he wanted to leave with his birth parents. And yet, even with the appearance of these perfect parents who lacked nothing in the world, Olina's heart felt far from content.

"We don't need any money. All we want is for Shirone to live a happy life."

Shirone turned to Olina in surprise.

Her voice, unlike before when she had been intimidated by the royal presence, now carried a calm but firm undertone of anger.

Eliza, ever attuned to subtle shifts in emotion, didn't miss the nuance. Her expression hardened. She could overlook this tone from Shirone, but she could not forgive a mere nursemaid daring to speak so brazenly.

Still, she could not cast them out on the spot. Uorin's earlier statement continued to carry weight.

From Eliza's perspective, Theraze was a detestable woman who had stolen her husband. But she wasn't foolish enough

to act rashly against such overwhelming power. All she could do now was deliver veiled insults, little barbs of passive revenge.

“Regardless, please accept it. I wouldn’t want you to regret it later.”

Olina neither nodded nor shook her head. She simply lowered her gaze, but her eyes never strayed from Eliza’s. Sensing things were headed in a dangerous direction, Shirone decided it was time to bring out the main point.

“Actually, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Eliza, perhaps also sensing the need to change the atmosphere, switched her tone with an uncomfortably quick smile.

“Yes, tell me anything, dear. Your mother will grant whatever you ask.”

Olina grew even more unsettled. Eliza’s words dripped with condescension, as if to say, no matter what kind of mother you pretend to be, Shirone is a royalty.

“I have no intention of becoming Kazura’s heir. I already told Zion that. So please allow me to stay for a short while and then return to Tormia.”

Every utensil at the table came to a halt. Orkamp’s face darkened, and Eliza sat in stunned silence, mouth agape.

“What are you saying, Shirone? This is your home now. There’s no need to return to such a shabby place.”

“I want to go back. No, at the very least, please let me graduate from my current school.”

Shirone played the magic school card first. Truthfully, he wanted to leave the palace right then, but doing so might endanger his family.

“No! That is absolutely unacceptable! You are a prince of royal blood! There are magic schools here in Kazura! I will personally introduce you to the best instructors.”

“I’m taking my graduation exam next year. It’s the most important time for me right now. Just give me one year.”

Of course, he had no intention of returning after that year. Once he escaped the palace safely, he planned to finish school and flee with his parents.

Once again, Uorin stepped in to support Shirone.

"I understand how brother feels. He must have friends at school. And networking is important too."

"Networking with nobles? You need to associate with royalty."

Eliza was adamant. How could she possibly send away the son she had only just recovered? Worse yet was the unbearable sting to her pride that lesser people might be seen as a better parents.

Orkamp, after a long pause, finally spoke.

"We will consider it."

"My dear!"

Eliza rebuked sharply, but sensing the cold aura in her husband's eyes, she quickly fell silent.

Even Orkamp thought it unacceptable to leave his son in the hands of commoners. It was a shame to the royal family. But with Theraze's children present, trying to force Shirone to stay could provoke suspicion and defiance from her faction.

Only then did Reina finally grasp Shirone's strategy.

If the Theraze faction posed the greatest threat, then they also held the greatest power. Rather than oppose it, Shirone intended to use it to his advantage.

He really is clever.

At first, she had worried he was acting impulsively, but Shirone wasn't the kind to throw himself into a losing battle. Inviting his parents to the royal table, choosing this exact moment to declare his wish to leave, he did it all knowing that Theraze's children were in the room.

Ultimately, Orkamp had no choice but to retreat a step.

"Shirone, all evidence suggests that you are my son. And I believe it as well. But the verification has not yet been completed."

He was saying they needed proof. While not something usually said in such circumstances, Shirone had anticipated it. This would reassure Theraze's faction.

"So how about this? We follow the proper procedure to verify the First Prince. A blood test will be conducted. If we start tomorrow, the results will take about four days. Let's think of a good path forward until then."

Shirone wasn't thrilled at the delay, but negotiating decisively with royalty from the start had always been a long shot.

"Alright. I'll think about it carefully too."

Though a feast had been laid out before them, no one at the royal table remembered what was served that day.

Chapter 271: Theraze's Bloodline (4)

Even past midnight, Orkamp remained in his study. Seated at his desk, he buried his face in his hands, replaying every sentence exchanged at that day's dinner.

Had he misspoken and provoked Theraze? What variables might his words now unleash?

Such obsessive reflection, repeated daily, was draining and exhausting. But not a single mistake could be allowed.

Until he held a card strong enough to stand against the Empress, caution and more caution was his only path.

A voice came from behind him.

"You summoned me, Your Majesty?"

Through the veil of darkness appeared a man in his mid-thirties. His slender eyes curved as if always smiling, and he wore seven piercings along the edge of his ear, a feminine-looking man.

Morrigan Arius.

A mage known in whispers as a Grave Robber, and an Unlocker who had unlocked the Immortal Function.

He was one of the Seven Mages from the Black Line, recognized for his mastery of scale magic, and scouted by Kazura five years ago.

Unlike the Red Line, the Black Line had no official association. There's no ranks, no hierarchy.

Although some mages formed organizations like the Seven Mages, but many, like the Grave Robber Arius, operated alone. Most of them were fugitives, wanted criminals.

Some mages crossed over from the Red Line after causing trouble, but even those were nothing compared to the mass-murderers and monsters that prowled the Black Line.

If a mage was even somewhat known, their bounty started in the hundreds of millions. In fact, there were entire Red Line guilds that specialized in hunting the Black Line. Though any state linked to the Black Line faced harsh international scrutiny, Kazura's volatile political reality left little choice.

The political unrest remained even after the civil war had ended through Theraze's marriage alliance.

First of all, bordering nations would never allow Kazura to thrive peacefully, and internally, Theraze's faction kept a wary watch.

Unable to strengthen the Red Line without drawing foreign ire, Orkamp's outreach to the Black Line was inevitable.

"What became of the task I assigned?"

"It's been handled successfully. We've diverted most of the confidential materials. I doubt Theraze will notice a thing."

"I see."

"It's time to proceed to the next stage. I've kept an eye on him, he's a fine specimen. Is he really Your Majesty's son?"

Orkamp sighed, his chest hollow with shame. He had thrown the boy away without hesitation, and now, just because the child might be useful, he'd brought him back like some lost tool. The hypocrisy was laughable.

Arius smiled like a snake, offering cold comfort.

"No need to worry. It's not as if we're going to kill him, right? There won't be any issues."

"He said... he wants to leave the palace."

Arius's narrow, slitted eyes opened slightly. In the exposed pupils, a flash of light glinted like starlight.

"I see. Well, Unlockers rarely care for the mundane world. They're the sort of people who chase oddities, mysteries, and things they can never truly grasp."

"Like you, perhaps?"

Arius's nickname was the Grave Robber. But what he sought wasn't gold or gems.

“More or less. Still, none of this changes our course. What matters isn’t Shirone, it’s Ataraxia.”

Orkamp grimaced. Why must it be that boy, of all people? And yet, this was clearly an opportunity. If he missed it now, he would never escape Theraze’s grasp.

He couldn’t forget the humiliation he had endured after marrying her. Nightmares haunted him, sweating and writhing awake in darkness.

She had trampled his spirit into the dust, then vanished like the wind, leaving behind two thorns, Zion and Uorin.

Theraze had a plan, that is to swallow the world.

One cornerstone of that plan was a multinational military force formed to counter Heaven, the Valkyrie.

Comprised of 24 nations, Valkyrie’s power was enough to obliterate a small kingdom in three days. Theraze was its supreme commander.

Kazura’s meteoric rise over the past two decades was due in part to inheriting a share in Valkyrie’s influence.

But Orkamp doubted that rise could last. Zion was growing strong and his surname was not Orkamp, but Theraze.

In the end, Theraze would devour Kazura, just as she had once devoured him.

Then one day, intelligence arrived. It was news that a student at a magic school in the Kingdom of Tormia had used a power from Heaven.

An investigation began immediately, and the truth was staggering. The boy was Shirone, the child Orkamp had discarded 18 years ago.

It felt like the heavens themselves were giving him a second chance.

Even in the Valkyrie, only a handful of people could wield powers from Heaven.

Experts said that Ataraxia was the ability of an Archangel, a power ranked as SSS in its classification system.

No one, whether in the past or present, in all of Valkyrie had ever wielded a SSS ability.

And that Shirone is his bloodline. If he could crown Shirone as the First Prince, he would finally have a weapon capable of opposing Theraze.

Not only would his position within Valkyrie be strengthened, he might even expel Theraze's bloodline from the Kazura Castle.

At last, having made up his mind, Orkamp asked.

"Can Ataraxia be replicated?"

"It's my specialty. Leave it to me."

"I don't want the boy to be harmed. I want him to live the life he chooses."

Of course, that was a lie.

The only reason Shirone had been summoned was to use Ataraxia's power as a check against Theraze.

From that perspective, the very existence of Orkamp's bloodline was a dangerous provocation to her wrath.

The best outcome now was to extract the information on Ataraxia and send Shirone back. If he hadn't called him in the first place, there would have been no need to fear Theraze's reaction at all.

After learning about Ataraxia, Arius had once infiltrated Alpheas Magic Academy. But apparently someone sharp on the Red Line had already destroyed the black box.

In the end, Shirone was the only person in this world capable of wielding Ataraxia. That was why, as a reluctant second-best option, he had been brought to the royal palace.

"We're not taking it from him, it's a good thing. We'll just share it. A son can do at least that much for his father, can't he?"

"If Shirone refuses the position of successor, I won't force him. But we absolutely need that power."

Arius nodded confidently.

"Don't worry. Just allow me to meet him during tomorrow's paternity test."

Orkamp turned toward him with a puzzled look.

"The paternity test? All the ministers will be present. It's a formal verification of royal blood. There can be no games."

"Of course. I have no intention of interfering with the test. It's just... well, wouldn't it be best to make sure of things beforehand? Haha. There should still be an opportunity before it starts."

Only then did Orkamp understand and nod.

The test would be conducted under strict supervision, but before the procedure began, it would still be possible to approach Shirone quietly.

"I'm counting on you."

"Rest easy. Everything will go well."

Leaving only those words behind, Arius vanished like smoke, a trademark move of those who wield scale magic.

The study's door opened, and Eliza entered. Her complexion suggested she had overheard their secret conversation.

"What brings you here at this hour?"

Eliza clasped her hands together and pleaded.

"My dear... he's our son. I don't know what's going on, but please don't put him in danger."

"There's nothing to worry about. It's just... a political matter. Don't concern yourself. Go back."

"How can I not worry? Don't you feel any guilt? Please, don't hurt him any more than you already have!"

Orkamp's expression twisted into something fierce.

"Guilt? If we hadn't abandoned that child, Kazura would've become a vassal of Yakma. I would have been beheaded at the gallows, and you? You would've become a toy for foreign officials. Is that really what you wanted?"

Eliza trembled, her face pale. More than anyone, she knew what happened to royalty who lost a war.

She had no desire to ever experience such a fate.

Without another word, Eliza returned to her chambers. She would continue to enjoy the life she now had. And she had no intention of giving up her position as queen, a life where she could obtain anything she desired.

A village located fourteen kilometers from the Kazura royal palace.

The Seer of Light Armin, who is also called as Eternal Reflector, was residing in a small village called Toshka, carrying out a special mission.

Of course, his identity as a painter still held. Though he had lost his physical sight, the luminous eyes within his sockets allowed him to perceive the hidden layers of the world.

The charcoal in his hand scratched rough lines across the canvas, as raw and unsettled as his emotions.

His movements today felt unsatisfactory.

A work of art inevitably reflects the artist's state of mind, and the closer he came to completing the piece, the more disturbed his heart became.

"Huh..."

Armin paused and set the charcoal down.

By the nature of his occupation, he came across and passed on information from across the world. To the eyes of ordinary people, the world might seem quiet, but beneath the surface, turbulent currents were stirring.

Shirone...

Of all the names circulating among those who moved within the underworld, none were spoken more frequently these days than Shirone.

When he first read the article about Shirone in Spirit magazine, Armin had felt pride.

He had sensed such talent back then, and now it was finally shining.

But the moment he recognized the magic circle featured in the article, he was struck with shock.

He didn't know how Shirone had acquired the powers of an archangel, but it was an event that would draw the attention of leaders around the world.

And yesterday, he had obtained intelligence that Shirone had accepted an invitation from the Kazura Kingdom.

It was said he was the son Orkamp had lost eighteen years ago.

Whether the rumors were true or not, if so, then Kazura's choice was a brilliant one.

On the other hand, for Shirone, it was dangerous.

Kazura was a kingdom under the influence of Theraze, the Empress of Kashan and the supreme leader of the Valkyrie. For Shirone, a mage not yet fully formed, to be swept into that torrent, it was far too perilous.

"What are you doing? You said you were busy today, and now you're not even painting."

Keira entered, carrying ingredients she'd bought at the market.

On paper, she was listed as his wife, but in reality, she was his handler. Seeing Armin deep in thought, her brows furrowed.

"Huh? Oh."

Armin hurriedly tried to shake off his thoughts and picked up the charcoal again, but there was no fooling Keira's eyes.

Even if she wasn't the most perceptive, she, too, was one of those who operated within the underworld. She could easily guess what was occupying Armin's mind.

"..."

Without setting down her basket, Keira waited for Armin to speak up on his own.

But he simply stirred the charcoal across the paper, as if nothing had happened.

The fact that he wore a blindfold, making it impossible to read his eyes. This was the second most infuriating thing about dealing with him.

"You're not seriously thinking something foolish, are you?"

Armin's hand froze midair. His brows knitted in displeasure as he turned to face her.

"Something foolish?"

"About Shirone. Of course, we're supposed to keep watch, but this isn't our affair. The higher-ups ordered us to wait

until the Kazura Kingdom reaches a conclusion on its own.”
Armin tossed the charcoal aside and stood.

“The Kazura Kingdom is entangled with Black Line mages. You know their power better than anyone. Shirone is a key figure for us too. If we wait for a conclusion, it’ll be too late.”

“Which is exactly why we can’t interfere. The higher-ups are strictly controlling all confrontations with the Black Line. It’s better to let the Red Line handle it.”

“This isn’t something that should be taken so lightly. The reason they brought Shirone in...”

Keira’s gaze turned cold.

“Armin. I’m telling you again not as a colleague, but as your superior. Don’t act on your own. If you disobey, I’ll have to invoke the treaty.”

Armin glared at her in silence. Breaking orders would endanger those he loved. Naturally, Siena’s name was on that list.

As the cold light of the eyes hidden beneath his bandages began to shimmer, Keira felt a chill run down her spine.

But she could not afford to back down.

There had been no conflict between the Red and Black Lines for forty years. To disrupt the balance now would only invite catastrophe.

Armin sighed and walked to the window to gaze out. Though winter had come, the sun still shone brightly upon the world.

“...So this is how it’s going to be?”

“There’s no choice. It’s my job.”

Keira forced her voice to remain steady. As a fellow mage, she didn’t want to drive someone who had reached the pinnacle of time magic into a corner like this.

But the treaty was in effect by the authority of the upper ranks. It wasn’t her decision. And so, she had to convince him whatever it took for his own good.

Armin fired back coldly.

“So your job is to bind me, restrain me, and keep me in chains?”

Keira looked a little hurt.

“Yeah! If you’re angry, go ahead and curse at me! Say whatever you want, I’ll take it. But until the order is lifted, you can’t go anywhere. That’s my job.”

Armin’s breathing grew rough.

Feeling like she was in the presence of a growling beast, Keira instinctively slipped her right hand inside her coat. In a one-on-one fight, Keira was at a slight disadvantage. But she had one advantage that she could use.

The treaty enforcement talisman clutched in her hand, ready to be activated at any time.

“Good grief, this is too much...”

Armin let out a deep sigh, bringing the tense standoff to a close. Then he walked over to the table and gently stroked a flower in a vase.

A flower forcibly plucked and trapped in a glass bottle. In some ways, it wasn’t so different from his own situation.

“Keira...”

His voice was heavy with sorrow. Understanding his feelings, Keira softened her expression and approached.

“Armin, I’m sorry. But...”

“No one can bind me.”

At that moment, Armin turned toward her and spoke. Then he swung his hand, knocking the vase to the floor.

Keira’s eyes instinctively followed the falling vase.

Damn!

In that split second, she lost sight of Armin. And by the time she realized it, the time field had already activated.

The vase, which had been falling upside down, froze midair. Keira, unable to redirect her gaze, was left standing like a puppet.

Within the frozen moment, Armin was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 272 Hostile Friendly Relations (1)

The morning dawned on Kazra Royal Palace.

Shirone waited in a designated waiting room provided by the inspection department for his paternity test.

While it wasn't completely off-limits for visitors, no one came to see him, as it was a significant event being watched by the nobles of Kazra.

Once the paternity test was complete, there would be no return to his old life. What would his future hold from now on?

"Huu, I'm getting nervous for no reason."

"There's no need to worry. It's just a simple test."

Shirone lifted his head with a start.

A tall, slender man stood before him. He didn't give off a cold impression, but there was a sharpness in his presence that felt unsettling.

A faint chill ran down Shirone's spine, similar to what he had felt when he first met Armin.

"No way, Unlocker?"

The man responded with a polite bow instead of words.

"My apologies for the late introduction. I am Arius. I serve as an advisor to His Majesty, Orkamph."

Shirone narrowed his eyes and heightened his guard.

"What brings someone like you here?"

The waiting room was an enclosed space by human standards. Being alone with a master who had infiltrated such a place without anyone knowing was by no means a safe situation.

"I simply wanted to meet you. There's a certain connection between Unlockers, after all."

Arius let his presence radiate freely as if to show Shirone that he understood the tension Shirone felt from their resonance.

“I’ve heard plenty about your achievements, Shirone. Especially Photon Cannon—it left quite the impression. I assume it’s an omniscience that manipulates mass?”

Shirone's tension heightened. If Arius was an enemy, the fact that he had already analyzed his abilities was not good. Arius raised both hands to show that he had no hostile intentions.

“Don’t be so on edge. It’s merely pure interest. You could say I’m a fan. By the way, as for my abilities...”

“Scale Magic, right?”

“Hooh? What makes you think that?”

“This room is sealed on all six sides. You couldn’t have entered with just spatial movement magic. To distort both time and space, it has to be Scale Magic.”

Arius admitted readily. It wasn’t exactly a secret among the higher circles of mages.

“Correct. More than half of Unlockers are Scale Mages. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

It was the first time Shirone had heard this. More than half of Unlockers were Scale Mages.

Then again, Armin’s magic could also be considered a form of Scale Magic. After all, time and space are inseparable.

“The reason so many Unlockers specialize in Scale Magic isn’t fully understood. It’s believed to be linked to the nature of Immortal Function. In that sense, Shirone, your omniscience is quite unique. The ability to manipulate mass is extremely rare. I must admit, I’m envious.”

“No, it’s not that impressive...”

Armin suddenly leaned in, interrupting Shirone.

“Still, I’m stronger.”

It was a childish remark coming from such a high-level mage. However, Arius didn’t mind and added casually.

"I want to make sure of this."

"Ah, of course."

Shirone didn't bother to deny it. Arius was, after all, someone employed by a king—a senior far beyond a mere magic academy student.

Then Arius tilted his head as if surprised.

"Huh? Aren't you acknowledging it a bit too easily? Too much humility can be harmful, you know."

"Yes? It's not like that. I'm just a student."

"Of course, your magical power may still be lacking. But who knows what will happen if you cast Ataraxia?"

Shirone was taken aback. Ataraxia was a term from Heaven. Only a few close to him knew about it, and in academic papers, Killain had referred to it merely as a "magical amplification circle."

'This person has been to Heaven too.'

Arius stared intently into Shirone's eyes. As if trying to find a little fairy living inside his pupils. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly after confirming that the keyword had been properly imprinted.

"How do you know about Ataraxia?"

"Haha! Most mages who've been around long enough know about it. It's the ultimate technique of Archangel Ikael. Of course, I'll admit, knowing a human could master it was quite shocking."

"Then have you been to Heaven yourself?"

Arius nodded his head as if it were no big deal.

"Once, a long time ago. But I didn't find it all that entertaining. Still, I keep collecting information about it—it concerns the survival of humanity, after all. We all owe a debt to Miro, don't we? Then again, I suppose she's not too bitter about it, since she became the greatest mage because of it."

Shirone, who had only thought of Miro's choice as a sacrifice, found Arius's words refreshing.

"Miro's the greatest Unlocker?"

Arius gave a self-deprecating smile.

"Well, wouldn't you say so? Honestly, who can really say who's the best? But she did save humanity, and she now resides in a dimension beyond our reach. No mage born in this era will be able to overcome Miro's fortress. It's unfortunate."

Though his words seemed harsh, they weren't without truth. Everyone deserves a chance to pursue their dreams.

Otherwise, this world that Miro protected with her sacrifice would already be as good as dead.

"I see. But Miro must have thought the same..."

"Haha! Of course, I'm aware of that! Don't take it too seriously. If it weren't for Oberk, the founder of Turn Undead Magic, humanity would have been overrun by necromancers. It's the nature of magic that the title of 'greatest' changes depending on the circumstances.

Besides, there already existed in this world the greatest mage that none could surpass."

"The greatest mage? Who is that?"

Shirone thought of several people's names.

Was it Kergos, who established the theory of photonization? Ibris, the creator of Ignition Magic, Ignite? Perhaps Gloria, who consolidated the Four-Way Zone system in the Spirit Zone?

"The greatest magician in history... McClain Goffin."

Shirone smacked his knee in disappointment.

"Ah! I knew that person!"

Goffin, the mage who established the gateway to Heaven in the autonomous region of Kerugos. How great a mage he was could also be seen from Ikael's words.

"What kind of person was Goffin?"

Arius scratched his head, seemingly unsure of the answer.

"Hmmm, actually, I don't know. There are no records about Goffin. There's even debate over whether he really existed."

"Huh? But Goffin...."

“Yes. His achievements are found all over the world. However, what remains are only ruins. There are no historical records of Goffin himself. Even now, archaeologists roam the world to find traces of Goffin, but not a single written record has been discovered. Not even folktale.”

“How is that possible?”

Shirone was puzzled.

Every person, no matter how insignificant, leaves behind traces of their life. Even a nobody without fame leaves records through acquaintances. So, for someone like Guffin, it would only make sense that the whole world should know of him.

“Whether or not Goffin was a real person is still a matter of academic debate. Some scholars argue that he may never have interacted with any intelligent life during his lifetime. However, there is a hypothesis that is currently in the spotlight.”

The so-called greatest mage in history disappeared without leaving any record. Shirone thought that perhaps this was a tremendous magic in itself.

Arius raised a finger and continued.

“The hypothesis is that Goffin did exist, but for some reason, the world forgot about him.”

At those words, a memory came to Shirone’s mind. It was something he had heard from Peope, the fairy of Heaven. Archangel Ikael was said to have committed an unforgivable sin, but the divine subjects of Heaven do not know what sin it was.

Because Anke Ra has erased said memory.

“Goffin definitely existed, but now he exists as someone who never did. This theory is referred to as the ‘Goffin Erasure’ or the ‘Reset’ theory in academic circles.”

“Reset...?”

“Goffin may have simply erased his name from the Akashic Records. But if that were the case, the entire world should have been altered. So why do Goffin’s ruins still exist? The

Reset hypothesis provides an explanation. It suggests that the world we experience has been reset at some point."

To Shirone, who had not yet reached the depths of intellect, Arius's words sounded like the rambling of a madman. Yet, he couldn't stop himself from becoming absorbed in the topic—an Unlocker's nature naturally led them to such contemplations.

"One of the most notable pieces of evidence for Goffin Erasure is something called the 'Fracture Field Verification Experiment.' It suggests that the total time and energy of the world we live in are ever so slightly misaligned."

Arius spread his ten fingers, pretending to hold a sphere.

"The Akashic Records are perfect as a whole. Therefore, this world cannot lose its perfection. However, fractures can occur. A fracture is a form of individuality, not a flaw. Scholars believe that traces of Reset are left within those fractures."

Shirone found it hard to believe. Yet, if many scholars were discussing it seriously, it wasn't just a baseless tale.

"If reset is true, does that mean everyone in this world is living the same life for the second time?"

"That would be the case. But don't think too hard about it. Time doesn't flow; it's perceived. For example, let's say humanity began 10,000 years ago. Did the people of today wait 10,000 years to live this moment? No. They didn't wait even a second. Because time is perceived from the moment of birth. This is why scholars cite déjà vu as evidence of Reset. The feeling of reliving something you've already experienced—that's a cognitive error caused by the brain confusing time before and after the Reset."

Arius raised his index finger and posed a question.

"Now, here's the question. How do you think McClain Goffin was able to reset the world?"

A word automatically came to Shirone's mind.

"Immortal Function."

Arius nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"Exactly. When consciousness expands infinitely, the ego disintegrates. But any phenomenon has a threshold. If one could fully control the Immortal Function, one would reach a state that is both infinite and finite at the same time—a paradoxical state. In other words, you become the whole while retaining the self."

Arius' explanation triggered a memory of a similar concept in Shirone's mind. Becoming the whole while retaining the self means, conversely, that the self is present in everything. And people called such a being God.

"I see. So this Goffin..."

Shirone finally realized why McClain Goffin was the greatest mage in the world, unrivaled by anyone else.

"Yes. McClain Goffin...."

Arius smiled as he concluded.

"He's the Infinite Mage that is unprecedented in the history of mankind."

Though it was the second time Shirone had heard the term "Infinite Mage," the impact this time was much stronger.

At the time, he was ignorant of Immortal Function or Akashic Records. But now, he had a vague idea of how a human could take the position of God, and the process of it.

"We don't know exactly which era Goffin belonged to. Was it 100 years ago? A thousand years? Maybe even before the dawn of humanity. However, the most prominent hypothesis places the reset at 18 years ago. Since then, no traces of Goffin's achievements have surfaced. Coincidentally, 18 years ago is also when Miro's Space and Time was born."

Arius mentioned this as a possibility, but Shirone had already heard directly from Ikael that Miro was Goffin's successor.

Also, 18 years ago... was the year Shirone was born.

However, Shirone didn't dwell on that. How could he be the only person born 18 years ago?

Arius checked his watch. The time for the examination was drawing near, and it was time for him to return to his main

task.

Chapter

273 Hostile Friendly Relations (2)

Arius approached Shirone and asked for a handshake, saying,

"I must be going now. I can't be away from my post for long. Since Shirone is also an Unlocker, being aware of these matters will help you in your role as a unique in the magic society."

Shirone quickly grasped Arius's hand.

"Yes. It was incredibly helpful. Thank you."

"Haha! There's no need to thank me. From now on, I plan to dig into your Ataraxia."

Arius flashed a cold smile, but Shirone couldn't see his expression. His head had already drooped deeply, succumbing to sleep.

High-level sleep magic cuts off consciousness so cleanly that it leaves no awareness of the mental waves being severed. Even if Shirone's consciousness revived and tried to connect with the lost memory, he wouldn't feel anything unusual.

"Well then, shall we begin?"

Arius, a Scale Mage adept in handling the psyche realm, used a magic called Dive to penetrate the human consciousness.

He can infiltrate anywhere in the 12 levels of the human psyche, except for the 12th level shell which is the realm of intellect.

However, the inside of the human mind is a perilous environment. Diving recklessly could cost a person their life, even if they had ten lives to spare.

Thus, most divers use a method of throwing a net from the surface to extract only the desired information, and the keyword plays a crucial role in that.

Having suddenly implanted the keyword into Shirone, prompting him to recall the impression of Ataraxia, Arius did some stretches before casting the Dive magic.

Even now, dozens of divers lose their lives each year in the human psyche realm, but as a mage of Seven Prodigies, he cast the magic without hesitation.

"Dive. Ataraxia."

The Deviate-Type Spirit Zone shrank to an extreme scale and penetrated Shirone's mind. At the same moment, Arius' body vanished from the waiting room.

He reappeared after about five minutes, kneeling, his clothes drenched as though he had emerged from water. Arius caught his breath and slowly stood up. He gazed at Shirone with a troubled expression for a long moment before moving, but then a voice called from outside the door.

"Sir Shirone, the trial will begin shortly. Please come and attend."

Clicking his tongue, Arius used Flicker, a signature move of Scale Mages, and disappeared from the waiting room.

"Huh?"

Shirone blinked and looked around.

Although he had been asleep for five full minutes, the clean cut of his consciousness made it feel like those five minutes had never existed.

In the state of consciousness that had been severed and then sutured, he could only think that Arius had suddenly disappeared while shaking hands.

'He really moves like a ghost. Well, Armin was like that too.' When there was no response from Shirone even after some time, the attendant opened the door and entered.

"Sir Shirone, you must come out now."

"Ah, sorry. I'll be right there."

Shirone followed the attendant into the courtroom.

The prominent nobles of Kazra sat in the jury seats, and two chairs were placed side by side below the judge's seat.

Instead of evidence, various tools were laid out in the evidence storage area, and an alchemist and a mage were inspecting them.

Shirone sat in the chair on the right and waited. From outside the courtroom, a booming voice echoed, and the door swung open.

"His Majesty Orkamph is entering!"

As the nobles stood to greet him, Orkamph strode in with a dignified gait.

He paid no attention to the other nobles and observed Shirone's condition. Though Arius had already made contact, it was impossible to know whether he had successfully replicated Ataraxia.

"Let's begin."

When Arius, seated next to Shirone, gave the signal, the judge initiated the examination.

The mage used a syringe to draw blood from both individuals.

The moment the needle pierced the king's body, the atmosphere in the courtroom turned chilly.

After Shirone's blood was also drawn, an alchemist mixed both samples into a substance called Oxstamine. As he shook the beaker, the liquid changed from a deep purple to a transparent water-like substance.

The alchemist explained.

"The blood mixed with oxytamine will be stored in a vacuum state for 3 days. If a positive reaction occurs, it's a biological parent, and if a negative reaction occurs, it's not a biological parent."

As the alchemist handed over the blood, the judge put it into an alchemy box called a Caspi.

When the lid was closed, the air was expelled, creating a vacuum state.

It was perfect for security-required inspections because it would break if even a little air seeped in.

The judge held up the Caspi and announced,

"This Caspi will go into the vault and be placed in the inner palace garden. The royal guard will monitor it 24 hours a day, and any noble with access to the inner palace may check it at any time. However, crossing the restricted line is strictly forbidden. If a separate observer is assigned, their identity must be registered within 1 hour."

Shirone nodded at the Inspection Department's decision. If the vault was exposed to an unspecified number of people, they would become each other's observers, preventing any mischief.

"This concludes the examination regarding the verification of the first prince of the Kazra Kingdom."

The procedure ended with the judge striking the gavel. Orkamph left the courtroom as if he had urgent business to attend to, without even saying a word of appreciation to Shirone.

Shirone, who knew Orkamph's personality, no longer minded. Rather, he was more concerned about the fact that he hadn't heard from Reina since last night.

He understood that, as a legal representative, she had to approve all administrative work, leaving her incredibly busy. It was also the reason he could spend his time leisurely like a nobleman.

Still, wasn't that why he had brought Amy along? It was strange that there had been no message from her, no matter how far the lodging was.

@

"You failed?"

Orkamph's face distorted.

It was the first time he heard those words since hiring Arius. And they were words that should never have been uttered. The only reason he had endured the criticism and recruited a criminal from the Black Line was because he believed in his skills. But he failed?

"I apologize. I succeeded in casting the net, but I couldn't replicate it."

Divers refer to the process of using keywords to pull up concepts that are sunken in the deep sea of the unconscious to the surface as "casting a net".

"What on earth is the reason? Didn't you say it was guaranteed to succeed if you just planted the keyword?"

"Replication is possible even now. It's just that there's no need to do so."

"No need?"

Arius recalled the situation at the time and made a bitter expression.

"Ataraxia was encapsulated."

"Encapsulated? Is it a type of code?"

"No. Code is about rules. You write 100 characters on a 1-meter strip of paper, wrap it around a rod of a specific thickness, and read the characters that align on one side. If a sentence is revealed, it is a code. Now, what is encapsulation? You write a clear sentence on the 1-meter strip of paper and then crumple it up randomly. There's no pattern, and it cannot be unraveled. What I saw wasn't Ataraxia, but rather a tangled cloud of information, like a ball of yarn."

Arius raised his index finger and continued.

"Then why is there no need to replicate it? Keywords make the other person think of a certain concept. For example, this: Apples are delicious. Then, Your Majesty, an apple comes to Your Majesty's mind. However, that is the apple that Your Majesty thinks of, not the perfect apple. The perfect apple exists in the unconscious, beyond language. In the end, the thought revealed through keywords is just a shadow. Usually that's enough, but when it's encapsulated like this time, it's useless. Because even if I replicate the information cloud, it will remain just that—an information cloud."

Orkamph couldn't blame Arius. He understood. And blaming Arius would only expose his own ignorance.

"Then what do you plan to do now? We absolutely need Ataraxia."

"First, I suggest speaking with Shirone. To find a solution, I need to see Ataraxia directly—learn what kind of information system it is, and understand its activation principle. Only after such information is collected can I provide an answer to Your Majesty. Of course, I've installed a door so I can go back in at any time."

"A demonstration of Ataraxia..."

Orkamph did not like Arius' proposal.

Shirone was a clever child, so there was a high probability that he would guess that he wasn't simply invited to the royal palace for a paternity test.

In that situation, if the original purpose was brought up, the damage Shirone would receive would be tremendous.

If it was to protect the kingdom, he could bear the stigma of being a despicable father as much as he wanted. But he wanted to avoid a situation where Shirone would refuse to cooperate because of that.

"Isn't it too blatant? He'll definitely be suspicious."

"Your Majesty, this is a major matter that will change the first prince. The Terraje faction will surely make their move within the three days before the test results are out. If we do not take advantage of having priority in negotiations with Shirone, the initiative will be taken by the Terraje faction."

Orkamph fell into deep contemplation.

Should he fully embrace Shirone, or use him and discard him? Either way, the sooner he made his decision, the better.

"If we're going to do this, we might as well make it grand, right?"

Arius answered with a sly smile.

@

Shirone, who was heading to his parents' quarters, stopped in his tracks on the 2nd floor corridor. An unknown attendant, a messenger of Zion, was blocking the way. It

was simply amazing how he could find him like a ghost in this vast royal palace.

"Sir Shirone, you must come with me."

Shirone straightened his back and lowered his chin.

It was clear he wasn't being called for a pleasant matter, but avoiding it wouldn't help.

Rather than getting hit in the back of the head while running away, it was more effective to meet directly and observe the reaction.

"Please lead the way."

"As expected, an excellent choice. Please, follow me."

The attendant took Shirone to the basement. It was a place where warehouses were concentrated, so there was very little foot traffic, and perhaps because expansion construction was frequent, the layout was complicated like a maze.

They arrived at the outermost part, where a door was installed into the wall, leading even deeper inside.

It was not a room that had originally existed.

"This is the place. Please come in."

Shirone grabbed the doorknob without lowering his guard.

Contrary to his expectation of a room, what lay before him was a rectangular cave lit by torches, stretching out with another door visible 15 meters ahead.

A double entrance.

It didn't seem like a structure chosen for fun, but no reasonable explanation came to mind either.

When he was about halfway through the cave, the attendant slammed the door shut with a thud. It was clearly to alert someone.

Startled, Shirone stopped in his tracks, but after taking a deep breath, he opened the second door.

It was a completely white room.

Not painted, but made entirely of marble, and along the walls, shelves were lined with various objects on display.

There didn't seem to be anything particularly luxurious, but knowing Zion's nature, the room still gave off a sense of unease.

Zion and Uorin were drinking tea at the table. Seeing Uorin, he felt a little relieved, but realizing that even such thoughts were dangerous, he erased them from his mind.

"You're here. What are you doing standing there? Come in." Shirone hesitated to move. Zion and Uorin were looking at him with playful eyes.

But he couldn't just stand at the door, so he cautiously took a step forward, being mindful of his surroundings.

At that moment, the floor suddenly sank with a whoosh, and his body toppled forward.

"Ugh! What the—!"

Shirone hurriedly raised his head. The floor was soft, so he didn't feel any impact, but hearing Zion and Uorin's giggles made his face turn red with embarrassment.

'Why is the floor so soft?'

Crawling and groping around, he felt a solid floor at some boundary.

"Are you okay, Oppa? I'm sorry for teasing you. But it was fun, wasn't it?"

Uorin approached and held out his hand.

Grabbing her hand and standing up, Shirone looked back at the spot where he had fallen. There was nothing distinguishing that part of the floor from the rest.

"What's this?"

"It's <Fluffy Everywhere>."

"Fluffy... what?"

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Uorin scratched the floor where Shirone had fallen with her fingers. A transparent sheet of film peeled off with a "zip" sound, and she held it in her hand.

"Ta-da! This is it. Now, check the floor again."

When Shirone stepped on it, unlike when he fell, the hardness of the marble that matched common sense was transmitted. He even stomped down with his full weight, but the result was the same.

"Isn't that amazing? With just this, you can take a nap even on rocky terrain. You can even do this. Watch closely."

Uorin walked up to the eagle sculpture that was taller than her and covered it with the film. As if by magic, the sculpture sank and a flat floor appeared.

She pressed down her skirt, jumped up, and landed on her bottom. Her buttocks sank into the fluffy floor and bounced back.

Her actions were childish, but Shirone observed her seriously. He had no idea what caused this to happen.

It wasn't science. But it wasn't magic either.

Shirone looked around seriously. Only then did he realize why the items in the room were not luxurious. This was a place where the most expensive items in the world were gathered.

Uorin smiled mischievously.

"That's right. This is where we collect Objet."

He had suspected it, but hearing the words spoken out loud sent a wave of shock through him.

He recalled the Objet of Sleep owned by the two-horned Mara Baalb at Heaven.

Even then, he shuddered at its strangeness, but the current shock was on a different level.

'Are you saying everything here is an Objet?'

In any normal place, items would be arranged according to their function—tableware in the kitchen, books in the library. But here, there was no order or reason for how things were displayed, and there was no consistency in their arrangement.

Roughly counting, there were over 50 items on display. It was only possible because they were the Terraje Family that ruled the continent.

While Shirone was still in a daze, Zion approached, holding a copy of Spirit magazine.

As expected, his reaction was cynical. Raising the corners of his mouth as if it was nothing, he shoved the magazine and said,

"A genius aspiring magician, huh?"

Shirone didn't even feel like responding.

"Of course, magic is a tremendous power. I acknowledge that too. But you see, even such an ability is nothing compared to an Objet, right? The annual salary of a 3rd-class archmage working at Kazra Royal Palace is approximately 30 million gold. If I sell one of these items, how many archmages could I hire?"

"What do you want to say?"

"No matter how outstanding a mage is, in the end, they're just a dog of the royalty. The talent of a ruler isn't determined by something trivial like magic."

Zion held the Spirit magazine at Shirone's eye level and dropped it. He stepped on the magazine and walked past Shirone, turning around.

"Must feel great, huh? In three days, you'll be the first prince. What's it like? Already feeling like a king?"

Now that the paternity test was over, it was clear that the power struggle among the nobles would intensify. In such a

situation, it was natural for someone like Zion, who was at the heart of power, to gauge Shirone's state of mind.

"I'm pretty sure I made it clear. I'm not interested. As soon as the results are out, I'm going back home."

"Hmph, sure you will."

Zion didn't believe him.

Who in the world would turn down the throne? Even if someone did, it would only be because they hadn't yet tasted the sweetness of power.

Power guarantees all kinds of pleasures that humans crave. Once he becomes the first prince, no matter how much character Shirone has cultivated, his mind was bound to change.

"It's no use pretending to be noble. This is the royal palace. Especially with me, such tricks won't work."

Zion snatched <Fluffy Anywhere> from Uorin and threw it on the floor.

"For one toy like this, I could buy the entire magic academy you attend to. In an instant, I can become your teacher. Your teacher will have to crawl between my legs. And what? You're not interested in the throne? Do you think I'd believe that?"

Shirone realized that Zion was a person purely driven by material things. Shirone attended the academy not for tangible things but to gain the intangible values that lay within.

Hearing the story, it seemed that <Fluffy Everywhere> was in the billions range, but he just dismissed it as a child's toy. But the power of an Objet, which defied common sense, could hold immense value depending on how it was used. For example, what if it was used to conceal a vault containing the "Essence of Spirits"?

No matter how expensive an Objet is, it's not even worth a dime compared to the Essence of Spirits, of which there are only 17 in the world (2 fire, 3 water, 5 wind, 7 earth).

Once equipped, not only could one cast magic of the corresponding element, but they could also completely block magic of that same element, making the Essences worth more than the entire budget of a small kingdom. In the end, there will always be people in the world who absolutely need it, and they won't spare any expense to get what they want.

A family like Terraje might be able to buy it for amusement, but Zion's belief that they were expensive purely because of a collector's whim was simply a misconception.

"I think it would be better if you gave the Fluffy Anywhere to someone else. No matter how good a book is, it's useless to someone who would use it as a pot coaster."

"Haha! That's the privilege of royalty. A good book? We could use gold as a pot coaster if we felt like it."

Shirone gritted his teeth and swallowed his anger. Since their origins were different, they couldn't find a common ground even in trivial things.

"Enough. If you're done talking, I'll be going back."

Staying any longer would only hurt his feelings, so he headed towards the door, but Uorin ran over and tugged on his sleeve.

"Wait! I have something to tell Shirone Oppa too. There's something I want to show you. Come this way."

Shirone found it hard to refuse Uorin.

First of all, she was someone he could communicate with, and she had supported him among the arrogant royalty. Above all, she was the daughter of the mighty Terraje Family.

"Hurry, hurry. This way."

As Shirone was dragged away by Uorin, Zion sneered, but in reality, his situation wasn't all that different from Shirone's. Seeing Zion silently follow his sister after she mentioned she had something to do was another sign of his circumstances. Uorin sat Shirone at the table and brought a small box.

It had a shabby square wooden frame with a concave hemispherical interior structure. In the center was a worn-out arrow-shaped pointer, which seemed to be a roulette that could be flicked and spun with a finger.

"This is an Objet called <Daily Gift>. It leaves a gift once a day."

Although it was explained in simple terms that even a child could understand, Shirone felt as if something essential was missing, like a sentence without its subject or object.

"Huhu, strange, isn't it? At first, everyone feels that way. Since Objets operate beyond the bounds of common sense, when encountering the 'Guideline,' things often don't make sense."

"That's right. The strangest part is when you say it leaves. Who exactly? This is just an object."

"Guideline contains two meanings. First, for something to be 'given,' gravity is necessary. Secondly, 'giving' implies leaving but not arriving. Therefore, there needs to be a space that can't be observed from inside or outside."

Shirone realized why the entrance here had a double structure.

There had to be a third location where no one was passing through, neither from the inside nor the outside.

"<Gravity> and <No Observer>. If these two conditions are met, it gives a gift once a day. If you look closely at this roulette, you'll see it's divided into four colors, right?"

Shirone's gaze followed where Uorin pointed.

It was an old item, with the paint fading, but the different shades were still distinguishable. The size of the areas varied, and there was writing engraved inside. It was faint and hard to see, but it was definitely not in the Thormian language.

Uorin pointed to each of the four areas and explained.

"The letters written here are in the language used by the gypsies of the eastern mountain region. Translated, it's Modest Gift, Pleasant Gift, Excessive Gift, and Miracle. When

measured in radians, Modest Gift takes up about 75 percent, Pleasant Gift is 20 percent, Excessive Gift is 4 percent, and Miracle is 1 percent of the space."

"Hmm...."

The fact that Modest Gift took up 75 percent suggested that the gap between the different levels of gifts was quite significant. The 4 percent chance for Excessive Gift was exciting, but Shirone was even more curious about what a Miracle would be.

Since the roulette could only be spun once a day, simple math suggested it would land on a Miracle within 100 days. However, when considering the concept of probability, it could take much longer than that.

Shirone carefully pointed to the gauge of the roulette, as if afraid to even touch it.

"Could I spin this arrow?"

"Yes. That's why I was waiting for Oppa to come."

"Hm? Me?"

"Give it a spin. I'll give Oppa the gift that comes out."

Shirone blinked at the unexpected words.

Given Uorin's wealth, no matter how great the gift, she likely wouldn't be too attached to it. However, since no one knew what would come out, it didn't seem like something one would easily give away.

"Probability, huh..."

In any case, it was an opportunity to directly experience an Objet.

Shirone didn't particularly desire any gift for himself, but he was intensely curious to see what would come out.

Perhaps, that curiosity was the true value of this Objet?

The thrill that comes with imagining the gift.

In that sense, <Daily Gift> was a very well-designed entertainment tool that understood human psychology.

Unlike other forms of gambling, there was no failure.

"At the very least, a Modest Gift is guaranteed. So, can I give it a try?"

"Of course. I do it every day anyway."

Uorin readily agreed and added an explanation.

"You just need to flick the end of the pointer with your finger. Based on experiments, it needs to spin at least ten full rotations; otherwise, it's considered invalid. But don't worry, it doesn't mean you lose your chance for the day if it doesn't spin enough."

"Oh-ho, I see."

Shirone's eyes sparkled with interest.

Why must it spin at least ten times? If there was no limit on the number of rotations, you could get a Miracle just by gently pushing the gauge.

'It's really amazing. Even though it's an object, it has rules like Rule Eater.'

At that moment, a clever idea popped into Shirone's mind.

"This, maybe it can be made to always land on a Miracle."

Then, Uorin's eyes also sparkled like Shirone's.

The insight to analyze an object from various angles is an essential requirement for an objet collector. In that sense, Shirone had a strong collector's temperament.

"As expected of a mage. You're suggesting adjusting your touch to spin it exactly 3,600 degrees?"

"Exactly. Or, you could hire a professional gambler. By feeling the sensitivity of the roulette and adjusting the force, you could always land on the same result."

"That's a great idea. But unfortunately, it's impossible. I've already tried. It seems that when you spin the roulette, the position is determined by some kind of random number generation."

"Hmm, so you're saying that Daily Gift is manipulating the probabilities? Even the 1% chance of a Miracle might be a trick. If that's the case, it's not fair gambling, is it?"

If it's a gambling Objet, at least the probability should be fair. Otherwise, there's no need to have an interface to experiment with probability in the first place.

Uorin felt a strong sense of kinship with Shirone.

In fact, she had made several people besides Shirone spin the roulette. But most of them were more focused on the gift they would receive rather than being fascinated by the nature of the Objet.

There were times when she got annoyed and left after seeing them praying for expensive gifts in front of the roulette.

They say that an Objet collector needs two things: an interesting Object and an audience who can appreciate its true value.

Zion occasionally found decent Objects for her, but when it came to discernment, he was completely clueless.

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But Shirone was different.

In her opinion, the significance of <Daily Gift> lies in the fact that one can feel the anticipation of a gift every day, rather than the value of material goods.

In that sense, Shirone's tendency to explore the Objet resonated with her own self when she first got her hands on <Daily Gift>.

"That's right. That's why I once invited a Schema master. I can't reveal their name, but they were a world-class professional gambler. Over ten days, they spun the roulette ten times with the exact same force, but the results were always different. Still, I believe this remains valid as a form of gambling."

"Why? Did you discover some other feature?"

Zion, unable to suppress his boredom, let out a yawn.

Of course, he understood the importance of deciphering the Objet's <instructions>.

But he can leave such tedious work to the subordinates. The royal family can just buy the Objets and enjoy them.

Regardless, Uorin's gaze was solely focused on Shirone.

"It's because of statistics. It's been exactly 1,003 days since I got my hands on this roulette. In other words, excluding today, I've spun it 1,002 times. Among those, a Miracle occurred twice. Modest Gifts 823 times, Pleasant Gifts 171 times, and Excessive Gifts 6 times."

Shirone realized what Uorin was trying to say.

"Aha, the probability and statistics roughly match. Then the variables should be considered fair. Perhaps those variables are of a nature that humans cannot control...?"

Uorin pointed at Shirone and shouted.

"Exactly! The fact that the statistics follow probability means there's no trickery involved. Therefore, this Objet retains its value as a gambling tool."

Shirone rested his chin on his hand, lost in thought.

Statistically, fair rules exist. But even the world's best gambler couldn't produce the same value. This suggested that the variable operated in a realm beyond human control.

"An extremely sensitive sensor, perhaps? Something muscle power alone can't influence?"

"Yes. That's the opinion of the experts too. They said it would be a quantum-level error."

The quantum level.

It was certainly impossible to control the weight of electrons, which are lighter than atoms, with muscle strength. This meant that despite its childish appearance, the Objet was extremely precise.

Shirone examined <Daily Gift> more closely than before. On the outside, it just looked like an old antique. A crude wooden case. A miniature clown was smiling, and childish drawings were drawn on the hemispherical surface.

Suddenly, an image of children in a gypsy village gleefully spinning the roulette came to mind. Normally, it would be a pleasant sight, but now, for some reason, it felt eerily unsettling.

"What kind of gift does Miracle give?"

Uorin's face hardened coldly.

"I can't tell you that."

Shirone stared blankly at her. Then, as if nothing had happened, Uorin stuck out her tongue playfully and returned to her usual cute expression.

"Hehe, just kidding. It's no fun if I tell you in advance. Ah geez, now hurry up and spin it."

"Hmm, should I?"

Shirone also stopped analyzing and prepared to test it out.

He flicked his finger, knowing full well that human strength couldn't control it.

He had to leave everything to chance. Heading toward a childish future filled with nothing but excitement.

"Then I'll start."

Shirone placed his finger on the end of the pointer and flicked it.

Tiririri. The sound, reminiscent of a toy, rang out as the arrow spun.

Uorin's eyes sparkled as she watched. This time, even Zion seemed interested, as he crossed his arms and fixed his gaze on the roulette.

As soon as the pointer stopped, Uorin jumped up and slammed the table.

"Wow! This is an Excessive Gift! This has a 4% probability!"

Shirone was too caught up in the tension to even feel the joy of winning such a low-probability reward.

The roulette had spun exactly according to its Guideline. What would happen next?

Knock, knock!

Shirone turned to the door at the sound of knocking. But no matter how long he waited, he couldn't feel any further presence.

"It's here! Oppa, go out and look quickly!"

Shirone walked quickly to the door. But it took quite a long mental preparation to open the door.

As he pulled the doorknob, a view of a rectangular cavern lit by torches appeared.

There wasn't a single sign of life—no one, not even a fly.

Shirone thought of <Gravity> and looked at the floor. A gift box decorated with a red ribbon was placed there.

A shiver ran down his spine at the sight of the gift that had appeared out of nowhere.

This was an enclosed space. He didn't even hear the sound of the first door opening. Then who on earth knocked?

"Oppa, show me quickly. I'm curious."

As Uorin urged, Shirone picked up the gift with an uneasy feeling and placed it on the table.

Zion and Uorin both craned their necks like turtles to get a better look.

"It's yours, so you open it, Oppa."

Shirone pulled on the red ribbon, and with a smooth sound, the wrapping untied itself.

It was a rather romantic scene, but Shirone, treating it as if it might explode, carefully handled the gift.

"Huh? What's this?"

Inside the gift box was a porcelain doll.

It was a 3-body proportion girl with black hair reaching down to her ankles. Her eyelashes were long, and her eyes made of processed jewels looked like real human eyes.

Although it wasn't a particularly grotesque shape, Shirone felt an intense sense of disgust so strong that he didn't even want to touch it.

They say humans feel the greatest fear at the midpoint between the unfamiliar and the familiar.

The porcelain doll was no exception.

The proportions were messed up and it lacked life, but the hair, eyelashes, and eyes were so lifelike that it induced a strange fear in the observer.

On the other hand, Uorin was wide-eyed with fascination.

"Oh, this?"

Uorin, whose hand reached out to the doll without realizing it, paused and looked at Shirone's expression. She was worried that he might feel burdened if she showed interest after saying she would give him the gift.

Shirone readily gave in. Honestly, he didn't even want to look at it.

"It's okay. I don't know what it is, so you take a look."

Uorin carefully took out the doll, worried that a crack might form on the surface.

Zion followed it with his gaze.

Though he wasn't particularly knowledgeable about dolls, there was no way he could be unaware of this one. He had, after all, gone through great lengths to acquire one for his younger sister's prized collection.

"It's El Crouch's seamless jointed doll."

"Huh? El Crouch?"

Uorin held the doll up to the ceiling light, inspecting the interior of its porcelain face. As expected, there were no signs of seams, confirming it as an authentic piece.

With newfound certainty, she spoke belatedly.

"El Crouch is a doll maker. They're famous for not using adhesives. Only twelve of Crouch's works have been made public, and they all have owners. I own four of them myself. In other words, this one is an undisclosed piece. If it went to auction, it would start at no less than 100 million gold."

"What? 100 million gold?"

Shirone's eyes widened in shock.

For reference, the annual living expenses of a commoner family in the Kingdom of Thormia were roughly 100 gold. Shirone's household, before joining Ogent Family as house servants, had once lived on just 50 gold a year.

It was a tremendous amount even when considering a mage's income, not a commoner's.

The annual salary of a mage who has just entered the professional stages is around 4,000 gold, and even for a certified 6th-rank mage, the average annual salary does not exceed 200,000 gold. In simple terms, it was the amount of money that Teacher Sienna would have to work hard for 500 years to save.

From the 5th-rank and above, classified as mid-level, the annual salary varied greatly depending on their skills, but considering that the annual salary of a 3rd-rank archmage at Kazra Royal Palace was around 30 million, 100 million was an amount that would change the look in the eyes of any noble.

'Wait, come to think of it...'

The amount wasn't the issue. How could one of El Crouch's works be selected as a gift?

A piece of art is a tangible item that exists in the world.

Unless the gift had been pre-arranged, this would suggest that some object from a specific location had been instantly transported here.

"...How is this possible?"

"Because it is Objet. Excessive Gifts are chosen based on their rarity. Once, we even received a deep-sea fish that had a face resembling a human. It died immediately. Excessive Gifts do not necessarily mean expensive items. In that sense, an El Crouch doll is a tremendous material gain.

Because this can be sold."

Uorin glanced at Shirone's expression.

"Um, so about this..."

Shirone could guess without even hearing it.

She had said she already collected four dolls. To others, it might look hideous, but to a true collector, they would be nothing short of beloved treasures.

"If you want it, you can have it. I don't mind giving it as a gift."

"Huh? N- No! There's no need to go that far! I was just going to buy this for 100 million. But I figured you wouldn't like that kind of deal..."

She seemed to remember how Shirone lost his temper when Eliza offered to buy a castle for his parents on the first day he was invited to the royal palace.

"Haha! You're right. I don't need money. Just take it. The Objet is yours anyway."

Even for Shirone, giving up something worth 100 million gold wasn't easy.

However, if the target of the concession was Uorin, the highest authority in Kazra, then it was worth giving up. No matter how good money was, it wouldn't be more valuable than his life.

As expected, Zion's face contorted.

Why would she go into debt to a rival competing with her own brother for the throne? No matter how immature he was, this time his thinking was too shortsighted.

'No, could it really be?'

A sudden ominous thought crossed Zion's mind.

Uorin had always been a dutiful younger sister who listened to her older brother's words well. Despite being the direct heir of Terraje Family, she had never once disregarded him. But today, something felt off.

Uorin was the one who chose the meeting location with Shirone.

Of course, since she enjoyed showing off her Objets, it made sense that she picked the gallery. But why, out of all the Objets available, did she choose Daily Gift?

'Because it's the most probability-based Objet...'

If Shirone had gotten the 75% Modest Gift, it wouldn't have been an issue at all.

But the result was an Excessive Gift of a whopping 4 percent.

Moreover, the gift was a porcelain doll of El Crouch, whom Uorin cherished so much.

'Uorin isn't a fool who would go into debt with just anyone. Could it be that she was testing Shirone's probability? If so, it means she's weighing between me and Shirone...'

The very thought made Zion's throat burn.

It's a delusion. A simple coincidence. That's what he should think.

How can it not be a coincidence that Uorin chose <Daily Gift> when Shirone had a 4% chance of winning?

Besides, she was the daughter of Terraje. Even if she appeared indifferent, she couldn't be without the ambition of a conqueror. Even if she liked Shirone, she wasn't a child empty-headed enough to betray her own brother who held the power in Kazra.

"Aah, it's really pretty. Thank you, Shirone Oppa."

Looking at Uorin happily hugging the porcelain doll, Shirone understood why older brothers cared for their younger sisters.

But the delighted smile soon turned into a worried one. No matter how he thought about it, Objets weren't normal items.

"Uorin, I don't think you should spin this roulette again."

"Huh? Why not?"

Shirone looked at Daily Gift with discomfort.

"It doesn't make sense. No magic can violate the principle of equivalent exchange. Even Rule Eater is a form of mental equivalent exchange. But these Objets are too bizarre. If you keep getting gifts like this, someday there might be a price to pay."

Uorin blinked for a moment, then carefully placed the porcelain doll back into its box. She sat down, resting her chin on her hand, lightly tapping the now-ineffective Guideline of the Daily Gift.

"Hmmm, I understand what you're saying. But if you think about it that way, nothing in this world is 100% safe. For example, more people have died from kitchen knives than from Objets."

"But there are fewer Objet users than kitchen knife users. 1 out of 10 people dying is different from 10 out of 100 people dying. You can't judge by numbers alone. Besides, from what I've heard, it seems there are definitely people who die from Objets, right?"

Uorin handed Daily Gift back to Shirone.

"This Objet first appeared in the world 240 years ago. And among the people who owned this item, some indeed met miserable deaths."

Chapter 276 Hostile Friendly Relations (5)

"Equivalent exchange of luck and misfortune?"

"No. It's not a problem with the Objet, but with the human being. The first owner of Daily Gift was a shoemaker who lived in the lower class. He probably made a lot of money. But he couldn't overcome his obsession. On the days when he received a modest gift, he became extremely depressed. Such days were 75 out of 100. Eventually, he developed a mental illness, spent all day spinning the roulette, and ended up losing his mind."

It was a phenomenon that happens when humans become obsessed with probabilities.

In reality, people who sink to rock bottom due to gambling don't do it to make money. What they seek is the thrill of winning against the odds, and money was merely a tool to achieve that.

"As time passed, Daily Gift ended up in the hands of a noble. Obviously, not someone who would be staring at the roulette out of desperation for money. But one day, they hit miracle gift. And then..."

"And?"

Uorin pouted her lips as she imagined the situation at that time.

"The family was ruined."

"Ruined? Why?"

"When you hit a miracle, it gives you an Objet. The Objet that the noble received is a small stone called Nemesis. When someone comes into contact with it, the person's imagination becomes reality within a 20-meter radius. The nobles who acquired Nemesis became lost in their

imagination every day. You know how it is, Oppa. The thing about human desires..."

Uorin waved her index finger and clicked her tongue, perhaps embarrassed to say it out loud.

Shirone understood right away. And he didn't necessarily think it was all bad.

After all, every human lives with desires, and through imagination, they find balance with reality.

The problem arises when that imagination turns into reality.

"Anyway, that's how they were ruined. And Nemesis left to find a new owner. Even now, it's very popular among enthusiasts. But it seems no one can hold onto it for long. It's been known to return to auction houses within a month. Of course, it's true that Objet are dangerous. But that's a human problem, not the Objet. In fact, most owners of Daily Gift led comfortable lives."

If that's the case, Shirone had nothing to say. But he felt even stranger.

If it's not particularly dangerous, then what exactly are these Objets? Why do such things even exist in the world? Shirone glanced at Daily Gift.

The idea that one Objet could generate another was like a goose that lays golden eggs for collectors.

But on the other hand, he thought it was terribly destructive. If there was no limit to Objet production, the world would eventually be destroyed, if not immediately. When he shared his thoughts, Uorin also agreed to a certain extent.

"That's a possibility too. Maybe not in our generation, but still. I think we'll be fine. Even though Objets are special, they aren't necessarily more durable than other items. They eventually wear down and break over time. The most dangerous Objet that's come from a miracle so far is Nemesis. The Curia Auction classifies Nemesis as Grade A. Daily Gift is also Grade A. It seems like it can't offer anything beyond that level of a gift."

Curia was a world-class auction house, and he had heard about it from Nade before.

But what caught Shirone's attention wasn't that.

Daily Gift cannot give a gift higher than its assigned grade. While it sounded plausible at first, logically, it didn't make sense.

"How is that possible? The grade is decided by the auction house, but there's no way the Objet knows those criteria. Couldn't it be a coincidence? Even after 240 years, the frequency of hitting a miracle is low. If you consider the probability of a Grade A item coming out on top of that, there's not enough data to compile statistics."

"That may be true, but...."

Uorin didn't fully agree nor disagree, leaving her words vague. While Shirone's reasoning was logical, once you've owned more than 40 Objets, you naturally come across knowledge that the average person wouldn't have access to.

One of them was a VIP membership card issued by the Curia Auction House. On the back of the card, there were precautions written, and the first clause had this phrase: <Document> Objets do not guarantee 100% safety to users.

Members would often ask their curators to explain this first clause. The curators would share various cases that speculated on the origin of Objets, and from those stories, you could tell that the warning in the first clause wasn't just an intimidating phrase.

But Uorin was tight-lipped about this issue.

Becoming a Curia VIP member wasn't just about having money. You had to possess a sense of camaraderie regarding Objets.

Abusing privileges to non-VIP members was an act of lowering the value of Objets yourself.

Yet, Uorin's pride as a Terraje wouldn't let her stop the game, so she gave Shirone the chance to realize it on his

own.

"Come this way. I'll show you other Objets."

Uorin guided Shirone to the shelves. The first thing she introduced was a magnifying glass that could be found anywhere.

"This is an Objet called Just Once!. It shows a person's bare skin."

"You mean it lets you see through clothes?"

"Yes, but it only works within a distance of 5 centimeters."

With a playful "Hey!" Uorin aimed the magnifying glass at Shirone's lower body.

Despite having heard the Guideline, Shirone instinctively crossed his legs. Then, Uorin stuck her tongue out and handed him the magnifying glass.

"Hehe, you try it, Oppa."

Shirone shone the magnifying glass on his arm.

At first, all he could see was the fabric of his sleeve enlarged, but as he brought it closer, his bare skin came into view.

"That's fascinating. But if this is how it works, you might as well just look openly."

"Exactly! If you tried to peek at a woman, you'd get caught right away. That's why it's probably called Just Once!."

"Haha! That could be. But depending on how it's used, it could be useful. It seems like it could see through armor too, so it could be used for inspections."

Shirone returned Just Once!.

"How does it work? Seeing through things like that."

"I haven't fully checked it yet. The ability of an Objet doesn't necessarily depend on its function, so it could be the ability of the handle or frame. Honestly, it's not a high-grade Objet. I got it randomly, just to round out the collection."

Shirone thought so too. Compared to Daily Gift, this one seemed a bit lower in grade.

The next Objet Uorin introduced was a bookshelf. It was densely packed with works by renowned scholars.

"This is Zion Oppa's. It's an Objet called Philosopher. If you put a book on this shelf, the contents enter your head without having to read it. You can store up to 124 books in Kazra print. But keep in mind, once you remove a book from the shelf, the knowledge vanishes from your memory too."

Shirone was dumbfounded. The idea that just placing books on a shelf could implant their knowledge in your head was a whole new level of shock, different from Daily Gift.

"How can a bookshelf connect to a person's head?"

"Hmm, that's surprisingly simple. Some Objets have a tendency to be bound to the owner. At auctions, this is called Contract Type. In short, Philosopher is a Contract Type Objet that is currently bound to my Zion Oppa. This is Grade B according to Curia Auction House standards."

Shirone looked at the Philosopher in rapture.

He didn't know about the others, but he really wanted this Philosopher at least. He felt like he understood a little why collectors became obsessed with Objets.

Uorin also introduced several other objects, including a headband called Beauty that, when worn, causes the wearer to exercise for an hour while losing consciousness.

The Guideline said that you can lose weight effortlessly, but since you often make unsightly movements, you should lock the door if possible.

There was also an Objet called Soulless Massage. It consisted of a pair of stones, one red and one blue. When held in both hands, they would target any aching area, contracting and relaxing the muscles to relieve pain.

Shirone tried it himself and found it incredibly refreshing. When the arms, legs, shoulders, ankles, and soles of the feet were all massaged simultaneously, it felt so good he almost lost consciousness. Although he couldn't feel human warmth, the effect was top-notch.

'So that's why it's called Soulless Massage? This is probably around Grade D.'

Shirone's eyes lit up as he gained realization.

The names of the Objets he had encountered so far.

Moreover, the grades that even an outsider like himself could judge. These two facts revealed the secret of Objets.

'I see. Objets are...'

Daily Gift does not give Objets above Grade A. However, in order for the Guideline to be established, one of two hypotheses must be followed.

Either the Objet knows the auction company's criteria, or the Objet itself has an intrinsic value of its own.

The answer was the latter.

Objets are born with inherent value. Because their functions are invariably tied to human desires.

The fact that they had such clear purposes implied they weren't naturally occurring objects—they were artificial creations, born from the mind of an intelligent being.

The desire to become more beautiful, the desire for knowledge, the desire to receive gifts every day, the desire to make one's imagination come true.

In that sense, Nemesis, which fulfills the highest level of desire, deserved a Grade A rating no matter what anyone said.

'Then what is Grade S?'

If you consider the fact that Daily Gift cannot give anything higher than Grade A, it implies that there must be something classified as Grade S.

Shirone thought it was quite likely. Humans have not only animalistic desires but also higher-level aspirations.

If Nemesis, the pinnacle of animalistic desires, was Grade A, then Grade S was likely to be an Objet containing rational aspirations.

'Huhu. Looks like you've got a bit of a sense for it.'

As Shirone remained lost in thought for a long time, Uorin had a satisfied smile. This was the joy of collecting Objets.

On the other hand, Zion was burning up inside.

It was the first time Uorin had kept someone other than a Curia Auction House VIP member in the gallery for so long.

'That bastard dares...'

To Zion, Uorin was more than just a little sister. She was the most powerful weapon he possessed, even more than the royal blood that flowed through his veins.

'Why? What's so special about that bastard child that she's fussing over him?'

Unaware of Zion's seething emotions, Shirone quickly looked at the other items.

Looking back now, it was truly an enormous amount of wealth. Most of the Objets lined up along the shelves were Grade C or B, but there were also some Grade A objects that caught his eye.

This was a level of luxury even a king couldn't afford. It was a testament to how immense Uorin's power was as a direct descendant of Terraje Family.

Shirone, who had examined all the shelves on the east side, turned his gaze to the north. However, the space there was barren, with only a single sword on display.

"Huh? Uorin, what's that sword?"

"It's Demon Sword Armand. It's the Objet that Zion Oppa treasures the most."

It was the most treasured item for Zion, who even considered gold trivial. For someone like him, it wasn't particularly flashy.

It wasn't adorned with jewels or covered in elaborate ornamentation, and it didn't even have a scabbard. Yet, there was something subtly captivating about it. It had a unique design that was almost imperceptible to the average person.

But even that assessment vanished the moment he saw the jewel embedded in the center of the hilt. An overwhelmingly imposing presence was conveyed to the point that he couldn't look away.

As if Armand were calling him, his feet moved on their own. When he came to his senses, he had already arrived at the north wall.

Just as he was about to reach out and grasp the hilt, Zion shouted.

“That’s mine! Don’t touch it!”

Even after Shirone stepped back in surprise, Zion's distorted expression showed no sign of relaxing.

Demon Sword Armand was a Contract Type Objet that belongs to its owner. However, its presence is so strong that it sometimes reaches out to another people.

The exact Guideline for selecting the owners has not yet been revealed, but the very act of seducing someone else in the presence of the owner was unpleasant.

Shirone came to his senses and asked Zion.

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean to. But this sword, it’s Grade S, right?”

“What does it matter to you? You can't even afford Grade F, so stay away from my sword. Who do you think you are, touching a royal treasure? You’re just a bastard.”

Shirone turned around with a frown. No matter how much of a Grade S Objet Demon Sword Armand was, he didn't lack so much pride that he would remain interested after hearing such words.

Watching him, Zion changed his mind. Wasn't this a good thing? It was a good opportunity to show the gap between royalty and a commoner.

Chapter 277 Hostile Friendly Relations (6)

"Fine. If you're that curious, I'll introduce it specially to you."

"No, I'm not really...."

Before Shirone could finish speaking, Zion extended his hand towards the sword.

"Come, Armand."

A clear ringing of metal spread throughout the room.

The moment Shirone turned towards Armand, the sword floated up on its own and was drawn into Zion's hand.

Shirone, who had twisted his body again along the path of the sword, suddenly stopped moving. Before he knew it, the blade was at his throat. The cold metal hummed, sending high-pitched vibrations to his ears.

Irritated by the sudden interruption of her hobby, Uorin grumbled.

"Oppa! Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

"You stay still."

This time, even Zion wasn't willing to back down.

Glaring at Shirone, his lips curled in annoyance. The fact that he wasn't showing any fear, even with a blade at his neck, was driving him mad.

"What's wrong? Suddenly lost for words? Afraid I'll kill you?"

Shirone's nerves were on edge, feeling the vibration from beneath his chin.

He had already unfolded his Spirit Zone. The nature of Armand, conveyed through synesthesia, was truly bizarre. Was this really a sword, or a living organism?

"Why aren't you answering? Weren't you supposed to be some genius mage?"

It was a petty remark to make after ambushing someone.

Of course, Shirone was confident he could cast Teleportation faster than Zion's reaction speed. But he couldn't confidently say he would be able to evade the sword flying through the air afterward.

Zion, who took Shirone's silence as an acknowledgment of defeat, let out a roar of laughter and withdrew his sword.

"Hahaha! Of course, you couldn't. My guess was right.

Articles in magazines are all exaggerated. You're just a student; what greatest talent could you possibly have..."

Uorin put her hands on her waist and spoke with a sullen expression.

"Oppa, that's too much."

Zion paid no attention and threw Armand.

The demon sword emitting a chilling light swiftly and covertly flew back to its original place and stood upright.

Shirone belatedly realized that there had been no stand supporting the sword from the beginning.

"Do you know why I don't kill you? Because you're not even worth it. Even if it's not me, there are plenty of people in the royal palace who hate you. You probably felt it, right? This morning."

Shirone couldn't make sense of Zion's words. If it was morning, he was busy with the paternity test and there was nothing else unusual.

If he had to pick something, it would be that he couldn't contact Reina?

But if something had happened on her end, the palace should have already been buzzing with rumors.

"What are you talking about? What about this morning?"

This time, it was Zion who tilted his head.

Although he couldn't stand Shirone, he knew better than anyone that Shirone was not stupid.

In the end, it meant that Reina, the legal representative, had preemptively blocked information from reaching Shirone.

'Hmm, she's not ordinary either.'

He underestimated her because she wasn't the head of the household, but she turned out to be a more resourceful woman than he expected. Well, that must be why she was sent by Ogent Family.

In any case, it was clear that she didn't want last night's incident to come to light.

He admits it was an excellent decision, despite being made by the enemy.

"Hmph, now I see you're really a pitiful bastard. In the end, even your allies don't trust you. You're probably the only one in the entire palace who doesn't know about what happened last night."

Shirone spoke indignantly as if demanding an explanation.

"So I ask you, what happened!"

From what Zion was saying, it seemed like Reina knew about it. How could she know something that he didn't? It wasn't likely that he was deliberately kept in the dark. But what could have prevented even Amy from sending a message?

"Forget it. I'll go ask her myself."

Shirone, realizing he wouldn't get answers from Zion, headed towards the door. Just then, Uorin, who had been quietly listening the entire time, finally spoke up.

"Even if you go, you probably won't be able to meet her. I heard she moved quarters last night."

Shirone paused with his hand on the doorknob and turned to look at Uorin.

This was news to him as well. What in the world was happening around him?

"Moved? Where to?"

"I haven't heard that either. Your legal representative added a non-disclosure clause early in the morning. You'll probably find out if you go to the audience chamber."

She suggested he ask the highest authority directly.

Moreover, a non-disclosure clause. It wasn't a powerful diplomatic means, but from Reina's position as the relatively

weaker party, it was a bold move.

Finally sensing that the situation was seriously wrong, Shirone left the gallery without looking back.

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An awkward silence flowed in the gallery after Shirone left. Zion shot a glance at Uorin. She, either oblivious or indifferent to the tension in the air, continued sipping her tea with complete focus. Even if an hour passed like this, she wouldn't bat an eyelash. His sister was that kind of woman.

"You, whose side are you on?"

"What are you talking about all of a sudden? Side?"

Uorin responded with an innocent expression.

Zion eventually exploded with anger.

"Why are you being so nice to Shirone? That bastard is my enemy! An enemy who's trying to steal the throne! You should obviously be helping me!"

Uorin felt burdened by his blatant demand.

"Why are you acting like this, Oppa? We've never had a conversation like this before. Don't tell me you were nice to me expecting that? Just because I'm Terraje's daughter?"

"No, that's not it...."

Zion's face flushed with embarrassment.

No one would understand how humiliating it was to hear something like this from his own sister.

In fact, her mere presence was helpful.

Just by flaunting the title of being Uorin's older brother, any noble would eagerly spare no effort to support him. With that overwhelming power, Zion had eliminated countless formidable enemies over the years.

Uorin probably knew. Yet she had never brought it up even once.

That's why it was good. But who would have thought it would boomerang back like this and stab him in the back?

'Tch! So this is how you're going to play it?'

Zion turned around with a bitter heart and blew out his breath heavily.

Sensing that he was acting as if he would never speak to her again, Wuorin sighed and gently patted her sulking brother's back.

"Ei, come on. I get it. Do you think I haven't thought about it? It's just awkward for us to have this kind of conversation. The number one reason for royalty to split apart is this. There's no one here who can threaten you anyway. What are you so afraid of?"

Zion found himself wondering the same thing.

What exactly was he afraid of?

Shirone was just a bastard with no ties or foundation. All he has to boast about was his meager reputation in the magic society. The power of an archangel? This was a royal palace where even archmages were swarming.

"Alright. I was being petty. I'm sorry."

Zion immediately changed his attitude. He felt better knowing that his sister had understood his concerns.

Uorin said a few more things that Geon had always wanted to hear and then returned to her seat.

Unlike Zion, whose mouth was stretched from ear to ear, she poured tea as if she was tired, then sighed a long breath towards the ceiling.

'Phew, men are really.'

2. The Trap of Choosing Between Two Choices (1)

Shirone went to the administrative department to request an audience.

Permission was granted within 10 minutes. It was such a quick process that it felt like there had been instructions.

Upon arriving at the audience room, the royal guard opened the door. Orkamph, who was dressed, was waiting.

"I was just about to summon you. Come this way."

Shirone sat across from Orkamph.

He was wondering where to start, but Orkamph answered before he could even ask a question.

"Your family's quarters have been moved to the annex. I'll have someone guide you there."

The swift explanation almost sounded like a defense.

But Shirone hadn't come all the way to see the king just to find out where his family was staying. What Shirone wanted to know was even more crucial.

"What exactly is it that I don't know?"

Orkamph let out a sigh.

Being king meant there was nowhere to hide. Reina might have been able to escape difficult questions, but he couldn't.

"From last evening until dawn, there were five assassination attempts. Three poisonings and two by assassins. Lethal doses of poison were found in the food meant for your family. In the early hours, assassins were caught entering the royal quarter at one-hour intervals. We couldn't investigate the mastermind because they committed suicide, but it is a well-known fact that they were after you." Shirone felt as though he had been struck on the head with a hammer.

Assassinations are carried out by people, yet the sheer unpredictability of it made it feel like a natural disaster.

"Why would someone try to kill us?"

"What do you mean? Did you really think nothing would happen?"

To be honest... he did.

Of course, it wasn't that he had let his guard down. But being convinced that enemies would take action within 2 days of arriving at the palace was a completely different matter.

"I don't understand. Assassinating a candidate for the first prince is a serious crime. If the mastermind is revealed, it would be more than enough to destroy their family. Does it make sense to resolve such a grave matter in just 2 days?"

"Do you think they're foolish? No, Shirone. On the contrary, this is a very logical and clever move. They're exploiting a

blind spot in your thinking."

"Blind spot... in thinking?"

"Assassins are divided into two types: assassins and hitmen. There's a saying among traditional assassins: 'It's not the person that kills, but the situation.' You can dodge a blade, but you can't escape a situation. If they had to kill you, last night was the perfect opportunity."

Shirone corrected his error in his line of thought.

It wasn't that he had forgotten the danger of assassination. But on the other hand, he couldn't deny that he also thought, 'Surely not now?'

"An assassin's skill doesn't lie in wielding a blade but in creating the situation. That's why, in a royal palace, a single assassin is far more terrifying than a hundred guards. They pierce the blind spot in your thinking. Once you're caught, you have no choice but to offer your neck even while knowing."

Orkamph was right.

Why had he felt at ease?

No, it wasn't a mere oversight. You can't go through life scrutinizing every part of your thinking. Even if you corrected one thought, they would have found another blind spot and infiltrated.

"Shirone, stop trying to analyze everything with your head. This palace is filled with predators. No matter how great the price of failure is, no coward here would miss their chance to act out of fear."

Orkamph rose from his seat and walked over to his desk. As he poured strong liquor into a crystal glass, he said,

"Reina made the right judgment. Anyway, in 3 days you can become the official successor. There's no point in engaging in a mud fight, it'll only be a loss for us. So you too, pretend you don't know."

Shirone clenched his fist.

He acknowledged that Reina's judgment was correct, but his parents could have died in that situation.

"Are you telling me to just take it? We could use this as an opportunity to strike back."

Orkamph gave a bitter smile.

"Then let me ask you. Who do you think is behind this?"

"Of course, Terraje Faction...."

Shirone stopped mid-sentence.

Was it really only Terraje Faction targeting him? That was also a blind spot in his thinking that he had not considered until now.

"...I don't know."

"That's right, you don't know. It is no exaggeration to say that changing the first prince candidate is a matter that moves all the interests of the kingdom. Even those outside Terraje Faction would have plenty of reasons to eliminate you."

Shirone tried to narrow down the suspects.

The faces of numerous people flashed by. Even Orkamph....

"Does everyone want me to die?"

Orkamph returned to his seat, holding his crystal glass.

"If it's Terraje Faction behind this, it's likely a warning. If it's Neutral Faction, then they're testing the waters. They want an accurate source to know what kind of person you are."

"A warning? It was a lethal dose of poison. If we had ingested it, we would have died. Even Amy, who came along without any fault, almost died."

Orkamph gulped down the strong liquor. Shirone was overly agitated, but perhaps that was normal.

For the average person, assassination was a concept too distant to grasp. One might be robbed or hit by a carriage, but living each day knowing that a professional killer is targeting you? It would drive anyone insane in less than a month.

Such was the life Orkamph had lived. He lived his whole life cohabiting with assassins, eating, going to the bathroom, and even having children. Being able to forget it all with a

sip of strong liquor—he realized, perhaps he was the abnormal one.

Chapter 278 The Trap of Choosing Between Two Choices (2)

"Shirone, even something beautiful is just a monstrosity when seen up close. The world is not beautiful to anyone but you, and showing emotions is never good. Especially if you want to protect the people you love."

Shirone took a deep breath to calm his excitement. Now was the time to devise a solution rather than get angry.

"What should I do from now on?"

"Show them your strength. If they want a clear reason to choose sides, providing them with solid evidence could be one approach."

Orkamph finally revealed what he had truly wanted to say.

"I'll arrange a place. Give a demonstration of Ataraxia. If you show them your power there, at least you'll force them to distinguish friend from foe. Then, at the very least, they won't touch your family."

Shirone's gaze lowered. As his mind settled calmly, a hot sensation came up his throat and got stuck in his throat.

"So that's... the real reason you called me here."

Orkamph let out a small breath. As expected, lies didn't work on Shirone.

"Have you heard of the Valkyrie? It is an army organized by Terraje in preparation for the Final War. The reason Kazra Kingdom was able to survive economically was that we secured contracts for weapons from them. But the situation isn't optimistic. The reason Terraje planted their children here is to eventually drive me out and swallow Kazra one

day. We need to strengthen our influence within Valkyrie even more. Your Ataraxia is fully capable of doing so."

Shirone felt the strength drain from his body. He had vaguely guessed, but tears welled up in his eyes when he heard these words from someone he thought was his birth parent.

In the end, blood ties weren't important. What they wanted was Ataraxia, the ability of an archangel.

"I'm asking you. Show them. Just by demonstrating it before the nobles, the impact will be immense. It's an opportunity to sway the neutral faction to our side."

Shirone forced himself to swallow the tears that were threatening to spill. Orkamph wasn't crying, so neither could he.

"Did you think I would obey readily if you said that?"

"On the contrary. That's why I'm thinking of making a proposal. You said before that you wanted to go home. Does that still hold true?"

"No, it's not. I want to go back even more than before."

Orkamph wasn't displeased by Shirone's sarcastic words.

"If you perform the demonstration, I'll let you return home as soon as the paternity test is finished. You can go to the magic academy or do whatever you wish. You won't even have to come to the royal palace if you don't want to. What do you think?"

Shirone couldn't just pass up this proposal either.

Now that he had experienced the royal palace, he realized that returning home wouldn't be as simple as he initially thought. In that situation, Orkamph's proposal was definitely tempting.

"But then Ataraxia won't be available for you. I'll be needed eventually, so how do you plan on convincing the nobles?"

("하지만 그렇게 되면 아타락시아는 이용할 수 없을 텐데요. 결국에는 제가 필요하게 될 텐데, 대신들을 어떻게 설득시킬 생각이죠?"/I don't know why Shirone mentioned minister out of nowhere so I changed it to noble.)

Orkamph felt uneasy as if his true intentions had been exposed. The reason he proposed the demonstration was for a much greater purpose than drawing in the neutrals.

Arius had said that if he saw Ataraxia directly, he could find a way to replicate it.

Once replication succeeds, Shirone would be unnecessary. No, rather, it would be better for him to leave the royal palace. Even for Shirone's own life...

"That's why a secret agreement is necessary. I'll announce to the nobles that you will return after graduating from the magic academy. Would one year suffice? During that time, I will purge Terraje Faction. After that, we can each go our own way."

In the end, it meant that if he couldn't purge Terraje Faction, the deal would be nullified.

However, Shirone nodded as if that level of risk was natural. As long as he was guaranteed one year, whether the promise was kept afterward didn't really matter.

He was planning to move his residence once he graduated from the magic academy anyway. It's just a matter of thinking that the moving distance has become a bit farther. At least until he had gained enough power to stand unshaken by royal authority, he could live that way.

"Who will be attending the demonstration?"

"I've already sent word. All the high-ranking nobles will gather. They're expecting a grand show."

Shirone looked at Orkamph with sorrowful eyes.

"You knew from the beginning that I couldn't refuse."

"Shirone, it was you who first requested this proposal three days ago. I merely created a justification to allow it."

Orkamph remained cold to the end.

But thanks to that, Shirone regained his composure. He would do this not for Kazra, but for his family.

"Fine. Let me know when the preparations are finished. For now, I need to go see my 'parents.'"

He wanted to just leave right away. He also knew that even if he did so, Orkamph wouldn't reproach him.

But Shirone maintained his composure and exited with courtesy.

After all, Orkamph was the king of a neighboring kingdom.

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Upon arriving at the quarters, Shirone first checked on his parents' well-being.

Their eyes were sunken as if they hadn't slept all night.

Though they were forcing smiles so as not to worry their child, Olena's face was as pale as a blank sheet.

Even for Shirone, who had trained in magic, his heart was racing. For her mother, who had lived her life without causing harm to others, the stress must have been unbearable.

'I'm sorry, Mother.'

Amy, who greeted him, neither forced a bright smile nor showed signs of tension. She just raised her hand in greeting with a bitter smile.

Shirone felt a strong sense of camaraderie in her appearance.

Reina, who had been in a meeting with the attendants in the next room, greeted him with a bright expression.

"You're here, Shirone. We've been waiting."

Despite everyone looking worn out, Reina alone seemed full of energy. As expected of a court musician, she was clearly accustomed to the palace atmosphere.

While it was refreshing to see this new side of her, Shirone couldn't shake the discomfort in that moment.

It's not that he disliked her. But no one would understand how he felt, having been a fool for a day while his family's lives were in someone else's hands.

"I met Orkamph."

Reina's expression hardened.

Not only from Shirone's cold voice, but also from the way he addressed the king by name, one could guess how angry he

was about this incident.

"I'm sorry for not telling you in advance. But I was afraid you'd worry..."

"I understand the reason. But everyone was in danger."

Reina swallowed hard. It was the expression that appeared only when Shirone was truly angry, which she had seen once at their family estate.

Now that she was on the receiving end, it felt like her heart was freezing. Had her father felt this same chill back then?

"It's okay now. We've strengthened the security procedures. We've requested the guard to further enhance security..."

"You should have told me."

Reina's mouth shut tight like a clam. Amy, watching the situation unfold as if she were observing a fire, let out a sigh.

'See? I told you we should have said something.'

This mess was a result of underestimating how much Shirone cared about his family.

But honestly, Amy was in no position to say anything either. Even though she had clearly anticipated Shirone's reaction, she had followed Reina's judgment because she knew Reina's decision was ultimately the right one.

Even now, with Shirone fuming like this, if he had found out earlier, the situation could have spiraled out of control.

There's no way Shirone wouldn't have known this fact.

That's why, in the end, it was Reina's victory.

Vincent, feeling the awkwardness, tried to console Shirone.

"Shirone, Ms. Reina had no choice. Moreover, it was a decision made after seeking our consent. If you're upset, be mad at me."

Shirone lowered his head. He had known that from the beginning.

He was just angry.

The thought of his family being threatened with assassination, his so-called birth parents being obsessed

with Ataraxia, and now even Reina shunned him. The sheer frustration of it all made him want to scream.

"I'm sorry. I know Reina Noona saved all of us. I just... I felt so frustrated, and it got the better of me."

Reina heard the faint tremor in Shirone's voice. What on earth did Orkamph say to him that this usually strong child returned so broken?

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. You had every right to be upset. Informing you was also one of my duties. From now on, I'll report everything without omission."

As Shirone managed a forced smile, Reina finally relaxed a bit.

As expected, this child was the most beautiful when he was smiling. It made Reina even more determined not to see him sad.

In order to leave the palace safely, Reina knew she needed to remain level-headed. Even if the same situation arises, Reina intends to make the same judgment.

Once the tension between them subsided, Amy asked.

"So what did you talk about when you went to the audience chamber?"

"Ah, that's...."

Shirone said what Orkamph had proposed. Amy sank into careful thought, then nodded.

"Hmm, it's a decent proposal. Of course, assuming he keeps his promise."

"It doesn't matter. We have to move after graduation anyway. We can think about the next problem when we get there. So I accepted the proposal for now."

"That makes sense. Same for me."

The concept of a "main family" for nobles exists because their place of residence changes depending on their profession.

Amy's older brother, Diane, was the head of the archers' division at the royal palace, and her second brother, Ares,

who was an explorer, was always wandering remote places, so his current whereabouts were unknown.

Globally, the employment rate for mages is about 80 percent, and the hiring rate is close to 99 percent. The reason the employment rate is lower than the hiring rate is that there are quite a few mages who refuse jobs.

But competition was fierce, and most students, upon graduating, moved to the capital, Bashka, to find work or prepare for certification exams. If those options don't pan out, many went abroad for further studies.

Although there are magic institutions in Creas too, Shirone didn't want to end his magic career in a provincial region. In the future, when he reach the certified fifth class, he might be appointed as the vice-chairman of the Magic Association Creas Branch, but right now, there were many things he wanted to accomplish.

Alpheas Magic Academy was a kingdom-designated institution, and upon graduation, you receive a non-official tenth rank mage certificate. Once you obtain the certificate, guilds give you work, so you can also live as a mercenary. This way, he wouldn't even need to buy a house, making it more convenient to move around.

He thought that maybe, after living like that for a while, he might meet someone special and eventually settle down somewhere.

Amy, as if supporting Shirone's resolve, clapped her hands and cheered him on.

"Alright! If we're going to do this, let's do it right!"

@

The Colosseum was built in a basin area 2 kilometers north of Kazra Royal Palace. It used to be a huge gambling den where warriors fought wild beasts and nobles placed bets. However, due to financial issues in the royal palace, it had been indefinitely closed.

The unkempt sandy ground still bore traces of blood. No matter how much the workers swept with their brooms, the

red bloodstains wouldn't be erased.

The nobles entered with their guards, and Amy and Reina also took their seats in the third-floor stands.

Orkamph had considered Shirone's feelings and allowed his parents to attend, but since Olena's health had worsened, it was decided that Vincent would stay behind at the quarter with her.

Shirone was waiting for his time in the waiting room underground the Colosseum.

Around him, there were exercise machines and sandbags once used by champions, and various weapons were displayed on shelves.

As the iron door of the waiting room opened, Zion and Uorin entered. It seemed to be Uorin's first time in the underground waiting room, as she curiously glanced around. Shirone no longer welcomed anyone. After learning of last night's events, everyone seemed like an enemy to him.

Zion approached with a waddling gait and said, "What a desolate place. I wonder what thoughts went through the minds of the warriors waiting here. Were they praying not to be eaten by the lions? Or perhaps they were planning how to break down that door and escape."

"No, they must have been determined to kill their enemy. Because that's the only path left for a warrior."

Zion smiled crookedly. As expected, when it came to words, he was no match for a mage.

Chapter 279 The Trap of Choosing Between Two Choices (3)

"Hmph, your mouth is still lively as ever. What's the reason for this clown show? Did Father say he'd make you king later or something?"

"I'm sure I told you clearly. I'm not interested."

Zion turned away without even listening. He walked along the wall, taking in the scenery of the waiting room.

In fact, today's demonstration schedule was unexpected even for him. He hadn't expected Orkamp to propose a real showdown so quickly.

But it also meant that things were quite urgent on their side as well.

Zion, who arrived in front of Shirone again after circling the waiting room widely, made a tempting proposal.

"I will send you home."

Shirone asked back with a puzzled expression.

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you're not interested in the position of the first prince? Then what you gain from this demonstration is freedom. I'm saying I'll give that to you. No matter how much you avoid the eyes of Kazra Royal Palace, you can't avoid Terraje's gaze. We have a global reach. But if I send you off? Kazra will become mine, and you'll gain your freedom. It's a win-win for both of us, don't you think?"

It was a sweet temptation, almost impossible to refuse. But it wasn't something to accept easily.

It was said that Empress Terraje had planted Zion to swallow Kazra. Therefore, if Zion becomes the king, Orkamp and

Eliza will die. Without cutting off the royal family's legitimacy, they can't plan for the future.

"What do you want me to do?"

"It's simple. Ruin the show. Whether it's the power of the archangel or whatever, just mess it up. And tell the nobles. The rumors were exaggerated, it succeeded because of luck, it's not magic that someone as insignificant as me can do, like that."

Shirone nodded in understanding.

Today's demonstration was a political stage. Whether the nobles believed the lie or not, once Shirone raised the white flag, the game would be over.

However, what weighed on his mind was the death of Orkamp and Eliza. Was it really okay to do that?

No matter how much they abandoned their child, they at least kept him alive. Does he have the right to repay that tiny bit of grace with death?

"I'll think about it. No, give me time to think."

"Take as much as you need. Anyway, I'll hear your answer at the Colosseum. Whichever way you choose, Kazra will end up in my hands. Make a wise decision."

Shirone, with his head lowered, heard the sound of Zion leaving. But his mind was too complicated to pay attention to it.

If he helps Orkamp, he'll be chased by Terraje Faction for life. But if he sides with Zion, Orkamp and Eliza will die.

'What should I do? What on earth do they expect me to do?'

Uorin, who had recovered her pet cat that had been wandering around the waiting room, finished preparing to leave and said goodbye to Shirone.

"Oppa, stay strong."

Shirone looked up at Uorin with lifeless eyes. She probably knew about his dilemma. But she offered no advice other than words of comfort.

He tried to convey his urgent feelings with earnest eyes, but she just tilted her head and smiled as if she knew nothing.

Shirone looked at the ground with a resigned expression. What on earth is he hoping for? There's no way there could be someone to help him in the royal palace, is there?

At that moment, Uorin sighed.

"Haah."

And then, in a calm and lowered voice, she said.

"Do you want me to help you, Oppa?"

Shirone raised his head again.

Uorin was still beautiful. But the bright feeling that was evident just a moment ago had disappeared.

"Of course, I could help you."

Uorin stepped back a couple of steps as if reestablishing the distance.

"But I could also choose not to. What's important is justification. For example, let's say there's a wealthy person who owns 100 billion gold. He wouldn't mind giving 1 gold to anyone. But he doesn't do that. Not because he's stingy, but because there's no justification. If he were to give 1 gold to someone for no reason, he'd eventually have to give 1 gold to everyone in the world. You don't have justification yet, Oppa. So you have to create a reason why I must help you."

"What... should I do?"

"That's also up to you, oppa. You might lose a lot in this demonstration. But it's also an opportunity to gain something more precious. I hope you make a wise choice."

With those final words, Uorin headed towards the door.

Shirone couldn't see the beautiful smile he had hoped for until the end.

Left alone in the waiting room, Shirone fell into thought. He was analyzing her words left at the last moment of choice.

'I see.'

Losing a lot meant the material loss he would suffer if he gave up the title of first prince. On the other hand, gaining something precious referred to the lives of Orkamp and Eliza.

If Zion becomes the king of Kazra, Uorin will also have justification to help him.

In other words, she's saying this: Give the throne to Zion, and she'll guarantee the lives of his birth parents.

'Yes, that will do.'

Shirone made up his mind to ruin the demonstration.

Perhaps Orkamp would be disappointed, but ultimately, he would be saving his life, so he would have fulfilled his responsibility as a son.

The lamp on the ceiling lit up and a noisy siren sounded.

Having organized his thoughts, Shirone entered the elevator installed on the wall. When he pulled the switch, the elevator ascended to the ground with clanking sounds.

What he saw upon arriving at the ground was only enclosed darkness and iron bars installed 10 meters ahead.

The sunlight was as faint as it was before sunset, but the champions of long ago would have rekindled their hope for life while looking at the intense sun of midday.

The iron bars went up, and Shirone walked to the center of the Colosseum.

Zion's words about it being a clown show were right. As numerous gazes focused on him, he felt as if he were stripped naked.

The target was standing in the direction of the setting sun.

As if found in haste as a last resort, it was an extremely shabby wooden board.

It's not even a stone slingshot, but they expected him to cast magic on that? If the intention was to mock, it was perfect.

He snorted, thinking about how even choosing one target would have caused a power struggle.

"We will now begin the qualification test for the first prince candidate."

A qualification verification for the first prince candidate. It was certainly a fitting excuse to put on a clown show.

Shirone paid his respects to Orkamp and said,

"Your Majesty, magic is a powerful force. If we're not careful, there is a risk of damaging property. I would like to ask for your understanding regarding that first."

It meant that the precious target might be destroyed. It was a sharp jab at those mocking him.

Orkamp quickly grasped his intent and supported Shirone's point.

"Do not worry. The target is merely a pretext; as long as you can showcase your abilities, it doesn't matter what you do." Shirone felt delighted as if he had given them a blow. But in the end, this was all he could do.

Feeling a bit of self-loathing, he turned towards the target. As everyone held their breath, he concentrated and cast Halo.

An intensely bright light, like a star, pierced the space and began to move slowly, drawing a gigantic circle.

He had to draw it as large as possible.

He had heard from Amy after Heaven's Trial duel that Halo could shock those with sensitive senses. If so, it would surely work on someone here.

It might be a meaningless resistance, but without doing what he could, he couldn't create any variables.

Finally, as the Halo was completed, a brilliantly shining light ring appeared.

Amy quickly surveyed the surroundings.

First, Reina frowned. If she felt pressure from the Halo, it meant her Schema sensitivity was quite high.

On the other hand, the nobles were calm. Most of the nobles at the center of power were from the administrative branch, so they were far from Schema or Spirit Zones.

But those who guarded them were different. Without exception, they were all biting their teeth desperately.

'Hmm, they're certainly strong ones...'

Zion and Uorin didn't seem particularly shocked.

Since she hadn't expected much from them anyway, Amy looked toward where Orkamp was.

To be exact, it was the tall man standing behind Orkamp. There are many experts in this place, but none were as highly tense as that man. Moreover, he was covering his face with his right hand, as if he still couldn't adapt.

'Damn it! That startled me.'

Arius decided to believe in the existence of the soul. Because at the moment the Halo was born, he felt as if something inside his mind had flown outward. It was that much of a terrifying shock.

For him, who hadn't been mentally stunned for more than a second since joining the Seven Magical Sins, it was astonishing.

'He has materialized the Immortal Function into a form. Is this the basic mental system of the Nephilim?'

Having finished analyzing the Halo, Arius waited calmly. Through this demonstration, he planned to figure out the mechanism and find a way to break the encapsulation. As Ataraxia began to accumulate, his eyes shone intensely.

'It has begun! First is a binary choice. Is it based on binary numbers?'

Starting with the first magic circle embedding itself in the center of the Halo, a shower of light surged in.

The nobles marveled at the spectacular sight, but Arius organized all the concepts accumulating in Ataraxia without missing a single one.

'Algebra. Musho Geometry. Multi-Operation Equations. Vanessa's Theorem. Spherical Integration. Eisen's Relativity. And that, Hegel's Paradox?'

As the concepts accumulated within Ataraxia, his thoughts began to overload. His head felt like it was about to explode. As the accumulation process passed the halfway point, even the Zeta Function, the cutting edge of human intellect, appeared. It was a kind of hypothesis that was thought to contain the blueprint of the universe, a formula for discovering patterns in prime numbers.

Arius stopped thinking. No, he couldn't.

From the Zeta Function onwards, everything was a concept he had never seen before, and it was being embedded into the Halo at an incredible speed.

Unanalyzable.

'This fucking....'

As the accumulation ended, Ataraxia was born as an iridescent, integrated concept. It was the reality of a supreme magic amplification circle that humans could never realize.

Arius shuddered with a sense of defeat.

He had only managed to understand 65% of the entire circuit. Compared to Shirone, who gave up at the 17% point when he was possessed by Ikael, it was an astonishing level of intellect, but not knowing even 1% is the same as knowing nothing.

Shirone stared at the Ataraxia that appeared before his eyes and fell into thought. From now on, his life would change depending on what he chose.

After about 10 seconds, the nobles who had been watching closely gradually lost interest.

Knowing how important one second was in real combat, they were only disappointed by Shirone's inexperience.

"What are you doing? If you're going to do it, do it, if not, don't."

"He's indecisive. Or does he need some more preparation steps?"

Nobles who commanded archmages wouldn't have the patience for a student-level demonstration. As complaints arose here and there, Zion added his voice.

"Haha! Rumors are often exaggerated. How many high-level mages are there in the royal palace, yet a mere aspiring mage is being verified with this?"

Then, those presumed to be part of Terraje Faction chimed in one after another.

Leaving them to set the atmosphere as they pleased, Zion arrogantly looked down at Shirone.

Now the stage was all set. All that remained was for Shirone to confess his inadequacy.

Shirone listened to the voices coming from all directions. As expected, the majority were Zion's subordinates.

'Okay, let's stop. From the beginning, he was too strong of an enemy for me to deal with.'

Shirone dropped his shoulders powerlessly and opened his mouth.

"I..."

The first word of a crucial announcement came out, but the nobles' murmuring showed no signs of stopping.

Realizing his voice was too small, Shirone took a deep breath and filled his lungs with air so that everyone could hear.

'Wait...'

Then suddenly, a strange thought occurred to him.

Was giving up really the right decision?

It was a thought that suddenly emerged, pushed up not from his head but from his body.

Chapter 280 The Trap of Choosing Between Two Choices (4)

Throughout his life, Shirone had never judged others based on what they possessed. The inertia of those 18 years made the alarm of doubt ring in his mind.

Only then did he feel like his head was starting to work. This was a trap of a false dilemma. It was a battle where no matter what he chose, Zion would win.

The reason the logic of a false dilemma is scary is that it preemptively cuts off possibilities other than the given choices. They present something bad and something worse, inducing you to choose the bad option to make you feel like you gained something, but in reality you are being played by the enemy.

Shirone realized that he had misunderstood what Uorin was trying to say.

No one gives away even a single gold coin without reason.

In other words, no one will help those who give up.

It was a delusion to think that if he begged with a pitiful face, Terraje Faction would spare him.

The palace is a den of predators. Show weakness, and they'll strip the flesh from your bones.

That was what Uorin had been trying to convey.

If you want to live, growl. Bare your teeth and growl. Wield your claws so that no one thinks you're easy prey.

The moment you stop fighting, every beast in the royal palace will pounce on you to devour you.

"Huuuuu!"

Shirone finally exhaled.

He didn't know how long he had been holding his breath, but the air kept coming out endlessly, as if even the stray thoughts cluttering his mind were being expelled.

As his mind cleared, the target became clear.

Shirone assumed the proper stance, preparing to cast his magic. But the nobles continued to sneer.

In their minds, if Shirone had any sense, he would have deployed a fast and flashy technique by now.

The experts can judge magical skills, and what they wanted to verify was Shirone's will. With such a lukewarm approach, no noble would be convinced.

But Shirone didn't care.

He would become a fierce beast.

With that thought, he focused his mind, and a Photon Cannon burst into existence before him.

Shirone compressed the photons endlessly. The ball of light contracted and expanded, trembling violently with intensity. Amy, noticing that the casting of Photon Cannon was taking far longer than usual, felt a chill down her spine.

In the Heaven's Trial duel, even in a near-exhausted state, it had enough power to shut down the system. She couldn't even imagine what would happen if the strongest Photon Cannon passed through Ataraxia.

'Not enough. This still won't quench my anger!'

Shirone continued to compress the sphere of light.

From the beginning, there had been no true allies or enemies here. Whether it was Terraje Faction or Orkamph Faction, they all simply intended to use him for their own purposes.

'More... more!'

Tears welled up in my eyes. Memories from the past three days came flooding back to him all at once.

As he recalled his mother's frightened appearance, his Photon Cannon compressed rapidly and transformed into a state of blinding white light that could no longer contain the

photons. Photon Cannon, now the size of a human head, trembled violently, as if it would burst from its center.

Amy jumped to her feet. It was too extreme, and the unpredictability made it dangerous.

But before she could shout at Shirone, the Photon Cannon penetrated Ataraxia. Having already experienced it in Heaven's Trial, she tightly closed her eyes and twisted her body.

Flash!

A huge tunnel of light appeared in front of Shirone, pushing away everything in its path. Even the atmosphere.

A deafening explosion followed, leaving everyone's eardrums ringing, while the intense light erased vision momentarily.

For a time, everything was dark.

As the eyes adapted to the scenery, the world that was revealed was completely different from a second ago. Not only the inner walls of the Colosseum but even the distant ridges of the surrounding hills had disappeared, reduced to dust, with the particles now floating above the ground like a massive cloud of smoke.

When the wind began to disperse the dust, the path left by the Photon Cannon became clear. A flat plain, wide enough for dozens of carriages to pass through, stretched endlessly to the horizon.

The nobles were surrounded by high-ranking mages. The mages were casting strong localized barriers with grim expressions, while the knights guarded the perimeter. Had Shirone shown any suspicious signs, the knights would have stormed into the Colosseum.

"What insolence! What is the meaning of this?!"

A fat noble slammed his chair and stood up, furious. The other nobles were just as shaken.

What would have happened if the magic had been directed toward the audience?

If Shirone had turned in that direction, the knights would have beheaded him instantly, but that would have been within the rules. In fact, didn't they also let their guard down, thinking that a student was demonstrating magic? The fat noble hurled insults at Shirone. But at the words of a noble next to him who looked like a wolf, he quickly shut his mouth and sat down.

This event had already been approved by Orkamph. To oppose it now would be no different from exposing their true loyalties.

"That, that bastard..."

Zion trembled with anger.

It was not only that Shirone had chewed up his proposal like a dog chewing gum, but the terrifying power of magic had shattered his pride.

Does it even make sense for a human to push away a mountain?

No, even if it's possible, it's at the level of an archmage.

The fact that a mere aspiring mage could wield such powers spoke volumes about how unfair the human world was.

Zion, who had always refused to be equal with anyone, now felt a jealousy so strong he could hardly bear it.

Such overwhelming power should only belong to royalty. If a mere bastard with no power, wealth, or status was allowed to possess such strength, how could the kingdom possibly manage to endure?

"I heard your answer clearly, Shirone. I'll be watching you!"

Zion shouted loud enough for everyone to hear and stormed toward the exit. A large group of nobles followed him out.

It was likely the Terraje Faction, but Shirone didn't care. He was just trying to hold on to his consciousness that was reeling from the aftereffects of casting the full-power Photon Cannon.

This was the first time he hadn't collapsed after casting Ataraxia. It was thanks to his increased endurance, but it

was also a testament to how fiercely he had willed himself to stay standing.

Shirone turned his head with an intense gaze. Uorin was still in her seat. But her only reaction was slightly raising her eyebrows and lifting the corners of her mouth as if mocking. Rising from her seat, she whispered something to her cat and left the Colosseum without hesitation.

Late Night Ball (1)

Orkamph's steps were quicker than usual.

He was not one to get easily excited, but this time he found it hard to control his emotions.

Only after pushing open the door to the study and gulping down the water on the desk could he calm his mind.

Ataraxia.

It was a truly catastrophic magic. No, was this really such a new revelation?

What he saw was the power of the archangel, the supreme commander of Heaven. And it was said that there were seven more archangels of equal strength in Heaven.

Suddenly, a wave of doubt washed over him.

Would Valkyrie alone really be enough to oppose them?

'Enough. Let's not look too far ahead. Anyway, it's a good thing for me.'

If only they could replicate Ataraxia, then joining the 'Crusade', the supreme national gathering of Valkyrie, would not be a dream.

The 12 most powerful monarchs in the world.

Although the position of the 'Three Emperors', to which Empress Terraje belongs, was unreasonable, the 'Seven Kings' below that is sufficiently worth considering.

If that happens, even Terraje will have no choice but to recognize Kazra's independence.

What would it feel like to freely handle the world's economy, culture, society, life, knowledge, and art? Orkamph was already imagining such things.

"How is it?"

As Orkamph asked, Arius appeared from a corner of the study.

Such an entrance would normally be displeasing from a monatch's perspective, but Arius had an odd stubbornness in him.

However, unlike before, today he wasn't being particularly theatrical. His face was as flushed as Orkamph's.

"It was certainly amazing. Ataraxia, a wonderful ability."

"That's not what I'm asking. Can we replicate it now?"

"It's impossible."

Orkamph thought he had misheard. But no, his ears were fine.

Suppressing his rising anger was no easy task.

He had done whatever Arius asked for until now. He even pushed for a demonstration while stabbing his son's heart.

"What do you mean it can't be done? Is it another capsulization issue?"

"That's one primary reason, yes. But even if we broke the capsulization, it wouldn't make a difference. Ataraxia is a power that transcends human understanding. In other words, even Shirone himself doesn't fully comprehend it."

"Does that make sense? I clearly saw with my own two eyes Shirone casting Ataraxia. Then are you saying Shirone is not human?"

"In a sense, yes. Something non-human resides within his human body. Shirone doesn't understand and cast Ataraxia either. Perhaps this explanation will make more sense: it simply works."

Orkamph's eyes grew cold.

"Speak clearly. You must convince me with your answer this time."

Feeling the murderous intent, Arius finally dropped his smirk.

"The most likely scenario is that Ataraxia is engraved deep within Shirone's subconscious. Perhaps it's close to instinct? If that's the case, it's not surprising that he can wield the

power without understanding the principle. After all, we don't need to understand how to breathe in order to breathe."

"Instinct. Then can't we extract it from there?"

"Well, instincts are part of what we call primal consciousness, governed at a genetic level. No matter how skilled a grave robber I am, diving into that depth is impossible. Or rather, it's possible to dive in, but I would be crushed by Shirone's subconscious before I could retrieve anything."

Orkamph slammed the desk.

All he had heard so far was that it couldn't be done. And now Arius was saying he wouldn't even attempt it for fear of losing his life.

"Do you think I hired you to hear that kind of nonsense? If we don't obtain Ataraxia, then...!"

"There is one way."

Orkamph changed his expression as if nothing had happened.

Of course, the Seven Sins of the Black Line wouldn't have blabbed about his incompetence without having a solution in mind.

"I apologize for not mentioning it sooner. But this method could be quite... difficult. It will require you, Your Majesty, to make a significant commitment."

"I am always ready for whatever it takes. What is this method?"

Arius looked around and whispered in his ear. Normally, he didn't care whether Eliza was eavesdropping or not, but this time, it was better to be cautious.

"W- What did you say?"

Orkamph raised his eyes in shock. On the other hand, Arius' eyes narrowed like a snake's.

When he smiled, it was hard to notice, but with his expression gone, his face resembled that of a venomous snake.

"It's the only way."

Orkamph leaned on the desk with trembling hands.

"That, that can't be. Do you know what that means?"

"Of course. But if we use this method, we can definitely obtain Ataraxia."

Orkamph exhaled heavily.

Obtaining Ataraxia. Possessing an ability designated as triple S in Valkyrie.

Kazra's independence. Seven Kings. Various thoughts flashed through his mind.

"But... Is it really necessary to go that far?"

"Your Majesty, I've said this many times, but we don't have time. It's time for a quick decision."

Orkamph shook his head.

He needed time. Even if they went through with it, how could he handle the aftermath that would come rushing in? He would need countermeasures in place for that.

"Just give me a little, a little time to think."

Arius' face distorted hideously for a moment. But when Orkamph raised his head, he returned to a smiling face as if nothing had happened.

"Of course, this is a matter that requires time. I understand. Call for me once you're certain."

Arius paid his respects and left the study.

Walking quickly down the corridor, he leaned against the wall where no one was and spat out curses.

"Tsk, stupid bastard. Pathetic fool. Indecisive shit."

Of course, Orkamph's reaction was normal. After finding his bloodline after 18 years, he called him and made him endure all kinds of humiliation and insults, and now he's trying to take away the most precious thing.

But a king's ruthlessness should know no limits. Judging that this was acceptable but that isn't, having such barriers to judgment means that the vessel is small.

If you start to hesitate, you can't have anything. Even if you follow the suggestion later, the pangs of conscience will

disturb your mind. Such people will ruin everything someday.

'What a disappointment, Orkamph. I thought you were a cold-hearted monarch, but you're no different from a common noble.'

Chapter 281 Late Night Ball (2)

Most of the Black Line are wanted criminals. The Seven Sins in particular were branded as world-class atrocious criminals, so they absolutely need a safe hideout to stay in one place.

Working under such a lacking master, it's only a matter of time before one finds their neck on the guillotine. As this thought crossed his mind, he couldn't help but worry about his own safety.

"Hmm, maybe it's time to wrap things up here?"

The reason bounty hunters from the Red Line, who had been tracking him with crazed eyes, had never caught Arius until now was thanks to his beast-like instinct for knowing exactly when to strike and when to flee.

His intuition, honed by over a decade as a fugitive, was warning him that if he didn't leave now, it would be dangerous.

'But it's a shame to end it like this....'

Ataraxia. The biggest catch in his grave robber career had been ensnared in his net.

Though material wealth played a part in why he dove into grave robbing, the greater motivator was to satisfy the intellectual hunger of an Unlocker.

In that sense, the power of Archangel Ikael was certainly something that piqued his curiosity.

'Should I just act crazy and dive down to the first level? No, it's impossible alone. Especially since a mage's unconscious is much stronger than ordinary people's. I can't rely on Orkamph either.'

As Arius propped his chin and sank into thought, he slowly raised his head. Glancing down the empty hallway, he flashed a thin smile and spoke.

"What's the matter?"

When an unknown official close to Zion revealed himself from the corner, a sneer naturally formed. The official was neither a mage nor an assassin. But as always, his presence couldn't be felt until he showed signs of himself first.

"There's someone who wishes to meet you, Sir Arius."

Arius knew who Zion was. But the official refrained from mentioning his master's name.

It wouldn't do anyone any good if it were known that Arius, Orkamph's close aide, was secretly meeting and dealing with Zion, a key figure of Terraje Faction.

"That's a welcome proposition. Lead the way."

As the administrator turned around and took a step, Arius stared at the old man's Achilles tendon.

He walked briskly, not making a sound.

Despite appearing as light as a cat, the calves hidden beneath the robe were undoubtedly highly developed.

However, that didn't necessarily mean he was a martial arts master. It was more like the craftsmanship of someone who had spent a lifetime tending to their master's needs.

'Haha, what an interesting place. The Royal Palace.'

@

"Damn it! That bastard made a complete fool of me!"

The glass bottle Zion threw smashed against the gallery door. The shattered glass flew everywhere, startling the cat sleeping on the floor into the air.

Unbothered, Uorin, sitting at the table, raised a teacup to her lips and took a sip.

"Why? I thought it was great. It was quite spectacular."

Zion glared at his sister.

Her nonchalant personality was usually cute, but in a situation like this, it's so infuriating he could die.

"I'll have to step up myself. I can't leave Shirone alone."

Uorin stroked the chin of the cat that climbed onto her lap and said.

"He was threatening though. What if he had cast magic towards the audiences' seats?"

Zion flushed as he recalled the situation at the time.

As Uorin said, it was a terrifying force. No matter how top-notch the guards were, there would have been casualties.

"That's exactly it! It was a declaration of war! It must have been revenge for me pointing a sword at him!"

"Isn't that a bit of an overstatement? He could have just done that because he was angry."

"It's the same either way! That lowlife ignored my offer! I won't let it slide!"

Just then, someone knocked on the door.

Zion, who thought it was Arius, calmed his excitement and returned to the table where his sister sat.

"Come in."

Arius opened the door and entered. It was the only place where he could meet Zion away from prying eyes, but the atmosphere today was unusually tense. He gracefully leaped over the glass shards on the floor and greeted them politely.

"It's been a while, First Prince. Ah, you were here too, Young Lady."

Zion snorted. In the current situation, even the title of the first prince was nothing but a facade.

"Sit down for now. There's something I want to discuss."

As Arius gestured for understanding and sat down on the chair, Uorin poured him some tea.

Receiving the teacup with both hands, he looked at Zion and asked,

"What brings you to summon me? Have you grown tired of the Objet I procured last time?"

Uorin waved her finger and corrected him.

"Ei, you didn't 'procure' it. You sold it to us, fair and square."

"Haha! If we're being precise, that's right. But you're well aware that it's not something that can simply be bought with money, yes? The Objet."

Zion wasn't interested in idle chatter.

"The Objet isn't the issue."

"Oh? Then what is it?"

"Don't play dumb! It's clear now. The reason father summoned Shirone to the palace. It's to rob Acraxia, right?"

"It's not Acraxia, it's Ataraxia. And grave robbing, really. If you're going to say it, please call it extraction."

Zion took a deep breath and calmed his mind. Getting dragged into Arius's sly banter would mean never reaching the point, even if a whole day passed.

"So... how far has the plan progressed?"

"Hmm, even for the First Prince, this is a bit difficult. After all, I am a subject of His Majesty, so I can't just reveal classified information."

Zion extended his hand to the north. Armand flew into his hand as if sucked in by a magnetic force, and in one swift motion, he pointed it directly at Arius's throat.

"I'm not joking around right now. It's best you answer properly."

Arius took a leisurely sip of tea, as if only now feeling at ease with the sword aimed at him.

But many thoughts were passing through his head.

Zion was nothing more than a brat without manners.

Armand, on the other hand, was a troublesome weapon. He had retrieved it himself, but it was truly a shame for such a precious item to be in the hands of an immature royal.

"If you're asking how far it has progressed... about 49 percent, I'd say?"

It wasn't a lie. After all, starting is half the work, and since they haven't even started yet, 49 percent is appropriate.

Uorin let out a small chuckle as she realized the meaning of the words, but Zion seemed to think that Arius had made

considerable progress and continued to press him with a surprised expression.

"Stop it at all costs. No, just eliminate Ataraxia completely. If you're a grave robber, it should be possible, right?"

Arius exhaled through his nose.

What a pathetic bastard. How could he think of eliminating the power of an archangel that has crossed into the world just because a mere king deems it necessary?

Ataraxia, even if he didn't excavate it, was a treasure trove for humanity that had to be analyzed at some point.

"I'll say it again, as a body employed by His Majesty..."

"I'll give you as much money as you want."

Arius closed his mouth.

He had earned a huge fortune while dealing with Zion so far. Of course, he had a tendency to enjoy grave robbing itself rather than money, but he intends to part ways with Orkamph anyway. If he made a big haul one last time and left, wouldn't he be able to secure something like a retirement fund?

"Hmm."

Lost in thought, Arius finally revealed his true nature.

As his cold, snake-like eyes emerged, Zion, despite having a sword pointed at him, couldn't help but shiver.

However, the pupils hidden by Arius' narrow eyes were not directed at Zion, but at Uorin.

'Beautiful.'

It wasn't an emotion one would normally feel for a fourteen-year-old girl, but she was truly stunning. Her mysterious appearance, combined with the halo of being a Terraje, made her a truly tempting fruit.

He had analyzed the minds of countless individuals, but Uorin remained the only one whose thoughts he couldn't fathom at all.

When he first began his work as a Diver, he indulged in the amusement of directly peering into humanity's innermost desires.

Such filthy, grotesque, and even horrifying desires.
But after diving over 800 times, no human mind could feel novel anymore.

In that situation, Uorin was material that could show him a new world he had never experienced before.

If he could dive one last time before he died, the target would be Uorin, not Ataraxia.

"First, let me tell you the exact progress. Currently, it's impossible to extract Shirone's Ataraxia. It is encapsulated. However, if you wish, I can extract Ataraxia in its entirety and present it to you, Prince."

"Present it to me? Ataraxia?"

"Yes. The power of an archangel would belong to Your Highness."

Zion swallowed hard. At this moment, his face looked exactly like Orkamph's.

No, anyone who had witnessed the power of Ataraxia would react the same way.

But Uorin, apparently unaffected, immediately caught the flaw in his words.

"But you said that extraction was impossible a moment ago?"

"With normal methods, yes. Ataraxia is presumed to reside in the deep sea of Shirone's consciousness. In short, it's too deep. The deeper you dive into the psyche, the stronger the ego's resistance becomes. At that depth, the moment you enter, you'll be buried immediately upon entering."

Zion retracted Armand and asked,

"But how do you plan to grave rob it?"

"There is but one way."

Arius was thinking of offering the same proposal he had made to Orkamph.

But unlike before, he took his time.

If there was any chance to turn things around, this would be the last opportunity. The moment he presented this idea, he

would be permanently at odds with Orkamph. Also, he himself had to leave Kazra as soon as the job was done.

"Speak! How can I make Ataraxia mine?"

As Zion urged him, Arius spoke in a cold voice.

"By extracting Shirone's brain."

Not only Zion, but even Uorin were visibly shocked.

"Extracting... the brain?"

"To be precise, it's about destroying Shirone's unconscious mind. Consciousness is governed by the brain, but the unconsciousness is connected to the body. Therefore, by separating the brain from the body, even if you dive deep into consciousness, the resistance of the ego will be significantly weakened. Of course, you don't need to open up the skull. Just need what's above the neck will do."

Arius made a gesture with his thumb, as if slicing his neck. Zion, seeming to understand, nodded.

"So, in short, you're saying we need to kill Shirone."

"Well, I'm not a fan of inductive reasoning. Cutting the neck doesn't necessarily mean death, does it? I'm not saying we should kill Shirone, I'm just telling you a way to safely infiltrate the unconscious mind."

Zion was dumbfounded. He couldn't believe this suggestion was being made without acknowledging that it involved assassinating a crown prince candidate.

"Cutting off the head doesn't mean death? You're completely insane."

Arius smiled as if he had been complimented.

"While living as a grave robber, I learned one thing. There's no one in this world who isn't crazy."

Zion, tired of the madness, skipped the banter and got to the point.

"If I bring you Shirone's head, can you extract Ataraxia?"

"If you're asking whether it's possible, yes, it is. But it must be done quickly. The moment the head is severed, I need to Dive immediately. Because 'if by any chance' it leads to death, the mind also disappears."

"That fast? Life would only last about 10 seconds after decapitation."

"Time flows slowly in the unconscious. The door has been installed, so as soon as Shirone is decapitated, I will Dive. I'll Dive to the first level, and from there, I'll excavate the true Ataraxia. Then it will belong to Your Highness."

Zion puffed his cheeks and let out a long sigh, pacing around the gallery.

No matter what, an outright assassination. Isn't that too hasty?

No, this was the right move. As time passed, the number of neutrals siding with Orkamph would only increase. If he had to make a move before the paternity test results came out, today was the perfect time.

Arius read the murderous intent that appeared in Zion's eyes and smiled with satisfaction. He was definitely closer to a king than Orkamph.

As if he had already heard the answer, Arius asked, "So, how much are you willing to pay?"

Zion, not offering a rebuttal, gave his answer through silence.

Now the negotiation table was set. After pondering for a while, he proposed a suitable bid price.

"2.7 billion gold."

Arius asked back with a slightly displeased expression.

"Hmm, wasn't Armand 3 billion gold?"

"So what? Are you saying that bastard's magic is more valuable than my magic sword?"

The 2.7 billion that Zion proposed was calculated based on that reasoning.

Chapter 282 Late Night Ball (3)

"Well, I'm just the seller. Since you've seen the demonstration directly, shouldn't the buyer make the offer?"

Zion bit his lip.

No matter how much he tried to deny it, the reality was clear. Ataraxia was far more valuable than Armand, the cursed sword. No, beyond value, he wanted to have it by any means necessary.

"4 billion. That's nearly my entire fortune. That should be enough, right?"

"Hmm, four billion."

Four billion was a massive amount, enough to build four magic academies at current rates. But Arius still wasn't satisfied.

Honestly, it wouldn't have mattered how much was offered. Demon Sword Armand was sold for 3 billion, but if it had gone to the Curia Auction House, it would have easily been classified as at least S-grade, with buyers offering blank checks for it.

The reason it couldn't be auctioned was because it was stolen goods.

Of course, most Objet are stolen goods, but putting something directly stolen up for auction risked being tracked by pursuers.

Since money didn't hold significant importance to Arius anyway, selling it to the safest option, Zion, was the most profitable deal.

When Arius showed that he was not satisfied with even 4 billion, Zion grew impatient. Desire only intensifies when something was out of reach.

However, even if he scraped together all his assets, he could only add another seven million at best.

If it were Uorin, she would have at least ten times the 4.7 billion Zion could gather, but wasting a favor from her for mere money was foolish.

Knowing that Arius wasn't someone particularly driven by material wealth, Zion decided to play his final card.

"On top of that, I'll place you in the Terraje Faction."

As expected, Arius's eyes lit up with interest.

Terraje, Empress of Kashan, as one of the three most powerful emperors on the continent. With her protection, Arius could stop living as a fugitive.

However, Zion had no authority to grant such favors. The only gateway to Terraje Faction was Uorin.

Zion glanced sideways at his sister's expression before asking her.

"Uorin, you can make that happen for me?"

This was his first time asking her for a favor, and he knew it would be the last. With Ataraxia in his hands, he could rise to the top on his own power.

Just once, just this once.

"Then Shirone Oppa would die?"

"Probably. There's no guarantee decapitation will kill him, though."

Knowing that his sister had some fondness for Shirone, Zion mimicked the crazy logic Arius had used. But it was a decent enough excuse.

"Hmm."

Uorin placed her finger on her lips, looking up at the ceiling. She had no interest in getting involved in Kazra's politics, but seeing Zion struggling lately made her feel a bit sorry for him. In a way, his incompetence was pitiful. Since this seemed like his last chance, she figured it wouldn't hurt to show a bit of kindness.

"Fine. I'll speak to Mother for you."

Zion breathed a sigh of relief.

It was ironic to feel anxious over something that should be natural for family, but now that he had her approval, nothing else mattered.

"Good, the deal is done. 4 billion, and Terraje Faction. Tonight, cut Shirone's head off and bring me Ataraxia." Arius blinked and raised his hand.

"Hold on a second. You're asking me to do that job?"

"What do you mean? If the Grave Robber doesn't do it, who will?"

"No, well, Your Highness doesn't know, but this is a specialized profession. I'm an expert in grave robbing, not combat. Especially, I really hate seeing blood."

Zion stared at him in disbelief.

No matter how many non-combat mages there are in the world, they all have enough combat power to overcome dangerous situations.

How could someone who was just raving about extracting brains say they don't want to see blood?

"Does it make sense that you can't fight? But still, you could best Shirone, right?"

"It's not about winning or losing. I may be cursed all over the world, but I'm an authority in psychoanalysis. At one point, I was even named one of the top 100 minds in the world. you imagine someone like me holding a sword and cutting off the head of an eighteen-year-old boy?"

"Then what am I supposed to do? Go and kill him myself?"

"If you could, that would be best."

As Arius made a gesture of passing the task onto him, Zion gritted his teeth. But since Arius refused, he couldn't force him to do it.

"Fine. I'll do it myself."

"Oh, as expected of the Prince. Very manly."

When Arius egged him on, Zion snorted. There were plenty of people who could secretly cut off the head of an eighteen-year-old boy without looking outside.

"But I'm not going to dirty my hands with blood. We'll need to bring in a specialist for this. Zenogre."

With that, Zion turned his gaze to the air in front of him.

His gaze, which had caught something, slowly lowered and fixed on something beyond Arius's shoulder.

Feeling the sharp chill of murderous intent brushing against the back of his neck, Arius forced a stiff smile.

"Huhu, now I'm too scared to even turn around."

Just as Arius finished speaking, the murderous intent vanished as if it had never existed. Moments later, a man descended before Arius, hanging upside down.

A thin thread, seemingly coming from his waist, was connected to the ceiling. He had his legs crossed as if sitting, and his hands were gathered at his lower abdomen forming a circle.

His face was gaunt, with a sharp, thin nose that jutted down from his brow in a straight vertical line. His lips were so thin they were nearly nonexistent. Especially, his eyes were not the usual almond shape but perfectly round, and even those were small.

"Have you called for me, Your Highness?"

Zion glanced back at Arius and introduced him.

"Say hello. This is my personal bodyguard, Spatur Zenogre. Zenogre, this is Arius."

Still hanging upside down, Zenogre twisted the thread to face Zion and gave a slight nod. He then turned to Arius.

"Of course, I know him well. We've crossed paths many times. Though this person is seeing me for the first time, of course."

Arius cracked a thin smile.

It was definitely his first time seeing Zenogre. But Zenogre must have been watching him every time he came to the gallery.

"Wow, impressive skills. Where were you hiding?"

Zenogre responded with a deadpan face, devoid of any emotion.

“Hiding? I was behind you the whole time?”

“Oh, such joke....”

Arius’ bird-like eyes narrowed even further.

Perhaps it might be true. Without eyes on the back of your head, the world behind you practically doesn’t exist.

But since it's not easy to trail one of the Seven Prodigious, it would be better for mental health to think of it as a joke.

“Do you think I’m lying?”

As he spoke, the flesh on both sides of his cheekbones and temples bulged out. Then, tearing through the skin, 6 additional eyes, 3 on each side, emerged.

They were eyes without pupils, glowing purple like grapes. A total of 8 eyes. His blind spot would probably be at most 15 degrees.

'A mimicry ability user...'

As Arius suspected, Zenogre was a master of Spider Mimicry, a form of Schema body technique.

Mimicry refers to the rapid transformation of cellular characteristics through Schema to create organs that are entirely different from those of a human.

However, to achieve such extreme transformations like Zenogre, genetic enhancements were necessary.

The Spartur Clan, who have been responsible for the safety of Terraje Family for generations, have transformed their bodies into spider-like traits for nearly a thousand years. As this has been passed down through inheritance, they have acquired the ability to perfect the art of Spider Mimicry.

Arius turned his gaze away from Zenogre and looked at Uorin.

Terraje's children always have personal bodyguards.

Therefore, Uorin's bodyguard must surely be here too.

Arius expanded his line of sight as much as he could without drawing suspicion. Yet, no matter where he looked, no assassin was visible.

Perhaps... they might be standing behind him.

The thought gave him a slight chill.

Engaging the Spirit Zone in the presence of royalty could raise suspicions, so he refrained. Even if he used his enhanced senses to scan the area, it was likely they wouldn't be detected.

Skilled assassins often mastered techniques that rendered them invisible to Spirit Zone.

'Haha, this is why I can't give up on this life.'

As the strange introductions ended, Zion returned to the main topic.

"Now, let's come up with a plan. Zenogre will handle the task of killing Shirone—no, separating his brain from his body. Once his head is severed, you can step in and extract Ataraxia."

Arius no longer had any complaints.

"Of course. Mobility won't be an issue. But the second thing we must consider is stealth. No one outside of this room must ever find out about this operation."

Zion immediately understood and asked Zenogre.

"You can ensure no one will find out, right?"

"That won't be a problem. When you tail someone long enough, there's always a moment when they're alone. Even if that's not the case, I can simply kill everyone present, right?"

"Of course, that could be one way. But I'd like to minimize variables if possible."

Arius said.

"The tricky ones are the two women. Reina can be easily distracted since she has her duties, but that girl Amy will stick close to Shirone. She's also the daughter of Carmis Family. If we leave her free, she could create unexpected variables."

Hearing Arius' words, Zenogre's face once again grew eight additional eyes.

Activating his mimicry ability, he became the perfect spider. Even though he was standing right in front of them, it was as if his presence had blurred.

"Mistakes do not exist for me."

Arius gestured with both hands to calm him down.

"Whoa, whoa, it's not that I don't trust your skills. I'm just saying hypothetically."

Zion, who had been resting his chin in thought, made his decision.

"Fine. While you two handle the job, I'll keep Amy occupied. It should only take about five minutes to kill him, right? So I just need to keep her busy for, what, an hour at most?"

"Hoo, that's your preference, huh?"

Zion didn't deny it.

"Well... she's pretty, isn't she? I suppose it would suit my taste to play with her for a night."

Arius felt bitter about the words coming from the boy's mouth. Well, growing up in the palace, Zion's experiences were certainly different from those of other adolescents of the same age.

Anyway, he wasn't interested in royal bedtime stories.

Robbing the ability of an archangel. Only that excited him.

"Then let's finalize the time and place."

While the three meticulously planned, Uorin spent a boring time isolated in a corner.

She stroked the cat, which meowed in response. Uorin smiled back, replying with her own playful "meow."

@

The palace was brimming with a festive atmosphere.

As the first prince candidate, Shirone, displayed his mighty power, the vassals were overcome with emotion and shed tears of joy, even if it was forced.

A grand ball was held, and even after nightfall, the Grand Hall was as bright as day.

Long tables were set along the perimeter of the hall, adorned with lavish delicacies. As the court musicians performed, nobles and aristocratic ladies engaged in pleasant conversation.

Nobles, drawn by the food to their liking, came over to pay their respects to Shirone.

"We witnessed the demonstration well. It was truly a splendid display. Although the test results aren't out yet, judging by your prowess, it's clear you are indeed of His Majesty's blood. Haha."

Shirone said nothing, merely listening, prompting another quick-witted noble to chime in.

"Is there even a question? A reunion after 18 years... It's all thanks to His Majesty's virtue reaching the heavens.

Wouldn't you agree, Shirone?"

Shirone remained silent this time as well.

He wouldn't be fooled anymore. The rules and manners of the palace were nothing but masks to hide their true feelings. And once the masks were removed, everyone's face was as cold as his own.

'Are these people enemies, or allies?'

It seemed that royalty was fated to live their entire lives pondering such thoughts.

The loudest voice in the banquet hall belonged to Eliza.

Though she had never raised him, her praises were endless as if she knew everything about Shirone.

Chapter 283 Late Night Banquet (4)

Amy frowned more than Shirone.

While showing off is also a virtue for royalty, she didn't seem to realize that the more they did so, the more dangerous it became for Shirone.

As Shirone scanned the faces of the nobles gathered in the banquet hall, his gaze met that of a large man across the room.

The man let out a hearty laugh and strode diagonally across the hall toward him.

"Greetings, Shirone-nim! My apologies for the late greeting. I was over there enjoying some lamb stew, which happens to be my favorite. Oh, look at me, I'm late again with my introduction. I'm Ritney Walker, Chief of Security. I'm the chief in charge of maintaining order in the royal palace." Shirone smiled for the first time.

As the person responsible for security, Walker was someone related to his parents' safety, so it wouldn't hurt to get on his good side. Moreover, his straightforward attitude, unlike that of a noble, was also likable.

"Hello. Nice to meet you."

"Haha! That's right! There's never a good reason to see the chief of security too often, is there!"

He was a reassuring figure. His face bore the traces of 60 harsh winters, but his physique was the largest and most solid-looking of anyone in the banquet hall.

When Walker offered a handshake, Shirone also grasped his hand.

At that moment, Walker's eyes flashed, and a wave of light surged into Shirone's mind.

Shirone felt as if his thoughts had stopped for a moment. The dominance of Walker's Eye Technique was on a completely different level from anything Shirone had experienced before.

But befitting a mage who had reached the realm of Unbreakable Diamond, he didn't easily give up control.

Walker tilted his head as if puzzled, then soon smiled as if he understood and released his eye technique.

Shirone looked at Walker, swallowing his rough breath down his throat. Though his thoughts had momentarily vanished and he couldn't remember much, he didn't sense any hostility from him.

"As expected, you're amazing. To withstand Clear."

"Clear? Is that an eye technique?"

"It is. It's a technique that injects madness into the target. Prolonged exposure can cause someone to lose consciousness. But it seems ineffective against you, Shirone-nim."

Shirone's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Are you saying you tried to make me faint?"

"Haha! Of course not. I was just demonstrating how powerful madness can be. It's so powerful that once under Clear's influence, one can't think at all. Thanks to that, it even wipes away mental magic cleanly. It's like using hydrochloric acid to remove stains that soap can't erase."

Madness was the purest mental state humans can reach. Therefore, any thought was bound to be swept away in the face of madness.

"As the person in charge of the security of the royal palace, I had a duty to check if Shirone-nim had been brainwashed. If you find it rude, I apologize."

Shirone understood Walker's feelings.

This wasn't a battlefield; it was the heart of the kingdom. The threats the chief of security had to deal with weren't just the visible ones.

"It's fine. If I were brainwashed, I wouldn't be able to know, right? Being checked like this actually puts my mind at ease. It also feels like I've had a vaccination."

Walker scratched his head awkwardly.

"To be honest, it didn't fully work. But if you can withstand Clear which I've honed for decades, no one should be able to brainwash you, Shirone-nim. Even if you were brainwashed despite this... well, what can we do? It would be beyond anyone's control."

Shirone wasn't sure whether to laugh at this point. The chief of security's remarks seemed far too irresponsible.

Then Walker added with a wink.

"The royal palace is a difficult place to understand. It's like a household where dozens of people with different surnames live under one roof. Always protect yourself."

Shirone belatedly understood the meaning of his words and nodded.

"Yes. I'll keep that in mind. It was nice meeting you."

Walker burst into hearty laughter as he crossed the hall once more. Watching him pile on the lamb stew reminded Shirone of Rian, and a smile naturally formed on his lips.

The meeting between Shirone and Walker was an event that drew the attention of numerous nobles. And Zion was also one of the people who watched that scene.

After confirming that Walker had left, Zion went behind Arius and spoke to him while pretending to choose food.

"You think it'll be fine? It looked like Walker tried to use Clear just now."

Arius was pondering that very thing.

This morning, he had installed a backdoor in Shirone's mind in the waiting room. If Clear had properly entered, it could have had an effect.

"Clear is definitely a natural enemy of mental magic."

"So what, does that mean you failed?"

Arius gave a relaxed smile.

"Usually, that's the case. The backdoor is different from brainwashing or hypnosis. There's no need to interfere deep into the consciousness. I installed it at the 11th level in case this situation arose."

"Are you sure? What if it broke somehow?"

"That won't happen. If Clear had invaded even the surface level, Shirone would have lost consciousness. Causing the first prince candidate to faint at a banquet full of nobles would've caused quite the stir."

The human consciousness's 11th layer is where external thoughts intrude, so no matter how pure Shirone's mind was, finding the door would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

Nevertheless, when Walker attempted Clear, it gave him goosebumps. As chief of security, he must have checked it in a hurry, but it was likely that everything below the 9th layer had been swept clean.

'It's unlikely that Walker really thinks Shirone has been brainwashed. What exactly is he suspicious of?'

Ritney Walker.

As the royal palace security chief and a swordsmanship theorist who authored "Kazra Court Swordsmanship (Beginner)". He had won a regional swordsmanship championship at eighteen and had quickly been recruited to the royal palace, rising rapidly in the ranks.

The position of security chief couldn't be filled by someone who was just strong. One must thoroughly understand the nature of politics.

The fact that he attempted Clear right after Ataraxia's demonstration was evidence that he anticipated the existence of flies clinging to the archangel's power.

'Then I must be within his range too. Of course, I'm no mere fly.'

Zion asked.

"By the way, what will you do now? Walker seems suspicious. You're not planning on leaving any loose ends

that could come back to bite us, are you?"

"There's nothing to worry about. Walker isn't an expert in mental magic, and Clear is just simple in principle, though wide in application range. Why, they say there is no panacea that is effective. If I put my mind, I can easily bypass it. Let's proceed as is."

"I see. I understand."

Zion filled his plate with food and moved away from Arius. Since parting ways with Walker, the nobles refrained from speaking to Shirone. There was nothing good to come from being picked on by the security chief.

Seeing Shirone standing alone, Amy, always quick to notice, came over to keep him company.

"Shirone."

"Hmm? How's the party? Having fun?"

Amy shrugged.

"Just so-so."

"Same here. So, what have you been up to?"

Amy gestured toward her eyes.

"I've been observing with Red Eyes."

"Observing? What?"

"How many times do people glance at you?"

Shirone stared blankly, his mouth slightly open.

Of course, while self-image memory was difficult, it wasn't impossible. But was there a need for such hard labor?

"What kind of information can you get from that?"

Amy pouted.

"I don't know. I just did it because I had nothing to do, but there really wasn't anything special. You're the main character of the banquet, so it's natural for people to glance at you."

"Haha! Right. Don't tell me you're just realizing that now?"

Shirone joked, but Amy didn't laugh.

"But... I did notice one strange thing. If I saw correctly, there's a group that hasn't looked at you once throughout the entire banquet."

As if telling him to check for himself, Amy gestured with her chin towards the opposite side. Where Shirone looked, mages belonging to the magic department were gathered. At that moment, a middle-aged mage standing at the center of the group turned to look at Shirone. His gaze felt like it was cutting through Shirone's mind, making him feel frozen. "That's Aimar Bosun, the chief of Magic Department."

"That person..."

A 4th-rank mage certified by the Red Line.

Known as a talented individual excelling in various fields to the point of mastering all elements, he was said to oversee all aspects of food production in the Kazra Kingdom.

Kazra, with its magical power weaker than other countries, had no certified 1st-rank mages except for the association president. In Thormia, the position of chief of Magic Department is held by a 3rd-rank archmage.

Still, Bosun was someone far beyond Shirone's ability to judge.

Bosun looked at Shirone for a long time, as if relieving the frustration he had felt until now. Then, with a smirk, he picked up a dish of food from the table and approached.

"Greetings. I am Aimar Bosun."

Shirone and Amy bowed their heads in greeting.

Regardless of political inclinations, a 4th-rank Red Line magician was a senior as lofty as the sky. Of course, Shirone outranked him in the palace hierarchy, but showing respect to seniors was a source of pride for mages.

"It was impressive—the ability of an archangel. It will be a great strength for the Kazra Kingdom in the future. That is, if Shirone-nim becomes the first prince."

Shirone remained silent, tense.

Though it was the same provocation, it felt different from Zion. Each word felt like it was piercing his mind like a blade.

Bosun offered Shirone the food he had brought from the other table.

"Would you like some?"

"No. I...."

Shirone's face turned pale as he inspected the food.

It was a fresh truffle, a chocolate dusted with cocoa powder, the same type of dessert laced with a lethal dose of poison that had been served to her family.

A surge of murderous intent welled up inside Shirone. Could it be that Bosun had attempted an assassination?

No, that wasn't important. If he wasn't the culprit, it was even more vicious.

Bosun, who was observing Shirone's expression, tilted his head and asked.

"Hm? What's wrong? Do you dislike chocolate? It's really delicious."

Shirone wanted to punch Bosun's lower jaw as he chewed the chocolate. He was so excited that he had such violent thoughts.

Yet Bosun remained calm, which only fueled Shirone's anger even more.

"This...!"

Just as Shirone was about to blurt something out, Amy grabbed his hand.

It's a trap. Everyone in the royal palace knows that fresh truffles contain poison. Bosun just wanted to touch Shirone's nerves.

Shirone also came to his senses and calmed his anger.

Seeing that his provocation hadn't worked, Bosun, as expected, lost interest and took his plate away.

"It was a pleasure meeting you. Well then, I'll be going."

As Bosun returned, the mages who hadn't even glanced at Shirone until now began to sneer at him.

Not a single one of them was a mage to be treated carelessly. Shirone realized anew where he was.

"Shirone, are you okay? That bastard provoked you on purpose. You did well to endure it."

"That's right. He's a really bad person."

The night was deep, but the banquet didn't end. The nobles, seemingly tipsy, danced Kazra's traditional social dance to the court musicians' performance. And now was the time for Shirone's group to act. As people drank and chatted with the women, information would inevitably slip out. The plan was to eavesdrop on this with Reina's powerful hearing. According to the original plan, Shirone and Reina were supposed to enter the banquet hall by now. But Amy, observing the situation, noticed Reina standing in a corner, merely watching the scene nervously. She seemed dejected from the earlier incident. 'Was she this type of person? It's different from how she appears on the outside.'

The thought that Reina was a kind person wasn't unpleasant, but it made her feel a pang in her heart. In any case, work had to be done. With a sigh, Amy approached Reina and subtly nudged her toward Shirone. Reina then pretended to give in and walked to Shirone. But even there, she hesitated for a while. Shirone, smiling, extended his hand. He had been feeling guilty about snapping at her earlier. "Should we start?"

As Shirone treated her comfortably, Reina also regained her playfulness. "After all the nagging I endured while learning, it'd be a shame not to put it to use, right?"

Reina followed Shirone's lead and circled the banquet hall. Numerous couples dancing the same dance brushed past them. Just as musicians can detect an out-of-tune note even amidst dozens of instruments, Reina could similarly pick up on various pieces of conversation, treating voices like instruments themselves. She collected a vast amount of information.

Discussions about booking summer villas in advance. Talks of switching banks for slush funds. Whispered promises of secret meetings, saying to meet in rooms because security is tight.

When something big was about to happen, it would inevitably surface in conversation. But so far, from all the information gathered, there was no sign of anything significant.

Chapter 284 Late Night Banquet (5)

"It looks like it'll be a quiet day today. But we still shouldn't let our guard down."

Shirone responded with a smile.

She wasn't doing this simply to dig up high-level information. He was grateful for Reina's efforts to reassure her.

"I'm sorry about earlier today. I must have been on edge."

"Hoho, it's okay. Don't worry too much. I'll do my best to protect you. By the way, relax a bit. If you stay so tense, you might trip."

As Shirone relaxed his body, the two moved with graceful and fluid dance steps, like flowing water.

They were the most beautiful couple in the ballroom.

"Haha! What a perfect match they make. How can Shirone-nim be so beautiful? It must be thanks to inheriting His Majesty's bloodline."

"And what about his partner? I hear she's a famous musician from the Kingdom of Thormia. She has such a lovely presence; just seeing her brightens your mood."

Amy was standing alongside the noble ladies having this conversation. Even to her eyes, they were clearly different from other couples.

'Why is it taking so long?'

Checking the time, Amy realized it was going much longer than initially planned. She wondered if some new information had come up, but at that moment, someone approached.

Startled, Amy noticed it was Zion, and she quickly gave a respectful bow.

"Good evening, Your Highness."

"Yes, are you enjoying the banquet?"

"Yes. Everything is to my liking."

Zion smiled with satisfaction. Having spent the evening dealing with Sirone, who treated him with little respect, the contrast of Amy's flustered attitude made him finally feel like a prince.

"How about it? May I request you as a partner for a moment?"

Amy stared at Zion's outstretched hand.

According to etiquette, the only way to refuse a partner request was to already have a partner.

But since Shirone was dancing with Reina, Amy had no excuse to decline. Clearly, Zion had planned this approach with that in mind.

"Yes, it would be an honor."

Amy took Zion's hand and entered the ballroom.

Although it was her first time with the traditional Kazra dance, with her exceptional dancing skills and Red Eyes abilities, she could match Zion's rhythm without much difficulty.

The gazes of the nobles now shifted to Zion and Amy.

They were met with a flood of admiration, rivaling that of Shirone and Reina. Lovely. Beautiful. Noble. And so on.

Amy's face flushed hot. Is this what it feels like to become a princess?

But the excitement quickly faded.

She had never once wanted to become a princess. Every day, her thoughts were solely focused on becoming the greatest mage in the world.

'Surprisingly innocent. That's unexpected?'

Seeing Amy being shy, Zion thought he had already crossed seven-tenths of the way. With his experience of stirring romantic affairs among noblewomen since he was 12, he knew exactly what words would captivate someone at a time like this.

"You're beautiful."

Amy felt as if she had been ambushed.

Is this kid out of his mind? She wanted to scream out of embarrassment.

But she couldn't show given the setting she was in.

As she continued dancing while boiling with emotion inside, her gaze collided head-on with Shirone approaching from the opposite side.

It was truly a fleeting moment.

Shirone seemed surprised. Even in that brief instant, his eyes conveyed a question.

Amy quickly averted her gaze.

She didn't know why, but she was afraid to meet Shirone's eyes.

She regretted it afterward, realizing she shouldn't have done that, but by then, the distance between them had grown.

As her mind became complicated and her steps began to tangle, Zion smiled. He seemed to think she was nervous because she was in his arms.

"Be comfortable. As long as you're with me, no one can look down on you."

Zion liked Amy. She felt different from the spoiled nobles.

Finding her adorable, he pulled her closer by the waist, causing Amy to stop dancing abruptly.

It was the result of her body reacting before she could think.

Naturally, the nobles' attention was focused on them.

Amy, her face flushed, scrambled to come up with a way out.

"Oh, I'm a little tired. It was fun."

Acting as if she had intended to stop from the beginning, she politely excused herself and turned away, but a flash of malice glinted in Zion's eyes. Grabbing Amy's wrist, he whispered in a low voice.

"I've taken custody of Vincent and Olena."

Amy quickly scanned the crowd with shocked eyes. She was trying to find Shirone's location.

Zion continued his threat in a menacing voice.

"It's not good to cause a scene. Don't tell anyone and quietly follow me. If you do, Sirone's parents will be released safely."

Amy turned her gaze back and forced a calm expression. The biggest issue was that she couldn't determine whether he was telling the truth.

Reina's attendants were supposed to check in every hour, and the last report came in 32 minutes ago.

Would something have happened in those 32 minutes? Or was that enough time for something to have happened?

Amy followed Zion, acting as if nothing had happened. Whatever intention he had in plotting this, she knew she wasn't the core of it.

In any case, in 28 minutes, Reina would act. If she could hold out until then, the crisis might turn into an opportunity.

'Of course, I have to survive first.'

As the two held hands and left, the nobles finally dispelled their doubts. It wasn't an uncommon sight for young men and women to slip out of the hall when passions flared.

Zion, dragging Amy along, was seething inside.

The strategy of using Shirone's parents was Plan B proposed by Arius. He had boasted that he could make any woman fall for him, so his pride was more than a little hurt.

'Fine. Anyway, it's enough if I just pull her out. I've done my part, Arius.'

Once Amy was out of the picture, Sirone would be isolated. Reina would have to manage the overall affairs of the royal palace, so she wouldn't be able to focus solely on Shirone. Even if she did eventually realize what was happening and acted, by then, Shirone's head would already be rolling on the ground.

'Kekekeke, farewell, Shirone.'

@

Reina looked at Sirone, who suddenly stopped dancing, with a puzzled expression. It seemed like she didn't even realize

that her legs had stopped moving.

"Shirone, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Oh, that's... Amy went somewhere with Zion."

Reina quickly scanned the room. Just as Sirone had said, the two of them were nowhere to be seen.

According to her investigation, Zion wasn't the type to pursue women. However, he doesn't hate women like most boys his age, so there were quite a few women who spent the night with him.

Thinking simply, he might have taken an interest in Amy. Amy was a girl beautiful enough to charm even royalty, and with Zion's personality, he wouldn't hesitate even if she was Shirone's friend.

The problem was Amy. What on earth did she hear to follow Zion?

Reina looked at Shirone. He was pretending to be calm, but his gaze was fixed on the door.

She smiled bitterly and nudged Sirone's back. If he was going to go no matter who tried to stop him, it was better to send him off right away.

"Go ahead. You can just go ask Amy, right?"

"Is that really okay?"

"What are you saying? You're friends. Go quickly. I'll take care of things here."

"Then... I'll be back."

Shirone hesitated for a moment before turning around. But after that, he didn't look back and left the ballroom in a hurry.

Reina rested her hands on her hips and exhaled.

'Have I made things too difficult by getting in the middle?

Haaa, how am I supposed to fix this personality?'

But now wasn't the time to dwell on her feelings.

The reason she sent Shirone first was because it would soon be time for the attendant to come. Amy was important, but she couldn't neglect the vigilance on his parents' side either.

'Huh? His parents?'

The moment she thought that far, one idea occurred to her. Amy wasn't the type to fall for Zion's tricks. So what could have made her follow him without saying a word?

'Could it be?'

Reina stomped the floor.

This wasn't the time to wait for the attendant. No, if they had made a move on the other side, it was more likely the attendant wouldn't come. After checking the time, she dashed toward the residence where Vincent and Olena were staying.

Terraje's Proposal (1)

Shirone ran to the royal quarter.

He had followed Zion as quickly as possible, but they had already disappeared. His first thought was to go to Zion's room.

'Why on earth did Amy follow Zion?'

There must have been a valid reason, but whatever it was, it didn't sit well with him. A strange feeling kept rising inside him, making it hard for his thoughts to connect as quickly as usual.

Arriving at Zion's room, Shirone unconsciously hesitated just as he was about to turn the doorknob.

An unpleasant thought came to him. He recalled the image of Amy dancing with Zion.

Why had she avoided his gaze? If she had a special reason, she should have signaled him. That's the Amy he knew.

'Am I... doing something unnecessary?'

What if it wasn't what he thought? Or worse, what if it was?

Shirone hurriedly shook his head.

Amy isn't someone who would act rashly before a big event. Such thoughts were rather insulting to her.

Sirone steadied himself and opened the door.

The room, brightly lit, was empty of any noticeable presence. But there was someone there. He could see Uorin moving toward the table.

"Uorin? Why are you here...?"

Uorin leisurely sat down on a chair. Looking at her stroking the cat sitting on her lap, it was as if she didn't even realize someone had entered.

But now Shirone realized that visible actions weren't important.

"Uorin. Where is Zion now...?"

"Sit down."

Uorin interrupted him and offered him a seat. Her voice carried a weight of authority, unlike her usual tone.

Swallowing nervously, Shirone sat down across from her.

"Why are you in Zion's room? I didn't see you in the banquet hall."

"I thought Oppa might come. So I waited."

It was as Shirone expected. She knew what was happening in the royal palace right now.

"Where is Zion?"

"Well, somewhere, I guess."

Uorin looked away as if uninterested.

Shirone felt frustrated. But he didn't do the foolish thing of rushing her.

He had already made his intentions clear at the demonstration. All that remained was her choice.

As the silence grew longer, Uorin spoke first.

"Why did you do that?"

Shirone glared at her intensely.

It didn't make sense to say she didn't know. Therefore, even this question wasn't the core issue.

"Why did you release all your power? That was no different from declaring war on Terraje Faction. Oppa Zion is furious because of it."

"If I did it half-heartedly, you wouldn't have helped me."

Uorin made a puzzled expression, but Shirone wasn't fooled by the mask. That too was something Uorin had taught him.

"You're different from Zion. You're the heir to the Empress.

Kazra's political situation is just a part of you who dreams of

becoming Emperor."

"Is that so? Well, everyone is eager to cling to my power. Even Oppa Sirone is no different."

"Perhaps. But the Ataraxia must mean something different to you, too."

For the first time, a hint of interest flickered in Uorin's eyes.

"What makes me different?"

"The Emperor of Kashan Empire is the leader of the Valkyries. And Ataraxia is considered the ability of the highest archangel even among Valkyries. Then it should be worth make use of for you too."

Uorin nodded readily. If Shirone's Ataraxia hadn't left such a strong impression today, she wouldn't have had any reason to help him.

"That's right. After seeing your ability, I've changed my perspective a bit. Ataraxia would be a great help in securing my path to the throne."

"So help me. If you want, I'll be on your side after graduating from the magic academy. So please don't touch my family and friends."

Uorin chuckled softly.

"A bit naive, aren't you?"

"What?"

"How many archmages do you think submit their resumes to me in a year? If you thought I'd cling to you just for Ataraxia, you're mistaken. I don't underestimate your talent, but you're still just a student, aren't you?"

Chapter 285 Terraje's Proposal (2)

"So you can't accept me?"

Uorin scratched her cheek with an apologetic expression.

"I'd like to help, but there are many daughters of Teraje in numerous kingdoms who are my rivals. I am particularly young and do not want to stand out yet. And Kazra isn't exactly a strong foundation either. There's no need to draw attention and become a target for my older sisters, right?"

Shirone felt a bitter feeling well up inside. Fourteen years old. That was the age of the girl sitting in front of him.

'You're really something, Uorin.'

He also realized anew how ridiculous his own behavior had been a few days ago.

Even now that he understood the reality of the royal palace, it was chilling. What kind of guts did he have before to try to deal with a woman like this?

"Fine. If there's no room for negotiation, I'll leave. I need to find Amy."

Shirone stood up as if there was no need to listen further.

If his assumption was wrong, everything would spiral into the worst-case scenario, but there was nothing he could do. Because there are no fools in the royal palace who miss the time to act no matter how great the danger.

"I wish you luck."

Hearing Uorin's parting words made his heart drop. But he walked towards the door without showing it.

He must not show hesitation or fear. He had to truly let go of everything and leave this room.

'Ataraxia is not needed. Is that really so?'

Perhaps to Uorin, it didn't matter much.

But even if it was just a sliver of gain, people always found it hard to give away even the smallest advantage to someone else.

Shirone walked, holding on to a small hope as if it were his lifeline.

Even as his hand reached for the doorknob and began to turn it, Uorin did not respond.

The door opened, and Shirone clenched his eyes shut.

This was the end of everything.

"But if perhaps..."

Shirone's steps came to an abrupt halt.

"If I were to make the maximum concession... that is, if we consider it as borrowing against Oppa's future..."

Shirone slowly turned to look back at Uorin.

"You could earn at least an opportunity to negotiate with the daughter of Teraje."

"An opportunity to negotiate?"

Even if he pledged Ataraxia as collateral, all he would gain was the chance to sit at the negotiation table? And even that opportunity requires borrowing against his future.

"Yes. A negotiation. I can't just help you for nothing. Like I said earlier, I don't want to put myself in a dangerous position unnecessarily. There's one condition. It shouldn't be a particularly difficult condition, but anyway, if you agree to this condition, I'll be on your side."

Shirone raised his chin as if to say, 'Go ahead, tell me'.

"Tonight, spend the night with me."

"Wha- What?"

It was absurd for a condition put forward at the end of such an intense psychological battle. What reason could there be for him to spend the night with her?

As if reading Shirone's thoughts, Uorin added.

"Don't worry. I didn't mean it that way. Just stay with me tonight. Well... if you happen to have other ideas, I don't mind if you try."

Shirone's expression crumpled.

"What on earth are you saying? You're my half-sister."

"Well, that's something we'll only know after the paternity test is done. And honestly, it doesn't matter. Same-sex marriage is common for royalty who bring a whole kingdom as a dowry."

Shirone couldn't understand. It felt like solving a series of difficult exam problems only to encounter a nonsensical riddle at the end.

"Why on earth? What does that condition have to do with helping me?"

Uorin sighed reluctantly with a "hmm" and, for the first time, told her own story.

"The daughters of Teraje Family have always been the ones to ascend to the emperor's throne. It might sound strange, but for us, men are merely tools to be consumed according to their use. That's why a daughter of Teraje doesn't keep a man who has another woman in his heart by her side. If Oppa is thinking of Amy, then I cannot accept you either." Shirone understood. For a woman of Teraje Family, it wasn't strange to have such an iron rule.

But Uorin was mistaken. Amy was his closest and dearest friend, not someone he held romantic feelings for.

"I understand what you're saying. But I don't have Amy in my heart."

The corners of Uorin's mouth slightly rose.

"I think Zion Oppa is interested in her."

Something hot welled up in Shirone's chest.

"Of course, if she rejects him, nothing will happen. Despite how he seems, Oppa has too much pride to force himself on a woman who turns him down."

If Uorin's words were true, it was a relief. But the fire that had ignited in his heart showed no signs of going out.

Uorin clapped her hands together and said,

"Well then, let's do this. I just want to confirm your feelings. From this moment on, I'll guarantee the safety of Amy and

everyone else. I could send people right now and give the order. All you need to do is spend the night with me."

Shirone didn't know what kind of threat Amy was under that made her follow Zion, but if he accepted Uorin's offer, Amy could be saved. On top of that, his family and Reina's safety would be ensured. There was no reason to refuse.

"Zion... Where did he take Amy?"

I can't reveal that yet, not until you've made your decision. It's very simple. You just need to trust me. Show me that I take precedence over that woman."

A trembling that started at his fingertips spread throughout his body. Everything was falling in his favor, yet he couldn't bring himself to make the decision.

Because he couldn't be sure.

Was human existence so bound by the five senses? What on earth should he believe to follow her words?

There wasn't a single piece of evidence to suggest that Uorin wasn't helping Zion. If, by any chance, Uorin was lying, then Amy was in tremendous danger.

"Why are you hesitating? I'm Uorin of Teraje. Not only do I not lie, but isn't this proposal what you wanted? If you can prove that you don't have feelings for another woman, I'll support you wholeheartedly. I'll spare no resources to help you grow your abilities, and when I become empress, you could become the greatest mage in the world."

It was truly a dream-like story for Shirone. And she had the ability to turn that dream into reality.

Even archmages are writing resumes wanting to work under Uorin. Such a huge opportunity was lying right before his eyes.

Lost in thought, Shirone finally made his decision.

"I'm going to Amy. I won't be accepting your proposal."

Uorin sighed, as though frustrated.

"Are you throwing away the incredible opportunity to form a connection with Teraje? No, more than that, you could

protect the family you hold so dear. And yet, you're willing to throw it all away over a woman?"

"That's right. That's what I intend to do."

Uorin closed her mouth as if shocked. But on Shirone's face, neither resignation nor regret could be found.

"But Uorin, for humans, that's everything. The only world that exists is the one we see and feel. Even if you truly save Amy, if I can't see it for myself, then it's just an unrealized world. I can't leave Amy in visible danger while trusting in some invisible safety. That's why I have to go to Amy."

Sadness briefly flickered in Uorin's eyes.

"You make life so hard for yourself. It would be easy if you just made a choice."

Shirone smiled bitterly. He often thought the same thing himself. But that's precisely the shackle of intellect. Once you know something, you can't act as if you don't.

"I understand how great this opportunity was. I also know how much you, the heir to the emperor, conceded to help me. I'm not doubting you at all. But I have to go."

Uorin walked up to Shirone and hugged him, burying her face against his chest.

"You're such a fool, Oppa. I'm sorry I couldn't do anything for you. Personally, I really liked you. I hope good fortune follows your future."

Then, stepping back a couple of steps, she revealed the information Shirone wanted to know.

"Go to the gallery. It's the only place where you can avoid people's eyes. It's also the place Oppa takes women when he wants to seduce them."

Once again, a fire ignited in Shirone's heart. As he readied himself to leave, Uorin pulled something out of her pocket.

"Wait a moment. Take this."

Shirone caught the small object Uorin threw.

He opened his hand to find a glowing red orb. By its color, it seemed to be a ruby, but it lacked the cold texture characteristic of gems.

"This is...?"

"It's the price for El Crouch's porcelain doll. It should be worth at least 100 million."

"No, I really meant for that to be a gift..."

"Of course, I understand your sincerity. But reason and emotion are separate matters. Now that negotiations have broken down, I can't be indebted to you, can I?"

With those words, Shirone had no choice but to accept. While he felt personal affection, politically they were now strangers. Clearing up any debts was the best way forward for both of them.

"Alright. I'll use it well when I graduate later."

Shirone put the orb in his pocket and walked to the door.

Then he suddenly stopped and looked back at Uorin.

Thinking about it, he had received a lot of help from her.

At the dinner table, she had upheld his parents' dignity and supported his claim to attend magic academy.

In the gallery, she had introduced him to the Objet, and at the Colosseum, she had helped him understand the true nature of the royal palace.

And now, as payment for the porcelain doll, she had provided him with escape funds. In a situation where he was being pursued by the royal palace, 100 million gold would be of great help.

"Thank you, for everything, from the beginning to now.

Thinking about it, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have made it this far."

"Huhu, even in hell, there's water to drink."

Uorin answered with Kazra's proverb.

It means there's hope even in difficult situations, but in reverse, it also implies that the small glimmer of hope only strengthens the suffering.

"Haha! That makes sense."

Realizing the situation he was in, Shirone let out a hollow laugh as he left Zion's room.

"Phew."

Once the door closed, Uorin let out a deep breath. Then, putting her hands behind her back, which she usually didn't do, she paced around the room.

"Arian Shirone..."

Stopping her steps, she quickly looked back at the door. Her eyes, now filled with a cold smile, gleamed with madness, like a child standing before the best toy they had ever seen.

"He's really no ordinary person, is he?"

Uorin burst into laughter and cheerfully returned to her seat, plopping down in the chair. Crossing her legs and resting her chin on her hand, she stared intently at the door through which Shirone had exited.

Of what Uorin had just told Shirone, less than 10 percent was true.

Everything was a lie. She had no intention of putting Shirone to good use, nor of guaranteeing Amy's safety.

It wasn't true that Zion had strong pride either.

Rather, he was a person who would eliminate any woman he set his sights on by any means necessary.

Had Shirone stayed with her this night, his life would have been completely ruined.

"Humans don't have the sense to trust others. Isn't that right, Cleo?"

Meow.

Uorin's cat answered. It was highly unlikely that it would understand human speech, but it didn't matter anyway.

Humans had no way of truly trusting one another.

But people live their lives ignoring that simple truth just because they find the idea unpleasant.

Those who acknowledge the truth and those who turn away from it.

Uorin believed that was the small difference that divided rulers from the ruled in this world.

Uorin tilted her head back over the chair's backrest, looked up at the ceiling, and smiled faintly.

“If you keep refining yourself, one day you might reach that understanding.”

The cat did not answer.

Chapter 286 Terraje's Proposal (3)

'Quick, quick!'

Reina ran at full speed toward the annex.

If Teraje Faction had made a move against Shirone's parents, the situation would become serious. On the other hand, she felt guilty. She should have been a little more careful.

'No, this was the best we could do. We strengthened all the security measures...'

That would mean the enemy acted without regard for the consequences. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps all the attendants had been wiped out.

The puzzling part was why now, of all times.

The timing of sending assassins on the first day had been perfect.

But now they were fully prepared on this side. In a situation where getting caught would reverse the tide, there was no reason to employ a high-risk, low-return approach.

Entering the annex, Reina turned toward Vincent's quarters. At the same time, she bumped into an attendant from Ogent Family around the corner.

"Ah! Miss Reina!"

Reina pushed past the attendant and ran to the room.

"Move! What happened?"

As she opened the door and entered, Vincent and Olena looked at her with puzzled expressions. It didn't seem like there had been any commotion.

Vincent was in the middle of carving a piece of wood, and beside him, Olena was drinking cocoa wrapped in a blanket.

"Lady Reina, is something wrong? You don't look well."

"Ah, well..."

Reina was lost for words at Vincent's question.

The two were safe. Then why had Amy followed Zion?

The attendant, who had hurried back into the room with a flushed face, asked in confusion.

"Miss, what on earth is the matter? Why are you suddenly rushing here?"

Reina quickly recovered her composure.

"Oh, um... I just wanted to check in and make sure everything was okay, so I came by for a routine patrol."

The attendant heaved a sigh of relief.

"Phew, I thought something serious had happened. I was just about to go report. Everything is fine here."

Olena asked with a concerned expression.

"Is something wrong? What about Shirone?"

As expected, a mother's instinct about her child was sharp.

Reina swallowed hard and hastily made up an explanation.

"He's still at the banquet hall. Don't worry, he's having a good time with Amy."

At the mention of Amy, Olena seemed to relax. If something had happened to Shirone, she would surely have come running by now.

"I see. Don't worry. We're doing just fine here."

"Hoho! Yes, well then, rest comfortably. I'll return soon."

Forcing a smile, Reina left the room and immediately headed in the opposite direction.

Shirone's parents were safe. But Amy would have had no way to confirm that fact. That meant she must have been threatened. But why Amy?

Reina suddenly stopped walking and spoke aloud.

"Shirone."

It was the worst-case scenario.

The fact that no particular danger was detected in the banquet hall was the effect of the Ataraxia demonstration, meaning that most Neutral Faction had become favorable to Orkamph.

But that had caused Zion to draw his real sword. No matter how much she thought about it, there was only one reason why he separated Amy—even lying about something that would be discovered right away.

He intended to end it tonight.

‘I thought things would pass smoothly, but for Zion to take action himself. That’s why no intel came through.’

There was no time to waste. Since the attendant had just left Vincent’s quarter, it had been over 20 minutes since she had last seen Shirone.

Reina unfolded Sound of Silence, a Schema Ear technique. With her hearing enhanced, she began to pick up even the smallest sounds in the royal palace.

It was too late to try following Shirone's trail now. Wherever high decibels were heard, that would be the center of the incident.

@

Amy followed Zion into the underground gallery.

Whether the palace underground was originally quiet or Zion had taken care of it beforehand, not even an ant was passing by.

On reflection, it made sense. The banquet was going late into the night, so the attendants who weren’t on duty were likely asleep.

Amy thought this was rather fortunate.

Zion may be royalty, but his actual fighting power was at the level of nobles his age. Having received elite magical training from a young age, Amy felt confident she could overpower him if the opportunity arose.

Therefore, this silence worked to her advantage. She could beat Zion without worrying about others' eyes.

‘If possible, even killing him...’

It was unsettling to think about hurting someone, but with Shirone’s parents being held captive, that hesitation was a luxury she couldn’t afford.

With a gentlemanly smile, Zion led Amy deeper into the gallery's cavern. Amy noticed that the door was double-layered and had the same thought as Shirone would have. 'If I need to break through the doors, I should save at least two magics.'

But even that concern faded when she saw the peaceful atmosphere of the gallery.

It was a room filled with all sorts of items.

She didn't know what they were used for, but at least they weren't the kind of tools meant for torture or harm.

Amy examined the northern display case, which was the only part that could be used as a weapon.

Only an expert would know how well the blade was sharpened, but the sword reflected in her eyes emanated sharpness on its own.

"Where are Shirone's parents?"

Zion raised the corner of his mouth playfully and said,

"Parents? Well, why would I know about that?"

Amy's gaze grew icy.

"You deceived me?"

Zion checked the time. The next hour was the window for assassination. The reason they hadn't set a definite assassination time was that they had planned the strategy with minimal personnel.

Some flexibility in the situation was inevitable, but on the other hand, it had the advantage of being able to respond flexibly to variables.

'One hour....'

Suddenly, he felt a tinge of regret. Amy was truly a fine woman. Wouldn't an hour with such beauty feel like a fleeting moment?

Regardless, while he wasted time here, Zenogre and Arius would finish their task. All he had to do was wait and collect the Ataraxia that would roll into his lap.

"I apologize for lying. But I believe you'll understand. A little harmless deception is necessary when trying to charm a

beautiful woman, don't you think?"

Amy didn't want to hear it. Thinking she could be somewhat rude since he had deceived her first, she shot back:

"I'll be leaving. I'll decline such invitations from now on."

"Oh? I wonder if you can say that after seeing this?"

When Zion opened his fist, a necklace with a yellow cross pendant dangled down. The precision of the craftsmanship alone made it clear that it was a valuable item.

But Amy snorted.

She didn't know how many had fallen for such tricks, but Carmis Family was also a renowned house in Thormia Kingdom.

Even if he offered her a diamond, she was confident she wouldn't bat an eye.

"What are you doing right now? Do you really think this would win my favor?"

Zion smirked as if he had expected such a reaction and moved closer.

"Something like this? Why don't you look more closely?"

Amy shot him a glare and inspected the pendant.

There was no way royalty would carry anything made from alloy, so it was certainly pure gold. A quick look suggested that about 500 gold coins would need to be melted down to produce this size.

A pearl was set in the center, but unusually, it had a metallic iron color.

It was far from the beautiful luster of natural pearls.

Though the form was perfect, it was clearly not something a woman would wear for aesthetics.

'What is this? What's so special about it...?'

Amy suddenly realized.

She remembered reading about it in a book. A pearl with a dark iron color. It was a pearl from the Heavenly Emperor Clam that lived in the Alcantara deep sea.

According to geologists, the Alcantara Trench was the deepest part of the ocean in the world.

Because not a speck of light enters and the water pressure is enormous, fishermen can't harvest them, and only national projects involving mages can access it.

The durability of the clams that survive that pressure was said to create chemical substances harder than diamonds. In other words, it was one of the hardest substances in the world.

Moreover, its flawless spherical shape made it highly versatile for industrial use.

Of course, not many people would buy such things with money, but from what she read in books, Heavenly Emperor Clam pearls could replace the ball bearings of ancient weapons, so they were worth at least 200 million each.

As such, these pearls were sometimes used as currency in large transactions between kingdoms, where transporting vast amounts of gold coins was impractical.

'So this is a Heavenly Emperor Clam pearl...'

The reason ancient weapons from prehistory still exist today is believed to be that they were made from the hardest stone in Heavens.

However, no matter how advanced an ancient weapon was, its moving parts would eventually wear down. To replace those parts, they needed durability at least equal to Heavenly Emperor Clam pearls.

One ball bearing alone was worth 200 million gold.

One could guess how much budget kingdoms were pouring into maintaining ancient weapons' functions.

'Hmph. So that's what this is about.'

Zion assumed her silence was due to her inner conflict.

How could she not be? What he had offered wasn't merely a jewel but currency traded between nations.

"As expected, you have refinement. Most nobles exchange diamonds as their marriage vows, symbolizing an unbreakable love. But this, this is Heavenly Emperor Clam's pearl, far harder than any diamond. Only direct royal lineage

could use it as a betrothal gift. So, how about it? Shall we promise our future with this?"

Zion prepared to put the necklace on her, flashing a greasy smile.

Of course, he didn't tempt just any woman with Heavenly Emperor Clam pearls. Even for a truly fine woman, readily giving away 200 million gold would be madness.

But right now, he doesn't mind giving away not just 200 million gold but all the Objets in this room.

Because once Shirone dies, it would be over for Amy anyway.

"From the moment I first saw you, I was captivated. Will you accept my heart?"

Finally, Zion delivered his heartfelt confession. Amy stared blankly at him.

For the blood of Teraje and the first prince of Kazra Kingdom to propose with a Heavenly Emperor Clam's pearl—this would be the dream scenario countless noblewomen had fantasized about. Thus, Amy wondered if she was abnormal for feeling so unmoved.

But she truly felt indifferent. The first thought that came to her mind upon hearing Zion's confession was that she should return to Shirone now.

"I'm sorry. While I'm grateful for Your Highness's favor, I cannot accept such a burdensome gift."

Zion wore a dumbfounded expression.

This was the first woman to remain so composed even after seeing a Heavenly Emperor Clam pearl. No matter how noble, it was a situation where 200 million was rolling in at once. Even if uninterested in him, most would normally grab the extended hand.

Thinking he couldn't hold Amy here like this, Zion decided to present a card that would surely enchant her, since he was already making empty promises.

"Then how about this? I'll let you bear my child. You could become royalty."

Amy was dumbfounded.

'This wet-behind-the-ears kid...'

Though nobles had political marriages, royalty took it one step further. They acted as if their blood was of some extraordinary value.

Well, maybe it was. Even now, women lined up wanting to bear princes.

But Amy had no desire to become royalty. So Zion's words felt nothing short of an insult.

"I'll be leaving. I don't think we have anything more to discuss, Your Highness."

Amy walked to the door without waiting for a response.

"Why you.....!"

Zion, wounded in his pride, yanked her wrist forcefully. Amy hurriedly shook off his hand and stepped back. Her wrist stung from how hard he had gripped it.

'How disgraceful for a prince of a kingdom to act like this.'

Amy glared at Zion while caressing her wrist.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Her voice was filled with emotion, but it was Zion who was truly furious.

"How dare you reject me? You, just a mere noble!"

Amy felt like she had heard a novel insult.

Even Thormia's royalty deferred to Carmis Family. But such thoughts rather made Amy more realistic. After all, standing here was not just any royalty but a son of Teraje.

Chapter 287 Terraje's Proposal (4)

"Weren't you expecting this when you followed me? Do you even realize how much of an honor it is to enter my bedchamber?"

"I clearly told you I didn't want to."

"Hmph, how arrogant. You really don't know your place." Zion ground his teeth but soon regained his smug smile as though an idea had come to him.

"Fine. Then as royalty, I give you an order. Attend to me tonight."

"No. Even if you're a prince, I'm a noble of Thormia. I do not obey orders from foreign kingdoms."

"Really? You think you're so high and mighty, huh? Then how about this? If you don't come to my embrace tonight, I'll wage war against Tormia."

Amy looked at Zion with an expression of disbelief.

Do you think it's impossible? Kazra will be mine soon enough. Once I become king, I'll start by conquering Thormia. Your actions will lead to your kingdom's downfall." It wasn't an entirely impossible situation. If Zion became king of Kazra, Terraje would spare no effort in supporting his ambitions to expand his influence.

Zion gave a vile smile, taking Amy's slow bow of her head as a sign of resignation.

But at that moment, a cold voice flowed from Amy's mouth as she looked down.

"Go ahead and try if you can."

"What?"

"If you want war, by all means, go ahead and start one."

"You've got to be joking. You're really asking for it now, aren't you?"

To think a mere noble would dare not use honorifics with the first prince. But compared to Amy's declaration of being unfazed by war, it was barely shocking.

"Don't tell me you thought I was joking? If so, you'll surely regret it."

Amy couldn't hold back and burst into laughter.

"Don't talk nonsense. You think you're going to be king? Don't flatter yourself. Your position as First Prince isn't even secure."

"Why you really...!"

"True, I might have been a bit nervous if it was Empress Teraje. But you? You're not even going to be emperor, are you? You think a brat like you scares me?"

Zion's eyes gleamed with murderous intent. Never in his life had he been so insulted.

His mind changed. He wouldn't kill Amy. He would just leave her barely alive.

And he would surely reduce Thormia to ashes and watch tears of blood flow from her eyes.

"Those words... You're going to take responsibility for them, aren't you?"

"Responsibility? No, I won't take responsibility for anything. Even if a war breaks out because of me. And if you dare to invade our kingdom..."

Amy's Red Eyes began to glow with a menacing crimson light.

"At that time, I will also fight with my life as a subject."

Zion flinched at the murderous intent emanating from Amy's Red Eyes.

It felt as if his blood had frozen. Who would have thought such extreme determination lay within the girl who was blushing in the banquet hall.

'They say mages are eccentric....'

Amy stepped forward, eyes blazing.

"You, what are you plotting? Why did you bring me to this room?"

From the circumstances so far, Zion hadn't brought her here just to satisfy his physical desires.

It didn't match his personality to mention Shirone's parents for something so trivial.

'In the end, he's after Shirone for something, but just what...?'

Amy's lips trembled as the realization dawned on her.

Zion wasn't the important factor here. Teraje Faction was planning to settle everything tonight, once and for all.

She had to find Shirone immediately.

Entering the Spirit Zone, the door's location came through synesthesia.

'Was it a structure that could be opened from inside?'

She could open it, but she remembered that it had been locked. The only option was to break through. With her Fireball omniscience already prepared, Amy waited for the right moment. And when Zion's face twisted like a beast's, she rushed to the door.

"Armand!"

The demon sword defied inertia and flew straight into Zion's hand. Without even glancing at it, he swung his arm, hurling the blade.

Sensing the trajectory of the sword through her Spirit Zone, Amy twisted her body. With a thud, Armand embedded itself in the door. Without her Spirit Zone, she would have died.

'He really intends to kill me. He's going all the way...'

Zion's composed expression was irritating. Given the situation, this was his golden opportunity to corner her, yet he didn't seem rushed.

Amy quickly realized why.

Armand. From the sword lodged in the door, she could feel a malevolent energy, the likes of which she had never encountered before. It felt vile, like something repulsive was clinging to the door. Just being near it was horrifying.

"Do you think you'll get away with this? I'm also a well-known person in our kingdom."

"Karmis Family, huh. They are a bit troublesome. But once Shirone is dead, none of it will matter."

Assassination is the most efficient means of overthrowing power.

Not because the dead person held important value. Because the dead cannot speak.

If Shirone dies, the living can create hundreds of circumstances. Shirone's soul may wail in the underworld, but there will be no way to appeal his grievance.

'I have to get out of here, somehow.'

Amy bit down hard on her lip, gathering her resolve. As her teeth sank into her lip and she tasted blood, the nauseating sensation from the demon sword lessened slightly.

'Let's go out on the count of three.'

As she was counting in her mind like this, Zion extended his hand and recalled Armand.

Amy frowned at the unexpected turn of events. It was strange to recall the sword after blocking the escape route. Yet she didn't think Zion could face her with the sword either.

Amy watched Zion with wary eyes.

His face showed no tension as he stood holding the sword. Could he have secretly devoted himself to swordsmanship? But his next words shattered any expectations of a high-level twist.

"What a shame. You could've had the thrill of your life tonight. But thanks to your petty noble pride, you're going to die a virgin."

"I won't be dying by your hand, but if I do become a vengeful spirit, I swear you'll be the first to go. If you see me in your dreams, then go ahead and believe in the afterlife."

Zion's face contorted.

Mages are all just talk, so it's hard to break even in verbal fights. In the end, show of force is the special remedy.

Zion, imagining Amy's miserable future to calm himself, held Armand vertically close to his body and muttered. "Diamond Armor."

With a 'ching!' sound of metal springing, Armand's blade split and cracked open like spider legs.

The hilt came loose and the pommel and grip separated. The once skeletal frame of the sword, now reminiscent of a building's bare structure, began to ooze red fibers akin to the essence of a living organism.

Amy was seized by an even more vicious feeling than when she sensed it through the Spirit Zone. Armand, centered around its crimson jewel, morphed into a form resembling a massive spider.

But what followed was even more disturbing. The split blade, now divided into dozens of legs, began to envelop Zion, covering him from head to toe.

Amy frowned at the grotesque sight, but in the blink of an eye, the repulsive form began to take on a shape more pleasing to the human eye.

The part that was the handle transformed into a helmet protecting the face, while the blade extended over the top of his head, cascading down his back and clinging to his core muscles, forming a foundational skeleton.

From that skeletal structure, metallic elements expanded, taking the shape of armor.

The metal, now encasing his wrists, turned into gauntlets, and the metal extending down his legs transformed into pointed metal boots.

As the armor protected his vital organs, the red fibers wrapped around his joints, tightening without leaving any gaps.

Finally, an enormous amount of fiber leaked from the neck guard, transforming into a fluttering cape.

From Amy's perspective, everything happened in an instant, as if he had transformed.

With his face concealed by the cross-shaped visor of his helmet, Zion lowered his arms and clenched his fists. At that signal, an extremely thin needle pierced Zion's nape and connected to his spinal cord. There was no pain, but an electric current surged down his spine.

<Gothic> - Copying the user's brain function. Sharing. Activating linguistic cognition.

Armand's voice echoed in Zion's mind, immediately began to adjust his bio-signals.

<Gothic> - Strength enhancement. Bone density increases. Endoskeleton augmentation. Maximizing neural transmission speed. Metallic proliferation complete. Weapon generation and transformation enabled. Specialized for killing. Optimized for close combat.

Ching! Ching!

30-centimeter blades sprang from both of Zion's gauntlets. Amy gulped. Except for the eyes visible through the cross's grooves, all of Zion's parts were concealed by the demon sword. Judging by its appearance, it seemed that the fibers had enveloped most of his body, with the armor layered over them.

'How could this be possible?'

This didn't make sense. Judging by the weight of the metal alone, it was clearly far heavier than the original sword, even by rough estimates. And the armor—what were those fibers supposed to be?

The fibers protected the joints with tough, muscle-like tissue, maximizing both durability and mobility. Perhaps because of this, despite wearing heavy armor, Zion was displaying far more agile posture than before.

Seeing the bewildered expression on Amy's face, Zion was pleased.

'Hmph, of course. When would someone like her have seen something like this?'

Demon Sword Armand is an S-class Objet with the contradictory traits of a metallic organism.

Its functions were largely divided into two categories: the first was Perfect Control, which allowed the user to control the sword at will, and the second was Diamond Armor, which maximized combat abilities by merging with the user. In Perfect Control, metallic characteristics are prominent, and in Diamond Armor, the biological traits become more pronounced.

Especially since Diamond Armor shares the brain with its user, it could even perform intelligent tasks.

"Did you take me for a dumb prince who only leans on the name of Teraje?"

Zion took a step forward.

Clang! The eerie screech of steel boots grinding against the floor echoed through the space, and Amy instinctively pressed her back against the door.

"Of course, you might think that. But so what? Everything is trivial before Teraje's name. Your family, your talent—I'm not envious of any of it. Because I am..."

Zion held out his palm towards Amy.

"A great royal."

The fibers in his glove wriggled, and from the center of his palm, a tentacle shot out, rushing toward Amy.

Even in the urgent situation, Amy noticed the tips of the flying tentacles hardening into sharp points and hurriedly threw herself aside.

Bam! The tentacle embedded itself in the door. At the same time, the tentacle, still connected to Zion's palm, snapped off with a snap, as if cutting its tail.

Amy looked at the door with a stunned expression. As the tentacle fibers sank into the wood, small root-like structures spread out, sealing the door entirely.

Amy bit her lip with a frustrated expression.

Though she didn't know how tough the tentacles' fibers were, it seemed they couldn't be destroyed by ordinary

force.

"When are you going to use that fire in your hand?"

Zion slowly approached. The pressure he exerted now was on a completely different level from before his Diamond Armor. It was as if the ominous aura of Armand had completely enveloped him.

"Then again, you don't really think something like that would work, do you?"

Zion raised the blade protruding from his gauntlet vertically. Amy's face glaring at Zion was reflected in the smooth blade surface.

All Sorts of Variables (1)

Even as he ran to Zion's gallery, Shirone couldn't shake off his strange thoughts.

Even though he told himself there was no way it could be true, unwanted images of a scene he never wanted to witness filled his head.

'What am I even thinking?'

He needed to think rationally.

First, why had Amy followed Zion in the first place? She wasn't the type to act rashly, but she was also the one who had left for danger in Galliant, worrying about Jis' safety.

Chapter 288 Terraje's Proposal (5)

'Right, it was like that back then too. Because I was late after meeting Marsha Noona...'

Then it suddenly dawned to him that maybe Amy might be feeling hurt by him. Had his dancing with Reina Noona slighted her?

Looking back at it now, he wondered if perhaps even when she went to Falkoa knowing it was a trap hadn't been completely unrelated to such feelings.

'No. I'm overanalyzing. Dancing with Reina Noona was already part of the plan. Amy wouldn't be like that.'

But even as he told himself that, he couldn't be entirely sure.

The reason was simple. When he saw Amy dancing with Zion, he felt a strange and unpleasant ripple deep inside himself.

Wouldn't Amy be no different?

If she had felt that same, she might've followed Zion outside on the slightest impulse.

Because Amy is such a delicate girl.

Shirone's footsteps quickened. Though he racked his brain to control his emotions, his heartbeat only grew faster.

"Hm?"

Shirone abruptly stopped and glanced behind him.

Ever since he came down to the basement, his nape had felt eerily creepy. But in the hallway he had walked down, there wasn't the faintest sound and any signs of life, let alone a rat.

"Is it just me?"

Shirone stroked his neck and slowly moved forward.

'Kekeke, no good, no good.'

The man hanging upside down from the ceiling where Shirone had left spread his mouth in a grin. It was Spatur Zenogre, who had received special orders to assassinate Shirone.

Suspended solely by the grip of his ten fingers, he clung to the ceiling.

The Spatur's Spider Mimicry granted him strength that defied gravity.

Fine fibers on his fingertips and a sticky oil that seeped from his skin worked together, generating a chemical bond strong enough to support his body weight.

Of course, his martial arts were only possible due to the assassin training that honed his technique to perfection, allowing his upper body alone to bear the load of his lower body.

Also, the oil seeping from his finger skin evaporates in 20 seconds when the secretion stops, leaving no trace of his presence.

A near-perfect assassin.

Zenogre unfurled his long tongue to his chin, only to retract it again.

'Quite a sensitive prey. Like... a mosquito.'

But this was because Zenogre had been continuously sending very faint killing intent toward Shirone.

It was a basic tactic for an assassin—to gauge a target's reaction and calculate the appropriate response. He could kill at any time; he was only gauging the situation to ensure a 100 percent success rate.

'Hm, that's it.'

Assassins, after all, are those who exploit circumstances rather than rely on brute force. Thus, it's also an occupation that involves spending long times in extreme solitude.

Because they must make their own judgments and evaluations about everything, talking to themselves had become habitual.

Zenogre actually enjoyed his profession as an assassin. It was much more sophisticated than being a hitman who just swoops in and out.

Although his body had become so grotesque that he could not blend in with the human world, this transformation epitomized the peak functionality that the assassin clan, Spatur, pursued as their ideal of beauty.

'Should I.... push a little more?'

Zenogre moved, scaling the wall with his fingers and following his prey closely. Then he drew a strand of spider silk from his waist, letting himself drop silently behind Shirone.

The thin thread clung to the ceiling, allowing Zenogre's body to advance. Even a slight breeze would make the thread sway, but perfect control was not a difficult task for the Spatur clan.

Shirone's nape was right in front of him. It was a distance where exhaling would flutter his hair. The sight of that pale neck, like a slice of fish meat, ignited an urge to bite down. Zenogre tore the corners of his mouth wide and slowly brought his fingers to Shirone's neck.

'Now then, let's test his sensitivity, shall we?'

Zenogre's fingers came close enough to almost touch the fine hair. It was a distance that could be considered almost touching.

Shirone turned his head with a surprised expression. But all he saw was the empty hallway. Even the flickering patterns of the torches seemed undisturbed.

"What the hell is it?"

Something was definitely strange. Maybe he was just unusually sensitive today, but he kept getting the feeling that something was getting on his nerves.

'It wouldn't hurt to be sure.'

Shirone pretended to move slowly, then suddenly expanded his Spirit Zone.

"...."

All kinds of information flood in through synesthesia. Small creatures scurried everywhere. Most likely rats or cockroaches, given the proximity to the food storeroom. "Ugh...."

Shirone shivered, rubbing his arms at the unpleasant sensation.

In any case, his senses had picked up only small creatures. He thought that his nervous system might have gone awry after being threatened with assassination for several days.

"Phew, let's go quickly."

As Shirone moved away, a satisfied smile appeared on Zenogre's lips, still clung to the ceiling.

'He took the bait. Congratulations on your impending death.'

A mage's Spirit Zone is one of the most challenging abilities for a melee assassin, as it is not easy to approach them because they can expand their minds and perceive objects with synesthesia.

But an assassin knows:

There is no perfect sense without a blind spot.

Spirit Zone allows mages to integrate all information within its range. It was not a precise feeling like sight, hearing, or touch, but rather a kind of sixth sense.

But what if one blends into their surroundings so seamlessly that they become a part of them? With a sixth sense that integrates information, it becomes unable to distinguish the differences between two entities.

That blind spot of the sixth sense.

Just as creatures in nature have mastered the art of concealment through evolution, assassins have also developed their own unique techniques through long years of fighting against Spirit Zones.

This is the art of Equalization—the ability to blend in with objects.

'Yes, that's right.'

Shirone felt the presence of Zenogre through the Spirit Zone, but he could not tell the difference between the stone wall and Zenogre with his sixth sense alone.

And this was exactly what Zenogre was aiming for.

For a mage, dependence on Spirit Zone is as great as an ordinary person's dependence on vision. So much so that if something cannot be sensed through Spirit Zone, they may as well believe it doesn't exist.

This was why Zenogre had been subtly provoking Shirone all along.

Having confirmed his surroundings with his Spirit Zone, Shirone's vigilance had dropped significantly.

That's why Shirone would die.

It was not Zenogre who killed him. The circumstances kill him.

Hitmen who specialize in hit-and-run missions risk their lives with a fifty percent chance of success, but an assassin won't move even if they have a ninety-nine percent chance. They only move when the target has taken the first step into the swamp of death on their own.

This was why high-ranking officials feared a single assassin more than an entire army. Once they appear, it signifies that the target was already in the heart of death.

But the best assassins aren't necessarily the best swordsmen. Mastering Equalization is such a challenging skill that reaching its peak requires a lifetime of dedication. But they are still strong.

If a swordsman fights with equal abilities from 1 to 100, an assassin was unbeatable within one of those hundred. They dominate in the critical one percent of scenarios.

Which meant Shirone was not at fault. He simply believed in what he believed in. And Zenogre used that blind spot to make the target completely defenseless.

The current Zenogre was invincible.

'Kuku, should we get going then?'

Zenogre, who had approached Shirone along the ceiling, landed on the floor without making a sound. Then he puckered his lips and mimed pulling something out from between his fingers.

A strand, thin as wire, unfurled from his fingers.

This would be sufficient.

‘Indeed.’

Zenogre’s chosen method was the Death Noose.

By tying the wire-like thread into a noose and throwing it over Shirone, a single yank would be enough to snap his head from his shoulders, like plucking a ripe grape.

‘Seven seconds left.’

Zenogre deftly twisted the wire in the air, instantly tying it into a noose.

Then he let it ride the air currents, and it gently floated like a kite over Shirone’s head.

Soundless, traceless, scentless—perfect assassination.

‘Four seconds. Three. Two.’

The noose passed over Shirone’s face and dropped down toward his neck.

‘Now!’

Zenogre twisted his mouth into a grotesque grin and yanked the wire.

The razor-thin thread tightened instantly, coiling down to the size of a tiny seed.

“ ”

Shirone, now on the ground, stared up at Zenogre.

“Wh- What? Who are you?”

“ ”

Zenogre stared blankly like a person who had lost his ability to think. No matter how much he thought about it, he could not understand the current situation.

Just as he tightened the noose, Shirone suddenly dropped to the ground and rolled. Then he turned to look back and met his eyes.

‘What? Where did I miscalculate?’

Shirone was supposed to die. The circumstances dictated that he should.

So it wasn't his fault. There had to be an unexpected factor at play.

Shirone gulped and glared at Zenogre.

Right after he had confirmed his surroundings through his Spirit Zone and started walking with a sense of security, an urgent voice echoed in his mind, shouting, 'Danger'!

Without a second thought, he rolled to the ground. And when he turned around, he saw a man with a sinister appearance staring at him.

Zenogre asked in an eerie voice.

"How... did you dodge?"

Shirone furrowed his brow at the strange question.

'How did I dodge it? Of course, it's....'

He heard someone's voice. But judging from the reaction, it seemed that the man did not hear it.

Just then, a faint cracking sound came from his pocket, like glass shattering.

Shirone searched through his pockets without taking his eyes off Zenogre. When he took it out, he found that the gem that Uorin had said was worth well over 100 million was broken into two pieces.

Zenogre's shoulders trembled. Viewed through the compound vision of his insect-like eyes, Shirone's gemstone was unmistakably what he thought it was.

"The Last Wail of the Yeager Family?"

There's no way Shirone would have access to something like that. And yet, it was undoubtedly the Last Wail of the Yeager Family. If not, there was no reason Shirone would have survived his meticulously crafted plan.

'Damn it... of all things.'

Historical records said that 480 years ago, Yeager Family had ruled over the western continent.

Then, one day, family members began to be assassinated one by one, each night without fail. No matter how much

security was strengthened, one corpse was inevitably found every morning.

The patriarch of the family tried everything to find the culprit, but there was no way to stop the number of victims increasing day by day.

When the family's numbers dwindled to less than half, he took a drastic measure.

He sealed off the mansion.

Yet, even that night, another servant died.

Realizing the assassin must be within the family itself, the head began to interrogate the surviving family members.

However, no one was found to be suspicious, and as time passed, what was once a family of 287 had dwindled to just 63 members.

The family was already as good as ruined.

Their spirits grew hollow, and mistrust tore through them like a plague. Few even dared to speak to one another.

The patriarch stopped trying altogether.

Whoever died, he would simply wait. As long as he could identify the culprit, it didn't matter if his family perished.

And so, on the 286th day since the assassination began.

Only two people were left in the mansion.

The patriarch himself and his youngest daughter, whom he loved the most.

"H- How could it be you...?"

The patriarch could not believe the reality before him.

He was not the assassin. Therefore, the culprit could only be his fourteen-year-old youngest daughter.

"No! I am not the culprit, Father! I really am not!"

The patriarch drew the sword strapped to his waist.

She must die. No matter how dear, this daughter of his had been the reason they were all dead.

But he couldn't bring himself to kill his daughter.

Because she was already dead.

The patriarch, who was staring blankly at his youngest daughter who had turned into a corpse, finally realized and

trembled his chin.

The secret was now laid bare.

The sword dropped, and his knees hit the floor with a thud.

“N- No! This can’t be happening! No!”

The patriarch tore at his hair and let out a despairing wail.

There was no one left to die. No one but himself.

He took a strong liquor and headed to the study. And sitting at the desk, he recorded the events of 286 days in a single letter.

It was said that the life or death of the patriarch was never confirmed.

Some say he left the mansion, while others believe he was the final victim, but either way, Yeager Family disappeared from the world.

Two years later, a merchant purchased Yeager Family mansion at a bargain price.

The mansion had remained untouched, as it was the patriarch’s private estate. But two years was the legal limit before the kingdom could claim it and put it up for sale.

When the door of the mansion, which had been sealed for 2 years, was wide open, the first thing that caught the merchant's eye was 287 red beads on the floor.

This was the hidden story of the Last Wail of the Yeager Family. It was also cited by the Curia Auction House as an example of why not all Objects are 100 percent safe.

Chapter 289 All Sorts of Variables (3)

The true origin story of Objet is never clearly known. Only the name of the item was passed down from someone, and through that, people let their imaginations soar. However, the Last Will of the Yeager Family is unique in that an actual record remains.

The merchant who acquired the mansion soon realized what powers the 287 beads possessed.

If one possessed it, a warning from a girl would be heard the moment they encountered a murderous intent. It was such a sharp alarm device that even the most skilled and restrained murderous intent would not be able to avoid it.

They say the merchant sold it at auction and became the continent's wealthiest person. And the 287 Objets passed into the hands of rulers of various kingdom, with currently about 82 estimated to remain.

‘Indeed.’

This was the story Zenogre heard during his assassination training.

And that made the current situation all the more bizarre.

Only the highest nobles or royals of each country could even come by such an Objet, so how could Shirone possibly possess one?

“Where... did you get that? You don’t seem to have a life worth such a price.”

Shirone scrambled to his feet, taking up a fighting stance.

“What are you? What were you trying to do to me?”

Without answering, Zenogre waved his hand in the air.

The threads intertwined, forming a white strand visible even to the naked eye, coiled around his wrist. Fastening one end

to the ceiling, he yanked, and his body flew up swiftly. Shirone casted Teleportation. However, Zenogre had already completely disappeared from sight.

He was a master beyond comprehension, at least from Shirone's perspective.

Zenogre pursued Shirone while moving along the walls. Either way, this was a target that could be eliminated with hitman methods 90 percent of the time. Above all, since The Last Will of the Yeager Family > no longer there, the fact that Shirone would die remained unchanged.

There was no escape for Shirone.

However he had been hidden until now, Zenogre's murderous intent was suffocating.

Moreover, the source of the murderous intent wasn't just in one place. It was interfering with his Spirit Zone's synesthesia at an extraordinary speed.

'If this continues, I'll die!'

In this desperate situation, Shirone gave up on fleeing.

Instead, he lowered his fist and summoned all his strength to cast Photon Explosion.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom!

The basement walls shook and dust fell in clumps.

"Kekeke! Magic, eh, magic."

There is no profession that takes mages lightly, but for the assassin clan Spatur, there was always a manual for handling any situation.

As Zenogre's lips puckered, tightly coiled, spider-webbed wires shot out. The steel wire tore right through Shirone's magic, piercing his shoulder.

"Keuh!"

Shirone hurriedly pulled out the wire and rolled across the floor. It wasn't a fatal wound, but this strike made him fully aware of the gap in their skill.

Expansion-type defensive magic like Photon Explosion boasts wide-ranging defensive power, but were inevitably weak against pinpoint penetration.

A master who could see through and counter a magic's weakness the moment they saw it. Their speed of thought likely far exceeded Shirone's.

Zenogre, who had been lingering outside Shirone's field of vision, suddenly dropped to the ground with a soundless thud, landing on his hands with the perfect poise of a spider. Zenogre's tongue stretched out, licking his face from chin to brow.

"Kiki, good reaction. I aimed for the heart but you dodged. Youngsters like you are my type. I'd like to tie you up with spider webs and 'take care of you,' but..."

A shiver ran down Shirone's spine as he felt a chill of dread. "I'm busy myself."

As Zenogre disappeared from sight faster than before, Shirone found himself unable to judge the situation.

A mage could exert power beyond human limits, but when limited to person-to-person combat, they struggled against those who had pushed their physical abilities to the extreme.

Zenogre was a master unlike any seen before; even considering a confrontation from the start had been a grave miscalculation.

Shirone turned completely around and cast Teleportation. If both escape and confrontation were impossible, the only remaining option was to hide and buy time.

A flash of light bounced off the walls and darted into the food storage. As it fed hundreds of palace residents, the space was massive and sectioned by food types.

Shirone hid with his back against the pile of wheat straw that resembled a castle wall. He hadn't cast magics for long, yet his breathing was already heavy.

'Where might he target me from? The ceiling? Behind the sacks? Or the opposite section?'

Shirone moved their gaze trying to find traces of Zenogre. In reality, however, Zenogre was clinging to a corner of the storage room ceiling, completely outside Shirone's

expectations.

'Kikiki, how foolish. Thinking common sense applies against a master of Equalization.'

All eight of Zenogre's eyes zeroed in precisely on Shirone.

@

Zion's combat power, borrowing the strength of Diamond Armor, matched that of a certified swordsman expert. He was launching sharp attacks without giving Amy time to cast Teleportation.

Zion felt somewhat relieved seeing Amy's pale face.

Armand, highly valued even among S-rank Objects by standards, was indeed worth every bit.

Hard work doesn't suit royalty. Of course, neither does talent. Royalty are noble for their bloodline alone. And through that bloodline, they can buy whatever effort or talent they require.

"Still, you're holding up quite well."

He hadn't expected the fight to last this long. He had thought she were a weak mage, but her movements were as agile as a swordsman's.

"Hmph, so you prepared thoroughly since childhood? That makes it even more pitiful. Losing to someone like me who hasn't learned even swordsmanship, let alone magic."

"Stop spouting nonsense! I'll never lose to a brat like you who only relies on weapons!"

Amy gritted her teeth and rushed at Zion.

She was so frustrated she felt close to tears. This was the result of efforts made without missing a single day for 10 years. Someone who had never experienced hardship in their life couldn't possibly best her just by wielding a magic sword.

Amy utilized her Schema to the fullest to deploy a distraction tactic. But Armand responded in turn, adapting Zion's physiology.

<Gothic> Enemy entity acceleration change detected.

Removing retinal afterimages. Maximizing visual cognition.

The reason why afterimages occur was because when the human brain sees objects, it remembers them for one-tenth of a second.

But when Armand removed the retinal afterimage, Amy's movements became abruptly clear, as though stuttering into sharp focus.

Zion paused, then suddenly lunged. The blade attached to his gauntlet sliced through the air, grazing the edge of Amy's collar.

Zion wasn't a Schema user. However, Diamond Armor's body tuning ability was perfectly replicating Schema's effects.

'No! I absolutely can't accept this!'

Amy bit down hard on her lip.

To avoid Zion's gaze, she would need a speed that outstripped his perception. But her Schema hadn't reached that level.

'In that case...'

Amy entered Spirit Zone.

In such a confined space, going up against an agile warrior equipped with close-range weapons, she wasn't sure how effective her magic would be, but if the direct approach didn't work, survival would be impossible.

'Eat this!'

Amy scattered Fireballs in all directions. Instead of targeting him directly, she aimed to limit his movement—a tactical choice.

'Tch! How annoying.'

Zion gave up charging and retreated.

The gallery was full of various Objets. As long as he had Armand, the other items didn't matter, but most of them belonged to Uorin, which posed a problem.

'First, I need to protect the Objets.'

Sensing Zion's intentions, Armand extended its tentacles in all directions.

As the tentacles clung to the walls, Zion's body lifted into the air.

The tension allowed Zion to fly like a bug. Swinging the sword at tremendous speed, he split the Fireballs in two.

Amy snorted.

'Hmph, you think you can block them with that?'

Even if its form changes, the heat doesn't just disappear.

Just as she expected, the flames engulfed Zion, igniting the organic layer of Armand with a flash of combustion.

But as charred layers of hardened material flaked off, they were quickly replaced by new organic fibers.

Self-regeneration was a vital trait of living things. The reason Demon Sword Armand was classified as an S-rank was due to its combination of the strengths of both metal and organic matter.

Having blocked the Fireballs, Zion looked down at Amy while standing in mid-air.

"You have unexpectedly fiery temper. But you won't be able to rampage any further."

Amy stepped back and surrounded herself with Fire Mist. It wouldn't turn the tables, but nothing was better at repelling organic matter than heat.

"Hmph, you're really going wild."

Amy knew it too—the miserable reality that the best she could was improvisation.

Moreover, the opponent's movements were unpredictable, and in this narrow space, even her specialty Sniper Mode was out of question.

But the reason she didn't give up was because she saw a glimmer of hope. For some unknown reason, Zion clearly seemed to dislike the destruction of items in the room.

'They don't even look that expensive.'

She had doubts, but this was the only opening in the situation. As an experiment, Amy deliberately shot a Fire Strike toward the display case.

As expected, Zion leapt forward. Tentacles extending from behind his shoulder blocked the Fire Strike's path.

With a bang, the tip of the tentacle began to burn.

Amy clicked her tongue at the stronger-than-expected durability, having intended to sever the tentacle.

But her magic was just beginning. Rotating the Targeting Type Spirit Zone, she poured Fire Strikes in all directions.

Zion blocked them repeatedly by swinging his tentacles, but even Armand's durability had its limits.

'Hmph! Then I'll just catch the mage!'

One of Zion's tentacles clamped onto the back of Amy's neck and shoved her forward. Her head hit the wall, briefly causing her vision to blur, but she activated her Red Eyes, quickly offset it.

"Kuh, you think you can stop me with just this...?"

At that moment, sharp needles shot out from the tentacle and pierced her neck. Then her Spirit Zone disappeared and the magic was dispelled.

Zion, listening to Armand's voice, descended to the ground.

<Gothic> Extracting pituitary hormone from the user.

Synthesizing. Neural sedative substance manufacture.

Complete. Injecting.

The human body were nothing less than a massive chemical factory. Armand had extracted hormones from Zion's body and synthesized its own neural sedative.

Amy couldn't hold onto her fading consciousness.

'Damn it...! What kind of sword is that?'

She tried activating Red Eye, but with the endlessly flowing sedative, she couldn't muster the concentration to reestablish Spirit Zone. Rather, more chemicals flooded in, poisoning her liver.

"Huhu, mages are finished once you disturb their mind. Both you and Shirone. What makes you so arrogant about that mere magic?"

Amy looked up at the ceiling, breathing heavily. Her vision kept flipping as her eyes involuntarily rolled back.

"It must be exhausting. Why don't you just pass out already? And while you're out, I'll have plenty of fun with that body of yours. Of course, don't expect to wake up with your limbs intact."

"Ugh! Kuh...!"

Amy resisted desperately.

"Hahaha! Watching you struggle is quite the sight. Now do you understand? What happens when you mess with royalty."

Amy squeezed out a last bit of strength to activate Red Eye.

"Is that so?"

Zion snorted. He He already knew she couldn't form Spirit Zone anyway.

But then something astonishing happened. A flame flickered to life in Amy's hand.

Before Zion could process this, Amy threw the flame toward the shelf.

"Damn it! Block it!"

As Zion's consciousness focused on the shelf, Armand withdrew its tentacles and flung its master's body backward.

Just as the display shelf was about to explode, Zion barely managed to shield himself. As he held his breath expecting intense heat, the fireball disappointingly vanished before his eyes.

"Wha- What the hell?"

It was a fake flame, a cheap trick from Jack O'lanterns. Since spirits possess their own independent Spirit Zone, it could be cast regardless of Amy's mental state.

Chapter 290 All Sorts of Variables (4)

Amy, freed from the tentacles, reset her mental state with Red Eyes. The intense dose of sedative left her nauseous, but she managed to enter her Spirit Zone just in time. Equipping her strongest Fireball, Amy lunged at the door and swung her hand forward. As the powerful Fireball crashed in, the door entangled with organic matter shattered to pieces.

By the time Zion realized he had been tricked, the second door was already being blown apart.

"Ah, shit...!"

Zion demanded from the innocent Armand.

"What the hell did you do? You let her get away!"

It was a typical appearance of an inexperienced user.

Armand could copy the user's brain to assist with intelligence, but strictly speaking, it was merely a sword in symbiosis with its master. It couldn't make judgments in place of its master about situations.

Therefore, cursing at Armand was nothing more than berating his own stupidity.

"We need to pursue her. Let's go."

As if answering Zion's words, numerous tentacles stretched out from the Diamond Armor and stuck into the walls. Zion rose with the power of the tentacles and surged forward as if swinging.

@

Reina stopped walking and turned her ear toward the direction of the sound. The ability of Sound of Silence detected massive vibrations echoing underground.

The sound traveling through the walls was certainly subtle. However, the fact that sound reached this far in a palace boasting the kingdom's highest durability meant an enormous impact had occurred at the source.

'They're underground!'

Reina threw herself toward the stairs visible ahead. Such force—enough to make the entire structure tremble—was beyond even the strikes of a highly skilled swordsman. It was definitely Shirone casting a magic.

The moment she stepped into the underground, she heard someone running from the end of the hallway. Examining the rhythm of the footsteps, it was the movement of someone extremely excited.

Reina pressed herself against the wall, wary of the approaching person. Through the shroud of darkness, she saw someone rushing towards her.

Recognizing Amy, Reina quickly blocked her path.

"Amy!"

"Eek! You scared me! Unnie?"

"What's going on? What are you doing here?"

"Just run!"

As if there was no time to explain, Amy grabbed Reina's arm and ran. Then Reina also activated her Schema to match Amy's speed.

Bang! Bang!

Heavy impacts echoed from the walls.

Reina deactivated Sound of Silence. The vibrations were so intense that her eardrums felt like they might burst if she kept it on.

"What is that? Is some monster chasing us?"

Amy let out a sigh. She wanted to tell the absurd story she experienced, but finding Shirone was the urgent priority.

"I'll tell you later. Where's Shirone?"

"This way. I heard sounds coming from over there."

The two took the left path, gazing at the storage room waiting at the end of the narrow hallway. A sign hanging

from the ceiling read 'Food Storage'.

Inside, the room was a chaotic mess, clearly the aftermath of a fight.

Flour had spilled everywhere, and some of it had dispersed into the air, creating a foggy haze. Vegetables were chopped up as if half-prepared, their pieces dusted in flour. Amy was relieved that this wasn't the meat storage.

"Where's Shirone?"

As Amy took a cautious step forward, looking around, Reina blocked her with outstretched arms.

"Careful. Don't move."

Startled, Amy followed Reina's gaze. Through the flour smoke, numerous spider webs were strung.

"This is...!"

Now fully alert, she looked around to see webs everywhere, as if this storage room had been sealed off for a hundred years.

"Why are there spider webs in a place like this? And it seems like from an enormously big spider too."

"Be careful. Something's here."

Reina slowly made her way through the spider webs, leaving Amy behind.

At that moment, a faint voice came from the other side of a pile of sacks.

"...run."

Reina and Amy sprang toward the source of the voice.

Shirone was hanging upside down, caught in a massive spider web. His clothes were torn in various places, and his body was covered in numerous cuts.

Amy's eyes welled up with tears.

"Shirone!"

"Run away... This one... incredibly stro-"

"Hold on! We'll get you down right now!"

Amy immediately rushed over.

Just imagining an unknown person caught in a spider's web would be chilling enough, but seeing Shirone in that state

was truly terrifying.

After examining the spider web briefly, finding no method, she grabbed and tore it with her hands. A sharp sting shot through her fingers. She pulled her hand back and saw her palm was cut.

"What kind of spider web is this?"

Shirone shouted with all his might.

"Amy! Run!"

At that moment, Reina wrapped her arms around Amy's waist and leapt backward. The sharp whoosh of something cutting through the air was a sound only Reina's keen hearing could have picked up.

Amy, sprawled on the ground, looked at Reina in confusion. But Reina's gaze was fixed on something in the darkness.

"Keke, not bad."

Zenogre, hanging upside down, came down next to Shirone.

Amy and Reina recoiled at the man's grotesque appearance. Though the torchlight was too faint to make out all the details, they could clearly see he had multiple eyes.

"When a thread moves, it creates vibrations. If you have the ability to hear those vibrations, then sure, you wouldn't be easy to kill with just a flat strike. Yes, indeed."

Amy stepped forward and shouted.

"What did you do to Shirone! Let him go quickly!"

Zenogre, at eye level with the upside-down Shirone, turned his head.

"Ah, this? Just caught him for now, kikik. You felt it yourself, didn't you? These webs are razor-sharp. One wrong move and his body will be sliced to pieces. That's why he can't so much as move a finger."

"You...!"

Just as Amy was about to shout in anger, Zenogre spoke.

"Alright, here's a question. Then, when do you think those cuts on Shirone's body happened? 1, Before getting caught in the spider web. 2, After getting caught in the spider web."

Amy didn't understand why that would matter right now. But as she pondered Zenogre's words, her face grew red with fury. If the answer was the latter, she planned to twist Zenogre's neck no matter what.

"You, I'll never forgive you."

As Amy seethed with rage, Zenogre found some solace. In fact, 'option two' was his favorite game. By placing his prey on the spiderweb and inflicting little cuts bit by bit, he trapped them in a state where they couldn't move—yet couldn't afford not to move.

But, regrettably, the answer was actually 'option one'. Shirone's sense that detected the assassin's presence was truly incredible even to Zenogre. It was only after a full 10 minutes of pursuit that he finally managed to bind him in spider webs.

Zion's voice was heard from the storage entrance.

"What, it's not done yet?"

Amy turned around with a dismayed look. Zion, with tentacles hanging like octopus legs, was looking down arrogantly with his hands behind his back.

Amy and Reina instantly stood back to back, facing him. Shirone was captured by an assassin, and now their retreat was cut off. Every factor was turning against them.

But Zion paid no mind to the two women.

That Reina had tracked him this far was unexpected, but they were still mice trapped in a jar. His focus was more on Shirone, bound in the spider's web.

Zenogre, landing on the ground, bowed showing respect.

"You've come, Your Highness. I was just about to finish things up."

"Finish things? We're way past the agreed-upon time.

What's been taking so long?"

"My apologies."

Zenogre made no excuses. As skillful an assassin as he was, even he had to grant a brief delay to someone holding The

Last Wail of the Yeager Family. But pride as a Spatur assassin was derived solely from one's abilities.

Zion waved his hand as if annoyed.

"Forget it, just finish the job already. Cut off Shirone's head."

Zenogre immediately bowed his head and climbed the spider web where Shirone was bound. Yet, just as he was about to complete the task, one person came to mind.

"One person still isn't visible?"

He meant Arius.

But Zion dismissed it.

A Scale Mage's signature Flicker Magic could best be described as a short-range teleportation born from extreme space-time distortion.

Even if imprisoned, Scale Mages were ones who could instantly move to the opposite side as long as there were no magic-restraining devices.

Time and space were not meaningful constraints for Arius.

He would probably be watching for an opportunity to appear from some coordinate in space-time.

"He'll be waiting. Now, quickly separate Shirone's head from his body."

"Understood."

Amy shouted while assuming a battle stance.

"You must be joking! You think we'll let you do that?"

Finally, Zion turned toward the women, exuding a chilling murderous intent. Over his shoulders, tentacles rose up ready to shoot out like a witch's claws.

Even in his fading consciousness, Shirone intuitively realized that the armor surrounding Zion's body was Armand's true form.

Knowing that if things went on like this, they would all be killed, he ignored the agony of his shredded flesh and thrashed desperately, shouting,

"Run away! Reina Noona, take Amy and run!"

Amy didn't listen to a word of it.

What use would run away be if Shirone dies? For now, there was no choice but to settle things with Zion.

Reina must have reached the same conclusion, as she widened her stance and glared at Zion.

The Ogent are a family that worships swords Although Reina wasn't wielding a weapon, the skills she had honed since childhood were by no means easy to deal with.

Amy and Reina split left and right to flank Zion. Then unexpectedly, Armand's reactions became noticeably weaker.

Even though they were symbiotic, Zion made all decisions. However, being inexperienced in battle, he struggled to respond effectively to their flanking maneuver, which left Armand's tentacles unable to pinpoint precise targets.

Amy immediately noticed the opponent's change.

'You must've underestimated me! I'll pay you back properly!'

Zion gritted his teeth at the situation different from his expectations. Though Armand blocked visible magic with tentacles, the invisible Reina worried him.

"Damn! These wenches!"

Zion retreated as much as he could to block the doorway. If he could subdue the opponents anyway, he needed to at least block the escape route.

But that was exactly what the two were aiming for.

Reina made a wide detour around the storage and jumped up stepping on the sacks.

"Here!"

Any other knight wouldn't have turned at Reina's voice.

Even a child would know who's more dangerous between bare-handed fighting Reina and magic-wielding Amy.

But Zion, in his haste, looked back, and in that blind spot, Amy cast Fire Strike.

'It's over!'

Just as Amy thought that, her body was suddenly seized by an unfamiliar force, sending her flying. She struggled

against the inertia, but it was impossible to resist. Looking over mid-flight, she saw Reina and understood the situation.

A ball of thread that flew like a cannon unraveled and transformed into spider web, pouncing on Reina. Her body stuck to the wall near the ceiling, entangled in the web.

The moment she confirmed that, Amy crashed into the opposite wall, feeling a sharp pain in her back.

She looked down at the spider web pressing down on her.

She tried to tear it with brute force, but it was too tough.

If what bound Shirone was sharp steel wire like a blade, this was like sticky mucus.

Amy and Reina struggled with all their might, but Zenogre had no intention of letting them free.

Zenogre inflated his upper body like a balloon and spat out spider web beads from his mouth.

The continuously shooting spider webs spread wide at the midpoint, continuing to cover Reina and Amy.

The restraint became stronger with each layer of web that adhered to them.

After more than five layers stuck, Amy finally became unable to move at all. The situation was the same for Reina stuck to the opposite wall.

“Keke, causing such a ruckus. Are you all right, Your Highness?”

Only then did Zion come down to the floor with relief. He was quite satisfied seeing the three flies bound unable to put up even the slightest resistance.

Chapter 291 All Sorts of Variables (5)

Zion looked back at Amy and sneered.

"Hmph, serves you right. You should've known better who to mess with."

"You coward! Hurry up and untie me!"

"Don't worry, I'll let you out soon enough. But first, enjoy the show."

Zeon half-turned and ordered Zenogre.

"Bring me Shirone's head."

Zenogre climbed up the spider web where Shirone was tied, wearing a sinister smile.

Using his mimicry ability to control his center of gravity, he moved freely across the steel wire without so much as a scratch.

"Amy! Amy!"

Even in this life-threatening situation, Shirone called out for Amy.

Seeing this, Zion felt even more delighted. Although he wanted to torment Amy in front of Shirone, his desire to own Ataraxia as soon as possible was just as strong.

'Wait, but where's Arius?'

Everything was perfectly set up, so he should have appeared by now.

He felt a flicker of unease, but it made no sense for a Scale Mage, who controlled time and space, to be late. Most likely, he was planning to appear with a flashy entrance at the very last moment.

'Tch, always with the theatrics. Just can't help himself, can he?'

It wasn't like Zion didn't know his personality from the beginning. Arius had his professional pride, so whatever happened, he would handle the job properly.

Zion looked around one last time and made a throat-slitting gesture.

Zenogre, looming over Shirone, licked his lips, extending his tongue like he was going to lick his face. But Shirone, without even looking at him, mustered all his strength to shout toward Amy.

"Amy! Run!"

"Kekeke, how pitiful. But you're going to die anyway."

Zenogre spread his arms and legs wide, positioning himself as if to crush Shirone. There was a sound of something popping from his side, and two new arms emerged from inside his collar.

Shirone's face went pale at the sight.

"Keke, what's wrong? Grossed out? I can grow up to six arms, you know."

Zenogre pulled steel wire from his mouth with his new arms and skillfully circled it around Shirone's neck.

"There won't be any pain. I'm the best in the industry."

Sensing death, Shirone closed his eyes. It seemed his short 18 years of life would end here. But he couldn't die like this. With all his might, he shouted.

"Amy! Ig...!"

"Snip!"

Before Shirone could finish speaking, Zenogre pulled the wire with both arms while laughing grotesquely. The spider web dug into Shirone's skin, leaving a thin, ring-like mark on his neck.

Simultaneously, there was a crackling sound of electricity from behind Zenogre. It was the distinctive hum of Scale Mage's signature magic, Flicker.

'As expected.'

Zion clicked his tongue at Arius's antics. In any case, the timing was impeccable, so there was no reason to be angry.

"Hm?"

A puzzled look crossed Zion's eyes.

It wasn't Arius. No, was it Arius? With the face covered by a mask, it was impossible to tell.

"What's with that get-up?"

Without a word, the masked figure rolled forward and blocked the way to Reina and Amy. Just the position they took upon appearing was enough to show they weren't an ally.

'Not Arius? Then where is that bastard? Shirone is already dead...'

Zeon hurriedly turned his head towards Zenogre. Although he wore his usual unsettling grin, his face now held a strange, subtly twisted expression, unlike anything one could normally see from him.

Shirone too had his eyes wide open while facing Amy. And most importantly, the steel wire... remained frozen, slightly buried in Shirone's skin, as if frozen in time.

At that moment, another crackling sound of Flicker Magic was heard.

As Arius materialized into the space, he tumbled across the ground, coming to a stop beside Zion. He was drenched in sweat as if showing the hardships he had endured.

"Damn it! Am I late?"

Zion shouted, unable to contain his irritation.

"What! What's going on? Who is that person?"

"I don't know. He's undoubtedly an Unlocker specializing in Time Magic. I tried to shake him off somehow, but they kept disrupting the coordinates..."

In the field of distorted space and time, the two had attempted Flicker over 700 times. The masked figure had struggled as well, but in the end, it was Arius who arrived late.

'Damn it. The compatibility is terrible.'

For someone specializing in spatial magic, a time specialist was their natural nemesis. No, then again, the reverse was

also true—it was a relationship as opposed as fire and water. A relationship like fire and water where both parties are reluctant to accept each other.

Still, the fact that the masked figure arrived before him meant that their skills were top-notch even among Scale Mage.

'Who could it be? With such ability, they should be a mage I know.'

It was clear now why they wore the mask.

Covering their entire face must be a measure to completely hide their identity. After all, once someone reached such a level, one's vision could be replaced by Spirit Zone anyway. A few names came to mind for Arius, but none of them seemed plausible candidates to stand in his way in this situation.

Zion couldn't wait any longer and approached Shirone, swinging his gauntlet blade.

"Tch! Fine! I'll handle it myself!"

"Stay back!"

Zion flinched and stopped in his tracks.

Being naturally arrogant, he was more irritated at being yelled at than relieved about avoiding danger.

"What's wrong? They can't even move anyway."

"That's Temporal Field, a specialty of Time Mage Unlocks. Simply put, it's a Slow Magic converted into a Deviate Type."

"Deviate Type? Speak so I can understand."

Arius found Zion's ignorance exasperating but had no choice.

Considering a battle might break out, he needed to explain the key points while facing off against the masked figure. He didn't expect much of Zion's fighting skills, but depending on how Armand was used, he could still be helpful.

"If you enter that field, Your Highness, you'll end up like them."

Zion looked at Shirone and Zenogre, who were frozen in time.

Being immobilized in front of an enemy would be terrifying.

"Just stay away from it. Anyone who touches it will end up the same way."

"Then what if that bastard makes the first move?"

"That's impossible too. If the caster enters the Spirit Zone of the Deviate Type, the Spirit Zone will dissipate. In other words, time will resume. That masked guy has no choice but to maintain the current state."

Arius kept his focus on the masked figure while carefully observing the Temporal Field.

The radius wasn't as large as expected. But being clearly a time specialist, the time distortion must be tremendous.

'Huh?'

Arius sensed something odd and stared intently at the Temporal Field. More precisely, at Zenogre and Shirone trapped within it.

'They're moving...?'

Zenogre's arm is moving.

Though even his finely tuned senses couldn't visually confirm it, he could definitely sense a faint 'feeling' of movement.

'What the hell happened here?'

From the skill level he had observed during their Flicker chase, Arius had assumed a severe time distortion should be in effect.

But at this rate, even in just an hour, visible movement might become apparent.

'Calculating the time to descend to first-stage primal consciousness...'

Arius swallowed dryly.

This wasn't over yet.

There would be unconscious pressure since the brain wasn't completely separated from the body, but anyway, Shirone had received a near-death shock.

Furthermore, by the time he reached the first level, Shirone's condition would likely worsen. So as long as they secured a strong position, they still had a good chance.

"Your Highness, I'm opening the Door."

"What? Now?"

"There's still a chance. But as it happens, I will need some help. When I enter, please follow immediately."

Arius cast the Door Magic just outside Temporal Field. As his Spirit Zone materialized, a two-meter-high oval sphere appeared.

Arius leaped inside, and Zion, grinding his teeth in frustration, hesitated for a moment.

But there was no time to waver. The idea of dealing with that masked figure here was even less appealing.

"Damn it! What a pain!"

Zion withdrew his tentacles and dove into the door.

Only then did the masked figure unfold from their crouched position and stand up. After thinking for a moment, they ran toward the Door without looking back.

"Wait!"

The masked figure stopped at the door and looked back at Amy.

"Take me with you, too! It's like a gateway to Heaven, right? I've been there once. I can help save Shirone."

The masked figure revealed their voice for the first time.

"With the state you're in, how do you plan to enter?"

"Tha- That's... if you could just release me..."

"Ignite."

"Huh?"

Amy looked at the masked figure with surprised eyes.

"Don't you know Ignite? Aren't you a fire mage? Sticky spider webs are weak to fire. You could have escaped by burning it with flame magic."

"Oh...."

Amy's face went blank. Even reflecting on it, she couldn't understand why she hadn't thought of it.

Was it because of the urgency of the situation?

Certainly, that was part of it. But, to be precise, it was something she hadn't pulled from her unconscious mind. While fires born from Spirit Zone don't burn the mages, the fire produced while burning the web would indeed burn a mage.

This cost-benefit analysis suppressed the idea. Even while Shirone was close to death.

'Why couldn't I...'

Amy lowered her head with tears welling up.

"No need for self-blame. These situations are hard to handle without training. You lack experience. Following me would be dangerous. This won't take long; just wait here."

"No! I'm coming with you!"

Amy shouted with fierce determination in her eyes. Letting the masked figure go alone felt like something she would regret for the rest of her life.

'It's not that I'm afraid! It's not fear of fire or anything like that!'

She really hadn't thought of it. But Shirone would have... he would have figured it out.

Maybe that's what he was trying to say at the end? Even at death's door, trying to save her with such words...

'Shirone! I'll save you, no matter what!'

As she cast Fire Mist, flames rose up from the web. Just as the masked figure said, it burned well. Amy squeezed her eyes shut, not caring if her face got burned.

But suddenly, the heat disappeared.

Opening her eyes, she saw the masked man standing there, having thrown the spider web into the air. Like thread used in magic tricks, the web quickly combusted and disappeared.

"W- Why...?"

The masked figure sighed and knelt before Amy.

"Foolish. Even if you had escaped, it wouldn't have changed the outcome. Unless the enemy is an idiot, Shirone's death

would only have been hastened."

Amy quickly stood up.

This man was truly strong. And even now, he seemed set on doing something without giving up.

"Please let me go. No, I'll go alone if I have to."

"Amy! Me too, I'm going too! Let me go!"

Reina, who was hanging on a high place, screamed while flailing her ankles.

Amy asked while casting Ignite between her fingers:

"Are you sure? It'll be hot."

"My insides are burning more right now! Hurry! The Door might close!"

Amy smiled slightly and increased the flame between her thumb and index finger.

A touch of heat would be enough to make the web catch instantly, though if Reina fell, gravity might save her from serious burns.

But before she could cast the magic, the spiderweb split vertically and Reina fell down.

Amy looked at the masked figure in astonishment. Who was this person, who could cut only the web with a precise Wind Cutter? Certainly not someone she could have encountered in her circles.

Reina landed gracefully, then approached Amy.

She also looked at the masked figure with a puzzled look.

Though they didn't seem bad, she maintained her guard since their identity was unknown.

The masked figure examined the Door's condition. Energy fields were radiating intensely from the edges of the portal—a sign that its time was running out.

Chapter 292 All Sorts of Variables (6)

"Since it's come to this, I won't stop you. But I'd still advise you to wait. I can't guarantee your lives if you go in. Leave Shirone to me."

The masked figure quickly threw these words over his shoulder and dove into the Door.

Amy examined Shirone's condition.

A thin web-like wire, tightening around his neck, was clearly visible. Moreover, his gaze hadn't moved an inch from where he had been bound.

But it hadn't completely stopped, so if left like this, he would inevitably die.

Amy and Reina exchanged glances, locking eyes. Without hesitation, they jumped through the Door.

Five seconds later, the Door disappeared.

Zenogre and Shirone were slowly thawing, frozen at the crossroads between life and death. A very slow "Ig-" sound leaked from between Shirone's lips.

As though he tried to shout 'Ignite'.

Great Secret (1)

<Separate> Shirone's consciousness. 11th level surface consciousness.

Kwareureung!

Thunder crashed. Rain was pouring down in torrents. The dark clouds blanketed the entire sky, making it impossible to tell if it was day or night.

Amy looked around the streets in the pouring rain. The city was definitely new to her, but somehow it felt familiar.

Buildings lined the cobbled streets, and whale oil torches flickered outside the shops, weakened by the harsh winds.

The usually visible beggars had all taken shelter, and only men in ready-made clothes were hurrying along, clutching their collars.

In the distance, a carriage covered with a tarp was heading for the city gate, trying to leave the city.

It was probably daytime.

Amy and Reina shivered from the cold as they looked at each other. Their clothes clung to their bodies from the rain, and their hair looked like drowned rats.

"Where on earth is this...?"

"So you did come in."

Instinctively, the two women covered themselves and turned around. Although they were clothed, the wet clothes clinging to their bodies made them feel exposed so they couldn't help but feel wary.

From the darkness of the alley, the masked figure approached.

"I was waiting, thinking you might come."

Amy asked.

"Who are you? And what are you to Shirone?"

Instead of answering, the masked figure removed his mask. They had wondered how he could see with his face covered, but thin bandages were covering his eyes. He had been blind from the start.

"I am Generade Armin. I have a bit of a connection with Shirone."

Amy tilted her head, puzzled. A connection with Shirone? Of course, Shirone would have connections unknown to others. But if he had known someone of this caliber, there's no way he wouldn't have mentioned it.

"How can we believe that? Shirone never said anything about..."

Armin ignored her, glanced around, and gestured at the two women.

"Let's get out of the rain first. Follow me."

Having stood in the downpour for just a few minutes, their body temperatures had dropped rapidly, leaving them little choice but to follow.

And besides, even between women, they didn't want to be seen in such an embarrassing state.

The place Armin took them to was an establishment that served as both restaurant and inn.

Before stepping inside, Amy glanced at the sign. It looked somewhat similar to Thormian writing, yet subtly different, making it impossible to decipher its meaning.

"Welcome."

As they entered, a woman in her forties knitting behind the counter greeted them with a formal tone.

From the outside, the building had seemed too narrow, but once inside, it stretched deep into the back.

The main hall spanned roughly seven pyeong (about 23 square meters), with three tables set up for drinking. In one corner, a group of hunters was warming themselves with hot drinks.

As they walked past the hall and turned a corner, a long hallway extended further inside with a hearth set into the floor. There must have been drainage installed, as rainwater hadn't reached this far.

Square tables were arranged around, where people in travel attire were eating.

Armin first gestured for the women to sit in the empty seats, then took a seat across from them.

As they settled, a musician wearing a pointed hat near the hearth began tuning a four-string instrument.

Inns frequently visited by travelers typically contract musicians to play when a certain number of people gather. Even when that number wasn't reached, patrons could pay for a private performance.

The musician played his instrument and sang in a sorrowful tone.

It was a song about a knight who, having lost his beloved, sets out in search of a place to die. Though the melody was gentle, the lyrics were hauntingly sad.

Reina was taken aback to realize the musician was highly skilled. However, the variations deviated from basic harmonics. It felt like several songs mixed into one.

Yet, the other travelers seemed unfazed. In fact, they appeared to pay no attention at all—to anything. Not even to the two women whose wet clothes clung to their figures. Amy found this odd. Of course, it's not that she expected to attract attention from everyone, but the situation was undeniably strange.

Upon closer observation, she realized the patrons weren't actually eating. Their forks were meaninglessly going back and forth between food and mouth.

The reason they seemed to be eating was that they muttered continuously in a melancholy tone.

Unreadable sign. Strange song with odd melodies. People not eating. And gloomy expressions.

Amy suddenly felt goosebumps. She finally realized that this place was unlike any world she knew.

"Just where is this?"

Armin, as if he had been waiting for her to reach this question, nodded.

"This is Shirone's consciousness. Before you arrived, I took a look around. Here seems to be the 11th of the 12 stages of the human consciousness, the surface consciousness."

She had heard Arin mention in Galliant Island that the human consciousness was divided into twelve stages.

But that wasn't the concern right now. The problem was that they were now inside that consciousness.

Reina must have felt the same way, as she asked back.

"So, this place right now is Shirone's consciousness?"

Armin nodded as if that alone could convey all the explanation needed.

To explain such a strange world, it was more effective to make them believe rather than try to persuade them.

Amy saw through Armin's intention and suppressed her curiosity.

For now, it was best to believe him. Wherever they were, finding a way to save Shirone came first.

"We need to chase Arius. Besides, Shirone's neck will be cut in the real world soon."

Armin smiled and shook his head.

"There's quite a difference between real-time and consciousness time. You must have followed me right away, correct? Yet, I've been here for over thirty minutes already."

Amy did some intuitive calculations.

Though there was a slight time difference, they had entered almost simultaneously with Armin. If that thirty-minute gap had happened so quickly, time here was clearly moving much faster than in the real world.

'No, it's more accurate to say that consciousness operates at an accelerated speed.'

Armin continued.

"Shirone should be safe for the time being. Ideally, I would slow time down even more, but even Temporal Field has its limits...."

Currently, Armin was maintaining Time Stop Field over Keira, who was 14 kilometers away at the Kazra Royal Palace, which left him with little extra time in reserve.

If it were Slow Magic that ordinary mages use, he could have slowed time much more extremely, but that wouldn't have been a wise choice in the situation.

Because Slow was active magic after all.

If he filled the only omniscience slot that most mages possess with Slow, he would surrender the initiative to Arius, another mage of his caliber. Moreover, his opponent wasn't easy enough to compete within a divided temporal resource state.

Thus, he had opted for the passive technique of Temporal Field.

The Temporal Field, which simultaneously occupies time and space, continues to exert its influence even after activation, thus freeing up an omniscience slot to flexibly respond to the opponent's movements.

The reason Arius could not act rashly in the standoff was because he had perceived this fact.

Thanks to this, Shirone narrowly avoided instant death, but Armin's own temporal resources were down to its tail.

Creating another field was always possible, but if its effect weakened, it would be pointless.

'The only move left is the Flicker. I guess I have to try with this.'

Armin had waited for the two women because the state of consciousness they had entered—the 11th level of conscious awareness—was dire.

He had no intention of putting Shirone's friends in danger, but if they had come here of their own accord, he would have to accept their help.

"Of course, we have no time to spare. We need to find Shirone as quickly as possible. But coincidentally, I'm in a state where I've almost lost my combat ability. That's why I need your assistance. First, I'll tell you the information you absolutely need to know."

Reina took a listening posture and said,

"Yes, I want to help. So please tell us. Why is Zion going so far as to hire assassins and bribe even Arius to kill Shirone? Especially since Arius is affiliated with Orkamph?"

"To explain that, we should first talk about Arius. His alias is the Grave Robber, quite infamous among the Seven Sins of magic in the Black Line."

Amy frowned at the mention of Black Line.

Though there were criminals in the Red Line too, they were people who raised their ranks through infamy and achievements.

Arcane, for instance, was one of them.

The Black Line, on the other hand, was far from honorable. Those on the Black Line pursued only their own pleasures, indifferent to the destruction they caused to society in the process.

"You're saying someone like that has been by Orkamph's side all this time?"

"His skills are undeniable. He's an Unlocker and a Scale Mage, mainly known for infiltrating minds and stealing thoughts. He installed a Door in Shirone's surface consciousness. He probably dove at least once without Shirone knowing."

Amy tapped the table. A dull, clicking sound echoed.

"So, this entire inn is a product of Shirone's consciousness?"

"Yes. It appears as a place, but in reality, it's a landscape created by Shirone's mental activity."

Reina asked.

"What's the principle behind this? How can someone's thoughts materialize into such a concrete world?"

"All mental processes acquired as humans grow up become objectified. Love, anger, indifference—they all become an objects. You could think of it as language, but since this is a realm tied to the unconscious, 'objectification' is a more accurate term."

Armin looked around the inn's scenery and continued.

"Then why does the arrangement of objects resemble reality despite being a mental world? It's because all objects in this 11th level pass through the 6th level, or the realm of REM, before emerging here. If the unconscious were projected here directly, it would be a completely chaotic world."

Amy stroked her chin and said,

"Hmm. So, you're saying that a person's mind is filtered through this REM level, which converts it into objects that rise up here?"

"Exactly. Since REM is a mind state during sleep, it's easier to understand if you think of it as dreams. Dreams are the

boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness. That's why two characteristics appear simultaneously in dreams. Going up from the 6th level, consciousness strengthens, going down, unconsciousness strengthens."

Arius pointed to the ceiling.

"This is the Eleventh Level surface consciousness, the highest level excluding the shell level. As such, it's a highly objectified world—realistic, intricate, and expansive."

The musician's sorrowful melody played softly.

The tune's jumbled notes no longer felt eerie now that Amy thought of it as passing through a dream filter.

Reina asked.

"You mentioned Arius is a 'Grave Robber.' So what exactly is he trying to steal from Shirone's mind?"

Amy answered.

"Ataraxia."

Chapter 293 Great Secret (2)

Armin nodded.

"Yes. The reason Shirone was invited to Kazra Royal Palace is because he possesses an archangel's power."

"So that was it. Those bastards! It wasn't just about finding their biological son."

Reina, unfamiliar with anything related to Heaven, couldn't fully understand their conversation, but she chose to remain silent for now. She figured it wouldn't be too late to fill in the gaps after hearing the full story.

Amy suddenly raised her hand.

"Wait a moment. But why did they try to kill Shirone? If Shirone dies, won't Ataraxia disappear with him?"

Armin pressed his lips tightly together. It was a sharp observation. But since he had decided to accept their help, he thought he shouldn't lie and spoke honestly.

"There's a reason for that. It was probably Arius's idea to kill Shirone. At first, I doubt he intended to go that far. He probably planned to infiltrate Shirone's consciousness and replicate Ataraxia. But he failed."

"Why? Is it too difficult to replicate?"

"There are several variables, but in my opinion, Ataraxia isn't an ability humans can handle. Forcefully installing it at any point in consciousness could drive someone mad. So the original owner seems to have imprinted it very deep inside."

"How deep are we talking?"

Armin raised his index finger.

"Level One. It's probably in the primal consciousness that governs instinct. If you plant something in the realm of

instinct, no matter how bizarre the concept, the mind accepted it naturally as if it had always been there."

Amy nodded. Things were finally starting to make sense.

Armin continued.

"The primal consciousness is a safe haven for oneself but a terrifying place for others. However, someone of Arius's skill should be able to dive into primal consciousness briefly. And it seems he tried, given that there's a door installed."

"And yet, he failed to excavate it?"

"That's the only plausible conclusion. It's likely protected by an encryption system no human can break or sealed within a capsule so impenetrable that even Shirone cannot access it. That's why he decided to kill Shirone. That's why Arius decided to kill Shirone. The deeper one delves into the primal consciousness, the stronger the defensive instincts become. If the unconscious security system activates, even the greatest diver would drown without being able to escape "

"I understand now. That's why Shirone's neck...."

"That's right. Human unconsciousness has roots deep in the body. Therefore, if the neck is severed, the unconscious defense mechanisms collapse. Arius was waiting for that moment."

Amy bit her lip, lost in thought. There was still one thing she couldn't understand.

"Wait, something doesn't add up. Even if Arius collapses the unconscious and reaches the first level, what can he do from there? If it's a power humans can't wield, then even replicating it would be useless. And there's no way to imprint it onto instincts like Shirone has."

Armin felt the inevitable moment had come. From here on was information that absolutely must not be revealed to the outside world.

'I really didn't want to disclose this if possible...'

But without their help, Shirone couldn't be saved. To increase their mission's success rate even a little bit, they

needed to understand the truth.

"What you are about to hear is confidential information of the highest security clearance, regardless of the kingdom. Of course, no secret stays secret forever, but I'll tell you anyway."

Both women nodded. They didn't promise not to reveal it because they understood Armin's last words.

"Human consciousness... can transform into objects."

Amy blinked. The statement didn't sink in right away, and it felt underwhelming compared to the heavy prelude.

But as Armin's words sank in, she realized how outrageous it was.

"You're saying the mind can become an object?"

Armin delayed his answer and threw out an unexpected question.

"Have you ever heard of the word 'Dreamo'?"

Reina shook her head first, followed by Amy with the same response.

Armin continued as if this was expected.

"Dreamo is a multi-dimensional mental world. The human brain consumes energy to think. So, are thoughts energy? Some people believe energy merely powers the brain, and thoughts are a different concept. They are products created by energy. And that product must be released somewhere. That's what dreamos are: the space where thoughts are discharged."

"It's similar to the law of conservation of mass."

"Correct. Dreamo is a space you can enter from dreams if certain conditions are met. You could say it's a complex of imagination where all your thoughts gather. This leads to an incredible hypothesis: if thoughts can escape to Dreamo, then conversely, thoughts from Dreamo could be brought into reality."

Amy asked with a bewildered expression.

"Has anyone actually been to Dreamo?"

"Why wouldn't they? No, countless people have. They enter through dreams and smuggle things using the rule of equivalent exchange cleverly. However, they say it's difficult to smuggle ideas that lack strong desires. In any case, Arius uses this method to excavate thoughts."

"Wait. That means objects from Dreamo already exist. Then what exactly are..."

Amy's eyes widened as she realized something.

"Don't tell me those objects are..."

Arius said with a bitter smile.

"That's correct. We call them Objet."

Amy understood why Armin had warned them. It was evidence breaking the existing hypothesis that thoughts were merely energy.

"Literally, Objets are materialized human consciousness. That's why their abilities are deeply rooted in personal desires. In the realm of thought, this wouldn't seem strange at all. The problem arises when those thoughts manifest in reality."

Reina spoke.

"I know about Objet. A mage acquaintance told me they're items that violate the laws of the universe. But hearing this now, it seems they didn't fully understand either."

Armin agreed.

"That's likely. Even among the upper class, even royalty, very few know about Dreamo. Outside of the king and a dedicated department, it's probably classified as top secret. Objets may seem to ignore causality, but if we accept the hypothesis that thoughts are a type of matter, they're not actually violating universal laws. However, much about the interaction between reality and Dreamo remains unknown."

Reina said.

"Like 'The Last Will of Yeager Family'?"

"Oh? You knew about that?"

Reina blushed and shook her head.

"No. I just know what it's called. I was a performer at a royal gathering, and I have good hearing so I pick up a lot. I'm sorry. I just mentioned what I knew..."

Armin smiled reassuringly and shared the tale of 'The Last Wail of Yeager Family'. Amy, who had been listening intently, shuddered at the final incident.

"Did that actually happen?"

"It was. However, there's debate over whether it was the act of a psychotic patriarch or a phenomenon to restore dimensional balance. That's certain is they experienced something impossible, and an Object remained afterward. It's possible that someone in the family had accidentally accessed Dreamo. While I can't disclose the conditions for entering Dreamo, the probability of entering by chance isn't zero."

Amy was curious about these conditions but kept quiet, thinking it would be impolite to probe further.

"Anyway, the relationship between Dreamo and reality is not something that humans can predict. That's why kingdoms consider accessing Dreamo a serious crime. In truth, Dive Magic itself isn't inherently bad—it's used to treat mental illnesses, for example. You need an official diver license. However, Arius is abusing that. That's why he's called a grave robber rather than a diver. Accessing Dreamo is taboo in every nation. That's why Arius is a double-S class criminal wanted worldwide."

Reina's expression turned pale.

"In a way... we're up against someone truly extraordinary."

Armin acknowledged it wouldn't be easy.

"Indeed. If he weren't committing crimes, he would undoubtedly be recognized as a brilliant intellectual. Diving requires tremendous intellectual capability."

Amy pieced together the information she had heard so far.

"Let me summarize. Arius is after Ataraxia. He planned a murder to collapse Shirone's unconscious mind and is currently heading for Level One. He'll steal Ataraxia there

and go to Dreamo. Then bring it to reality through smuggling. If that happens...?"

Amy got goosebumps just imagining it. This was also why Armin came here, even binding Keira with Stop Magic.

"Exactly. Ataraxia will become an Objet. The power of the Archangel will be reduced to a tool anyone can wield. This is a truly catastrophic possibility."

"...."

Faced with a reality they didn't want to accept, the two women fell silent, each lost in thought.

@

Being trapped in temporal field doesn't mean one becomes a fool.

The acceleration of thought, emotion, and cognition remains the same—only the unfolding speed is slowed.

Therefore, Shirone was still impulsive, and that impulse was developing into an even more intense urge within the slow flow of time.

Likewise, Zenogre's steel thread carried potent energy as it gradually bore into Shirone's neck in the slowed flow of time.

The sound of flesh tearing spread slowly, and even slower... the crack carved in Shirone's neck became stained with blood.

@

Flash!

The scene outside the window was bathed in golden light for a moment.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Thunder roared with earth-shattering force, shaking the entire world.

Amy stared out the window with a terrified expression. It was an extreme natural phenomenon rarely heard even in reality.

She thought she had outgrown fear of thunderstorms, but the destructive roar clawed at her primal instincts, gripping

her heart with human fear.

"This is incredible. It's like thunder is striking right in front of us."

Armin said, looking outside.

"The fear of death from the unconscious has risen to the surface level. But this level is remarkably stable. If an ordinary person were in this situation, it would've been complete chaos already. It's only because it's Shirone that it's holding together."

Amy smiled sadly. Unlike how he had criticized her earlier, Armin openly acknowledged Shirone's abilities.

What would it feel like to be recognized by such a remarkable mage? The absence of Shirone in this moment felt all the more painful.

'Well, all of this is because of Shirone, after all....'

Armin cautioned himself against indulging in sentimentality.

"The thread is still constricting Shirone's neck even now. It will worsen, and his mind will start collapsing from the base. The consequences are apparent from the current state of Level Eleventh. Eventually, the minimum conditions for Arius to dive into the depths will be met."

Amy quickly snapped back to the pressing reality.

"Is there any way? A way to save Shirone."

Stopping Arius and Zion wouldn't end it. If the temporal field releases as is, Shirone will die immediately.

"Currently, there's only one way. We must pass through the REM realm and delve deeper. It's too late to fix anything from the outside. But if we plant something at the bottom of consciousness, it might be possible."

Everything that happens in Shirone's consciousness immediately becomes Shirone's. The idea was to prepare a method of countering the dire situation by implanting it into his unconscious beforehand.

"Like Ataraxia, you mean planting magic?"

Armin scratched his head.

"That's impossible. In truth, I don't know how Shirone came to possess that magic. The archangel must have had some special method. But it's impossible for us. However, if we delve deep enough, we might be able to engrave simple behavioral instructions."

Chapter 294 Great Secret (3)

Reina said.

"Behavioral instructions? Can something like that really work?"

Shirone was already strangled by the steel wire. It didn't seem like planting thoughts to trigger certain actions would improve the situation.

"We have no choice but to try. Honestly, we're not in a situation where we can afford to hesitate. While it might take time for his neck to be fully severed, even a severed artery would result in a fatal injury. By then, the unconscious mind will probably collapse at tremendous speed."

Amy grew anxious.

"Then what should we do?"

Armin's solution was simple.

"We need to find Shirone."

"What? But this is Shirone's mind."

"To be precise, everything here is a shadow created by projecting Shirone's core essence. We're going to find the core, not the shadow. We call it an avatar."

Amy recalled what she had heard from Godlock in the Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent. The enormous shadow of the Whirlwind Serpent had turned out to be nothing more than a smooth, small salamander. The people of Heaven had called it an avatar.

"Would this avatar be in the 11th level surface?"

Armin shook his head.

"It's unlikely. Which is why we'll have to summon it."

Reina asked.

"How do we summon it?"

Amy noticed before she heard Armin's answer.

"Couldn't we just ask the people here? After all, everyone here is a reflection of Shirone, right?"

Armin nodded approvingly. It seemed the two of them were beginning to grasp the nature of this world intuitively.

"That's right. We just need to ask people. We call it a keyword. While it's quite difficult from the outside, here, we can just ask. If we inject Shirone as a keyword, the avatar will rise to the 11th level. Now, let's get started."

Armin led the two women to the counter and asked the middle-aged woman who was knitting.

"Do you know someone called Shirone?"

As soon as Armin spoke, the bard's music stopped as if on cue. The people's murmuring could no longer be heard.

It wasn't until all sound vanished that they realized just how much noise had surrounded them before. It was now perfectly silent.

Amy felt a chill as she looked around.

The previously despondent people had snapped to attention, their eyes clear and focused on Armin.

The woman at the counter was the same. She had been motionless as if frozen but now opened her mouth after a delay.

"Why are you looking for that person?"

Armin let out a soft chuckle and smiled.

'That person,' indeed. Not saying Shirone's name showed his consciousness was appropriately cautious.

From here, he would have to tread carefully. They couldn't be too obvious, and statements showing hostility were forbidden.

"I have something important to tell them."

The woman thought for a moment before continuing her knitting.

"Don't know. Don't know who that person is."

"I see."

Armin exhaled with a sigh, thinking this wouldn't be easy.

Well-trained indeed, he thought. No matter how specialized a mage was in psyche, a scenario where their neck was on the line usually causes a crack in their composure.

Despite the thunderstorm raging outside, the fragments of Shirone's consciousness still maintained their vigilance. This was a testament to how disciplined Shirone's mind had become through constant refinement and discipline.

"I understand. Then we'll be going."

The woman at the counter spoke without looking up.

"Pay the roof fee before you go."

Even on the brink of death, it seemed he wouldn't be satisfied until collecting what was due. This too was the mindset of a mage seeking 100% efficiency.

'Huhu, you're a very thorough person.'

It was customary for those who stayed at an inn without lodging or meals, merely to shelter from the rain, to pay what was called a 'roof fee'.

But Amy had no money. Even if she did, it was questionable whether real-world money would work here.

At that moment, Armin rummaged through his pocket. He promptly pulled out and paid with a gold coin.

"Here you go."

"Huh?"

Amy observed the gold coin he handed over. As expected, it wasn't the currency of the real world but a cog-shaped gold coin unique to this realm.

The woman at the counter examined the coin and furrowed her brow.

"This is too much."

"Keep the change."

"I can't do that. Here, take it back."

"Really, it's fine."

When Armin declined with a smile, the woman coolly accepted.

"Alright then. Blessings to you."

Amy pouted.

Though the innkeeper's manner, appearance, and gender were different, somehow they reminded her of Shirone's usual demeanor.

"Now then, let's get going."

Armin said, his expression growing serious.

They left the inn but didn't dare step beyond the eaves.

Water was rising from the ground like a flood.

Amy shivered as a cold chill swept over her.

"If this continues, the whole world will be submerged."

Armin shook his head.

"No, the world will disappear before that."

Amy turned to look at the inn's interior through the window.

The warmth blocked off by just a single pane of glass made her feel colder, but seeing the people inside resting peacefully brought a small sense of comfort.

If Shirone dies, all of them will disappear.

Even though they weren't real people, Amy found herself wishing they could continue living in this world for a long time.

"First, since we've injected the keyword 'Shirone', Shirone's avatar should surface. Divers call this process 'netting'."

"I see."

"But that's where the problem lies. There's not much time, so I'll explain as we go. Once the water rises further, even moving will become difficult."

Armin dashed into the downpour where nothing was visible.

Amy caught up with him and asked.

"Where are we going? We don't even know where Shirone is."

"First of all... We'll need weapons, most likely."

Armin stopped in front of a two-story building and looked up. He saw a sign with crossed axes and swords.

The three once again took shelter under the weapon shop's eaves. This time the eaves were narrow, so they had to press against the wall.

Armin turned to the two women beside him and asked.

"Do either of you know how to use any weapons?"

Reina spoke first.

"I learned some swordsmanship when I was young..."

"I'm a mage."

When Amy said it sheepishly, Armin smiled. It seemed she was embarrassed to confidently admit she was a mage after the scolding she had received earlier.

"I see. Hope we can find something useful."

As Armin was about to enter the weapon shop, Amy hurriedly stopped him.

"Wait, but what's with the money?"

Even if there were good weapons available, they couldn't be purchased without money. Moreover, the money Armin used at the inn wasn't from reality.

Since Armin hadn't been in Shirone's consciousness for long, Amy wondered if she might also find a way to procure money herself.

"Ah, I withdrew it."

"Withdrew? From where?"

Armin pointed to the sky.

"From Shirone, of course. Since this is Shirone's consciousness, you can create anything you need. Just think to yourself that you need money. The amount you receive will correspond to the level of trust Shirone feels toward you. Let's see..."

Armin searched his pocket and pulled out gold coins.

"I have 9 now, so I received 10 gold total. If these are even called gold, haha."

Looking at the cog-shaped coins in Armin's hand, the two women both closed their eyes and thought about needing money.

Reina searched her pocket. Her face lit up with surprise and said.

"Huh? It worked! Seven coins, seven gold."

Amy looked on with wide eyes.

Considering how long she had known Shirone and the fact that she had never heard of this Armin before, Amy expected Reina to receive far more coins than Armin.

Yet, contrary to her expectations, Armin won.

Did this mean Shirone thought little of Reina? No, it was more likely that he trusted Armin that much.

'Who is this person? What connection does he have with Shirone?'

Anyway, Amy felt somewhat expectant too. These coins were useless in reality, but in this mental world, they were the only valid currency.

'Hmm, sir Armin got 10, sister Reina got 7. So maybe I'll get around 20?'

Amy stuck out her tongue and searched her pocket, then switched hands again and searched the other pocket.

Her expression gradually worsened.

"Huh?"

Reina tilted her head and asked.

"What's wrong?"

"No, hold on."

Amy frantically searched every pocket in her clothing. But no matter how thoroughly she checked, she couldn't find anything.

Her face flushed red as she spoke in disbelief.

"There aren't any gold coins?"

Armin nodded as if understanding the reason.

"Hmm, I see. If Shirone refuses the withdrawal, that's entirely possible."

Amy was stunned.

The number of coins was supposed to represent how much Shirone trusted someone. But how could she end up with nothing at all?

"N- No, I'll try again."

Armin dissuaded her as if it was useless.

"It's no use trying. Once it fails, no matter how many times you try, the result will be the same. Let's focus on buying

what we need with what we have.”

Withdrawing gold coins is an extremely simple task. If gold coins didn't come out once, it would be the same no matter how many times you try.

Reina consoled Amy and led her to the weapon shop.

“Come on, Amy, let’s just go. Sixteen gold should be plenty.”

Amy shook off Reina's arm, stopped in her tracks, and shouted.

“That can’t be right!”

Tears welled up in Amy's eyes.

The seven gold coins Reina received represented Shirone’s feelings for her. She didn't want to buy her weapon with such a thing. If she had to buy something, it had to be with the money Shirone gave her.

Armin fully understood her sentiments. This was exactly why grave robbing within consciousness was universally forbidden.

When someone learns about the innermost parts of another person’s psyche, it’s easy to feel as though everything they knew was a lie.

Even though that was actually human nature.

"Miss Amy, there's no need to feel betrayed. Shirone is desperately holding on. When emotional fluctuations occur, such things can happen. Perhaps you conveyed some negative emotions to him before coming here..."

Amy vehemently shook her head.

"No, that can't be. I..."

Amy cut her words short.

Honestly, how could she be sure? No matter how much she thought she knew Shirone, she couldn’t claim to understand every corner of his heart.

Perhaps it was because she couldn't properly respond to Zenogre's attack. Perhaps Shirone had hoped she would have melted the web with Ignite to save him, only to be disappointed by her lack of action.

Armin sighed. In the end, situations like this were inevitable when navigating Shirone's consciousness, and it wasn't a question with a clear-cut answer.

"Let's go in now. We can't delay any longer."

When Armin firmly cut off the conversation, Amy had no choice but to follow. Reina, looking at Amy's dejected expression, felt sympathy but knew there was no way to comfort her in this situation.

"Welcome."

The shop owner put down his newspaper and greeted them. Amy glanced up, only for her eyes to widen in shock. He looked a bit older, but he was undoubtedly Nade.

"Nade? How are you here?"

"Hm? You know me? But I'm seeing you for the first time?"

Amy turned to Armin with eyes demanding an explanation. Armin was also acquainted with Nade. He was one of Shirone's friends who had hidden in his house before.

"It's Shirone's projection. The concept of 'weapon shop' and the concept of 'Nade' have combined. It seems Shirone associates Nade with an interest in this kind of thing."

Reina said.

"Sometimes that happens in dreams too. You fight someone you think is a villain, only to wake up and realize they were a family member you quarreled with the night before."

"Yes, it's a natural mental process. And having a complex projection means there exists a more impressive concept here than elsewhere. Shall we look around?"

Nade stared at Amy intently and furrowed his brow.

"I really don't know you. Perhaps you're mistaking me for someone else?"

"Ah, maybe so. The person I know is much younger. I'm sorry."

"Hahaha! I do get told I look younger than my age quite often."

Amy pretended not to know to avoid stimulating Shirone's mind unnecessarily. The human mind is so intricate that

even the smallest disturbance could trigger a butterfly effect.

Chapter 295 Great Secret (4)

Having been hurt by Shirone's refusal to give her gold, Amy felt a bit better seeing her school friend and said,

"I'd like to take a look at some weapons. Mind if I browse?"

Nade smiled kindly and encouraged her to shop.

"Sure, take a look. We've got all sorts. However, I'm surprised to see people out in this weather. I was thinking of closing early because I'm feeling a bit down. Must be the rain—it makes everything seem gloomier."

Amy clasped her hands behind her back and wandered around the store, examining various weapons.

The basic equipment was all there. Most fortunately, there was no mage equipment.

If there had been items for magic users, she would have felt ridiculous clinging to her pride about not wanting to buy anything with someone else's money. It was easier this way. While casually browsing, Amy noticed a weapon encased in glass and displayed on the wall.

"Hm? What's this?"

Below the case was a paper labeled <First Thunderstrike>.

Nade's face lit up with pride as he spoke.

"Ah, that's the pride of our shop. When you swing it, it makes thunder sounds. Amazing, right? I tried it once and it's so powerful. Any monster would run away in surprise!"

Amy recalled a story she had heard from Rian during the carriage ride to Galliant about Shirone's childhood.

Successfully created Thunderstrike at age twelve, and it seemed this was quite a precious memory.

Amy looked at the price tag. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"5.9 billion gold?"

"Hahaha! Of course! It's the pride of our shop! It would take at least that much to have it."

Armin stepped up behind Amy and added,

"Probably no one can buy this through normal means. I'm not sure how the economy works in this world, but even if we combined all the gold Miss Reina and I have, it's only 17 gold in total. No one, not even Shirone's parents, could withdraw an amount as absurd as 5.9 billion."

Amy understood. But seemingly unable to let go, she stroked her chin and asked,

"Hmm, what if a grave robber tried to steal this?"

"They could. Since it's an object filled with Shirone's intense thoughts, it would be easy to convert into an Objet. They would gather funds through illegal means or theft, I suppose. But if I were a relic hunter, I wouldn't bother stealing this."

"Because it's not particularly useful."

Armin nodded in agreement.

"Right. Objets are valuable when they break common sense. The idea of a thunderous sound coming from an axe isn't particularly unique—it's merely about successfully creating a Thunderstrike. Most items at this eleventh level are probably like this. This is the surface layer, so there's no room for deep human desires to manifest. Therefore, rather than desire, <First Thunderstrike> is better interpreted as just a precious memory."

Amy had come to understand the nature of Objects and, with it, just how vile a person Arius was.

This world belongs to Shirone. Regardless of what others think, it's his most precious mindscape. For Arius to commit murder just to plunder that world meant he had to be stopped.

Armin walked over to the window, peering outside as he spoke.

"Anyway, as law-abiding citizens, we don't need to be greedy. If we're not going to rob, these are just dream items."

No need to be picky. Just arm yourself enough for basic self-defense."

Amy tilted her head and asked.

"Self-defense? Aren't we choosing weapons to fight Zion and Arius? Wouldn't we need perfect armament for that, and even that might not be enough?"

Armin, still by the window, replied,

"I'll explain that once we're outside. Just choose for now."

Reina propped her chin on her hand, lost in thought.

Ogent Family revered swords. And the sword was her most confident weapon.

"Do you sell bows here, by any chance?"

A smile spread across Armin's lips.

"Good choice."

Currently, it's too dark outside to distinguish anything. In such conditions, a ranged weapon would be more practical than a melee one. Especially given Reina's acute hearing, her accuracy with a bow would likely be excellent.

Reina examined the bow Nade selected. The draw weight was solid, and the bow's curve wasn't warped.

She had learned during martial arts training that bows could create variables. And being from a martial family, she had strong fundamentals from frequent hunting.

"I like it. I'll take this. And a quiver and arrows too."

"Great. I'll give you good quality ones. Just wait."

While Nade searched for items in the storage behind the counter, Reina turned to Amy and asked,

"There don't seem to be any magical weapons. Should we check somewhere else?"

"It's fine. Mages don't really need tools anyway."

Amy summoned a Jack-o'-Lantern next to her face.

"Besides, I have the weapon Shirone bought me."

Amy regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. Emphasizing that Shirone bought it would only make her feel more miserable.

But it was already spilled milk, so she pretended nothing had happened and turned her body away.

Armin leaned against the window with his arms crossed.

'Jack-o'-Lantern. That's ancient magic. She obtained quite a rare item.'

Having visited Heaven himself on a certain mission, Armin was familiar with the general market values in the community.

Ancient magic artifacts like the Jack-o'-Lantern could only be acquired with an elixir, and something of this caliber would likely require a White Elixir.

Shirone and Amy must be quite close.

Yet she can't withdraw money. And that last comment reveals her hurt feelings about Shirone.

'Hmm, so that's how it is.'

It might be dangerous. No—within the confines of this mental world, this might be the most significant obstacle.

'I should warn them ahead of time.'

Just as Armin made his decision, Nade returned with two 20-piece quivers. When asked about the total price, he said 4 gold.

Amy approached Armin and whispered.

"Isn't that too expensive? A single bow set is worth half your entire trust fund!"

"It is expensive. But it must be top-notch. It might even have additional capabilities. After all, the 'Master of this World' isn't the type to swindle people. Of course, the boy Nade might be someone who usually scams people, but considering he was entrusted with the <First

Thunderstrike>, he seems to be a friendly projection."

The reason Armin referred to Shirone as the 'The Master of this World' indirectly was because Nade was present.

Having experienced at the inn how sensitive projections were to keywords, Amy immediately understood and nodded.

"Yes. Nade isn't the type to carelessly sell low-quality items."

Reina paid the 4 gold. Money wouldn't be needed anyway once they met Master of This World.

Reina strapped one quiver to her back and another to her thigh. She also held three arrows between her fingers, resting them against the bow's back, ready for action.

Amy floated the Jack-o'-Lantern beside her and looked at Armin.

They were only a group of three, but their resolve was as firm as an army preparing for battle.

"Are you ready? We're going to meet 'this world's master' now."

Reina asked.

"But where do we start looking?"

"We don't need to go far. After all, he exists everywhere in this world."

Armin raised his head and looked toward Nade. Amy and Reina stepped aside to clear the way.

"Do you know where Shirone is?"

Amy gasped.

Though it wasn't a major incident, she didn't want to experience again the kind of intense focus and stares from others like at the inn.

As expected, Nade fixed his gaze on Armin without even blinking. But perhaps being a complex projection, he didn't completely play dumb like the innkeeper.

"Why are you looking for Shirone?"

A smirk tugged at the corner of Armin's lips. As expected, this weapon shop was a place where Shirone's consciousness was particularly concentrated.

'Then I can't miss this opportunity.'

Armin raised the intensity of the keywords.

"Shirone is about to die. We're here to help him before it's too late."

Amy swallowed nervously, anxiously awaiting Nade's reaction. How would Shirone's consciousness interpret Armin's statement?

Nade stared at Armin with an expression devoid of emotion. Then, in a voice completely different from before, he issued a warning.

"Leave. This is not your world."

Armin realized he had connected with Shirone's avatar and pressed forward.

"Is that a refusal? Shirone, think again. You need our help. Please tell us where you are."

An unusual sign occurred in Nade's body as he remained silent. His pupils vanished, replaced by pitch-black voids, and his entire body started to turn a deep, inky black.

"Tch! A failure?"

Armin hastily stepped back.

"What is it? "What's happening?"

"This is where it starts! Get outside!"

Armin shoved open the door with his shoulder, and Reina, with her bow nocked and ready, followed close behind. Amy hesitated for a moment, looking back.

The Nade she knew had vanished, replaced by a rapidly approaching black shadow. Her heart nearly stopped as she left the shop, seeing similar entities converging from all directions.

Amy immediately cast Shining, illuminating the surroundings. A burst of light illuminated the pouring rain, making every drop stand out clearly.

Silhouettes of shadows lingered within the curtain of falling rain.

The figures resembled humans but with unnaturally elongated torsos and arms.

The most unsettling part was their faces. A thin spiral of light swirled like a vortex, as though pulling everything into an abyss.

"Armin-ssi. What exactly are those..."

"They're Egoists."

Amy tilted her head slightly, puzzled.

"Egoist?"

"Don't be deceived by their appearance. Their forms are ever-changing."

"Swioooooo!"

An Egoist lunged, but Armin quickly cast Flicker, slipping through the encirclement. People poured out of nearby buildings, only to immediately transform into Egoists and join the chase.

Armin cast Flicker repeatedly. His form vanished, leaving only flickering shockwaves crossing space to reveal his trajectory.

Meanwhile, Reina finished combat preparations and instantly shot three arrows between her fingers.

Each arrow found its mark, and the Egoists burst apart with a pop, crumpling to the ground. This was definitely something that could not happen in reality.

As one Egoist fell, the others quickly adapted. When Reina shot arrows, they twisted their waists thread-thin to dodge. However, Amy's Fire Strike engulfed one's head in flames. Even while burning, the Egoists pressed on, attacking relentlessly. Contrary to their frail appearance, their physical strength was immense, comparable to Tier 3 monsters from the real world.

Reina was quickly becoming accustomed to her bow.

Ignoring the sound of the rain, she focused on tracking their movements by sound alone and made a predictive shot, hitting the Egoist as if the arrow was curving.

"Sheuooooooooo!"

While Armin and Reina effectively worked together, Amy was locked in her own battle against one of the Egoists and separated from the group.

This one was the strongest among them, the transformed form of Nade from the weapons shop.

Nade's Egoist shifted forms for tactical advantage, pressuring Amy. Its arms split into four, stabbing like drills, while its flexible torso contorted to dodge her rapid-fire Fire Strikes as if dancing through the air.

The number of Egoists pouring into the battlefield grew, waves of shadows surging in from all sides. Armin's Flicker magic, though effective for evasion, wasn't viable for holding the battlefield, and time was running out.

Amy cast Fire Wall to divide friend from foe. Concentrating, she raised the fiery wall to twice its usual height, burning several Egoists caught along the line.

Nade's Egoist paused to look back at the flames, then stopped its assault and stared intently at Amy.

Amy recalled hearing Shirone's voice in the shop earlier and shouted desperately.

"Shirone! It's me! Amy!"

The Egoist didn't answer, but it was clear that it had understood. Its head tilted slightly, about 45 degrees.

Chapter 296 Great Secret (5)

"We came to save you! Where are you now?"

"SHEEEEEOOOOO!"

Nade bent his four arms and roared toward the sky.

At that, all the Egoists froze in place.

Amy watched the situation with bated breath. Her heart pounded with the faint hope that her voice might have reached Shirone.

However, what unfolded next was horrifying. The Egoists began elongating as if being sucked upward, defying gravity and rising against the falling rain.

Then, they arced through the air and began converging into Nade's Egoist form.

The Egoist's form changed drastically after absorbing its comrades. Its body grew over three meters tall, with insect legs sprouting from its shoulders, sides, and waist.

Its tail swelled like a bee's stinger, and its face grotesquely stretched both forward and backward, resembling a twisted sausage. Its face split open like a knife cut, revealing saw-like teeth, and a long tongue emerged from its throat, waving like waves.

"Kiiieeeeeee!"

Amy's face grew pale. There was no way she could believe that thing was Shirone. The horrifying form, created by merging all the Egoists nearby, was monstrous beyond belief.

The ground shook with a thud as the abomination stepped forward. There was no defeating it. She was certain of that. Yet she took a fighting stance while struggling to maintain her fading consciousness.

If they retreat at just Level Eleven, they won't be able to save Shirone. Even if it meant dying right here, she resolved to fight.

"Good, let's go!"

"Well done! Now run away!"

Armin shouted as he dashed past her. Amy turned to glare at him in disbelief. But she soon canceled her magic and started running. Reina quickly followed.

The three ran with all their might. The Egoist's horrific screams echoed through the rain from afar.

Armin ducked into a dark alley and leaned against a wall, sliding down to sit. Amy and Reina sat opposite him, tilting their heads back and breathing heavily. Raindrops beat against their faces like a shower.

Amy asked before she could catch her breath.

"What on earth is that? How can such a monster exist in Shirone's mind?"

"It's humans' selfish defense mechanism. It's mixed in with the projections. The stronger the projection, the stronger the Egoist becomes."

Amy recalled how Nade had been the strongest projection so far.

"But is it really okay to just run like this?"

"When the ego is attacked, Egoists manifest using the nearby projections. However, when it enters a state of terror as it just did, its inherent nature as an Egoist disappears and can't track our location. It's incredibly strong, but fighting it offers no benefit, so escaping is the better option."

Reina rested her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands. Steam rose from her body after running so far.

"Phew, is this because we failed to inject the keywords?"

"It's not that we failed, it's that Shirone rejected us. His wariness is considerable. Of course, given the real-world situation, it can't be helped."

Amy asked.

"Do we have to keep fighting things like that?"

"It's the only method for now. We must keep injecting keywords until Shirone accepts them. There's no other way to descend to the First Level without Shirone guiding us."

"But those things are still part of Shirone's mind, right?"

Can't we reason with them somehow?"

Armin shook his head coldly.

"Egoists are the defensive mechanisms present in everyone's subconscious. They perceive everything except Shirone as an enemy. The moment the keyword of 'death' was injected, even we, who earned 7 and 10 golds of trust, were no exception. It's not something to take personally. While the world divides into 'me' and 'others,' to the Egoist, there's only me, me, me. To them, the concept of 'others' simply doesn't exist."

Having experienced the Egoists' relentless hostility firsthand, Amy shuddered.

"How do we fight from now on? They're so strong."

"No, this is actually weak. Egoists become stronger the closer you get to the deep layers. That's why we must find Shirone's avatar on the surface layer. If we descend to the instinctual realm at the first stage, the Egoists will dominate most of Shirone's consciousness to protect him. At that point, they'll wield power comparable to Shirone himself, the master of this world. This is why divers never descend to the deep seas. If Shirone's unconscious weren't already weakened, even Arius might have reconsidered his approach."

Amy's eyes gleamed as she asked.

"Then aren't Arius and Zion in the same situation? If the Egoists get stronger the deeper you go, they might die before they even get there."

Armin shook his head.

"No, they'll likely avoid Shirone altogether. Grave robbers are experts in the human mind. To us, this world looks ordinary, but each object here carries its own significance. Arius will interpret those meanings and find a direct path

down. Of course, the risk increases below the REM realm, but by then, Shirone's unconscious will likely have deteriorated significantly. That's what Arius is counting on." Reina said.

"Then how about we use Arius's method? Amy knows Shirone well, so she might be able to interpret the objects here."

"Hm, the structure of consciousness differs for each person. Some are stair-like, and some resemble plazas. Others might have corridors or even phased spaces. However, access to lower levels is typically represented as underground—it's the most natural imagery for the subconscious."

Amy suggested.

"Then shouldn't we just find a basement here?"

Armin chuckled.

It seemed these women still didn't understand how terrifying the human mind could be. Well, this was only the Eleventh Layer, after all.

"I was just explaining the general theory. The human mind is extraordinarily complex and delicate. Unless you're an expert, you would have to search every basement in this world, and even if you found one, there's no guarantee it would lead to the entrance of the Tenth Level. We can't arrive faster than them anyway. But if we manage to meet Shirone here, the situation could turn in our favor. We must keep injecting keywords."

Reina said with a tired expression.

"And each time we do, the Egoists will find us?"

"There's no other way. That's why I told you not to come. It might sound ridiculous now that I've accepted your help."

Amy had no regrets about that. What bothered her was the idea that Shirone's mind itself was attacking her.

"Haah. It feels strange. Having to fight Shirone's mind."

Armin glared coldly.

"Amy, get a grip."

"What?"

"This is no time to get sentimental. As you've seen, a person's mind is extremely dangerous. Even many of the best divers, on par with Arius, have lost their lives here."

"I know that. That's why I'm staying alert."

"Are you really?"

Amy looked at Armin questioningly. She really was alert. No, she was even prepared to risk her life.

"Make no mistake. Shirone isn't tormenting us. We're the ones barging into Shirone's territory and wreaking havoc. This is a deeply personal space, one Shirone has no desire to show anyone. And yet Miss Amy has entered it. Getting angry or disappointed at this world's response is cowardly and base behavior."

"That's..."

Amy was speechless.

She had never considered Shirone's perspective, as Armin pointed out. If someone were to enter her mind and examine everything in detail... The mere thought was terrifying.

"We're not going to meet Shirone. We're meeting Shirone's avatar. The avatar is completely different from the Shirone you know outside. Amy, you couldn't withdraw currency. You might feel hurt, but that might be natural for the avatar. When you see Shirone's avatar, whatever he does will probably feel unlike Shirone."

Reina added.

"And yet, that's probably the truest version of Shirone."

"Yes. What humans can know about others is only what's shown externally. But avatars are different. They encapsulate every emotion a person harbors, even the shameful, humiliating parts they would never reveal. That's what we're going to face."

Amy paused to think, then took a deep breath. She slapped her cheeks repeatedly with both hands. Her face stung, but

it helped her focus. As Armin said, she hadn't been alert, let alone prepared.

"I understand. I won't judge, no matter what."

Armin finally smiled in satisfaction when he saw the cold light in Amy's eyes. Without this level of resolve, one wouldn't be able to endure what lies in a person's mind. What if the heart of a man who confessed his love turned out to be nothing but animalistic desires? What if the inner thoughts of someone you considered your closest friend were filled with jealousy and spite?

How many people in this world could know such truths without feeling betrayed?

Armin emphasized once more.

"Ataraxia will be at least below Level Three. And that place is a repository of things no one ever wishes to reveal to others."

"Yes. I'll take no interest in anything I see. After all, I have my own secrets I would rather not reveal. I apologize for being so thoughtless. Not being able to withdraw currency shook me more than I realized."

Reina chimed in.

"It's okay. I hadn't thought that far either. I would probably have felt upset if I couldn't withdraw anything too."

Amy gave a bitter smile.

"Shirone must be upset with me about something too. I made a mistake. No matter how much mental power someone has, and even with Indestructible Diamond, he's still human with the same emotions as everyone else."

Armin, who had been watching outside the alley, slowly turned his head to look at Amy.

"Just now... What did you say?"

"Huh? Oh, that Shirone has the same emotions..."

"No, not that. Did you say Indestructible Diamond?"

Amy blinked in confusion, but seeing Armin's expression was more serious than expected, she quickly said.

"Yes. There is a famous monk at our academy named professor Ethella, and she said that. To wield Ataraxia, one would need to reach the realm of Indestructible Diamond."

"Ah, what a fool I've been...!"

Armin slapped his forehead with his palm.

Why hadn't he thought of it?

Even if inscribed into instinct, Ataraxia was too vast a concept for the human mind to contain.

Normally, it would be enough to destroy one's mind.

And yet Shirone wielded it. Therefore, this teacher called monk Ethella had hit the mark.

"I apologize, Miss Amy. I've been acting so arrogant. I'm the fool here. I feel like hitting myself a hundred times over."

"Huh? What did I..."

Armin gripped Amy's shoulders firmly as if transferring strength to her.

"You've saved us. Follow me. We're going to Shirone."

Reina adjusted her bow and stood.

"Then are we fighting the Egoist?"

"No. We'll take a detour too. Like Arius."

Armin was certain of success.

This method would allow them to catch up with Arius.

Moreover, it was a method that Zion's group, who had to avoid Shirone, couldn't use even if they knew about it.

Leading the two women, Armin emerged onto the street.

The Egoists, in their state of terror, seemed to have moved far away, as none were in sight.

Wading through ankle-deep water, they arrived at the outskirts of the main road. There stood a carriage, its coachman sitting in the rain on the driver's bench.

The coachman wore a wide-brimmed magician's hat, but for some reason, shadows obscured only his face, making his expression impossible to discern. It was as if he had no face at all.

As Armin approached, the coachman spoke without even giving him a glance.

"We're not operating today."

Armin took out all the remaining gold coins and showed them.

"We urgently need to get somewhere. Please make an exception."

The sum surpassed the trust Armin had earned, so the coachman couldn't refuse outright. As expected, his tone softened slightly, though it still carried reluctance.

"It's difficult to operate on a day like this. It's raining too much. Where on earth are you trying to go in this weather?"

Armin glanced once at the two women waiting behind him and requested to the coachman.

"Let's go somewhere where it's not raining."

The driver's head snapped toward Armin as if struck by lightning. The movement was so unnatural that the watching women gulped nervously. Slowly turning to face forward, the driver gripped the reins and spoke.

"Get in, Customers."

Chapter 297: Master of Consciousness (1)

The carriage carrying Armin and his party sped towards the castle gate.

The wheels splashed through knee-deep rainwater, sending water flying outside.

The carriage bounced over the rough mountain path, hitting rocks. Amy and Reina gripped the handles tightly with both hands.

"It looks like we'll arrive soon. It's fortunate that it's not far."

Amy stuck her head out the window. Beyond the sky covered with dark clouds, a massive pillar of light seemed to pierce through.

As they entered that place, the sound of rain disappeared, and a warm, sunlit meadow spread out before them.

Armin and his party got off the carriage and looked back at the path they had taken. Between the dark clouds and the horizon, almost touching, lightning like static electricity was flashing.

Even in the sunlight, the coachman's face was not visible.

Amy thought he must be a nobody, as even Shirone had no particular impression of him.

Shirone was sitting on the meadow below the hill, looking at flowers.

Although his face couldn't be seen as he had his back turned, there was no one else who could exist alone in the realm of the Unbreakable Diamond.

Following a fluttering butterfly, he turned his head, and his profile showed a beautiful smile.

Reina, now understanding the mental world, was amazed.

Even in the horrific reality, Shirone's mind was unwavering. She seemed to understand why he could make precise judgments in numerous crises.

'But... should I talk to him?'

Reina couldn't easily approach.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't Shirone but his avatar. Since it integrated even intimate emotions, an unexpected response could hurt him.

"Let's go. We have nowhere else to retreat."

Armin pushed Reina's back and approached Shirone.

Sensing their presence, Shirone turned his head.

Reina swallowed hard.

"Oh? Mr. Armin? And Sister Reina?"

Shirone greeted them with a bright expression.

"It's been a while. How have you been?"

Armin scrutinized Shirone.

'Truly remarkable.'

Shirone's avatar was almost indistinguishable from his usual self.

Among the avatars Armin had met, there were famous personalities from around the world. But even they often revealed disappointing natures at the avatar stage.

It wasn't their fault.

That's human nature.

But Shirone was different.

While anyone might deviate when unseen, Shirone's mind had reached a pure state, unaffected by others' gaze.

It was a form of avatar that could only emerge from refining and cultivating one's inner self from childhood.

'The rumor that he's the most promising talent in Tormia wasn't unfounded.'

Even after parting a year ago, Armin had consistently heard about Shirone's achievements. His abnormal, wide-ranging progress, which couldn't be explained by talent alone, was supported by this mental completeness.

"So, what's going on?"

The avatar knew this was the mental world. However, it couldn't separate it from the dimension of reality. It was like not realizing one is dreaming in a dream.

Reina asked Armin.

"Does Shirone not know why we're here? We've been feeding him keywords all this time."

"It's hard to draw a clear line on what he knows. The avatar governs the whole but isn't the whole itself."

"It's like a core code."

"Exactly. While all this is the avatar's doing, it doesn't embody the avatar's will."

"Um..."

Amy's voice was heard.

When the two turned their heads, they saw the Egoist, over 2 meters tall, holding Amy with four arms. The upper right arm had turned into a rope, strangling her neck.

'There shouldn't be any projectiles?'

Reina looked around and realized the coachman had disappeared.

But why did the Egoist manifest? Wasn't Shirone supposed to be friendly to them?

"Shirone, what's wrong?"

"I just... get annoyed when I see Amy."

Armin sighed.

What he feared had happened.

Connecting cause and effect is the realm of reason.

Conversely, emotions are true to the moment's feelings.

In reality, the two are strictly separated, but the mental entity, the avatar, couldn't do that.

"Shirone, you need to suppress your emotions as much as possible now. You might feel it, but your life is in danger. You need our cooperation. And of course, Amy's cooperation too."

Armin's persuasion didn't make Shirone understand, but he had no choice but to follow since his life was at stake.

Suppressing his emotions, the Egoist became blurry and then turned into black smoke.

Amy, rubbing her neck and coughing, looked at Shirone with sad eyes. She had been prepared, but being treated like this still hurt.

"What's the reason? You have to tell me so I can fix it."

Shirone didn't know the reason either. Memories related to Amy surged like a fountain, but the avatar, unable to arrange cause and effect in order, could only feel the emotions of those situations.

Shirone distanced himself from her and turned to Armin.

"What should we do now?"

"First, we need to penetrate deeper into Shirone's mind. If we don't catch the intruder, there's no way to recover the situation."

"But I don't know the way down."

"No, you do. The reason Shirone can accept the current situation without discomfort is because he knows. It's just that the logical system is broken, so he can't draw conclusions. Think about going down. Then tell me the first place that comes to mind."

Lost in thought, Shirone pointed to the western mountains.

"It's not exact, but..."

"That's enough. Let's go."

Armin sat in the coachman's seat in place of the disappeared coachman.

They traveled for about an hour in the direction Shirone pointed to and arrived at a small village.

It was also pouring rain there, but as soon as Shirone entered, the weather cleared up as if by magic.

Shirone led them to a shabby stable. When he hugged a bunch of soft straw on the floor and moved it aside, a door leading underground appeared.

"Oh, there really is a door?"

"Rather than that, it's more accurate to say it was designated. The door exists where Shirone thinks it is."

Remember this sense. At this speed, we can catch up with Arius and Zion."

Hearing the names of the two, Shirone's face twisted fiercely.

Armin flinched and looked back. Though it had disappeared, he felt a momentary, otherworldly killing intent.

'What was that just now?'

Armin realized he needed to revise his thoughts.

Shirone's avatar seemed no different from his usual self, but perhaps that wasn't all there was to it.

Shirone's Mental Stage 8

Arius independently gathered information and delved deeper.

The current place he was exploring was a landfill with a stench so foul it was hard to breathe.

As the unbearable smell wafted on the wind, Zion covered his mouth with a handkerchief.

'What on earth is this smell? It's not even the smell of a corpse.'

The fear Shirone felt was manifested as a smell. It was the scent of death that couldn't exist in reality.

Arius, already accustomed to the stench, grabbed a passing man and asked,

"Where is the nearest library?"

The man, covering his nose, pointed in a direction and hurried on his way.

Arius headed to the place the man indicated. As soon as he entered the library, the stench disappeared, and he felt a sense of relief.

Zion shook his handkerchief and, deciding it was beyond saving, threw it to the ground. He looked around and said, "Is it a library this time?"

Arius ignored Zion's words and focused on examining the books. The books were categorized by subject, but the titles on the covers wriggled like worms, making them unreadable.

However, some sections had clear titles.

They were books related to Shirone's major, photonics.

Arius walked along the shelves, glancing at the covers. Then he picked up a book titled "The God Particle."

When he tapped the wall with the book, a rectangular crack appeared. The wall dissolved into the air, revealing a staircase leading down.

"I've been curious for a while, how do you find these things?"

"You trace the flow connected to Shirone's unconscious.

Every object has its own inherent meaning. It's a field that requires a certain level of study. You need an excellent understanding of psychoanalysis."

"I see."

By the middle of Arius's explanation, Zion had already lost interest.

As always, complicated matters were best left to experts.

He just wanted to extract Ataraxia and get out of there as soon as possible.

When they opened the door to the 7th stage, a plaza unfolded before them. There was no torrential rain, bone-chilling cold, or stench that could rot one's nose.

Zion adjusted the leather strap of his armament at his waist and mentally prepared himself.

"At least it's livable here."

As soon as Zion finished speaking, a man fell from above.

He landed face-first, his brain spilling out as he died.

Looking around, people were climbing onto rooftops.

There were numerous suicides. From a window in one building, a woman was seen standing on a chair, preparing to hang herself.

"What the hell is this?"

Arius, watching from behind Zion, spoke.

"The 7th stage is the gateway just before entering the REM realm. It's a layer with strong rationality. Projections facing death exhibit symptoms of nervous breakdowns."

"Ahhhhh!"

Two sisters falling from the 4th floor screamed as if they were being torn apart.

Zion frowned.

He didn't care about the sisters' deaths or the gruesome corpses. He just wished they would die quietly without making a fuss.

"Let's move quickly. This place is annoying."

"No. We'll stay for a while. If they meet Shirone's avatar, it will be troublesome. They could reach the deeper layers much faster than us."

"Hmm, in that case?"

Arius pointed to a castle beyond the city.

"We'll meet the ruler of consciousness here. Shirone's superego. Divers call it the antithesis."

"Antithesis?"

"It's the consciousness that criticizes Shirone. It's as strong as the Egoist but significantly weakened due to being on the brink of death. That will buy us some time."

Arius turned north. They had to be careful with their actions as the nerves of the passersby were so sensitive that even brushing against them could provoke murder.

The place they arrived at was a castle so small it seemed like a miniature compared to reality. But it had a quaint charm. Beyond the walls, seven red spires stood, and guards were stationed at the entrance across a moat that was more like a stream.

As they approached the archway, the guards crossed their spears to block the entrance.

"Stop. Who are you?"

"We're here to meet the ruler of this place."

"Lord Ignite is on sick leave. Go back."

Arius gave a meaningful smile.

The ruler's name was usually the most impressive concept in rationality. And Ignite was the name of an ignition spell.

"That's precisely why we're here. I have medicine that can cure the illness."

The guards were confused. They exchanged glances, and one guard went inside.

After a while, he returned and allowed Arius to enter.

Once inside, it was far from luxurious. It looked like a military camp stationed at the front lines.

Like the citizens, the soldiers were also on edge, but under Ignite's control, they performed their duties without faltering.

At the end of the hall, covered with a red carpet, sat Ignite, resting his chin on his hand. He was nearly two meters tall, with a stylish brown beard that stood out.

Chapter 298: Master of Consciousness (2)

Zion tilted his head, recognizing the familiar face.

"Surely... was it Vincent?"

As they walked across the carpet, Arius explained.

"It's largely projected. The superego is heavily influenced by the father. Normally, it would be strong enough to suppress the Egoist."

Ignite greeted them with a broad smile.

"So, you say you have a cure for me?"

Arius was momentarily speechless, feeling an overwhelming pressure as if facing a wild beast.

'Unbelievable. Is this the weakened state of the superego?'

In a normal person, the superego would be paralyzed in the face of death. But Ignite still exuded a powerful presence.

'This is truly impressive.'

Even Arius, who had explored many minds, had never encountered such a strong superego.

A person with a criticism consciousness as solid as steel never lets their guard down. The rumor that Shirone could become a top-tier talent was based on this trait.

Zion snorted.

"Is he bluffing even on the brink of death? What an annoying guy."

Arius thought that Zion's superego must be very weak.

"There is no cure for my illness. Because this world is already sick. So, why have you come to see me? I'll overlook the first lie, but from now on, you must tell the truth."

Knowing that clumsy lies wouldn't work on the ruler of reason, Arius spoke honestly.

"We need to kill Shirone."

The soldiers lined up in the hall glared at Arius in unison. However, under Ignite's control, they did not manifest as Egoists.

"Why should I do that?"

Ignite lifted the massive axe resting against the chair with one hand.

As he grasped the weapon, the air grew as heavy as steel, pressing down on their chests.

Zion, terrified, drew his Armand. Activating his golden armor, the sword split and encased him like armor. At the same time, Ignite's subordinates raised their weapons.

Arius sighed in frustration. But needing Zion's help to achieve his goal, he abandoned his initial strategy and joined in the show of force.

"Just hold them off for a moment. It will be over soon."

"What are you going to do?"

Arius approached Ignite, a bluish light of the mental magic Confuse gathering in his palm.

"...I'll have to start mental reconstruction."

"Cough! Cough!"

Shirone's party coughed as they exited the door to the 7th stage. The stench from the landfill was still imprinted in their minds, making it feel like the smell lingered.

But the situation here wasn't any better. Shirone's party stood in front of the door, unable to move, with blank expressions.

The plaza floor was littered with corpses with burst heads. People were falling from rooftops like rain.

Elsewhere, citizens were fighting each other to the death. Even though it wasn't reality, it was the most horrific scene they had ever seen.

Armin watched the situation with a serious expression.

If the actions of the projections were this extreme, it meant that Zenogor's influence was tightening faster than expected.

Shirone, watching his world crumble with sad eyes, suddenly wore a fierce expression. He mischievously yanked Amy's hair.

"Ouch!"

Amy turned around with a bewildered look.

"Why did you do that?"

"Don't block my view. I can't see."

Amy pouted her lips.

She couldn't understand why Shirone, who was kind to everyone else, was only like this to her. She wanted to hit him, but she had prepared herself before meeting the avatar, so she controlled her emotions.

"Fine, sorry."

As Amy shrugged and turned away, Shirone became even more confused.

She was a good person and on his side. So why did he feel bad?

"Why did you come to save me?"

Amy flinched at the question from behind. But without turning around, she thought for a moment and gave a short answer.

"Because we're friends."

Shirone recalled a memory from reality. It was a terrifying memory like a nightmare.

The world was upside down, and his body felt like it was burning. He saw Amy cocooned on the opposite wall. He couldn't guess the situation, but it was extremely unpleasant.

"But you... didn't save me."

Amy lowered her head with a sad face.

Was it that? Did Shirone hate her for her weakness in not being able to act?

"Shirone, that was..."

As Amy turned to explain, an Egoist suddenly appeared before her. She quickly stepped back, and Arius and Reina also distanced themselves.

The projections with burst heads began to transform into Egoists, surrounding Shirone like a wall.

Reina looked at Armin and asked,

"What's happening?"

"Get down!"

Amy grabbed Reina's waist and dove towards the exit of the 7th stage. As Reina turned her head, she saw a rain of arrows filling the sky.

Armin used Flicker magic to escape the radius.

Egoists rushed towards Shirone. Amy closed the door after confirming this.

Thud! Thud!

Dozens of arrows struck the door, making her hand holding the doorknob tingle.

As soon as the arrow rain stopped, she opened the door and checked on Shirone. The Egoist, now in a ball form, was pierced by an unsettling number of arrows.

"Shirone! Are you okay?"

As the Egoist separated and retreated like an ebbing tide, Shirone stood in the same position as before. More Egoists approached him in a menacing manner to protect him.

Amy sighed in relief and turned her head to where Shirone was looking.

A group of soldiers was advancing. The archers split to the sides, and the heavy cavalry took the lead.

"What is that army?"

"It must be the antithesis. The Egoist rationalizes the self, while the antithesis criticizes. The stronger the superego, the more moral it is, so Shirone's antithesis must be quite strong. Stay alert."

Amy was shocked to see the commander of the cavalry. He was a middle-aged man with a huge axe on his back, and even from a distance, his presence was overwhelming.

"Uncle Vincent?"

Except for being about 1.5 times larger and having scars on his face, he looked so much like Vincent that it was

believable he was in disguise.

"I am Ignite, the ruler of this city!"

Ignite's shout echoed through the plaza. Even the citizens, whose nerves were on edge, turned to him with startled expressions.

Ignite pointed his massive axe horizontally and shouted at Shirone.

"Shirone! Your selfishness is causing everyone to suffer. What do you, a commoner, dream of? Your power is not something you earned through your efforts! It should be given to others! Now, I will end all suffering with your death!"

Amy looked at Arius with a bewildered expression.

"Is that Shirone's critical consciousness? That's just typical loser logic."

"Indeed. Arius seems to have manipulated the superego. Humans have a strong desire for death as much as for life. It looks like we're in serious trouble."

"Shirone! Answer me! Are you justified? After causing so much suffering, do you still want to live?"

When exposed to extreme fear or pain, humans sometimes think they would rather die. Arius had easily manipulated Ignite by exploiting the fact that Shirone's world was sick. Every time Ignite spoke, Shirone trembled.

For the ego, the superego's message was as powerful as the Bible to a religious person.

"That's right! It's all Shirone's fault that this world is like this!"

"Killing Shirone is the only way to restore peace!"

"Kill him! Kill Shirone!"

The projections in the plaza raised the banner of rebellion, siding with Ignite.

They were all antitheses, and as their numbers grew, Shirone's avatar weakened further.

"Get ready! They're coming this way!"

As Armin shouted, the heavy infantry charged, shaking the ground. Archers drew their bows from the sides of the plaza, and the citizens also rushed in as an angry mob.

"Everything will be better without you!"

A citizen wielding a club took a full swing at Shirone.

At the same time, an Egoist tackled him to the ground.

Transforming its entire body into teeth, it bit down, tearing the antithesis apart with a scream.

But Ignite's subordinates were not so easily dealt with. They wielded their weapons with overwhelming strength, overpowering the Egoists.

The Egoists attacked by the antitheses disintegrated with a hissing sound.

"Kill Shirone! Everyone, charge at Shirone!"

The dead projections turned into Egoists and fought to protect Shirone. Meanwhile, the citizens all became antitheses.

Desire and reason clashed in the center of the plaza.

In this close battle, Ignite's presence was the decisive factor.

He was stronger than any Egoist and far surpassed the other antitheses in power. Every swing of his massive axe shattered the Egoists like dust.

"Shirone! It's not yours! Let it go!"

Armin, watching the battle, was dumbfounded.

'How can this be?'

Reason was overcoming desire.

It meant that Shirone's conviction was incredibly strong, but considering the situation, it was absurdly strong. Even soldiers willing to die for their country have a stronger desire to live when their lives are at stake.

'But desire is losing? Even when his neck is on the line in reality? Can this really be the mind of an eighteen-year-old boy?'

Arius probably didn't expect the antithesis to win either. If Ignite captured Shirone, they wouldn't be able to obtain Ataraxia.

Shirone's conviction transcended human limits.
Like prophets in history, Shirone was someone who could willingly die for his beliefs.

"This won't do. We need to join the fight."

Armin cast Flicker and infiltrated the battlefield.

Saving Shirone was the top priority. If the avatar was defeated, they wouldn't be able to catch up to Arius.

Amy defended herself with Fire Mist and cast Fire Wall.

As the wall of fire surged between the Egoists and the antithesis, the crowd split in two.

Focusing her mind, the Fire Wall grew taller. The heavy infantry, unable to remove their heated armor, screamed in agony.

Reina climbed onto a roof and sniped the archers. The arrows she bought from Neid's projection had several times the penetration power of real ones, easily piercing through two or three people with a single shot.

"Move aside! I'll deal with this myself!"

Ignite's voice came from beyond the wall of fire. He soon emerged, parting the flames.

With a massive axe on his shoulder, he took a swing stance, targeting Amy first. Numerous Egoists attacked him, but he scattered them with a single swing.

"Amy! Watch out!"

Reina grabbed four arrows from her quiver and fired them in quick succession. Each aimed at a different spot: shoulder, wrist, thigh, and heart.

Without taking his eyes off Amy, Ignite sensed the arrows and swung his massive axe with both hands.

A sound like a fierce wind roared.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The powerful arrows struck the axe blade but didn't bounce off. However, the shafts bent at 90 degrees, losing their force and falling to the ground.

"Foolish girl!"

Ignite continued his charge, swinging his massive axe. He brought the axe blade behind his back right in front of Amy. As his upper body straightened, Amy felt like a wall had appeared before her. She didn't have time to cancel Fire Wall and cast another spell.

Chapter 299: Master of Consciousness (3)

"Do not threaten our peace!"

The speed of the massive axe descending towards her head was almost impossible to follow with the eyes.

In that fleeting moment, Amy realized this was her end.

'Goodbye, Shirone...'

It was a bad ending.

But in a way, she thought it might not be a bad conclusion.

This was Shirone's mental world. She would sleep forever in his embrace.

"Raaaargh!"

A ferocious roar snapped Amy back to reality. At the same time, something dark and fast moved past her eyes.

When she came to her senses, Ignite had been thrown 10 meters away.

Amy felt a presence behind her and turned around.

But to see it properly, she had to tilt her head all the way back.

It was an Egoist, covered in spiky protrusions all over its body. It stood over 6 meters tall, in a hunched posture that was somewhere between quadrupedal and bipedal, glaring forward.

The Egoist manifested in a specific form, borrowing the avatar's desire. The process wasn't finished yet, and all the Egoists in the plaza turned into black smoke and were absorbed into it. Although it didn't grow taller, the spikes on its body became abnormally long.

"Raaaargh!"

Egoist - Rage Form.

The giant shadowy monster roared and leaped over Amy.

With the obstruction gone, she saw Shirone with a fierce expression.

'Shirone...?'

Shirone had a stronger inclination towards reason than desire. But the current Egoist was exuding a strength on a different level than anything she had experienced before.

'Could it be that he's trying to save me?'

Knowing the hostility Shirone's avatar held towards her, Amy avoided jumping to conclusions.

But she couldn't help but feel a swelling hope. It had always been this way. Whenever danger struck, Shirone always protected her.

The Egoist (Rage Form) tore through hundreds of antitheses and still had energy to spare. Even Ignite's heavily armed subordinates were sent flying with a single kick.

"Shirone! Do you still dream of a petty life to the end?"

Ignite, coughing up blood, grabbed his massive axe and charged at the monster. He leaped high and swung the axe behind him.

Bending his back like a bow, he sprang forward and brought the axe down. The Egoist's head was split in half.

A smile formed on Ignite's lips, but the expected scream didn't come. The state of the Egoist transmitted through the handle was still angry, bubbling, and about to explode.

As Ignite's expression hardened, the Rage Form's claw swiped across his face.

With half his face gone, he fell to the ground, and a leg thicker than a pillar stomped on him.

Boom!

The ground shook, signaling the end of the battle.

"Ahhh! R-run away!"

The antitheses scattered in all directions in panic. The Egoist roared and chased after them, trying to eliminate even one more.

The plaza, now empty except for Shirone's party, was clean without a single corpse.

Amy, who had been on the brink of death, collapsed to the ground. Shirone approached her.

Turning her head, Amy's heart raced as she realized Shirone was there. Was his anger gone? Had he returned to the kind Shirone of before?

"Shirone, thank you. If it weren't for you..."

"You make me angry."

Shirone spoke without even making eye contact, looking at the ground.

"You really make me angry."

Then he turned coldly and walked away.

Even now, he couldn't understand why he had saved Amy. Just before the massive axe split her head, he was seized by an intense impulse. From that moment, his rage exploded, and he couldn't remember anything else.

Amy hung her head in dejection.

Reina, who had hoped for their reconciliation, patted her shoulder.

"Don't be too disappointed. Once we save Shirone, all misunderstandings will..."

Before Reina could finish, Amy lifted her head.

Contrary to expectations, her face was bright. She even looked somewhat relieved.

"It's okay. Shirone saved me, after all. Maybe he doesn't hate me to the core. That's enough for me. Haha!"

Even though she said that, Reina could guess how great Amy's sense of loss was.

She was holding on desperately, solely to save Shirone.

"Yeah, let's keep going a little longer."

Reina looked at Armin. He was drenched in sweat from disrupting the enemy deep within the antithesis's camp.

"Are the antitheses gone now?"

"They're not gone. But the manipulated antitheses are no more. Still, we can't let our guard down. They are fundamentally mental entities that criticize Shirone."

After a short rest in the plaza, they followed Shirone's lead into the castle. Although Ignite had been there just a while ago, no projections were visible anymore.

Shirone descended into the basement. He walked through the maze-like paths without a single hesitation.

When he opened the door to the storeroom, another staircase leading down appeared.

On the first basement floor, Armin grabbed a torch and walked alongside Shirone. At an old wooden door, he stopped the group and turned around.

"Beyond this door is the world of dreams, the REM realm.

Before we enter, there are a few things to note. You've all dreamed before, but different physical laws apply here than in reality. Simply put, it's called focus."

"Is it like concentration?"

"Similar. Reality is a series of concentration and relaxation.

In an ordinary life, the relaxation phase is overwhelmingly long. But in dreams, there's only concentration. It's like following the dramatic structure of a play. You only see what you want to see, and other situations don't exist. So if you lose focus, you lose yourself. This is called 'rilpin.'"

Armin held up five fingers.

"There are five main types of rilpin. First, a sense of floating. Second, meaningless mumbling. Third, repetition of the same segment. Fourth, perspective shift. Fifth, the realization of anxiety."

Amy thought she understood. She had often experienced these things while dreaming.

"Dreams only mimic gravity; they don't actually have it.

Keep confirming the feeling of your feet being on the ground. The moment you feel a sense of floating, you'll keep rising endlessly. And don't speak without certainty."

"Conversations need focus too, like a script in a play."

"Exactly. Habitual slang is also not allowed. Losing focus in language will make you repeat meaningless words."

"So the repetition of the same segment is spatial focus?"

"Yes. Don't turn around or run away without thinking. You'll lose focus and repeat the same segment. Fourth, if you focus on the surrounding situation, you'll lose yourself and become an observer. Lastly, don't have anxious thoughts."

"Because they'll become reality."

Armin nodded at Reina's words.

Amy, deep in thought, asked,

"What happens if we get caught in rilpin? For example, if we start floating or can't stop mumbling meaningless words?"

"As long as we don't all get caught at the same time, we can pull each other out. If you start floating, we'll pull you down. If you start mumbling, we might slap you."

Amy puffed out her cheeks as if she had already been slapped.

Reina asked,

"What if we can't get out?"

"Eventually, you'll catch a new focus. But it won't be Shirone's focus; it will be ours. In the end, you'll be dreaming a new dream."

"A dream within a dream."

"Exactly. This is why Drimo is called a multidimensional world. It's fine in your own dream, but this is someone else's world. If you get deeply buried, you might never wake up from the dream."

Everyone tensed up after hearing Armin's explanation.

"Don't worry. As long as we focus on following Shirone to the next exit, there shouldn't be any problems."

Shirone took a deep breath and grabbed the doorknob.

"Then... I'll open the door."

With Armin's approval, the door slowly opened.

Music softly played, and soon the performance of court musicians filled the air.

Amy squinted at the familiar scene.

"This place...?"

Many couples were dancing in the grand hall. It was the ballroom of Kazra Castle, where they had been just a few

hours ago.

Armin hurriedly explained, as if he had missed something.

"The REM realm is a fluid space. It's like multiple plays being performed on the same stage. If the background is the grand hall, the exit should be close."

"That's the exit."

Shirone pointed to the other side of the ballroom.

Amy thought she understood why. It was the door she had exited with Zion. Shirone must have gone through that door to find her. And then all this happened.

'It was because of me.'

Amy smiled bitterly.

If she hadn't followed Zion, if she had refused his request, would Shirone be in a different situation now?

'Haha, no wonder he hates me.'

"Amy, don't lose focus."

Amy quickly regained her composure. She took deep breaths and maintained a clear gaze.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Then let's go. Shirone, walk straight ahead without bumping into anyone."

Shirone walked carefully. He stopped and waited when couples passed by. Taking a detour could lead to rilpin.

Amy and Reina only looked at the back of Shirone's head.

Meanwhile, Armin walked leisurely, observing the surroundings. He had obtained a lucid dream certification for a certain mission, making this possible.

'What exactly happened?'

Given that Shirone in reality was facing a horrific death, the REM realm's situation was likely a nightmare.

This made him tense.

At any moment, everyone in the ballroom could turn into monsters, or people might suddenly go mad and start killing each other.

However, nothing happened as they crossed half of the ballroom.

Since the focus had already shifted from the path they had taken, it was unlikely that anything would happen there.

'Strange. What kind of nightmare is this?'

Armin noticed something and his eyes lit up.

'So, that's what it is.'

In the center of the ballroom, a couple was dancing. The woman wore a beautiful red dress like a rose, and the man had a strange appearance.

The man's eyes were completely slanted upwards, his nose was upturned, and his lips were smaller than a chicken's anus. It was a human face, but one that couldn't exist in reality.

'He must have really hated him.'

If it were just this, it wouldn't be a big deal for a third party. But for Shirone, it was a horrific nightmare.

Armin turned his gaze and saw someone serving near a long table.

He was dressed in the attire of a steppe tribe, which didn't match the castle's scenery at all. He wore a red hat, had a stylishly long beard, and was confidently smoking a pipe even in a non-smoking area.

The only entity not a projection of Shirone, he was Luber, a dreamer dispatched from Drimo.

Luber looked at Armin and winked. But Armin just glanced at him indifferently and turned away.

He wasn't someone to greet out of mere curiosity. Currently, dreamers couldn't be analyzed by human intelligence. They were acknowledged simply because they existed.

When Shirone reached the exit, the focus on the path they had taken ended, and the music stopped.

Was the ball still going on in the grand hall? They were curious, but no one looked back.

Chapter 300: Master of Consciousness (4)

"We've arrived. If we open this door, we can go down."

"I see. So now we will enter Shirone's unconscious."

Understanding Armin's words, Amy took a deep breath.

Beyond this door lay Shirone's true emotions.

Given the state of his avatar, there wouldn't be any vile desires. But there might be equivalent longings.

'It doesn't matter. I'm not pure either. Everyone has such feelings.'

Shirone hesitated to open the door. It seemed he was conflicted about descending to the lower level.

Eventually, he let go of the doorknob and looked at Amy with a displeased expression.

"You don't need to come along..."

Suddenly, Shirone tilted his head back and rolled his eyes. Then, like someone having a seizure, he trembled and collapsed.

"Shirone!"

Amy held Shirone and checked his condition. His face was pale, and his lungs were heaving as if he might stop breathing at any moment.

"What happened? What's going on?"

A rumbling vibration was felt, and the ceiling of the grand hall began to collapse. As boulders larger than people fell, Armin flung the door open and shouted.

"We don't have time! The unconscious is collapsing!"

Kazra Castle's food storage.

Zenogor's strong line finally cut into Shirone's blood vessels.

Thousands of blood droplets burst from the wound and spread slowly, as if time had slowed down.

The impact on reality immediately affected the mind. With the rainfall at level 11 surging, half the city was submerged. Projections floating on the torrents let out cries close to wailing.

Among the crowd flowing into the lowlands was the fear manifestation of Neid's projection, the Egoist.

"Kiyaaaah!"

The Egoist flailed its limbs desperately trying to escape. But it couldn't overcome the rapidly rising water and sank below the surface with a desperate scream.

Secrets of the Abyss (1)

Shirone's Mental Stage 5.

Creak, the door opened with an old sound.

The aura of caution entered before the people did.

Only after a while did Arius, with a flushed face, and Zion, fully protected by his golden armor, cross the threshold.

"This is... Shirone's unconscious?"

Zion was bewildered by the unexpected situation.

The 5th stage they arrived at was a library with bookshelves extending endlessly.

The Spine of Knowledge.

Arius realized just by looking at a few bookshelves that the history was arranged in chronological order.

'This is... beyond impressive, it's almost inhuman.'

He had dived into the minds of high-ranking magicians far greater than Shirone. But even they had disorganized and chaotic unconscious minds.

It was natural. It would be strange for a human's unconscious to be standardized.

Zion asked in a disappointed voice.

"What is this? You said we could see everything about Shirone?"

"It's the Spine of Knowledge."

"The Spine of Knowledge?"

"It's the arrangement of history in chronological order. It's not only difficult to create, but even attempting it is rarely

successful. It seems to be a result of Shirone's unique growth process."

Zion scoffed.

Shirone grew up as the son of a lowly hunter. No matter how much he excelled, he couldn't be better than someone like Zion, who had been educated in imperial doctrines since birth.

"Surely, it's a crude method. In other words, he crammed it in by brute force? That's typical of the uneducated, memorizing without understanding."

"Is that so?"

Arius smiled pleasantly.

It was indeed impressive.

Not just the Spine of Knowledge itself, but the fact that it resided in the 5th stage below the REM realm was astonishing.

"You can't establish a spine in the unconscious with mere memorization. He understood everything. That makes it highly effective. Any knowledge he studies can be systematically arranged. It's far more efficient than just cramming in knowledge meaninglessly."

Zion's expression twisted.

Although his face was hidden by the helmet of his golden armor, Arius could feel the murderous intent emanating from him.

"Is that so..."

Zion was upset.

Very upset.

He had absorbed everything good since childhood. No one in the world could have received a better education than the child of Teraje.

But his confidence had been repeatedly wounded since Shirone appeared.

How could the son of a commoner be better than the emperor's son?

Zion's breathing grew rougher.

He looked at the books filling the library.

Shirone couldn't have read tens of thousands of books. It just seemed that way because the knowledge he understood and mastered was perfectly categorized.

"Damn bastard!"

Zion drew a blade from his gauntlet and slashed at the bookshelves. Paper scraps fluttered like goose feathers, and the bookshelves were smoothly cut like cheese.

Moving to the next section, he swung both blades, destroying Shirone's knowledge.

"How about this? Huh? I'll mess up your mind completely!"

Zion's voice trembled with excitement.

"Haha! This is fun! If I had done this from the start, it would have been easy! More, more destruction!"

Arius spoke in a cold voice.

"Stop it."

Zion, who usually didn't care about others' words, had to stop this time.

Slowly turning his head, he saw Arius's cold gaze.

It was a murderous intent worthy of being called one of the Seven Great Magicians.

"What? Are you talking to me?"

His stomach churned, but Zion didn't back down.

He was Arius's employer, and an employee shouldn't oppose their employer.

Even if this was Arius's domain, the mental world, the power of money spread throughout the universe.

As long as humans existed there.

Arius suppressed his murderous intent.

'Damn brat...'

Honestly, he almost killed Zion.

The Spine of Knowledge Shirone had built was a pleasing sight even for Arius.

Notorious as one of the Seven Great Magicians of the Black Line, he was second to none in intellect.

He understood better than anyone why Shirone had constructed such a knowledge structure. Despite being an enemy, he couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie. If they had met under different circumstances, he would have genuinely cared for Shirone.

Of course, given the personalities he had encountered so far, it seemed unlikely Shirone would join the Black Line. Arius suppressed his anger and returned to his usual self. Regardless of his feelings, he was a professional. Defying his employer was against his principles.

"From now on, we're in the realm of the unconscious. If you tamper with it, Ataraxia might be damaged. So let's stop the destruction and go down."

Ataraxia was probably safe. The 5th stage was merely the result of the 4th stage.

Changing the result wouldn't alter the cause.

But Arius didn't want to destroy the Spine of Knowledge.

Not because he cared for Shirone.

This place genuinely satisfied his intellectual aesthetic.

Hearing the word Ataraxia, Zion stopped his rampage. He had spent a fortune of 4 billion gold to obtain it, so any damage would be a huge loss.

"Fine. He's going to die anyway, so I'll leave it at this."

Arius smiled contentedly.

"Shall we go down then?"

Despite being infuriated by Zion's foolishness, there was something to gain. Even after damaging the Spine of Knowledge, the Egoist hadn't appeared.

From the REM realm downwards, there were no projections, so the Egoist could manifest at any time to eliminate intruders.

This was one reason even divers with lucid dream certifications hesitated to descend into the depths.

'The Egoist isn't manifesting. It's about time for the collapse.'

And this was precisely what Arius had been aiming for.

If the mental processes had reached the 5th stage, considerable time must have passed in reality. Shirone was likely fatally wounded and close to death.

'Will I finally see Ataraxia?'

Arius's eyes shone more intensely than ever.

Armin burst through the door and entered the 5th stage.

Shirone, supported by Amy, followed, gasping for breath.

Barely escaping the collapse of the REM realm, Shirone could no longer walk and collapsed to the floor. His face was pale and fading.

"Shirone! Are you okay? Snap out of it!"

Amy worriedly caressed Shirone's cheeks.

But Shirone roughly pushed her away and spoke coldly.

"Get away."

Amy stepped back with a sad expression.

Even in the dire situation of the mental world's collapse, Shirone's frozen heart showed no signs of thawing.

As he glared at Amy with upturned eyes, his lips moved as if trying to convey something. But as Amy turned away, his mouth closed again.

Amy looked around with a pounding heart.

No matter what she saw, she wouldn't criticize Shirone.

Even if it was something bad directed at her.

"Where is this...?"

But she saw nothing.

What lay before her was not raw emotions but a categorized flow of history.

The Spine of Knowledge Shirone had mentioned before.

When she heard about it, she had vaguely imagined a diagram, but seeing it in reality, she realized it was an impressive achievement.

Having the Spine of Knowledge engraved in the 5th stage meant not a single piece of information was treated carelessly.

It was impossible to understand without connecting the causal relationships of all the acquired information.

Shirone had done it.

She could clearly see how hard he had worked to catch up with the intellectual abilities of the magic school students.

Armin, like Arius before him, quickly grasped the characteristics.

The categories of information on the bookshelves were divided so that any item could be independently understood.

'What kind of child is this...'

More importantly, this was the realm of the unconscious.

There is information that one never forgets throughout their life. People call this fundamental knowledge.

Shirone had brought the Spine of Knowledge to the state of fundamental knowledge.

As Armin wandered through the library, repeatedly marveling inwardly, he discovered a section that was completely destroyed.

Books were torn to shreds, and the bookshelves were also destroyed.

"It looks like they came through here."

Seeing the brutally damaged bookshelves, Amy felt distressed. She knew better than anyone how much effort Shirone had put into completing the Spine of Knowledge, and she felt a surge of resentment towards them.

"Those bastards. Do they even know what this is..."

Amy gathered the scattered papers from the floor and eventually started to cry.

She couldn't forgive Zion. She would make him pay in some way.

"Wait a moment."

Armin stopped her.

The collapsed bookshelves were regenerating as if a living organism was healing its wounds.

Amy watched the process with a surprised expression.

"How is this possible?"

"Normally, it wouldn't be. But the complementary knowledge base is structured like a network. Even if one path is blocked, it immediately reroutes and establishes a new path. The Spine of Knowledge will soon be restored to its original state."

Reina asked,

"Then why did they destroy it? Arius must have known. He's an expert."

"That's exactly why."

Reina tilted her head in confusion.

But Armin's explanation ended there. There was no point in praising the enemy in a situation where they would soon face off.

Zion destroyed it, and Arius stopped him.

That was the only scenario that came to mind.

Though the world saw him as a grave robber, he had a strong intellectual pride. He must have been deeply impressed by seeing Shirone's unconscious.

Just like an invader wouldn't want to damage the relics of another country.

Chapter 301: Secrets of the Abyss (2)

"This is truly amazing."

Shirone had perfectly categorized his unconscious mind. Honestly, it was beyond impressive; it didn't seem humanly possible.

Armin's group turned towards the sound of footsteps at the entrance. Shirone, looking paler than before, was walking in, breathing heavily.

"I'm feeling a bit better. Let's go down quickly."

Amy wiped her tears and approached Shirone.

"Are you okay? Let me help you."

"Go away. I don't want your help."

"But we need to go. Come on."

Despite Shirone's strong resistance, Amy supported him. Shirone couldn't hold out any longer and had to accept her help.

Reina watched them with a bittersweet smile.

'So that's how it is.'

At first, she couldn't understand how they could ignore their feelings and remain friends.

But now she understood. They were bound by a strong trust that transcended emotions.

'I... could never be in that position.'

"She's an amazing girl."

Armin approached Reina. He also thought Amy was holding up well.

The avatar's hostility was pure emotion, making it 100% reliable. Yet, Amy was sacrificing herself for Shirone, something an ordinary girl couldn't do.

A relieved smile finally appeared on Reina's face.

"She's been holding on for a year."

Shirone's Mental Stage 3.

It was a world of extreme cold.

As the freezing wind that could freeze blood blew, Shirone's group crossed the frozen sea, huddling their shoulders.

There was no sun, but the ground reflected the moonlight, allowing them to see ahead.

However, all that lay before them was a vast darkness.

Amy imagined this was what the Arctic night would be like.

So cold and lonely, yet mysteriously serene.

In the extremely short visibility, occasionally passing by were crystals as tall as a person.

Each had a different color and emitted a soft glow like bioluminescent organisms.

"Love. Friendship. Desire."

Armin spoke.

"These are probably jewels containing such fundamental emotions. We can't access them unless we approach directly. He's handling the unconscious as if it were conscious. There's no need to worry."

Amy sighed in relief.

Since she hadn't encountered his inner emotions, it wouldn't be awkward to face Shirone again.

Of course, that was assuming they survived this place.

As they descended deeper, Armin felt he understood Shirone even less.

Even just looking at the 3rd stage, it was a landscape that couldn't exist without defining and establishing all inner aspects oneself.

'How deep is this child's insight?'

As he pondered, the lights of the crystals began to go out one by one. Shirone looked as if he could die at any moment.

Amy didn't look back at Shirone.

He wouldn't want her to see.

She just kept moving forward, unable to wipe away her flowing tears.

The avatar's weight had become so light it could no longer be called human.

'Just a little longer, Shirone...'

Even as he struggled to take a step, Shirone glared into the darkness with determined eyes.

Finally, the curtain of darkness lifted, revealing a small, lit cabin.

"That's it. The 2nd stage."

Everyone knew by now.

Armin moved his frozen legs quickly and explained.

"We've taken the shortest route through the mental world. We might have caught up to Arius by now. Be prepared for anything."

He was telling them to be ready for battle.

Amy began to warm up her mind with a series of mental exercises.

Reina took out an arrow covered in frost from the cold and nocked it, leaning against the door.

Armin quickly opened the door and inspected the inside of the cabin. Though not a Zoner, his panoramic vision without visual direction allowed him to scan the area faster than an ordinary person.

Next, Reina swiftly entered the cabin.

Following Armin with her bow drawn, she covered all directions but saw no enemies.

When Armin signaled that it was clear, Amy brought Shirone inside.

Their skin, blue from the freezing wind, thawed in the warmth of the cabin.

When the door closed, the eerie wind noise disappeared.

"Over there..."

Shirone pointed to the living room sofa with a trembling hand.

Amy helped him over, and he collapsed onto the sofa like a puppet with its strings cut.

"I just need to rest a bit..."

"That would be best."

Armin, checking Shirone's condition, agreed.

Then Reina, taking on the role of the villain, spoke up.

"We don't have time to waste. If Arius isn't here, it means he's already gone down to the 1st stage."

"Even if he found Ataraxia, extracting it will take time. Even if we stop Arius, Shirone will die if we don't imprint something here."

"Ah..."

Reina recalled the situation in reality.

Zenogor's strong line was cutting Shirone's neck.

Having reached the final stages of the depths, it was time to find a solution.

"The 1st stage is Shirone's earliest memory. It's called the primal consciousness. Since it involves events in the womb, it's impossible to imprint a clear concept."

"So this is Shirone's treasure trove."

Reina looked around.

The precious place Shirone had chosen was his cozy home. It showed how much he had felt his family's warmth.

Amy put dry firewood in the fireplace and cast Ignite.

Damn Ignite.

She thought to herself, feeling the warmth of the fire with her hands before turning to the group.

"The method is one thing, but where do we record it?"

"It varies from person to person. But based on what we've seen, it might be in the form of a book. Let's check the library."

The three of them headed to the library.

Shirone's thoughts throughout his life were categorized in the form of books.

There were even books with people's names as titles.

Vincent, Olina, and of course, Reina and Armin were all there.

As Amy scanned the names of the magic school students, her eyes fixed on one book.

Carmis Amy.

It had a red cover.

Everything was in that book.

How Shirone thought of her. What emotions he felt towards her.

Amy, as if possessed, took out the book and caressed the leather texture of the hardcover.

Armin and Reina watched from behind.

"I won't stop you, Amy. If that satisfies you."

"Amy has guided Shirone well up to this point. She deserves it."

Reina looked at Armin in surprise.

She understood the woman's heart and allowed it despite knowing it was wrong, but she didn't expect Armin to approve as well.

One thought crossed her mind.

'So that's it. The odds are much lower than we thought.'

Armin was preparing for the worst-case scenario.

If they couldn't find a way to save Shirone, this would be Amy's last memory with him. At least she should know his feelings before saying goodbye, Armin thought.

"No. I won't do it."

Amy only looked at the cover and then put the book back on the shelf.

Nothing was over yet. Shirone would survive. He would continue to compete with her and become a magician.

"It doesn't seem like there's a way to imprint something on Shirone here. Let's check somewhere else."

As Amy left the study without hesitation, Armin and Reina exchanged smiles.

Amy met Shirone's gaze, who was staring intently at her. But now, she was beyond caring.

"Go ahead, hate me all you want. When we get back to reality, I'll beat you up good."

"I hate you. Really."

"Hmph! Do whatever you want. I hate you too! Bleh!"

As Amy stuck out her tongue, Shirone coughed.

When a mouthful of blood gushed out, Amy's face turned pale, and she rushed over.

"Shirone! Are you okay?"

Even as the mental world collapsed, his eyes had remained clear, but now they were unfocused.

The avatar had become so light it could no longer feel its weight.

Shirone struggled to lift his trembling eyelids and spoke.

"Why... do I... hate you..."

"Okay, I get it. Just hang in there."

"...No."

Shirone spoke in a dying voice.

"I hate seeing you dance... with someone else."

Amy felt like she had been hit with a hammer.

She thought it was disappointment over not being able to save his life. She never imagined it was because she danced with Zion.

"That... that, you know, Shirone..."

It was an unavoidable event.

Or was it really?

Was she entirely blameless for Shirone's resentment?

"Idiot, it's not like that."

Amy spoke in a trembling voice.

She knew Shirone would be hurt. Yet, she couldn't help but look away.

She was too scared.

"It's really not like that. I... I..."

Shirone squeezed out his fading voice.

"Run... take everyone... and get out of here. I can't... everyone will die."

Amy shook her head and hugged Shirone.

No matter what happened, she wouldn't give up. She would never let him go.

"No one will die. I'll save you! I will definitely save you!"

Shirone was losing consciousness.

No matter how loudly Amy shouted, it seemed he couldn't hear her, his blurry eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Run... Amy."

Reina, who had been searching Shirone's room, ran out to the living room and shouted.

"Amy! Over here! I found it!"

Amy laid Shirone on the sofa and ran to the room.

She didn't even think to wipe her tears. They had reached the final moment, and it was all or nothing now.

On the table in Shirone's room, a notebook lay open.

Armin was waiting, and Reina was anxiously pacing.

Amy pointed to the notebook as she approached.

"Is this it?"

"Yes. It seems to be a notebook recording the flow of consciousness. But no matter how much I think about it, I can't figure out a way to save him. What should we do, Amy?"

Amy approached the table and examined the notebook.

At the top of the last page, the name "Amy" was written.

With a sorrowful expression, she turned the pages to understand Shirone's thoughts.

Her name was written there too.

The entire notebook was filled with her name.

She turned another page. It was the same.

No matter how many pages she turned, she couldn't find where the name "Amy" began.

Tears welled up in Amy's eyes again, but she quickly shook her head to control her emotions.

She had to save Shirone. By any means necessary.

But how?

No matter how hard she thought, she couldn't find a way to safely free Shirone from the strong line strangling his neck.

At that moment, the cabin shook like an earthquake.
Amy grabbed the table to steady herself.
If the 2nd stage of the depths was shaking this much, it
meant Shirone's life in reality was almost over. If they didn't
catch up to Arius, they would all perish here.
"Amy! We need to go down now! I'll bring Shirone!"
Reina ran out of the room, but Amy couldn't move.
Even if she died here, she had to think of a way to save
Shirone.
'No! I don't know! What should I do?'
But reality was different from the mental world.
What couldn't be done, couldn't be done.
Reina and Armin weren't fools.
They knew it was physically impossible, so they were
looking for a way to save someone else first.
Amy's hand, gripping the pen on the table, trembled. Each
passing second felt like a curse.

Chapter 302: Secrets of the Abyss (3)

Armin, who had been keeping watch outside, urged her.
"We don't have time. If you're going to do something, do it now."

Amy clenched her teeth and closed her eyes tightly.
There was no way. But she couldn't just go down to the 1st stage without doing anything.

'If it were Shirone... Shirone could do it.'

Amy opened the last page and moved the pen.
Shirone.

This was the best she could do.

If she couldn't find a way to save him, she could at least try to change the flow of consciousness.

At that moment, Reina shouted from the living room.

"Amy!"

Amy put down the pen and ran to the living room with Armin.

A figure clad in armor that mixed the properties of living beings and metal was charging at Shirone.

"Zion!"

Amy's eyes blazed with fury.

Arius, the only way to escape this place, was nowhere to be seen, but she was glad. Zion was the person she wanted to beat the most right now.

Reina pulled Shirone away just in time, and Zion's blade sliced through the sofa.

Amy, fueled by her rising anger, strengthened her fireball and threw it. The flame, twice as large as usual, flew at Zion and exploded right in front of him.

Zion was thrown against the wall by the explosion. But just before impact, his tendrils grabbed the wall, minimizing the damage.

As Reina moved Shirone away, Armin and Amy simultaneously blocked the path.

"It's a diversion tactic."

Armin's Spirit Zone, when fully expanded, covered the entire cabin.

He might not be able to detect an assassin's equalizing, but he wasn't clumsy enough to miss Zion's presence.

'He was hiding in the 1st stage. So Arius has already gone down?'

Just as Armin's group had to stay in the 2nd stage to save Shirone in reality, Arius needed time to extract Ataraxia.

That's why he sent Zion to buy time.

"You're determined to take it, aren't you?"

As Armin stepped back towards Shirone, Reina understood and stepped forward.

Flicker magic and weaker spells couldn't impact the golden armor.

"Amy, you know what to do?"

"Yes."

They recalled the battle in the food storage and moved apart.

They planned to exploit Zion's lack of skill in handling blind spots.

"Hmph! I won't fall for it twice."

Zion sent tendrils to both sides, preemptively blocking the targets' dispersal. Then, using the tendrils anchored in the wall, he launched himself at Reina.

Reina shot an arrow in the split second she rolled on the floor.

As the arrow struck his armor, Zion's body lifted into the air. Amy, using a targeted Spirit Zone, fired multiple Fire Strikes. Each time the flame spear grazed him, the organic material of Armand's armor crisped and burned.

"Arrogant wench!"

Zion spun in midair like an acrobat and launched himself off the wall.

With eight tendrils embedded in the wall, he gained tremendous speed.

Amy twisted her body, only catching a glimpse of his afterimage.

Zion crashed to the floor with a thud, spinning on his knee as he swung his blade.

A silver flash passed, slicing Amy's collar and exposing her collarbone and upper chest.

Red blood slowly welled up on her milky white skin. A slightly deeper cut would have severed her aorta.

"You bastard..."

"Haha! You look just like a tavern wench!"

Blood from Amy's wound trickled down her cleavage.

The contrast of white and red fueled Zion's madness.

As he licked his lips and prepared to charge, Shirone glared at him.

"Raaaargh!"

Darkness gathered between Zion and Amy, and a sleek, agile shadow emerged.

Egoist - Killing Form.

Its jaw was sharp like a fang, and its hair, as sharp as blades, swept back in a large arc down to its waist.

Its long arms were like complete swords, and its reverse-jointed knees stored immense kinetic energy.

Even its feet were shaped like crescent moon blades.

"Shreeeeeek!"

The piercing shriek was so sharp it made Zion recoil in fear.

The Killing Form compressed its reverse joints and sprang, disappearing without a trace.

It didn't charge head-on.

But Zion couldn't predict its path, so his eyes remained fixed.

Warning. Unable to recognize moving object. Nervous system paralyzed. Switching to automatic defense mode.

As the warning transmitted at the speed of thought, Zion's cloak wrapped around him. Simultaneously, tendrils extended in all directions, striking at the unseen presence. But the Egoist's Killing Form evaded even that, crossing its arms and striking Zion.

As the shadow of the blade passed at supersonic speed, the cloak's surface rapidly hardened, leaving a clear X-shaped scar.

Boom! The sonic boom followed.

"Raaaargh!"

Zion, thrown by the shockwave, rolled on the floor as the cloak unfurled.

He stopped rolling by stabbing the floor with his gauntlet blade and looked up at the standing Egoist.

Moving object detected. Nervous system relaxed.
Automatic defense mode deactivated.

Armand immediately assumed a combat stance, but Zion had already lost the will to fight.

There was no need to risk his life after spending 4 billion gold.

He had bought the time Arius needed.

Reading its user's emotions, Armand activated the mobility system, and Zion disappeared from Shirone's group's sight like the wind.

Amy and Reina gave up the chase and checked on Shirone. In Armin's arms, Shirone was so transparent that objects could be seen through him.

"Shirone! What happened?"

Armin explained.

"He used the last of his strength to manifest the Egoist. He can't move anymore."

"Armin, run away."

"No. If we don't stop Arius, we can't leave either. Show us the way down. If Ataraxia is stolen, a great disaster will occur."

Armin laid Shirone on the floor. The avatar's outline glowed brightly, and the floor melted like chocolate, flowing downward.

"Is Shirone dying?"

"No. He's going down. The entrance to the 1st stage is Shirone himself."

Amy crawled to the floor, which was sinking in the shape of a person. She shouted at Shirone, who had already descended more than 5 meters.

"Shirone! I'll save you! I will definitely save you!"

The darkness of the underground engulfed Shirone's surface like liquid.

Maybe it was an illusion, but Amy clearly saw a faint smile on Shirone's lips.

And finally, the entire 2nd stage was sucked into the hole.

Shirone's Mental Stage 1. Primal Consciousness.

It was the end of the abyss.

Amy, who had fallen along with the scenery, looked around.

It was an empty, yet not dark, horizontal plane.

Somewhere, she heard the sound of a heartbeat, like being submerged in water.

"This sound...?"

Armin appeared from the darkness.

"It's the sound Shirone heard when he was in the womb.

This place is called Primal Consciousness, containing records from conception to birth. It's where instincts are formed."

"So Ataraxia was in the final stage."

Armin smiled wryly at Reina's words.

They had embarked on this journey with only a vague possibility in mind. But to think the power of the archangel

was imprinted in the realm of instincts.

'How did he do it? Could it be possession?'

Even so, it was too dangerous.

Possession grants stronger mental exploration abilities than diving, but the Egoist's resistance would be immense.

Attempting possession on a normal Shirone would risk even an archangel's destruction.

'Well, I can't be certain. If it's an archangel...'

Armin thought the odds were 50-50.

Honestly, he couldn't definitively say that any being could enter another's mental world and overpower the avatar.

But since it was an archangel, there was room for variables.

A being that far surpassed human abilities.

Thinking about his experiences in heaven still made him shudder.

"Let's go. Arius's work must be quite advanced by now."

Reina looked around and asked.

"But... where do we go?"

"Just walk. This place isn't a space. Mages call it a spot.

Since there's no direction, it doesn't matter where you go.

To add, a mage's Spirit Zone is also a phenomenon that occurs by concentrating the mind in the 1st stage."

Amy nodded at the new information.

The 1st stage was a storage that compressed higher concepts.

Since it wasn't a space, its volume was infinite.

Infinity might not be a vast something but just a single point.

Following Armin's words, they walked aimlessly. Since there was no change, it felt like walking in place.

When they saw an object 50 meters ahead, the sense of distance created a change in the 1st stage's scenery.

It was a blue garden with the sound of birds chirping and random white statues.

Amy, who had only seen strange machinery in the great world war in heaven, didn't notice, but Armin recognized the

angelic sculptures at a glance.

'Is this Ikael's trace?'

Armin's group entered the temple beyond the fountain. The coolness of the marble floor felt refreshing.

They saw an 8-meter-tall angel statue, and in front of it, Arius and Zion were waiting.

Arius realized who the masked man was.

He had never seen the face, but among the scale magicians who dealt with time and were blind, there was only one person.

"Hmm, this is unexpected. I apologize for not recognizing someone of your skill. But it feels a bit strange. Honestly, I never imagined you would be the one to break the 'agreement' first."

Armin pretended not to hear and examined the statue.

The archangel had her hands clasped at her chest, smiling.

Her wings wrapped around her body, and a halo floated above her head without any support.

'Is this the materialization of Ataraxia...?'

Turning to Arius, Armin spoke sternly.

"The agreement is still valid. I am here as a magician to deal with a grave robber, unrelated to any organization."

Arius nonchalantly cleaned his ear.

"Well, as far as I know, your world isn't run that freely. After all, don't you play a matriarchal role in the magical society?"

"So? Are you saying you won't give up the grave robbing?"

You won't be able to escape anyway."

Arius pretended to blow nonexistent earwax off his finger.

"Is there a need to escape? Once again, you have no authority to arrest me. No, never mind. This isn't the time to argue about that."

Pointing to the statue, Arius introduced it as if it were his own.

"What do you think? The Archangel of Amplification, Ikael.

This is Ataraxia, known to be her most powerful ability. I imagined it, but who knew it would be this beautiful?"

"Do you think we'll let you take it so easily?"

Zion lifted his chin and spoke.

"Of course, I'll take it. Do you know how valuable this is?"

From now on, I am the owner of Ataraxia."

"You bastard! Someone like you doesn't deserve to live!"

Amy's eyes blazed as she charged.

At that moment, her vision distorted, and the distance seemed to stretch.

When she regained her senses, Armin was standing beside her.

It was Flicker magic.

"What's wrong? We need to catch Arius quickly."

Armin cast Wind Cutter.

The wind, shaped like a shuriken, shattered with a clang at the midpoint. Thin electricity spread out in a right-angle pattern from the point of impact.

"It's a mental wave barrier. Divers call it 'cat's cradle.' It's woven from strands of Shirone's consciousness to form a barrier."

Arius clapped his hands with a delighted expression.

"As expected, you're knowledgeable. The Eternal Seeker's reputation is well-deserved. Correct. While you were slowly following like turtles, I played around with Shirone's mind."

Chapter 303: Secrets of the Abyss (4)

Amy shouted, her face flushed with anger.

"You thief! Using someone else's property to make a barricade? If you're a magician, fight me fairly! What, are you scared you'll lose to me?"

"Haha! Is there any need for that when there's such a difference in our levels? Especially since I know, Armin, that you're not in your normal state."

Arius placed his hand on the statue.

"The rehearsal is over. The reason I waited for you before the main event is that I wanted to share this historic moment with everyone. Enjoy the spectacle, as it's something you'll never see again in your lifetime."

Casting the scale magic Resizing, the 8-meter-tall statue of Ataraxia shrank to the size of a chess piece.

As the archangel's statue turned into a figurine, Zion's eyes sparkled.

At that size, it could be carried around easily. He could use Ataraxia anytime, anywhere.

"Hmm, this is excellent. Now then..."

"You thief! That's Shirone's! If you touch it, I won't let you get away with it!"

Seeing Amy trembling with rage made Zion feel ecstatic.

"Haha! What are you going to do? There's nothing you can do anyway. Just watch as Ataraxia becomes mine."

Arius grabbed the archangel's figurine and lifted his upper body with a grunt.

But for some reason, it didn't budge.

He strained until his face turned red, but it was no use.

"....."

Arius let go of the figurine and stepped back.
He looked around at the people watching him and then burst into embarrassed laughter.

"Hahaha!"

Why wasn't it moving?

Resizing reduces the scale of space, so it has nothing to do with mass. A small pebble to a human is a giant boulder to an ant.

'Even so, it can't be lifted. A mass that transcends dimensions? No, there's no dimension that surpasses scale magic. So what's the problem?'

Unable to bear it, Zion pushed Arius aside and took his place.

"Move. Why are you struggling with this?"

Arius let Zion try. While the boy's strength was no different, Armand could exert power comparable to Schema.

"Magicians, honestly..."

Zion clicked his tongue and bent over.

Grabbing the archangel's figurine and clutching his wrist with the other hand, Armand responded immediately.

Activating muscle enhancement system. Increasing energy metabolism rate. Enhancing muscle fibers. Flexing operational joints. Strengthening ligament tensile strength. Resetting force center.

"Ughhh!"

As Zion straightened his back while holding Ataraxia, he was surprised by its unexpected weight.

But he was overflowing with strength thanks to Armand's muscle enhancement program. He felt like he could move a boulder the size of a house.

Zion extended his bent knees and pulled his upper body up. Finally, the archangel's figurine began to lift about a finger's width.

"This won't do! We have to get in there and take it back!"

Amy shouted, but Armin only watched Zion's movements. As a scale magician, he knew. Ataraxia wasn't heavy because of its mass. Some other rule was at play.

'What's happening?'

Zion succeeded in lifting Ataraxia to his waist.

"Got it! Now it's mine...!"

At that moment, a metallic screech echoed, and the surroundings turned red. The peaceful temple atmosphere suddenly became perilous.

As the archangel's figurine released a shockwave, Zion and Arius were thrown against the walls. Meanwhile, Armin's group was safe, thanks to the mental wave barrier absorbing the impact.

Zion steadied himself with Armand's help.

As he tried to rush back to Ataraxia, Arius, leaning against the wall, shouted.

"Stop! Don't go near it!"

A magic circle was engraved on the floor, and a cylindrical barrier of light rose to protect the figurine. Ancient heavenly script began to inscribe itself rapidly on the barrier's surface.

"We need to get Ataraxia back quickly!"

Reina nocked an arrow and prepared to charge. But Armin extended his arm to block her.

"Wait! That's a sealing formation."

If alchemy advanced magic technologically, sealing formations advanced it spiritually.

Magicians don't recognize the dichotomy of good and evil, but the religious community has used sealing formations to imprison many entities defined as evil.

Arius also realized it was a sealing process and tensed up.

'Why is there a sealing formation in Shirone's consciousness?'

It's impossible to inscribe something in the primal consciousness without leaving a trace.

Even with possession, there should be a statue like Ataraxia. Perhaps it was a mutation that occurred when Shirone was an embryo.

But the likelihood of a logically constructed sealing formation manifesting in the 1st stage of consciousness was lower than the chance of wind-blown parts assembling into a carriage.

The golden ancient script climbing the barrier of light completed the process. As the programming dissolved, a sentence appeared in the center of the cylinder.

Arius quickly interpreted the heavenly language.

'La Hadamah Judran Arab, Ya Ahud Min Al-Foud. Lord of Chaos, break down the walls of the boundary. Whatever it is, it won't be cute. Huh?'

A new phrase appeared below the sentence.

A sealing formation requires the sealant's signature. Like an exorcist's command, "In the name of so-and-so." This was also proof that Shirone's security device was an artificial construct.

"What...?"

Armin and Arius, who could read the ancient language, froze.

The light line, as if written by a human hand, slowly drew a period next to the designer's name.

The name of the lost one was inscribed.

McClain Goffin.

Master of the Avatar (1)

'Impossible! Impossible! Impossible!'

Arius's mind raced faster than ever. It was a mix of 80% excitement, 19% fear, and 1% denial.

The sealing formation designed by Goffin was clearly a security device to prevent the excavation of the primal consciousness. Otherwise, there was no explanation for its silence until now.

'But why... why?'

The 1st stage is at the genetic level. Could Goffin's relic be hidden here?

Goffin's work ended 18 years ago. So when was the sealing formation created?

Arius thought of Shirone's age.

'Eighteen. But which eighteen? Before the reset? After the reset?'

There was no way to know. But Arius had a thought that felt like blind faith.

'Could it be the reset point?'

The rift field verification experiment proves the discrepancy between time and energy. Though the discrepancy is fleeting, it causes the universe to crack.

There's no guarantee Shirone was born from the rift. There's no evidence to support it.

But Arius was gripped by a strong conviction.

If Goffin truly designed the security device, no existing magician could deactivate it.

But why wasn't it installed in the 11th stage, where external interference is greatest?

'Because it had to be.'

It was installed in the fetal or embryonic state.

'Was excavation impossible from the start?'

No diver, not even Arius, could break through Goffin's sealing formation.

But he hadn't given up hope yet.

'It depends on what comes out of there.'

The entity trapped in the sealing formation emerged above the magic circle.

It resembled a rhinoceros, with grayish-white skin covered in rough, bumpy protrusions that even a knife couldn't penetrate. It had seven eyes, one in the center and three on each side.

As the creature broke free from the sealing formation, it placed its foot on the ground.

When it pulled up its other leg, the temple floor collapsed, and it poured into the ground.

Judging its size by its face was a mistake. Its body was 100 times larger than its face. Its belly was grotesquely swollen, and thousands of lightning-shaped horns covered its back. It looked like the real form of the Rage Form Egoist that had manifested in the 7th stage.

"Damn it!"

Arius cursed and backed away.

The Demon Behemoth.

It was the king of beasts that existed long before human history.

'Even antiques have their limits. How old is this thing?'

Behemoth is a creature from creation myths, even in heaven. Powerful demons would bow to Behemoth, hence it was called a demon god.

Behemoth, awakened from its long slumber, didn't move for a moment. Then it stretched its neck and loosened its body, looking down at the people with its seven eyes.

"Foolish humans, by the contract of sealing, I shall destroy you."

Behemoth, having issued its death sentence, generated electricity at the tips of the horns on its back.

As thousands of lightning bolts lit up simultaneously, everyone's faces turned pale.

"Damn! We need to get out."

Arius opened the door and escaped immediately.

Zion, looking longingly at the archangel's figurine, turned his gaze to Behemoth's electrifying power and screamed, running towards the door.

"We need to get out too! Follow me!"

Armin shouted to the two women.

This time, there was no need to think.

A demon god was a double-S class entity by magical society standards. This meant it had the power of 370 9th-level combat magicians.

Even practically, it would take over 20 6th-level magicians, assuming they knew the strategy to defeat it.

Moreover, in real combat, various variables arise depending on traits and combinations, so at least 1.8 times the practical combat power is required to subdue it stably.

In other words, with this party, they couldn't even scratch it, let alone harm it.

Without looking back, Amy and Reina threw themselves through the door, and Armin immediately followed with Flicker magic.

Thousands of lightning bolts intertwined into a web-like electric field. The bolts, exceeding their saturation point, spread out and scorched the space.

The door, absorbing the powerful energy, vanished with a pop.

Armin's group was flung out of the door like being shot from a cannon. Amy and Reina rolled on the ground, while Armin barely managed to land on his feet.

"Are you alright?"

Amy coughed repeatedly.

"Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. Cough!"

As soon as they jumped through the door, a powerful heatwave from Shirone's mental world hit them. If they had been a moment later, they would have been roasted by Behemoth's bolts.

Arius had already fled, leaving only Zion behind. But he seemed too confused to take any action against Armin's group.

Amy saw Shirone hanging upside down in the web.

The time field hadn't been released yet, but he couldn't hold on much longer. Eventually, the field would have to be released, and no one could predict what would happen next.

"It looks like his blood vessels have been cut. What should we do?"

"What did you imprint on Shirone's consciousness?"

Amy shook her head in despair.

"I couldn't think of anything. So I just wrote 'Shirone.'"

"You did well. If you can't devise a concrete strategy, something abstract might be more helpful. We can use Shirone's consciousness. Now, we'll release the time field. Be prepared."

"But...!"

Amy wasn't ready.

Changing the flow of consciousness might make Shirone instinctively find a solution, but if it failed, his neck would be cut in the next moment.

Chapter 304: Master of the Avatars (2)

"We can't delay. We need to give Shirone some breathing room. The strong line is still tightening around his neck. If we stall, the situation will only get worse."

Amy swallowed back her objections with great effort.

Armin was right. If it was going to happen anyway, they had to take the chance with the highest odds of success.

"We need to worry about Arius too. We have to retrieve the time line used on Shirone. I'll give you three seconds. If no other solution comes up, I'll release the time field."

A timer automatically started in Amy and Reina's minds.

One second, two seconds... no solution emerged.

By the time they reached three seconds, they had resigned themselves to fate.

It was a forced situation, but they were ready to face reality as the time field was released.

'Good luck, Shirone...'

Armin retrieved the time line and used Flicker magic to leave the food storage.

If he lost Arius, the fact that Arius broke the agreement would be revealed to the world, causing international conflict on par with the Ataraxia issue.

Amy and Reina, unaware that Armin had disappeared, focused intently on Shirone's next move.

As Zenogor's face showed signs of life, a flash of light burst from Shirone's body. A short, intense beam exploded, sending Zenogor flying.

By increasing the density of the beam to create a physical barrier-like impact, Zenogor felt as if he had been hit by a carriage.

But he couldn't understand it.

The sensation of cutting through skin still lingered on his fingertips. It was the first time in his assassination history that he had been counterattacked after feeling this sensation.

"Sh-Shirone..."

Amy's voice trembled with emotion.

She had no idea how Shirone had repelled Zenogor. Even if the flow of consciousness had changed, the casting speed and power were beyond the level of a magic school student. The web holding Shirone burned with a red light, turning into hard ash and breaking apart. Shooting a laser to conduct heat through a 1-millimeter-thick web was also beyond Shirone's current precision.

As Amy felt relieved that Shirone was alive, she realized something was off.

But when Shirone fell to the floor with a thud, her mind went blank again, and she rushed forward.

"Shirone!"

"Don't move!"

Zenogor, who had been thrown by the beam, flew back and pinned Shirone's head and back. Yet his eyes were still unfocused.

'What happened?'

In an instant, the world seemed to have changed. The women bound in the web were freed, and their positions were different.

'Something happened.'

Trapped in the time field, Zenogor had no way to understand the current situation. But his mind, honed by years of experience, quickly eliminated meaningless variables.

Something had happened outside his perception.

As long as he kept in mind who the current enemy was, he would be the last one standing.

"Zenogor! Kill him! Right now!"

Zion shouted after finishing his calculations.

With Arius having fled, if Shirone survived, Zion would take the fall. Killing everyone involved in today's incident was the only way for him to secure his future.

"Do you think I'll let you?"

Amy charged at Zenogor.

This time, she wouldn't make a mistake. She would save Shirone, even if it cost her life.

Zenogor moved slightly faster. He pulled out the strong line from his mouth and looped it around Shirone's neck.

But just before he could pull it tight, red light gathered around Shirone, and high-powered lasers shot out in all directions.

A laser beam hit Zenogor's shoulder, piercing through the bone.

"Huh? What is this... Aaargh!"

Amy's eyes widened.

She had seen the power of lasers many times, but this was an unbelievable level of output. Even at full power, Shirone's spells had never been this strong.

Sensing danger, Zenogor flattened himself on the floor. Like an insect, he moved his limbs to retreat while keeping his eyes on Shirone. He climbed the wall and hid in the ceiling corner, a spider's favorite spot.

With Zenogor failing, Zion decided to deal with Shirone himself. He extended the blade of his gauntlet and charged.

"Die, you worthless scum!"

"Your Highness! No! Get back!"

Despite Zenogor's warning, Zion didn't stop.

Shirone, with his head down, staggered and reached out to the approaching Zion. In an instant, a thin laser pierced Zion.

The reaction came a second later.

"Aaargh!"

Zion was thrown back as if struck by a strong wind, clutching his stomach and rolling on the floor.

He didn't know where or how he was hit. He only felt immense pain in his abdomen.

Abdominal perforation detected. Maximizing cell regeneration. Injecting pain-blocking substances. Reducing physical ability utilization index by 48%. Estimated recovery time: 3 minutes 47 seconds. Rest recommended.

"Your Highness! Are you alright?"

Zenogor, crawling like an insect, supported Zion's upper body. Meanwhile, his left eye kept a close watch on Shirone's every move.

As an assassin of the Spatur family, he had a manual for dealing with magicians.

But he had never encountered such a simple spell. If the laser had pierced Zion's brain, he would have died instantly. Shirone hadn't said a word. He staggered like a drunk person.

After firing the laser, he shuddered.

He coughed violently, spitting out a handful of blood.

"Damn, the human body..."

When Shirone slowly lifted his face, Amy covered her mouth in fear.

His eyes had turned pitch black, and blood vessel-like nerves bulged around his eyes and temples.

Amy realized that the expansion of Shirone's nervous system had enhanced his magic.

But it wasn't normal.

The traits of the monster that appeared in the 1st stage of the depths were now present in Shirone.

"Shirone, are you really Shirone?"

Shirone didn't answer.

Of course, he was Shirone. But he had integrated with Behemoth at the avatar stage.

Unlike possession, where two egos share an avatar, integration meant they had merged.
He wasn't the pure Shirone, but if it was Shirone's avatar, then he was undoubtedly Shirone.
"Answer me! Who are you?"
Shirone smiled coldly.
"It's me, Amy. Don't you recognize me?"
Amy was certain.
The being before her wasn't Shirone.
"Liar! You're that monster from before! Turn Shirone back to normal!"
Shirone had a cold nature. But now, he was like a boiling volcano.
Ignoring Amy, Shirone looked ahead.
The only emotion driving him was anger. Anger that felt like it would explode if he didn't release it.
That anger was directed at Zion.
Having recovered, Zion extended the blade of his gauntlet and prepared to attack.
"A commoner like you... Do you think I'll lose to someone like you?"
Zenogor, sensing the situation, made a suggestion.
"Your Highness, you should retreat..."
"Shut up! How can I run away from a traitor who inflicted a fatal wound on a prince?"
It wasn't pride that made him stand his ground.
If the incident ended like this, he would have to pay for attempting to assassinate Shirone. But if he killed Shirone here, he could frame him as a traitor and cover up the incident.
"Zenogor, distract him. I'll attack from behind."
"Understood, Your Highness. I don't mind dying, so please preserve your life."
Shirone looked at Zion and Zenogor indifferently.
But inside, the chemical reaction of immense anger was making him lose consciousness.

"Here I go, Your Highness!"

Zenogor charged with an all-out attack stance.

As an assassin, he knew that attacking Shirone now meant death. But he willingly flew towards his death.

"Long live Empress Teraje! Preserve the Spatur family!"

Zenogor poured all his strength into releasing the strong line.

He didn't expect to inflict a fatal wound. He just needed to buy time for Zion to realize the situation and escape.

Today's sacrifice would ensure the survival of the Spatur family.

"Huh?"

There was nothing where the strong line extended.

Reaching the spot where Shirone had been, Zenogor turned around and felt a chill.

An explosive-speed teleportation.

Shirone reached Zion, grabbed his neck, and slammed him against the wall.

"Ugh!"

Zion was lifted off the ground, his neck being strangled.

Even as he struggled to breathe, he saw Shirone's distorted face. His eyes were even darker, and the bulging nerves around his eyes extended to his cheekbones.

"Heh, found you. It's you."

Zion's face felt both familiar and strange.

But it didn't matter to Shirone. The moment he saw Zion, immense anger flared up.

As a gleam flashed across Shirone's eyes, Zion realized for the first time that even darkness could contain light.

His face turned pale with fear.

Armand was too busy supplying oxygen to Zion to focus on any other strategy. It was Zion's only command.

Even as he trembled, on the verge of suffocation, Shirone was displeased. He noticed the limp tendrils and smirked.

"So it's an object. How about this?"

Shirone's nerves thickened, raising the skin along his arm to his wrist.

His grip strength increased. The sound of blood vessels bursting echoed, and his eyelashes turned red with blood.

'My neck...'

Shirone intended to break Zion's neck.

Despite Armand's physical enhancement abilities, the sound of Zion's neck twisting and creaking could be heard. Zion shuddered in fear and wet himself.

"Ze-Zenogor..."

He called out desperately, but there was no response.

Realizing that Zion had no chance of survival, Zenogor had fled to warn the family of Teraje's impending retaliation.

"This is really annoying. It still won't break. Is my body too weak?"

The avatar, integrated with Behemoth, forcibly expanded Shirone's consciousness. While the power of his magic increased, it also brought excruciating pain as if his brain was being torn apart.

Suffocating Zion would mean the object would absorb the oxygen, and breaking his neck required more strength than Shirone had. It was frustrating in every way.

Shirone's words struck fear into Zion.

After experiencing something akin to a near-death experience, the world looked different. Nothing was more valuable than life.

"If you kill me..."

Zion squeezed out his last bit of strength to shout.

"If you kill me, you won't survive either! I am the son of Teraje!"

At the same time, Shirone threw Zion to the other side. Zion rolled on the floor, clutching his neck and making choking sounds. Water and saliva flowed from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Shirone clicked his tongue as he rubbed his wrist. His ligaments seemed to have stretched, causing significant

pain.

He couldn't break Zion's neck with his own body. While he was quite satisfied in the mental realm, he hadn't paid much attention to physical enhancement.

As Shirone approached, Zion shuddered.

Having narrowly escaped death, his mind was spinning. The reason Shirone spared him was because he mentioned the name Teraje.

'Well, even a psycho would be scared. How would he handle the aftermath if he killed me?'

Contrary to Zion's expectations, Shirone wasn't scared or thinking seriously. He was just recalling a memorable incident from long ago.

"Teraje, huh. It's been a while since I heard that name. That woman is quite interesting too. So... what about Teraje?"

"I told you, I'm Teraje's son. If you kill me, my mother will hunt you down to the ends of hell and kill you."

Shirone tilted his head.

"What are you talking about? Are you... a woman?"

"Hmph! I know the rules of female lineage! But blood is blood! My sister likes me too! If you touch me, all of Teraje's forces will hunt you down."

"Pfft..."

Shirone's lips quivered as air escaped.

"Puhahaha! Puhahaha!"

Chapter 305: Master of the Avatars (3)

As Shirone burst into laughter, Zion's face turned red. A lowly commoner looking down on him and laughing? He had never experienced such humiliation in his life.

Shirone, still chuckling, shook his head.

"Is that so? It seems a lot of time has passed. Do you really know nothing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Teraje has no sons. She only gives birth to daughters. You are nothing but a shell of Teraje."

Zion's face went blank.

What did he mean by no sons? Only daughters? Then who was he? Was there such a thing as a child without parents?

Zion's face twisted like a wounded beast.

"Shut up! How would someone like you know that? You're insane. You've gone mad after being consumed by that monster! Who are you to speak about my mother like that?"

"Didn't Teraje tell you? You must have been a truly pathetic fool. She respects ability above all else, even if you're not her child. But it seems you weren't even worth that."

"When did you meet my mother?"

Zion, losing his temper, charged.

He had lived his whole life with the pride of being Teraje's son. And now he was being called a shell?

No, it was the ramblings of a madman. How could a commoner like him have ever met Teraje, the emperor of the continent?

"I am royalty! A bastard like you has no right to speak to me!"

As the blade of Zion's gauntlet approached Shirone's neck, a photon cannon struck Zion's abdomen.

Zion spat out a mouthful of blood and was thrown 10 meters into a sack of flour.

"Cough! Cough!"

The sack tore open, and flour poured over Zion like a waterfall.

His face, covered in flour and blood, looked like that of a clown.

Armand reported: Combat ineffective.

It was the only information Zion could comprehend.

Shirone walked over, holding a photon cannon in his palm.

"Humans love such things. Kings, bloodlines, heritage, families. But Teraje, whom you follow, once said this to me."

Zion struggled to lift his head. He watched the photon cannon in Shirone's palm vibrate and grow.

Shirone mimicked Teraje's tone.

"Even if you are royalty, you are merely part of the human lineage. But..."

Shirone's photon cannon grew stronger.

Half out of his mind, Zion seemed unaware that it was a spell meant to attack him. He stared at the light with a dazed expression.

Shirone grinned, holding the photon cannon.

"Talent is bestowed by the heavens."

The photon cannon fell in a brutal arc. Tears streamed down Zion's face as he watched the light's trajectory in despair.

A powerful shockwave shook the food storage. The photon cannon, buried in Armand's fibers, tore through Zion's organs until it exhausted all its power and dissipated.

Flour spread in a ring, creating a thick fog.

Amy and Reina anxiously scanned the white smoke. A shadow appeared, and Shirone emerged.

Amy couldn't bring herself to speak.

Even if that boy was Shirone, the aura emanating from him felt like holding a ticking time bomb—dangerous and

unstable.

"I'm going to the surface. You need to run as fast and as far as you can. I'll handle things here."

The moment of truth had arrived.

Run fast and far? Such words were only spoken in the face of natural disasters like typhoons or earthquakes.

"What are you planning to do? Whoever you are, you need to treat your injuries. That body belongs to Shirone!"

"I am Shirone."

Shirone tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. His cold gaze slowly descended to Amy.

"Are you disappointed?"

Amy couldn't breathe, unable to say a word.

Shirone channeled his immense rage to strengthen his mind. The sound of blood vessels bursting was eerily audible beneath his skin.

As he cast a laser, a beam as thick as a log shot up to the ceiling. The rapid accumulation of thermal energy caused the ceiling to shake.

"Shirone! Wait...!"

"It's dangerous! We need to run!"

Reina grabbed Amy's wrist and ran for the exit.

As they left the food storage, an explosion echoed from Shirone's direction.

The shockwave sent them rolling on the ground. They turned their heads to see a massive rock blocking the entrance to the food storage.

The court musicians' music turned discordant.

As an earthquake shook the grand hall, women screamed and collapsed. The men also looked around in fear.

"An earthquake? Kazra isn't on a fault line, is it?"

"Everyone, get down! Get under the tables!"

At the guards' shouts, the nobles crawled under the tables. Those who got there first fought with those who arrived later, resembling a bullfight.

The earthquake lasted about a minute before stopping.

The nobles, regaining their composure, crawled out from under the tables with embarrassed expressions.

Orkamp and Eliza, supported by the guards, also looked pale.

There had never been an earthquake reported in Kazra's history. A sense of foreboding crossed Orkamp's mind.

The north side of the grand hall exploded with a bang.

Bricks flew in all directions, and smoke filled the air.

A few nobles, already on edge, lost their composure. They fell to the ground, flailing their arms and legs meaninglessly.

The first to grasp the situation were the palace guards and the nobles' personal bodyguards.

Realizing it wasn't a natural disaster, the guards surrounded the king and queen, and the bodyguards closed in on the nobles.

"An attack? What's happening?"

The guards searched for the head of security, Ritney Walker. He had been there just moments ago but was nowhere to be found.

The chain of command was in disarray.

If it were terrorists from an enemy nation, the security level needed to be raised to the highest. But there were too many factors to consider before making such a decision without orders from a superior.

For a moment, nothing happened.

The nobles tried to maintain their dignity. They hid their true feelings and peered into the hole in the floor.

But when a figure emerged, they fell back in shock.

"Is that... Shirone?"

Orkamp muttered with a puzzled expression.

The person who had wrecked the grand hall was none other than Shirone.

He remembered seeing Shirone dancing with Reina just an hour ago. Why was he doing this now?

"Shirone, what on earth are you doing?"

The guards blocked Orkamp's path.

"Your Majesty, don't approach. Something is wrong."

Even Orkamp could see that Shirone looked different from an hour ago. His eye color had changed, making him look like a different person, but the most striking difference was his expression.

Shirone never showed such emotional expressions. He always maintained a calm poker face, but now he looked pained and angry.

"Modern castles are quite durable. Humans have come a long way."

A guard approached, ready to draw his sword.

"Sir Shirone, using magic inside the castle is strictly forbi...!"

Without turning, Shirone fired a photon cannon.

The guard dived and rolled on the floor. The photon cannon's beam chased him, scraping the marble floor.

"From now on, no one speaks without my permission. I make the decisions."

Shirone's seriousness was proven by his earlier attack. If the guard had reacted a moment later, he would have been torn apart by the photon cannon.

The atmosphere in the grand hall turned icy. The nobles looked around, confused and unable to understand.

For days, they had assessed Shirone as a herbivore—docile and honest, an easy prey.

But now, even the most experienced nobles found Shirone's presence ferocious and wild.

The guards, unable to find Walker, awaited orders from the deputy commander. But someone who had always stayed out of responsibility couldn't make such a critical decision.

"Deputy Commander, what should we do? Give us orders!"

The deputy commander anxiously rolled his eyes.

The main forces were stationed outside the inner castle, so even if contacted, it would take time for them to arrive. It was abnormal for an incident to occur in the heart of the castle, the grand hall.

"Deputy Commander! Orders! Should we activate the magic control device?"

The deputy commander's face twisted.

"Do you think it's that easy, you fool?"

The magic control device disrupts a magician's concentration. But it affects everyone, friend and foe alike. If activated, even their own magicians would be rendered useless.

'Damn, what should I do? Should I activate the control device? But making all our magicians useless just to catch one person? If it goes wrong, I'll have to take the blame. Where the hell did Walker disappear to?'

Since it concerned the king's safety, he had to consider all possible variables before making a decision.

But the pressure overwhelmed him, and his thoughts ended in frustration and resentment towards Walker.

"The control device is a last resort. Why not leave it to us?"

The deputy commander turned his head, feeling as if he had found a savior. Kazra's head of magic, Aimar Bosun, was approaching.

"Ah, are you sure?"

"We've been closely monitoring Shirone's movements. It seems he's finally showing his true colors. But we can handle it. With the security chief's permission, may we use magic?"

"Of course. If you could take care of it..."

It was much better to share the responsibility than to bear it alone. Besides, Bosun had significant influence in the palace, so he wouldn't ignore any fallout.

Bosun gave a fake smile and walked towards Shirone. One by one, his subordinates emerged from the group of nobles and followed behind him.

"I'll stay by your side, sir."

The spot next to Bosun was taken by his closest aide, Mito Ekkashi.

Standing at 153 centimeters, with thick eyelids and eyes that slanted sharply, he had a childlike face.

Having roamed numerous battlefields since childhood, he had risen to the rank of certified 6th-level magician in Kazra's magic department at the age of twenty-three.

Of course, there were extreme geniuses like Olifer Shina, who became a certified 6th-level magician at the age of twenty. But such individuals were rare, even on a kingdom scale, appearing perhaps once in a decade. Ekkashi was certainly considered the future of Kazra.

"This is an unexpected opportunity, sir."

"Hmm, unexpected events can easily turn into disasters. But this time, you might be right."

Casting magic in the royal court was a serious crime.

Moreover, Shirone had attacked a royal guard and uttered treasonous words, effectively branding himself a condemned criminal.

"So, what has made the first prince candidate so angry?" Shirone glared coldly at Bosun.

An hour ago, he had wanted to punch him. But now, he felt no such desire. He only wanted to kill him.

"So, you're the one driving me mad."

Bosun's heart raced at the pure, 100% killing intent that didn't seem human.

But he didn't lose his composure. He turned slightly and spoke to the royal guard.

"Escort His Majesty to safety. I'll handle this."

"Understood. Your Majesty, please come."

Orkamp shook off the guard's hand.

He didn't know why Shirone had changed, but if he left, Bosun would kill Shirone. That would mean handing over his position to the Teraje faction.

"Who said anything about running away? Who do you think is the king here?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Sensing his mistake, the guard knelt. In the urgency of the situation, he had followed Bosun's words. Under different circumstances, it might have been overlooked. But considering Bosun was part of the Teraje faction, it was indeed a reckless move.

Chapter 306: Master of the Avatars (4)

"But Your Majesty, this place is dangerous."

"That is also for me to judge. The royal guard's duty is to protect the king. Is that not so?"

"I understand. Then please move to a slightly safer location."

As Orkamp moved past Bosun and took a position on the south side of the grand hall, the nobles were infuriated. Since the king wasn't evacuating, they had no choice but to stay put as well.

As the nobles gathered around Orkamp, their personal bodyguards followed closely behind.

Regardless of their level, magic is a phenomenon that can erase a person's life in an instant. Since Bosun had decided to step in, the nobles had no intention of lending their shields to anyone else.

Even so, it was a four-on-one battle. The senior members of the magic department, including a certified 4th-level magician, were on a different level of combat power compared to Zion.

"Seeing you cause such a ruckus, it seems the first prince candidate won't amount to much. After living in the palace for a few days, do you think everything belongs to you?"

"I wouldn't take this place even if it were given to me.

Bosun, was it? In other countries, you'd be polishing the shoes of great magicians. You've got it easy here, farming." Bosun couldn't help but laugh in disbelief. He never expected to hear such insolence from a junior.

More than anything, he felt extreme anger at having his specialty, plant magic, dismissed as mere farming.

Of course, plant magic isn't specialized for combat. While combat magicians train one element, like ice or fire, to the extreme, plant magicians study various elements to change fertilizer composition or cultivation methods, enhancing agricultural productivity.

In a sense, it's the furthest from combat.

But a certified 4th-level magician would have at least one specialty to subdue an opponent, regardless of their field.

"You are too arrogant for your age. Well then, let me evaluate your skills this time."

Bosun reached into his pocket and took out dozens of seeds, spreading them on his palm. Each was different in color, shape, and size.

"This is my specialty, 'A Handful of Seeds.' It's a comprehensive gift set of asexual plants I've improved. They're all mixed, so I don't know what will come out."

Bosun scattered the seeds with a wave of his arm.

As he expanded his Spirit Zone, the seeds sprouted in mid-air and quickly grew into plants, each revealing its unique characteristics.

Three seeds of the Kawankra were the first to mature. The flowers were light green spheres that opened to reveal sharp teeth. The roots grew and grabbed Shirone's arms and legs, opening their jaws to attack.

Kieeeeek!

As Shirone exploded a short-range beam, the Kawankra flowers burst with a pop. Despite their ferocity, the durability of plants was lacking.

But the other seeds settled and threatened Shirone with their unique traits.

The giant plants formed a jungle on the north side of the grand hall.

Bosun had improved a total of 87 plant species, so 'A Handful of Seeds' contained at least 30 different types.

The scene around Shirone resembled a small ecosystem.

The roots of the Kokora tree, known as the killer vine, climbed the walls and covered the ceiling. The Orto fungus spread spores that caused hallucinations, and the killer flowers on spring-like stems at the ceiling corners spewed acidic mucus.

Shirone looked around with interest.

To think human magic had advanced this far while he was trapped in the sealing formation. He could understand why the angels were so desperate for the final war.

"Did you improve these yourself?"

"That's not worth answering."

As the killer plants attacked, Shirone evaded with teleportation. But the plants were everywhere.

Bosun skillfully cornered Shirone. As the trees extended their branches, the space to evade gradually shrank.

"What do you think of a farmer's magic?"

The sight of the trees moving their branches like living creatures was grotesque. But it was infused with excellent insights from nature.

Plants have no muscles. The only way they can move is through 'growth.'

Bosun's passive magic, 'Growth Acceleration,' speeds up plant growth by up to 100,000 times. That's why plants in the growth acceleration zone moved like animals.

But this also meant the plants had short lifespans.

The Kawankra, which normally lives about ten years, stops growing and becomes inactive after 40 minutes under growth acceleration.

Of course, a Kokora tree, with an average lifespan of 1,200 years, could remain active for over 20 hours. But the average activity time for plants in 'A Handful of Seeds' was only about two hours, making long-term battles impossible. While growth acceleration creates activity, detailed movements are possible with the active magic 'Elemental Combination.' By injecting various elements into plants, specific instincts are triggered, including photosynthesis.

It's similar to how humans exhibit meaningful behaviors in response to different hormones.

Growth acceleration and elemental combination are called the heart and brain of plant magic for this reason.

Bosun skillfully combined the two magics to fiercely corner Shirone.

Flowers shot acidic mucus, and thorny vines moved like whips.

As the plants grew, the space became increasingly saturated.

When the vines intertwined three-dimensionally, leaving no room to evade, Shirone stopped teleporting.

Vines descending from the ceiling wrapped around his limbs.

"Now I'll give you my evaluation. You fail."

Though he said this, Bosun was boiling inside.

In an environment without soil, the power of a plant magician is reduced. But it was still the prowess of a certified 4th-level magician. To come this far against an amateur was a complete loss of face in front of his subordinates.

"What's going on? Did you have an epiphany?"

A person can't change this much in just an hour. While personality can change with madness, the level of magic itself was different.

Shirone pulled at the vines wrapped around his wrist. It was impossible to break them with a magician's body. Instead, the thorns scratched him, drawing blood.

Bosun snorted.

The plant prison was one of his most prideful magics. Its binding power was unmatched, and the wounds from the thorns paralyzed the nerves.

"Give up. Only a scale magician can escape this prison. If you surrender, I'll grant you a painless death."

Shirone blinked as he looked at Bosun. Then, with a look of realization, he spoke.

"Ah, scale magic."

Shirone looked up at the prison's ceiling.

The vines, bulging like tendons, formed walls like petrified lava. With such entanglement, the durability would be considerable. But that was fine.

"Such a good method?"

With a smirk at Bosun, Shirone immediately created a sphere of light before him.

As he activated Immortal Function, the photon cannon's photon density increased dozens of times.

"Raaaargh!"

All the nerves running through Shirone's body stood on end. The capillaries in his eyes burst, causing him to cry blood. Yet he didn't lose consciousness, thanks to the power of the Unbreakable Diamond.

Shirone realized what he possessed and what he could do with it.

He expanded his mind to the brink of the Unbreakable Diamond's elasticity. It didn't matter if it tore. If he could unleash this much power, he could play around, even at the cost of his life.

"Sir, we need to finish him now."

Seeing the photon cannon compressing immense kinetic energy, Ekkashi spoke. Bosun had no objections.

Using elemental combination magic, he made the plants ravenous, and numerous carnivorous species emerged from the branches, baring their teeth at Shirone.

"Shirone!"

As the grand hall doors opened, Amy and Reina entered. They saw Shirone trapped in the dense forest. He looked worse than when they saw him in the food storage.

His nervous system was protruding from his skin. It meant his brain was receiving an overwhelming amount of information, unbearable for a human.

In this state, even if Shirone's personality returned, it was doubtful he could live a normal life.

"Raaaargh!"

Shirone focused all the mental power drawn by Immortal Function on the God Particle.

As the photon's mass increased, the photon cannon began to blur. The immense mass generated gravity, pulling in the photons.

"Shirone! No!"

The photon compression, incomparable to Shining Impact, sent chills down Amy's spine. She heard the hallucination of Shirone's mind being torn apart.

The human mind is fluid but extremely vulnerable to sudden shocks. If Shirone exceeded his limits, he might never return to his senses.

Numerous carnivorous species descended the trees like snakes, opening their jaws towards Shirone's flesh. At the same time, the photon cannon's light disappeared.

With a pop, a black sphere the size of a human head was born. The mass was so extremely compressed that light couldn't escape and was sucked in.

It was the dark sphere, the counterpart of the photon cannon.

Kieeeeek!

The small gravity field created by the dark sphere had a radius of one meter. The stems of the carnivorous species trapped in the gravity field snapped, and they were sucked into the dark sphere like water droplets through a straw.

Next, the vines holding Shirone's limbs began to bend with a creaking sound.

The vines struggled to resist but eventually snapped and were sucked into the dark sphere. Consequently, all the plants connected to the vines were torn from the walls and swirled around like a vortex.

Crack! Crack!

The fibers broke, burst, and compressed in sequence, eventually being swallowed by the darkness of the dark sphere.

Bosun watched in dismay as his specialty, 'A Handful of Seeds,' was completely destroyed.

The only force that can trap light is gravity, and it requires an immense concentration of gravity.

'Scale magic...'

Shirone is an Unlocker, not a Scale Magician. However, by drastically enhancing gravity, he created changes in space similar to those made by Scale Magicians.

Bosun thought that perhaps all Unlockers could be Scale Magicians.

When the dark sphere disappeared, the forest that had taken root in the north of the grand hall was completely gone. Only some moss remained in the corners of the ceiling, and a few surviving flowers dripped acidic mucus before falling to the floor.

Bosun turned his stiff neck to look at Shirone. Despite crying tears of blood, Shirone was smiling.

"How about my scale magic? Pretty easy, right?"

As he spoke, a bucketful of blood poured from Shirone's mouth. Amy screamed.

Even so, Shirone laughed like a madman.

It's fine. I can still think. As long as I can fight, it's okay. My insides are still burning.

Bosun, unable to contain his crushed pride, trembled at his fingertips. No matter how much of an Unlocker he was, this was too much.

Due to the gravity-specialized magic, he couldn't launch an attack. But in terms of defense, it was unparalleled.

"I'll handle this."

Ekkashi stepped forward with a cold expression.

There are two main ways to stand out in combat magic: inventing a groundbreaking spell that shocks the world or being exceptionally skilled in combat.

Ekkashi belonged to the latter category. Though small in stature, his combat sense was renowned throughout the kingdom.

Chapter

307: Master of the Avatars (5)

Without even thinking of wiping the blood off his lips, Shirone turned to Ekkashi.

"Who are you? Are you stepping up, you little brat?"

"Bosun is the person I respect the most. You'd better shut your mouth."

"Then you must die too. Bosun is one of the people I hate the most in this world."

As a combat magician, Ekkashi wasn't swayed by the provocation. Holding a short baton from inside his robe, he extended it in front of him and spoke in a cold voice.

"Lance of Magic, Freeze."

As he opened his palm, the baton didn't fall but spun in place. Like it was affected by centrifugal force, the ends extended, transforming into a lance longer than his height. Ekkashi grabbed the lance with both hands and swung it. A cold wind reached Shirone.

After displaying a dazzling spear technique, Ekkashi took a final stance, aiming the lance. Ice shards fell from the blade with a cracking sound.

Ekkashi specialized in ice magic, particularly in magical spear techniques, making him a typical combat magician. The magical weapon Freeze was a highly coveted and expensive weapon among ice magicians. It had a base magic amplification of 128%, with an additional 146% amplification for ice magic.

Moreover, the blade of the lance had a special magic amplification of 280%, making it an incredibly powerful weapon.

Thus, when Ekkashi cast ice magic on Freeze's blade, it could achieve a magic amplification of 554%.

'Quite an impressive item for something made by humans.'

Shirone kept a close eye on the ice continuously falling from Freeze's blade.

The ability to freeze the air was something only an authority in ice magic like Shina could achieve. Even with the power of a magical weapon, Ekkashi's combat prowess couldn't be underestimated.

"Blizzard Blade."

Ekkashi muttered in a cold tone and closed the distance with teleportation.

As Freeze swiftly cut through the space, the air along the blade's path froze. A long line of ice formed like a rope, then shattered into pieces.

"It's disgraceful to use this on an amateur, but..."

Ekkashi thrust the lance at the shortest distance.

As Shirone cast a beam, Freeze's blade pierced through it, causing a shockwave.

Both Shirone and Ekkashi retreated simultaneously. Then, they both sprang towards each other again.

A close-quarters battle ensued, where a single mistake could be fatal.

Seeing Ekkashi approach, Shirone slammed a photon cannon into the ground. The impact was strong enough to shake the floor, but Ekkashi had already leaped into the air. Suspended in mid-air, Ekkashi grabbed the end of Freeze's handle with one hand and spun, swinging the lance.

A ring-shaped ice tube formed along the lance's trajectory. A spot of red blood marked one point.

Shirone's back, bent over, was thinly sliced, and frozen blood burst from the wound.

"Raaaargh!"

Shirone pushed off the ground, escaping Ekkashi's attack range. But he couldn't hold out for long and collapsed.

The terror of Freeze lay in turning even minor wounds into fatal injuries. The pain in his back felt like it was on fire, and his consciousness began to fade.

Ekkashi stood with the lance behind him, observing his prey's condition.

"Your movements are decent. But you're still inexperienced. Be content with becoming the fertilizer for my greatest legend."

As Shirone, with burning eyes, tried to respond, something rolled towards his feet.

It was a fresh truffle.

The dessert served at his parents' meal. The one that hid a lethal dose of poison beneath its sweet chocolate exterior. Shirone turned his head with a soulless expression. Bosun, who had kicked the chocolate, stood there with a mocking smile.

"How about it? Want to taste it now? It's really delicious."

"...I've changed my mind."

Shirone's face twisted like a demon's.

"All of you, die."

Dozens of laser beams shot out from Shirone's body.

There was no need for targeting. The beams indiscriminately scorched the walls, causing explosions wherever they touched. The grand hall shook.

The nobles were thrown into chaos.

They had thought they only needed to worry about Bosun's faction, but Shirone's indiscriminate attack made them realize this place wasn't safe.

"Damn it! What are you doing? Kill that bastard now!"

Personal bodyguards charged at Shirone. Dozens of swordsmen drew their blades and rushed in, while Bosun's subordinates unleashed concentrated attacks with their respective specialties.

Shirone, standing hunched over, cast a beam.

As the infinite unit's heartbeat resonated, pure energy, invisible to the naked eye, filled the space.

The floor beneath Shirone crumbled like a cookie, forming a deep hemispherical depression. The wind pushed by the light barrier sent people flying against the walls.

But those present were more than capable. Though the initial surprise attack failed, they quickly regrouped and charged at Shirone again.

Leading the charge was Ekkashi with Freeze.

The wind, torn by the lance, froze into a blizzard and spread behind him. Shirone countered with a photon cannon, but Ekkashi swiftly circled around and seized Shirone's blind spot.

'This ends now.'

As Ekkashi swung Freeze, a red flash appeared before his eyes.

"Ugh!"

A thin laser grazed Ekkashi's nose as he leaned back.

Losing his balance, he fell on his back, staring in disbelief at Freeze. The blade had been cut off, and the severed edge glowed red like molten lava.

'Damn it, what kind of magic is this!'

A light that could cut through metal.

How much power did it take to achieve such a feat?

The guards, observing the situation, finally realized they had misjudged from the start.

From the beginning, Shirone had considered everyone here his enemy. In a place filled with the highest-ranking nobles, their combat power was inherently limited. It was a classic guerrilla warfare scenario.

A guard, thinking this far, cautiously asked.

"Deputy Commander, shouldn't we activate the magic control device...?"

"Why are you asking, you fool? Get over there and activate it now!"

Shirone watched the guard run off and then turned his gaze indifferently.

There wasn't much time left to fight anyway. Half of his consciousness was already in the afterlife. He couldn't tell if his legs were moving or if his limbs were already torn apart and he was hallucinating.

'I'll kill them all...'

Only killing intent and rage remained.

If he could kill everyone here, he wouldn't mind dying now. If he could quell the rage tearing his insides apart, nothing else mattered.

"Ugh!"

Shirone, standing in the center of the grand hall, bent over and vomited blood.

Even the durability of the Unbreakable Diamond had reached its limit. The process of his mind collapsing was filthier than any feeling.

Immortal Function theoretically drew infinite mental power, but the human body had its limits. This was the end.

As Shirone's movements ceased, everyone stopped as if on cue. In the silence, debris fell from the ceiling.

"Is it over?"

Those who had fought Shirone looked as if they had been trapped in a room with a ghost. Their eyes were sunken, and their faces glistened with sweat.

"Kill him! What are you waiting for? Kill him now!"

The swordsmen, regaining their senses, hurriedly adjusted their stances and charged at Shirone. Dozens of swords aimed at every part of Shirone's staggering body.

Shirone quietly awaited the end. Realizing it had come, he softly muttered.

"Halo."

With a pop, light exploded, and a halo formed.

The halo, like an angel's, appeared above his head, forming a perfect circle without any creation process. The shocked swordsmen dropped their weapons and clutched their heads.

The nobles weren't shocked by the halo's shape. But in a different sense, their minds went blank.

Having witnessed the power that destroyed the coliseum earlier that day, it didn't feel real. Then they finally realized.

If Ataraxia was cast here, the palace would be obliterated without a trace. It was the true end.

The accumulation speed of Ataraxia was more than ten times faster than the demonstration at the coliseum. The super magic amplification array, completing its concept in an instant, emitted a brilliant light, awaiting the end.

None of the nobles thought of running.

Even if they were weak in combat, they had used their brains to rise to this position. None were foolish enough to misjudge reality.

No matter how fast they ran, they couldn't outrun Shirone's photon cannon. If even one person stepped out the door, that would be the end of Kazra.

"Shirone..."

Amy covered her mouth and burst into tears.

Shirone's staggering figure was unbearable to watch. Blood flowed from his burst veins, and his once dark pupils were now red like blood-filled pools.

Having reached the end of his life, Shirone was actually crying. Hot tears of blood streamed endlessly down his cheeks, contorted like a crying child.

With a choked voice, he spoke.

"You... you bullied me first."

Amy couldn't bear to watch and collapsed.

"You tried to kill me. I did nothing wrong, but you tried to kill my mom, dad, and my friends!"

No one responded to Shirone's anguished cry. It seemed like they were reflecting on their wrongs, but in reality, everyone was thinking about how to escape this situation.

Especially Bosun, whose mind was racing faster than anyone else's.

He had underestimated Shirone. No, that didn't make sense.

He had assessed him accurately. If anger alone could elevate one's level, everyone would be a great magician.

What on earth had happened to him?

'Even if the garrison arrives now, it's too late. Where did we go wrong? Have we really lost? No, it doesn't make sense for a kingdom to fall to just one person. It can't be. It mustn't be.'

Bosun moved cautiously. When Shirone glared at him with red eyes, he immediately stopped.

Shirone was currently insane and holding a doomsday bomb. Negotiation was the only way to survive.

"Alright, I understand. Let's talk. First, I apologize for tormenting you. We'll compensate you in some way. So, please, get rid of the halo..."

"Kneel."

Shirone's voice was harsh.

"Everyone kneel. No one moves. There's something you must hear before the end."

Bosun blinked and then, without hesitation, knelt down. With the kingdom's fate at stake, there was no room for emotions.

"Alright, is this satisfactory?"

Shirone glared at the nobles behind Bosun.

At Bosun's signal, they began to kneel one by one.

Even Amy and Reina knelt.

Shirone had seized control with a strategy of mutual destruction. If he appeared to have allies, someone would inevitably try to exploit that weakness.

But Orkamp and Eliza thought differently.

Shirone had toppled the Teraje faction. He would become a proud son of the kingdom and lead Kazra in the future.

Eliza, with a look of overwhelming emotion, approached Shirone.

"My son, you saved the kingdom. Well done. Come here. Your mother is so proud of you..."

A photon cannon shot towards Eliza's head.

A royal guard, kneeling, leaped like a beast and shielded her, falling to the ground. The heavy mass struck the wall,

creating a clean hemispherical dent. If it had hit a person, their head would have been blown off.

"Sh-Shirone..."

Eliza, terrified, trembled with a pale face. The afterimage of the photon cannon still lingered on her retinas.

Chapter 308: Master of the Avatars (6)

"If you ignore me one more time, I'll blow everything up."

Bosun realized the situation was far more serious than he had anticipated. If Shirone was willing to use magic against his own parents, he was clearly not in his right mind.

Orkamp quietly sat down next to Eliza. It was humiliating to show such a sight to the nobles, but he had to prevent Kazra's destruction at any cost.

'Damn it. How hard did I work to build this country?'

With Orkamp being the last to kneel, Bosun, now naturally the representative, turned to Shirone and asked,

"Now, tell us. What do you want to hear? If you have any demands, we'll do anything."

"Who ordered the assassination of my parents? Who was it?"

The nobles glanced at each other nervously, then fixed their gaze on one person.

Without turning around, Bosun raised his hand, knowing who they were looking at.

"I gave the order. If you want revenge, take it out on me. But... how about ending it with me?"

"Cut the crap. Do you think I'll forgive you?"

"You can't forgive us, I understand. But think rationally. No one has died yet. Even if you kill us, can you fight against Empress Teraje? Moreover, your loved ones are here too, aren't they?"

Bosun immediately exploited Shirone's weakness.

Even while holding a bomb, Shirone was trying to uncover the mastermind behind his parents' assassination, indicating that they still had value as hostages.

Thinking this might be his last chance, Bosun raised his hands and stood up, showing he had no intention of approaching.

"I'll comply with your wishes. Everyone involved in this assassination attempt, including myself, will face legal consequences. You can take your family and go home. I, Aimar Bosun, a certified 4th-level magician, guarantee it. So, how about resolving this through dialogue?"

Shirone's expression softened slightly.

Even if he killed everyone here, it wouldn't ease his anger. But if he blew up the palace, his family and friends would disappear from the world.

"Charge! Charge!"

A commotion was heard outside the grand hall. The garrison, having received the call, stormed in fully armed. But upon arrival, their determined expressions turned to shock.

"What... what is this?"

It was an unimaginable sight. The heart of the palace, the grand hall, was in ruins.

What shocked them the most was that everyone, including Orkamp, was kneeling.

'Now!'

As Shirone's gaze briefly shifted to the soldiers, Bosun cast teleportation.

When he reached Shirone, he had already drawn a dagger from his sleeve.

'This is the last chance! I must stab his heart!'

Shirone was shocked to see Bosun charging at him. But Bosun, having steeled himself, thrust the dagger without hesitation.

With a squelching sound, the dagger pierced through Shirone's flesh.

Bosun grimaced.

He had expected Shirone to be in a groggy state, but his reaction was quicker than anticipated. The dagger, aimed at

his heart, ended up in his side as Shirone twisted his body with all his might.

"Damn it."

Shirone couldn't analyze his current emotions.

His rationality was gone, replaced by the ferocity of a beast.

The foreign object invading his body brought not only pain but immense humiliation.

Seeing Shirone's eyes, Bosun quickly cast Earth Skin.

Soil rapidly covered his skin. The durability of Earth Skin, cast by a certified 4th-level plant magician, was as strong as rock.

A photon cannon struck Earth Skin. Thousands of cracks appeared in the earthen wall, shattering it to pieces.

Bosun's shocked face was revealed. Blood spurted from his mouth, indicating the impact had penetrated.

"Aaaargh!"

Shirone clutched his abdomen, writhing in pain.

Above his head, the photon cannon was growing at an incredible speed. Those watching the meter-wide photon turned pale.

The size gained at the cost of compression was no longer that of a photon cannon. It was a gravity cannon, aimed at buildings rather than people.

The grand hall was in complete chaos. The nobles screamed in terror, and the guards looked around helplessly.

"Lady Reina!"

Following the garrison, the attendants of the Ozant family stormed in, fully armed. But they too were stunned by the unexpected sight.

"Subdue the nobles! Right now!"

Reina ordered the attendants.

The continuous shocks shaking the grand hall meant the palace was on high alert. If they didn't subdue the nobles now, they would lose their escape route in a critical situation.

The attendants approached the high-ranking nobles and held swords to their necks.

As Reina had anticipated, forces from various departments under command began to pour in. High-ranking officers, not even fully dressed, came running.

Screams, cries, shouts to kill Shirone, Reina's orders—all the sounds mingled into a cacophony, ultimately becoming meaningless noise. No one could convey any meaning to another; they were just shouting.

To Amy, it seemed as if they were laughing. She too began to laugh.

Facing an overwhelming situation, her mind surprisingly calmed down.

'If this is the end, it's truly a spectacular finale.'

Through the cacophony filling the grand hall, a gentle voice reached Shirone.

"Shirone."

Silence fell as if by magic.

Everyone turned to look at the entrance of the grand hall.

Olina, holding Vincent's arm, stood there with a stern face.

Seeing Shirone covered in blood with a dagger in his side, Olina felt dizzy and staggered.

Vincent supported her, but she pushed him away and walked into the grand hall alone.

People made way for her. Her lips trembled as she approached Shirone.

"Don't go."

Eliza's words made Olina stop.

"Shirone is mad. If you go, you'll die."

Eliza didn't want Olina to approach Shirone.

Shirone had tried to kill her. If a different outcome occurred with Olina, her pride in her bloodline wouldn't allow it.

"Sigh."

Olina took a deep breath and turned directly towards Eliza.

Seeing her dazed face, as if she had been bombed, made Olina's anger surge and her vision darken.

Slap! Olina's palm struck Eliza's cheek.

The nobles couldn't believe what had just happened. No parent would remain rational after seeing a dagger in their child's abdomen, but the person she had struck was none other than the queen of Kazra.

Eliza didn't understand what had happened.

As she turned her slapped face, she saw Olina crying. That was strange too. Why was the person who slapped her crying instead of the one who got slapped?

"What have you done to my son?"

As the pain finally hit, Eliza's eyes filled with tears. It hurt so much.

And it provided a convenient excuse not to answer Olina's question.

Orkamp didn't reprimand Olina. No, he postponed it for another time.

She had undoubtedly stopped Shirone's rampage. For now, they had to place their hopes on her.

"Stop Shirone immediately. The fate of Kazra depends on it..."

Olina, trembling as if struck by lightning, turned to Orkamp with sparking eyes.

Orkamp flinched, expecting another slap. But the king's authority remained intact.

When he opened his eyes, Olina was gripping her wrist, trembling. Then she coldly turned and walked back to Shirone.

"Shirone."

Shirone didn't respond.

Seeing Olina's face, he felt like a child who had done something wrong. He had caused an irreparable disaster.

The fear of disappointing his parents was an instinctive fear of any child.

As a child, he had seen Olina's stern gaze a few times. But today, she wore the kindest smile.

That made Shirone's heart ache even more. He didn't know why.

"Shirone, do you know how adorable you were as a child? Your smile was as cute as a little girl's. Every time you smiled, your father would make a silly face. Then you'd laugh even more."

Olina reminisced about the past.

"You were such a gentle child. Even when you were angry, you couldn't express it or hurt others. When your friends got mad, you'd come home and brood over it."

Olina's eyes grew misty. Yes, those were the days.

But time had flown by. The baby who came as a blessing had grown into a young man.

"But I wasn't worried. Understanding others' feelings is a noble trait. I'm so happy you grew up kind."

Olina gently caressed Shirone's cheeks. Her handsome son looked so weary today.

"You're so gentle and kind that you don't know how to be angry. Even when you're furious, you can't hurt others, so you end up hurting yourself."

Olina softly embraced Shirone.

"Seeing you so badly hurt, it seems our son was really angry today."

Shirone's vision blurred. Different from the tears of blood he had shed before, clear, salty tears flowed down.

His eyes ached dully. It felt like the poison that had risen to his throat was draining away. His chest was so tight he could hardly breathe. All his emotions converged in his eyes, squeezing out words.

"Mom..."

It was the voice of a lost child desperately calling for his mother in an unfamiliar place.

Tears welled up in Olina's eyes as she hugged Shirone's face and patted his back.

"Yes, my son. Let's go home. I'll take you home. Don't worry about anything, let's go."

"Mom... Mom..."

Overwhelmed with sorrow, Shirone gasped for breath and said,

"They tried to kill you, Mom. Those people... they tried to..."

"It's okay, Shirone. You protected me. I'm not afraid at all. For you, I'm not afraid to die."

Holding Shirone's arms like a child, Olina smiled beautifully.

"Shirone, children are their parents' future. That's why I can do anything for you."

The immense anger that had dominated Shirone began to sink rapidly, like a collapsing building. The aura of hatred descended through the stages, from the 10th to the 9th, and then to the 8th.

The sealing formation in the deepest level of his mind was restored.

Shirone's avatar, illuminated by a bright light, emerged from the archangel's statue. Behemoth was expelled and returned to the sealing formation. As the pillar of light disappeared, Goffin's security device was deactivated.

Shirone returned to his pure self.

His physical body experienced a sudden backlash. Before he could even feel the pain, he lost consciousness. As his eyes closed, the Spirit Zone dissipated, and Ataraxia vanished.

Olina sat down with her collapsing son.

Though she could die for her child, she couldn't save him.

She looked at the enemies who had tried to kill her son and said,

"Please, save my son. I beg you."

No one in Kazra stepped forward. But Amy and Reina moved quickly.

First, they confirmed that Shirone was still breathing. He might be brain-dead, but the immediate concern was the bleeding. Without a transfusion, he wouldn't last an hour.

"Amy, I'll take Shirone. You go ahead with the attendants and help prepare for surgery. We need to start the

transfusion, so take his mother with you to inform the doctor of his blood type."

Chapter 309: Master of the Avatars (7)

Reina, having given the instructions, lifted Shirone's arm over her shoulder and stood up.

With Ataraxia gone, the nobles would likely rise up.

However, since the highest-ranking nobles were subdued by the attendants, there was no major commotion yet.

Even so, someone blocked her path. It was Bosun, who had stabbed Shirone in the abdomen.

Reina spoke in a cold voice.

"What are you doing? The battle is over. If you don't step aside, we'll behead the nobles we've captured."

"Bo-Bosun! Step aside quickly. Let them go for now!"

"Yes! Move aside! Move aside, I say!"

The nobles with swords at their necks urged Bosun.

But Bosun didn't budge. Even if all the nobles here died, he couldn't let Shirone live.

The world is divided by power and intelligence, and humans are either wolves or sheep.

If Shirone were a gentle sheep, even with the ultimate intelligence of an archangel's ability, he could be kept alive and used.

But Shirone wasn't a sheep. Even if it was an impulsive situation, someone willing to blow up the entire palace was far more dangerous in the future.

'Today's incident has clearly divided the factions in the palace. If Zion doesn't become king, it's all over.'

Even within Kazra, most of the Teraje faction, except for Uorin, were Zion's subordinates. There was no way Teraje would show mercy to a defeated prince.

"How about negotiating instead?"

Amy was stunned by Bosun's shamelessness. Who was the first to draw a sword while talking about negotiation just moments ago?

"How can you say that? Move aside!"

Bosun didn't expect them to agree. But he needed to buy time.

Shirone was already half-dead. In a situation where every second counted, time was the most terrifying weapon.

Reina saw through Bosun's strategy. But she couldn't decisively order the nobles to be beheaded.

Bosun had already deemed Shirone the greatest threat. If the nobles were killed, Shirone would die too. Reina, who had to save Shirone at all costs, had to find another way.

As Reina and Bosun glared at each other, a strong wind blew in from the entrance of the grand hall. With a sound like burning fire, figures in black clothes flew in like a swarm of bats.

Thirty figures landed in the center of the grand hall. They all wore owl masks and carried identical swords at their waists. The nobles, seeing the triangular badges on their collars, widened their eyes in disbelief.

"Th-Those are...?"

They were the Wind Guards, the Empress Teraje's personal guard.

A hundred swordsmen sworn to the Empress. It was rare for all of them to move, but when they appeared, everything in sight was said to disappear.

"Why are the Wind Guards here?"

The Wind Guards weren't an army. As the Empress's sword, they never moved without her orders. No matter how fast they were, it was too far from Kashan to have come in response to today's incident.

The Wind Guards, in a triangular formation, stood perfectly still, all facing forward. A chilling voice emerged from the center of the formation.

"As of this moment, we are taking custody of Shirone. Additionally, all decision-making authority regarding the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Kazra is revoked. Remember, defying this will mean war with the Kashan Empire."

The nobles murmured among themselves.

Revoking internal authority meant stripping all the nobles here of their power. They waited, expecting someone to object or raise a question, but only silence followed. Realizing no one had the courage to step forward, the nobles bowed their heads in unison.

"We accept the order."

They couldn't oppose a decision made by the ruler of Kashan.

The Wind Guards were the Empress's swords. Their presence alone proved that the Empress's command was not an empty threat.

"Please wait a moment. Are you saying this is truly the Empress's decision?"

Bosun objected.

Like the other nobles, he wasn't rejecting the Empress's order. But something felt off.

Zion hadn't lost yet. Shirone was on the brink of death, and with a little more time, he would die on his own. It didn't make sense to spoil an easy way to take over Kazra.

Moreover, there was no way the Wind Guards, who guarded the Empress 24/7, could have arrived in Kazra so quickly.

"I've heard that the Wind Guards wear owl masks and have triangular badges on their left chest."

One of the Wind Guards spoke.

"...What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying it's easy to impersonate them. Handing over the ruling authority is a serious matter for the kingdom. If you received orders from the Empress, you should have brought an official document. Can you show it to us?"

The nobles looked at the Wind Guards.

Bosun's words made sense. Following Teraje was natural, but they needed to verify it was truly her command.

"There is no official document. The order will come."

"Hmm, that makes it even more suspicious. How can we hand over the ruling authority without proof? Do you have any identification?"

"We do."

"May we see it?"

The Wind Guards triangular formation converged into a single line. It looked as if thirty people had merged into one. That one figure then seemed to split into hundreds, creating afterimages as they flew towards Bosun. A black storm swirled around him.

"Ugh!"

The first sword struck Bosun's chin, lifting his face vertically. As his face rose, thirty swords slashed his body without a single collision.

The slashes were so fast that the air vibrated like a bee's wings.

The Wind Guards, having delivered nearly a thousand slashes per second, leaped back to their original positions, forming a perfect triangular formation.

The nobles stared at Bosun in shock. Or rather, what was left of him.

His body had been reduced to pieces smaller than fingernails. Blood slowly seeped from the minced flesh. Something fell from the air with a splat.

It was Bosun's face.

Though his eyes were gone, anyone could see the expression of shock. His wide-open mouth shriveled as it soaked in blood.

"No one can impersonate the Wind Guards."

The nobles couldn't object. The display of skill was perfect proof that they were the Wind Guards.

In reality, the Wind Guards tactics were impossible to imitate. To replicate the movement of the wind, each

individual's skill had to be the best.

They were the ones who embodied fluid dynamics with their human bodies.

A hundred such experts formed the strongest swordsmanship group on the continent, the Wind Guards.

"Master Bosun!"

Ekkashi ran forward, veins bulging.

Kneeling before the minced remains of Bosun, he reached out with trembling hands to touch the face, then glared at the Wind Guards.

"You bastards...!"

How could they be so cruel?

Even if he had doubted the Empress's swords, Bosun had fought hard to make Zion king. He didn't deserve to die in such a gruesome manner for a single mistake.

Ekkashi grabbed the broken Freeze. But then he looked at them with eyes filled with fear.

A dark aura rose from the Wind Guards' triangular formation. Only Ekkashi could see the hallucination. His brain, exposed to the killing intent of thirty people, was tricked into thinking he was facing death.

'I must fight... for Master Bosun...'

His heart felt like it was turning to stone. With a clatter, Freeze fell, and Ekkashi dropped to the ground, vomiting everything inside him.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

The Wind Guards didn't even glance at him.

They had been instructed by Teraje to handle things appropriately, but it wasn't their fault. They had responded appropriately to the weak killing intent. They couldn't help that Ekkashi's level was far below their expectations.

'Foolish boy.'

The report had described him as a promising 6th-level magician in Kazra. But given the nature of the 6th level, where the gap in skill was the largest, it wasn't surprising.

'Even considering that, he's weak. There must have been some trickery.'

Kazra's magical power was weak, so the state might have supported him. For example, pooling points earned by other magicians and giving them to Ekkashi.

In any case, Ekkashi's journey as a combat magician was over. Having been exposed to the Wind Guards' signature collective killing intent, 'Gaksi,' he would be haunted by the fear of death for the rest of his life.

With Bosun dead and Ekkashi collapsed, the nobles retreated on their own. The personal bodyguards, having seen Ekkashi fall on his own, didn't dare show any resistance.

Once the area was cleared, the Wind Guards moved again. They fluttered like particles of air and flew towards Shirone. Reina, supporting Shirone, trembled in fear within the black storm. The Wind Guards' words reached her like a whisper in the wind.

Each person spoke one syllable, making their voices hypnotic.

"We will take Shirone. The continent's top experts will treat him. We will return him by tomorrow morning."

With a sound like a strong wind blowing inside her ear, the Wind Guards moved away. They circled the grand hall like a rapid current and exited through the door.

Everyone present could see the movement of the wind.

The Wheel of Causality (1)

"Huff! Huff!"

Arius ran through the inner garden. Though it was late at night and pitch dark, he didn't trip over any roots thanks to his Spirit Zone.

But even as one of the Seven Great Magicians, his heart was ordinary. Out of breath, he stopped running and cast Flicker. He reappeared in a completely different direction from where he intended to go.

Falling off balance, he curled up like a shrimp and rolled on the ground. It was his twentieth failure.

"Damn it! Damn it!"

The timeline of the inner castle was subtly distorted. Even a discrepancy of about one ten-thousandth of a second was fatal for the highly precise Flicker magic.

'That guy is chasing me.'

Armin of the Radiant Eye.

He hadn't confirmed it, but if it was a blind magician specializing in time magic, it had to be him.

Now, he had two options: run and climb over the castle wall or break through Armin's time distortion.

But the latter wasn't a good choice. Even a slight mistake would land him in a completely different place from his escape route.

The magic control device hadn't been activated yet, but the king's residence was filled with various magic traps. He had memorized the route over the past five years, or he wouldn't have found his way now.

'Run. Are you going to stop breathing just because it's annoying?'

Arius chose to rely on his physical strength. He would think about losing Armin once he reached the inner castle gate. Once he escaped Kazra, the world would become interesting.

Armin had broken the agreement. If this fact spread, even the magicians of the Black Line, known for their madness, would have to unite.

A bloody storm would sweep across the continent.

'That would be interesting in its own way...'

But what fascinated Arius more than a chaotic world was the discovery of Goffin's trace. Something countless scholars had searched the world for but never found was hidden deep within a boy's mind.

Chapter 310: The Wheel of Causality (2)

'What's going on? Archangel Ikael and Goffin. Is there a connection between the two? Or is it merely a coincidence?' It was definitely related to the Reset. Once outside the fortress, I would need to research it.

If the Reset were true, there was a high likelihood that traces of it would remain in the depths of another person's psyche. I would kidnap at random and dissect them.

I slowed down as the city gate came into view. Guards holding torches were patrolling the walls.

Arius carefully attempted a Flicker. Disappearing with a fizz, he reappeared thirty centimeters ahead. The time distortion was gone.

'Have I shaken them off?'

Armin had spent considerable time in the food storage, making it difficult to pinpoint his exact location. Expanding the Spirit Zone to warp the entire radius was the only way. Moreover, considering his timeline was short, it was quite possible that he had already escaped.

"But somehow, it feels unsettling."

Arius keenly observed the movements of the guards.

Realizing there was a two-minute gap in the guard coverage, he waited for the right moment, then sprinted forward, planning to break through the wall with a Flicker and escape.

'Take that, annoying Kazra.'

"Where are you rushing off to?"

Arius' run came to an abrupt halt.

The voice came from behind him. The presence was so silent that it indicated remarkable skill.

'Damn it!'

Arius turned around slowly, knowing that any hasty action could cost him his neck.

Kazra's chief bodyguard, Litni Walker, was lowering his long sword, grinning like a beast.

'The worst-case scenario.'

Of all people, it had to be him.

Kazra might be weak in magic, but not in swordsmanship.

Moreover, Walker was a swordsman who adhered most closely to the textbook of great magicians.

The best strategy for a swordsman against a magician is

'cut them down before they can cast a spell.' And Walker was the best at that in Kazra. It was something he had read about in the basic court swordsmanship guide that Walker had written.

Walker leaned his sword on the ground and looked up at the night sky.

Even as Arius turned his gaze away, he was unable to move, as if Walker's nerve had lashed out and bound him like a noose.

"It's not the time for people to be wandering around. Even the bars are closed tonight."

"Ha! I had a sudden urgent appointment. And what about you, Captain? Are you on patrol?"

"Hehe, what's this, playing the player?"

Walker's eyes gleamed like those of a nocturnal beast.

"You, a grave robber? Arius of the Seven Great Magicians."

"I don't know what you mean. How many Ariuses do you think there are?"

Walker was neither from the faction of Teraje nor from Orkamp. He worked solely for the prosperity of the kingdom. He had been tracking Arius for a long time.

Being a member of the Seven Great Magicians was irrelevant. For a kingdom like Kazra, weak in magic, it was an inevitable choice. But if he disrupted the kingdom, he couldn't just be ignored.

"Know what's scarier than a tyrant king? A betrayer. I'll give you the choice: surrender peacefully or be split in two by my sword."

"Just when I thought things were going well."

Arius slowly lowered his hand.

If he acted without trying to escape, Walker wouldn't move either. It was wisdom gained from experience.

A mage equipped with teleportation can't escape a swordsman due to the humanly time it takes to activate it. Once the magic is activated, the swordsman can't catch the mage. But as long as it happens within human realms, a master of schema senses surpasses a mage.

The exact moment when the activation occurs remains a mystery to mages. According to swordsmen, they feel a change in temperament.

Arius kept a close eye on Walker's every move. From Walker's perspective, it might seem like no more than an ordinary person watching, but still, as a Habari mage, Arius had gathered some information. Walker's momentum felt like a volcano on the verge of erupting.

Arius sighed with a look of despair.

"Ugh. Annoying."

Bang! A long sword struck the ground where Arius had been standing, as if it had followed him a moment too late, in a vertical slicing stance.

"Damn it all..."

Arius was gone. He had been a half-beat too slow.

Or perhaps not. The timing had been exact.

The speed of perception, sensation, nerves, action—everything had transcended his opponent. Arius surely hadn't even seen his own movement. Perhaps there was as much difference as the time a human and a mosquito perceive.

'But how did he escape?'

It wasn't a teleportation-type magic. Nor was it Flicker. He simply vanished.

Invisibility magic? Even if so, the increased casting speed didn't make sense.

But it was a possibility that couldn't be ignored, so Walker looked around.

"Captain! What's going on?"

The guards had heard the sound and rushed over.

"From now on, we search for Arius. Strengthen the inner city's defenses and assemble all available troops."

"Arius? Isn't he His Majesty's technical advisor?"

"It's incitement of rebellion. The more time we waste, the harder it gets."

The guards scattered in an orderly fashion.

Walker watched his subordinates' movements and then entered the forest. If invisibility magic had been cast, there would still be traces somewhere.

After everyone had left, a Flicker magic was cast, and a man appeared like a ghost. It was Armin.

"Apoptosis. A rational decision."

Apoptosis is known as one of the most difficult scaling spells in the realm of scale magic. It makes sense because it's a spell that involves diving into one's own psyche.

If the body enters the psyche, the boundary between thought and reality collapses, turning into a concept entity.

There are no emotions and even thinking becomes impossible. The chances of Arius returning on his own were very slim.

'It's better than dying.'

Certainly, it was better than dying.

Every magician has a critical technique.

Indeed, Walker's response was flawless. However, Apoptosis has almost no casting time compared to other spells because it's a feedback from the Spirit Zone.

Armin had ended the time distortion in case Arius was caught by Walker. It wouldn't matter if he died, but being captured and potentially spilling secrets would complicate things.

'No need to worry for a while.'

It's unlikely he attempted Apoptosis without a way to return. He must have made arrangements or formed a pact with someone for such a situation.

A year, or perhaps ten, or even a hundred years might pass without him returning. But he was certain to return someday.

'The collaborator is likely. That's where I should start my investigation.'

The most likely candidate was the mages of the Seven Magical Sins.

Remembering the members, Armin frowned. Arius was among those whose sanity had completely turned.

'Maybe it's time to get going.'

Armin looked back at the fortress.

He wanted to stay by Shirone's side a little longer, but there was no time to delay. He had to return to Keira as soon as possible.

As he cast the Flicker magic, his form disappeared with a fizz. Walker's shouts faintly echoed across the empty space. Zenoger was running through the underground emergency exit.

Every ten steps, a trap was triggered. A trapdoor opened, arrows flew, and a log studded with nails swung like a pendulum.

Zenoger maintained his speed, dodging the traps. He jumped over trapdoors and caught the studded logs in webs he spit from his mouth, stopping them midway.

"Ha! Ha!"

Leaning against the corner of the underground maze, he took a short break. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he looked up at the ceiling.

He couldn't save Zion. Therefore, he had fled. Teraje wouldn't spare a failed assassin.

If it were only his own death, he could accept it, but it would also mean the end for the Spatur family, who depended

entirely on Teraje's support.

'I must escape. And find a faction to rely on.'

His clan had been assassins for a thousand years. Even if they didn't meet Teraje's standards, there were plenty of forces that needed them.

Zenoger restored only the energy at his core and resumed running through the maze, aiming to escape the fortress before dawn.

The floor suddenly swung open like a saloon door. Using his spider senses, he leaped just before falling, sticking a web to the ceiling and swinging in a parabola. At the same time, a dagger flew towards him.

"Argh!"

While swinging like a pendulum, he twisted his waist to dodge the dagger.

Though intended to be thrown by a person, the dagger flew as swiftly as an arrow and embedded itself in the wall.

Zenoger landed and immediately took a defensive stance.

His chest swelled, sprouting four arms, and six eyes opened on either side of his temples.

"Who's there? Come out."

A petite woman turned around from the shadowy corner.

Her black hair was cut in a neat bob, and she squinted her closed eyes slightly, wearing a straight, narrow skirted dress that seemed more like wrapping than clothing.

Her hands, demurely clasped together, held the sheath and handle of the dagger, the blade partially exposed.

"Are you a hitman? Who hired you?"

"I have nothing to tell someone who's about to leave this world."

Her voice was refreshingly clear, even if only to the ear.

But Zenoger wasn't fooled. Her voice was highly trained.

"Hehe, well... that's just the way we live."

As Zenoger finished speaking, the dagger flew towards him.

He leaped to the ceiling and spread webs in all directions, transforming the environment to his advantage. Then, he

whipped a whip-thick strand of web.

It seemed the woman's form multiplied briefly, then she moved swiftly behind him as if riding a rail.

'An unusual walking method.'

The narrow straight skirt seemed utterly unsuitable for combat. Even with her legs spread as wide as possible, she could only stride half as far as a normal person. The strange sandals between her toes were also annoying.

However, her walking speed was unimaginably fast. Plus, the acceleration phase was incredibly dense, creating an eerie movement as if chasing afterimages.

At first, it appeared slow, but with explosive additions over short distances, she suddenly appeared right in front of him. It was really troublesome. It wasn't ordinary acceleration, so timing was impossible to measure accurately.

'The rhythm is completely different.'

This must be how she made her living.

If categorized, she belonged to the circus. A hitman who uses athletic ability to deceive the opponent.

A fleeting curiosity about who she might be passed through his mind, but it was just a momentary thought. For an active assassin, being known by name meant they were essentially done for.

Zenoger cast a web curtain to block her approach. As he got used to the rhythm, her movements began to become predictable.

From then, the tide turned.

Zenoger moved like a spider between the walls, approaching the woman.

Despite the irregular rhythm, the last dagger did not unsettle him. He caught it in his mouth, twisting his neck.

"Hehehe! Not bad for a circus performer."

Diving into the woman's arms, Zenoger lifted his upper arms in reverse joints. Climbing over her shoulder with one hand, he grabbed her face and pushed her against the wall, smashing her head.

A thud followed by a crack as her face split like porcelain, with shards falling to the floor.

Zenoger quickly moved his left three hands. One hand strangled her neck, and another hand reached under her skirt. There were no genitals.

The middle hand grabbed her breast and tore it apart. The silk material ripped away, revealing a cushion-like mass resembling fat.

The bare skin of her breast was flat, and below it, her emaciated ribs were visible.

Chapter 311: The Wheel of Causality (3)

"I knew this would happen."

As the woman tried to break free, Zenoger mercilessly smashed her head against the wall.

A dull thud sounded repeatedly as the porcelain-like skin covering her face completely shattered.

It revealed a grotesque face, or rather, it was indistinguishable as male or female.

It had no eyebrows or eyelids, just eyeballs embedded in the sockets that moved from side to side.

"Hehehe, a face specialized for disguise? You are as hideous as me."

For the first time, the mysterious assassin spoke.

"Ah, you must be seeing this for the first time. I have seen your hideous face to my fill."

Zenoger's expression soured.

It was a line he had once said to Arius. If it was a psychological battle, he shouldn't be shaken.

However, a sudden thought crossed his mind. Every child of Teraje was assigned one bodyguard, but he had never seen Uorin's bodyguard.

"No, that can't be right. It didn't escape my senses. Where were you hiding?"

The assassin's voice shifted again as she spoke.

"What are you talking about? I've always been behind you."

Zenoger's face turned pale.

He knew exactly who owned the voice. It was an unnamed administrator who relayed orders under Zion's command.

"Damn it! So that's what it was!"

Specialized disguise, unique walking technique, a line previously said to Arius.

When piecing together all the circumstances, it was clear that the assassin was sent by Uorin.

"Stay calm. After all, my combat ability is superior. I must not fall for psychological tricks."

Zenoger used his six arms to suppress areas where the opponent's strength was amplified. The assassin, whose muscles were even burnt away for the sake of disguise, had no escape.

"From now on, answer my questions. If you lie, I will tear off your limbs. Does Uorin know where the Spatur family is hiding?"

"...She knows."

"Is that so? Tell me where. Answer quickly! You, being her personal guard, must know."

"The Mountain of Echoes. The Valley of True Names."

Zenoger felt as if his heart was collapsing.

If Uorin knew the hiding place, it meant that a punitive force had already been sent. By tomorrow morning, the Spatur family would be erased from history.

"Give up. Even if you escape from here, there's nowhere that will take you in."

"Ugh... Ughhh! Shut up!"

Zenoger did not give up.

If his clan was to be annihilated, he had to survive even more. If it all ended like this, where would the value of a clan that had forsaken humanity for a thousand years be found?

"Die! Damn you!"

Zenoger raised his left central arm, sharpening his hand like a spear, and swiftly plunged into the assassin's chest, grabbing the heart.

The assassin's body twitched as the heart burst, and her eyes shook with shock.

Clang!

One of the porcelain dolls from El Crouch's collection on the shelf shattered. The body rolled off the shelf, causing a secondary crack.

Uorin, who was sitting at the table, blinked slowly as if she hadn't heard anything. Then, she walked to the cabinet and pulled out a strong liquor.

She filled half a crystal glass and returned to the table, sitting down, crossing her legs, and flicking her white calves as she sank into thought.

"Hmm..."

The breaking of the porcelain doll.

It meant that another life had been extinguished.

The crystal glass gently parted her cherry-like lips and went in. The clear liquid flowed down, moistening her tongue, then escaped.

"Such a boring night."

Zenoger glared at the assassin with terrifying eyes.

He had killed countless people before, but this was the first event that transcended his understanding. He had stabbed the solar plexus and burst the heart. He could still feel the heart cooling in his hand. But why...

"Why aren't you dying?"

"I died once."

Zenoger received the assassin's words somewhere between understanding and insight.

A fleeting curiosity passed through his mind, but it was just a momentary thought. There's nothing someone about to leave this world needs to know.

"So you were an assassin."

"It's not the people who kill."

The assassin swung her only free left hand. A flash streaked, and with a thud, Zenoger's head flew off.

"It's the circumstances that kill."

The assassin watched as Zenoger's head bounced on the floor, then pulled Zenoger's arm from her chest. Zenoger's

body glowed harshly on the floor, and a fountain of blood sprayed from the severed neck.

The assassin showed no emotion. Even if she had any, her face wouldn't have been able to express it.

Dollmaker El Crouch.

Very few knew that he had been immersed in black magic 200 years ago.

During the days when he was renowned for his jointless doll technology, a woman visited him.

Surprisingly, the visitor was Teraje, who ruled the continent.

The two had a lengthy conversation, and the day after

Teraje left, Crouch died. At least officially.

Hundreds of dignitaries crowded the funeral, but while they were shedding tears, Crouch was on a small boat heading to a country in the East.

At Teraje's command, he arrived at the dollmaker's household. Already well-versed in black magic, he quickly mastered the art of dollmaking.

The art of imbuing dolls with affection. The method of creating a perpetual motion machine, which a demon had told him. The technique of fitting mechanisms into the bodies of the dead, and more.

Crouch mastered it all and left the East.

When he returned home, 180 years had passed. But having transformed his body into a doll, he could no longer die even if he wanted to.

He first collected his earlier creations. Only in dolls crafted with the soul of a dollmaker could he distribute life.

However, most of his works had been sold, and he could recover only a few.

At that point, Teraje gave her first command: to take care of her daughter Uorin.

Uorin liked Crouch, and from then on, she began collecting El Crouch's porcelain dolls.

"Miss Uorin, it's me."

Crouch knocked on Uorin's door.

It was a needless act for an assassin who could infiltrate anywhere, but today, formal greetings were appropriate.

"Come in."

Crouch slowly opened the door and entered.

Leaning her arms on the back of the chair, Uorin, slightly intoxicated, greeted him with a seductive smile that had not been seen before.

"So, what brings you to my room?"

Crouch smiled happily, but lacking muscles to show his expression, he couldn't convey that it was meant as a funny joke.

"I have eliminated the dogs of Spatur, Princess Uorin. No..."

Unable to be satisfied just with bowing, Crouch knelt and prostrated himself on the floor.

"Empress Teraje."

Uorin chuckled and turned to look out the window. It was still dark outside, but signs of dawn were visible.

"You are quick-witted."

Crouch shook his head and honestly confessed.

"To be honest, I didn't know until yesterday. I realized it when the wind guards came. Even I, who is with you 24 hours a day, was deceived. When did you awaken?"

"Two years ago."

Crouch clicked his tongue.

As a dollmaker, he knew every detail about human facial expressions. Not missing even the slightest movement of facial muscles, it was shocking that he had not known Uorin had awakened for two years.

'Well... it's been an eternity.'

Teraje is the 'Mitochondrial Eve.'

Mitochondria are passed only from mother to child.

Following this lineage, one can eventually meet the ancestor of all humanity, known as Mitochondrial Eve.

Long ago, a woman's mitochondria underwent a strange mutation. An absolute genetic ability to pass on 100% of her memories to her offspring.

Teraje's daughter fully awakens the memories of her ancestors after the age of ten. When a mother gives birth, the child becomes the mother again.

It was as if one human being was living eternally by means of reproduction.

She must have existed before she was known as Teraje.

Perhaps even during the time when she was just a primate.

That's why she does not know the moment of her own creation.

However, she retained the history from her creation onward in her mind. From the beginning of humanity until now.

That's why she was the only human with residual *deja vu* of McClain Goffin.

Teraje had long known that merely replicating herself would ultimately lead to extinction.

She could catch a disease, become entangled in wars, or be swept away by natural disasters.

She strived to enhance the efficiency of her species. After 4,000 years of breeding experiments, she discovered how to selectively incorporate her father's genes into the modified body.

From then on, Teraje became superior in every aspect.

She inherited the superior traits of handsome men, becoming more beautiful, and inherited the blood of the absolute, gaining a strong will.

The bargaining skills of a wealthy merchant, the physical prowess of a great swordsman, the intellectual abilities of a great mage—she absorbed all traits that could dominate the world into her body, passed them on to the next generation, and repeatedly reawakened the same memories.

In this self-replicating process, Teraje grew stronger.

Since these traits did not manifest in her son, she herself established a nation in the body of a woman. Now, she reigns as the Empress of Kashan and one of the Three Emperors.

"It's been a while, Crouch. The handsome face of the young man has been greatly damaged."

Crouch, recognizing that these were the words of Teraje who visited him 200 years ago and not the fourteen-year-old Uorin, respectfully bowed his head.

"With the help of Her Majesty, I have gained immortality. To a dollmaker, a face is just wrapping paper. My pride lies in the organs that make up my body."

"Hehe, that's so like you. Indeed... you were like that the day we first met."

Uorin would remember everything, but Crouch's memory was foggy.

Unable to respond immediately, he broke the awkward silence with a question.

"The funeral procession has come. You must have anticipated and summoned it, Your Majesty. Did you know that Shirone would survive?"

Uorin approached the window and pulled back the curtain. The garden viewed from the apartment was still peacefully asleep.

"Politics is not about giving one thing and getting another. It's about making an offer where no matter what the opponent chooses, you win. It would have been good if Shirone lived, but it wouldn't have been a bad outcome if he died either."

"I see."

"But, I can say this: he had enough merit to survive."

"I understand you've tested him several times."

Uorin looked up at the ceiling, reminiscing about that time.

"Initially, I tested his luck. When I spun the 'Daily Gift,' he won an excessive gift. I thought that might be possible."

Crouch tilted his head, seemingly puzzled.

"Did you also know that a piece I created would arrive as a gift?"

Uorin nodded.

"The world is like a gumball machine. Inside the machine, blue and red events are mixed. Those outside cannot tell in what pattern the gumballs will come out. That's what humans are. They just go to the machine and turn it without knowing what will come out. Crouch, do you believe in luck?"

"Luck, huh? Well, looking back, I think I have been lucky."
Uorin continued with a smile.

"There's no such thing as luck. Nor is there such thing as misfortune. It's already predetermined which gumballs will come out in what order inside the box. The feeling of luck or misfortune is just because humans can't see inside the box. For some, it may continually be blue gumballs, while for others, it might always be red. Of course, most people will alternate between blue and red. And all of that is what constitutes human life, life itself."

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Crouch listened intently with a serious expression.

"But you know, how should I put it... Yes, if you live long enough, you start to see a bit of what's inside the box. To explain it from a human perspective, you begin to understand who will be unlucky and who will be fortunate."

"I see."

Teraje had witnessed countless events from the origin of humanity to the present.

Feeling that an excessive gift would come out even before spinning the roulette was not due to supernatural powers or magic. It was an understanding of chaotic patterns gained from spinning the gacha machine countless times.

"It was just a thought."

Perhaps thinking it sounded boastful, Uorin cut herself off with a cute gesture, sticking out her tongue.

Crouch found her endearing. It was an absolute love for an unattainable being.

"Your foresight always amazes me, Your Majesty. So, what do you plan to do now?"

"Hmm, even someone as skilled as Arius couldn't extract Ataraxia. There must be something I don't know. I plan to ask Zion. I have some guesses."

"Then what about Shirone?"

It was clear that Uorin had summoned the Wind Guards, but he hadn't heard anything about Shirone's fate. If she had taken him for another purpose, he would need to act.

"I feel that Shirone alternates between red and blue balls. I'm not sure yet. I want to observe a bit longer. Let him live

his life. Just block any external interference, whether from factions, organizations, institutions, or nations."

"Understood."

Uorin gave orders befitting the Triumvirate.

Maintaining Shirone's life as if today's events hadn't happened was possible because Teraje's world was far broader than Shirone's.

"And I will inherit Teraje's castle. Inform the sisters of each country to dissolve within two years."

"I will obey."

There was no need to seek permission from the ruler of Kashan. Uorin's judgment was Teraje's judgment.

In the early days of the lineage, disputes arose over who would succeed the predecessor. But over the ages, Teraje evolved to a stage where she could accept death.

The sisters would accept it and end their lives when the time was right.

But Uorin could also be the one to end her life. So why did Uorin decide she should inherit Teraje's name?

The only difference between her and her sisters was that she had met Shirone.

"Do you think Shirone can prevent the final war?"

Uorin looked out the window, satisfied with her subordinate's insight. Morning had come, and bright sunlight was illuminating the world.

"Hehe, prevent the final war? That's not the reason to inherit Teraje's name."

"Then...?"

"Heaven is just another conquerable territory. It doesn't matter if it's not now. I am an eternal being. One day, I will conquer beyond heaven to the ends of the universe."

Crouch gaped in astonishment.

Conquering the universe. It was an ambition to dethrone Anke Ra, the incarnation of the Akashic Records, and become a god herself.

"Ataraxia is a shortcut to that future. If Arius failed, it means no one can excavate it. But wouldn't it be different if it were me?"

"Then..."

"Yes."

Uorin looked at Crouch and placed her hands on her chest. Her figure, smiling in the sunlight, sparkled with a golden hue.

"I will become Shirone's daughter."

The next morning, the medical team from the Kashan Empire transported Shirone to his quarters.

They had done everything they could, but he had not regained consciousness. Even if he did, they said there was only a fifty-fifty chance his mind would fully recover.

Vincent wept at the possibility that Shirone might never become a mage. Amy and Reina comforted the sobbing Olina.

"Don't worry. They were just giving a general prognosis. Shirone's mental strength is different from others. He will surely recover completely and wake up."

Olina nodded repeatedly, her voice hoarse.

Sensing her resolve, Vincent wiped his face with his sleeve and comforted his wife.

"Yes, let's wait. The medical team said it's fifty-fifty. It's not a hopeless situation yet. We need to be Shirone's strength now more than ever."

Hearing this, Olina stood up abruptly. She couldn't just sit and cry as a mother.

She placed a wet cloth on Shirone's feverish forehead and clasped her hands in prayer.

Amy, knowing the extent of the shock Shirone had suffered, understood that such temporary measures were ineffective. But she kept silent, respecting Olina's motherly concern. Leaving Shirone in Olina's care, the three quietly left the room.

Having survived, they now had to think about practical matters. They wanted to pack up and leave immediately, but Kazra was currently under Kashan's administrative control.

Interference in internal affairs was considered a national disgrace. Despite the nobles' strong opposition, they couldn't openly rebel because Teraje was still technically Orkamp's wife. They had no choice but to wait until the paternity test results came out the next day.

Spending a night in enemy territory felt like walking on thin ice.

The Kashan medical team assured them that the Kazra nobles wouldn't act, but they couldn't be sure. The biggest concern was whether Eliza would remain passive.

Olina had slapped the queen. It was a capital offense for a commoner to assault royalty. Olina would have done the same even if she could turn back time, but getting out unscathed was another matter.

The long night finally ended, and morning came.

The attendants of the Ogent family, who had stayed up all night watching over Shirone, had dark circles under their eyes. Contrary to their fears, nothing had happened. It seemed the Kashan medical team hadn't spoken lightly. On the day of Shirone's paternity test, the nobles of Kazra focused on the court.

The safe displayed in the inner garden was retrieved. Since a public surveillance system was in place, no one had accessed the safe during the exhibition period.

The alchemists opened the neatly sealed caspi. If anyone had planned to tamper with it, now was the only chance, but with Kashan in control, no one dared approach.

The alchemists confirmed the results, handed them to Kashan's minister, and prepared a report. Before the public announcement, they sent a letter to the king's apartment. Eliza had been bedridden with a fever for two days.

The fact that Shirone had tried to kill her was shocking. Plus, her cheek still hurt from Olina's slap. She hadn't slept a wink the previous night, with her fever reaching 40 degrees.

Orkamp's mental state was also far from normal.

He was furious about the internal interference, and their only hope, Shirone, was under Teraje's protection. The test results were their last hope. If Shirone was confirmed as their child, they would have some leverage.

'I need Shirone. I need Shirone.'

Just then, the interior minister arrived with the documents from the alchemy department.

"Your Majesty, the results are in."

Eliza snatched the documents before Orkamp could react.

Her hands trembled with tension.

She sat on the bed and opened the file. Inside was an official document stamped by the alchemy department.

The paper in her hands shook.

She read every word on the document. When she finally saw the results, tears streamed down her cheeks.

She hugged the document tightly and looked up at the ceiling.

"Oh, my son..."

Olina had stayed up all night nursing Shirone. Her dedication seemed to pay off as his fever subsided a bit by morning. Amy looked at Shirone with pity.

The Kashan medical team said there was a high chance he would wake up within 24 hours. But if he didn't, they couldn't predict when he would regain consciousness.

It might take a day or two, but in the worst case, he could remain in a vegetative state for over a year.

'Well, he did cast an unbelievable spell.'

A monster from the first level of the deep had clawed, torn, and ripped apart Shirone's mind.

It was like tearing a child's blanket to cover an adult's body. Even considering Shirone's rapid growth, it would take at least five years of training to reach that level.

The mental shock he had suffered was unimaginable.

Could he recover?

If his mental resilience had lost its elasticity, he would be a wreck for life.

'Sigh, what am I thinking? Shirone wouldn't... Shirone...'

There was a knock at the door. When Reina opened it, Eliza's maid bowed.

Amy thought the inevitable had come.

"The queen requests your presence, Olina."

Olina nodded calmly.

She changed the wet cloth on Shirone's forehead, kissed his cheek, and prepared to leave.

"Let's go. Lead the way."

Vincent followed with a worried expression.

"Dear, let me go with you."

"No. The queen called for me. Don't worry. I'll be back soon."

Olina had her reasons for needing to meet Eliza alone.

If the charge of assaulting royalty was upheld, she wouldn't be the only one facing execution. She had to negotiate to protect her family.

The Grand Hall still bore the marks of the battle. The debris had been cleared, but the collapsed floor was temporarily repaired with planks, and the broken pillars were left untouched.

The king and queen's attire was more elaborate than ever.

Olina could sense their desperate attempt to hide the humiliation of losing control to Kashan.

Eliza looked down at Olina arrogantly, but when Olina didn't avert her gaze, she felt a pang of confusion.

When they first met, she had been too scared to even make eye contact. But now, why was she glaring at the queen of a nation? Was it because she was a mother? Perhaps.

But she couldn't accept it in her heart.

'If our positions were reversed... could I do the same as her?'

It seemed like something any mother could do, yet it wasn't something just anyone could do, a contradictory thought.

"I clearly remember what you did to me."

Olina let out a very small scoff.

Orkamp thought she had dust in her nose, but Eliza, being a woman, knew it was a scoff.

Her eyes seemed to say, "If there's one thing I regret most in my life, it's that I only slapped you once."

"Do you think I'm a pathetic mother?"

"I'm not someone who can judge others. I just couldn't allow my child to be harmed."

Olina replied, bowing her head respectfully.

Orkamp couldn't sense the high-density psychological warfare going on between the women, so he kept his mouth shut.

Eliza recalled the situation when Shirone had gone berserk.

"Yes, it was scary. But Shirone attacked me. If I had gotten closer, I might have died. You act like you did something greater than me, but what would you have done in my situation?"

"I would still have gone to Shirone."

"Why? Because you're a mother?"

"Because my child was stabbed with a knife."

Chapter

313: The Wheel of Causality (5)

Eliza's sneer froze.

"Your Majesty, I don't know what happened that day. All I could see was the knife stuck in my blood-soaked son's stomach. I couldn't think of anything else, and I ended up committing an unforgivable rudeness to you."

Eliza gripped the armrest of her chair tightly.

"Hmph! How shameless! Well, commoners might think you're right! All they have are their emotions! But I think differently! You almost turned your son into a parricide!"

"If it's something Shirone chose, I have to accept it."

"Accept it? That's a very convenient way of thinking. No, it's cowardly. Shirone tried to kill me. Are you saying I don't even have the right to criticize him?"

"Parents don't have that right."

Eliza ground her teeth and stood up, looking ready to order an execution.

Oline continued speaking, her gaze lowered.

"Parents only have the years to teach their children not to do such things."

Eliza's mind went blank. She wanted to think of something, but her thoughts were as white as a blank sheet of paper, and she sank back into her chair.

"Your Majesty, I have been by Shirone's side for 18 years. So now, no matter what my son does, it's all my fault. Please punish me."

Parents don't have the right to reject their children's decisions. But they are given countless years to ensure such decisions are never made.

Tears welled up in Eliza's eyes. She didn't have that. The moment she abandoned her child, that precious time disappeared as well.

The silence of the Grand Hall was broken by a guard's announcement.

"Your Majesty, Shirone requests an audience."

Olina turned to the door in surprise.

Orkamp had also heard that they didn't know when Shirone would regain consciousness. After a moment of thought, he gave a solemn order.

"Let him in."

Shirone, looking haggard, walked in along the red carpet. Behind him were Amy, Reina, and Vincent. Vincent sighed in relief upon seeing Olina unharmed.

"So, what is it? You don't look well. If it's not urgent, we can talk after you've rested."

Shirone hesitated to speak. Having rushed here as soon as he regained consciousness, he didn't think he could raise his voice much.

He approached Orkamp as closely as possible and spoke bluntly.

"I will leave the castle immediately."

Amy, Reina, and his parents turned their heads in shock. Even when he insisted on meeting Orkamp as soon as he woke up, they hadn't expected him to announce his departure so quickly.

"I realized something while I was here. From this moment on, aside from my parents who are with me, I have no other parents."

It was a vow Shirone made for life, a declaration to sever all ties with Kazra.

Orkamp, deep in thought, finally spoke.

"I permit it."

This time, everyone's eyes turned to Orkamp.

But he showed no particular emotion, as if he had already prepared for this. He simply met Shirone's gaze calmly.

"Reina, please prepare the carriage. I'll go back to my room and pack."

Shirone didn't look back once as he left the Grand Hall. It was clear how much he detested the place.

Reina glanced at Eliza. With Orkamp's permission, she hoped to quietly resolve Olina's matter as well.

As she turned to leave with the group, Eliza's cold voice stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going? We still have unresolved matters."

Olina frowned and turned around. Her heart was pounding, but she didn't want to show any weakness now.

"The reason I called you is that I haven't decided on your punishment. I thought about executing you, but that wouldn't satisfy me. At first, I considered blinding you or cutting out your tongue."

Vincent's face turned red with anger. If they did such a thing, he was ready to escape with Olina, even if it meant dying here.

"But that didn't satisfy me either. So I thought about it and came up with the perfect punishment. And that is..."

Everyone held their breath, waiting for her to continue.

Eliza, observing their reactions with sleepy eyes, finally spoke.

"Just letting you go."

"...What?"

Amy asked reflexively. The others were equally puzzled.

"If I harmed you, Shirone would always look to you. That bothered me. So I'm letting you go. I want you to live your life constantly comparing yourself to me, the queen, and feeling envy and jealousy until your dying breath."

Everyone was speechless. It was a vicious way of thinking, regardless of the severity of the punishment.

Eliza, who had been radiating murderous intent, soon looked exhausted and rummaged through her clothes.

"But just in case, though it's unlikely, if you managed to convince me, I thought I should give you this. And... you won."

A crumpled piece of paper rolled from Eliza's hand to the floor.

Olina picked it up and slowly unfolded it. It was the official document with the results of Orkamp and Shirone's paternity test. Having taught Shirone to read, she could understand most of it, except for some difficult terms.

She quickly skimmed through the complex experimental details and focused on the most important result.

Everyone's eyes were on the document, unable to wait any longer.

The blood samples of Client 1 and Client 2 were dissolved in oxytamine and kept in a vacuum state for three days. No changes in color, concentration, or sediment were observed. Therefore, based on the negative oxytamine reaction, it is concluded that Client 1 (Orkamp) and Client 2 (Shirone) are not biologically related.

"Oh my..."

Orkamp and Shirone were not father and son. Biologically, they were complete strangers.

Amy looked at Orkamp. She finally understood why he had been so indifferent earlier.

"How is this possible?"

"I don't know. And I don't need to. There's a zero percent chance of tampering, so don't worry. Anyway, he's not my son, so take the document. You might need it."

Eliza added.

"Shirone doesn't know yet. Whether you tell him the truth or not is up to you. Considering your rudeness two days ago, I would prefer to remain Shirone's real mother forever, but I'll forgive you this time, thinking you did what I should have done."

Olina looked up in surprise.

Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed like Eliza smiled for a moment.

"Go back now. Shirone is your son."

The third basement floor of Kazra Castle was a dungeon where many political prisoners were taken during times of internal turmoil. They hadn't seen sunlight for decades and likely never would.

Some nobles married their torturers. Gender didn't matter. It was a love that transcended the barriers of sex, a pure union between living beings, at least in their minds.

What did it matter? To them, the end of the world was the walls of the dungeon. And this place was a completely isolated society from the human world.

Uorin walked on the dirt floor, filled with the smell of pus. Numerous underground creatures scattered as she walked. They were the daily food for the isolated prisoners.

"Uuuuh. Uuuuh."

Strange sounds leaked from the doors installed in the walls. It sounded like pain, but also like pleasure. It sounded like crying, but somehow, it felt like they were laughing.

The Kingdom of Kazra had neglected this place for five years.

Now, they were useless lives, but someone might have endured the torture and held dangerous information, waiting for the right moment. There was no need to bring them to the surface and create trouble. It was best to let them rot away forever.

Uorin recalled a novel her predecessor had read 80 years ago.

The protagonist was a child born in a dungeon that had been neglected for 70 years.

The novel depicted the dungeon as an ant society. Women were valued for giving birth, and male children were used as food or became slaves for life.

The protagonist was born as Food 141. But with the help of the oldest man in the dungeon, he became a slave.

The old man was a top noble 70 years ago, the only one who knew the outside world. Knowing his life was short, he passed all his knowledge to the protagonist.

When the protagonist turned fifteen, a rebellion broke out in the kingdom. The dungeon was opened for the first time in 85 years, and the protagonist escaped to the outside world, quelled the rebellion, and became king.

Uorin smiled.

A novel is just a novel, but who knows? Maybe Zion would experience such a miracle and escape this place.

When Uorin found Zion in the food storage, he was barely alive, relying on Armand's recovery program.

He would have died if left alone. And perhaps, that would have been happier for him.

Zion wouldn't know who saved him. Who ordered the torture as soon as he regained consciousness. Who threw him into the dungeon after he confessed what happened in Shirone's mind.

Zion sat in a makeshift wooden cell.

He knew how miserable the dungeon was. His eyes were swollen from crying all night, and he looked dazed, like someone who had lost his mind.

Hearing footsteps, he instinctively curled up. But when he saw Uorin's face in the dim torchlight, he brightened and clung to the bars.

"Uorin! Here, here! Get me out! Where have you been?

Some weird guys tortured me and threw me in here!"

Despite Zion's whining like a child asking for milk, Uorin felt no maternal affection.

Her son's abilities didn't manifest in him. To her, a self-replicating being, her son was just an empty shell resembling her in appearance.

Zion's face was a mess from the torture. The places where he had been hit were covered in scabs, and his eyes were bruised. His ribs were broken and wrapped in bandages.

Despite his difficulty moving, his frantic behavior showed how terrifying the dungeon was.

"You look terrible. How did you end up like this, brother?"

Zion's eyes lit up when he saw the sword Uorin was carrying.

Even though it was sheathed, the hilt was unmistakably that of the . It was clear she had brought it to help him escape.

"Damn it! I won't let that bastard get away with this. Shirone is still in the castle, right? No matter, I'll find him and kill him."

Zion reached out through the bars to grab Armand.

Uorin took a step back. When Zion looked at her in confusion, she smiled and showed him the prison key.

"What? I've already been released? You should have told me sooner."

As soon as the lock was opened, Zion eagerly pushed the door and stepped out of the cell. At the same time, Uorin grabbed his neck and shoved him back inside.

"Ugh...!"

Zion slumped to the ground, his head hitting the wall. Uorin leaned in, still holding his neck.

"Do you still not understand the situation, you pathetic human?"

"U-Uorin...! Why are you doing this...!"

"Do you know why I didn't kill you?"

Zion was one of the few who had reached the first level of Shirone's deep mind. He had already revealed much, but he might still be useful someday.

"You must not reveal anything you have seen, heard, or experienced. If you even think of something, I will destroy your brain. If you try to do anything, I will destroy your limbs."

Zion realized from Uorin's cold tone that it was like hearing his mother's icy voice.

Chapter 314: The Wheel of Causality (6)

The instinctive thought was to get out of there.

To activate the Diamond Armor, he needed to grasp the sword. But Armand's hilt was too far away.

'Direct Control...!'

Armand, responding to Zion's mental wave, began to slide out of its sheath with a watery sound. But before it could reach Zion's hand, Uorin swiftly grabbed the hilt with her left hand.

Zion glared at Uorin with hostility.

This wasn't the sister he knew. Not only had she grabbed Armand's hilt without looking, but she was also holding the sword in place with a strength that defied explanation.

Uorin slowly moved the arm holding Armand in a reverse grip. Zion commanded the sword again, but Armand only vibrated in place, unable to break free.

As the blade approached Zion's neck, the vibration grew louder. Uorin's wrist, visible outside her sleeve, was as slender as that of an ordinary girl. He had never heard of her training in swordsmanship.

'How does she have this strength?'

Uorin's face remained calm, showing no sign of exertion.

But in her mind, a powerful force of will was at work. In heaven, this technique was called Incarnation. In this world, swordsmen referred to it as Divine Transcendence.

Uorin slowly moved the sword toward Zion's neck. Even with Divine Transcendence, it would be ineffective without physical support, but Zion's weak mental strength posed no problem.

"You are not worthy to be the master of this sword."

As Armand moved against his will, Zion's mind grew hazy. Finally, the blade touched his neck. The vibration intensified, cutting into his skin.

"Cancel the contract. Otherwise, your head will be severed." The blade felt icy cold where it touched, then suddenly burned like fire, making him scream involuntarily.

"Cancel the contract!"

At Zion's shout, Armand's vibration ceased.

Only then did Uorin release Zion's neck and sheath Armand.

"This sword is too precious for you. I'll put it to good use."

Zion, slumped against the wall, rubbed his neck where her hand had left a mark.

"Who... who are you?"

"You would do well to heed my words, mortal."

Leaving those words behind, Uorin exited the cell.

The door was open, but Zion couldn't move. Only after she disappeared did he realize the reality of his situation.

He must do nothing. Until she released him, he would rot in the dungeon forever.

Overwhelmed by despair, tears streamed down his face. He slowly collapsed to the side, curling up in a corner and trembling.

Uorin sheathed Armand and left the dungeon.

The combat-ready silver sheath had been custom-made by a craftsman. Gold was the most stylish, but she had excluded it for practical reasons.

"I hope he likes it."

As she exited the castle gate, all traces of Teraje disappeared from Uorin's face.

She reverted to a fresh-faced 14-year-old girl, smiling brightly as she ran toward the carriage.

"Shirone!"

Shirone, who was loading luggage onto the carriage, turned his head. Uorin was waving as she approached. For a moment, a nerve in his brain seemed to pass through a certain point, but it was just an empty space. After blinking

a few times, he smiled lightly. He had severed ties with Orkamp, but he wanted to see her again.

He had heard that Teraje's personal guard, the Wind Spirit, had taken him when he lost consciousness. It was clear Uorin had helped. Without the she had given him, he would have been dead from Zenogger's strike.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes. Thank you for everything. I felt bad about leaving without saying goodbye."

"Hehe, no need for formalities between us. We'll see each other again, right?"

Shirone scratched his eyebrow awkwardly.

He had been in critical condition until recently, but fortunately, his mind was mostly intact. If he continued his life as a mage, Uorin would be an unavoidable presence. But having just gained the freedom he longed for, he hoped not to get entangled again.

"Are you still upset with me?"

"It's not that. But we're too different."

Uorin smiled bitterly.

Anyone who had experienced what he did at the castle would feel the same. But hearing it from someone she had hoped would be her future husband was disheartening.

"Still... you consider me a friend, right?"

"Of course. No, you're my savior. You saved my life."

"Then that's enough. Don't worry. I won't bother you again."

Shirone realized the futility of words. Uorin had taught him that. But he appreciated her consideration.

"Take care."

"Oh! And this..."

Uorin handed him the sword she had been carrying.

It was unmistakably Armand. Shirone stared at it, puzzled, as Uorin explained.

"I'm giving it to you as a gift. Zion won't be out of the dungeon for a long time."

He had heard from Reina that Zion was alive. He didn't know the details, but Teraje had personally imprisoned him for disgracing their bloodline.

Armand shone with a tempting light, just as it had in Zion's gallery. But Shirone hesitated to accept it. He didn't want to owe the royal family again.

Amy understood his feelings. Just hearing the names Teraje or Kazra gave her a headache. But this was an S-class object. Only a fool would refuse it.

"Shirone, it's rude to refuse a gift."

When Shirone looked at her with half-closed eyes, Amy stuck out her tongue and stepped back.

Uorin, as if to reassure him, pushed the sword into his hands.

"It's okay to accept it. It's a token of appreciation from the Kingdom of Kazra. You went through a lot because of the castle's situation. Don't think of it as a debt."

Uorin was sincere this time. It wasn't a debt. She considered it a dowry of sorts.

With such words, it was hard to resist. But it was still an excessive gift.

S-class objects were rare even among royalty. And Armand wasn't just for show; it was specialized for combat. He couldn't even guess its market value.

"I don't know if I should accept it. I'm not a swordsman. It should go to someone who needs it more."

"Hehe, you don't know Armand's true value yet. Just make a contract. If you don't like it, you can always cancel."

Shirone finally took Armand. But having never dealt with a contract object, he didn't know how to proceed.

"So, how do I do this?"

"Hold the sword with both hands, stand it vertically, and say, 'I, the great mage Shirone, command Armand to obey me.'"

Shirone looked at Uorin incredulously. She smiled sheepishly.

"Just say 'Contract.'"

Shirone drew Armand and said, "Contract." The jewel glowed, and a majestic vibration spread through his palm.

"Is the contract done? I don't feel anything."

He knew that shared consciousness with its user. But he felt no different than before.

"It's because you haven't activated Armand yet. Direct Control requires copying the user's brain with Diamond Armor. Say 'Diamond Armor.'"

Amy, who had seen Diamond Armor in action, swallowed nervously.

The blade opened into a skeletal frame, enveloping Shirone's face. Unlike Zion, who transformed instantly, it took time for a first-time user.

The metal frame spiraled along his muscle lines. Once the frame was complete, a thin needle entered Shirone's central nervous system.

"Gasp!"

-Scanning new user's brain. Analyzing. Specializing in mental activity. Activating linguistic cognitive abilities.

A grand voice echoed in his mind, as if transmitted through a golden crown. The frame tightened around his body, and organic material flowed out.

Amy realized Armand was transforming into a robe, not armor.

Light bone-like gauntlets formed on his wrists, and the organic material turned into a hood covering his face.

Finally, a cloak spread out like a stream of water.

-Activating neural network. Detecting focal points. Relaxing beta waves. Maximizing theta waves. Searching for time division sections. Usable. Suggesting materialization.

Approved. Creating exobrain. Searching for conceptual term. External.

A pressure was felt on the leather of his right gauntlet.

Looking at his palm, he saw a convex glass hemisphere embedded there. Light emanated from it, forming a glassy substance in the air.

A completed amethyst orb quickly circled around Shirone. It was an external brain, specialized for his time division ability.

"Wow..."

Everyone watching Shirone was wide-eyed.

With the hood on, Shirone looked like a perfect professional mage. The organic material forming the robe was desert-colored, not flashy, but it made him look stronger.

Unaware of his changed appearance, Shirone was amazed by the internal changes. His physical abilities had increased, but his mind felt refreshingly clear. It was at least twice as invigorating as his best condition.

Most of all, he loved the external brain. It was a duplicate of his own brain, so he still had only one slot, but his time division speed could increase dramatically. It was almost like having a double Spirit Zone when using passive magic.

"This is incredible..."

Uorin nodded with a satisfied smile.

"Armand enhances the user's strengths and compensates for weaknesses. Now deactivate Diamond Armor and try Direct Control."

When Shirone thought of deactivating, the Diamond Armor disassembled.

Armand, now a sleek sword, flew through the air at Shirone's command. Having achieved mental integration through the Diamond Armor, the shared consciousness felt natural.

Armand flew low and entered its sheath on the ground. Then it flew to Shirone's side, attaching itself like a belt. This was Armand's way of ensuring it didn't burden the mage's body with any weight.

"Thank you. But no matter how I think about it, this is too much. It's an S-class object."

"Oh, brother, you really are something. But that's why I like you."

Uorin tested him slightly, but Shirone didn't seem to catch any special meaning.

Maybe it's too soon? But someday... She thought, as she held Shirone's arm to ease his burden.

"It's okay. Objects like this need to meet the right owner to be truly effective. Please take good care of it. See you next time."

With that, Uorin turned and walked away. She knew Shirone's personality well enough to understand that if she didn't leave decisively, he wouldn't be able to depart for hours.

Shirone felt grateful for Uorin's consideration and got into the carriage.

As the horses neighed and the carriage started moving, Shirone's group cheered.

Going home felt like a dream.

For a while, the carriage was lively with chatter. They gossiped about the Kazra nobles and speculated about .

After an hour, the carriage, furnished like a home, fell into a peaceful silence.

Chapter 315: The Wheel of Causality (7)

Shirone, still reeling from the mental shock, lay down on the bed and fell asleep. Vincent and Olina sat on the opposite bed, while Amy sat on the floor, gazing out the window. Lost in thought, Reina finally spoke with a relieved expression.

"Phew, those were a really long four days."

Amy, enjoying the breeze, turned around.

"Indeed. And I was really surprised. Orkamp wasn't his real father."

Vincent shook his head, recalling the events.

"I was just as shocked. When my wife went into the Grand Hall, I thought we'd be buried here."

Reina looked at Olina.

"So, what will you do? Will you tell Shirone the truth?"

"I've thought about it, and I think it's better not to. He'll find out eventually anyway."

Amy asked, "Why not? Queen Eliza even gave you an official document stating he wasn't her child. You should make it clear to Shirone that she's not his real mother."

"I saw Shirone's eyes when he entered the Grand Hall.

Maybe he already knew they weren't his real parents."

Reina agreed. "He's smart and perceptive. Shirone said he had no parents other than you two. Maybe he said that assuming other real parents might show up."

Thinking about it, it made sense. At first, they thought his words were out of betrayal, but Shirone wasn't one to throw tantrums.

"He's a good kid. He spoke boldly in front of the queen, but he's really an exceptional son. I feel ashamed for dragging

him into this mess."

Reina offered words of comfort. "Don't think that way. It was unavoidable. The place and time they abandoned their child matched, and it was the only case of an abandoned child at that time."

"Wait a minute!"

Amy seemed to realize something and raised her hand.

The maid who abandoned her son said she left him in the stable at the Valley of Dawn. That's why Shirone was invited to the castle as a likely candidate. But the results showed he wasn't their child.

"Then who is Shirone?"

Everyone fell silent, understanding the weight of the question.

If he wasn't Orkamp's child, who had abandoned Shirone?

Vincent vividly recalled that night. He heard a baby's cry while sleeping and went to the stable. But there were no signs of anyone having been there.

What happened that night? Why couldn't they find Orkamp's child? What did Shirone realize that made him say those words to Orkamp?

With countless answers buried deep within, Shirone remained in a deep sleep.

Armin arrived in Toshka Village. He had heard on the way back that Shirone was safe.

But now he had his own problems. If rumors spread that he was involved with a Black Line mage, the higher-ups wouldn't stay quiet.

'It should be fine. I explained everything clearly.'

He had explained to Amy why he wore a mask, so she would keep her promise.

Even if she didn't, there was nothing he could do. Trust was fundamental.

Armin looked up at the house surrounded by a time barrier. It was deathly quiet.

Sighing, he cast a Flicker spell and found himself inside the room.

As soon as he arrived at the spot where he had cast the Stop spell, time resumed, and a vase shattered.

Keira glared at Armin. She had been distracted by the falling vase and couldn't tell how much his position had changed.

"How many days... has it been?"

"About four days..."

Keira bit her lip in frustration.

"So you went after all? Even though I told you not to?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't lie to me! Otherwise, why would you cast a time barrier?"

Armin lied calmly. "I was just angry and needed time to think."

Keira scoffed. Who would believe that?

But what infuriated her was that she had no way to confirm it. His confident lie meant he had left no trace. So he still held the upper hand.

"Fine. I'll report to the higher-ups. But first, report to me."

"I'll say it again, I didn't go anywhere."

Keira ground her teeth.

Armin was known for his stubbornness since joining the organization. Once he clammed up, no method could make him talk.

Just then, a small red bird flew through the wall. It was a Telebird sent by the higher-ups.

The level of photomancy required was extreme, and flying 78,000 kilometers to deliver information was only possible for a mage who had reached the pinnacle of information magic.

A red Telebird signified a Level 1 crisis.

The bird glowed red and inscribed letters in the air. Keira's face turned pale as she deciphered the code in real-time.

"This can't be. It can't be this fast..."

Armin watched the red bird vanish like a flame and walked to the window. Before going to Kazra, he would have thought the same as Keira, but not anymore.

"I've changed my mind. Let's go back, Keira. There's something we need to report to the higher-ups."

He wasn't one to change his mind on a whim. Keira guessed that the events in Kazra and the Telebird's message were not entirely unrelated.

"You know something, don't you?"

Armin remained silent.

He hoped Shirone could enjoy his school days a little longer. Once everyone knew, the world would never leave him alone.

'We might meet sooner than expected, Shirone.'

The Kingdom of Kazra cut off all diplomatic channels.

There was no official statement. They only communicated through a hotline that the Kashan Empire had taken over governance.

Allied nations were displeased, but with Teraje standing firm, they couldn't openly exert pressure.

It was the power of the Triumvirate, and thus the Kingdom of Kazra faded from the world's attention.

Shirone rested for a few days and returned to school. The advanced class curriculum was over, but the graduation exam, the school's biggest event, was the next day, so the atmosphere was intense.

Returning to school meant he wasn't royalty, so his classmates' attitudes remained cold. But since it wasn't certain, they couldn't hurl insults like before.

Shirone had felt a bit hurt before leaving, but compared to the humiliation in Kazra, it was child's play. Besides, he had more pressing concerns lately.

A monster was sleeping inside him.

The feeling of a vast memory that once existed, the emptiness in his brain, was proof.

At first, it was just a vague feeling. But as he rested, the outline emerged like a fossil being unearthed.

Some memories were completely lost, but scenes that left a strong impression gradually became clearer.

When the demon forcibly expanded his mind, the pain was unbearable.

Or was it really?

In truth, he felt a bursting sense of liberation at the end of the pain. The acceleration through the rampage was exhilarating, like being high on drugs, and every time magic was activated, a thrilling pleasure flowed through him.

'No, that wasn't me.'

It wasn't him. It was a new being, a fusion of Shirone and the demon. But following that line of thought led to the conclusion that it was still himself.

The demon still slept deep within Sjrone. And the key to unlocking the seal was still in his hand.

'I mustn't open it. If I can't control myself, nothing can be mine.'

The demon had taken control because he was weak. To reverse the master-servant relationship, he needed unwavering strength in any situation.

Shirone went to the training ground. The regular course was over, so no students were around.

After performing a water ceremony for about an hour, he calmly opened his eyes and focused on photons. Taking a magical action of holding a ball with both hands, photons formed between his palms.

The demon had expanded his mind to the brink of the Diamond Body's elasticity collapsing. It couldn't have been a calculated attempt. Without the Diamond Body, he would have been a wreck, confined to a corner.

Shirone was surprised by the different compression of photons.

When preparing for the Supernatural Psychic Science Research Society's presentation, he had strengthened his

Spirit Zone by rebounding his mind daily. But this time, the rebound was far more extreme.

As he concentrated on the divine particles, the light source of the Photon Cannon gradually shrank, transforming into a white sphere with a clear outline. It was like looking at platinum burning in sunlight.

Further compression would exponentially increase the density, creating a spell called Dark Sphere, but it would inevitably lead to a loss of control.

Shirone pressed the photons up and down. The flattened photons flew like a disc, slicing through space and returning. He caught it, split it in two, and shaped it into shurikens. As he extended his hands, the shurikens pierced through space and returned with a reverse spin.

Even after two shapings, the form didn't collapse, so Shirone split it further.

He shaped eight throwing knives with crescent-shaped wings on streamlined bodies, resembling birds, and held them between his fingers.

Crossing his arms in an X, he swung them, and the knives responded sensitively to the wind pressure, slashing through the air with a sound like a swarm of locusts. Anything entering the radius would be shredded instantly.

Shirone gathered the slowing knives, four in each hand. The density was significantly weakened. As he combined the knives like clay, the photons exploded, scattering blade-like flashes. The sparkling fragments of light floated before his eyes like petals.

"Hmm..."

Thanks to controlling the photon's luminescence, he could perform detailed shaping without using fractal batteries. Since function comes from form, the utility of photon-based magic was incomparable to before.

But Shirone wasn't satisfied.

As he pondered, he sensed someone behind him. Turning around, he saw Iruki and Neide with their jaws dropped.

"Oh? When did you guys get here?"

Neide was too stunned to respond.

They had thought it was typical of Shirone to head straight to the training ground upon returning, but this was different. The magic he was using now was on a completely different level from a few days ago.

"What was that just now? A new spell you developed?

What's it called?"

"It doesn't have a name. I was just experimenting with different things. I've managed to control the luminescence of photons. But using it as a weapon seems inefficient. I need to think about it more."

Photons are inherently difficult to shape, so spells involving shaping consume a lot of mental energy. Unless it was significantly more effective than the Photon Cannon, there was no reason to switch to an attack spell.

Iruki concluded, "So, the spell that left us dumbfounded was just a simple experiment. A piece of trash magic that you'll never look at again."

"...No, it's not that bad."

Iruki chuckled and asked, "What happened? I heard the governance was transferred to Kashan, but what else?"

Chapter 316: One-Third (2)

Shirone shared his experiences in Kazra.

He left out the details about Armin, as Amy had requested, but there was still so much to tell. He had debated with a king, befriended Uorin, the daughter of the queen, clashed with high-ranking officials in the magic department, and demonstrated Ataraxia in front of the highest nobles.

His friends listened with their mouths agape. The scale of events was unbelievable for an eighteen-year-old. Shirone had been to the royal castle.

"So you got stabbed? You really almost died."

Shirone lifted his shirt to show the scar. The stitches were still visible.

Iruki asked worriedly, "Is your head okay? That must have been quite a shock."

"Luckily, after a few days of rest, I'm much better. My stomach still aches, though. Oh, and I brought an object back. Come to my room later, and I'll show you."

"What? Really? Weapons are banned on campus. You got really brave after getting stabbed, huh?"

Shirone waved his hand tiredly. "I didn't want to, but I had no choice."

Armand, too proud to be left behind, tormented Shirone with mental waves every night. He had to promise to bring it along just to get some rest. Like most demon swords, Armand had a very demanding personality.

"Let's go see it now. I can't wait! Diamond Armor! Direct Control!"

"Later. I have somewhere to be right now."

"Where are you going?"

Iruki nudged Neide. "It's the graduation exam. He has to spend the last night with his girlfriend."

Shirone shook his head firmly. "No, it's not like that! Amy followed me to Kazra to help. I want to go support her."

"Sure, sure. Anyway, you should go. The iron gate closes at sunset. Tell her good luck."

Shirone checked the time and was startled. "Oh? It's already this late? I'll be back. See you later."

Leaving the training ground, Shirone headed to the graduation building.

He hadn't sought out Amy immediately because the experiences of the incarnation were floating just beyond his consciousness. The memory of confessing his jealousy to Amy was so vivid that he wanted to hide in a hole.

If he had talked to her right after the incident, it wouldn't be so awkward, but circumstances didn't allow it. Shirone had collapsed in the carriage and was taken home, while Amy returned to school without a break to prepare for the graduation exam.

'Oh no, how am I going to face Amy?'

Shirone shook his head to clear his thoughts.

Amy had followed him to Kazra despite having an important exam. Without her, he wouldn't be attending magic school with a clear mind today.

'Right, for now, I won't think about anything else. Amy's success is the priority.'

She had entered the school at twelve, and now, six years later, her graduation was just a day away. She was ranked fourth in her class, an incredible achievement in just half a year.

'So I won't be able to keep my promise? Well, it doesn't matter.'

Shirone had promised to catch up to Amy, but she had worked tirelessly to reach her high rank. If she graduated, he would gladly acknowledge his defeat.

Passing through the iron gate, the symbol of the graduation class, he saw some seniors walking in the flower beds.

No one looked at Shirone. Today, they were absent. Their minds were entirely focused on tomorrow.

Some seniors were concentrating on mental unification, while others thought it better to relax. A group was gathered around a bonfire, chatting.

Many familiar seniors were there, including Amy and Seriel.

"Oh, there's Shirone!"

"Really?"

Shirone approached with a stiff face. He hadn't expected Amy to be with other seniors.

"Hello..."

Seriel ran up and hugged Shirone's face.

"Shirone! What are you doing here? Did you come to cheer me on?"

Buried in Seriel's chest, Shirone's cheeks burned.

But he felt her body trembling and realized she wasn't joking. He could hear her heart racing.

'This is the graduation class.'

Everyone here had dedicated their lives to becoming mages. And if they passed tomorrow's exam, they would achieve their dream.

The odds were one in three.

It seemed like a high probability when it was someone else's problem. But when he thought about it, the remaining 20 would have to endure another year of fierce competition.

With that thought, Seriel's embrace didn't feel embarrassing.

Shirone hugged her tightly. Everyone had worked hard. He couldn't imagine anyone failing.

But if possible... he hoped she would pass.

"Do your best, senior. I'll be cheering for you."

"Thanks, Shirone."

Only then could Shirone see Seriel's face. It was a mix of fear and excitement.

Even the expression that seemed on the verge of tears was noble. He knew how much effort she had put in to get here.

Shirone turned to Amy.

Unlike Seriel, her face showed no tension or excitement. She was fully prepared. Her six years of growth seemed perfectly aligned for tomorrow.

He felt relieved and grateful. If she had shown any sign of wavering, he would have been tormented by guilt for taking her to Kazra.

"Amy, you too. I'll be cheering for you tomorrow."

"Thanks. I'll do my best."

Amy's mind was like a great river, flowing as one stream of thought. There was no room for awkward memories of Kazra.

Shirone chatted with the seniors. Even the student council president, Amira, was there. She had led a sit-in protest when Shirone was trapped in Miro's Time and Space, but now it was just a memory.

"Finally, tomorrow, this tedious school life ends."

Most nodded at Amira's words. No one thought they would fail the day before the exam.

But Samuel didn't look good.

Shirone remembered when he had come as Etella's demonstration assistant. He had amazed the advanced class students with his incredible ultrasonic magic.

But he had failed the graduation exam last year, and this was his second attempt.

According to the school's statistics, the chances of passing the second time were quite low, so it was natural for him to be nervous.

Amira comforted Samuel.

"Don't worry too much, Samuel. You've worked hard. You almost passed last time. This time, you'll get good results."

"Thanks. You too."

Since no one passed alone, it was humanizing to see competitors encouraging each other.

"Hey, you guys are all here?"

Famous seniors from the school approached.

Richard of Alchemy. Lycan the Electric Monster. Hershey of Sona.

And leading them was Ardino Fermi, the top-ranked student in Class One.

Fermi, always in a suit, looked more like an accountant than a mage. The Ardino family was known as a merchant family. "Why do you all look so serious? Don't be so tense. I've been taking the graduation exam for six years. Haha!"

Fermi joked, but no one laughed.

It was a mystery why he, always the top of the graduation class, hadn't graduated yet. Some rumors said he was a broker who took money to influence the exam, but nothing was confirmed.

"Fermi, aren't you too complacent? If you keep this up, you'll be taking the exam with juniors next year too."

"Haha! Just doing my best. This is something you leave to the heavens."

Fermi felt a gaze and turned. Amy was looking at him boldly.

"Wow, our little lady is as spirited as ever. How's your condition?"

"Perfect. How about you?"

"Me? So-so."

"I hope you take the exam in top condition. Tomorrow, I'll be graduating as the top student."

"Haha! I can't beat you. Alright, let's compete properly.

Tomorrow, we're not classmates but rivals."

As Fermi and his group walked away, those around the bonfire watched them warily. Their skills were one thing, but they were also veterans who had taken the exam at least four times, so their experience couldn't be ignored.

To change the mood, Amira spoke up.

"I visited the World Meteorological Organization last vacation. It was amazing. They have over a thousand professional mages."

"Wow, that's impressive. They say the head of the organization has more power than a king."

Weather controls human needs, food production, and ecosystems. That's why climate mages in the Red Line must pass a national exam, or using magic is a crime. Since there are no borders, international agreements are needed, and the World Meteorological Organization oversees them.

"Even if it's not the World Meteorological Organization, it's powerful. One of my relatives works at the observatory, and even high-ranking nobles can't ignore him."

"But you have to pass the national exam. Someone I know couldn't pass for ten years and had to change majors."

Amira spoke confidently.

"That's why it's a challenge. High risk, high reward is my motto. If I pass, I can aim for the highest position as a mage."

"Yeah, you can do it. If you get a position, make sure to contact me. Haha!"

Having been the student council president, Amira naturally envisioned herself as the head of the World Meteorological Organization.

In the future, when she realized the gap between the two positions, today's words might embarrass her, but what did it matter? Someone would achieve it, making it a dream.

Starting with Amira, everyone shared their aspirations.

Seriel initially dreamed of working at a health center and living a normal life, but now she wanted to develop vaccine magic at the World Health Organization. She believed vaccine magic would lower the cost of medicine.

Amy still aimed to be a soldier, but after visiting Kazra, she had a new sense of mission.

Amy still aimed to be a soldier, but after visiting Kazra, she found a new sense of purpose.

Listening to her, Shirone thought of Zion. When he heard how Zion had threatened Amy with war against Tormia, his blood had boiled, making him want to join the military himself.

Samuel planned to double major. While the Word Magic was important, he intended to study mental magic abroad.

"Wow! Everyone's got tough lives ahead. Let's give it our all! Tomorrow, we'll all become mages!"

"Yeah!"

Shirone felt his heart swell as he looked at the seniors taking their first steps toward their dreams.

He sincerely hoped everyone here would pass.

Morning arrived.

The Colosseum, where the graduation exam would take place, was packed with people.

Though not mandatory, the entire student body had signed up to watch, and most of the graduating class's parents had come to the school. Scouts from various national magic associations and reporters were also present.

Shirone couldn't believe the prominent figures he had only seen in newspapers were casually walking around. It felt more like a political event than a school exam.

"The graduation exam is really something."

Iruki commented nonchalantly, "It's like this every year. It's crazy. I just hope my dad didn't come."

"Shirone, isn't that Amy's father over there?"

Karmis Shakora and his wife Isis were standing arm in arm in front of the Colosseum.

Chapter 317: One-Third (3)

Although retired from active duty, the influence of a first-class noble was immense. Many parents approached him to greet him.

Shirone led his friends to Shakora and took the opportunity to greet him when other nobles weren't around.

"Hello."

"Ah, Shirone. How have you been?"

"Well, thanks to you."

Isis approached with a worried expression.

"Shirone, how is our Amy? Do you think she can pass?"

"How would Shirone know that? Don't stress the boy out," Shakora scolded, making Isis pout.

"Haha! It's okay. I saw her yesterday, and she seemed in good condition."

"Hmm, that's a relief."

Shakora's face showed a hint of relief. Despite trying to appear calm, he was clearly nervous. Even a first-class noble was just a parent when it came to their child.

Iruki and Neide, who were standing behind Shirone, also greeted Shakora. Shakora showed interest when he heard the name Merkodain.

"So, you're Iruki. How is your father?"

"He's... still around, I guess."

It was a cheeky remark for such an occasion, but Shakora just laughed.

Honestly, Iruki was quite polite compared to his notoriously eccentric father.

"Shirone, bring your friends over to our house sometime."

"Yes, I will."

After finishing their greetings, Shakora and Isis headed to the entrance for parents. Shirone entered the Colosseum

through the student entrance.

Although juniors and classmates gave him wary looks, he didn't feel lonely. Students who were only interested in magic, not status, gradually gathered around Shirone. After all, to discuss the exam, you needed to be on the same level.

Dante, Closer, and Sabina approached. On the other side, Canis and Arin appeared, followed by Boyle and Pandora. Finally, Mark, who knew how to use his connections, confidently brought Maria to the best seats.

Except for Mark and Maria, the top ten candidates for the next graduation class were all gathered. Since none of them could afford to be left out of the graduation class, their classmates frowned at their gathering.

Dante smirked and asked, "How does it feel to send your girlfriend to the battlefield?"

Shirone looked down at the arena.

"I don't know yet. What do you think?"

Dante also looked at the arena and said, "There seems to be a difference in skill levels among the participants. Based on objective abilities, she should be in the top ten. But the exam subjects will play a big role. Unexpected situations usually arise from asymmetrical power."

As an information processing major, Dante's analysis was hard to argue with.

While they talked, Sabina waved at Neide.

"Hi."

"Oh, hi."

They weren't close enough to warrant a special greeting, so Neide responded politely.

Sabina stood there for a while, waiting for more conversation, but when Neide showed no interest, she sulkily sat next to Dante. Pandora's scoff was audible.

"Everyone, it's starting."

The 30 students participating in the graduation exam stood in a line in the center of the Colosseum, all wearing 2000-

series bracelets.

However, the audience didn't need bracelets to watch. The exam venue was designed to the highest national standards, making the entire Colosseum a giant Image Zone.

Arin clasped her hands and prayed for Amy's success. Canis frowned and said, "Do you think that helps? If prayers worked, anyone could become a mages. Besides, you don't even believe in God."

"Still, I'm nervous. Don't you want Amy to pass?"

"Why should I care who passes? It's not my exam."

Arin glared at Canis, feeling hurt. But his indifference was only on the surface. As he rested his chin on his hand, watching the arena, he saw Amy, ready for battle, and smiled slightly.

"Do your best, pumpkin."

The faculty, led by Alpheas and Olivia, took their seats.

Parents sat on the left, while scouts and reporters sat on the right.

After Alpheas's opening speech, Olivia explained the exam evaluation criteria.

The exam was divided into two parts, with two out of six subjects chosen by roulette. Since they didn't know which subjects would be chosen, students had to train in all areas. This rule was established to ensure fairness for non-combat mages and to give repeaters a slight advantage, as a courtesy from the Magic Association.

The preliminary event ended with the students pledging to compete fairly.

The 30 participants stood in a circle along the Colosseum wall, and the announcer, Saad, shouted from the podium.

"We will now begin the Alpheas Magic School graduation exam!"

A giant circular hologram appeared in the sky above the Colosseum. The six subjects were evenly divided, and the central pointer began to spin rapidly.

The participants clenched their fists and performed the water ceremony.

The 2000-series would activate the moment the pointer stopped. They had to move instantly.

Finally, the pointer indicated the first exam subject.

"Wow!"

The crowd's cheers filled the Colosseum.

Night fell.

People poured out of the Colosseum's exit, all with excited faces. Shirone's group also remained silent until they were outside.

At the exit, Neide turned to Shirone.

"What now, Shirone? Iruki and I are hungry and need to eat something."

"Go ahead. I'll stay with Amy."

"Alright. See you tomorrow."

After his friends left, Shirone exhaled white breath, warming his cold insides. He turned as light from the Colosseum shone on the scoreboard displaying the names of the successful candidates. The top ten students had become mages and were ready to venture into the world.

1st: Alt Amira

2nd: Ludwig Aconel

3rd: Connie Kale

4th: Tanto Selena

5th: Ekins Samuel

6th: Aresa Depo

7th: Fortress Seriel

8th: Lara Coril

9th: Andres Raul

10th: Dolin Rickston

Amy's name was not there.

She had been the third to be eliminated as soon as the first exam began.

The first evaluation was combat power measurement. Since it favored combat mages, the students focused on targeting

Amy. It was practically a one-sided lynching. Seriel couldn't even intervene before Amy's mental gauge hit zero. It defied expert analysis, but such variables were part of the graduation exam. Amy must have anticipated this and prepared thoroughly.

Still, it felt off.

Collusion in combat is natural. When one side grows stronger, the weaker ones band together. But did it just seem like the strong were colluding?

Initially, it was chaotic. Amy wasn't the only one aspiring to be a combat mage, and with 30 participants, the firepower was dispersed.

But when Fermi's group started acting, the tide turned sharply.

They targeted only Amy, avoiding all other students' attacks.

After about a minute, even the initially unaware students realized that siding with Fermi's group made things easier. Eventually, everyone except Seriel attacked Amy. Even the mighty Amy couldn't withstand such an onslaught. Fermi's group's combat power had to be superior to the combined power of all other participants for such a tactic to work.

Could this be called natural collusion?

The strangest part was that none of Fermi's group passed the exam. It even seemed like they deliberately lost to Samuel.

'Samuel.'

Most students noticed that Fermi's group seemed to support Samuel during the first exam. But the feeling was so subtle that it was hard to judge.

The harshness of the graduation exam? There were too many oddities to dismiss it as that. Most suspicious was that Fermi, who had never lost first place in six years, was at the center of it all.

'Maybe it's just a misunderstanding. There's no guarantee such things won't happen on the battlefield. And even if it's

not a misunderstanding, what can I do about it?'

Simply put, the stronger side won the combat power measurement. Even if it was the result of artificial collusion, it didn't change the evaluation criteria.

'Unless there was a personal deal.'

There could have been an agreement between Fermi and Samuel.

But Shirone quickly dismissed the thought. If it wasn't true, it would be a great insult to Samuel. Besides, if such a thing had happened, the faculty would have already investigated.

'Yeah, no matter how much I think about it, there's nothing I can do.'

Right now, he was only worried about Amy.

Since she was eliminated early, her mental strength should have recovered. But thinking about how she had to watch the exam from the waiting room for a long time made his heart ache.

Amy's parents emerged from the parents' exit. Shirone approached them, unsure of what expression to make.

"Shirone..."

Isis greeted him with tearful eyes. Both Shakora and Isis, a famous dancer, must have noticed the oddities in the combat situation.

"Shirone, how could this happen? Amy was eliminated. It's like..."

"Watch your words. How do you think Amy would feel hearing that?"

Shakora cautioned his wife.

He also found some parts suspicious. But nothing was so strange as to be beyond reason.

Except for Fermi's group's elimination, the battlefield's flow was rational and logical. And since the second exam was a non-combat subject, Fermi's group's elimination couldn't be deemed unnatural.

Shirone swallowed dryly as he saw the eliminated students leaving. When he saw Amy among the middle group, his

mind went blank.

Amy glanced at Shirone before approaching her parents. She smiled and stuck out her tongue.

"Hehe, Dad, Mom. Sorry, I failed spectacularly."

"It's just an exam. You did your best, so don't be too disappointed."

"Disappointed? No way. I think I made a mistake in my judgment. I'll just have to try again next year."

Shirone felt relieved by Amy's bright demeanor but also worried.

She couldn't be feeling normal. She was putting her family's feelings first.

Now the successful candidates were coming out. Seriel approached Amy, crying her eyes out.

"Amy, Amy..."

Amy was genuinely happy for her friend's success.

How could she not be? Today, Seriel graduated from magic school and took her first step as a mage.

"Congratulations, Seriel. Do your best for both of us. I'll catch up soon."

Seriel shook her head.

Why wasn't it Amy instead of her? Anyone could see that Amy should have been the one to pass.

She should have realized it sooner. If she had quickly sided with Amy when Fermi's group attacked, the battle might have turned out differently.

"Amy... I..."

Amy grabbed Seriel's shoulders.

"Seriel, get a grip. You passed the exam. Do you understand? You took your graduation exam, and I took mine. And you passed. Nothing else matters."

Seriel swallowed her tears.

She couldn't cry. How could she cry when Amy wasn't?

Chapter 318: One-Third (4)

"I'm sorry. But I'm so upset. I know it's wrong for me to say this to you, who passed..."

"It's okay. I would feel the same way. This isn't the only exam. I'm the one who should apologize. And I don't think I can go to the party."

After the graduation exam, it's a tradition for the successful candidates to have a graduation party. Anyone can attend, but no one who failed has ever gone. There's no need to show up and dampen the spirits of those who passed.

"What's the point of a party now? I'm not going either!"

Amy looked at Seriel with loving eyes. Despite her early elimination, she was proud of her friend who fought through the turmoil to achieve her dream.

"Promise me, Seriel. Promise you'll go to the party. If you don't enjoy this moment, I won't be able to be happy even if I pass next year. I don't want to take away this once-in-a-lifetime joy. Smile proudly for me."

Seriel bit her lip and nodded.

For Amy, who had to fight for another year, this was the most important thing. She could easily set aside her own feelings for her friend.

"Alright. I won't think about anything else. I'll enjoy my success to the fullest. So you have to pass next year."

"That's the spirit. Thank you, Seriel."

A teacher called out from the shadows.

"All successful candidates, gather now! There will be an orientation! Hurry! There's no time!"

The reality of passing would sink in with the sunrise. And with the graduation party late at night, now was the best time for the orientation.

"Go on. See you at the graduation ceremony."

"Okay. You get some rest too."

Before leaving, Seriel looked back at Shirone.

She knew Amy was consciously avoiding eye contact with Shirone. So he was the one who could take care of her until the end.

Shirone nodded reassuringly. Only then did Seriel feel at ease and ran to join the other successful candidates after greeting Amy's parents.

Amy watched her friend's retreating figure with satisfaction and then let out a deep breath.

"Phew, I'm tired. Mom, Dad, you should go too."

"Are you sure? How about we go out for a bit? I can talk to the school."

"No, it's fine. I'm not the only one who failed. Why make such a fuss? We'll see each other soon during the break anyway."

Shakora, understanding his daughter's feelings, said,

"Alright, we'll go. We'll send a carriage for the graduation ceremony. Get some rest tonight."

"Okay. You too, Dad."

Isis turned first, unable to hold back her tears any longer.

Following his wife, Shakora looked back at Shirone.

"Shirone."

"Yes. Don't worry, I'll take care of her."

Shakora conveyed his gratitude with his eyes and walked away. Parental comfort wouldn't help in this situation. It was fortunate Shirone was there.

Left alone with Amy, Shirone said nothing. He would answer if she asked something, but if she remained silent, he would respect that silence.

"Damn it! I failed again!"

"Damn it! How many times do I have to take this graduation exam?"

The silhouettes of disgruntled students emerged from the Colosseum. Shirone recognized Fermi's group by their voices.

Seeing Amy, Fermi changed direction and approached. Despite failing the exam for the seventh time, he showed no sign of disappointment.

"Well, meeting another failure is awkward. Don't be too upset, little lady. That's life. I'm in the same boat. How about joining us..."

Shirone stepped in front of Fermi. The cold look in his eyes made Fermi scratch his head and joke.

"That's a face I'd like to punch. But I'll let it slide today. I'm sore all over because of that little lady. When top contenders clash early, it always ends up like this. My life is a mess too."

Fermi had already put up a defensive barrier and watched Shirone's reaction. But Shirone said nothing.

Fermi turned back to Amy.

"Haha! Anyway, Amy, how about..."

Shirone blocked him again.

This time, Fermi didn't stay silent. His eyes turned cold for a moment as he looked down at Shirone with a domineering gaze.

Shirone calmly met his gaze. Anything Fermi said would only hurt Amy. He didn't want Fermi to approach her.

"Having a boyfriend is nice. Well, enjoy your time together."

Fermi turned and walked away without hesitation. Rejoining his group, he shouted loudly.

"Let's go! Let's drink, you pathetic losers!"

"Haha! Yeah! Let's drink till we drop!"

Shirone looked at Amy. She had turned away and was staring into the distance, seemingly uninterested.

"Let's go, Amy. I'll walk you back."

"...Okay."

As they walked to the graduation dormitory, a heavy silence hung between them.

Amy, staring at the ground, frowned and turned to Shirone.

"Sigh, this is unbearable. Hey!"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you look so down? It's making me feel weird. If you have something to say, just say it. What's bothering you?"

"But I don't have anything to say."

"That's the point. I just failed the graduation exam. I'm not the only one who failed, and even if I were, my life isn't over. So why are you acting like this?"

Amy's words gave Shirone courage.

"Haha! You're right. So, I get another chance too?"

"Hmph, you should be grateful. I won't make this mistake again."

"One mistake is a stepping stone to growth, two mistakes are a disgrace to the family?"

"Of course. And tell your silly friends that next year's graduation class will be brutal. I'll crush their spirits from the start."

To Shirone, Amy's words sounded like an apology for disappointing them.

But she had nothing to worry about. Neide and Iruki were confident Amy would bounce back.

They returned to their usual selves, chatting as they reached the dormitory. Although she had failed the exam, the tension of the past year had lifted.

"Sigh, I'm tired. I need to wash up and sleep."

"Yeah, don't think about anything tonight. Just rest."

"Okay. See you tomorrow. Thanks for walking me back."

With a tired face, Amy said goodbye to Shirone and entered the dormitory. The hallway felt different from the morning, with a slight chill in the air.

Entering her room, Amy closed the door and sighed. No matter how tired she was, she needed to wash off the sweat.

But as she headed to the shower, she stopped. Transparent tears streamed down her face.

"Sob! Sob..."

She was devastated.

So devastated she felt like dying.

Why her? One-third of the students passed, and ten of her study mates had become mages. Why was she the only one left behind?

She had been in top condition. Why was she still at school? Why did she have to endure another year of this hell?

Collapsing onto her bed, Amy clutched her blanket. She couldn't stop her face from contorting into a crying expression.

"Ah... Ah..."

Shirone let go of the doorknob and leaned against the wall. He realized he couldn't see her anymore tonight.

"Ah... Ah..."

Amy's sobs were harsh and breathless.

"..."

But Shirone just looked up at the ceiling with deep eyes, staying there for a long time.

Long past lights-out, the lights were still on in Alpheas's annex. Olivia's angry voice leaked out through the window.

"How could this happen? How did you manage the students?"

It was Olivia's first time supervising the Alpheas Magic School graduation exam, and she was shocked. After the exam, she immediately investigated the students' profiles in the records room.

"These kids here!"

Olivia shook the profiles and threw them onto the table where Alpheas sat.

The papers spread out, revealing several students' names. It was Fermi's group.

Alpheas glanced at the profiles briefly before speaking disinterestedly.

"Calm down. The exam is over. It can't be overturned, and there's no reason to."

"Why not? The participants colluded!"

"Collusion is part of strategy. Situational judgment is crucial in combat."

"Who doesn't know that? The problem is that this collusion was separate from the tactical flow. They had already formed alliances before the exam. Why? What do they gain from it?"

Alpheas couldn't answer that. It had been happening every year since Fermi joined the graduation class.

In a battle royale, there's no particular benefit to targeting a specific person. The strangest part was that they ended up failing too.

"The graduation exam isn't just a school issue. It's a national certification exam. Tactical flow is part of it. A teacher's personal judgment can't change the criteria for passing." Olivia scoffed.

"Do you think I'm blind? Fermi didn't even show half his skills in this exam. He's already good enough to be a professional. He could graduate from the Royal Magic School immediately. How can he not pass for six years?"

"So what should we do? Just let Fermi graduate? Then why have a graduation exam? That would only cause backlash from the students."

Frustrated, Olivia paced the room before collapsing onto the sofa.

"I don't get it. Why doesn't he graduate? What's the benefit of staying in school?"

"I asked him before. He said this place makes money."

Olivia sat up abruptly.

"That's a diploma broker! If he's taking money to help others graduate, it's not just a school issue. It's a crime against the state."

"I investigated but found nothing. Not a single penny."

Olivia rested her chin on her hand, deep in thought.

If there were no records of bribery, it would be a case of no evidence. But based on intuition, it suggested there might be something else going on.

"Fermi... he's an irregular exception, right?"

Alpheas nodded.

"Probably. I don't know how he's making money, but if he's an irregular exception, it's hard to investigate. Unless Fermi uses his magic, there's no way to uncover it. But in seven graduation exams, I've never seen him use it."

"Then shouldn't we start there? Whether he's taking money or using magic for compensation, it's the same. Honestly, Samuel's performance today wasn't great, but he passed. Amy should have taken that spot."

"I had similar thoughts. But it's just something we can say because no one else is here. Without solid evidence, it's impossible. What if we start an investigation and find nothing? Would any noble stand by if their child was accused of a crime?"

Olivia leaned back on the sofa, cooling her heated head with her palm.

"So what will you do? Do you have any ideas?"

"No. As always, we conducted the graduation exam, and the successful candidates became mages. Whether there was bribery or not, that fact doesn't change."

"But we can't say we accurately measured their abilities."

"Can we really say that?"

Olivia raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Chapter 319: One-Third (5)

"If he helped someone for compensation, it's illegal. But what if Fermi just helped someone on a whim? Can we call that unfair?"

Olivia couldn't answer.

"The graduation exam candidates range from first to thirtieth place. But the gap between students isn't consistent every year. Some years, students of similar levels compete, while other years, a standout talent sweeps the competition. Fermi's case isn't different."

"Even so, deliberately failing is a problem. It goes against the purpose of the graduation exam."

Alpheas shook his head.

"Think about Shirone from Class Four. He'll probably join the graduation class next year. If Shirone went pro right now, what level do you think he'd be?"

Olivia put a finger to her lips, pondering.

"Hmm, if we're only talking about combat ability, he could probably compete at level eight. Honestly, below certified Class 6, it's all pretty similar. They just keep overtaking each other."

"We can say that from above, but for students, even certified Class 10 mages are a huge barrier. And that's normal. But there are always students who surpass the typical level. You can't argue fairness just because a few exceptional students are included."

"That's true, but..."

"In terms of competition difficulty, next year's graduation class will be much tougher. The squad moving up to the graduation class next semester is arguably the strongest ever. But will they complain just because the competition is tougher than other years?"

"But those kids won't deliberately fail."

"You can't be sure. I'm not saying they'll deliberately fail, but it's hard to set clear standards for these things. Whether there's bribery or not, the free competition system doesn't change."

Olivia groaned, resting her chin on her hand.

There was no way to overthrow Fermi's regime. What was a mage with professional-level skills, suspected of unregistered practices, thinking by doing this?

"So there's no way to help Amy. It's unfortunate."

"Are you sure Amy would have passed 100% without the collusion?"

Olivia's eyes narrowed at Alpheas's leading question.

"Based on talent alone, yes."

"Karmis's daughter is renowned across the continent. She absorbs everything like a sponge. A jack-of-all-trades, you could say. And she's actually beautiful too."

Olivia glared at Alpheas with cold eyes. But he wasn't wrong, so she sighed.

"Being too pretty is a curse."

"I've watched her since she was twelve. She'll get through this."

They both looked out the window. The school, which had seen countless events over the year, was now as quiet as a stage after a performance.

Thus, the year at the magic school came to an end.

Heaven, Sixth Heaven, Zebul.

The city of angels, Zebul, has two main systems.

One is Inglis, where the Akashic Records are kept, and the other is the Great World War, Archangel Cariel's laboratory.

The Great World War, which had been devastated by Shirone's Photon Cannon, was now fully restored.

The central control system, a massive pillar, was the tallest structure in the Great World War. Next to the pillar emitting multicolored light, a galactic telescope smoothly observed the movements of the stars.

The Great World War had regained its former appearance. But Heaven had not.

Since Shirone's departure, a wind of change had blown through First Heaven, Shamain. The citizens no longer believed in the absolute correctness of the Doctrine of Unity, and some radicals had emerged.

In response, the angels mobilized all their resources to break through Miro's Time and Space.

Leading the charge was Archangel Cariel.

The Archangel of Creation, who had tried to cast the Elixir of Life on Amy, Tess, and Arin, who had been captured by the fallen angel Ikasa.

The most intelligent of the angels, he analyzed the Meta Gate Shirone had left behind when he returned to his original world.

Finally, he found the coordinates to the Land of Earth. But to get there, they had to break through Miro's Time and Space.

"Even with the coordinates, we have to break through. But it's tricky."

"Then what's the point of recovering the coordinates?"

Cariel turned at the majestic voice.

Recognizing the voice, he smiled. Another archangel, Uriel, clad in pure white heavy armor, floated in the air.

Angels are taller than humans, but Uriel was the tallest among them, standing at three meters. His chest armor was so thick it reached his chin.

Cariel flapped his wings of light once, rising to the top of the central control system. A large screen was installed 40 meters high, displaying numerous numbers.

"Not necessarily. There are quite a few Nephilim in the Land of Earth now. Even if we break Miro's Time and Space, we can set up a firewall. But with the coordinates, we can bypass it."

"Break Miro's Time and Space? Wasn't that strategy dismissed long ago?"

Only Anke Ra could dismiss an archangel's proposal. Indeed, Anke Ra had forbidden investigating the Land of Earth after the Final War was blocked by the Maze.

The archangels didn't know why, but they couldn't defy Anke Ra, who governed the Akashic Records.

But Cariel didn't give up.

The decisive factor was Shirone's appearance. His presence changed the citizens. And that change was rapidly amplifying over time.

"I don't intend to defy Ra's will. It's a precaution. The Land of Earth will be conquered someday. It might be too late to prepare then."

"So you're not certain about this experiment either."

Cariel smirked.

He had never been uncertain before. But every attempt had been thwarted by Miro's quick response. It felt like he was playing a game with her from an unseen place.

But today, she would have to give up.

Miro's Time and Space would be breached. Anke Ra wouldn't want it, but... what could he do? It was fate.

Cariel flew past the galactic telescope to the western wall.

Uriel watched for a moment before creating a terrifying gust of wind and catching up in an instant.

"Here it is, my masterpiece for today."

"..."

Uriel couldn't find words to describe it.

Cariel's masterpiece was so massive it occupied a quarter of the Great World War. A rectangular wall, 40 meters wide and 70 meters high.

Uriel, who had seemed like a giant earlier, now felt small in front of the wall.

"It's quite large."

Uriel's acknowledgment made Cariel even more proud.

"I wondered why we couldn't break through Miro's Time and Space. It's because the dimensional wall is inherently unbreakable. But with this Celestial Wall, it's possible. Even

unbreakable liquid shatters when frozen. We'll strike Miro's Time and Space directly."

"A direct hit. So this Celestial Wall represents Miro's Time and Space?"

It was a simplistic but accurate interpretation.

Well, it didn't matter. He had called Uriel for his strength, not his intellect.

"If the Celestial Wall breaks, so will Miro's Time and Space. I wanted to add an amplification circuit, but it's impossible without Ikael's help."

Uriel avoided responding.

Ikael wouldn't help. She was imprisoned for an unforgivable crime, and Shirone's actions had solidified suspicions that she sided with humans.

Cariel tapped the Celestial Wall.

"So, want to give it a try?"

Uriel pondered whether he should break it.

If the Celestial Wall broke, so would Miro's Time and Space. And that went against Anke Ra's will.

"No one can defy Ra's will. Not because he's strong, but because he's the whole."

Whatever the future held, Ra would remain Ra. Cariel knew this, which was why he was taking such a reckless action.

Uriel decided to be honest. From the beginning, it wasn't Ra that bothered him, but Ikael.

"Why... did Ikael abandon us?"

Angels had long conveyed and executed God's will in the Land of Earth. Uriel, in particular, had excelled in destruction. His power overturned the earth and split the sea.

But even Uriel, who had blindly slaughtered humans, questioned his righteousness when he heard rumors that Ikael might side with humans.

Ikael was always right.

No, it wasn't about right or wrong. Even if she wasn't right, he wanted to follow her. If it was his nature to do so, he

would dedicate himself to it, even if it was wrong.

Cariel probably felt the same way throughout his existence. Angels had no concept of a mother. But if they had to choose one, it would be Ikael. The archangel who had cared for them since their birth.

Uriel glanced at Cariel. Seeing his innocent smile reminded him of long ago.

Cariel hadn't always been like this. He was still sly and perverted, but he hadn't been obsessed with creating things. He used to make fun and ingenious items to give to Ikael, who would laugh and pat him.

"Cariel, I can destroy it. You know that. Do you really want this?"

"Haha! This time won't be easy. No, honestly, it has to be destroyed. I want to annihilate the Land of Earth as soon as possible. If we break Miro's Time and Space, today will be that day."

"Why are you in such a hurry? Ra hasn't given any orders. Ymir is still asleep. Is this really necessary?"

Cariel looked out of Zebul. The rebellion that started in First Heaven, Shamain, had spread to Second Heaven, Rakia, where citizens and fallen angels were fighting.

"Shirone has changed Heaven. And this is just the beginning. We must break through the Miro's Time and Space and eliminate the humans on Earth as soon as possible."

Cariel's concern was understandable.

But it didn't make sense for an archangel who had destroyed countless earthly nations to be so anxious about a mere rebellion.

"Do you think destroying humans will bring Ikael back?"

Cariel's face suddenly hardened.

"...What do you mean?"

"Ikael's crime has already been erased. The incident itself no longer exists. Goffin disappeared as a result. Shouldn't we at least forgive her?"

Cariel's halo expanded at a terrifying speed.

As the 40-meter-wide halo spread, the Great World War's mecha system sounded an emergency alarm, reflecting Cariel's current state of mind.

"Erased? Then what are these filthy memories left with us? I don't care about Goffin! It's Ikael who disgusts me! Don't ever mention her again!"

"Are you really going to fight her? Cariel, I'm asking again. Are you really going to fight her?"

Cariel's expression was a mix of sorrow and anger.

"She gave birth to a human child!"

The halo sent out wave-like ripples. As the mecha system flickered on and off, the Great World War blinked.

Chapter 320: Fleeting Rift (2)

Cariel wore an uncharacteristically vicious expression for an archangel. His eyes gleamed with murderous intent, as if he had suffered an unbearable insult.

"How could the leader of the archangels do such a thing? It's like mating with a dog if you compare it to humans! And you want me to forgive her? Could you?"

Uriel couldn't answer.

In a way, Cariel was like his twin. Both were born from the primordial knowledge of the first archangel, Ikael.

But their personalities were as different as their given primordial concepts. And above all, Cariel... truly loved Ikael.

Cariel retracted his halo. But he turned away coldly, clearly hurt.

"If you don't intend to help, then leave. I will break through Miro's Time and Space. I will annihilate all the arrogant humans who defied God's will!"

'...So petty.'

Uriel looked at his back with pity.

The radiant wings, a symbol of the archangel, spread brilliantly, but in some ways, he resembled a human.

Just like Ikael.

'I'm sorry, Ikael. But we still need you, especially Cariel.'

Uriel placed a hand on Cariel's shoulder.

"Alright. I misspoke. I'll join you in this endeavor. So, I just need to break this Celestial Wall or whatever it is?"

Cariel turned back reluctantly, but soon regained his bright expression and continued explaining.

"Yes. But it won't be easy. Even for you, it will take your greatest strength to break it. I've created a material far stronger than anything in this world."

Nodding, Uriel approached the Celestial Wall, passing Cariel. Up close, it appeared as nothing but a black barrier. Examining its molecular structure, he saw it wasn't formed through heat and pressure. Likely an explosion. This wouldn't be easy.

"You remember, Cariel, from long ago."

Uriel transformed his halo into a radiant form.

As information accumulated in the four-meter-wide halo, a glowing club materialized beside him. It was four meters long, with a one-meter shaft and triangular ends, forming the Celestial Club.

"Of all the things you've made, there's nothing I couldn't destroy."

Taking a stance, Uriel spun the Celestial Club rapidly, creating a wheel-like afterimage. As the rotation speed surpassed Mach, the air screeched like metal being torn. Celestial Club Destruction Technique - Celestial Wheel.

"Uoooooooo!"

Archangel Uriel, the angel of destruction, held a primordial concept opposite to Cariel, the angel of creation.

In the beginning, the world was born from an amplification of something. Creation and destruction intertwined, bringing forth all things.

Cariel constantly created, and Uriel destroyed. It was the destiny of the two brothers born from Archangel Ikael, the angel of amplification.

"Here I gooooo!"

Twisting his torso and swinging his arm, Uriel sent the ten-meter-wide Celestial Wheel flying. As he launched his punch, the powerful wheel of light struck the Celestial Wall. Kuuuuuuung!

A massive reverberation filled the Great World War.

But the Celestial Wall didn't budge, and the rebounding Celestial Club flew to the end of the Great World War before returning.

"Haa! Taa! Uooooo!"

Uriel continued to crash the spinning Celestial Wheel into the Celestial Wall.

Cariel, knowing its power better than anyone, winced with each impact.

'Tsk, tsk, so brutish...'

After about ten attacks, Uriel didn't throw the returning Celestial Club again. No matter how hard he hit, it showed no signs of breaking.

"Hmm, this one is quite something."

Cariel smiled broadly, trying to console him.

"No need to overdo it. Even this much will have a tremendous impact on Miro's Time and Space. It's a shame we can't see that woman's terrified face."

Though meant to be comforting, it only fueled Uriel's determination.

Uriel swung his wings forward, retreating far back. After measuring the distance, he spoke.

"Stand back. This time will be different."

Cariel shrugged and flew to the side of the Celestial Wall, signaling for him to go ahead.

"Huuuu."

Uriel took a stance like a heavy infantryman about to charge, exhaling deeply.

As his halo expanded to 20 meters, the information of destruction accumulated. Golden sparks crackled around the halo, causing the Great World War to tremble slightly. Even Cariel, usually quick with a joke, looked worriedly around his lab.

"Uooooooooo!"

Uriel charged at the Celestial Wall.

The 25-meter-wide Celestial Wheel followed, increasing its rotation speed. The atmosphere of the Great World War was

sucked into the wheel's center, creating a fierce wind. Ten meters from the Celestial Wall, Uriel twisted his torso with all his might.

The Celestial Wheel flew in a curve, colliding with the Celestial Wall. The disc's afterimage vanished, and the Celestial Club embedded itself in the surface.

But the rotational inertia was fully contained in the Celestial Club. The massive Celestial Wall shook violently, and white cracks spread across the black surface.

Kaaaaaang!

With a powerful explosion, the Celestial Wall shattered.

Though he lost the bet again, Cariel's face was filled with joy. It was the destiny of their primordial concepts for Uriel to destroy what Cariel created. Cariel had merely applied that destiny constructively.

What mattered was that it broke.

And according to his calculations, it was enough to destroy Miro's Time and Space.

Miro's Time and Space.

Miro had built a temple in an endless, meaningless space. It was an act of squeezing meaning from a vast void.

The temple existed, so she existed. Based on that existence, she erected a massive barrier between Heaven and humanity.

In the grand temple, Miro existed alone.

Sitting in meditation, her biological clock had stopped long ago. In this new time and space, she inherited the destiny of endlessly maintaining the dimensional wall.

'What are you plotting, Cariel?'

Attempts to bypass Miro's Time and Space had always existed, but recently, the approaches had become blatant. She felt cornered.

When Heaven attacked, Miro blocked. It had always worked. But now, she sensed something ominous.

'What are they thinking?'

A powerful impact struck Miro's Time and Space.
Electromagnetic waves hardened the dimensional wall.
Miro's eyes snapped open.

A second and third impact followed.

As Miro's Time and Space shook, the same intensity of shockwaves hit Miro's mind.

'They're directly striking the space-time. Is this a new technique?'

Even with humanity's advancements, they couldn't match Heaven's technology. They must have found a way to break the dimensional wall with a mecha system, not magic.

Kneeling hastily, Miro formed complex hand signs. Crossing her left hand, with the index and thumb touching, and her right hand, with the middle and ring fingers pressed by the thumb, she created a cross.

As she reinforced the dimension with scale magic, the wall thickened.

'This power... Uriel?'

Miro's face contorted. Cold sweat dripped, and her crossed arms trembled.

How much time had passed? Suddenly, the impacts stopped.

Breathing heavily, she collapsed to the floor. Even with the reinforced wall, she couldn't hold out in this state. A new method was needed.

"Ah!"

As the Celestial Wheel struck the Celestial Wall, an unprecedented shockwave hit Miro's Time and Space.

Miro was thrown tens of meters as if directly hit.

Sliding across the floor, she gritted her teeth and endured. Her eyes trembled with confusion.

The impact had cracked Miro's Time and Space.

'At this rate, it'll break. No, it's already broken.'

Miro decided to use her last resort.

Sitting cross-legged, she floated her fist above her palm and closed her eyes. There was no time to deliberate. If the

dimension remained empty for just ten more seconds, Heaven's army would invade without resistance.

'Entering Samadhi.'

Once in Samadhi, she couldn't escape on her own. It was a state of absolute concentration, devoid of any thought.

As the sole guardian of the space-time, she had to remain vigilant. But now, it was time to fall into a deep sleep.

She focused on focusing. And focused again. Repeating the process endlessly, her ego faded, and she reached a state of no thought. Only the inertia of descending into the abyss remained.

In return, she gained immense mental energy. The dimensional wall thickened infinitely, sealing the cracks.

Even Uriel couldn't break it now.

The temple's tremors subsided, but Miro remained motionless, like a stone.

Lost in infinite concentration, she forgot her existence. And unless someone came to wake her, she would remain in that state forever.

"What happened?"

At the top of the central control system, Cariel and Uriel analyzed the experiment's results. Cariel watched the screen with interest.

Miro's Time and Space had cracked. But it quickly recovered before Heaven could exploit it. Miro's response was impressively swift.

Most remarkable was that Miro's Time and Space had become significantly stronger after the recovery. The durability readings on the screen made even Archangel Cariel shiver.

"It's still getting stronger. What did she do? Can a human really achieve this?"

Uriel simplified the complex results.

"Did we fail?"

Cariel smiled wryly.

"But we achieved something. About three seconds by Earth's standards. If we had three more seconds, we could have completely broken it."

"I see."

Uriel didn't feel regret. In fact, he wasn't sure. Maybe he even felt relieved.

"The technology of the Celestial Wall itself can be considered a success. But we underestimated Miro. She truly represents the Nephilim of Earth. How did she strengthen it? Now, even a decent Celestial Wall won't make a dent."

"Humans are strange. They seem infinitely weak but can become infinitely strong. Goffin was like that. Miro is a formidable human too. Maybe that's why Ra blocked access."

"Hmph, they're still just humans."

Cariel didn't acknowledge humans.

They were unclear, chaos itself. That's why Ra controlled their lifespan under the guise of immortality.

"So, what now? The strategy to destroy the dimensional wall failed. It will be harder to attack in the future."

Cariel wasn't worried.

"We'll find another way. What's important is that Miro's Time and Space cracked. Interesting things will happen. This was a good experiment."

Cariel pointed to the monitor. The process of the Celestial Wall experiment was displayed in a 3D image.

A reference line was drawn at a specific point on a large sphere, showing durability values as numbers. When the Celestial Wheel struck, cracks appeared.

Such cracks wouldn't allow Heaven's army or any creature to pass through. But that was within the realm of living beings.

On the outskirts of Heaven, there are all sorts of strange entities that defy human definitions. And at this moment,

something had slipped through the cracks into the Land of Earth.

"What is that...?"

Cariel couldn't answer.

It wasn't due to a lack of knowledge. It was because whatever had entered the Land of Earth existed in an 'unknown state.'

After the magic school's graduation ceremony, Shirone took the carriage sent by the Ozent family back home.

Reflecting on the journey, he realized it had been a year since he enrolled. It was a short time, but so many events had occurred.

Chapter 321: Fleeting Rift (3)

Shirone lay on his bed, enjoying a rare moment of relaxation.

With the next semester marking the start of his final year, he could afford to skip some evaluations. But this also meant it was his last chance to solidify his basics during this break. That's why Iruki and Neide had gone straight back to their families instead of taking a break.

"For now, I should just rest."

Shirone laughed at himself for saying that. But truly, he didn't want to do anything at the moment.

It was the first time he felt this way, and while it was a bit unsettling, the lack of urgency suggested there was a reason for it.

"Looking back, I really worked hard."

Reflecting on the past year, he couldn't believe how he had made it through. It felt like just yesterday he was at the bottom of Class Seven, and now he was among the top in Class Four.

"And I went through a lot."

All the magic school students gave their best, but Shirone had faced many incidents and accidents.

Through life-and-death struggles, he had grown stronger. Honestly, he felt confident he wouldn't be easily pushed around in the final year.

Shirone got up from his bed and approached the . Just seeing it standing there without support made him feel satisfied.

With Direct Control, carrying it around wasn't an issue. But he wouldn't need to use it while attending school.

Unsheathing Armand, a clear high-frequency sound accompanied the blade. It was shorter than a longsword but sharp and well-balanced for practical use.

'Why is it so quiet? Could it be dead?'

It had sent mental waves every night, but since returning home, it had been silent. The lack of response made him wonder if the contract had been canceled.

He hadn't activated Diamond Armor since showing it to his friends. There hadn't been a need, but it also felt awkward for some reason.

When you share something with a sentient being, it's hard to treat it as just an object. Activating Diamond Armor without a specific reason felt like it would be seen as silly. Of course, he knew there was no need for that. It was something he needed to get used to gradually.

'Should I try it? It's my sword, after all...'

It was frustrating to have an S-class object and not use it. He didn't want to fight anyone, but imagining himself in action with Armand made his heart swell.

With a sense of pride, Shirone watched the sword and then spoke the activation word.

"Diamond Armor."

Despite his fear that nothing might happen, the blade opened up and enveloped him.

The transformation was instantaneous. The hood covered his face, and the fibrous cloak billowed out like flames. A glass orb emerged from the gauntlet's palm, and the artificial brain, the External, quickly orbited around him.

"Whew!"

Shirone loved this feeling.

It made his mind feel clearer than ever. The deepened focus point made him feel like he could amplify any magic.

Armand, sharing its user's brain, adjusted its abilities based on the situation. But since there was no combat, there were no special changes.

Shirone approached a full-length mirror and looked at himself. With a shabby robe and hood covering his face, he looked like a proper mage. The External looked more impressive than any other magical tool.

Even if not now, the thought of exploring the world as a professional mage in this form made his heart race.

Shirone clenched his fists and mimicked drawing in magical power.

I am a mage of the Immortal Function. One day, I will become the greatest mage in the world.

"Uoooooooo!"

Shouting towards the ceiling, Shirone's face froze when he saw the door in the mirror. Vincent stood there, looking at Shirone with a bewildered expression.

"Dad!"

Embarrassed, Shirone stomped his feet.

It was a relief he had the hood on. If his face had been visible, it might have burst from the heat.

"Your mom says it's time to eat. Come down."

"Okay."

As Vincent closed the door, he added, "Aren't you a bit old for that?"

Shirone's face burned as he hung his head.

Hearing the door close, he finally took off the hood and grabbed his head.

"Ugh! So embarrassing! It was my first time trying it!"

Thinking that doing things that didn't suit him only brought trouble, Shirone deactivated Armand. The fibers and glass orb were sucked back into the sword.

Using Direct Control, he sheathed the sword and put it in a corner before heading downstairs.

The smell of soup on the table made his stomach growl.

Suddenly very hungry, Shirone sat down and grabbed a spoon. Olina smiled as she ladled soup into his bowl.

"Hungry? Eat up."

"Yes. Thank you!"

Magic school food was nutritious for mages, but nothing beat the taste of home-cooked meals.

As Olina watched her son devour a bowl of soup, she refilled his bowl and asked, "What are your plans for this break? Do you have anything in mind?"

"I'll rest for a while and then start training seriously. But there's something I want to do first."

"Something you want to do?"

"Yes. There's a local festival in the Les Mountains every winter. Can I go?"

Vincent chimed in, "Oh, the old castle ruins. You wanted to go there before."

"Really? I don't remember."

"You were very young. It must have stuck with you. Go ahead. We couldn't afford to take you back then."

Olina rested her chin on her hand and smiled slyly.

No matter how much her son tried to hide it, he couldn't fool his mother.

"So, who are you going with?"

Shirone felt a pang of guilt, even though he hadn't done anything wrong. His face flushed.

"Well... Amy. I haven't asked her yet, though."

"Oh, so it's a date."

"No! I just want to cheer her up... She might not even want to go!"

Olina knew Amy had failed the graduation exam. She wasn't worried. Amy was a considerate and strong girl, as she had seen in Kazra.

Besides, the Karmis family seemed to like Shirone. Didn't they go to the island together in the summer?

"Alright, go ahead. It takes about three days to explore the old castle ruins properly. There are plenty of places to stay, but take good care of Amy. Don't take her to cheer her up and end up needing comfort yourself."

"...Yes."

Olina's last words bothered Shirone, but he agreed without thinking. His instincts told him it was dangerous to delve deeper.

After clearing the dishes, Shirone went to his room to pack. It would take some time to get to Creas, so he needed to leave before noon.

He could teleport and get there faster than a carriage, but he didn't want to break school rules for something trivial.

Wearing a winter coat and a wool scarf, Shirone slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed for the door.

As he grabbed the doorknob, his head buzzed. Turning around, he saw Armand sending mental waves. There was no voice, but the vibrations conveyed its protest.

Sighing, Shirone said, "Sorry, but I can't. Commoners aren't allowed to carry swords. I don't have a weapon permit."

Commoners needed a weapon permit issued by a specific guild to carry weapons. Mages automatically received one, but as a student, Shirone couldn't get it. The S-class Armand was a burden in many ways.

Armand didn't give up, sending more mental waves.

Having a sense of self meant having pride, which made things difficult. It couldn't understand why it wasn't being carried around after forming a contract.

Maybe it had resigned itself when it belonged to Zion. That's why it had sent out tempting lights even with an owner.

'Thinking that way, I feel sorry for it. I haven't treated it better than its previous owner.'

Shirone approached Armand, feeling he had no choice.

Honestly, carrying Armand around made him feel secure in any situation. If he got caught in an inspection, he could use Direct Control to hide it elsewhere.

"Sigh, alright. Let's go."

Shirone opened his coat and called Armand.

The sword flew to his waist. Being shorter than a longsword made it easier to conceal. Covering it with his coat, only the

tip of the sheath was visible. At a glance, no one would notice the sword.

With Armand's mental waves gone, Shirone shook his head and left the room. Considering there were swords that killed their owners, this was a minor inconvenience.

Kingdom of Tormia.

Magic Association in the capital, Bashka.

The Alrog district, where major institutions were concentrated, was particularly unpleasant at noon. The numerous high-rise buildings reflected the sunlight, making it blinding.

The Magic Association, one of the tallest buildings, looked like burning gold.

A neatly dressed woman had been waiting for someone at the Magic Association's main entrance for 30 minutes.

With tanned skin and curly blonde hair tied back, she wore red horn-rimmed glasses. Her small, sharp nose and pink lips, tightly closed, reflected her determined personality. Her slightly downturned eyes gave her a strong impression, but overall, she had an exotic charm not commonly seen in Tormia.

She was Ahoya Kangnan, the chief secretary of the Tormia Magic Association.

The southern nation of Nambang, near the equator, was a federation of many tribes. Kangnan was the last descendant of the now-extinct Wolf Tribe and a warrior trained in the ancient martial art of Ram Muai.

Ahoya Kangnan, the chief secretary of the Tormia Magic Association.

Nambang, a nation near the equator, is a federation of many tribes. Kangnan is the last descendant of the now-extinct Wolf Tribe and a warrior trained in the ancient martial art of Ram Muai.

Despite starting her studies late after moving to Tormia at fifteen, her exceptional intelligence allowed her to rise to

the position of chief secretary of the Magic Association, overcoming fierce competition.

However, the old and lecherous nobles of Tormia did not acknowledge her.

They saw Kangnan as an exotic commoner woman with a perfect figure. Many who tried to flirt with her ended up with torn abs from her knee kicks.

Some of these were high-ranking nobles, but the Magic Association did not fire her. Her skills overshadowed her personality, a typical example.

But today, Kangnan intended to restrain herself. She was waiting for the highest envoy of the neighboring Yakma Republic.

As a decorated carriage appeared at the end of the avenue, she adjusted her attire. She checked her high heels for dust and fixed her horn-rimmed glasses as the carriage arrived. Armored guards opened the door, and a corpulent man emerged. His neck was buried in fat, and his belly protruded like a cannonball. However, his eyes, buried in his eyelids, gleamed sharply.

'He is the highest envoy of a nation. I must be careful.'

Kangnan walked gracefully, her heels clicking, and bowed at a 90-degree angle, holding a file folder in her arms.

"Welcome. I am Ahoya Kangnan, chief secretary of the Magic Association."

"Ah, so you are Kangnan. Nice to meet you. I am Ordon."

Ordon extended his hand for a handshake.

It was good manners for the highest envoy to offer a handshake first, but he had ulterior motives.

Stories of Kangnan sending numerous nobles to the hospital had spread even to foreign social circles. Her exotic looks, commoner status, and the title of an unyielding flower intrigued Ordon.

As Kangnan shook his hand, Ordon subtly rubbed her smooth hand with his thumb.

Kangnan's expression did not change. She had heard rumors about Ordon and was prepared for some inappropriate behavior.

"The president is waiting. I will guide you."

Ordon admired Kangnan's slender waist as he entered the Magic Association.

The fact that she remained unscathed after beating up Tormia's nobles suggested the Magic Association had her back. But she couldn't afford to offend the highest envoy of a foreign nation.

'I'll be the one to pluck that flower.'

Chapter 322: Fleeting Rift (4)

As they ascended to the top floor, Ordan's mouth did not stop moving. Although most of what he said was trivial, Kangnan listened without showing annoyance.

"What percentage of Thormia's population are graduates from magic schools?"

"I believe it's about 72 percent."

"Ah, similar to Yakma then. That's a good sign. School graduates are reliable. Those who come from the streets know only one thing, their adaptability is low, what good would hiring such people do?"

Kangnan was displeased when someone unrelated to magic commented so freely on the association's matters.

"But perhaps improvisation in real-world situations could be considered higher, couldn't it?"

"Ha! Improvisation? That's just pettiness."

'Dirty bureaucracy.'

Kangnan's lips twisted.

She too wasn't a school graduate. Indeed, how could one who only sees the numbers on paperwork understand reality?

Upon entering the reception room, Kangnan sighed as she looked around. Even though a foreign diplomat had arrived, someone who was supposed to be on the same floor hadn't yet appeared.

"Please wait here. I will bring the association president."

As if it were the predetermined course of action, Kangnan diffused the situation and exited the reception room.

Her pace quickened from that moment.

The sound of her high heels, full of killing intent, stopped abruptly. She turned precisely at a right angle and knocked on the door of the president's office.

"This is Kangnan. I'm entering."

No response came, not that she expected any. Kangnan forcefully turned the doorknob and entered.

The room, filled with stifling heat and the smell of sweat, assailed her senses. The sight of the man sitting on the sofa, his groin indecently accentuated by tight square-cut briefs and his legs shamelessly spread, offended her.

The man, a magician who should abstain from tobacco, was clenching a particularly potent cigar between his teeth while gazing at the ceiling. He looked as if he had just finished exercising, his chest heaving.

His wide chest and lean waist, uncharacteristic of a typical magician, his thighs as solid as rock, and his calves sharply defined, did not fit the mold.

However, if any woman other than Kangnan saw the man's body, they might scream. It was covered in scars, looking as if hundreds of worms had writhed over him.

"What do you want, mongrel?"

Kangnan's expression grew fierce.

She had met this man when she was wandering the world alone after the annihilation of the Wolf Tribe and had started a new life with him, but now he seemed not a benefactor but a sworn enemy.

"What do you mean what do I want? I told you that an urgent emissary from Yakma has arrived. They are waiting in the reception room; what are you doing here?"

The man's head slowly rose from behind the sofa.

Despite his muscular body, his face was rugged, with pronounced cheekbones. A scar ran vertically over his left eye, and his lower jaw was also covered in scars, indicating his long sufferings.

Micae Gaold, the president of the Thormia Magic Association.

He was a first-class grand magician of the Red Line and a founding member of the Alpheus Magic School's Supernatural Psychics Research Society.

"An emissary... came?"

"Don't you remember? I told you just an hour ago! Go and receive them now."

Gaold seemed lost in thought.

He couldn't remember. Lately, it seemed he was forgetting more frequently.

What did it matter?

He deeply inhaled his cigar and said curtly,

"No."

Kangnan closed her eyes. She had to be patient.

Thinking of it as saving a pitiful wretch, she reopened her eyes and pulled out an official document sealed with the royal emblem.

"His Highness Adolf himself issued this order. The matter is serious and requires your cooperation regardless of the situation. If you still refuse, I will proceed according to the law."

Gaold leaned back on the sofa, unconcerned, continuing to puff on his cigar with annoyance.

"It's damn troublesome. Can't even be left alone for a second."

"Receiving an emissary is a matter of courtesy every second. Please stop acting like a spoiled brat."

After finishing her sentence, Kangnan muttered under her breath,

"Like a duckling..."

Gaold lifted his head.

"What did you say?"

"...to stop acting like one."

"That's what I said earlier!"

"I was emphasizing."

Kangnan adjusted her glasses with a prim expression and walked towards the wardrobe. Reluctantly, Gaold got up as

she pulled out his official robes.

"Damn! Just let it be something trivial, or I'll show you."

He roughly wiped off the sweat and changed his clothes.

Throwing his cigar on the floor, Gaold strode out of the room and headed toward the reception room.

Opening the door, Ordan greeted him brightly. He couldn't treat a secretary and the president of the association the same way.

After the pleasantries, Ordan got straight to the point. Even as the top emissary, his eyes changed once business began. An aide brought a portable video recording device to the table. Then, a small safe arrived, and Ordan unlocked it himself. Inside the safe was Obscura B.

"Currently, anomalies are occurring around the world including in Yakma. Let's watch the video first."

Once Obscura B was connected, a video appeared. It showed a provincial city still retaining ancient features. Gaold, who had been watching indifferently, suddenly showed interest as his eyes lit up.

People with tongues multiplying inside their mouths were seen eating others.

Following screams, the guard was dispatched. However, the situation escalated uncontrollably as the guards bitten by the mutants underwent the same mutations.

"This happened in a region called Kubelin. Besides Yakma, we haven't obtained videos from other countries. However, rumors say similar diseases have spread. In some areas, there are reports of ghosts."

Gaold focused solely on the video.

Eventually, the kingdom's special forces intervened and subdued the mutants. Some of the magicians collecting samples were ones Gaold knew by name.

Magicians collected samples and set the entire village ablaze with a massive flame.

"After the incident, we performed autopsies on the deceased. Any kind of mutation is based on existing

properties. However, the mutations in the deceased did not match the characteristics of any known creature here."

Gaold returned to his indifferent attitude and yawned lazily.

"So what, are you saying this came from space?"

The video Ordan showed must be top-secret information from Yakma. Showing it to a foreign magician and sharing key information meant they expected something in return. Ordan, Yakma's top diplomat, couldn't have missed Gaold's reaction.

But today wasn't about setting up a negotiation table. It was a transnational matter, with the world's eyes on this meeting.

"It seems something has gone wrong with Miro's Space-Time."

Gaold, who seemed weary, suddenly showed a spark of interest in his eyes, but it was a fleeting change, and his face soon returned to its usual calm.

"So what? What do you want me to do?"

"We'd like to investigate Miro's Space-Time. As you know, it can only be accessed through the Kingdom of Thormia... Of course, I'm not asking for it to be independently opened.

The Valkyries have already approved it."

"That would be through the Alpheus Magic School, precisely."

Gaold showed his displeasure.

Even if he had become a reclusive amnesiac, there were memories he could never forget. Vivid memories of reality still torturously whipped his mind and body.

Gaold leaned back and crossed his legs, manners long forgotten from his mind.

Kangnan sighed, but he didn't care.

"I'll think about it. You can go back now."

Faced with an unexpected response, Ordan's expression turned incredulous.

"Think about it? Do you think I came here to ask you for a favor? This is about international cooperation. I understand

His Highness Adolf has already agreed..."

Gaold's facial muscles twisted abnormally. As if a demon's soul had possessed Gaold's face, two extreme expressions appeared simultaneously.

"Do you think mentioning the king will make me back down? Adolf? Who the hell is he? No one goes without my permission."

The air heated up, and the room's furnishings began to tremble. The emotional conflict between wanting to kill Ordan and restraining himself moved the objects.

This was an extreme beyond human limits. Even Kangnan couldn't intervene this time and swallowed hard.

Ordan hallucinated.

The reception room disappeared, and only he and Gaold sat facing each other, surrounded by hellish flames. The smell of sulfur was intense, and beyond the wall of fire, the screams of the damned could be heard.

What kind of life had this man lived? Having met countless harsh people in the world, this was the first time someone had truly terrified him.

'They say the president of the Thormia Magic Association is a madman...'

Kangnan understood why she hadn't been expelled from the association despite beating many nobles. The head of the association himself was an unparalleled lunatic.

"Get out. Before I kill you."

A man who referred to his own king in such terms. Gaold's words made Ordan realize there was not an iota of falsehood in them. Screaming, he fled the reception room as urine ran down his trousers.

The incident had already occurred, so the reception room was enveloped in heavy silence.

As Gaold's killing intent subsided, Kangnan sat in Ordan's place.

"Did it really have to go this far? You could have sent him away nicely."

"The bastard deserved it. You enjoyed it too, didn't you?"

Kangnan couldn't deny it.

Gaold pulled out a cigar from his pocket and flicked his fingers, igniting a flame that lit the cigar.

In the association where magic controls were active, Gaold was the only one who could wield magic.

"You want me to investigate Miro's Space-Time? Might as well stick my neck out and ask you to smash the back of my head, right?"

"But what really happened? If there's an issue with Miro's Space-Time, Thormia should be the first to show signs."

"Probably. It just hasn't materialized yet. You said the tongue monsters appeared in Kubelin, right? Where the ancient Colosseum was."

"What does that mean?"

"It's not a creature. More like... a concept, I suppose. That concept has crossed over here and settled in areas where human thoughts are concentrated, maybe something like that?"

Kangnan nodded compliantly.

If Gaold said so, it must be true. No one in Valkyrie's command knew as much about the Labyrinth and heaven as Gaold did.

"Why did such phenomena occur?"

"The creatures couldn't cross over. The most likely assumption is that Miro's Space-Time has suffered significant cracks. The Labyrinth could repair that extent. But it won't hold out for long."

Gaold leaned back, fitting the cigar between his fingers. The acrid smoke from the tobacco filled the reception room.

"Kangnan, you'll have to go."

Kangnan straightened up, placing her hands on her knees.

"Give your command."

"Something similar will happen here soon. Investigate everything. Start with places where ancient thoughts might

congregate—historical sites, Colosseums, old church grounds."

Kangnan noted Gaold's orders in her notebook and sprang to her feet, heading for the door. If it was a solo mission, she wouldn't need a carriage, so no matter where an incident occurred in the kingdom, she wouldn't be late.

"Ah, and while you're at it, swing by Creas too."

As Kangnan turned to leave, she paused and looked back.

"The place with the magic school? Do you have a message for Alpheus?"

Gaold tapped on the sofa, lost in thought.

It might seem premature, but if there was an issue with Miro's Space-Time, there was no time to waste. It was time to enact a plan he had devoted his life to.

"Meet a kid named Shirone."

Chapter 323: Second Outing (1)

When Shirone arrived at the Karmis mansion, he checked his appearance and walked through the arch of the main gate.

Through the white iron bars, the unique, free-spirited garden of the Karmis family stretched out.

The guards, who were vigilantly watching the surroundings with sharp eyes, were still the same.

As expected, when Shirone approached, the guard's right hand moved to the handle of the sword at his waist.

"Stop. What is your business here?"

The difference from half a year ago was that they used honorifics.

The guards of noble mansions typically rotate every four hours and change positions monthly, so it was unlikely that the guards from back then were still here.

Nevertheless, the reason they couldn't treat Shirone carelessly was because they sensed an extraordinary aura different from ordinary people.

After attending the magic school for a year, Shirone's appearance had shed much of his rustic look.

Especially the high level of mental strength he had cultivated through practical experience and training was radiating an aura that even the guards, who were not familiar with magic, could feel.

"I'm Amy's friend. Is Amy inside?"

The guards tilted their heads in confusion and exchanged glances.

Shirone had entered Amy's room, which was a forbidden area for men, half a year ago.

But since that day, there had been no instance of a male friend being allowed in, so it was natural for the guards, who were unaware of the incident, to be skeptical.

"There are no scheduled guests today. If you have business, please follow the proper procedures."

It was the expected response.

Shirone smacked his lips and turned around.

He had hoped to get in right away if he was lucky, but since things were complicated, he had no choice but to write a letter and send it to the mansion.

"It's fine. Let him in."

A familiar voice came from inside the gate.

When Shirone turned back, the head butler of the Karmis family, Adel, was standing there with a smile on his face.

The guards straightened up.

To those who lived in the mansion, Adel's kind face felt like that of a grim reaper.

Adel, leaning on his cane, crossed the gate and stopped in front of Shirone, looking into his eyes.

Recalling the memory from half a year ago, Shirone prepared himself.

The eye technique, Pressing, which he had experienced for the first time.

As the head butler of the Karmis family, Adel wouldn't have used his full strength, so Shirone had to stay alert.

But Adel didn't use any technique. He simply bowed politely at a right angle.

"Welcome, young master Shirone."

Shirone, who had been tense, relaxed and quickly bowed in return.

"Yes, have you been well?"

"Haha, an old man's life doesn't change much. You must be here to see Miss Amy."

"Yes, I'm sorry for coming without notice. Is she home?"

Adel scratched his eyebrow awkwardly.

"You must be aware of the situation. Because of that, Miss Amy has been a bit unwell lately. Just the other day, Miss Seriel came by but had to leave."

"Oh, I see."

Seriel was Amy's closest friend. If even she was sent away, it meant Amy was serious.

But Shirone didn't give up.

"Please just tell her I'm here. If she still doesn't want to see me, I'll leave."

Adel hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

In fact, the atmosphere in the mansion had been tense since Amy failed her graduation exam. Since she wasn't the type to show her frustration outwardly, no one had stepped up to comfort her, just watching her mood.

But Shirone might bring a change.

After all, he was the only friend who could enter Amy's house as a man.

"Understood. Please wait a moment."

Adel instructed the guards to treat Shirone with respect and got into the carriage waiting in the garden.

'It's been about half a year. What has he been through?'

As the carriage started, Adel's expression turned serious.

Using Pressing on men approaching Amy was a small pleasure and hobby only the head butler could enjoy.

But this time, he didn't even dare to attempt Pressing.

Shirone's mind had become much sharper than before.

No, 'sharp' wasn't enough to describe it.

'Chilling.'

The moment he tried to use Pressing and met Shirone's eyes, he felt his hair stand on end.

Overall, his temperament didn't seem to have changed much.

He was still intelligent, bright, and kind-hearted, just as he had been half a year ago.

But the energy in his eyes was subtly sharper.

'Something else is living inside him. Something very terrifying...'

It was a fact that only someone of Adel's caliber, the head butler of the prestigious Karmis family, could sense.

He couldn't guess what it was, but if he tried to harm Shirone, it would surely come out and devour him.

In the brief moment their eyes met, Adel realized that such a situation must never happen.

It was that violent and extreme a monster.

'Is it okay to let him in? Of course, he wouldn't have come to see his friend with an uncontrollable demon inside him...'

Adel reserved judgment on this matter.

There was no way the head of the family, Shakora, wouldn't know what he knew. And of course, the person in question would know as well.

Thinking that far, a bitter smile appeared on his face.

'...What an extraordinary boy.'

How long had it been since he felt his legs go weak, even for a moment?

Shirone had sealed such a monster deep within himself.

'He's become even stronger in half a year. Truly remarkable talent.'

The Karmis family was known for its lineage of geniuses.

Especially Amy's talent was outstanding even among her family.

But Shirone's growth was beyond imagination.

If Amy was the fastest sprinter among humans, Shirone was a giant with a stride on a different level.

'What drives him?'

As the carriage stopped, so did Adel's thoughts.

With unanswered questions in his mind, he opened the mansion door.

Although quite some time had passed since the graduation exam, a solemn atmosphere still lingered.

For Adel, who had loved the diverse atmosphere of the Karmis family all his life, it was a difficult adjustment.

"Master."

Shakora, who was reading the newspaper, turned his gaze.

"Shirone has come to see Miss Amy. However, Miss Amy has informed the butler's office that she will not meet anyone..."

"Hmm, Shirone?"

Shakora understood Amy's feelings.

His daughter, who was full of pride, had messed up her graduation exam, so how could she face anyone?

But with Shirone, there was room to gauge her intentions.

Although Seriel had been turned away, the emotions between a man and a woman were different.

Isis, who had been listening from the kitchen, came out and spoke.

"I'll go ask Amy."

Isis went upstairs to Amy's room on the second floor.

After a brief conversation, she came back out and approached the railing, shaking her head.

Receiving Amy's message, Adel bowed without hesitation.

"Then I will send Shirone back."

"No, let him in."

At Shakora's words, Isis looked worried.

"But dear, Amy..."

"It's fine. Didn't I tell Shirone to come when I saw him at the school? It's not polite to send him back like this. I want to see him. Let him in."

"Understood."

Thinking that at least Shirone wouldn't be disappointed, Adel left the mansion with a brighter face.

Ten minutes later, Shirone arrived at the mansion.

Shakora was sitting on the sofa waiting, and Isis brought out a tray of tropical fruits just in time.

Shirone walked over to Shakora and bowed.

"Hello, Father."

"Yes, welcome. Have a seat."

Sitting on the sofa, Shirone waited for the conversation to start.

Having heard that the atmosphere in the house wasn't good, he didn't bring up Amy first.

Like Adel, Shakora also immediately noticed the subtle sharpness in Shirone's demeanor.

During the graduation exam, he hadn't had the time to observe closely due to his concern for his daughter, but now that she had failed, he was interested in Shirone's achievements as a parent.

'The kingdom's top prospect...'

Of course, this evaluation excluded the graduating class.

But even including them, he didn't think Shirone's evaluation would drop significantly.

Although he hadn't told Amy, Shakora was an enthusiastic father who had been clipping articles about the magic society since she entered school. The student he had heard about the most was Dante.

When Shirone defeated Dante, the top student in the kingdom, even Shakora was surprised.

But now, seeing him, it was clear it wasn't luck or chance.

In the eyes of this spiritually accomplished monk, there was a burning desire that transcended the mundane world.

Adel had called him a monster, but Shakora thought differently.

That too was Shirone.

'It's not something you can get anywhere. Was it a latent trait that manifested later? But how?'

He had already heard the story of Shirone's rough experiences in the Kazra Kingdom. But even so, it was too transcendental a demon for an eighteen-year-old boy to bear.

Realizing they hadn't spoken for a while, Shakora returned to being a doting father and smiled wryly.

"Actually, she's not very sick."

"Yes, I know."

He had thought as much.

But the reason he didn't think it was a lie was that it might be a condition more serious than physical pain.

Shakora scratched his head as if troubled.

"Honestly, I don't really know. She doesn't seem to be struggling much, but she seems a bit deflated. You would understand, right?"

"Of course. I would feel the same way."

At first, it's bearable.

You might think, since it has come to this, let's start over.

But when you think about having to repeat the grueling training for another year, the failure of the graduation exam hits you to the bone.

With each passing day, the regret grows heavier and the self-reproach endlessly weighs down on your heart.

"Amy is strong. She has truly given her best since she was twelve years old to get this far. That's probably why the wound is deeper."

"Yes, it's best to leave her be for now. Anyway, that's Amy's current state."

Shakora shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of surrender. It meant that with his daughter's mood as it was, there was nothing he could do to help.

Shirone glanced up at the second floor and confirmed that Amy's room was firmly closed.

It seemed he could still hear the sorrowful sobs he had heard outside the dormitory door on the day the graduation exam ended.

"May I go up and see her?"

Isis spoke with a troubled expression.

"I asked, but Amy said she was sick and told me to send you away. If you push in recklessly..."

"Haha! I'll just get hit once, then."

Shirone replied playfully. But at the same time, he conveyed his determination not to give up.

Shakora sighed deeply and fell into thought.

Only Shirone could fully understand Amy's feelings.

Also, the fact that a considerate child was being stubborn meant that Amy's condition was much more serious than expected.

If there was no breakthrough, shock therapy might be a good method.

"Go to Amy's room. I give you permission."

"Thank you."

Shirone got up from the sofa and went up the stairs to the second floor.

Watching him, Isis asked Shakora with a worried expression.

"Dear, what are you going to do? With Amy's personality..."

"It's fine. He understands Amy's current psychological state better than anyone. Actually, Shirone can just leave if it doesn't work out. But the fact that he insists on meeting her means that things can't go on like this."

"What if the situation gets worse?"

"It'll be fine. More importantly, he's a friend Amy trusts."

Isis pouted her lips as she glanced at Shakora.

'Since when did you start praising boys? You doting father...'

Chapter 324: Second Outing (2)

Arriving at Amy's room, Shirone took a deep breath in front of the door.

He listened for any sounds inside but heard nothing.

When he knocked on the door, he finally heard the rustling of blankets.

Clearing his throat, Shirone announced himself.

"It's me, Shirone. I'm coming in."

The sound of the blankets moving stopped abruptly.

When there was no response after a while, Shirone spoke again.

"If you don't open the door, I'll open it myself."

There was a loud thud as something fell off the bed, followed by heavy footsteps.

The door swung open, and Amy appeared with a flushed face.

"What, what is it? Why are you suddenly causing a commotion?"

"I heard you were sick, so I was worried. But you're not sick?"

Amy sighed.

She had long known that clumsy lies wouldn't work on Shirone.

She stepped back, indicating for him to come in, and turned towards the bed.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding. I'm not avoiding people; I just wanted to rest and sort out my thoughts."

"Yeah, I know."

Shirone chuckled and closed the door.

Hearing the door close, Shakora, who was reading the newspaper, smiled.

"He passed the first hurdle."

Isis also shrugged in surprise and headed upstairs with tea.

Normally, she would stay in Amy's room and chat with Shirone, but this time she just set the tea tray and left.

This meant she was entrusting full authority to Shirone.

Sitting across the table from Amy, Shirone couldn't help but laugh when he saw the teacup.

He remembered how Amy had sprayed tea on his face half a year ago.

Amy was thinking the same thing.

But since it was a dark memory for her, she erased it from her mind and picked up the teacup.

"So, what's the matter today? You're not planning to take me to another strange place like last time, are you? I want to rest this vacation."

"Yeah, that's why I came. To let you rest."

Amy looked puzzled.

"Let me rest? How?"

"Let's go on a date."

"Pfffft!"

The tea in Amy's mouth sprayed out like a mist, soaking Shirone's face.

The spray didn't stop until all the tea in her mouth was gone.

Slowly opening his eyes, Shirone spoke in a low voice.

"This is... the second time, I think."

Amy, her face red, wiped her lips and stood up.

"What, what are you talking about! You fool!"

She wiped her mouth with a tissue from the cabinet and threw a few more at Shirone.

As Shirone wiped his face, he spoke.

"Every winter, there's a festival in the Les Mountains. I've always wanted to go, so I thought we could go together if you're interested."

It was certainly unexpected. Shirone, known as a model student, suggesting a trip.

"Are you talking about the old castle ruins? The Ice Queen's relics. I know the place. I've never been there because I've been busy."

"Yeah. Let's go for a 2-night, 3-day trip to refresh ourselves. I've been feeling unmotivated lately and need to recharge. This time, there won't be any dangerous situations, so let's just have fun."

Amy rested her chin on her hand and thought. The biggest concern was the 2-night, 3-day trip.

"Just you and me, without any friends? Where will we sleep?"

"We'll find a place to stay. We can even have discussions at night."

"Aha..."

Amy was at a loss for words.

In essence, he was suggesting they share a room, but he said it so confidently that it left no room for suspicion.

"Are you...?"

Amy started to say something but shook her head.

Trying to clarify might just create unnecessary trouble.

"Why? Is there something bothering you? I think..."

"No, it's fine. Wait outside. I'll get ready and come out. If you tell Dad we're going there, he'll arrange a carriage."

"Okay, I'll wait downstairs."

When Shirone came out sooner than expected, Shakora and Isis looked at him curiously.

But after hearing Shirone's explanation, they quickly understood.

"Oh, the Ice Queen's relics..."

Shakora reminisced about his younger days.

When he was dating Isis, he had taken her to the Ice Queen's relics as a date spot.

"It's a beautiful place. Romantic."

"Yes, I've heard that. But I heard it takes some time to see everything."

Shakora laughed heartily.

"That's part of the charm. You can't see it all in one day.

Alright, go ahead. I'll arrange a carriage. If you leave now, you'll arrive by morning."

Shirone sighed in relief internally.

As parents, they would naturally worry about sending their daughter off alone with a boy. But Shakora even gave advice.

"When you get to the old castle ruins, look for a place called Snow Crystal. My wife and I stayed there. You'll make good memories."

Isis looked at her husband in disbelief.

She seemed about to say something, but Amy came out of her room, and the moment passed.

"Shirone, let's go. Dad, I'm going to the winter festival."

Amy, wearing a red winter coat with rabbit fur, came down the stairs.

Her hair was still steaming from how quickly she had dried it.

Knowing that Amy wasn't one to dress up, Isis was quite surprised by her transformation.

Shirone, too, was momentarily mesmerized by Amy's more mature appearance compared to how she looked at school.

Then he came to his senses and greeted her parents.

"Then, we'll be off."

"Alright, take care."

Since it took over 10 hours to reach the Les Mountains, they had to leave now to arrive by morning.

As Shirone and Amy left the mansion, Isis squinted at her husband.

"Snow Crystal?"

"Why? What's wrong with that place?"

"Are you serious? Do you remember how we ended up getting married? It was because you seduced me there...!"

"Haha! Was it? Anyway, you enjoyed it too."

Isis put her hands on her hips and sighed. It seemed Shakora didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation.

"What are you thinking?"

"If we're going to use shock therapy, we might as well do it right. When the blood rushes to the head and then comes down, it clears the mind."

"And if it doesn't come down?"

"That's for Amy to decide. At eighteen, she's an adult. It's her body, so she should make her own decisions."

Isis shook her head.

The Karmis family's characteristic of producing exceptional talent in any chosen field meant that the family had always valued individual freedom over strict rules and regulations. Letting talent flow naturally, they believed that whatever path was chosen, it would lead to mastery.

The wide spectrum of professions within the family was the Karmis family's greatest strength.

The moment rules and oppression were introduced, talent would be stifled.

Shakora, knowing this better than anyone, had given Amy freedom from a young age, even though it had led to some wayward behavior.

But if this was the history of the Karmis family, Isis had no choice but to accept it.

"Are you sure you can handle the consequences? If you change your mind or blame Amy later, I'll be really angry."

"Handle the consequences? Why would I do that?"

Shakora spread out the newspaper and pretended to read. He had already erased thoughts of his daughter from his mind.

"Shirone will handle it."

The northern hemisphere of Heaven.

The eternal frozen tundra.

In Heaven, it is called Optros.

It was an electromagnetic network pattern that drifted on the cold northern winds for eons.

The fact that the pattern of information exchange was close to infinite meant that it was, in some sense, a divine existence.

However, Optros could not become a god.

For Optros, born in the tundra, Heaven's environment was a dull and boring place without stimulation.

Without stimulation, there is no learning.

Just like a baby abandoned in the mountains would become a beast if it never left the mountains.

Thus, Optros had lived for countless years, repeating meaningless and simple information exchanges.

Then one day, a crack appeared in Miro's space-time.

A small change that living creatures could not even perceive.

But for Optros, it was as thrilling and immense a stimulus as birth and death.

A massive aurora spread across the tundra sky from the magnetic field emitted by Optros.

A three-second crack in Miro's space-time.

Optros broke through the gap and escaped into a new world.

The first destination was the Les Mountains.

The electromagnetic network that constituted it absorbed the unfamiliar environment rapidly, like the brain of a newborn child.

The place where Optros could gather the most information was the castle ruins located halfway up the Les Mountains.

Countless humans were wandering around, all explosively spreading information.

At a level even it did not recognize, Optros instinctively absorbed all the information.

The electromagnetic network flashed with infinite patterns, pioneering new territories.

At dawn, Shirone and Amy arrived at the Les Mountains, grabbed a meal at a food stall, and joined the crowd at the

ticket booth of the old castle ruins.

The entrance to the ticket booth was also crowded with tourists.

After waiting in line and buying tickets, Shirone's eyes widened at the sight before him.

"Wow..."

The old castle ruins had been perfectly restored using ice instead of stone or soil.

The sunlight reflected off the ice, making every scene sparkle like diamonds.

Even the usually bold Amy blushed at the sight.

Shirone was satisfied.

When he had taken her to the Galliant ruins, things had gone wrong from the start. They had fought the Parrot Mercenaries and even followed them to Heaven, narrowly escaping death.

Determined to make up for the hardships of that time, he vowed to make this a fun trip.

"Let's go. This looks fun."

Shirone and Amy walked through the snowfield.

The rainbow bridges connecting the towers, the railings along the battlements, and the stairs inside the castle were all made of ice.

'This is why they call it the winter festival.'

When the temperature rose, the structures would collapse, so the ruins had to be closed by early spring.

Eventually, when summer came, the ice would melt away, leaving only the desolate remnants of the castle.

Like winter memories that were a midsummer night's dream.

"Shirone, let's try that."

Amy pointed to a makeshift stall selling ice snacks, a specialty of the winter festival.

Shirone put the cold ice snack in his mouth and chewed. It was made by freezing white snow with strawberry syrup, combining a crunchy texture with a sweet strawberry flavor.

"Alright, we got our snacks. Where should we go first?"

"Of course, we should start by seeing the Ice Queen."

Amy led Shirone to the main castle.

The main castle was the least damaged part of the ruins. It had a 120-pyeong hall with staircases on both wings, but the left staircase had collapsed long ago and had been restored with ice sculptures.

Would it be strange if it was warm enough not to melt the ice? With people gathered, it was definitely warmer than outside.

Shirone and Amy entered the 1.5-floor corridor connecting the staircases. The Ice Queen was positioned at the central railing protruding towards the hall.

Shirone approached the Ice Queen. Inside a massive block of ice stood a beautiful woman with her eyes closed.

Chapter 325: Second Outing (3)

"This is the Ice Queen. She's as beautiful as the rumors say."

"800 years ago, it was a time when mages were branded as witches. In a way, she was a tragic woman."

Amy briefly recounted the story of the Ice Queen.

The Ice Queen was originally a mage.

At that time, the era was dominated by theocracy, so she hid her identity, but there was no way to hide her beautiful appearance.

When the woman's beauty spread by word of mouth and reached the royal palace, the old king summoned her.

Enchanted at first sight, the king made her his queen.

However, having lived her life pursued by the Holy Order, darkness had already grown in her heart.

Hundreds of innocent people were subjected to horrific torture and killed under the pretext of magical experiments.

As more people died, the queen's magical power grew stronger. As her power grew, the queen went mad.

It is extremely rare for a mage to go mad, as the profession itself strengthens the mind.

However, if the mind is destroyed for any reason, it results in a situation far more severe than ordinary mental illness.

As the mind and magic become intertwined, the mage loses control over their magical power.

Mages call this phenomenon "magical synchronization."

The queen, consumed by madness, froze everything around her.

Her room, adorned with icicles, resembled an ice cave in the Arctic.

Not only the furniture like the bed and dressing table but also the maids and servants who attended to her were frozen to death.

As the situation spiraled out of control, the king built a small castle in the Les Mountains and made her the queen of that place. It was essentially an exile.

But even there, the queen's bizarre behavior did not stop. The first subjects of her experiments were dozens of attendants. When they all died, she captured commoners and continued her cruel experiments.

After a year, no one was left in the small castle in the Les Mountains.

But the queen was satisfied. She had finally reached the level she desired after long experiments.

"I will sleep in a place where even time is frozen. When I return, the world will kneel at my feet."

The queen cast her final spell, encasing herself in a massive block of ice.

This was the story behind the last appearance of the Ice Queen that Shirone was looking at.

"Hmm, I see."

Shirone moved a little closer to the Ice Queen.

Hearing the story made it feel more real. The figure with closed eyes in hibernation truly seemed like someone from 800 years ago.

Amy concluded the story.

"Perhaps she was tormented by guilt even as her mind was destroyed. That's why she devoted herself to a spell that would freeze even herself."

"That could be. If it's true, it's really impressive."

A mage cannot die from their own spell.

While not theoretically impossible, casting a spell that harms oneself requires a will that transcends omnipotence.

"If the Spirit Zone wavers, the spell won't activate. Ordinary mages can't even attempt it."

"Hmm, maybe it's closely related to the phenomenon of magical alignment?"

Shirone stroked his chin, lost in thought.

Amy burst into laughter at his unnecessarily serious demeanor.

"Why so serious? It's just a legend anyway. It's not even clear if the Ice Queen was a real person. Some say she was modeled after a tyrannical queen of the time. And the figure in the ice is just a wax doll."

Shirone knew that the winter festival wasn't based on actual history.

"Yeah. But it really looks real."

Amy also acknowledged the doll's craftsmanship. It was only natural that they put effort into the festival's main attraction.

Shirone and Amy moved closer to examine the figure of the queen encased in ice.

At that moment, the Ice Queen's eyes suddenly opened.

"Ahhh! What is that!"

Shirone and Amy simultaneously hugged each other and stepped back.

Tourists turned their heads at the scream but soon realized what was happening and chuckled.

Realizing she was in Shirone's arms, Amy quickly pulled away.

Her face flushed with embarrassment, she stomped the floor and shouted.

"Idiot! There's a mechanism on the floor. If you step on it, the doll's eyes open."

"Who knew? And you were just as scared."

"Who was scared? It was your loud voice that startled me. Men are such cowards."

Shirone pointed at Amy's pale face.

"Haha! For someone who wasn't scared, your face is pretty pale."

"Oh, really? Should I make your face even paler? If you throw up your guts, it'll look like thin soup."

As Amy approached, rubbing her fist, Shirone averted his gaze and mumbled while looking at the floor.

"If you were scared, just admit it. You're not a gangster..."

"What? Gangster? Yeah, I'm a gangster. What are you going to do about it?"

Amy made a fist and poked Shirone's side. Shirone, feeling a sharp pain in his ribs, flailed his arms and ran down the corridor.

"Haha! Stop! It tickles!"

"Where do you think you're going? Come here!"

Their voices echoed through the hall.

The tourists didn't pay any attention.

This was a festival, and it was a great date spot for couples.

However, three students from Eins Magic School couldn't take their eyes off Shirone and Amy after spotting them.

To be precise, they were graduates who had just passed the graduation exam.

Eins Magic School, one of the two magic schools in Creas, was not as prestigious as Alpheas Magic School, so it was less well-known.

Moreover, even after graduation, they couldn't automatically obtain a mage's license like graduates from prestigious schools.

Of course, submitting a diploma would get them a mage's license from most guilds. But considering the privileges of prestigious school graduates, it was a blow to their pride.

"That couple over there... they're quite famous, aren't they?"

Rudvans pointed to the railing with his chin.

Tall and curly-haired, he wore long sunglasses that made him look much older than his actual age.

"Oh, they are."

Vivian also recognized Shirone and Amy at a glance. She had a complex about her slightly drooping eyes and drew

her eyeliner more fiercely than others.

Like most magic school students, they regularly subscribed to the Spirit Journal.

While most of the pages were filled with introductions to prestigious schools and their students, the journal's sales were much higher among non-prestigious schools.

Students from prestigious schools didn't need to buy a book to read about their own school or their rivals.

"Arian Shirone and Karmis Amy. Oh, come to think of it, Jokre, you know Amy, right?"

"Of course, I know her very well."

Jokre, the leader of the group, smirked.

Of medium height with messy hair, his narrow eyes and thin lips revealed a stubborn personality.

For Jokre, Alpheas Magic School was a painful past.

He had attended classes there until he was thirteen before transferring to Eins Magic School.

Neither Rudvans nor Vivian knew that he had confessed to Amy just before transferring and was rejected.

Of course, he didn't transfer just because he was rejected by a girl.

It's no exaggeration to say that the top talents in the kingdom gather at prestigious schools like Alpheas Magic School.

Ordinary talent would only become fodder for geniuses.

Jokre sought another path through transfer, thinking he couldn't win in the competition.

In fact, many students at prestigious schools didn't graduate even as they aged.

In that sense, Jokre's decision was wise.

But in reality, transferring from a prestigious school to a non-prestigious one was extremely rare.

Prestigious schools had their own pride.

From the students' perspective, seeking another path to avoid competition seemed like running away.

Before entering magic school, they were all praised as geniuses, so their high self-esteem played a part.

'Hmph! Prestige and reputation are all just pretense. What's the point of pride if you can't produce results?'

Jokre always thought that way.

But if asked if he had no regrets about leaving the prestigious school, he couldn't easily answer.

"Wow. I never thought I'd see those kids here."

Vivian knew almost everything about Shirone and Amy. She could confidently say she knew more about their school life than their families.

It was common for students from non-prestigious schools.

The students featured in the Spirit Journal were their goals and idols.

"That boy is Shirone. He's the one who defeated Dante, who boasts an undefeated record. And there's Karmis Amy, the Red-Eyed. The rumors about them being a couple must be true."

The word "couple" drove a nail into Jokre's heart. Even after five years, seeing Amy made his heart race, which only made him angrier.

"They're just students. Clinging to prestige, they fail their graduation exams. Pathetic. No need to feel intimidated. We're official mages."

Jokre muttered to himself.

'Although we haven't received our licenses yet...'

Anyway, he was no longer the snot-nosed Jokre of thirteen.

He had proudly graduated from magic school and was now in the process of becoming an official mage.

Meanwhile, Amy had failed her graduation exam, so when would he get another chance to gloat?

"Let's go. We should at least say hello since it's been a while."

Following Jokre, Rudvans added with his usual expressionless face.

"Of course, from the position of seniors, right?"

Unaware of Jokre's approach, Shirone was cornered at the end of the 1.5-floor corridor, being playfully attacked by Amy.

"Haha! Okay! I was wrong! Stop it!"

"Funny. This is just the beginning!"

Amy, in a playful mood, persistently poked Shirone's ribs, hitting the sensitive spots.

Shirone's laughter exploded like a bomb.

"Hmm? That voice sounds familiar."

A young boy, who had been looking around the history exhibition on the third floor, turned his head towards the railing.

From his high vantage point, he could see Shirone and Amy playing around on the 1.5th floor where the Ice Queen was displayed.

"Are they here on a date?"

It seemed that Shirone had brought Amy to cheer her up after she failed her graduation exam.

The boy watched them for a moment before turning away indifferently.

'Well, it's none of my business. I should mind my own.'

He was naturally disinterested in other people's affairs, especially when it came to getting involved in relationships.

'Where is the antique exhibition?'

Sipping on his iced coffee, the boy disappeared into the depths of the exhibition hall.

After their playful tussle, Shirone and Amy went up to the second floor.

At the end of the broken castle wall, a rainbow bridge made of ice connected to the opposite tower.

"Wow, it's beautiful."

The decorations on the railing were intricately crafted, and standing at the center of the arch, they could see the ice garden spread out across the ruins.

Crossing the rainbow bridge to the opposite tower, they found a mini-game area.

The game involved knocking down targets of soldier figures standing on the opposite watchtower, using snowballs that were plentifully available.

"Come on, come on! Try your luck. Ten snowballs for ten silver. Knock down a soldier and win an Ice Queen plush doll."

Hearing the announcer's explanation, Shirone glanced at the Ice Queen doll in the prize corner.

It was a three-headed doll that could be hugged, with large, sparkling eyes and a bright smile.

It was a completely different atmosphere from the legendary witch he had heard about in the story.

Chapter 326: Second Outing (4)

"Ten snowballs for ten silver? That's one silver each? That's pretty expensive."

Having grown up in the mountains and never experienced festivals, Shirone found it culturally shocking.

But Amy took it as a matter of course.

"Tourist attractions always have a premium. Besides, that Ice Queen plush doll is quite famous. It's strategically made by the autonomous district and can only be obtained during the winter festival. The types of dolls change every year, so there's even a collection."

"Oh, I see."

Shirone's eyes sparkled.

If it's a festival limited edition, it's natural for the price to increase over time.

If he could win the game, paying ten silver for ten snowballs wouldn't be a bad deal.

"Alright, I'll give it a try. Watch me."

Shirone paid ten silver.

"Ten snowballs, please."

"Here we have another brave participant. May the blessing of the Ice Queen be with you."

The blessing of the Ice Queen didn't seem like a good thing, but since her character was a tourist attraction, he let it slide.

Shirone received the box of snowballs.

Entering the game area, he saw someone else attempting the challenge. While waiting, he picked up a snowball from the box and found it was mixed with water, making it hard and heavy.

'Hmm, this should have a decent range.'

Throwing it wasn't the problem.

However, he noticed that the snowball had to be thrown through a window in the wall to reach the opposite tower.

The throwing angle was restricted, making it difficult to generate power and significantly reducing accuracy.

"Whew, this is harder than I thought."

The previous challenger wiped his sweat and stepped back after failing.

People who visited the winter festival every year knew how difficult it was to win the Ice Queen collection, so they weren't disappointed.

Following the announcer's instructions, Shirone entered the game area, set the box down, and picked up a snowball.

He rolled it between his fingers to gauge the distance, then opened his stance and threw the snowball with all his might.

The snowball passed through the window, fell due to gravity, and shattered against the castle wall below the watchtower.

The tourists laughed cheerfully.

Normally, Shirone would have laughed it off too, but with Amy watching, his face turned red.

He didn't dare look back at her and quickly picked up the next snowball, analyzing his failure.

'I can't increase the angle, so I can't generate power. This is much harder than I thought.'

Well, a game with a festival limited edition prize wouldn't be designed for just anyone to win.

"Grr...!"

Shirone gritted his teeth and threw the snowball.

He barely managed to get the distance right, but the snowball missed the soldier target and fell elsewhere.

"Whew! Whew!"

Determined, Shirone threw the snowballs one after another.

Having succeeded in Thunder Strike in one go, he thought he could eventually succeed by reducing the margin of error

bit by bit.

But after throwing five snowballs, he realized.

'This is harder than Thunder Strike.'

The rules were simple, but it was not a game made haphazardly.

It was designed to look easy to succeed, but the throwing angle and distance were cleverly adjusted so that only those with natural strength or professional skills could succeed.

After throwing ten snowballs, Shirone was panting.

Despite the cold weather, his body was hot, and sweat formed on his forehead. He couldn't take off his coat because he was wearing Armand.

Shirone sheepishly stuck out his tongue and returned to Amy.

"Uh, sorry. I failed."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. It's just a game. But that was really hard."

Through Shirone's challenge, Amy guessed that the game's difficulty was top-notch.

Analyzing with her red eyes, she calculated that there weren't many routes to hit the target considering the force, gravity, and air resistance.

"Haha! You failed spectacularly. And you're supposed to be a magic school student. How embarrassing."

Shirone and Amy turned around simultaneously. A boy with messy hair was approaching with a sneer.

Behind him stood a tall, curly-haired young man and a heavily made-up girl, standing arrogantly as if guarding the rear.

"Long time no see, Amy."

When Jokre extended his hand, Amy stood still, lost in thought.

Since entering magic school, she hadn't known anyone outside of her school friends.

Especially not any boys.

"Um, sorry... but who are you?"

Jokre's face twisted.

How could she not remember him?

Even if she had rejected him, being confessed to should be an unforgettable memory.

At least, that's what Jokre thought.

He had never been confessed to by a girl, but if it ever happened, he was confident it would be a lifelong bragging point.

"Do you not know, or are you pretending not to? Jokre.

Alpheas Magic School. You really don't remember?"

"Jokre? Jokre..."

Mumbling, Amy's eyes widened as she pointed at Jokre.

"Oh, oh! Wow! It's been a long time."

Though she didn't seem genuinely pleased, her exaggerated surprise made Jokre puff up with pride in front of his friends.

Being recognized by none other than the famous Karmis Amy was something.

But he hadn't approached to reminisce with an old classmate, so he raised his chin and looked down at her.

"Hmph, shouldn't you greet me properly?"

"Huh? What greeting?"

Jokre swept his arm over his friends behind him and pointed his thumb at himself.

"I hear you're still in school, but we're official mages. That means we're unofficial 10th-grade mages."

Official mage.

Amy's heart fluttered. Since entering Alpheas Magic School at twelve, it was a term that had never left her mind.

Praying her face wasn't stiff, Amy extended her hand to Jokre.

"I see. Congratulations. You finally graduated."

At the time, Amy was thirteen. She barely remembered Jokre, but she clearly recalled looking down on him when he transferred as if fleeing.

A smile spread across Jokre's face.

Amy's poker face was perfect, but he could see her heart without her opening up.

How frustrated must she be, watching him from the position of a genius from the Karmis family who had failed her graduation exam?

'Hmph, how does it feel? When you rejected me, it was much more humiliating than this.'

Jokre turned his gaze to Shirone, who was standing idly.

"Seeing a famous person here. Arian Shirone. The kingdom's top prospect, right?"

Shirone remained silent. He could tell from the tone that Jokre wasn't approaching with friendly intentions.

"Want some advice from a senior? A prospect is just a prospect. The real competition starts when you become an official mage. Well, for a commoner like you, you're doing well. Haha!"

Amy shouted angrily.

"Jokre! What are you saying? Apologize to Shirone right now!"

"Why should I? I'm not wrong. Oh, was that a public secret? But it's better for your mental health to give up. It's already been published in the journal. Every student knows."

"Really? Then should I say whatever comes to mind too? Are you okay with that?"

Jokre's eyes narrowed. He didn't know what she was going to say, but he couldn't help feeling pricked.

'Amy...'

After five years, Amy had grown into a much prettier girl than she was as a child.

Her hair was permed, something he hadn't seen even in the journal, and she wore bright, cute clothes. It was clear she had dressed up with care.

'Tch! I guess this look is only for Shirone?'

Amy was the girl most coveted by the boys at Eins Magic School.

Across the kingdom, the number would be much higher.

Thinking that she dressed up and put on makeup just for one person made him feel like he had lost to Shirone without even fighting.

'I'm disappointed, Amy. How can you date a commoner unless you're out of your mind? No matter how skilled he is, he's still just a student.'

Seeing Shirone frown without retorting after being insulted as a commoner only made Jokre more annoyed.

'He should at least argue, but he doesn't say a word? Is he ignoring me? No, he must be scared of the term "official mage." Pathetic, hiding behind a girl... tsk tsk.'

Jokre was mistaken.

To Shirone, who had even fought against Bosun, a certified 4th-grade mage, the title of official mage wasn't much of a threat.

The reason Shirone was frowning wasn't Jokre but the Armand he was wearing.

A person's mind flows like water.

And Armand's precise control was a delicate function that synchronized almost 100% with its owner's mind.

If he couldn't perfectly control his emotions, Armand would move before he could calm himself.

That's why it was called a cursed sword.

Of course, it wouldn't have mattered to its previous owner, Zion. He could just kill as his emotions dictated.

But Shirone had to continue his school life normally.

As a commoner with no one to rely on, committing murder would put him in an irreversible situation.

The problem was that after returning from Kazra, it was harder to control his emotions than before.

Though the demon Behemoth was trapped in the sealing formation, it was connected to Shirone's mind through the keyword "anger."

If his emotions amplified to an uncontrollable state, Armand would decapitate his opponent without a second thought.

'I guess I shouldn't have worn it. I'll have to be more careful in the future.'

Seeing Shirone unable to retaliate, Jokre clicked his tongue and pointed to the game area, speaking to Amy.

"It seems you can't believe everything in the journal. You couldn't even win a doll for your girlfriend. Mind if we show you how it's done?"

Amy shrugged.

"It's a game anyone can play if they pay. Go ahead if you want."

Jokre's group entered the game area.

Vivian, seemingly aware of Shirone's challenge, spoke loudly on purpose.

"Guys, if you win the Ice Queen doll, you have to give it to me."

"Let's see. Well, it should be easy for Rudvans."

The announcer handed over the box of snowballs. Although Jokre paid, it was Rudvans who received the box.

Jokre looked back at Shirone and Amy, pointing his thumb at Rudvans.

"Rudvans is our school's 'Tuku' representative player. You can expect great things."

Tuku is a combat sport derived from ancient warfare, where teams of five compete in an arena with obstacles, trying to hit opponents with rubber balls.

While amateurs, including children, can enjoy it, at the semi-professional level of school competitions, the speed of fastballs can reach up to 160 kilometers per hour.

Additionally, tactics using three-cushion shots and various types of breaking balls have been developed, making it an exciting yet injury-prone sport.

Rudvans was the ace of his school, and the Eins Tuku team was strong enough to reach the quarterfinals in last year's national competition.

"Well... let's start with a trial shot."

Rudvans' stance was clearly different from that of an ordinary person. Each movement had a mechanism, and they connected smoothly to create the best throwing power. As he swung his arm forward, the snowball flew with a whoosh.

It hit the target precisely, and Vivian cheered.

"Great! A success on the first try! As expected of our school's ace!"

Chapter 327: Second Outing (5)

But it was too early to celebrate. The target, which seemed about to fall, bounced back due to its elasticity.

"Too bad! The first attempt is a failure!"

Vivian stared at the oscillating target in disbelief and then glared at the announcer.

"Why is it a failure? It hit the target perfectly."

"No, no. I clearly said the target must be knocked down."

"Isn't this a scam?"

"Haha! A scam? Is this your first time at the winter festival? Everyone knows this. Besides, do you know what kind of collection this is? If you resell it later, the doll is worth more than one gold."

Jokre turned to Rudvans and asked.

"It seems there's a spring attached below. Can you do it?"

"Well... there are still nine throws left."

Rudvans placed the snowballs in a convenient position and focused on the target.

'They've made the angle tricky. I guess I have to rely on a straight throw.'

Over the next ten minutes, he threw all nine remaining snowballs.

Despite his determined efforts, Rudvans remained expressionless, but sweat formed on his forehead, and steam rose from his head.

"Too bad. I think I could do it with one more try."

The attempt was a failure.

He hit the target with the second and third throws but missed the fourth, fifth, and sixth, which was his downfall.

Hitting the target with maximum force from a distance greater than a sports field was not easy, even for a semi-professional.

He managed to hit the target with all the remaining snowballs from the seventh throw onward, but the target still didn't fall.

Shirone got a hint from this.

'You have to use the elasticity to knock it down. No wonder they installed a spring on the target.'

If you hit the target consecutively while the pendulum motion is still active, the elasticity gradually increases. Eventually, it reaches a tipping point where it can't withstand the weight and falls.

Rudvans' accuracy in hitting seven out of ten was impressive, but he failed because the force wasn't applied continuously.

"Amy, how about giving it a try?"

"Me?"

Amy looked at Shirone in surprise.

In fact, her playful nature made her eager to try such a fun game. But usually, boys would take on the challenge to show off in front of girls, so she just watched.

'Ah, I see what's going on.'

She understood Shirone's intention. The person who needed to show off here was herself.

'In that case, there's no need to hold back.'

Amy walked over to the announcer and paid ten silver.

If Rudvans was the representative player for Tuku, Amy's pride was on the line as a future sniper.

"I'll give it a try too. Here's ten silver."

"Oh, it's been a while since we've had a female challenger. But miss, the soldiers in the watchtower won't be swayed by beauty. Still, I'll give you an extra snowball as a bonus. Do your best."

"No, ten will be enough."

"Haha! What a spirited young lady! Everyone, give a round of applause for this brave girl!"

The spectators applauded as the slender girl, who seemed unlikely to even throw a snowball to the watchtower, stepped up to the challenge.

Amy licked her lips and picked up a snowball. Her eyes turned red as her photographic memory recorded the current state.

"Here we go."

With a cute motion, she swung her arm, but the snowball fell short, not even reaching halfway.

The spectators laughed good-naturedly.

But Shirone held his breath, knowing Amy's true skills were about to show.

Unlike the first throw, Amy took a proper stance and stared intently at the target.

Her photographic memory corrected the errors and made her brain sense the precise trajectory.

Using the basic build of Skima for strength enhancement, she firmly grasped the snowball, widened her stance, and swung her arm powerfully.

The snowball flew at a speed similar to Rudvans' and hit the target, making the spectators' eyes widen.

Amy stored the state of the second throw in her photographic memory. Then she mechanically threw the third, fourth, and fifth snowballs.

With each hit, the target's oscillation increased until it finally couldn't withstand the eighth throw and fell with a thud.

"Wow! She knocked it down! A girl knocked down the target!"

"Miss, are you an athlete? That's amazing!"

Amy looked up at the ceiling and exhaled with relief.

Having tried it herself, she realized it was indeed a challenging game. Even a Skima user would struggle without trained sensory skills.

Of course, a Skima master could knock down the target in one shot with cannon-like power, but such a person wouldn't bother making a scene at a festival just to win a doll.

The announcer gladly handed the prize to the successful challenger.

Holding the Ice Queen doll, Amy thanked the cheering spectators and lifted it like a trophy.

Vivian looked at the smiling Ice Queen doll with a wistful expression.

"Oh, I'm so jealous. I wanted that."

Shirone and Amy, excited, walked away without even remembering Jokre's group.

Rudvans spoke.

"...This is a bit annoying."

Jokre felt the same.

"Hmph, she's always been self-centered since she was a kid. That's why she failed the graduation exam. They say she was beaten up. No wonder she can only hang out with commoners."

Shirone and Amy remembered Jokre's group only after reaching the first floor.

They had no desire to go back. Those people hadn't approached with good intentions from the start.

Amy hugged the Ice Queen doll to her chest and rubbed her cheek against it, enjoying the soft texture.

"Hehe! It's so cute."

Shirone felt content just watching her.

Despite her outward personality, she liked cute dolls. Her room was filled with teddy bears, after all.

'I'm glad she has such a normal taste.'

He genuinely thought so.

Unlike Woorin's collection of El Crouch's porcelain dolls, which were too eccentric to collect unless one had a peculiar taste.

"Since we won it for twenty silver, even if we sell it for just one gold, we made eighty silver."

"Haha! That's so like you. But isn't it time to stop thinking like that? You're the richest person in the magic school."

"The richest? Me?"

Amy pointed to Shirone's coat.

"Armand. They say its stolen value alone is over twenty billion gold. At auction, it would fetch at least twice that. In other words, you're carrying our entire school with you."

Only then did Shirone realize and blinked.

The amount was so astronomical that he hadn't even considered the sword's value.

Thinking about walking among so many people with an S-class object worth over forty billion gold suddenly made his side, where the sword was strapped, feel heavy.

'What if someone steals it? No, that's not possible. It's mentally linked to me.'

Amy carefully placed the Ice Queen doll in her bag. Shirone, who had been watching, pointed outside.

"It's hot from the game. Let's go out and cool off."

"Yeah. I need some fresh air too. How about skating? I heard the ice quality here is really good."

Shirone nodded eagerly.

He remembered the fun times skating on a frozen lake with skates his father had made for him as a child.

"Great! Let's head to the skating rink!"

The skating rink was filled with couples.

Shirone and Amy joined the flow of skaters circling the rink.

The cold winter wind felt refreshing.

While gliding on the ice, following the person in front, Amy could momentarily forget her worries.

But her good mood vanished the moment she saw Jokre's group entering the rink.

Not joining the flow, they showcased their skating skills in the center of the rink.

It wasn't against the rules, but Amy, already annoyed with them, found it irritating.

"What? Did they follow us here?"

"They probably came to skate. Don't mind them."

Amy didn't want to get involved with Jokre's group.

Seeing them enjoying their time after passing the graduation exam only deepened the wound of her failure.

"Forget it. Let's just avoid them. We've cooled down, and I want to look around other places."

"Alright. Let's go."

Shirone and Amy slowly skated towards the exit.

"Hey! Leaving already?"

When Shirone turned around, Jokre was skating towards them at full speed, waving his arm.

He quickly pulled Amy aside as Jokre skidded to a stop, spraying ice shavings into their faces. The cold particles wet their faces, making Shirone frown.

"Why are you doing this? Right in our faces."

"Haha! Why are you getting mad over that? You're more uptight than I heard. It was just a joke."

"Why are you joking around like this?"

Amy pushed Shirone aside and stepped forward.

"Why do you keep following us? If you have something to say, say it straight. Stop acting like kids."

"It's been a while since we met. Let's have some fun. We still have some unfinished business."

"Unfinished business? What business?"

The only thing Amy remembered about Jokre was that he had transferred to another school, seemingly running away from competition at the prestigious school.

'Huh? Could it be...?'

A vague memory surfaced in Amy's mind.

Before transferring, Jokre had confessed his love to her.

At the time, it was just a routine event. It was such a trivial incident that it was surprising she even remembered it.

But today, she was mindful of Shirone's feelings.

No woman would take the word "date" as a joke, even if said jokingly.

Amy was a woman and not naive.

She had followed Shirone on this 2-night, 3-day trip fully aware that anything could happen.

She didn't want to make Shirone uncomfortable with a meaningless past.

Simply being confessed to wasn't a bad memory, but having the person in front of her was a different matter.

"Enough. I don't want to talk to you. Shirone, let's go somewhere else. We don't need to hang out with people like them."

As Amy tried to leave, Jokre ignored Shirone and approached her.

"Wait a minute. Let's finish our conversation..."

Jokre stopped talking and turned his head. Shirone was holding his shoulder, frowning.

"She said she doesn't want to."

"Let go of me. We might be from different schools, but I'm still your senior. I'm an official mage."

"That's that, and this is this."

Jokre was taken aback by Shirone's audacity.

"You're getting cocky because people around you are treating you well. Do you know that Amy and I have known each other since we were thirteen? It's none of your business."

"What does it matter when you met? In that case, we met when we were twelve. Stop bothering someone who doesn't want to talk to you and leave."

"What? You met at twelve?"

Jokre was stunned by Shirone's lie.

Having memorized the journal, he knew about Shirone's past.

How could someone who had only been at the magic school for a year have met Amy at twelve?

Moreover, he was the son of a mountain man, not a noble.

"You're surprisingly shameless. Do you think that lie will work? Do you know what happens if you get on a senior's

bad side in this field? Especially someone like you with no connections. You'll be kicked out."

"If there are seniors who make petty threats, I don't want to be there."

"You little...!"

Jokre lost his temper and raised his fist at Shirone, who didn't back down.

But just as he was about to swing, a snowball flew from somewhere and hit the back of his head with a thud.

Chapter 328: Philosophy of a Combat Mage (2)

"Ouch!"

The snowball was hard enough to make his head ring.

Moreover, he was standing on slippery ice.

Unable to keep his balance, Jokre fell forward.

The shock was brief, and anger surged. Who dared to play such a prank?

"What the... Who did that?"

Jokre touched the back of his head and turned around.

A gray-haired boy stood outside the skating rink, casually tossing snowballs. In his other hand, he held an iced coffee, quite out of place in the cold weather.

"No matter how unpopular you are with girls, you shouldn't mess with a couple on a date."

Jokre squinted at the familiar face.

Vivian muttered in surprise.

"Isn't that... Dante? Airhain Dante."

Dante entered the rink with his shoes on, gliding smoothly on one leg as he pushed off the ice. Rudvans and Vivian instinctively stepped aside to let him pass.

'No way. It's really Dante?'

Vivian couldn't believe her eyes.

Since she entered magic school, Dante had never lost his position as the kingdom's top student. When the news of his defeat by Shirone was published in the journal, every student in the kingdom was shocked.

Jokre, too, had once clipped articles about Dante and pasted them in his notebook, fueling his determination.

But how long could he cling to memories of his school days?

Above all, being hit on the back of the head before even introducing himself was a lifetime humiliation.

"Hey, you..."

Dante ignored Jokre and approached Shirone.

"Long time no see, Shirone. And Amy."

Amy crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Oh, so now you're calling your seniors by name?"

"Haha! We'll be in the same graduating class next semester anyway."

Amy wasn't really upset.

During the 2000th duel, Dante had treated her with utmost respect, so his friendly attitude now felt a bit awkward.

But Dante's personality was so cool that he seemed to have already erased those memories from his mind.

Anyway, meeting a schoolmate outside of school was a pleasant surprise, even if they were rivals at school.

Shirone smiled and said,

"Fancy seeing you here. What brings you?"

"As you can see, I'm here to have fun. I travel every vacation. It's my first time in Creas. Someone recommended the winter festival."

"I see. Did you come alone? What about Closer and Sabina?"

"They started special training as soon as vacation began. By now, they must be realizing what hell is. They're exhausting to hang out with."

Dante shrugged, and Shirone burst into laughter.

He had been wondering if it was okay to have fun, but seeing Dante's relaxed demeanor made his own worries seem insignificant.

'Dante, you're amazing as always.'

Sometimes, when he recalled the 2000th duel, Shirone was astonished that he had defeated Dante.

Beyond magic, Dante had star quality. The ability to captivate people's attention wasn't something that could be achieved through effort alone.

As expected of someone from the capital, Vashka, he dressed well.

He wore a blue coat, black skinny pants, and a purple scarf, looking both understated and radiant.

He even had a piercing in one ear. For someone like Shirone, who was clueless about fashion, it was surprising.

But Jokre thought differently.

He had been completely ignored.

In front of Amy, no less. Or rather, in front of Amy's boyfriend, Shirone.

What angered him the most was how bright Shirone, Amy, and Dante looked together.

'Geniuses only hang out with other geniuses? Seeing them together is really annoying.'

Jokre took a deep breath and spoke.

"Hey, Dante."

"Hmm?"

Dante turned around, sipping his drink, seemingly having forgotten what he had done earlier.

"If you hit someone, shouldn't you apologize? Especially to a senior mage."

"A senior? Who are you?"

"Jokre, a graduate of Eins Magic School. I'm not just some promising student like you."

Dante blinked, still sipping his drink.

The longer Dante remained silent, the more anxious Jokre became.

He couldn't help but imagine what Dante might be thinking.

Of course, Eins Magic School was Jokre's beloved alma mater, and he had no shame in choosing to transfer.

But Dante was from the Royal Magic School.

The kingdom's top institution.

Although he was now attending Alpheas Magic School to avenge his defeat by Shirone, it was still one of the top five schools.

Moreover, he had been the direct disciple of Olivia, a certified second-grade archmage, so Jokre knew he wouldn't be noticed.

"Sorry, never heard of you. And you're the one bothering a couple having fun."

"You...!"

Jokre's eyes flared. The words "never heard of you" pierced his heart like a thorn.

Rudvans and Vivian, who had hoped their names were known in the minor leagues, also looked coldly at Dante.

"Dante, don't be mistaken. Do you think you're something special? You're just a student. And you were thoroughly defeated by Shirone. Shirone, who is a commoner. And Amy, who was hailed as a genius, is just a repeat student."

"You really know a lot."

Dante's expression didn't change as he spoke.

"That's the difference between you and us. We're featured in the journal, and you buy it to read about us."

Shirone's face burned with embarrassment.

If he liked witty remarks, Dante mercilessly trampled on his opponent's weaknesses.

It was cool if you were on his side, but hell for the other party.

As expected, Jokre's group's faces twisted, and their eyes showed a hint of murderous intent.

If they intended to provoke, it worked perfectly, but knowing it wasn't their intention made Shirone worry.

'Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!'

Jokre was furious. Why was he being treated like this?

Logically, the roles should be reversed.

The successful graduate should be the one flaunting, while they should look at him with jealousy and envy.

'Hmph! Pathetic fools! Do they think a school's reputation will live their lives for them?'

Jokre glared at Shirone's group, wondering how to make them submit.

'Huh? What's that...'

He noticed something shiny under Shirone's coat. Upon closer inspection, it was a sword sheath.

'Why is he carrying a sword at a festival? And isn't he a commoner? Is he allowed to carry a weapon?'

Jokre pondered the reason. Then, realizing something, he burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! So that's it. You're just the same."

As Jokre's demeanor suddenly changed, Dante stepped back, seemingly intimidated.

Ignoring him, Jokre pointed at Shirone.

"Acting all confident, but you're just insecure. Why else would a commoner carry a sword? I guess you wanted to match your noble girlfriend."

Vivian looked and gasped.

"Oh, it's true? But isn't that illegal?"

"Of course it's illegal! How can a commoner carry a sword? And you think you can talk big?"

Jokre approached Shirone and opened his coat.

Since it was a serious crime for a commoner to carry a sword, he didn't hesitate.

As the buttons tore off and the coat opened, the silver sheath of Armand was revealed at his waist.

"Just as I thought. Pathetic. Do you think this will make you a noble?"

Shirone's eyes turned cold.

"Step back. And compensate for my coat."

Shirone desperately tried to control his emotions. The inner monster, sensing his anger, was trying to emerge again.

But Jokre, feeling victorious, continued talking.

"No decorations and short. It must be cheap. Well, where would someone like you get an expensive sword..."

Jokre reached for the handle.

Since it was short, the blade would be unimpressive. He planned to draw it and repay the humiliation he had suffered.

But his thoughts ended there.

With a swishing sound, Jokre's movements stopped. His arms slowly rose.

His eyes trembled with shock, and his skin prickled with cold.

"This... this is..."

Rudvans and Vivian's faces turned pale with shock.

Shirone's sword had drawn itself and was now pressed against Jokre's throat.

"What... how did the sword..."

Shirone was frowning fiercely.

Not because he was angry at Jokre. If he had been even a moment late in controlling his emotions, Jokre's head would have been rolling on the ice.

'I was too complacent.'

The precise control was an impressive feature, but its synchronization was so perfect that it was influenced by the demon's actions in the first layer of his mind.

Shirone was a mage who had trained his mind to remain calm in any situation. But that didn't mean he had no emotional changes.

In a fleeting moment of anger, Armand had drawn itself. His disappointment in himself made Shirone even angrier. Sensing its master's anger, Armand trembled, and Jokre heard the sword's wailing through his eardrums.

Jokre gritted his teeth and glared at Shirone.

"You...!"

"This is your final warning. Just leave. If you act rudely again, I won't hold back."

Jokre, feeling the pressure of death, wobbled on the ice, unable to keep his balance.

He would have fallen if Rudvans hadn't come to support him.

"Let's go. We're official mages. If we cause trouble here, we'll be the ones at a disadvantage."

Though meant to boost Jokre's morale, it was also a practical statement.

"Hmph! Arrogant brats! Let's see how well you do."

Jokre continued to curse until the end.

But as Rudvans pulled him away by the collar, he only looked more pathetic.

It was only after Jokre's group had completely left the skating rink that Shirone sheathed Armand.

"Hey, no matter how angry you are, you shouldn't swing a sword."

Shirone's eyes narrowed at Dante's words.

"You're kidding, right? This is all your fault! Why did you have to provoke them? What about my coat? You have to pay for it!"

"You can just sew the buttons back on. By the way, what's with the sword? Is it magic too?"

Amy, glancing around, spoke up.

"Let's move somewhere else. People are watching. The guards might come."

For now, people didn't know Shirone was a commoner, so they saw it as a minor incident. But if the guards came and investigated, things could get complicated.

"How about we go to a café and have some coffee? Since I helped, you guys can treat me."

"Why should we buy you coffee? And aren't you already drinking coffee?"

"This is iced coffee. Let's go get something warm."

"Are you a coffee addict?"

Dante winked, holding his iced coffee.

"No, I'm a coffee enthusiast."

Shirone and his friends found a café called 'Cozy Teahouse' in the shopping district and went inside.

As the warmth enveloped them, their cheeks turned rosy.

Shivering to shake off the cold clinging to his clothes,

Shirone sat at a table and took out a sewing kit.

Dante picked up the menu.

"When you travel, you should try the local specialties. Let's see, 'Warm Ice Queen Coffee'? That's a strange name."

Amy waved her hand dismissively.

"Skip the weird ones. I'll just have orange juice."

"Alright? Then I'll have the Warm Ice Queen Coffee. Shirone, what about you?"

Shirone, focused on sewing the buttons, replied.

"I'll have hot cocoa."

Chapter 329: Philosophy of a Combat Mage (3)

Seeing the look of a craftsman in Shirone's eyes as he sewed, Dante spoke with a bewildered expression.

"Hey, do you really have to sew here?"

"This is the only coat I brought. And if I do it outside, my hands will freeze."

Shirone blew on his still-cold hands and focused on sewing again.

After ordering tea at the counter, Dante returned with Armand, which Shirone had leaned against the wall.

Shirone glanced at Armand. The usually temperamental cursed sword was quiet, as if acknowledging that Dante was worthy of examining it.

With people watching, Dante didn't draw the sword but inspected its exterior while holding it vertically.

"So, this is an S-class object."

He had heard a rough explanation on the way.

A cursed sword equipped with the concepts of precise control and diamond armor.

It was a perfect weapon that not only amplified magical power but also maximized physical offensive and defensive capabilities.

Dante threw Armand against the wall. Shirone used precise control to return it accurately to its original position.

Seeing this firsthand, Dante smiled.

"It's a good weapon. Considering its rarity, I understand why it's worth over 4 billion gold."

Amy, who had been warming herself by the fireplace, turned her head and spoke.

"You talk about 4 billion gold so casually? Well, the Airhain family is ranked 20th in the kingdom's business world. But why does a young master from such a family need to get coffee from others?"

"Haha! Coffee made by others always tastes better. And coffee bought by others tastes even better. Besides, if a single sword is worth 4 billion gold, my parents would be shocked too."

Shirone, who had finished sewing the first button, connected the needle to the second button and said,

"Too bad. I was thinking of selling it for around 3 billion if you were interested."

Armand's gem vibrated with a hum.

"I'm not really into collecting things. I don't even buy souvenirs when I travel."

Dante calling an S-class object a mere collectible showed he wasn't a typical person.

But Shirone liked that about him.

After all, mages only cared about what they liked and ignored everything else.

While Shirone finished sewing and put his coat back on, the server brought their drinks.

Shirone and Amy drank their juice and cocoa in silence for a while.

Just a moment ago, they had been laughing and having a great time, but with Dante around, they suddenly became reserved.

Dante sat with his legs crossed, sipping his coffee and watching them.

Then he pointed at Amy with his coffee cup.

"By the way, how are you doing?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Neither of you seem like the type to go on a casual date. Is this a consolation trip or something?"

Shirone put down his cup and looked at Amy. It was the first time she had talked about the graduation exam.

"Hmm."

Amy rested her chin on her hand and looked out the window.

"Honestly, I don't know. It's not that I've lost motivation, but everything feels so vague."

Having had enough time to organize her thoughts, Amy spoke calmly.

"Anyway, I did my best for six years and took the exam. But I failed. I don't know what to do next. I feel like just improving my skills won't be enough. So, I guess..."

Amy sighed and shrugged.

"I'm just trying to pull myself together. It's probably a psychological issue with the second attempt. I need to find or create a special trigger."

Dante nodded.

Of course, he hadn't even considered the possibility of failing the graduation exam. But if he had, he would have had the same concerns as Amy.

"I see. But what exactly happened during the exam? I watched, but it's different from being there in person."

Shirone looked at Amy with a tense expression. It must be a memory she never wanted to recall.

But he also wanted to hear it.

Especially since he would have to face Fermi's group after the vacation, the more information, the better.

Fortunately, Amy didn't seem particularly distressed. It seemed she had already overcome the initial pain.

"I was ganged up on... starting 1 minute and 32 seconds into the battle."

Amy's red eyes glowed as she recalled the information from that time.

"As soon as the one-on-one combat category was announced, the 2000th duel activated, and all participants moved quickly. At that moment, I thought the first target should be Samuel. It seemed other participants thought the same."

Shirone spoke.

"Because Samuel is a word magic user."

"Right. Word magic takes time to activate. During training, Samuel's level of ultrasonic magic was 148 syllables per second. It takes at least 4 seconds to activate intermediate magic. But once the word magic is complete, its amplification power is immense, making him the top priority target in one-on-one combat. But Fermi disrupted the flow."

Amy's expression turned serious.

"It was really strange. That feeling. The sense of incongruity. Of course, during the battle, I didn't have the mental space to think about collusion, but I instinctively decided to change my target to Fermi. In hindsight, that was a mistake. With Lycan's plasma covering the area, I couldn't see the target clearly. So I tried close combat, but it seemed they had a prearranged play."

Amy was silent for a while, probably recalling the critical mistake she had made.

She took a deep breath as if to shake off her regret and returned to the present, dropping her shoulders.

"After that, the tide turned, and as you know, I was pushed back and eliminated early."

Dante, deep in thought, asked,

"But I heard Fermi's group has been using that tactic for a long time. The prearranged play, I mean."

"Right. I wasn't unprepared. In the graduating class, we train in six exam subjects on a rotation. You can understand the factions and each other's skills. But something was different on the exam day. Even if you consider the prearranged play as part of their tactics, there was no need for them to shield Samuel from concentrated attacks. But the atmosphere completely shifted. I still don't understand why that happened."

"The atmosphere shifted..."

If they could change the battlefield's atmosphere at will in one-on-one combat, it meant their skills were far superior to

expected.

But there was no reason someone with Amy's keen eye wouldn't notice if they were hiding their skills. That's why Amy was confused.

'It's not just a simple disguise tactic. There's something undiscovered. Probably the key player is...'

Fermi, the top-ranked student in the graduating class. He could either perfectly conceal his allies' skills or drastically enhance them.

Whatever method he used, it was clear he could do one of those two things.

"Hmm, so you were ultimately overpowered. Then there's no room for excuses. No wonder Master Olivia didn't intervene."

Amy shook her head.

Of course, she had no intention of making excuses for her defeat. But it wasn't because she lacked skill.

In a fair fight, or at least if the neutral factions hadn't been swayed by Fermi, she would have made it to the final ten.

"If those are the rules, I don't want to argue. But compared to the other participants, my skills were never inferior. I'm not saying Samuel should have been eliminated instead of me. If Fermi can control the battlefield's flow, anyone targeted would inevitably be eliminated."

Dante blinked in surprise. Amy's expression showed she was sincere.

"I admit it can be frustrating. But the opponent ultimately played that way, right? So isn't it accurate to say you were overpowered?"

Amy put down her juice glass and sighed.

"Ugh, you keep misunderstanding..."

"No, I understand perfectly. Fermi's group controlled the battlefield's flow, and everyone targeted you."

"So you're saying it's my fault? Why? Because I'm usually annoying? Or because I seemed like an easy target?"

"Calm down..."

"Do I look calm to you?"

Amy slammed the table and stood up. The café patrons turned their attention to her.

Realizing this, Amy quietly sat back down, but her face was still flushed.

"Fine, everyone is entitled to their opinion. But I fought in the graduating class for a year and took the exam. If you were in my situation, Dante, could you say the same thing?"

Dante didn't answer.

Of course, his opinion hadn't changed.

But he felt he wouldn't get a rational response from her in her current state.

'...That's what I think, but...'

Dante was a mage. And so was Amy. Hiding the truth because of emotions didn't suit either of them.

"Don't be childish, Amy."

Amy's eyes filled with anger.

"Childish? Me?"

"Alright, then let's ask Shirone. What do you think about the results of this graduation exam?"

When Amy turned to him, Shirone swallowed hard. No matter what he said, it wouldn't please her.

"Shirone, do you think the same? Am I being childish, as Dante says?"

"Uh, well... I don't know. I..."

"Be honest. I respect Dante's skills, and I respect yours too. If both of you see me that way, then it must be true. I want to know the exact truth."

Amy was sincere.

As a student majoring in magic, she wasn't weak enough to be comforted by empty lies.

Above all, she believed in herself.

She hadn't failed the graduation exam because she was weak or lacked skill.

Shirone hesitated, then finally spoke, unable to bear the weight of silence.

"Morally, the exam was unfair. But no matter the situation... a mage should be able to win."

Amy felt all her strength drain away.

If even Shirone said that, she was likely mistaken.

Amy felt all her strength drain away.

If even Shirone said that, it was likely she was mistaken.

But she couldn't accept it in her heart.

"Childish? Me?"

She had never been lazy while studying magic. She prided herself on fighting harder than anyone else.

But childish?

What broke her heart the most was the possibility that their judgment, which she couldn't understand, might be true.

Dante spoke.

"Of course, you're strong. It's undeniable that you rose to the 5th rank in the graduating class within a year."

Amy slowly turned her gaze to Dante.

"But strictly speaking, it's because your talent is exceptionally outstanding."

"Talent...?"

"Currently, Alpheas Magic School has students as talented as those at the Royal Magic School. There's Iruki of Savant, Nade of Alchemy, Arin of Superhardness, Kanis who handles magical creatures, Shirone the Unlocker, and me, who uses the Central Calculation Magic Circle. Of course, Sabina and Closer are also formidable. Boyle of Summoning Magic and Pandora of Scent Magic each have their specialized talents."

Amy listened quietly to Dante.

"But if I were to rank based on what we were born with..."

Dante took a sip of his coffee and pointed at Amy.

"It's you. Amy, you're the best at Alpheas Magic School."

Amy didn't feel happy.

She still couldn't grasp what Dante was trying to say.

Chapter 330: Philosophy of a Combat Mage (4)

"Red Eyes. In other words, your photographic memory corrects errors in the shortest time. It's an incredible ability. In terms of talent alone, you're not just the best at Alpheas Magic School, but on the entire continent. The countless geniuses from your family prove that."

Amy couldn't argue.

Even her brothers from the main Karmis family had already made names for themselves in their fields at a young age.

"So what? I've never once thought of relying on my family! Are you saying that the only reason I've come this far is because of my talent? I've always tried to stand on my own."

"Yes. And that's exactly what I mean by childish."

Amy's face hardened.

"Instead, rely on your family. Use everything you have, everything your family has. You were born with things others can only dream of having, and you throw them away just because you want to do it on your own? That's what I mean by childish."

"I... never thought of it that way..."

"Remember the kids we met at the skating rink? Jokre, was it? Eins Magic School isn't exactly prestigious. Their talents are far below yours. Yet they find ways to survive and become mages. You think you failed because you were unlucky? No, Amy. You're competing at one of the top five prestigious schools in the kingdom. There are countless people more unfortunate than you. If you want to be a mage, especially the best mage, you have to fight and win no matter what."

Amy lowered her head.

Her anger had already dissipated.

No, it felt like everything had returned to square one.

Dante was right.

She was at Alpheas Magic School, where the kingdom's top talents gathered, and she was in the graduating class at the pinnacle.

There was no room for excuses.

In a battlefield where only the best clashed, any complaints would just sound like the whining of the privileged.

"So what should I do..."

She was back at the starting point, unable to overcome the wall.

The second time would be faster.

But that was just a thought in her head.

Now, she had to overcome herself. And that was Amy's first real trial.

'Amy...'

Shirone looked at Amy with pity.

Dante's blunt words must have been a huge shock to her.

But he couldn't intervene.

It wasn't out of arrogance, thinking he could help Amy.

It was because Dante's words were true.

Silence fell over the table.

The laughter of tourists chatting around them didn't reach their ears.

Dante drank his cold coffee and watched Amy.

He didn't have any special affection for her. But she had been the most noticeable during the graduation exam.

"Do you want to know why you failed?"

Amy looked up again.

Shirone, lost in thought, also looked at Dante.

Given Dante's expertise in information processing, his analysis would be worth listening to, regardless of the situation.

"Of course, the only time I saw you use magic was during the graduation exam. And that was less than five minutes. But even in that short time, there was something I couldn't understand."

"Are you saying I made a wrong decision?"

"No. It's a more fundamental issue. To get straight to the point, you have a fatal flaw. Especially if you aim to be a combat mage, there's something crucial you're missing."

Amy had never thought she had a weakness. So she swallowed hard, waiting for his next words.

Dante turned his head, holding his coffee cup. After a moment, he pursed his lips and spoke.

"You... lack style."

"Style?"

Amy asked, surprised by the unexpected word. But Shirone nodded slightly.

Lacking style.

It encapsulated the vague sense of incongruity he had felt while being with Amy.

The fact that Dante, with the kingdom's best defensive skills, had pinpointed Amy's flaw after just five minutes of combat was impressive.

Shirone added a comment.

"To put it nicely, you're versatile. I've always felt that you're too amazing for your own good."

Amy's face flushed. The embarrassment was greater because she was still reeling from Dante's blunt words.

"Are you teasing me?"

Dante shook his head.

"No, Shirone has a point. From what I've seen, you have a tendency to try to control every situation perfectly. Because you can."

"Why is that a problem?"

"It's a big problem. Your specialty is sniper mode. Most mages guide situations to environments where their specialties can shine. That's where style comes from."

Shirone likes strategies that overpower with brute force because of his Immortal Function. I like counters because I enjoy analyzing opponents. But you're different. If sniper mode doesn't work, you immediately look for a second solution."

Amy felt like she had been hit with a hammer.

"Do you know what's really serious? You actually find that second solution. You're too resourceful. But how long can that approach work?"

Amy's lips trembled.

Stupid. Foolish.

Why had she never thought of this before?

"Most students would hit a wall. But your talent got you through to the graduating class. Then, at the most critical moment, you hit that wall."

Dante clapped his hands together.

"That's when all the participants targeted you. For the first time, you faced a situation where talent alone wasn't enough, in a difficulty spike far beyond the graduating class lessons. Fermi must have known your fatal flaw. That's why you were chosen as the sacrifice."

Dante recalled the graduation exam and gave an example.

"When you felt the tide turning, you abandoned Samuel and targeted Fermi. You thought you could gain the upper hand in close combat with Skima. But that's where it went wrong. The moment you felt the incongruity, you should have created distance. You should have led the situation to specialize in sniper mode. But you didn't."

Shirone chimed in.

"Because you were confident you could handle it somehow."

Dante nodded.

"It's impossible to control every situation in a melee. Even one second is too long for decision-making in combat. If you have multiple options, there's bound to be a delay. That's why style is important. You have to trust your style and bet everything on it."

Amy recalled being trapped in Zenogor's web in Kazra. She had many thoughts at the time.

But if she had focused solely on what she could do, she could have melted the web with Ignite and escaped.

"You probably analyzed everything in the graduating class. The combat power, judgment, habits, and actions of all the participants. You analyzed everything and decided you had the advantage, right?"

Amy admitted it honestly.

"Yes. Exactly."

"But you didn't consider style. It's as important as combat power. If the compatibility is bad, you need to know when to avoid and wait. If I went back in time and fought Shirone from then, I'd probably win 90% of the time."

Shirone nodded in agreement.

There's no "if" in history, but if his past self fought the current Dante, he would likely lose most of the time.

"Combat isn't just about skill. To put it extremely, Shirone's Ataraxia can be destroyed before it's completed. But why didn't I succeed? Because Shirone constantly guided the situation to his advantage. It's a clash of styles. That's what a mage's combat is."

Amy remained motionless with her head down.

Her mind was filled with thoughts about magic, and nothing else registered.

Dante spoke.

"Well, I might fail in a similar situation. But I wouldn't be eliminated early without doing anything like you. Anyway, that's my analysis of you from the graduation exam."

Amy finally looked up. Her expression was still sad, but the excitement had faded.

"Thank you for being honest."

No matter the reason, it was kind of Dante to analyze her strengths and weaknesses, even though they would be competitors next year.

Feeling awkward in the solemn atmosphere, Dante wrapped up the conversation and stood up.

"I feel like I brought up an unnecessary topic during your date. Anyway, I'll get going. Have fun. See you at school."

Shirone saw him off to the door.

Outside the café, Dante looked at Amy through the window. Seeing her dejected expression, he scratched his head and turned to Shirone.

"Sorry. It seemed like you were having a good time, and I ruined it by butting in."

Having had his fair share of relationships at the Royal Magic School, Dante sensed the subtle tension between Shirone and Amy.

The fact that Amy had come on this trip with Shirone meant she had some thoughts about it.

If the atmosphere from the skating rink had continued, Shirone and Amy's relationship might have progressed.

But today's advice had complicated Amy's thoughts.

As a fellow man, it was natural for Dante to feel sorry.

But Shirone didn't see it that way. He was grateful that Dante had given Amy valuable advice.

"It's okay. Without you, we wouldn't have identified Amy's problem. You were a big help. Of course, Amy has to find the solution herself."

Dante smiled wryly.

Shirone seemed untouched by worldly concerns.

In a way, Amy was similar to Shirone, so they were well-matched.

Dante had always had instant relationships. It suited his personality, so he had no complaints.

But he thought it might be fun to slowly build emotions like a caterpillar.

"I didn't give advice just for Amy. Fermi's group will still be around next year. The more rivals, the better. Anyway, see you later. Have fun."

Dante waved and walked away.

Watching him leave as lightly as he had come, Shirone felt a sense of ease and freedom from the traveler.

'May you have a good journey too.'

A Winter Night (1)

In winter, the sun sets early.

Since the old castle ruins closed to tourists at 6 PM, Dante decided to end his sightseeing and head to his lodging.

'It's too early to just go in. Maybe I'll have a beer?'

At eighteen, he could legally buy alcohol.

Dante preferred sipping beer over stronger drinks, especially while traveling.

The shopping district was bustling with people leaving the tourist area.

As he wandered, looking for a comfortable place to drink, he noticed a young woman protesting in front of a bar on the third floor.

Her striking outfit caught Dante's eye.

She wore a loose-fitting garment with sleeves extending to her wrists, cinched tightly at the waist with a white belt. Her outer garment, which reached her ankles, was sharply tailored, and her skirt was red.

Dante guessed she was involved in some kind of ritual.

The large backpack, which didn't match her slender frame, suggested she had been traveling for a long time or had come from far away.

She looked to be in her mid-twenties.

Her skin was as white as if it had never seen sunlight, and she had a delicate appearance. Her black hair, tied high at the crown, cascaded down to her waist.

Chapter

331: Midwinter Night (2)

The way she was dressed, it seemed like she could freeze to death at any moment, making her an amusing sight for the drunken onlookers.

However, the woman paid no attention to the stares and continued to preach her message to the people.

"The end of the world is approaching. This place is dangerous. Everyone, leave the ruins quickly."

'The end of the world? What is she talking about out of nowhere?'

Dante didn't take it seriously.

Every ancient ruin has its share of people who get so caught up in cults that they give up on life.

The Ice Queen herself was a legend fabricated for the festival, so the idea of danger was absurd.

The tourists seemed to think the same, as no one was listening seriously.

"If it's the end of the world, it doesn't matter where we go, right? If we leave here, where should we go? Surely you don't mean we should die in the arms of our nagging wives at home? Hahaha!"

"Now that you mention it, that's true. That would be the worst. Miss, if you need attention, why not stop talking nonsense and dance instead?"

The woman, seemingly accustomed to such disregard, didn't change her expression and retorted while looking straight at them.

"It's not a lie. It's an oracle from the goddess Akeanis, who governs the melody of time."

"Akeanis? Never heard of that religion."

"You must believe me! Soon, the birth pangs of the end will occur here. Everyone will die!"

"Alright, alright, we believe you. But let's go inside first. We can talk over a drink."

When a large man put his arm around the woman's shoulder, she pushed him away with both hands and shouted.

"Don't lay your unholy hands on me!"

"Hey! This girl... Come on, let's go inside. I'm not a bad guy."

The woman reached into a cylindrical container slung horizontally under her backpack and pulled out something, pressing it against the man's neck.

At first glance, it looked like a quiver, but the contents were thin iron rods about 50 centimeters long.

The ends were sharp like awls, and a small bell dangled from a ring on the opposite end.

Feeling the genuine threat, the large man quickly withdrew his hands and stepped back.

"Whoa, what a temper."

As the situation escalated, the tourists who had been indifferent began to gather with interest.

Dante overheard the men standing behind him exchanging crude jokes.

"She's crazy. She looks fine, though. What do you think, should we have some fun with her tonight?"

"Forget it. You might get hurt dealing with a woman like that. Who knows what could happen?"

"But it's a shame. She's a rare beauty."

Dante observed the woman closely.

"Akeanis..."

Even Dante, who had a keen interest in the supernatural, had never heard the name before.

Well, there were thousands of religions in the world, so it was impossible to know the names of all the gods they worshipped.

The woman kept repeating the same message like a parrot.

"The end is near. Leave the old ruins quickly! If you don't, everyone will die. I'm telling the truth!"

"Will leaving solve the problem?"

The people's attention turned to Dante.

He was the first to take the woman's words seriously, so he drew more attention.

Dante stepped forward and spoke.

"If the end is really coming, there must be a way to solve it, right? Running away won't fix anything."

The woman, realizing Dante was younger than her, turned her head away in disappointment and addressed the crowd again.

"I am Lyria, a totemist and mage of the Akeanis Shrine.

Tonight, an exorcism will be attempted here. If it fails, it could be dangerous. So please leave this place quickly."

Dante was more interested in the fact that she was a mage than in being ignored.

Mages worked in exorcism circles, and their sealing formations were similar to mages' magic circles.

That's why Dante, who specialized in information magic, had studied exorcism to some extent.

While mages materialize phenomena through equivalent exchange, mages strengthen an aspect of logic through the power of will.

The two are similar but different.

In a situation where a fire needs to be extinguished, a mage would create water. But a mage would strengthen the will of water to suppress the will of fire.

Controlling the balance of the source.

Mages call this the law.

It doesn't have the sharpness of magical change, but it can encompass a broader range of phenomena.

Despite this, it doesn't receive much attention because the ability itself isn't logical.

Mages, specifically white mages, fight to eradicate the world's evil.

But good and evil are artificial distinctions created after humans were born.

So how can mages seal evil?

Due to this ambiguity, people often dismiss the law as a derivative or alternative form of magic.

"There is no time! Leave this place before the day ends. Your lives are at stake!"

Lyria pleaded earnestly, but the people paid no attention. Seeing no one else stepping forward, Dante approached her again.

"Can I help?"

Lyria sighed softly without looking at him.

'Kids these days.'

She had encountered boys hitting on her like this while traveling for exorcisms more than once.

The job of an exorcist seemed to spark quite a bit of curiosity among young people.

Judging by the boy's appearance, he was handsome and stylish. He even had a piercing, suggesting he was quite experienced.

'But this time, you picked the wrong person, kid.'

Lyria glared at Dante with cold eyes.

"This isn't something a kid like you should get involved in. Go home quickly if you don't want to cause your parents any trouble."

As Dante was about to respond, someone in the crowd spoke up.

"Hey, isn't that Dante? The kingdom's top mage prospect, Airhain Dante."

The middle-aged man recognized Dante's face because he worked for a company that supplied magical materials.

Even if they weren't mages, people working in magic-related fields often subscribed to journals.

Hundreds of new magical tools are developed each year, and analyzing students' needs helps them capture the market for popular products.

"Huh? That boy's a mage? He doesn't look like it."

"No, he's still a student. But I've heard even professionals can't mess with him."

To the general public, mages were mysterious beings. Moreover, the title of the kingdom's best in any field wasn't given lightly, so people paid attention.

Lyria finally adjusted her expression and looked at Dante. As a mage, she knew much more about the magical society than the average person, so her feelings of disregard disappeared.

"The kingdom's top student?"

Dante smacked his lips and shrugged.

"Well, maybe second best now?"

The man from the magic supply company knew that a boy named Shirone had defeated Dante.

But the nostalgia for the champion doesn't fade easily.

Especially since Dante had boasted an undefeated record since childhood, his popularity didn't wane quickly.

Lyria didn't care whether Dante was first or second. What mattered was that he was a knowledgeable mage and the first to take her seriously.

Dante pointed to the bar on the third floor.

"This isn't the best place. How about we go inside and have a drink?"

Lyria looked at Dante with suspicion.

Even if he was a skilled mage, if he was hitting on her like this, it was a different story.

"If you're trying to hit on me, find someone else."

"What are you talking about? Hit on you?"

"Then why are you trying to help me?"

"My specialty is magic circles. You deal with sealing formations, right? I'm interested. It might help my studies."

"Magic circles?"

If the boy was telling the truth, he could indeed be helpful. And if he was the kingdom's top prospect, it meant he was the best at handling magic circles at the student level.

"Alright. Let's go inside. But I won't drink."

"Suit yourself. I just need a beer."

Lyria finally shook the snow off her head and followed Dante into the bar.

"Damn... lost to a kid who hasn't even dried behind the ears."

The old ruins were not only a date spot for couples but also a place for lonely singles to find connections.

The many young men who had tried to hit on Lyria watched the two with envious eyes.

8 PM.

The old ruins were eerily quiet.

Moonlight glistened on the ice statues.

Even the laughter from the distant shopping district sounded reverent here.

Breaking the night's silence, two figures nimbly jumped over the crumbling walls and entered the deserted ruins.

Dante's expression was serious.

If what he had heard in the bar was true, the old ruins were far from safe.

'Seeing the future? Is that even possible?'

According to Lyria, the head of the Akeanis Shrine was a 70-year-old woman named Poriter.

She had the ability to see future events like déjà vu since birth.

In her childhood, there were rumors that she was mentally ill. She herself suspected delusions of grandeur.

But how often would a randomly imagined future scene come true by coincidence?

One day, when Poriter was eighteen, she saw her village burning at the hands of bandits, just as she had imagined.

That's when she realized.

She had the ability to see the future.

She didn't know how future events came to her mind, but she said it wasn't foresight.

Rather, it was like someone walking through the future, recalling past events, with sudden impressions like old

memories.

"Such a person said a disaster would strike the old ruins?"

Lyria nodded with a look of trust.

"And it's not just any disaster. She said a being that could bring about the end of the world would appear."

"The end of the world, huh? If the opponent is that formidable, there's nothing we can do, right?"

"No. That's why High Priestess Poriter is amazing. The future can be changed. We don't know what kind of disaster it will be, but we can deal with it before it manifests. It's like removing an egg before it hatches."

"I see. Do you have a plan?"

"We'll use necromantic summoning. Right now, its energy is seeping into this place. We'll materialize it and then immediately trap it in a sealing formation."

"But will it be that easy? What if it's stronger than expected?"

Lyria reached into the cylinder at her waist, pulled out a needle, and shook it, making a bell ring.

"That's why I, a totemist, was sent. This totem has a core of birch wood. By strengthening the power of the law with this, we can definitely capture it."

Lyria planted the totem in the ground. Then she moved to another spot and pulled out another totem.

"The sudden oracle left us short-handed. There's much more evil in the world than people think. Most exorcists, including myself, can't even go home and wander the world."

Lyria used 20 totems to draw a large circle with a diameter of 20 meters and walked to the center.

Dante followed and asked,

"I've always been curious, how does it work?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I can design a magic circle that imposes physical restraints. But a sealing formation isn't like that, right? It only reacts to evil. When something enters the sealing formation, how do

you distinguish if it's good or evil? What's the definition of evil?"

Chapter 332: Midwinter Night (3)

Lyria answered without hesitation.

"Think of it simply. Evil is anything that rejects good."

"Really? Then what is good?"

"Anything that rejects evil."

"..."

Understanding Dante's silence, Lyria explained further.

"I get that question a lot. But it's because people try to analyze it in only one way. Logic is just one way humans understand the world. If you look more broadly, you'll accept things beyond logic."

Lyria crossed her index fingers in an X shape.

"Good and evil define each other and prove their existence. Without good, how would you know what evil is? Conversely, the concept of good becomes clear because evil exists."

"Hmm, so the two opposing concepts support each other's existence."

"Exactly. Mages call this the 'Law of Numbers.'"

"The Law of Numbers?"

"Every number has meaning. At first, there was nothing, or maybe infinity. The number that represents this is 0. Then, as unique names like good, evil, Dante, and Lyria were given, things began to exist. That's 1. That's why a sealing formation must include the caster's name."

"Hmm, a unique name. Then what about 2?"

"The reason you couldn't define good and evil is that you saw them as separate 1s. But if you combine them into the concept of 2, that becomes the law."

Lyria held up three fingers and continued.

"Lyria is 1, and the law is 2. Therefore, 3 is the number that finds a perfect self within the law. In the shrine, we call this the Trinity. Of course, reaching a perfect Trinity is difficult."

Lyria interlocked her fingers to form a triangle.

"Everything in this world starts from the number 3. This is the Law of Numbers. It's the essence of the Akeanis Shrine and the first lesson given to exorcists."

Using the Law of Numbers, one can represent all the principles of the universe.

It's similar to how Dante structures the world with 0s and 1s. And this is the insight of the mages.

Lyria continued.

"A sealing formation is different from a magic circle. Only those who have refined their minds through endless training can trap evil. That's why it's a spiritual power. Of course, this is also why it's not recognized academically."

Dante, having organized his thoughts, nodded.

"I understand. So what do I need to do?"

"I might need your help if the disaster materializes through necromantic summoning. Once it materializes, it will affect reality. Set up a magic circle and protect me if I get in danger. You don't have to save me, but if the spell is interrupted before the sealing, it will be fatal. How long do you need to prepare?"

"Hmm, not long. I can start now."

Seeing Lyria's puzzled look, Dante chuckled.

"I don't like large magic circles. I usually use instant magic circles."

Lyria nodded in understanding.

Instant magic circles might be less powerful, but they offer flexibility in unexpected situations.

In fact, exorcists also use makeshift sealing formations when necessary.

"Alright. Let's begin."

As Lyria knelt and prepared to pray, Dante stepped back to brace for what was to come.

"O spirit lingering in the air, I bind your hands with the chains of holy power. Stay in place. Turn around. As the substance dedicates itself, a thousand masks will be removed."

Lyria's prayer continued endlessly.

She strengthened the will of the substance to pressure the non-substance. Speaking the will to increase its intensity was similar to word magic.

With the mage's signature, the necromantic summoning began.

"In the name of Lyria, I command you to reveal yourself."

Dante expanded his Spirit Zone and prepared for battle.

For a minute, nothing happened.

But since Lyria remained in her praying position, he didn't relax.

Soon, he felt the ground tremble.

The vibrations weren't strong, but they covered a vast area.

Snow on the Ice Queen's castle in the distance fell like dust.

'Damn! Come out if you're coming out.'

Dante surrounded the area with a defensive magic circle.

As time passed, the vibrations grew stronger. But still, there was no sign of the substance.

"Ugh..."

A groan escaped Lyria's lips.

She was exerting all her strength, squeezing out every drop of her spirit to push something into reality.

Suddenly, the scenery flashed blue. Finally, a massive electric grid spread across the night sky.

Dante looked up, stunned.

It was clearly not a human-made network but a form created by the random connections between charges.

"Gasp!"

Lyria's upper body jerked as she gasped for breath.

Dante was at a loss. Was that the substance of the disaster?

If so, should he fight it?

But how could he fight something like that?

"What is it? You need to tell me so I can act."

Lyria shook her head with a troubled expression.

"I was mistaken. That's not an evil spirit. It's a pure mental entity."

"A mental entity? Explain it so I can understand."

"It has a neutral will, not biased towards either side. I can't seal it in this state. But it seems to be quickly absorbing the law of this place."

Dante observed the signals exchanging through the electromagnetic network.

The patterns were increasing exponentially, causing the sky to flash with blue light.

'Damn, what is this?'

There wasn't a single repeated pattern.

It was evidence that the entropy of the information the law was learning was extremely low.

How could that be?

Even a newborn's brain isn't this active. Genetic learning about nature is already embedded at that stage.

"...It's not of this world. It came from somewhere else."

There was no other explanation.

To the mental entity, the information it was gathering here was as valuable as state secrets to humans.

Lyria didn't know about entropy. But she had a similar thought to Dante.

If the mental entity were of this world, it wouldn't have been born in such a pure, neutral state.

"Then we must seal it now! If we leave it, it will quickly absorb the world's evil! I'll attempt the sealing formation!"

As Lyria knelt again, a sound like nails on a chalkboard came from the sky.

The sharp noise found its frequency, creating a bizarre sound wave that no human could produce.

"Who... am I?"

Dante's face grew serious.

The question "Who am I?" meant it had developed self-awareness.

So what would happen next?

Before he could organize his thoughts, a simple yet blind shockwave, devoid of any individuality, struck the ground.

"Damn it!"

Dante set up a defensive magic circle around Lyria.

The mental entity's shockwave hit the ground with immense density, spreading out in a ring and generating a strong wind.

Swept away by the powerful wind, Dante was thrown back.

"Dante!"

A panicked Lyria ran to him.

The mental entity disappeared into the night sky, but she couldn't even think of chasing it.

"Dante! Dante! Wake up!"

Tears welled up in Lyria's eyes.

She had brought Dante into this. He had also kept his promise to protect her until the sealing was complete.

It was her mistake in misidentifying the enemy's substance that put Dante in danger.

If anything happened to him, it would all be her fault.

"Ouch, my head. That scared me."

At that moment, Dante sat up, rubbing his head.

Lyria stared at him in disbelief.

"Dante, are you okay?"

"Whew, that's why instant magic circles are great."

Dante showed his palm. A coin-sized defensive magic circle glowed blue.

In the moment of crisis, he had structured a defensive magic circle in the shortest time, splitting the shockwave.

Lyria finally understood the situation.

But she wondered if it was possible to do that in a split second without any margin for error.

Exhausted, she collapsed into a sitting position.

"Thank goodness. I'm sorry. Do you know how scared I was, thinking you were dead?"

"If I could die from this, I'd have died a hundred times already. But what was that? How can a mental entity produce a shockwave?"

Lyria regained her composure and stood up.

"It was probably the law. It seemed like a defensive instinct that emerged with its self-awareness."

"The law? How can the law produce such monstrous destructive power? It was almost at the level of magic."

Mages who use the law strengthen the opposing concept to pressure the concept they want to attack.

So if magic artificially twists phenomena, the law twists phenomena according to the natural order.

That's why it isn't bound by equivalent exchange, but its physical power is generally weaker than magic.

"It was probably a law that transcends human limits. If humans accept the law as 2, it accepts it as 1. It has always been the law. It must have existed as a mental entity for eons. Now that it has materialized, the strength of the law is different."

"So that's why the information entropy was so low. If it were of this world, it would have appeared by now. Anyway, the lower the entropy, the faster the changes will occur."

Even without understanding information entropy, Lyria agreed that time was of the essence.

"That's the problem. We need to capture it as soon as possible. Now that it has materialized, it will surely transform into something that can destroy the world."

"But... it's still in the early stages, right? There's no guarantee it will turn into evil."

Lyria shook her head firmly.

"High Priestess Poriter can't see all the world's disasters. But once she sees the future, it's never wrong. She said it would bring about the end. I'm certain that mental entity will become evil."

"Hmm, I see. Well... we wouldn't have known something was here if it weren't for Poriter. So, what do we do now?"

Lyria hesitated for a moment, then looked at Dante.

There was something she needed to address before they proceeded with the exorcism.

"You're really strong. Honestly, I didn't expect much help from a student."

"What? Suddenly? You don't need to say that; just tell me the plan."

"No, I'm serious. I've been involved in many exorcisms with the Order. I know how powerful that shockwave was.

Without you, we wouldn't have made it this far. On behalf of the Akeanis Shrine, which follows the path of good, I thank you."

Lyria bowed respectfully with her hands clasped.

But Dante didn't care.

He had heard words like "amazing" and "thank you" so often since childhood that they were almost boring.

"Alright, enough of that. What do we do now? It's already materialized, so necromantic summoning won't work, right?"

"To the newly born mental entity, this place is like a cradle. It won't leave easily. We don't have much time, though."

"Hmm, what about going out and getting help? No one believed you earlier, but now they can see the disaster for themselves."

Lyria shook her head with a regretful expression.

"It's too late. By the time we get back from the city, everything will be over. If the mental entity reaches the stage of intelligent reasoning, even I won't be able to hold it."

Chapter 333: Midwinter Night (4)

"Then? Do you have any other plans in mind?"

Lyria pulled out a totem and held it out.

"While the mental entity remains, we'll isolate this area with the law. We need to set up a golden formation, so help me out. You know how to calculate a three-dimensional magic square, right?"

Dante shrugged nonchalantly.

"Well... it's kind of my specialty."

As someone who specialized in magic circles, he was more than qualified to assist Lyria with her work.

However, Dante still had doubts.

Would this really be enough?

Even if they isolated the mental entity in the old ruins, trapping it in a sealing formation afterward was a completely different matter.

"Can we finish the golden formation by tomorrow morning?"

"It depends on our skill, but if we split the work, it should be possible. Why?"

Dante glanced back at the still-lit shopping district.

There were probably countless couples wandering the streets, drawn to the lights like moths.

"I think we might need some reinforcements."

After parting ways with Dante, Shirone and Amy spoke much less than before.

But the atmosphere wasn't tense.

Amy was preoccupied with Dante's advice, pondering how to find her own style.

Shirone, too, was deep in thought, struggling to fully control the wrathful spirit within him.

'That was really dangerous earlier.'

Armand had broken free of his control and targeted someone.

It wasn't that Shirone lacked mental discipline. It was more that his anger had grown stronger than before.

Of course, it's natural for one's personality to change over time.

But this wasn't the direction he wanted.

'I need more training. I'll visit Teacher Etella during the break and ask for advice.'

Having reached that conclusion, Shirone found the Snow Crystal Inn that Shakora had recommended.

"This is the place I mentioned."

Amy didn't say anything, just observing the atmosphere from outside.

Shirone examined the exterior of the building.

As Shakora had said, the ambiance was nice. The decorations were elegant, and the view of the endless snowy landscape was pleasing.

Amy had no complaints about the inn. But she still had questions.

There was no reason for Shirone, unfamiliar with the area, to specifically seek out this inn.

"Why insist on this place?"

"Well, I heard the atmosphere is really nice. We can relax here."

"Alright..."

If Shirone said so, Amy had no reason to argue.

Though practical by nature, this trip was also meant to console her, so she appreciated the effort he had put in. Still, she felt a bit guilty.

On a day like this, it would have been nice to spend the night together, but her mind was too conflicted.

"Welcome to Snow Crystal."

As they entered, Shirone was surprised by the bright lights. Numerous lamps lit up the hall as if it were daytime.

Past a right-angled corridor was a spacious terrace where tourists gathered around a hearth, drinking tea.

A minstrel's music filled the air.

The lyrics conveyed the Ice Queen's desperate feelings, freezing everyone around her.

"Are you two together?"

The receptionist smiled as she asked.

"Yes, two of us."

While Shirone arranged the rooms, Amy stood a bit apart, looking elsewhere.

It felt strange for a man and woman to enter such a place together, unlike traveling with friends in a group.

"Two rooms, please."

The receptionist glanced between Shirone and Amy, then nodded and placed the keys on the table.

"Alright, rooms 311 and 312. Take the stairs to the third floor and turn right in the corridor. Payment is in advance."

After paying, Shirone looked at Amy, who slowly walked towards the stairs.

As they walked down the third-floor corridor, Shirone spoke.

"Let's unpack first. If you're hungry, we can go out to eat."

"No, I just want to rest today. Walking around in the cold has made me feel heavy. Is that okay?"

If she was truly tired, resting was fine, but Shirone felt she might be lying.

Maybe she was angrier than he thought.

Even if she understood Dante's advice intellectually, emotions were a different matter.

When Dante asked for his opinion during their argument about the graduation exam, Shirone felt he should have sided with Amy.

"Amy, about earlier..."

Reading his thoughts, Amy smiled slightly.

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that. You know I don't hold grudges."

Shirone felt even more uneasy.

The fact that she mentioned grudges suggested she did hold one.

If Amy's feelings were already a mess, no words could make her feel better.

In this case, what was needed wasn't conversation but time.

"Alright, see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, you rest too."

Amy unlocked her door and went inside. Shirone watched her go, then inserted his key into the lock.

Entering his room, the first thing he noticed was the endless snowy landscape through the large window.

In the distance, tiny torches flickered, and people were ice fishing.

How nice it would have been to see this view with Amy.

The thought made him sigh.

"Sigh."

"Sigh."

Shirone and Amy turned to look at each other simultaneously. Then, as if on cue, they turned towards the door.

"What is this?"

There were two doors but only one room.

And only one bed.

They stared at each other in confusion.

A moment of silence followed.

Shirone's mind was overwhelmed with thoughts.

Most importantly, he had insisted on this inn, so he needed to come up with an excuse.

'What should I do? Should I ask to change rooms? But all the rooms here might be like this. Should we just get a refund and leave? Would Amy be upset? Or would she prefer that?'

As Shirone stood there, pale and unsure, Amy sighed softly. She had thought his behavior was odd. Now that things had come to this, the decision was hers.

Amy went to the wardrobe and set down her backpack.

"Well, we have no choice. Let's unpack."

"Oh? Oh, okay!"

Shirone was still flustered.

He started unpacking without knowing what was in his bag when Amy casually asked,

"Who told you about this place?"

"Huh? What?"

"You wouldn't have come here knowing what it was like. Did someone recommend it?"

Feeling embarrassed, Shirone confessed.

"Actually, your father did..."

Amy sighed, as if she had expected it.

With a spy in the family, she couldn't blame Shirone.

"He said the atmosphere was really nice. That you'd like it..."

The night view was indeed beautiful. But it was also a risky place for just the two of them.

After roughly organizing her clothes, Amy pointed to the door.

"Let's go down and have dinner."

When Shirone and Amy returned to the inn after dinner, it was around 11 PM.

They had spent as much time outside as possible, but they both knew this was their final destination.

Washing up and changing clothes felt different than usual.

Having traveled by carriage since the previous afternoon, their bodies felt heavy, but their minds grew clearer.

Neither approached the single bed.

They didn't discuss who would sleep in it.

The bed was a taboo topic.

They sat side by side, looking at the horizon where the white snow met the black night sky.

The mysterious night view allowed them to momentarily forget reality.

But strange noises from the next room abruptly brought them back to reality.

When their eyes met, Shirone's face turned red.

Amy averted her gaze, desperately trying to appear calm.

"What's wrong? Why is your face red?"

"Y-yours is a bit red too."

Amy realized this wasn't right.

If this atmosphere continued, she'd rather sleep in hell.

"Alright! Let's be honest. We're not kids, so let's not act like this. We're spending the night together in an inn, and we hear strange noises from the next room. And there's only one bed. It's a weird situation. But now that we know it's weird, it's not weird anymore. Agreed? Let's just sleep."

Shirone felt more at ease. But part of him was dissatisfied. How could emotions be cut off so cleanly?

"Are you sure? I'm still a guy."

"I know. But nothing will happen, right?"

Of course, nothing would.

But feeling a bit hurt, Shirone muttered softly,

"You never know..."

Amy chuckled at his timid protest. She thought of her family, who were probably imagining all sorts of things.

'Honestly, Dad...'

Setting up such a perfect trap to make them share a room.

No ordinary noble would think this way.

But the Karmis family, valuing individuality, was open-minded about relationships.

Though it was uncertain if they would accept a commoner.

Still, this decision showed how much they liked Shirone.

Knowing she wouldn't have to worry about her family's opinion in her relationship with Shirone eased her tension a bit.

'Come to think of it, he's amazing.'

The Karmis family's Red Eyes were excellent at understanding others' temperaments.

But that also meant ordinary talents didn't impress them.

Shirone had grown at a frightening pace, earning recognition from her strict father.

Though it was partly due to her own failure, he had kept his promise from a year ago and stood on the same level in the graduating class.

One year.

He had closed the vast gap in just one year.

But she didn't feel resentful.

Even if Shirone started his life over, he would still end up here.

"Honestly... I was mad at you earlier. I was upset that you didn't take my side when Dante asked."

Shirone turned to look at Amy.

"I don't know. I just felt pathetic. When I heard Jokre had passed, I was really jealous. I wondered if I should have transferred too. Maybe I was stubborn without the skills to back it up. Maybe I don't have the talent for a prestigious school."

"Amy, thinking like that..."

"I know. If I think negatively, there's no end to it. That's why I snapped at you. I was scared to admit I was wrong."

"But now you know what the problem is."

"Yes, Dante's analysis is accurate. I'm grateful for that. But... I still don't know. Even if I develop a style, I don't know if I can graduate. I have no confidence in anything."

'Amy...'

This is why failure is so frightening.

The graduating class is the pinnacle of the magic school.

Falling from the top feels much worse than failing a promotion exam in the advanced classes.

The probability of someone who failed the first graduation exam passing the second one is lower than average for this reason.

Chapter

334: Midwinter Night (5)

Shirone grasped Amy's hand firmly.

"Amy, you're strong. Stronger than anyone I know. You'll find a solution. You always have."

Amy turned to look at Shirone. The moment their eyes met, it felt like electricity coursed through her body.

The moonlit scenery, the sounds echoing off the walls, and the feel of Shirone's hand made her heart race.

It was as if the discomfort from just meeting his gaze earlier had been a lie, and now, courage surged within both of them.

'Shirone...'

Amy had to make a choice.

She was given another year, a time that felt like hell.

Having already experienced one failure, her focus had to be solely on mastering magic.

But for the first time in her life, she wanted to rely on someone, to lean on someone.

She didn't have the strength or confidence to overcome this alone.

Even in this moment of silence, Shirone looked at her with unwavering eyes.

She had to cross the point of no return.

If she turned away now, Shirone would leave her side.

To keep Shirone, she had to accept him.

Amy thought she had made up her mind. But at the same time, new hesitation surged within her.

Selfish thoughts.

Was it too much to ask for him to stay by her side, even if she didn't choose anything, even if she pretended not to know?

'Just one more year... Can't you give me just one more year? So I can make a careful decision, and until then, stay with me like this?'

Amy slowly withdrew her hand. If she thought this would disappoint him, she wouldn't have been able to pull away. Amy felt a sneer rise within her.

'What? You said you made up your mind? Liar.'

She knew the truth.

Shirone would wait for her.

Even if it was selfish, she couldn't help it. She couldn't give up either the graduation exam or Shirone.

"Thank you, Shirone. I'm glad you're here."

Amy wanted to hide somewhere after saying that.

The words she had carefully chosen felt so insincere.

But Shirone smiled gently, just as she had hoped.

"Me too. Let's do our best."

Shirone squeezed Amy's shoulder firmly, then went back to his spot and laid out his sleeping bag on the floor.

Amy felt relieved. It was as if they had returned to a time before the recent events.

But the look in Shirone's eyes, captured by her Red Eyes, reminded her that it was all real.

How long would he wait for her?

Feelings of self-contempt and guilt towards Shirone tangled within Amy's eyes.

Past midnight.

Jokre and his friends were quite drunk.

Still unsatisfied, they bought a large bottle of whiskey and snacks from a shop and settled in an open space near the castle walls.

Jokre opened the strong whiskey and poured it into the glasses in front of Rudvans and Vivian.

Finally, he filled his own glass and drank it down without even toasting.

"Ugh, it's really strong. What are you doing? Aren't you going to drink?"

Rudvans asked worriedly.

"Aren't you drinking too much? What about tomorrow?"

"Ugh, if I feel sick, I'll just stay in the inn."

Vivian, who had just wet her lips with the drink, looked up at the night sky.

"Sigh, graduating isn't that great. I thought I'd have a lot of fun once I graduated. But no guys are interested."

Jokre pointed to himself with his thumb.

"Aren't we guys too?"

"Oh, please. Do you think you can hit on me with that face?"

"Haha! Vivian, you're not that pretty either."

Rudvans agreed.

"Yeah, to be pretty, you'd have to be like that Amy."

Jokre's face twisted in anger.

"Damn it! I thought of her again! How dare she look down on us? They haven't even graduated yet!"

"But what happened with you and Amy? You didn't have to follow her to the skating rink. Those little actions make them look down on us."

Vivian also looked curious, waiting for an answer.

Indeed, Jokre had seemed more agitated than usual at the skating rink.

Jokre had intended to take the secret of what happened when he was thirteen to his grave. But once he started drinking, he couldn't keep it in.

To others, it might seem trivial, but to him, it was an unbearable humiliation.

"Just before I transferred to Eins, I confessed to Amy."

Vivian reacted with surprise.

"Oh my, really? So? What happened?"

"She said no."

"No? Just no?"

"Yeah! She just said no! Not 'I'm grateful, but,' not 'You're a good person, but,' not even 'I have someone else I like.' Just no!"

"Oh my, that's really mean!"

"Arrogant."

Vivian and Rudvans each added a comment.

Jokre's fists trembled as he recalled the moment.

"Do you know what the worst part is? I responded with, 'Okay, sorry.' I'll never forget that humiliation."

Vivian clicked her tongue.

"Pretty people only think about themselves. Hey, hey! It's better this way. Who cares about her? We're mages now.

Jokre, you won! Come on, drink."

Jokre downed the drink Vivian poured for him. It burned his throat and felt like fire in his stomach.

But he felt better. After all, friends were the only ones he could rely on.

Who cared about prestigious schools?

He had found people who understood him, so he had no regrets.

Jokre and his friends kept drinking, using Jokre's painful past as a topic.

Soon, the world started spinning.

The winter wind howled over the snowy field.

No one spoke anymore.

They all knew that no matter what comfort they offered, the truth wouldn't change.

Jokre couldn't beat Amy.

Vivian leaned back and touched the ground. Her eyes, looking up at the sky, were already unfocused.

She exhaled a breath full of heat.

"That's true. Alpheas Magic School is one of the kingdom's top five schools. Graduating means you can at least get a job at an official institution."

Jokre and Rudvans silently agreed.

Becoming a mage didn't mean everyone had the same job opportunities. Noble rank and connections mattered, but in a merit-based society, your background made a big difference.

Anyone working in the magical society knew the competitive edge of prestigious schools versus regular ones. So it was only natural that they were treated differently. Rudvans spoke.

"Anyway, we graduated from magic school and became mages. That's something. There are plenty of mages out there who didn't even graduate and just learned a bit of magic."

Whether you graduated from school or joined a guild, the issued certificates were unofficial, so there wasn't much difference.

But students clung to schools to have the school's name engraved on their certificates.

In reality, mages with guild names on their certificates were often seen as inferior by people like Jokre and his friends. But that didn't make them feel better.

Above school graduates were graduates from prestigious schools. And their ultimate goal was the official mage certification.

Guild mages were considered professionals because they earned money with magic, but the kingdom only recognized mages with official certifications.

But not just anyone could become an official mage.

It was one of the kingdom's top five exams, with fierce competition, attracting the best mages from across the country.

Entering a prestigious magic school, advancing each year, passing the graduation exam, taking the official mage exam, and passing it. Only then could you be considered elite in the magical society.

So Jokre and his friends, starting from a different point, couldn't just laugh at guild mages.

Jokre drank straight from the bottle and shouted.

"Damn it! Who cares if others get their certificates from guilds? Once we get jobs, we're all mages. And our bosses will be from prestigious schools. Look at Dante. He was

beating professional mages even when he was at the Royal Magic School."

"But that's just gossip from the journal, isn't it?"

Jokre's speech became more slurred.

"Who cares? It's all the same. We have to compete with graduates from the kingdom's top five schools. Will major institutions hire us? And we're not even top nobles. We'll end up as lackeys, becoming 9th grade, working like dogs to become 8th grade, and after ten years? The prestigious school graduates will all be 6th grade, sitting in management positions."

Though drunken ramblings, it wasn't untrue. Vivian nodded, accepting reality.

"True. And even prestigious schools aren't the end. Those who graduate at the top reach 6th grade in 2-3 years. What are we supposed to do?"

Jokre pointed repeatedly as he spoke.

"Do you know what's more annoying? Those geniuses become teachers at prestigious schools. It's a cycle of talent. Genius teachers attract genius students. We can't even dream of getting in."

Though Jokre's words were becoming exaggerated, they weren't entirely wrong.

There were exceptions among regular school graduates who reached the top positions in the magical society.

But such anomalies lost their significance against the average.

Regular school graduates were seen as less skilled than those from prestigious schools.

This was the accepted truth.

The pessimistic stories from Jokre and his friends lingered around their drinking spot.

In school, they thought becoming mages would solve everything. But once they became mages, their desperate hopes vanished like a mirage, replaced by new worries.

Vivian, staring at the stars, voiced a thought.

"Have you ever thought that this world might be a play?
We're living our lives, and someone is watching us."

Jokre and Rudvans turned to look at Vivian.

"If that's the case, I would never be the main character. The audience would never want me to succeed. They probably wouldn't even care. They might just want me to exit quickly, or maybe even wish I were dead."

Jokre looked at Vivian with pity.

She had always been a sensitive friend. But what really hurt was knowing that her words weren't just drunken ramblings. Maybe she was right.

"Why worry about that? Life isn't a play. No one knows what's going to happen. And no one thinks of you that way."

"But think about it. Shirone, Dante, Amy. Do they know how much we want to be like them? They don't. They just stick to their own group. Maybe we never had a place with them, like extras in a play."

The mood at the drinking spot grew extremely somber. Especially Jokre, who felt pathetic for not being able to refute Vivian's words.

"Damn it! What is this? This is supposed to be a graduation celebration trip! We passed! We became mages! We won! It's just bad luck that we ran into those jerks!"

Jokre put the bottle to his lips and drank deeply. The strong liquor burned all the way down his throat.

Chapter 335: Midwinter Night (6)

4 AM

The Ice Queen's Castle

A brown liquor bottle shattered against the castle wall.

"Come out, you bastards! Fight me!"

Drunk, Jokre shouted at the top of his lungs. His pupils were completely dilated, and he staggered in a zigzag pattern.

Rudvans and Vivian supported him from either side.

"Jokre, stop it. What if we get caught? We're not supposed to be here at this hour."

His gloomy mood had turned to anger through the alcohol.

Jokre needed someone to fight, and his defiance against the world led him to trespass into the restricted area.

"Haha! Who's going to stop me? I'm a mage! An official mage! Bring it on! I'll blow away any guards with a single spell!"

Jokre shook off his friends and stumbled forward.

Rudvans and Vivian couldn't stop him. They were also drunk and barely coherent.

Rudvans, who was the most sober, grabbed Jokre again and led him into the castle.

"It's cold. Let's go inside. If you keep shouting, we'll be in big trouble."

"Drinks! Rudvans! Let's drink! Let's drink to our hearts' content!"

"Alright, just be quiet and follow me."

The hall, now empty of people, felt eerie.

Objects they had passed by indifferently during the day now seemed to emit a creepy aura, as if they had come to life.

The Ice Queen's figure, illuminated by the cold moonlight through the window, was especially chilling.

Vivian shivered and said,

"Can we get some light magic?"

Jokre was too drunk to cast a spell, so Rudvans and Vivian attempted the light magic.

After several failed attempts due to their inebriation, they finally succeeded.

With a pop, two lights floated to the ceiling, instantly brightening the hall.

Jokre crawled up the slippery ice stairs.

Reaching the 1.5th-floor corridor, he picked a fight with the wax figure of the Ice Queen encased in ice.

"Hey, Ice Queen? Are you asleep? Want to have a drink with me?"

There was no response.

"Haha! See? Even legendary mages are nothing special. Just stuck in ice, sleeping! Is that even magic?"

Magic. Law that twists phenomena. Ice Queen. Mage.

The mental entity absorbed Jokre's information.

Materialized by Lyria's necromantic summoning, Optros instinctively fled to the place where the most familiar thoughts were concentrated.

That place was the Ice Queen's castle.

Among the information spewed by tourists, the Ice Queen held the most significance.

Optros quickly adapted to this world based on the vast amount of information.

At some point, the mental entity, which had only existed as a sense, developed cognition.

As sense and cognition communicated, the preservation of simple knowledge began to transition into the stage of thought.

I think, therefore I am.

Optros concluded that it needed a form to prove its existence. It sought a special vessel to materialize its thoughts.

The Ice Queen's eyes snapped open.

Jokre wasn't surprised. He knew that stepping on the wax figure's pedestal would make its eyes open.

The Ice Queen's beautiful appearance made his wounds, carelessly inflicted by a woman, throb even more.

Jokre knocked on the ice as if knocking on a door.

"Hey, Queen. Want to date me? Hahaha."

Vivian looked at Jokre's drunken antics with disdain and clicked her tongue.

"He's completely lost it. Hey, get a grip. If you pass out here, you'll freeze to death."

Jokre rolled up his sleeves and took a fighting stance against the Ice Queen.

"Alright, let's do this. Mage versus mage. If I win, you date me."

The information Optros had gathered was categorized as experience, and it reached the stage of judging the world by its own standards.

What is strength? Superior traits. Control of properties. Alteration, transformation, change of the physical world.

Then a question arose.

Then... am I strong?

"Enough already. Let's go back. We need to sleep. How long are you going to keep this up?"

Seeing Jokre's half-closed eyes, Rudvans grabbed him from behind and dragged him away.

Vivian, who had been sighing with her arms crossed, glanced at the Ice Queen and then followed Rudvans. But as she took a step, she turned her head sharply in shock.

"W-what?"

The Ice Queen's eyes, which should have been looking straight ahead, were now staring at her.

Vivian thought she was still drunk.

But no matter how much she tried to clear her head, the Ice Queen's gaze was unmistakably turned sideways.

It felt like her hair was standing on end. Her heart pounded as if it would burst, and she was in shock.

"Guys, over here..."

Jokre's voice faded down the stairs.

"Date me... huh?"

Don't leave me!

Vivian was too terrified to scream.

The Ice Queen's wax eyes, which were clearly made of wax, now moved freely, scanning the surroundings.

It seemed to be analyzing the material that confined it.

Vivian felt like she was going to die, even though she wasn't in pain.

No, it was scarier than dying.

As she felt the distance from her friends growing, her desire to live filled her lungs with air.

Vivian screamed louder than she ever had in her life.

"Heyyyyyy!"

Her scream echoed through the hall.

Rudvans, who was descending the stairs, turned his head in shock as a flash of light burst from the Ice Queen's location.

"What the...?"

Rudvans left Jokre and ran up the stairs.

The Ice Queen was enveloped in a radiant glow, and Vivian, pale-faced, watched in terror.

"R-Rudvans... this, this..."

The wax skin of the Ice Queen cracked, and light seeped through the gaps.

As her body vibrated, the ice block cracked and split into thousands of pieces, ready to explode.

'We need to get out. We need to get out...'

The ice block exploded with a deafening noise.

Simultaneously, Rudvans grabbed Vivian and leaped away.

Ice shards scattered to the ends of the hall.

Jokre, who was on the stairs, covered his face as the shards flew towards him. Then he looked up in shock.

Even as she fell on her backside, Vivian couldn't take her eyes off the Ice Queen.

Inside the shattered wax figure was a golden, glowing phosphorescence.

It slowly moved towards the railing.

As the light gradually faded, the Ice Queen emerged, far more vibrant than before.

Vivian muttered in disbelief.

"The Ice Queen... has resurrected?"

Having witnessed the Ice Queen's resurrection up close, she saw the wax skin break like a mold, revealing a new Ice Queen inside.

Jokre, who had reached the opposite corridor, started to run towards Vivian but stopped abruptly.

Like Vivian, his face turned pale.

"The Ice Queen?"

Was the legend true?

If this wasn't a dream, he was now facing the mage who had brought death to countless people.

"Haaa."

The Ice Queen opened her mouth and exhaled. Frost escaped, causing the air to freeze with a cracking sound.

"This is the freezing phenomenon."

Her voice was beautiful.

But as Jokre met the Ice Queen's lifeless eyes, he felt his blood freeze in his veins.

The Ice Queen, looking at Jokre with indifferent eyes, spoke.
"If you defeat me, I will date you."

"U-ugh!"

Jokre's nerves raced towards death.

Conversely, his desire to live instantly sobered him up, and he deployed the magic he had trained in the longest.

A fireball formed in his palm.

Jokre specialized in close-range fire magic.

Though not the fastest, he prided himself on its power.

"Jokre! No!"

Vivian shouted. From a third-party perspective, it was a reckless action.

But if she had met the Ice Queen's eyes, she would have done the same.

"Die, die!"

Jokre's fireball hit the Ice Queen's head directly.

No, it seemed she had no intention of dodging. With a pop, her head burst into flames.

"Ahhh!"

Vivian screamed, imagining the wax figure as a human candle.

The damage was done.

Rudvans, the most rational, carefully observed the Ice Queen's condition and muttered.

"Is she dead?"

The Ice Queen didn't move. All her nerves were concentrated in her brain.

The sensation of experiencing pain for the first time in her new form was intriguing.

Having transformed the law into a biological form, the pain of her face burning was excruciating.

But to her, who couldn't clearly define pain, it was just an abnormal sensory state.

'Is this heat? Absorb and suppress the energy.'

As she absorbed the energy through the law, the fire vanished, and the surrounding air froze.

The Ice Queen's grotesquely distorted face was revealed. Jokre, who had caused this, felt his legs give way and fell on his backside.

"Please, spare me..."

The Ice Queen savored the spasms of her facial nerves. Pain was an unpleasant sensation.

'The brain...'

As the Ice Queen approached Jokre, her face began to regenerate.

"I almost melted."

If the brain melts, you die.

That is a living being.

"Please, spare me! I'm sorry!"

Jokre prostrated himself, begging for his life. Facing a mage who survived even with a burnt face was madness.

"Jokre!"

Vivian and Rudvans ran to block Jokre.

Vivian and Rudvans rushed to stand in front of Jokre.

Though they couldn't hope to match the Ice Queen, Jokre felt his friends were like saviors, protecting him.

Vivian knelt and pleaded.

"Please, spare us! My friend is drunk. He never intended to challenge you, Your Majesty."

"Drunk?"

Alcohol. Brain. Disruptive substance.

"I see."

Realizing that the reason for her pain was a brain-disrupting substance, the Ice Queen lost interest.

"Consuming alcohol doesn't seem beneficial for living beings."

"Yes! Yes! We're very sorry."

"So, what will you do now?"

The Ice Queen asked with genuine curiosity.

She had taken on a human form and met humans. She was curious about what they would do to her.

Pure curiosity and madness often go hand in hand, and the Ice Queen's honest question filled Jokre with fear.

"We'll do anything you ask. Just please spare our lives."

"Anything I ask?"

"Yes, anything..."

The Ice Queen tilted her head.

"Why?"

Jokre looked up at the Ice Queen in bewilderment.

As he regained his senses, he realized her manner of speaking and behavior were strange.

But if the legend was true, she had been in hibernation for 800 years. It was likely she had lost her memory.

"Of course, Your Majesty is a ruler. A great mage. So you should rule again."

"Rule?"

The Ice Queen tilted her head further, then frowned as if something displeased her.

Though she had gained individuality by taking on a human form, her information processing speed was significantly slower.

But she accepted this neural discrepancy as a characteristic of living beings, not as something unpleasant.

"I see. I will rule. Because I am strong."

Jokre sighed in relief.

The Ice Queen was still the Ice Queen. If he had tried any tricks, he would have lost his life.

"Absolutely right. We are nothing compared to you."

Jokre groveled endlessly.

He had worked his whole life to achieve his first success.

If he died a meaningless death here before enjoying life as a mage, he wouldn't be able to rest in peace even as a corpse.

Chapter 336: Midwinter Night (7)

The Ice Queen, pondering Jokre's words, bent down slightly to look at him.

"Do you want to become stronger?"

Jokre blinked, not understanding the Ice Queen's intention. In the legend, she was a powerful mage, so much so that even the kingdom couldn't handle her, leading to her exile here.

But survival was his priority now. He couldn't risk angering the Queen with a wrong answer.

"I want to become stronger!"

Suddenly, Vivian shouted.

Jokre turned to her in shock.

'This fool!'

Was she still not sober?

He could understand her feelings, though.

How much frustration had she endured all her life?

If a god appeared one day and offered to grant a wish, people in their field would forsake wealth and love for magic.

But this wasn't the right time.

What could they expect from a woman who had frozen everything around her and even herself?

Maybe the situation felt too unreal.

Perhaps her theory of life as a play was resurfacing.

Vivian, unaware of Jokre's inner turmoil, looked up at the Ice Queen with desperate eyes.

Even if this was a trap, she knew it was a rare opportunity.

"Teach me, Your Majesty. Teach me magic!"

Her suppressed emotions surged, and her drunkenness hit her all at once.

But her mind was clearer than ever.

The Ice Queen raised her hand silently.

The information she had absorbed as Optros was now stored in her current memory.

Having created herself, she accepted the world's rules as pure information and could control them.

The Wave of Law.

A strong wind spread, forming concentric circles in the air.

But Jokre and his friends couldn't feel the wind. They only realized that something within them had changed.

They looked at their hands, trembling in disbelief.

The world they perceived was completely different from a moment ago.

The Ice Queen spoke indifferently.

"Is this the law you desired?"

Overwhelmed with emotion, Jokre could only nod repeatedly.

You can't feel or understand it until it happens.

But you will feel and understand it when it does.

That is the change brought by the law.

'This is unbelievable. How is this possible?'

Jokre clenched his hands.

Vivian was right.

Today's event was the most significant and perfect twist in his life.

The Next Morning

Shirone and Amy visited the old ruins' prison.

Time had eroded and exposed it, now half above ground.

The history of magic is ancient, but its academic definition is relatively recent. 800 years ago, there was little understanding of omniscience, and primitive magic was prevalent.

At that time, the Holy Order's power was immense, laying the foundation for modern holy magic.

As a result, mages were persecuted.

Abilities not attributed to God were considered demonic, and many mages were abandoned by their families. They entered the prison where mages were tortured. Standing before a device that stretched the spine, Shirone shuddered.

"How could they come up with such a device? It must have been so painful."

"Mages had it tough too. Magic isn't something you can do just because you want to. Now it's a blessed talent, but back then, it was practically a curse."

Shirone and Amy exited the underground prison.

As they climbed the stairs to the surface, they saw everyone looking at the sky. A massive storm cloud was rolling in.

The winter in the Les Mountains is known for clear weather due to the westerly winds rising along the mountains, creating high pressure.

Occasionally, localized low pressure brings snow, but even regular winter festival visitors had never seen such thick storm clouds.

"What is this? It doesn't look like rain."

The wind wasn't strong. Yet the storm cloud approached rapidly, like smoke, covering the sky.

The temperature began to drop sharply.

Even those dressed warmly felt the biting cold, and the tourists' faces showed signs of unease.

"What the... Is the weather going crazy?"

Shirone and Amy tightened their collars, watching the situation.

The temperature drop was too abnormal to be a natural fluctuation.

"Amy, something's wrong. The temperature can't drop this fast naturally."

"Yeah, it feels like magic."

Thunder rumbled from the Ice Queen's castle. A powerful wave surged, pushing the storm cloud away.

The air folded visibly along the wave.

"Watch out!"

Shirone stepped in front of Amy.

There was no time to dodge. The wave swept in from the outskirts of the crowd, approaching rapidly.

"Move!"

A woman in a robe stepped in front of Shirone and Amy.

It was Lyria, the mage.

She quickly formed hand signs.

The three basic seals of exorcism—prohibition, reversal, and fragmentation—flowed seamlessly, creating a barrier of law.

As the powerful wave swept over them, a shockwave exploded in front of Lyria.

"Ah!"

Lyria's body flew back like a cannonball.

The tourists all looked at her. The wave had passed, but only she seemed affected.

"What the... What's going on?"

Even after hitting the ground, Lyria rolled several times.

Dante appeared, lowering his stance. He caught her precisely in his arms.

"Are you okay?"

Leaning against Dante, Lyria bit her lip. She had performed many exorcisms, but this was the first time encountering a mental entity using such powerful law.

Shirone and Amy saw Dante and ran over.

They instinctively knew that the woman with Dante had protected them from something.

"Dante, what's going on?"

Dante delayed his answer and helped Lyria up.

The law, unlike magic, had no physical impact. Whether Shirone and Amy were unharmed was for Lyria to determine.

"How did it go? Did you succeed?"

"It was close. How about you?"

The Wave of Law had spread quickly, and Lyria couldn't protect both locations. No matter how skilled a mage,

without mastering the will of prohibition, reversal, and fragmentation, blocking the law was impossible.

Dante pulled out the totem hanging around his neck.

"Thanks to this."

The pendant, shaped like a monster's face, hung on a necklace made of twisted birch bark.

Though it looked menacing, it was a guardian spirit that repelled evil.

A diagonal crack ran across the guardian spirit's forehead, a scar from exposure to the Wave of Law.

As he placed it in his palm, it finally split in two with a crack. Dante handed the broken totem to Lyria with an awkward expression.

"You said it was the only one, right? Sorry."

Lyria shook her head firmly.

"No need to apologize. That's what totems are for. It means the law was strong enough to split the guardian spirit. It's a relief we blocked it."

Shirone couldn't understand their conversation. But the situation seemed serious, so he intervened.

"Dante, what's going on?"

Lyria answered.

"We were lucky. You should be fine."

Amy asked in frustration.

"What do you mean, fine?"

Lyria looked between Shirone and Amy.

It was already predicted that a self-aware mental entity would change the surrounding law to survive. In such a situation, Lyria could only save 2-3 people in an instant. There were hundreds of people gathered here.

Among them, there were surely those with the abilities needed for this exorcism.

Was it the right choice?

She couldn't predict the outcome of saving a couple not even twenty years old while abandoning everyone else.

"Dante, who are these kids? I didn't follow your lead to save your friends."

Dante glanced at the Ice Queen's castle and spoke.

"I told you, second place."

"Second? What's second?"

Dante squinted one eye.

After spending a night together, he realized Lyria was quite oblivious.

He didn't want to explain in detail. What would he gain from a long-winded explanation?

"He's first. The kingdom's number one."

Lyria looked at Shirone in shock.

Even though he wasn't a professional yet, she had allied with Dante because he was known for his exceptional skills in the kingdom.

Sorcerers didn't have a competitive system like mages, so hearing "second place" didn't impress her much.

In a kingdom with so many people, what did it matter if someone was first or second?

Second place just meant a very talented student.

But here they were.

In this vast kingdom, having the first and second place in one spot was shocking to her.

'Did this kid really beat Dante?'

He had a kind face. Except for his lively eyes, there was no aura of the nation's top student.

She had experienced Dante's skills firsthand early that morning.

His practical response, judgment, and exceptional skills were comparable to professionals.

Honestly, as a mage, she couldn't imagine what skills surpassed his.

Dante pointed to the Ice Queen's castle.

"She's here. Shirone and Amy, get ready. You might not understand, but stay alert."

A woman in the same dress as the Ice Queen flew across the sky towards them.

"Isn't that the Ice Queen?"

The Ice Queen descended slowly to the ground.

A flash of light twisted through space and landed beside her.

Amy's eyes widened.

"Jokre? Why are you...?"

Jokre sneered and bowed behind the Ice Queen. Rudvans and Vivian landed next.

No one understood the situation.

At least Shirone and Amy felt a sense of crisis, but the tourists seemed more relaxed, even smiling.

"Haha! It's really the Ice Queen! Is this some event?"

"Wow, she looks just like her! How did they find someone so identical among the mages?"

It was natural to think it was part of the festival.

Otherwise, how could the Ice Queen be walking around in front of them?

Shirone would have thought it was a performance by the organizers if he hadn't seen the shockwave explode in front of Lyria.

As the Ice Queen stepped towards the crowd, the tourists applauded and cheered.

The winter festival is held every year, but this year's special event was considered innovative even by their standards.

Reviving the legendary Ice Queen was quite an idea.

Even the wax figure of the Ice Queen had garnered numerous fans due to its beauty. However, the appearance of the woman playing the role was incomparable to the wax figure.

It was the radiant power of life.

"Whew! Ice Queen! Please shake my hand just once!"

A chubby man grinned and extended his hand, but the person next to him stopped him as if to say it was inappropriate.

"Hey, that's disrespectful. You might freeze."

People burst into laughter. No one realized that this was a real situation.

Amidst the jokes, the Ice Queen continued to walk with an indifferent expression.

Liria watched the Ice Queen's every move with her hands clasped.

‘What is it? What law did it touch?’

The wave of law had altered the laws of everyone except Shirone’s party.

Nothing special had happened yet, but considering the power of the wave, the extent of the change would be enormous.

Chapter 337: Wave of Laws (2)

The Ice Queen slowly raised her hand and spoke.

"Weak humans, kneel before me."

The tourists applauded and enjoyed the Ice Queen's serious tone.

"Nice voice! Sounds convincing!"

"Hey, Queen! Look over here. How about shaking hands with the Ice Queen... Ugh!"

The man suddenly grabbed his neck and knelt down.

The same thing happened to people simultaneously.

Their faces turned red as if they were about to burst. They desperately tried to breathe, but their breathing became increasingly rough.

Only Shirone's party was standing normally.

Shirone observed the changes in people. A necklace with conical spikes was now around their necks.

Liria frowned and muttered.

"Is that a Dharma Wheel...?"

The Dharma Wheel is an exorcism tool of the Exorcism Council that embodies the principles of law in its form, and its effectiveness is maximized the closer it is to a perfect circle.

The Dharma Wheels available to the public were mere imitations, at best promoting mental stability.

However, the official Dharma Wheels possessed by exorcists could only be manufactured by a craftsman who had reached the state of Nirvana.

To Liria, the Dharma Wheels around people's necks seemed genuine.

Although the perfection of the circle couldn't be distinguished by the eye, seasoned exorcists could sense the nature of the circle with their inner eye.

"A Dharma Wheel of Restraint. This is not from this world. Be careful. If you get caught in the wave of law, you'll end up like that."

As the people affected by the wave of law lost strength in their legs and knelt, the Dharma Wheels loosened, and air finally entered their throats.

Rough breathing was heard from all around.

"Ugh! Ugh! What is this? Who put this necklace on me?"

"Hey! Someone please take this off!"

Jocre watched the terrified people with a shiver running down his spine.

The form of the Dharma Wheel was implemented from the Ice Queen's unique memory, but the way it choked people's necks was his strategy.

The Ice Queen can change the rules of the world.

He wasn't sure if it was possible to this extent, but seeing everyone kneeling confirmed it.

The legend of the Ice Queen, who dominated the era 800 years ago, was entirely true.

"It's done! It's really done! I can't believe this day has come for me."

At this rate, ruling the world wasn't just a dream.

Moreover, she didn't remember anything from the past, possibly due to her 800-year hibernation.

The mage who once terrified the world had become a child who could be coaxed with a piece of candy.

"The Ice Queen will be mine."

After sorting out this place, he planned to gently coax the Ice Queen to make her his woman.

It was strange to date someone over 800 years old, but she seemed likely to fall for it, and above all, she was beautiful.

Even compared to Amy, who had coldly rejected him five years ago, she was not lacking in appearance.

Lost in such delusions, the Ice Queen turned to Jocre and asked.

"Is this how it's done?"

Jocre smiled satisfactorily at the Ice Queen's attitude of relying on him, asking about even the smallest things. But he still needed to be careful not to offend her, so he bowed his head and answered as if addressing a real queen.

"Yes. Everyone will obey you, Your Majesty."

Liria realized that most elements of the Ice Queen's personality were influenced by Jocre.

"Is it as the prophecy said...?"

As with most descent myths, this time too, the Ice Queen would meet one human and plunge the world into the abyss of evil.

Shirone looked at the grim scene of hundreds of people kneeling with a horrified expression.

"What is this? It doesn't seem like magic."

It was a natural question for someone who didn't know the law.

It's not equivalent exchange.

There was no way to put a choking Dharma Wheel on hundreds of people just because they didn't follow orders. Even the irregularities of the Fairy Chief of Heaven, Igin, weren't this bizarre.

Dante, who had no time to explain, spoke briefly.

"It's called the power of law. Be careful. That woman can change the rules of the world."

"Change the rules?"

The first thing Shirone thought of was the Akashic Records. But no being could twist the rules on such a grand scale unless they were an infinite mage.

Then there was only one possibility.

It was the Akashic Records from the beginning.

"Some kind of... conceptual entity?"

Liria turned her head with wide eyes.

It was impossible for anyone other than a spiritual practitioner to understand the essence of a spirit dedicated to a human body.

"This child knows the law..."

Most people live without knowing that the world moves according to the rules of the whole.

It was surprising that Shirone knew the mechanism of the law, which was passed down to only a few even in the shrine.

"That's right. It was a spiritual entity that couldn't be ranked from the beginning. It's called a demigod phenomenon. It's impossible for you to defend against it without knowing the law. Stay close to me."

Amy raised her fist and shouted at Jocre.

"You! What are you plotting?"

"Hahaha! Plotting? Do you still think this is a joke? We will conquer the world."

"Stop talking nonsense! Do you really want to get hit?"

Jocre sneered and conveyed to the people.

"Everyone, worship the Queen. If you don't obey, the Queen's law will kill you."

As the Dharma Wheels tightened around their necks, the terrified people touched the ground with their hands and choked.

Then they shouted in squeezed voices.

"Long live the Queen!"

"We will follow the Queen!"

As the faces of those who worshipped the Queen returned to a calm state, Shirone finally realized the seriousness of the situation.

Even Jocre's orders were being enforced by the law. Unlike logically designated magic, the law was a process of readjusting the balance of the whole.

As the voices praising the Ice Queen pierced the sky, Jocre tasted a pleasure he had never felt before.

It was as if they were all worshipping him.

"How about it? This is my power. If you come under me now, you won't end up like that."

Jocre expected Shirone's party to tremble, but contrary to his expectations, no one moved and they were watching the situation.

Dante, with his hands in his pockets, walked out crookedly.

"Hey, you. Are you out of your mind? Do you know what you're doing right now?"

"Ha! Do you think I'm crazy? Not at all! Can't you see the state of the people? You'll end up like that too."

"You almost killed hundreds of people just now."

Jocre's face turned pale.

"Do you know what it means to rule the world? Can you really take responsibility for that statement?"

"Ugh...!"

Jocre couldn't answer.

Becoming the ruler of the world was an ambition every man might have had at least once. But in reality, he was just one human who didn't want to go to prison or die.

The Ice Queen can change the rules. So if you put a leash on them, they will obey orders because they don't want to die.

That was the extent of Jocre's calculated thoughts.

But what if they refused?

They would all become corpses with broken necks.

Of course, no one in the world wanted to die, but once he imagined it, an unbearable fear surged in.

"Can I really conquer the world?"

Maybe he was temporarily insane, as Dante said.

While he was thinking that, Vivian's voice was heard.

"Hmph! So what? According to our words, no one will die!

Then the first victims will be you!"

Jocre turned to Vivian with a blank expression. Her eyes had completely changed overnight.

"Did you think you would always be the protagonists of the world? We are the ones controlling this situation now!"

"Vivian..."

Jocre realized by looking at Vivian.

She was ready to lose everything to seize the one chance that came in her life.

Yes, there was no turning back. Once you come this far, you have to see it through to the end, no matter what.

Great ventures require courage.

Regaining his composure, Jocre extended his hand and walked out.

"Kneel, Amy. And apologize to me. Otherwise, I will kill everyone here."

People, shocked by Jocre's words, raised their heads. They already felt the Dharma Wheels tightening around their necks.

"Hey! Kneel! We're really going to die!"

"Damn kids! Do as you're told! Apologize!"

The tourists didn't care what Shirone's party had done wrong to Jocre.

If they didn't obey, everyone would die.

Even if they had done nothing wrong, it was only right to obey Jocre.

"Apologize! Beg them for forgiveness! I have a family! It's nothing!"

"Please save me! Do as they say!"

Shirone's party didn't move.

If they gave up the initiative here, they would have to follow Jocre's party's intentions in the future.

Amy glared at Jocre with cold eyes.

"Why me? Why do you want my apology? Because I didn't accept your feelings?"

Jocre's face turned red as Amy hit the mark.

There was no trace of her flustered appearance at the skating rink. This was a battlefield, and caring about personal feelings was a luxury.

"It works. That guy really wants an apology from me because of that? How foolish..."

Provoking Jocre wouldn't necessarily lead to a good solution, but to create variables, they had to shake the opponent.

As planned, Jocre couldn't hide his embarrassment. He was furious that his narrow-mindedness had been exposed.

"Shut up! If you don't follow my orders, everyone will die! Do you really not care if everyone here dies?"

Dante spoke.

"If people die, it's because you killed them. We didn't do anything. You can live your life as a murderer on the run."

Dante was sincere.

For a mage, distinguishing between good and evil isn't that important. In a situation with no solution, it was better to sacrifice people than to head towards the worst-case scenario.

"Amy, you don't need to be swayed by that guy's words. He doesn't have the guts."

Jocre shouted threateningly.

"Hmph! Really? Will you really kill them? Go ahead!"

Terrified people hurled insults at Amy.

"You damn girl! Are you really going to kill us all? Kneel and apologize!"

"Please save me! We're all going to die like this!"

Amy bit her lip.

Her judgment wasn't different from Dante's. Even if they complied with the opponent's demands, greater demands would follow.

But being singled out, with hundreds of lives depending on her decision, made her blood run cold.

"Let's buy some time. I'll do as you say."

As Amy approached, Jocre's lips curled up.

'Of course, what could she do to resist?'

At that moment, Shirone grabbed Amy's shoulder. When Amy turned around with a surprised expression, Jocre's eyes flared.

"What are you doing? Do you want to protect your lover's pride even if everyone dies?"

Shirone didn't bother to deny it.

"Yes. Amy has no reason to follow your words."

Jocre's face twisted.

Is this what they call a mage's cold rationality?

No, it's arrogance.

Valuing a lover's pride over the lives of hundreds of people is not acceptable.

Chapter

338: Wave of Laws (3)

"Why don't you understand your place? Do you not realize the situation you're in? You might be the best at school, but do you think your reputation matters here?"

Shirone didn't hear Jocre's words.

If they held out like this, people would die. But if that was going to happen anyway, there was a much simpler solution.

Shirone narrowed his focus like a sniper. The Ice Queen's face came into sharp view.

'I have to end this in one go.'

Eliminate the Ice Queen in the shortest time possible.

If that happened, the strange power controlling this space would disappear as well.

As Shirone maintained his poker face, Jocre felt psychological pressure.

It was like someone with a sure winning hand in poker going all-in with their assets.

'What kind of people are they?'

Even in a situation where hundreds of lives were at stake, they were showing guts. It was something that defied his common sense.

They were looking down on him. That thought made uncontrollable anger surge up.

"How dare you look down on me!"

As Jocre shouted, Shirone's Armand unsheathed and rushed like a flash.

Armand's target was not Jocre but the Ice Queen.

The Ice Queen activated her law and quickly moved away.

Even so, as she was outpaced, she flew up into the sky.

'Law of Destruction.'

The Ice Queen's law enveloped Armand. However, the magic sword only trembled and did not break.

'Why?'

It was an unfamiliar experience for the Ice Queen.

'An incarnation?'

A perfect trinity object could not be altered by law, and in heaven, it was called an incarnation.

The Ice Queen activated the law of freezing. Frost formed on Armand's blade, and ice began to clump.

As the speed slowed, the Ice Queen regained her composure. But suddenly, she felt an impact on her back as if she had hit something.

'What is it?'

Without time to find the answer, she amplified the law of freezing. Armand, trapped in a massive ice chunk, couldn't withstand the weight and fell to the ground.

The Ice Queen immediately turned around and cast a wave of law at the point she had collided with. With a bang, a translucent dome-shaped barrier spread across the sky.

'Something is blocking the space.'

Jocre had a blank expression. Dante, who had been setting up the sealing formation all night, spoke triumphantly.

"How do you like my surprise gift? This area is already sealed. I planted totems all night to set up the sealing formation. The Ice Queen can never leave here."

Jocre slowly turned his head to look at Dante. The Ice Queen was trapped. It was the worst imaginable situation.

"You think you can rule the world by clinging to such a monster? Do you think the place you live is that easy? The army will be dispatched soon. Even if we die here, the Ice Queen will eventually be destroyed. End this now, and there might be some leniency."

Jocre's jaw trembled. His breathing became rough. If the army was dispatched, the Ice Queen would be destroyed. Of course, he and his friends would also pay the price for their crimes.

"You've trapped me."

The Ice Queen landed. The cold she brought spread across the ground, chilling people's bones.

Shirone did not avoid the Ice Queen's killing intent. Instead, he met her gaze as if challenging her, grabbing the handle of the returned Armand. The jewel embedded in the cross guard emitted a strong red light. He knew his opponent was not to be underestimated.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?"

The Ice Queen turned to Jocre, who asked worriedly, and gave him a gentle smile, patting his head.

But when she looked back at Shirone, her gaze was completely different. Her cold eyes pierced his heart like an ice spear.

"Why are you interfering with me?"

"Don't you see what you've done? And weren't you the one who first disregarded other people's lives?"

"Foolish. The strong rule. Isn't that the rule of the world you live in? I am merely trying to reign over you as the new ruler."

Cold air rose above the Ice Queen's head.

"Frozen Mist."

Cold air spread rapidly from the Ice Queen. Shirone's coat froze solid and shattered. The cooling speed was too fast. In a few seconds, the people around would have their hearts frozen.

"Watch out!"

Liria cast a localized sealing formation at the Ice Queen's feet. A circular formation glowed and drew itself, and a reddish pillar of light shot up.

"Ugh!"

The Ice Queen's face twisted. It felt like something essential to her was being pulled down, as if an object couldn't defy the law of gravity.

As the Ice Queen lifted her law and soared into the sky, Liria looked up with a regretful expression.

"No, her activity is too strong to be contained by a localized sealing formation. We need to bind her somehow."

The Ice Queen's face, unable to control her expression, was grotesque. The power of the sealing formation was immense. She hadn't felt such fear of annihilation even when her brain was burning.

"I will not forgive you!"

As the Ice Queen cast a wave of law, the laws around people's necks disappeared, and new laws were born.

"Argh!"

People's snouts protruded like dogs, and their teeth became sharp. Their muscles swelled, tearing their clothes, and their nails grew like wolves'. Their hardened skin protruded like armor.

"They're evolving into a state suitable for combat!"

At Liria's words, Dante shouted.

"Let's finish this before they join forces. If we concentrate our firepower, we can win. Liria, focus on defending against the law."

As Shirone's party was about to fly towards the Ice Queen, Vivian muttered, placing her hands on the ground.

"Radius of the Spirit."

Vivian's body petrified, and the ground shook. Circular walls rose in succession from her center and spread out.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Every ten steps, walls spread out in a radial pattern. The space between the walls was ten meters. And all this radius constituted her spirit.

"Damn! What is this!"

Shirone's party hurriedly retreated, but before they could take a few steps, a wall rose behind them. It was a 30-meter-high wall.

As they were taken aback, the front wall melted and Vivian's face protruded in relief. Her upper body emerged, and her lower body extended like a snake, connecting to the wall.

"Hehe. How do you like it? My ability, the Radius of the Spirit."

As Vivian raised her hands, Jocre and Ludvance jumped down and landed on her palms like cranes.

"Haha! Serves you right. Acting all high and mighty, and this is all you've got?"

The Radius of the Spirit builds walls shared with the caster's spirit at a rate of ten meters per second. However, the further the radius extends, the thinner the density of the spirit, so if the walls are built too far, the response drops to the level of inanimate objects. But Vivian was satisfied with her ability. The Ice Queen had accurately implemented her psychology of wanting to be the center of attention into her ability.

"This place is a perfect maze. If you catch me at the center, the Radius of the Spirit will be undone. But can you find the way?"

"No need to run around like mice."

Dante cast teleportation. A 30-meter wall was nothing to jump over. Then, countless Vivians popped out from the top and swung their petrified hands.

"Tch! Annoying."

If he collided with the petrified Vivian during a straight-line teleportation, he couldn't avoid a fatal injury. As Dante landed with an annoyed expression, Shirone raised Armand vertically.

"I'll take care of the Ice Queen."

As everyone turned to Shirone, he muttered.

"Diamond Armor."

The blade split, and thin frames like insect legs enveloped Shirone's face. In an instant, he transformed into a mage with a deep hood, and Jocre's party's faces hardened.

Dante asked.

"Is that Diamond Armor? What are you planning?"

"Armand withstood the law. Diamond Armor might be able to block the Ice Queen's law."

Liria nodded.

"It's possible. It's the same principle as a totem. But the Ice Queen is in the sky. We need to find a way to reach her first."

Shirone raised his hooded face. The Radius of the Spirit, which created clones at the speed of thought, was indeed a difficult obstacle. But it wasn't impossible to find a way out. "Function comes from form."

Shirone maximized his photonic sculpting. Light flared from his body, and giant wings of light spread out. He sculpted light.

The fact astonished the mages. Sculpting light with luminescence meant immense photon compression. Jocre's party swallowed dryly. They knew what Shirone intended, as he sculpted a form that performed only one function: flying.

"Take care of this place."

Photonic Sculpting - Light Wings.

Shirone bent his lower body and swung the wings of light downward, soaring at tremendous speed. Even though it wasn't teleportation, it was like a flash of light shooting up.

'You think I'll let you!'

Despite that, Vivian reacted. Dozens of Vivians popped out from the walls and bit at Shirone like teeth.

'Got you!'

The impact was clear. But soon after, Vivian furrowed her brows in confusion. The tendrils of Diamond Armor were blocking the petrified clones' attacks at close range.

"This...!"

Vivian poured all her strength into it. The sound of stone being worn down could be heard from where Shirone was. The force from the durability of the stone was tremendous, but the tendrils of the Diamond Armor were strong enough to crush most rocks.

External pressure: 1.7 tons. Reached muscle endurance limit.

Shirone gritted his teeth and pushed the tendrils downward. As the tendrils squeezed through a narrow gap and bounced Shirone up, Vivian's clones collided with each other and shattered.

'Eliminate the Ice Queen.'

The speed generated by the Light Wings was terrifying. Shirone pursued the Ice Queen at near the speed of sound. As his vision narrowed, Armand adjusted his physical abilities.

Target undetectable. Increasing photoreceptor cells.
Enhancing macular function.

As his vision widened, the Ice Queen came into clear view. The artificial brain balanced the flight. As the distance closed, the Ice Queen turned and cast her law.

"Blizzard of Freezing."

Sharp snowflakes, sharper than razor blades, swirled around, and Shirone covered his face. As the cloak covering his body hardened into a metallic texture, the ice shards scratched the surface like thousands of pieces of broken glass.

"Ugh!"

The Ice Queen's law wasn't as purposefully sharp as magic, but its scale was on a different level. Her rules were larger than the rules of this place. That was the scale.

Shirone turned the hardened cloak back into an organic material and looked ahead. The atmosphere had frozen, and massive ice columns spread out intricately like a human nervous system. It felt like becoming a microorganism on a microscopic level.

'So, it's ultra-low temperature.'

The reason he couldn't feel the cold was that Armand was regulating his nervous system. But as soon as he inhaled, the cold air immediately froze his lungs.

"Hmph!"

Shirone quickly closed his mouth.

Detected breathing blockage. Replacing with artificial oxygen. Remaining oxygen consumption time: 1 minute 27 seconds. 2 minutes 32 seconds. 4 minutes 49 seconds.

As Armand stored air, he began to inject oxygen directly into Shirone's bloodstream. Regaining his combat ability, Shirone flew between the ice columns and engaged in an aerial battle with the Ice Queen.

Like a hawk hunting, Shirone folded his Light Wings and swooped down, grabbing his wrist and firing 120 photon cannons per minute from the magic crystal embedded in his gauntlet.

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The Ice Queen made a wide turn, but she couldn't widen the angle faster than Shirone, who was rotating at the center. As the first shot hit, a series of shockwaves followed. The photon cannons that had been trailing behind all fired at once, and a thin scream erupted from the Ice Queen's chest. "Kyyaaaah!"

But she wasn't destroyed. Shirone's wrist, which was continuously firing, was about to break.

'Ugh! Why isn't she falling?'

Cold air began to spread from the Ice Queen's body, which had been pummeled by the photon cannons. The expansion accelerated over time, eventually forming a massive cloud that obscured the Queen's body.

Remaining oxygen consumption time: 1 minute 2 seconds. 48 seconds. 35 seconds.

The oxygen Armand had stored was rapidly depleting. When it reached zero, he would have to breathe the ultra-cold air. Desperately regulating his breathing, the remaining consumption time stabilized at 4 seconds, and air began to be stored again.

'What's happening? Did I win?'

He had fired photon cannons at a rate of 120 rounds per minute. A normal creature would have been turned into mashed potatoes.

As the mist that had gathered like a cloud dispersed, the Ice Queen finally revealed herself.

'What, what is that...?'

Shirone gaped in astonishment. His pupils shook violently with a look of shock.

Amy's red eyes flashed as she saved the coordinates. Dante and Liria followed her. They had already run over a kilometer. However, due to the nature of the circular maze, they hadn't approached within 100 meters of the center.

As they turned into the shopping district, they saw buildings cut in half by the rising walls. Amy's group entered a two-story house with an exposed structure and hid.

Dante looked out the window. Besides Jocre's group, monsters were roaming all areas.

"We can't keep running. The monsters won't tire. We have to take them down and get out."

Liria shook her head.

"They're victims too. We can't kill them."

"And if we die? The Ice Queen will only get stronger over time. We need to help Shirone quickly. But we're stuck at the monster stage, let alone destroying the maze."

"It's not about efficiency or results. Violence without the will of good is no different from the methods of evil. I'm not forcing you, but if you plan to help me, we must not harm innocent people, even if we die."

Dante smiled bitterly. It wasn't pretense or a lie.

Strengthening one's will to control reason was only possible with unwavering conviction.

"Is that the mindset of a mage? Well, we have a naive teacher like that at our school too. Etella."

Liria spoke firmly, as if it were absurd.

"It's not naivety, it's conviction. The world is maintained because there are those who uphold the will of good as much as evil rises. If we follow the methods of evil just because the situation is urgent, we will eventually be ruled by evil! I don't expect you, a mage, to understand the long-standing conflict between good and evil, but...!"

Dante waved his hand to interrupt.

"Alright, enough lecturing. I'm a mage, as you said. So, what's the plan?"

Liria, calming down, explained.

"We'll reduce the range of the wide-area sealing formation set up at the castle ruins to increase its power. It's a technique called Pakyojin. If we get the coordinates right, even a demigod's law can't escape."

Dante's expression turned serious.

"But that means if we fail..."

"Yes, even the last resort, the sealing formation, will be destroyed. The Ice Queen will become even stronger if she escapes into the world. So we only have one chance. If we can't create that opportunity, I won't attempt Pakyojin, even if it means my death."

Dante agreed. If the Ice Queen escaped the sealing formation, the damage would be uncontrollable. It was more efficient to keep her contained, even if everyone here perished.

"Alright. So what do we need to do?"

"The coordinates for Pakyojin can't be set arbitrarily. It must be placed at the point where the power of the sealing formation is concentrated."

"Where is that?"

"It's the apex of the inverted pyramid drawn from the sealing formation. Take me there."

"Another mountain to climb."

Finding the installation point for Pakyojin in a maze filled with monsters was nearly impossible. At the very least, the maze needed to disappear to start the operation.

"Alright, let's go. Liria and I will handle the monsters, and Amy, you take down the maze. You're the only one with the red eyes who can reach the center of the Radius of the Spirit."

Liria asked worriedly.

"Will she be alright alone? Their abilities aren't magic. The other two must have gained abilities comparable to the

maze."

"That's why Amy has to go. They'll likely target her first. It's better to split up. Amy, can you do it?"

Amy couldn't answer. Jocre's group had grown stronger. Even before that, they were skilled enough to pass the graduation exam.

'And I... failed.'

Dante spoke.

"You can do it. Believe in yourself."

"I can't. I really have no confidence."

Amy was sincere.

"If you can't believe in yourself, believe in your family."

When Amy looked up, Dante placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If your whole family can do it, there's no way you can't. Use everything you have to fight."

Many family members had proven their talents. That's why she could believe in herself in any situation.

With a determined look in her eyes, Amy followed Dante out of the building.

"Let's go, Liria. While they focus on Amy, we need to get as close to the coordinates as possible."

Liria asked as she followed Dante.

"Will she be alright? She doesn't seem very confident."

"She has her reasons. But she'll be fine. She might be struggling now, but..."

Dante smiled.

"She's not foolish enough to not know who's on top."

"Hohoho! The way you're running is priceless! Truly worthy of a prestigious school student!"

"Tch! Shut up!"

Vivian popped out of the walls at every turn Amy took, mocking her. Despite her best efforts to find a way, she was always in Vivian's grasp.

The wall in Amy's path suddenly opened, and Ludvance appeared, chewing gum.

"Wrath of God."

As he slammed an invisible shock orb into the ground, a shockwave with electrical and elastic force lifted Amy's body.

"Your panties are showing."

As Amy landed with a somersault, Jocre approached rapidly from the side.

"Speed Gear!"

The movement of the Speed Gear, which adjusted inertia from level 1 to 10, completely defied the laws of physics. As common sense was shattered, it felt like space-time itself was twisting.

Amy hastily deployed an air shield. Jocre's fireball exploded, pushing her body far away.

'I can't find Vivian like this. I need to get above the walls somehow.'

In the air, she might be able to use the air tunnel to directly strike Vivian's main body. But it wasn't easy to get such an opportunity against Jocre's group.

'The ground is blocked by walls. Is sniper mode impossible? Maybe if I injure one of them to tie them down...'

Amy shook her head. She was overthinking again. Dante's advice flashed through her mind.

-You have no style.

'Style. My style.'

There's no way to handle every situation. Amy focused solely on sniper mode. At the same time, her eyes widened. A core idea struck her mind like lightning.

'Maybe... No, I can do it. I can do it.'

Examining the structure of the walls, Amy set arbitrary points A and B and drew an imaginary string. Then, using the curvature of the walls, she calculated the radian value and combined it with trigonometry to derive the central coordinates where Vivian's main body was located.

'I have the coordinates. But to strike...'

Sniper mode alone wasn't enough. In a situation where all sides were blocked by walls, the flames couldn't reach.

But Amy didn't give up. Like Shirone and Dante, she deepened her strategy.

'It's possible. As long as it's heavier than air...'

Amy's red eyes flashed like electricity.

'More, more power is needed.'

Power. Power. Power. Power. Power.

Her eidetic memory began to eliminate distractions by backing up hundreds of frames per second.

Extreme self-censorship.

Her mind penetrated with a single purpose, in a state free of even 1% impurity.

Focus on focus.

Her mental power amplified exponentially, as if an explosion had occurred in her mind.

One path.

A temporary state of samadhi, occurring when focusing solely on one thought without any distractions.

'Inferno.'

Two streams of fire twisted like braids from under Amy's legs and rose above her head.

"What, what is that?"

Jocre's group stopped their charge and looked on in shock at the size of the flames Amy had created. The gas density was so thick that the flames dripped like paint.

"That's..."

Jocre, who specialized in fire magic, realized what Amy was attempting.

The thousand-degree fire that even professional mages struggled to achieve.

Judging by the color of the flames, they were burning at a minimum of 1,300 degrees above her head.

"You, you... that..."

Jocre's group didn't dare approach. If the Inferno exploded, everything within the radius would melt.

Amy turned towards the wall and spoke.

"Yeah. You can't even imitate this."

Jocre frowned in confusion. He couldn't understand why she was aiming at something unrelated after casting a spell to break the situation. But Vivian realized immediately. Despite her petrified face, her expression was clearly one of shock.

"No! Jocre, stop her!"

Amy raised her hands, supporting the massive flames.

"Stop her! She's aiming to attack the main body!"

Jocre didn't understand Vivian's words. How could she attack the main body when it was blocked by a 30-meter-high wall?

Amy smiled triumphantly.

"This is my style."

Bending her upper body like a bow, she swung her hands down while snapping her waist. The thousand-degree Inferno flames soared over the 30-meter-high wall and flew into the sky.

Ludvance muttered in a daze.

"Mortar fire..."

The fireball, boasting an immense gas density, arced across the sky.

While mortar fire can ignore cover, it has the drawback of lower accuracy. However, Amy could precisely target the coordinates with machine-like precision thanks to her eidetic memory.

"Kyyaaaah!"

Vivian's clone screamed and disappeared. If the Inferno fell into the center of the maze, she would melt instantly, unable to move in her petrified state.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The walls within a 1-kilometer radius simultaneously collapsed into the ground, and Vivian, freed from her petrified state, fled in a hurry, continuing the screams of her clone.

When the Inferno exploded upon reaching the ground, the surface melted like molten metal. The glowing red lava, with dark impurities floating on it, quickly cooled in the cold air.

The terrain before and after the Inferno's fall was completely different. The ground was grotesquely distorted, like the face of a demon.

Vivian, who narrowly escaped death, reached Jocre. The maze had disappeared, but Amy was nowhere to be seen. As Jocre looked around with an annoyed expression, he muttered.

"Damn it! Where did she hide?"

A dull thud sounded from where Ludvance was. A burning stone struck the back of his head, and he fell without even a groan.

Chapter 340: Wave of Laws (5)

"Fire Call?"

Jocre scanned the direction from which the rock had flown. Amy stood at a distance that blended into the scenery if not looked at closely.

"Do you dare look down on us?"

Jocre activated teleportation and raised Speed Gear to level 10. Amy hastily fired a Fire Call, but he easily dodged it, able to control inertia.

"Hahaha! Is this all you've got?"

Amy's lips curled into a faint smile. Just as Jocre felt puzzled, dozens of Fire Calls rained down from the sky, striking him.

"Ugh!"

A sniper shot at an angle of 88.97 degrees.

The Fire Calls, which had stayed out of perception, suddenly attacked from a blind spot, something even Speed Gear couldn't defend against.

Without stopping, Amy charged at Vivian. The Radius of the Spirit provided a favorable environment for allies but had the fatal flaw of petrifying the user. Vivian couldn't do anything and was hit in the stomach by Amy, lifting her off the ground.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

As Vivian lay on the ground, vomiting, Amy dusted off her hands and scoffed.

"Hmph, you're lucky it ended with just that."

She wanted to teach her a lesson, but the situation didn't allow for it. Explosions were echoing in the sky as Shirone's firepower battle began in earnest.

"Where's Shirone?"

Shirone was floating in the western sky. The Ice Queen was nowhere to be seen, but a cloud of cold air was visible on the opposite side.

"Huh? What is that...?"

Amy's face was filled with shock. The sight of the Ice Queen emerging from the mist was beyond her imagination.

Shirone swallowed hard, his face tense.

As the cold cloud cleared, the Ice Queen's enormous eyes moved around.

It would be hard to find her easily. Humans also struggle to spot objects smaller than their pupils.

Dust, mosquitoes, hairs.

Honestly, he didn't know.

Nor did he want to know.

Seeing an eyeball larger than a person, with pupils and irises moving at the same speed as human eye movements, made his mind go blank.

If the Ice Queen's eyeball was the size of a person, her face was as big as a house. Cold air leaked out between her neatly aligned teeth, each several meters long.

The fact that only her face had grown was the most bizarre. A small body attached to a giant face. If this were a dream, it would be the worst nightmare.

Why did she make such a choice?

If the goal was to shock and stop his heart, it was a decent strategy, but that wasn't the primary reason.

'She increased her brain capacity.'

That was the only explanation.

For the first time, the Ice Queen's face, which had shown almost no expression, was filled with emotion.

Fear and anger.

At the moment she experienced the threat of annihilation from the photon cannon barrage, she reached the most intense emotions a human could feel.

'Humans are strong.'

The Ice Queen realized through Shirone.

'Then I will become stronger.'

Shirone's strength came from his brain. Therefore, she needed to become larger than Shirone. It was a somewhat crude method but also the most intuitive and clear solution.

"Ooooooooo!"

Cold air spread from the Ice Queen's mouth. As the air contracted, it felt like the sky was closing in.

The impact reached the ground. The air cooled so much that it became hard to breathe as the ground froze.

Dante and Liria shivered in the intense cold. Even the monsters with ironclad skin were losing their activity. Amy, twisting Vivian's arm behind her back, ran over and shouted.

"Dante! What's happening with Pakyojin? If we don't act fast, we'll all freeze to death!"

Liria shook her head gloomily. The Ice Queen's transformation was grotesque. Regardless of power, it seemed impossible to defeat such a monster. It was better to die here than to let the Ice Queen escape.

"Amy! Let go of Vivian!"

Jocre and Ludvance, regaining their senses in the cold, ran over. But even they stopped in their tracks, stunned by the Ice Queen's transformation in the sky.

"What... what is that?"

The Ice Queen Jocre knew was gone. Only a monster with a giant face floated in the sky.

Amy, using Vivian as a shield, shouted.

"Do you see now? Do you understand what kind of monster you've awakened? Surrender and help us!"

Vivian struggled and shouted.

"Who cares! Jocre, attack!"

Jocre didn't move. No, he couldn't move. The temperature was dropping to a critical level. Attack or not, they would all freeze to death.

"Damn it! Stay still!"

"Ah! Hey! Handle me carefully!"

Unable to bear it, Amy threw Vivian aside and joined the group. She cast a Fire Wall, surrounding the area with a wall of fire, bringing a moment of warmth.

"Jocre! Do something! We'll die like this!"

Jocre, also a fire mage, snapped out of it and cast another wall of fire inside Amy's Fire Wall.

But it was futile. The fire, created with magic, had a much lower ignition point than reality, but even that couldn't withstand the extreme cold and went out.

The extreme cold swept over them. Their lungs froze, and their vision blurred. It felt like the end of the world, like the day the Ice Queen froze herself 800 years ago.

For the first time, Jocre felt the fear of death. His face contorted, and a desperate scream burst out.

"Save me! I can't die like this!"

Ludvance grabbed his throat and knelt.

"Ugh! I can't breathe!"

The current ground temperature was -120 degrees Celsius. It was a temperature that could kill everyone in three minutes.

'Shirone , please...!'

Amy looked at Shirone with desperate eyes.

The only one who could withstand the extreme cold was Shirone, protected by the power of the Diamond Armor.

"Shirone! We'll all die like this!"

Armand's auditory sensors collected Amy's voice and transmitted it to Shirone's brain.

But Shirone already knew without hearing it.

Even with Armand enhancing all his body's heat-generating organs, the cold was unbearable.

The heat consumption per second was a staggering 1 kilocalorie.

Even the organic robe, designed to maximize insulation, had hardened, so those on the ground likely had no strength left to move.

'There's no choice but to confront her.'

Shirone pushed his Light Wings back and charged at the Queen.

As the headwind increased, the perceived temperature dropped further.

It was a suicidal attempt, but Armand used all available means to maintain body temperature without complaint. But even that reached its limit.

Tissue necrosis. Organic generation impossible.

Remaining life support time: 4 seconds. 3 seconds. 2 seconds.

"Ugh!"

Shirone gritted his teeth and charged. His whole body felt like a cold stone.

And finally, at the last moment of his life, he plunged into the Ice Queen's mouth, the source of the cold.

Amy shouted in shock.

"He's crazy! Shirone!"

Entering the Ice Queen's body was even more insane than facing the extreme cold head-on. It wasn't just about dying. Who knew what was inside?

Dante, exhaling, spoke.

"Amy. The temperature is rising. Cast Fire Wall."

The Ice Queen, who had swallowed Shirone, didn't even blink. For some reason, she seemed to be in a temporary state of inactivity.

Shirone's decision was ultimately wise. If he intended to save everyone at the cost of his own life.

Amy's expression was grim as she cast Fire Wall. It already felt like Shirone had left the world.

"He'll come back. Shirone will definitely come back."

Dante didn't offer hopeful words. The odds of Shirone returning from the unknown were incalculable.

"We've bought some time. I don't know how much, but we need to do something. Gather around, let's plan."

While Dante's group discussed their strategy, Jocre stared blankly at the sky.

'That's the true form of the Ice Queen.'

The Ice Queen's giant face was horrifying. It was like someone outside the world was shining a magnifying glass on her face.

And Shirone had jumped into such a place.

Maybe he could have held out a bit longer. With his incredible flying ability, he could have escaped with his friends in the worst-case scenario.

But he threw himself into the jaws of death.

To save the world? To become a hero? Or was it just arrogance?

"Why?"

Jocre asked sincerely, but Shirone, who should have answered, had already disappeared into the Ice Queen's law. Shirone floated in the world of law.

Countless stars, whose distances couldn't be measured, flickered incessantly, exchanging signals.

Light and darkness were 1 and 0. The binary signal system was executing the Ice Queen's law.

But that wasn't the important information right now.

The truly important information was that there was no air here.

Remaining oxygen consumption time: 2 minutes 37 seconds.

Shirone was terrified. The time Armand conveyed was literally his lifespan.

'Stay calm. If I panic, I'll use more oxygen.'

He tried to regain his composure, but nothing changed.

There was nothing but the 1 and 0 signals. Therefore, he couldn't create any variables to change the situation.

Would he die when the oxygen ran out? Would his body become a corpse, drifting forever in the cold world?

Then the stars began to flicker rapidly.
It felt like ants that had been slacking off suddenly sped up when food fell to the ground.
Shirone felt his consciousness fading. The faster the stars flickered, the more his senses dulled.
Shirone floated in the world of law.
Countless stars, whose distances couldn't be measured, flickered incessantly, exchanging signals.
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Then the stars began to flicker rapidly.
It felt like ants that had been slacking off suddenly sped up when food fell to the ground.
Shirone felt his consciousness fading. The faster the stars flickered, the more his senses dulled.
'Ah, I see.'
This place was the digestive system of the law.
If he weren't protected by Armand's law, he would have already been broken down and absorbed into the Ice Queen's law.

Whenever his consciousness wavered, Armand readjusted the focal point to maintain his awareness.

It felt like being bait thrown into the sea.

'Please hold on.'

Shirone prayed earnestly to Armand. He knew it was just a tool, but it was his only lifeline now.

Armand held on well.

It didn't tell him how much oxygen was left because it judged that fear would worsen the situation.

Shirone thought that might be his own reasoning, but it made him even more scared.

'Oxygen consumption. Let's just know it.'

Remaining oxygen consumption time: 2 minutes 1 second. 2 minutes. 1 minute 59 seconds.

'Two minutes left, my life.'

He deliberately tried to think calmly. Otherwise, the oxygen consumption rate would double.

Of course, he could hold his breath to last a bit longer, but that would be the end of the line.

He needed to find a solution while he still had some time.

"Gasp!"

Shirone exhaled precious oxygen.

Suddenly, a giant sound was heard. No, it was a signal that made up a giant sound.

Shake.

Like bait submerged in water meeting a storm, Shirone's consciousness began to disintegrate rapidly.

Disintegrate.

'Ugh!'

Everything that had formed a whole was now waving independent flags and leaving.

His consciousness faded. Armand was trying desperately, but the Ice Queen's law began to engulf his mind.

"Ugh!"

Shirone grimaced. The nerves around his eyes rose, and his pupils began to darken.

A massive explosion occurred at the first level of depth, pushing the Ice Queen's law outward.

In response to the intruder in his mind, Goffin's sealing formation opened, summoning the demon again.

Multiple mental entities detected. Overdrive activated.

Armand discovered the only hope to save its master and immediately connected with Behemoth.

Chapter 341: Trinity (2)

As his breathing became labored, Shirone's oxygen consumption skyrocketed.

Remaining oxygen consumption time: 1 minute 17 seconds. 1 minute 3 seconds. 42 seconds.

Light flew from all directions and pierced Shirone's body. With the approach of the law blocked, it tried to penetrate his mind directly through physical means. Armand reacted immediately.

Observing nerve junction points. Docking and copying.

Armand's tendrils connected with the needles of light. Then even more light surged and pierced Shirone's body.

Dozens, hundreds.

The endless light demanded one thing.

Disintegrate.

"Ugh!"

Shirone's face twisted in fear.

The feeling of his existence being absorbed by another was as humiliating as being eaten alive by a beast.

Remaining oxygen consumption time: 4 seconds. 3 seconds. 2 seconds.

At this rate, he would be absorbed.

"How dare you...!"

Shirone focused his mind on a single point.

As the Immortal Function opened, his infinite mind spread throughout the world of law.

Detecting immeasurable focal point. Penetrating.

Armand's organic matter multiplied infinitely. The tendrils extended and docked with all the thorns piercing Shirone. Armand copied the information trying to hack its master's brain and began constructing a suitable firewall based on it. Finally, Shirone and the Ice Queen shared a single world as individual subjects of the law.

Firewall complete. Activating.

Light burst from Shirone's retina.

Small World Creation.

"Where is this?"

Shirone's looked around.

It was a dark space, like the world of law. The difference was that there were no twinkling stars.

But Shirone could see.

'How can I see?'

Is it possible to see in a place without light?

'Maybe...'

Shirone found an intriguing answer.

Memory. There is no light in memory.

Light does not linger in the past.

But he was in reality.

Therefore, this place was a space where all time unfolded. It was the entirety of time, where past, present, and future could not be distinguished.

As he took a step, countless Shirones emerged from the curtain of darkness.

"What is this?"

He turned around. It was as if infinite versions of himself were revolving, like a space expanded with mirrors.

Shirones pointed to one and approached. As the distance shortened, the perspective narrowed, and countless Shirones lined up in parallel.

There stood a version of himself with black pupils and an evil face.

Shirone reached out. The other Shirone also reached out. He felt the cold texture of a glass wall.

'Is this me?'

No, this is not me.

Where is this place? Outside the mirror, or inside? Am I the one looking at the mirror, or the one reflected in it?

"Ah..."

Shirone finally realized.

"This is..."

Both Shirones spoke simultaneously.

"You."

Crash!

All the glass walls that had been expanding in infinite parallel lines shattered at the speed of light.

With the sound of breaking glass, the boundaries of the mirrors began to destroy at the speed of light.

Shirone and the other Shirone's hands touched. But before he could feel the sensation, the other Shirone disappeared.

Within the Ice Queen's law, Shirone and the other Shirone referred to each other, achieving a perfect trinity.

The evil Shirone with black pupils was no more. Only the absolute, unshakable Shirone remained.

In heaven, this technique was called Incarnation. But mages considered it a state of mind and called it this:

Mental Transcendence.

The protagonist of life (1)

Having completed the trinity, Shirone's eyes snapped open. Simultaneously, through the multi-law network Small World Creation, Armand began to counterattack the Ice Queen's law.

The world shook, and starlight flared. Unable to withstand Shirone, the Ice Queen extended her neck and retched.

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!"

Amy's face turned pale as she watched from the ground. The sight of the giant face straining as if its eyes would pop out was beyond horrifying.

"Ugh!"

With one final effort, the Ice Queen vomited out Shirone, who was covered in tendrils. He spread his Light Wings and hovered, the first thing he did was inhale deeply.

"Ha! Ha!"

For the first time, he realized that even air had a taste.

"Shirone! Shirone is back alive!"

Amy's face, which had been contorted in pain, finally brightened. The grotesqueness of the Ice Queen couldn't overshadow the joy of Shirone's safe return.

But Dante's expression remained serious.

Above all, the Ice Queen's condition was strange.

The Ice Queen was making a grotesque expression that human facial muscles couldn't create. But it was the most accurate representation of her current emotions.

'Infinite? Infinite? Infinite? Infinite? Infinite?'

The Ice Queen was confused.

'What is that?'

As Armand constructed the firewall, the Ice Queen also copied Shirone's information.

But there was a problem.

Even with Optros' vast information, it was difficult to fully analyze the Immortal Function.

As the immense euphoria, surpassing the scale of the law, surged in, the Ice Queen couldn't control her gaping mouth. She was heading towards infinity.

That was the only fact the Ice Queen could grasp.

Her endlessly widening jaw exceeded the range of her joints and began to reverse, swallowing herself.

Like a grape peeling its skin and revealing the flesh, a new entity emerged from her throat.

'I am infinite.'

With human faces on three sides and dozens of arms sprouting from her shoulders, spreading like a peacock's feathers.

Three-faced Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara.

It was Optros' second dedication, having absorbed the Immortal Function.

"Grrrr!"

The sound of thousands of beetles crying erupted from the laughing mouth of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara.

"Ugh!"

Hit directly by the sudden sound wave, Shirone adjusted his hearing through Armand and widened the distance. The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's neck turned, and a face with raised eyebrows and a downturned mouth took the front. As the law of anger erupted, countless fireballs shot out in all directions.

"Watch out!"

As Liria pointed to the falling fire rain, Dante spread a massive defensive magic circle above their heads. As the fireballs struck, a loud crack echoed.

"Ugh! Damn it!"

Dante's expression was grim. In an isolated space, a mental entity's growth is limited, but the entity that emerged after swallowing Shirone had a law far stronger than the Ice Queen's. It was likely the Immortal Function. Indeed, there was no better stimulant for a law-absorbing entity than Shirone.

"Deploy Pakyojin immediately!"

Liria watched the battle in the sky with confused eyes. Shirone was firing photon cannons, but they didn't even scratch the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's body.

"Not yet. The range of Pakyojin is much narrower than the sealing formation. If we can't lure it here, it's better to die here."

Amy shouted towards the sky.

"Shirone! Push the monster this way!"

Armand copied Amy's voice. The noisy voice was transmitted to Shirone's brain.

"Push it?"

It meant they had found a way on the ground. But how could he push a monster that didn't even flinch from the photon cannons?

'I have no choice.'

Shirone focused on increasing the power of the photon cannons. Then the mental transcendence expanded greatly. The Immortal Function could borrow infinite mental power but couldn't increase its power beyond the Spirit Zone. But mental transcendence forcibly strengthened the Spirit Zone.

Of course, like divine transcendence, the mental backlash that followed was a separate issue.

Just as Rian's arm exploded when he swung his sword faster than his body could handle, attempting more than his capacity could lead to mental destruction.

Expanding focal point. Activating overdrive.

But Shirone didn't hesitate. Feeling an immense output he had never experienced before, he extended his hand, and dozens of flashes struck the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's torso directly.

"Grrrr!"

The body of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, which had been immobile, began to be pushed back slightly. As it fired sound waves in all directions, Shirone didn't stop his assault. In fact, the power was increasing over time.

250 meters to the Pakyojin installation point.

Those watching the battle from the ground were mesmerized by the sight of dozens of photon cannons flashing.

"How can he use such magic...?"

Liria, the mage, was the most shocked. She classified mental entities as demigods because they could freely manipulate the law. Law entities must be sealed with law. But Shirone was pushing back a demigod with sheer physical force.

"...I thought he was just an innocent kid."

Dante gave a bitter smile at Liria's misconception. Judging Shirone by his appearance led to this. He had no interest in fashion, and he was a rustic boy who calmly sewed in a café. But he was the only boy who had defeated him.

"Well, he's the coolest when he's a mage."

Liria was conflicted. The distance the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara was being pushed was visibly shortening. If the photon cannons didn't get stronger, it would be impossible to push it to the Pakyojin installation point.

"Liria. Deploy Pakyojin. Whether Shirone succeeds or fails, if we have to do something, now is the last chance."

'What should I do...?'

If Pakyojin fails, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara will escape into the world. Even if the kingdom prepares, given the scale of the law, a small city could be devastated in a matter of hours.

Liria turned to Dante and said,

"I'll prepare Pakyojin."

They had to rely on Shirone. The people here were just as precious as those in the outside world. This was different from not killing the monsters.

"Alright. Here's the plan. If Shirone can push it 50 meters closer, I'll set up a defensive magic circle to trap the monster. It won't be as strong as the sealing formation, but it will provide some safety. Meanwhile, Amy, prepare a spell to support Shirone with firepower."

Amy nodded.

"Got it. I'll cast the strongest spell I have."

Jocre watched them desperately preparing to fight. The contrast with his own helplessness made his anger rise.

Why were they risking their lives?

They could just leave. He would bear all the consequences, and the kingdom would handle the aftermath.

"Why are you fighting?"

Dante, who was protecting Liria, turned his head.

"What are you talking about? If you're thinking of interfering, I'll take you down first."

"Why are you fighting? You haven't done anything wrong, so you could just run away! Don't you want to live? You're so strong, with such natural talent! You have a bright future ahead of you, and you want to die here for nothing?"

Dante looked at Jocre in disbelief, then sighed as if he understood.

"Did you learn magic because you wanted to succeed?"

"What?"

"Isn't it the other way around? You learned magic because you liked it, and you became good at it, so success followed. Wouldn't you feel sick if you ran away now? I'm just fighting with the magic I learned. So don't interfere and just watch quietly."

Amy, having finished her calculations, opened her eyes.

"It's done. I'll start now."

Her red eyes emitted a crimson glow, and two pillars of fire rose from the ground, merging into a massive fireball. It was an Inferno several times larger than the one she had used in the Radius of the Spirit.

Jocre stared blankly at the blazing fire, then lowered his head as he realized something.

'These people are crazy about magic...'

Chapter 342: The Protagonist of Life (2)

Talent and all that, it was just an excuse from the beginning. Their minds were filled with magic from the start, leaving no room for success or honor.

They wanted to win. They didn't want to lose in competition. And ultimately, they wanted to become the greatest mages. Dante's eyes sparkled as he watched the Inferno. It was a powerful spell he hadn't seen during the graduation exam.

'She used eidetic memory to lower entropy. With the red eyes, it must be close to zero percent. This might work.'

"Dante, Dante."

Liria, who was kneeling, called out to Dante in a trembling voice.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

"Can we really... do this? Can we succeed?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

Liria turned her head to look up at Dante. Her tearful face showed significant inner conflict.

"You always make the right choices! So tell me! If you say it, I'll feel reassured."

Dante understood her feelings. In battle, a mage's cold rationality is as important as a swordsman's conviction. Fear comes from uncertainty, not crisis. When you can objectively analyze the situation, your comrades can muster the courage to fight.

"It's not optimistic. But it's not pessimistic either."

It was literally a coin toss. And this was the minimum probability for a mage to attempt something.

"There's a 50 percent chance Shirone will push through. A 50 percent chance my defensive magic circle will hold. And

a 50 percent chance Amy's spell will work on the enemy. Add those three together, and you know what that means?" Liria, mumbling Dante's words, suddenly widened her eyes and lifted her head as if realizing something.

"Then, 150 percent?"

Dante gave a bitter smile.

"...Don't become a mage."

The remaining distance to the Pakyojin installation point was 220 meters.

Shirone fired the photon cannons in a trance. The flashes shooting beyond his hands were blinding. The magic amplifiers embedded in his hands were glowing red-hot.

"Raaaargh!"

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's body bent and was pushed towards the ground.

Remaining distance: 200 meters.

Jocre, watching the massive Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara about to fall, felt his legs tremble.

'Is that Shirone...?'

The person who overwhelmed Dante, the kingdom's best defender, with firepower.

He had once thought Shirone was just at a student level. He couldn't bear the self-deprecation otherwise.

But the photon cannons he saw with his own eyes had a power that even most professionals couldn't wield.

They might not be superior to professionals in every aspect, but at least in one area, they had already reached a professional level.

That was the students of the five great academies.

Remaining distance: 170 meters.

"It's in! I'll create the second barrier!"

Dante trapped the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara in a hexagonal mansion. The magic circle only integrated information on the inside, so attacks from outside didn't apply. Meanwhile, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, trapped in the narrow walls, struggled violently.

"Ugh!"

Dante's face contorted. He was pulling the mansion containing the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara to the ground, but the resistance was stronger than expected. Especially the power of the fireballs spreading in all directions, which could destroy the highest durability defensive magic circle in less than 30 seconds.

Remaining distance: 120 meters.

Dante shouted with a face full of veins.

"Amy! Now!"

"Got it!"

Amy jumped up and swung her hands, sending the massive Inferno away from her. The slow-moving fireball crossed the sky and struck the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara with pinpoint accuracy, following the coordinates of her eidetic memory.

"Raaaargh!"

As the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's body burned, Dante felt the pressure ease slightly. Fire-based magic had the advantage of continuous impact over photon cannons. Remaining distance: 40 meters.

Liria shook her head and shouted.

"It's still not enough! We can't trap it in Pakyojin like this!"

The blazing Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara scratched and screamed inside the mansion. Eventually, the magic circle, reaching its durability limit, shattered like glass.

Liria's face filled with despair.

"It's over. The demigod will escape into the world."

"No, it's not over."

Liria's gaze turned to the sky. Shirone, gathering light in his hands, was looking down at the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara from above. As the light grew, it was like another sun had appeared in the sky.

"Yaaaargh!"

Shirone fired the photon cannon with all his might. A massive flash, one meter in diameter, struck the side of the

Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara.

Remaining distance: 30 meters.

"Raaaargh!"

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara flailed its arms desperately. But the mass, which even its law couldn't withstand, kept pushing in.

Remaining distance: 20 meters.

"Now! Start!"

Liria clasped her hands and prayed.

For evil to be vanquished. For a world where everyone can live happily. If she could create a paradise without hunger, murder, or adultery, she wouldn't mind if her body was torn into a thousand pieces, or if she was hated by demons and fell into hell to suffer forever. She would become the fertilizer for the world. If everyone could hold the will of good, she would gladly enter the dirtiest place and roll her body.

She shed tears like a waterfall. Her will, surpassing human limits, drew the energy of the totem embedded in the ancient ruins. As the sealing formation disappeared, a 10-meter diameter Pakyojin took shape.

"In the name of Liria, I command you! Evil, sleep here!"

Liria's eyes burned golden. The flowing tears evaporated instantly, and a pillar of light made of law pierced the sky.

"Raaaargh!"

As the photon cannon's flash pushed, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara screamed its death throes, flailing its dozens of hands.

Remaining distance: 10 meters.

"Yaaaargh!"

Shirone felt the output of the photon cannon decreasing. But as he drew more power through mental transcendence, the flash amplified, completely enveloping the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara.

Remaining distance.

0 meters.

As the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara entered the Pakyojin's domain, Liria focused all her will on one point.
"Screeeech!"

The strongest sealing magic of the Akeanis Shrine.
Okwang Pakyojin.

Two arms made of light twisted like braids and grabbed the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, pulling it to the ground.
"Raaaargh! Raaaargh! Raaaargh!"

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara resisted desperately. There was no reason for the law of evil to exist in a space filled with the will of good. The fact that it was resisting was clear evidence of a demigod.

'But it's over now! Just a little more...!'

Just as Liria thought it was over, she heard footsteps. Vivian ran past her towards the Okwang Pakyojin.

"Ice Queen!"

Dante's face twisted.

"That fool!"

Liria shouted in shock.

"Don't approach! You'll be dragged in!"

Pakyojin was different from the sealing formation.

It concentrated the will of good in a narrow area, so even a slightly evil-leaning person would fall into the abyss.

Vivian heard Liria's voice clearly. But she never stopped running.

"This is the end. This is the final act of my play."

It was a life where no one paid attention to her. But the Ice Queen gave her hope that she could be the protagonist.

Even if the reality was a monster, even if her kindness and consideration stemmed from ignorance, it was the only spotlight for Vivian.

Tears streamed down Vivian's face.

What would happen if she entered Pakyojin? Perhaps only the silence after the play ended would continue forever.

But she wasn't afraid. She would meet the Ice Queen. She would hold her hand and bow to the audience. She would

shout to the world, thanking them for watching a wonderful performance.

"Yaaaargh!"

As tears filled her eyes, blinding her, Vivian kicked off the ground and threw herself into the Okwang Pakyojin.

"Vivian! Come back!"

Jocre cried out in anguish.

She was a sensitive child. Perhaps her heart had broken in the face of an unbearable situation.

But it couldn't end like this.

It was all his fault.

If he hadn't entered the Ice Queen's nature while drunk, if he hadn't cared about Amy, she wouldn't have made such an extreme choice.

"Vivian!"

Jocre's desperate cry couldn't reach Vivian. It was Amy who caught her. Amy, throwing herself to grab Vivian, narrowly avoided the sealing formation and fell. At the same time, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara fell into the Okwang Pakyojin as if being buried. The sound of hundreds of nails scratching the ground echoed ominously.

"Raaaargh!"

The force tearing the ground sent chills down the spines of those watching. But even that formidable power couldn't overcome the principle of the Okwang Pakyojin.

It was the mysterious and profound power of the law.

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara sank into the abyss of the law, leaving only thousands of nail marks.

Then, Vivian, who had been watching with tears, turned to Amy and shouted.

"Let go! Let me go! I want to go in too!"

"Are you crazy? You'll die if you go in there!"

"Since when did you care about me? Do you know how I feel? You've lived your whole life as the protagonist, do you understand my miserable feelings?"

"So you're going to die because of that? Because you're miserable?"

"No, I'm going to make you suffer until the end! I'll make sure you never succeed! At this moment, I'm the protagonist!"

"Don't talk nonsense, idiot! What kind of protagonist gives up on life so easily?"

Amy's voice pierced Vivian's eardrums.

"Fighting is hard for everyone! But you fight to the end to become the protagonist! If you give up, if you give up..."

Amy's voice choked up, and she lowered her head. She, too, had always wanted to be the protagonist more than anyone else.

"From that moment, you become nothing."

The feeling of being thrown out of the spotlight of the world. While everyone looked at the successful candidates, Amy cried alone in her room.

No one looked at her.

But now she understood.

You have to fight anyway.

Even if what awaits is a bad ending, those who don't fight to the end don't deserve to be the main character.

Vivian, not understanding why Amy was suddenly so agitated, wore a blank expression and opened her mouth to say something.

"I..."

At that moment, the ground began to shake. Vivian turned her head, and everyone looked at the Okwang Pakyojin.

As soon as Shirone landed on the ground, he shouted.

"It's not over yet!"

Dozens of hands rose from the Okwang Pakyojin. As they bent simultaneously and pushed the ground, the face of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara reappeared.

"I am the ruler of the world!"

Shirone's party's faces turned pale. The Okwang Pakyojin's power hadn't completely subdued it yet, and they didn't

know what would happen as time passed.

"Did you catch the law user? You're lucky."

Shirone turned his head in surprise.

A woman with curly blonde hair, dark skin, and a tight-fitting suit was standing there.

It was Ahoya Kangnan, the secretary-general of the Magic Association.

"Who are you?"

Kangnan took off her high heels as she walked towards the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara. Passing by Shirone's party, she said,

"Step back. You might get hurt."

Liria shouted.

"Wait! You can't just go in! If you can't handle the law, you'll be dragged into the Pakyojin's power!"

Kangnan showed no hesitation and pushed her body into the Okwang Pakyojin. She didn't know whether she leaned towards good or evil. But the conviction she had lived with as a Ram Muai since birth was not weak enough to be shaken by the law.

"Raaaargh! Raaaargh!"

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara scratched the ground repeatedly, like a person drowning in the sea, rising and falling.

Chapter 343: The Protagonist of Life (3)

Kangnan took off her glasses and slipped them into her breast pocket. Then, as if emulating a wolf, she raised both fists above her face and stepped forward with her left foot, lightly keeping rhythm.

Shirone and his companions were baffled. Although they were unfamiliar with Ramuai, they could guess that it was some form of fighting stance. But standing before the gigantic statue of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, it seemed rather comical.

Unable to watch any longer, Liria approached with a frown. "Hey! What are you doing...?"

At that moment, Kangnan's figure blurred. A high kick, too fast to see, kicked up a trail of dust. Her instep smashed right across the face of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara.

The expression on the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara's face turned to one of bewilderment. It blinked its eyes rapidly, then its hand movements slowed. Finally, as if sinking into sleep, it was sucked into the deep sea of Okwangbakyojin.

"What... what is that...?"

The shock experienced by Shirone's group was beyond imagination. Although trapped in Okwangbakyojin, the moment her kick broke its neck was so startling that Shirone felt his heart could have leapt from his mouth.

Shirone looked down and saw her thigh exposed beneath her tight business skirt. At the moment of impact, the stocking on her instep had burned away, rolling up to reveal her right leg entirely. Her muscles tensed up like chiseled

sculptures, but soon, the soft subcutaneous fat returned, revealing her smooth, sculpted legs.

'Who exactly is she?'

It occurred to him that she might be a government official. If a foreign exorcist had come calling, it was insightful to think that any department in her own country might have anticipated the situation.

"Huh."

Kangnan breathed out freely, then pulled her glasses out from her pocket and put them back on. Shirone, having watched quietly, met eyes with his friends and then approached her.

"Excuse me, who are you? Perhaps from the kingdom... ack!"

As Kangnan suddenly lifted her skirt, Shirone's face turned as red as a beetroot. She rolled up her stockings, took out a new pair, and began changing them, unaware or indifferent to the boys' covert glances.

"The entity you faced is a mental being from beyond the northern boundary of heaven, codenamed 'Lawmaker'."

"Heaven?"

Dante cocked his head. It seemed there truly were all sorts of crazy people in the world. But for Shirone and Amy, it was a serious matter. Knowing about heaven meant this woman was no ordinary individual.

"Actually, the Lawmaker is not so dangerous. It's just a simple phenomenon like an aurora. But it becomes a headache when the environment changes. The golden time is 72 hours from onset. After that, it evolves exponentially. You barely caught it."

Kangnan pulled her stockings up to her belly button, then smacked down her skirt to straighten it.

"Because you judged well, I'll overlook the unilateral actions. If the Lawmaker had expanded its range, the military would have been deployed. You saved many lives."

Having said that, Kangnan turned around and put on her high heels. She adjusted her outfit which had shifted during her kick.

"But could you first tell us who you are?"

As Shirone removed his hood and approached, Kangnan's eyes narrowed slightly upon seeing his face.

'He looks younger in person. That he could defeat a Lawmaker...'

Even an initially awakened Lawmaker is ranked as a B-grade phenomenon by Valkyrie. A regular angel is A-grade, so essentially, he fought an opponent comparable to a fallen angel.

'But how did he block the law?'

If it were the <Magical Sword Armand> given to him as a gift by Princess Uorin, it might have somewhat defended against the law. But he definitely could not have defeated the Lawmaker with that alone.

'Could it be...'

Kangnan could only think of one possibility.

'Mental Transcendance? No, that can't be. An eighteen-year-old couldn't possibly have reached that state.'

It is said that all beings ultimately progress towards awakening their divine nature, but because the process is so lengthy, most die without discovering themselves within their given lifespan.

The exception was heaven.

In that place, governed by Anke Lae where lifespans are determined, there are humans who live for hundreds of years and plants that live for hundreds of thousands of years.

This is why the art of divine awakening is called the technology of heaven.

The time to reach enlightenment varies among species; on average, it takes humans 220 years, cats 400 years, monkeys 600 years, snakes 700 years, and foxes 1,000 years.

If Shirone had indeed achieved a transcendental mental state, then he would have effectively bypassed around 200 years.

'It seems there was no exaggeration in the association's evaluation.'

Kangnan was not a person of leisure. Furthermore, she was one of the trusted members of the association.

If it hadn't been for the direct orders of her superior, Gaold, she wouldn't have come just to meet a magic school student.

Kangnan recalled the situation at the time.

"Are you talking about Shirone Arian of Alpheus Magic School?"

"Yes. That miserable old school of mine. How it hasn't collapsed yet, I'll never know."

Gaold joked, but Kangnan, catching his intent, sharply interjected.

"Surely you're not thinking of involving him in this project?"
As expected, Gaold didn't respond.

"I'm against it. The risk is too high. You're basing this on one instance of Ataraxia, not to mention jeopardizing 20 years of preparation."

Gaold's expression turned serious as he finally spoke.

"I've heard he's growing fast."

Kangnan scoffed. No one in the association knew more about Shirone than she did.

"Of course, he's one of the promising representatives of the kingdom. He's an Unlocker who can impart mass to light. Probably, if he continues to accumulate achievements diligently, he'll attain level 6 by the age of twenty. Excellent managers are a rarity in any organization."

Kangnan narrowed her eyes and gauged Gaold's reaction. As expected, he kept his lips tightly sealed.

"Are you joking now? He's just level 6. The tutors teaching him, Romi Ethela and Olipher Siina, were certified level 6 by age twenty. But even they weren't the youngest. Such

geniuses are commonplace in the kingdom. If you're not planning to wait another ten years, it would be right to give up on Shirone."

"I don't know. Youngest or whatever, I'm not a genius."

Gaold, with a cigar in his mouth and leaning back, looked up at Kangnan.

"But right now, I'm the best, aren't I?"

Kangnan couldn't deny it. Although not a brilliant student, Gaold was now indisputably the greatest magician in the Kingdom of Thormia.

"That's an exceptional case..."

Gaold raised his hand to stop her.

"Ah, forget it. Just do as I say. Whether he becomes level 6 at 20 or 40, that kind of thing isn't important."

"No. In reality, numerous scouts are measuring talent based on performance over time. If that's not important, then what is?"

Gaold, with a cigar between his fingers, exhaled a careless cloud of smoke, deep in thought.

"In the end, what matters is what you accomplish."

Kangnan wanted to argue but held her tongue. The man was insane, but sometimes he rendered her speechless.

"Mongrel. Since I've reached the pinnacle of magic..."

Gaold arrogantly tilted his chin up. He was the only one who could call the last descendant of the Wolf Tribe a mongrel.

"Being the best isn't about being number one. It's about being an entity completely detached from the hierarchy.

Sure, following the path others have paved quickly can be considered a talent. But look at the world. Those we call the best are illuminating realms of the unknown that humanity could not reach even in a lifetime. It's not about being first or second. It's not even on that level. There's nothing to compare it to. It's a completely different issue from just following an existing path quickly."

Kangnan mulled over Gaold's words several times.

"Do you think Shirone can become the best?"

"I can't guarantee it. But his growth rate is breaking norms, and he can wield Ataraxia. If these two factors align at the right time, he might just reach that state momentarily. If so, he could create at least one more variable."

The 20-year project was still a challenge to the impossible. In such a scenario, one variable was worth any sacrifice. However, Kangnan couldn't accept it. Placing baseless faith in an uncertain subject in a matter as critical as exchanging the lives of all humanity was not prudent.

"I understand. But you know what? The right timing, specific circumstances, momentarily, at least. Most of what you said is based on assumptions."

Finally, Gaold seemed to relax and smiled slightly.

"I know. That's why I'm telling you to meet him. Check with your own eyes. If there's even a 0.1 percent chance to increase the success rate, shouldn't we use everything at our disposal?"

Snapped back from her recollection, Kangnan addressed Shirone.

"I am Ahoya Kangnan, the secretary general of the Magic Association."

"Ma, Magic Association secretary general?"

Shirone's eyes widened in surprise. His friends watching from behind couldn't hide their astonishment either. Being the secretary general was virtually the second highest position in the magic association, a person one might never meet in a lifetime as a magician.

Shirone quickly bowed his head.

"Ah, hello. I am..."

Kangnan cut to the chase.

"Shirone, it's a national emergency. Someone wants to meet you. Let's go to the capital together."

Shirone looked dazed.

The phrase 'national emergency' was shocking enough, but it was strange that someone would seek out a mere student in such circumstances.

"Who wants to meet me?"

Kangnan spoke nonchalantly.

"Micae Gaold, the president of the Thormia Magic Association."

"Micae Gaold?"

Shirone's heart raced. It was the most frequently heard name he had never met in his life.

Not just for Shirone. In the Kingdom of Thormia, there was no one involved in magic who didn't know Micae Gaold.

Dante, curious, asked.

"Why would such a high-ranking official seek out Shirone?"

Shirone was just as curious, but a part of him had a guess.

"Is it related to the Ice Queen?"

"Correct. The Ice Queen is an entity from heaven. Do you understand what it means for such a being to descend to this world?"

Shirone's eyes flashed. The first thing that came to mind upon hearing that a being from heaven had descended was the ultimate war.

"Could it be?"

"Yes. There has been a fissure in Miro's Space-Time."

If the only barrier holding back the armies of heaven had been compromised, Kangnan's mention of a national emergency made sense.

Liria interjected quietly.

"Wait a moment. This Space-Time of Miro's, is it the Barrier of Law mentioned in the prophecies?"

Kangnan looked Liria up and down.

"Are you a scholar?"

"Akeanis."

"Ah, I see."

Kangnan nodded and continued to explain.

"For now, it's not an immediate crisis. It was a small crack, and it has been repaired for the moment. But a crack is always the start of a collapse, and things can only get worse from here. We need to prepare for that."

"So, is Ms. Miro right now..."

Kangnan raised her hand to cut off Shirone's question.

"That's all I can tell you for now. The rest you'll have to hear directly from my superior. Come with me to the capital."

Shirone looked thoughtful, considering his options.

Chapter 344: The Protagonist of Life (4)

As the law was lifted and the tourists regained their human forms, they were horrified to see their naked bodies. Chaos ensued. Women screamed and covered themselves, while men fumbled around looking for places to hide. Shirone and his group managed to evacuate everyone to an inn with the help of people outside the city walls.

Sitting on the railing of a café terrace, Shirone watched the tourists filling up the buildings.

Some were threatening to sue the tourism board, while others were loudly demanding to see the manager.

They too had encountered a being from heaven. The implications of today's events were unpredictable.

Shirone looked back at Kangnan. She too was watching the tourists, but her mind seemed elsewhere.

"What do we do now? Should we try to convince the people?"

"Is that necessary?"

"Pardon?"

"We don't need to bother with trivial matters. The association will send people. They'll handle it."

"But what if it gets harder to manage over time? What if rumors spread?"

"Just announce it as if the myth of the Ice Queen was true. Whether they believe it or not, it contaminates the information. But it doesn't matter if we tell the truth because it's not something ordinary people can handle anyway."

Kangnan had often encountered such situations. Despite the potential for chaos if information about heaven spread

worldwide, she was certain nothing significant would happen.

People would still worry about their daily meals, lose sleep over important contracts the next day, and fret over how to raise their growing children.

Kangnan looked back at the group following her. Despite having no specific orders, they hadn't left her side.

They knew it was a situation beyond their control to manage.

But to Kangnan, it was merely an annoyance.

"The association will decide your fate too. So stop following me. Run away if you want."

The group hung their heads dejectedly.

They understood what it meant to be adversaries of the Magic Association. Even if they went to prison, as long as they were part of the Red Line, their magician's licenses wouldn't be revoked. But if they ran, the Black Line was their only refuge—a world inhabited by those lost to madness. The group didn't have what it takes to survive there.

"Yes, we're sorry. We'll turn ourselves in when the association people arrive."

Amy silently watched the departing group. This was as far as they could share their lives. Whatever happened, they had to continue living, fighting fiercely to be the protagonists of their own lives.

After ensuring follow-up measures were in place, Kangnan prepared to leave. Before speaking, she gave Shirone a hard look.

He looked much younger once the Diamond Armor was deactivated. Of course, she wasn't foolish enough to judge someone by their appearance.

However, she considered that such features could be problematic within the association.

Gaold's proposal was indeed radical.

"Shirone. It's time to leave. I'll wait for you in the carriage. Hurry up and come along."

"Yes, I'll be right there."

Shirone was ready to follow Kangnan to the Magic Association. The chance to meet Gaold was rare, but he was also curious about the situation with Miro.

'I might meet Rian and Tess in the capital.'

Shirone grabbed his backpack and approached Amy.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way."

He felt ashamed facing Amy. He had wanted to enjoy a proper vacation this time, but once again, he had put her in danger.

"I'll tell you plainly, I won't travel with you again."

"Ha ha! I'm really sorry. I don't know what to say."

Amy smiled and shook her head.

"Thanks, Shirone. Because of you, I've gained confidence. I think I can work hard again now."

Shirone felt it too. Not only had he overpowered the group, but the extreme heat of the Inferno was a spell difficult for others their age to execute without Amy.

He hadn't asked about her enlightenment during the fight. There are as many enlightenments as there are people, and Amy's style was unique. Perhaps they would discuss it someday.

"I'll contact you when I get back. And Dante, thanks for looking after Amy."

Dante shrugged. Unexpectedly tasked with escorting a rival's girlfriend, it wasn't a bad deal. Both the talks with heaven and Miro seemed to suggest that Shirone and Amy knew something. He planned to ask about heaven on the way.

"Don't know what this is all about, but go well."

"Yeah. See you at school."

As Shirone left, Dante and Amy also turned to leave. Near the exit, Dante pointed to a café.

"How about a coffee before we go? You're buying, of course."

"Trying to cling to the very end! Buy your own! You've got plenty of money!"

"Ah. I'm escorting you home, a coffee wouldn't hurt... huh?"

Dante turned around at a noise. Liria was standing there as she had when they first met, a large backpack on her back. With the Lawmaker sealed, she should return to the Akeanis order to report. Likely, after today, she wouldn't meet Dante again. Magicians and sorcerers, beings of light and shadow, naturally walked different paths.

But Liria was left with regrets. If she hadn't met Dante, this mission would likely have ended in failure. It was hard to imagine a wandering sorcerer sharing affection with someone, but because she had relied on him considerably, she couldn't simply cut off her feelings.

"I'll buy the coffee."

"Hmm."

Dante read the affection in Liria's eyes. Truly, she was a woman who couldn't hide her feelings. He wasn't one to enjoy flings, but he wasn't in the habit of turning away those who came to him. He pulled her close and pointed somewhere.

"Okay, forget coffee. How about we find somewhere quiet to go in?"

Liria's face flushed as she looked where Dante pointed. A big sign for an inn hung prominently.

"Not understanding the ways of the world, Liria was shocked by the proposal for an instant style of romance.

"Are you... what are you... saying...?"

"Ha ha! No need to back down. We're all adults here. Let's not waste time."

Liria groaned. She could tolerate his self-centered personality to an extent, but his promiscuity was unacceptable.

"Such a flirt! Let go!"

When Liria pushed him away, Dante easily stepped back.
"A flirt? How is it flirting when we haven't done anything yet?"

"Forget it! I must have lost my mind! I'm going back to the order!"

Dante chuckled. If this was where their paths ended, there was no need to hold her back.

"Alright. Take care."

'Indifferent bastard...'

As Dante truly let her go, Liria felt slighted. Yet, she didn't look back as she walked away. Turning around felt like it would make it truly irreversible.

"Write if anything fun happens!"

Liria blinked at Dante's voice echoing in the distance, then let out a chuckle.

Airhain Dante. 18 years old.

Second in line among the magic aspirants of the Kingdom of Thormia.

'Heh. I'll remember that.'

With a bright expression, Liria walked towards the horizon as Dante and Amy headed back to the exit.

Eager to leave the now tiresome ruins, they encountered Jokre's group waiting near the ticket barrier.

Their faces were surprisingly defiant. Unable to completely hide their fear, they seemed unwilling to show weakness.

Vivian approached Amy.

"I'm sorry."

Amy waved her hand. This wasn't child's play. Their arrest seemed just in balancing the situation.

"Forget it. We both fought with conviction. There's no need to apologize just because you lost."

"No. I mean for saving me at the end. If I had died then, there wouldn't have been a next time."

"Well..."

Amy awkwardly turned away. Truthfully, her actions weren't solely for Vivian. They were necessary to succeed with

Okwangbakyojin, and the last shout was something she wanted to say to herself.

"I don't know why you said that, but try hard. Make sure you become a magician at the next graduation. You definitely have what it takes to be a protagonist."

Amy was moved. It was a cruel thought, but words from the lips of a defeated opponent gave her more confidence than any consolation she had heard before.

Vivian limply dropped her shoulders and returned to her friends. Watching the miserable departure of a loser, Amy spoke up.

"Hey."

As Vivian turned around, Amy unbuckled one strap of her bag and rummaged through it as she approached.

"Here. Take this."

In Amy's hand was a doll of the Ice Queen, a prize from a mini-game arcade. Holding it with trembling hands, Vivian stared at the Ice Queen for a long while. The face of the Ice Queen, who had enveloped her in solitude, smiled innocently like a child.

"Sniff. Sob."

Tears streamed down as Vivian hugged the Ice Queen doll close. Jokre approached and comforted her back. After a moment, he led her away with a glance at Amy.

Amy watched them leave for a long time. They would continue to fight in their own lives. Perhaps, someday, they too could become protagonists.

'Yeah. It's just one failure. If this is my life, I'll fight and win as much as I need.'

Firmly clenching her fist, Amy turned around. Her steps towards Dante were now unhindered compared to yesterday.

Divine Transcendance (1)

In the capital city of Bashuka at the Kaizen School of Swordsmanship.

The current certified level 6 swordsman, Kuan, once called the Sorcerer of Death before injuring his Achilles tendon, was battling the nightmares of an irretrievable past.

Born into a military family, Kuan lost all his family on the battlefield at the age of six. His uncle took him in only to seize his fortune and send him to a swordsmanship school in another land.

However, he harbored no resentment.

Although he had no one to rely on, his genius allowed him to become a certified level 6 swordsman at just 20 years of age.

The nightmare began with an event ten years ago.

At 21, Kuan was appointed as the second company commander of a search battalion tasked with capturing the founder of the Dark Order, Kointra.

The soldiers did not welcome him. It was natural for a 21-year-old rookie to join a veteran unit with an average age of 38.

Kuan didn't care either. To him, a commander, soldiers were merely expendable resources needed to win wars.

Without even time to exchange greetings, Kuan led his troops into the Ghost Forest immediately upon his assignment.

Numerous search parties had entered before but all had lost contact without exception.

The previous company commander had fled back to his homeland citing illness from fear, prompting Kuan's emergency deployment.

But Kuan was confident.

Even if there really were ghosts in the forest, there was nothing in the world his sword couldn't cut.

'I'll capture it. Even if it's a ghost.'

The first day passed without incident.

But disaster struck in the early hours as the second company was reorganizing at camp.

"Attack! It's an attack!"

The sentry's cry was the last sound before disappearing.
Realizing the enemy had breached, Kuan grabbed his sword
and rushed out of the barracks.
Other soldiers, each armed, were also alert to the
approaching enemy in the dim dawn light.
A strong wind blew. Or rather, it seemed only to resound in
everyone's ears. Kuan reflexively cut through the darkness,
but his blade caught nothing.

Chapter 345: Divine Transcendance (2)

"Form a defensive square!"

Forty soldiers quickly formed a circle, understanding that in a situation where the enemy couldn't be identified, preventing isolation and defeat was paramount.

Kuan finally spotted the enemy.

About 20 meters away, a dark curtain shimmered before white masks suddenly flipped open, revealing their wearers.

"What is this?"

Figures wearing owl-like masks swirled around a point before forming a triangular formation.

Shing!

Thirty soldiers drew their swords in unison, but the sound was singular. The sight of them standing in the same pose, aiming diagonally, brought back information about a particular group Kuan had learned about during commander training.

"Could it be..."

The Wind Guards, the most formidable swordsmanship group known.

'Why are the Wind Guards here?'

The Wind Guards were the imperial guards of Empress Teraje of the Kashan Empire. Their presence meant only one thing: the cult leader Kointira was under Teraje's protection.

"What are you plotting, Kashan?"

"You'll find out in the afterlife..."

The Wind Guards' signature simultaneous strike was launched.

"You will know then."

"Argh!"

A soldier from the second company screamed. Even Kuan felt the tremendous murderous intent. No ordinary soldier, even a veteran, could stand against such a force.

"Damn!"

Kuan dashed forward, and the Wind Guards dispersed like the wind, only to regroup rapidly. Dozens of swords created thousands of afterimages as Kuan's movements seemed to defy gravity.

'Damn. How many centers of gravity are there?'

The skill of the Wind Guards was astonishing. They were humans who seemed to implement fluid dynamics with their bodies. Losing all sense of direction, it felt like fighting in zero gravity.

But what truly surprised was the Wind Guards.

'It's taking too long. How many swings have there been?'

'Around 23,000.'

It was rare for anyone to withstand over 1,000 strikes from the Wind Guards. Essentially, they could grind down any being in under a second.

'How playful can God be?'

If the world were perfect, all creatures would be happy as lesser beings. However, nature always creates a 0.1% mutation. That 0.1% makes the rest of the 99.9% seem trivial.

'A being born from chance... specially chosen.'

That was the Wind Guards' impression of Kuan.

Technique, artistry, physical balance, the ability to manipulate gravity, the thought of creating new paths.

'This man is a genius.'

As soon as the thought crossed their minds, the Wind Guards expanded like wings, then regrouped as a fierce wind swirling around Kuan.

'To kill a genius.'

The Wind Guards' blades occupied all space. They were so fast it almost felt slow.

"Charge! Charge!"

At that moment, the company members rushed in. Upon entering the Wind Guards' radius, they were shredded like meat caught in machinery. Kuan's escape from the sword net was almost instinctual.

'This is madness...!'

The oldest member of the company, an old man named Kovira, passed by Kuan without a chance for a farewell, but his smiling eyes conveyed a thousand words.

'Survive, Captain.'

Watching his company being slaughtered in an instant, Kuan understood why they had to die.

'I see. At least one must escape.'

It was necessary to inform the higher-ups about Kashan's involvement. Otherwise, more search teams would fall into the Wind Guards' trap.

'This is the best course. If anyone should survive, I have the highest chance.'

As Kuan propelled himself away with external gravity, he coldly watched the swirling black storm in the darkness. He hadn't even shared a day or a look with the soldiers, yet they had all departed from this world.

'Why...'

He felt something hot inside him. A massive flame had ignited from a place he thought had been extinguished to ashes.

"Why the hell! Damn it all!"

As Kuan exploded with external gravity, the Wind Guards, like feathers, regrouped in a triangular formation 20 meters away.

"None of you think about returning alive."

The Wind Guards did not respond. Their minds were racing with the unexpected situation.

'The mission has failed.'

Or, it almost did.

If Kuan had decided to flee, the Wind Guards would not have been able to catch him. The trivial lives of forty had created

an unprecedented precedent against the mighty Wind Guards.

The leader of the Wind Guards slowly raised a hand and removed her mask, revealing a woman's face with narrow, sharp eyes beneath thin, sparse eyebrows.

"This is the first time a living being has seen the face of the Wind Guards."

"So what? Expecting me to be grateful?"

"Join the Wind Guards. We will lead you."

For Kuan, recognized by the world as a genius, this was an extraordinary proposition. Especially since they were directly under Teraje of the Tri-Emperor. Accepting would mean a meteoric rise to the highest echelons available to a swordsman.

Kuan finally sheathed his sword and slung it over his shoulder.

"I refuse."

The woman's head tilted slightly. Which swordsman would reject an offer from the Wind Guards? Clearly, he had lost touch with reality from his subordinates' deaths.

"It's unfortunate about your subordinates. But a new future awaits you. Don't bury your talent in the past."

Kuan scoffed. No matter how great the Wind Guards were, there can't be two under heaven.

"Don't be mistaken. My men did their duty as soldiers. The foolish ones are those commanders who can't control their emotions."

"Then why refuse?"

Kuan's sword once again targeted the woman's brow.

"Ever wondered how embarrassing it is? Claiming to be the strongest while you mob up to slash?"

"Then it's a breakdown."

At the same time as the woman put on her owl mask, the thirty Wind Guards dispersed like wind and swooped towards Kuan.

'Wait. I'll take at least one with me.'

How could he face the underworld without even a companion to accompany him if he deserted the expectations of his subordinates?

Kuan spread external gravity all around as he dove into the storm created by the Wind Guards. The movements created by the masters of external gravity were almost like an art form beyond combat.

'I see. The answer was surprisingly simple.'

Kuan leaped over the wall. He was able to do it because he hadn't intended to survive. This time, even the Wind Guards had to tense up. The forest shook with the eerie sound of dozens of swords.

'Is a sword this beautiful?'

At the height of ecstasy, Kuan's sword split the path. A Wind Guard's head detached from its body, and simultaneously another's heart ceased as it was pierced.

'Two. That should be enough to pay for the meal.'

Whoosh!

As the Wind Guards realized the death of their comrades, the turbulence exploded like a storm. The simultaneous death of two members was a very rare event in the history of the Wind Guards.

Kuan calmly observed as their fury whirled like a hot wind. However, they didn't kill him. Instead, they sliced off his Achilles tendon like a sliver of fish flesh.

"Argh!"

Kuan screamed, not from pain but because everything that made him who he was, including his recent enlightenment, had vanished with the 30 grams of flesh that had been stripped away.

The nickname "Sorcerer of the Battlefield" had come from his miraculous skill with the sword, which could take an opponent's neck in any situation, but it was also backed by phenomenal agility and mobility.

Without the Achilles tendon, there was no genius. He was no longer the Sorcerer of the Battlefield.

"Ugh..."

Kuan couldn't stand. He couldn't even try. Yet, he reached out and crawled up the slope. The eerie sound of the Wind Guards swirling around him echoed. The voice of 28 men uttering a single syllable each would be unforgettable for a lifetime.

You've become a mere bug.

Kuan kept crawling. Death was not frightening because he had lost everything. But he couldn't give up on life after abandoning the 40 members of his unit.

Struggle like a bug.

"Argh! Shut up!"

Bark like a dog.

"Kill! Just kill!"

Confess to your master. Tell them the Wind Guards have spared you. Wag your tail and snitch.

As the Wind Guards' wind grew fiercer, the sound of flames crackling could be heard. To Kuan, it was as if the world was burning.

Burying his face in the ground, he clenched his fists. He could no longer endure. He couldn't prevent his life's beliefs from plummeting into the abyss.

"Argh!"

Kuan's scream echoed in the now silent Ghost Forest.

"..."

Kuan opened his eyes. His face was still expressionless, but sweat dotted his forehead.

"Damn."

He felt as if he was pinned down, unable to move a finger. This always happened after dreaming of the Wind Guards. He had to lie still like a corpse for 10 minutes, just as on the day 10 years ago when his Achilles tendon was severed. After barely escaping the Ghost Forest, Kuan lost consciousness and was urgently transported back to Thormia.

He reported that Teraje was protecting the Dark Order, but as expected, it had no impact on the political situation. The search battalion surrounded the mountain range for about a month in a stagnant local war before disbanding. There seemed to be some sort of agreement with the Kashan Empire, but that was a matter for the politicians, not something Kuan was involved in.

Kuan could not become a hero. The event of that day vanished into the annals of history without even a mention of the Wind Guards.

The military had offered him a position as a cavalry battalion commander—a two-rank special promotion—but it was clearly intended to silence him.

Kuan chose to discharge. His mind was already too shattered to wield a sword.

For a while, he lived like a hermit. He couldn't even dream of suicide as he thought of his subordinates, nor did he have any proper supporters.

Then one day, at the suggestion of his only friend, Kiyo Elis, he took a position at the Kaizen School of Swordsmanship.

'I can move now.'

Kuan climbed out of bed, limping to the window. Pulling back the curtain, the morning sun shone on his old desk.

Numerous papers were scattered about.

"Psychological Views on the Phenomenon of Divine Transcendence," "Incarnation Techniques," "The Correlation between Will and Phenomena"—though the titles varied, the themes were consistent.

In the corner of the desk were notes Kuan had scribbled with his own thoughts, which he now swept away with his hand. Despite gathering all material on divine transcendence, he still hadn't reached it. Let's assume for a moment that it's possible to move the body with the power of will. But what exactly is will? He was still limping. No matter how hard he tried to walk properly, it just didn't work.

'Ogent Rian.'

Who could have predicted?

That a boy with no apparent talent would achieve what Kuan, recognized as a genius, could not.

'I hope it's not just becoming a fool.'

Kuan shook his head. He knew the truth. His sword was already broken. The moment his Achilles tendon snapped, the god of swords had also turned his gaze away from him.

'Another year has ended.'

Today was the last day of the second half at the school of swordsmanship. The subject Kuan was in charge of was wrestling, among the combat evaluations.

Even if Rian could perform divine transcendence, he couldn't withstand the enhanced strength of Schema users. It was probably going to be another miserable day for him, but he was curious about the half-year's achievements nonetheless.

Tess entered the locker room with the female cadets in her group.

Wrestling required close physical contact, but since there was no distinction between men and women in the swordsmanship school, everyone had to remove their tops during evaluations.

Women were allowed to wear tank tops, however.

Tess struggled to put on the tank top. Not only was her frame large, but her ample bust meant she almost had to cram her breasts in by force.

Chapter 346: Divine Transcendance (3)

"Wow..."

As exclamations of admiration erupted from all around, Bawio turned his head with a triumphant look. However, the object of admiration was not Bawio, but Rian. Everyone couldn't take their eyes off him.

Rian's body was developed without missing a single small muscle. It was astonishing that such a variety of muscles could fit inside human skin. It felt perfectly compact, like it had been squeezed into a mold.

Even the male cadets, who prided themselves on their physical prowess, were mesmerized, so it was no wonder that Tess had hearts in her eyes.

"Rian..."

But her gaze soon turned wistful. She knew how much pain Rian had endured to perfect his current body.

After consuming Ymir's arm, Rian's right arm had developed abnormally. While increased strength was good, the imbalance was not. From that point on, Rian undertook extreme training, swinging a club heavier than a greatsword 3,000 times a day.

The feedback from his body was truly remarkable, and over time, his entire body began to develop in a way that balanced with his right arm.

Thus, Rian's current body was born.

His perfectly balanced physique had become four times stronger than it was six months ago.

He might be the strongest person among those who couldn't use Schema.

"He has matched his body to the sword."

While the cadets marveled at Rian's appearance, Kuan focused on the functional aspects.

It wasn't a body built for simple goals like strength or endurance.

It was optimized for the task of wielding a sword.

"But it's quite peculiar. It's not the first time I've seen a trained body, yet it feels like I'm seeing one for the first time."

Kuan's sense of unease was accurate.

Rian's body had surpassed the limits of what a normal human could achieve through the feedback from his abnormal right arm.

"Anyway, we'll see what that body can do among the Schema users."

Kuan put his thoughts aside and raised his head.

"Everyone, attention. I will briefly explain today's evaluation."

The cadets, who had regained their composure, focused on Kuan. Even Bawio, who had been glaring at Rian in annoyance, turned his head.

"Wrestling is a major subject for heavy infantry positions.

Therefore, we won't require any special techniques from rookies like you. You will pair up and compete, and strikes are allowed as long as you remain in close contact. Since weight classes differ, wins and losses won't be part of the evaluation criteria, and you may use 'folding'."

The cadets' eyes changed at Kuan's last words.

Schema is a virtual human diagram that exerts its effects by layering multiple diagrams of a specific build.

'Folding' is an advanced Schema technique that folds a specific human diagram in half, creating an effect as if two diagrams were layered.

For example, if a swordsman who bases their technique on strength enhancement uses folding, their strength increases by more than double.

At higher levels, double folding is possible, known as 'double'. This progresses to triple, quadra, and penta, with the current human limit known to be seven folds.

Of course, even a single fold is a difficult technique for cadets. However, Kaizen Swordsmanship School, where they were, is a prestigious institution that gathers the most talented individuals in Tormia.

Even though they were still considered rookies by the instructors, more than half of them could perform basic folding.

Tess looked at Rian. As expected, his expression was dark. Rian's skills were not inferior to other cadets. However, as long as Schema was part of the evaluation criteria, he would always be at the bottom.

Schema techniques include more than just folding.

There are numerous advanced techniques, such as 'penetration', which simultaneously manifests the properties of two human diagrams, 'reversal', which inverts the technique build, and 'cross', which folds the human diagram diagonally.

Chapter 347: Divine Transcendance (4)

So far, he has managed to hold on with just his physical abilities, but as his competitors' levels rise, the gap will inevitably widen.

Therefore, even though the school is aware of Rian's situation, they have not been able to create an exception for him.

"We will start the evaluation with the first group. Groups two and three, come out and warm up, the rest can rest."

The cadets in the first group glared as they headed to the training ground. Kuan, holding the evaluation sheet, signaled the start, and the cadets engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand combat with monstrous shouts.

As Kuan focused on the match, the cadets relaxed. As always, Tess came to sit next to Rian. It was good to talk to Rian before the evaluation, like being alone with a lover on a battlefield.

But Tess's small pleasure was ruined by Bawio's approach. With his developed jaw raised, he looked down at Rian and said,

"Hey, Rian. How about it? Do you think you can avoid last place this time?"

"Mind your own business. It's not your concern."

"Haha! Of course. I don't care about last place. But I suddenly had an interesting thought. It might be related to you."

"What are you talking about?"

When Rian turned around, Bawio pointed to himself with his thumb.

"How about a match with me? Wrestling. Who knows? If you beat the strongest, the school might recognize you. You have to try everything to avoid last place, right?"

Rian turned his gaze away, uninterested.

"I don't need anyone's recognition. I'll fight anyone if I have to, but I don't want to show off useless strength."

Bawio smiled faintly. It was the typical talk of someone who wanted to avoid a fight but maintain their pride.

But this time, that pride would be his downfall.

"Hmm. Can you take responsibility for what you just said?"

With that, Bawio looked around the training ground. Seizing the moment when the second group's match was ending, he raised his hand.

"Instructor! I have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"I want to compete with Rian. Please allow it. We have already agreed."

For a cadet to change the evaluation method was a bold move.

But this time, Kuan also thought deeply. If it was Rian, it would be interesting for him too.

He was curious to see how far Rian's divine transcendence could hold against Bawio, the most physically capable among his peers.

"I will decide after hearing the opinions of the group."

Even if Rian and Bawio had agreed, the other group members might have different thoughts.

But Bawio was confident.

There was no one who could beat him in wrestling, so they wouldn't refuse the proposal to gain high scores.

As expected, Bawio's opponent agreed without hesitation.

Even if the outcome didn't affect the grades, it was hard to show one's skills against an overwhelmingly stronger opponent.

Rian's opponent had no reason to refuse either. If Rian, who couldn't use Schema, did well, it would be a draw at best,

and if he didn't, it would be a serious loss.

With everyone's interests aligned, Kuan crossed out two names on the evaluation sheet and changed the group members.

"Good. Rian and Bawio will join group 17."

As Bawio sat next to Rian with a satisfied smile, Tess felt an inexplicable unease.

There weren't many who could overpower Rian in practical swordsmanship among his peers, but Bawio in wrestling was truly dangerous.

She didn't know why he proposed such a match, but she hoped it would end as just part of the evaluation.

Bawio looked at Rian's stiff face and said,

"How about it? You're really going to fight me now? You won't regret it, right? If you're scared, say so now. I'll go easy on you."

Rian didn't answer. He wasn't the type to make up words if he had nothing to say.

The evaluation proceeded smoothly after that.

When the eighth group entered the arena, Tess, who was in the tenth group, prepared to go out. Wrestling was a strenuous activity, so stretching beforehand was crucial to avoid injuries.

"Rian, I'm going."

"Yeah. Do your best."

Bawio added a comment.

"Your opponent is nothing. Show them your top-tier skills."

Tess ignored Bawio's words and headed to the training ground. Bawio didn't mind. The cold looks wouldn't last long. Once the match with Rian started, her eyes would burn with intensity.

It was Tess's turn. Her opponent was a man named Godim, a straightforward swordsman. He blushed as he faced Tess, maintaining the buzz cut from his trainee days.

It was foolish to distinguish between men and women in a school that taught killing techniques. But he thought there

was no need to engage in wrestling, which involved close physical contact.

However, once the match began, Godim's eyes sharpened like a warrior facing a beast.

Tess charged first and collided with Godim. He lowered his center of gravity and pulled her thighs with his arms. Her legs lifted momentarily, but Tess skillfully spun around, neutralizing the move.

Bawio smiled in satisfaction at the sight.

"Impressive, Tess. She's really amazing, isn't she?"

Rian acknowledged Tess's talent and skill. But Bawio's words were unpleasant. He knew Bawio's gaze was on Tess's body, not her technique.

"Why do you want to fight me?"

"You should know the reason."

Bawio sneered. It seemed he was anxious about losing Tess.

"If that's really the reason, don't involve Tess again. If you want to fight, come to me anytime. I won't run or hide."

"Haha! Confident, aren't you? But will there be a next time for you?"

Bawio decided to get to the point. With Tess absent, it was the perfect time to reveal his true intentions.

"Ogent Rian. I've heard the rumors. They call your training demonic. You've staked your life on victory, right? Fine. How about the loser of this match gives up on Tess?"

Rian snorted in disbelief.

"Do you think Tess will choose you if you beat me?"

"That doesn't matter. You leaving and Tess choosing me are separate issues. I'm asking about your resolve."

Rian delayed his answer and looked at Tess. Her wrestling was different from Godim's. She disrupted her opponent's rhythm with flexibility and balance, not strength.

Tess's talent was genuine. On the other hand, he had no talent or future. In this situation, pondering her significance was a luxury.

"I don't gamble with people's hearts."

"Hmph. Backing out because it's unfavorable?"

"But I'll tell you this."

Rian's eyes flashed as he glared at Bawio.

"Even if you kill me in this match, I won't resent you."

Rian's determination was sincere. But Bawio, being naturally strong and a soldier, felt more combative than fearful.

"Haha! Big words. Do you think I can't do it?"

At that moment, a thud was heard from the training ground.

Rian and Bawio turned simultaneously. Tess had thrown Godim to the ground, holding his arm.

Godim looked up at the sky, confused about what had happened, then blushed and sat up.

"I lost. It was a good match."

"Phew. You did well too. The last move was a gamble."

She had used the opponent's pushing force to attempt a throw. If she had misjudged, she would have been in a helpless position, but Tess, with her sensory Schema, couldn't miss the opponent's center of gravity shift. Godim knew her words were a courtesy to the loser and accepted his defeat gracefully.

Tess returned to Rian and made a V sign with both hands.

"Hehe. I'm done. Now it's vacation time."

But the atmosphere was different from before. Rian's expression was colder, and Bawio's eyes were filled with hostility. Something had clearly happened while she was away.

"Rian, why the face? Bawio, what happened?"

Bawio shrugged nonchalantly.

"Why ask me? I didn't do anything."

Tess looked at Bawio with suspicion but had no choice but to sit down. She knew he was lying, but Rian wouldn't answer even if she asked.

When the fifteenth group's match started, Rian, who was in the seventeenth group, entered the training ground to warm up. Bawio, pretending to follow, turned to Tess and said,

"Tess. You'll soon see how useless Rian is. And how great I am."

"What nonsense? No matter what you do, you'll never look good to me."

"That's harsh. We're friends, after all. You know, Rian and I made a bet earlier."

"A bet? What kind of bet?"

"The loser of this match gives up on you. I thought you should know."

Tess scoffed and shook her head.

"Bawio, Rian would never gamble with someone else. That's the difference between you and Rian."

Bawio was displeased with Tess's blind trust but didn't show it. This was also the source of his numerous scandals in social circles.

"Really? Just watch."

The match was set, so it didn't matter. Seeing Rian humiliated in front of the cadets would embarrass Tess too. Wrestling was perfect for this. It allowed him to slowly torment his opponent.

When it was the turn of Group 17, Rian and Bawio faced each other in the arena. Comparing their bare bodies, the difference in size was almost 1.5 times. Although Rian was not small for his age, Bawio's bulk was so intimidating that it looked like a match between an adult and a child.

The cadets fixed their eyes on the two, like people expecting to witness a brutal feast in the wild.

Rian was going to be devoured. The disadvantage of not being able to use Schema was fatal in every aspect.

Rian was recognized for keeping up with the progress solely through his physical abilities, but he was never the best in terms of skill.

Bawio cracked his thick neck and said,

"Shall we start? Are you ready?"

"Anytime. Since it has come to this, let's have a good match."

As Rian and Bawio took their wrestling stances, Kuan put down his notes and focused on their match.

As soon as the signal to start was given, the two collided. Once their bodies touched, anything was allowed. But Bawio charged in headfirst, delivering a shock right from the start. There was a loud bang. It was a sound that made one worry that a skull might have been broken.

Kuan didn't consider it a foul. Collisions to close the distance were common.

Rian wasn't unprepared, but when their heads collided, sparks flew before his eyes, and his upper body was thrown back.

In such collisions, weight was everything. This was why Bawio had bulked up so desperately.

As Rian staggered, Bawio immediately followed up, grabbing the back of Rian's neck. Rian quickly regained his composure and did the same. They stood like two bulls locking horns. Their faces turned red as they held their breath. Gradually, Rian's legs began to drag on the ground as he was pushed back. Once again, weight was the deciding factor.

"Huuuuh..."

Bawio's breath escaped through his teeth. He had heard the rumors, but facing Rian in person was shocking. Rian couldn't use Schema. Normally, he should have been knocked out in the first collision.

Chapter 348: Divine Transcendance (5)

‘Arrogant brat...!’

Bawio attempted a technique. He tried to disrupt Rian’s balance by entwining his arms around him. However, Rian also swung his arms to block the move.

Annoyed, Bawio pushed Rian. Then he collided with him again. With a bang, the second headbutt landed. This time, Rian also felt dizzy.

Finally, seeing an opportunity for a tackle, Bawio rushed at Rian, wrapping his arms around his waist. As Rian staggered back, Bawio hooked his leg, opening up his waist. If he could slam him down now, it would be over.

“Ugh!”

Rian barely twisted his body to escape. He still wasn't fully conscious. He needed time.

But Bawio didn't give him a chance to recover and charged again. Having been thwarted twice, Rian instinctively countered by thrusting his head forward. His mind flashed, but it wasn't as bad as the first and second times.

The two stood with their foreheads pressed together, glaring at each other. Blood was flowing from both their noses.

Bawio couldn't contain his anger. For someone aspiring to be a heavy infantryman, strength was as important as swordsmanship. The fact that Rian had pushed him this far, despite never losing in wrestling before, raised Rian’s value.

‘Hmph. I can't let it end like this.’

Bawio smirked and said,

“You're holding up pretty well. But are you okay? You look dazed.”

In reality, Rian was dazed. In a strength contest, you had to match your breathing to your opponent's reactions. It was like a contest to see who could hold their breath the longest underwater. With a lack of oxygen, even standing made him feel faint.

"Then let's start folding."

Rian ground his teeth. Had Bawio been fighting without using folding all this time? As if to prove he wasn't lying, immense power emanated from Bawio's body.

"Hahaha! This is too easy!"

Bawio toyed with Rian at will. He lifted and dropped him, swung him left and right like playing with a child. With more than double the strength difference, techniques were useless.

'You didn't think I'd end it like this, did you?'

Bawio hugged Rian's chest and lifted him. As he applied pressure, all the air was forced out of Rian's lungs.

"Ugh!"

The feeling of having the air forcibly expelled from his body was the height of discomfort, but it was nothing compared to what followed.

Bawio lifted Rian's arm and slipped it under his armpit, attempting an abdominal stretch while standing.

"What, what is that...?"

The cadets looked on in astonishment. It was an abdominal stretch, also known as a cobra twist.

It was a legitimate wrestling move, but successfully applying it to a standing opponent was difficult, usually practiced as a joke or for training unless there was a significant skill gap.

And this was exactly what Bawio was aiming for.

Rian was caught in the move, his side twisted and his arm lifted. It looked ridiculous, but it was a position where he couldn't exert any strength, making it impossible to escape once caught.

"Ugh!"

A groan escaped Rian's mouth. His muscles were stretched to their limits, and even a slight movement from Bawio sent pain shooting up his spine.

Bawio turned his body to show off Rian's predicament to the cadets. It was humiliating, but he had no choice but to be dragged along.

"How about I break your back like this? Huh?"

Every slight movement from Bawio made Rian's spine creak. Satisfied, Bawio turned to Tess. He saw her biting her lip and trembling.

'I told you not to underestimate me.'

Bawio had never considered going easy on Rian to impress Tess. A woman in love was single-minded, no matter how impressive another man might be. To turn her heart, he had to completely ruin Rian and remove him from her sight.

"Why don't you surrender now? Or should we play a bit more?"

Rian didn't answer. His gaze was fixed on what Bawio was looking at.

'Tess...'

Tess looked like she was about to burst into tears. She was a righteous person. Therefore, the most frustrated person here was not Rian, but Tess.

"Break it."

"What?"

Bawio asked, bewildered.

"I told you, I don't care if you kill me. But I will never surrender."

"Hahaha! Why are you always so serious? This is just an evaluation. There's no need to go all out. Besides, this won't erase your shame."

Bawio dragged Rian around again. He could feel the emotions of the cadets. Some were fearful, some were angry, some were sympathetic. But he knew these were the gazes of the weak looking at the strong.

"What the...?"

At that moment, a powerful force was transmitted. Bawio, startled as if bitten by an insect, looked at Rian.

‘He still has strength left?’

Rian’s face didn't show any strain. His eyes were cold and lifeless, as if time had stopped.

‘Straighten your back. Straighten your back. Straighten your back.’

Rian’s gaze was inward.

As the command to straighten his back was delivered, his side began to rise slowly, as if by magic.

“Huh. Look at this guy.”

Bawio laughed dismissively but couldn't completely hide his tension. He was subtly exerting all his strength, but he couldn't stop Rian from moving.

‘What is this? Why is this happening?’

Bawio gritted his teeth and flexed all his muscles.

“Huuuuup!”

And the moment he felt the response, his heart sank. It wasn't a mistake or complacency. Rian’s upper body continued to rise, and he couldn't stop it.

His heart raced, and a chill ran down his spine. Something other than strength was lifting Rian. A massive force, like the weight of the world, brought an unprecedented fear.

Kuan watched with unblinking eyes. This was it. The incomprehensible mystery of divine transcendence.

‘This is impossible. How is this happening? What is moving him?’

Rian wasn't in a position to exert strength. Yet he was defying the principles of leverage and standing up.

Therefore, it wasn't strength moving him. Some rule of the world was lifting him.

“Hey, wait! Stop!”

Finally, a desperate voice escaped Bawio's mouth. No matter how much strength he used, he was endlessly being pushed back. As Rian’s posture returned, Bawio's body

twisted grotesquely. Finally, the cobra twist was reversed, and his muscles stretched to their limits.

“Aaaargh!”

The cadets were stunned as the victim screamed. Rian neither vented his anger nor mocked Bawio. He was solely focused on moving his body.

“Surrender! I lost! Please stop! Not my back!”

Rian didn't stop. He hadn't been angry when Bawio performed his mocking act. He had long discarded shame in the face of his lack of talent.

But to defeat him, his opponent had to give everything. And even if it was the folly of someone without talent, he couldn't forgive Bawio for angering Tess.

‘Yes. This will do.’

Rian finally made his decision. He pressed Bawio's face down with his armpit. There was a cracking sound as something twisted.

“Aaaargh!”

Bawio screamed as if his jaw was dislocated. With their bodies entangled, he couldn't even fall. As his abdominal muscles tore, all strength left his body, and he hung limp like a puppet with its strings cut, drooling.

Rian grabbed Bawio's head under his armpit and pushed him away. Bawio twisted in pain from the second impact as he hit the ground. Tears streamed down his face from the pain.

In the prolonged silence, the cadets' gazes changed. The image of the absolute strongman they had seen in Bawio earlier was gone.

‘Poor guy. He was supposed to go on vacation today, but now he'll be recovering for three months.’

Bawio propped himself up with his hands. But he screamed and fell again from the pain. He barely lifted his head and shouted in frustration.

“Don't think this changes anything! I'm just weak! You're not strong!”

Bawio's venomous words, even as he belittled himself, showed his malice.

But Rian heard nothing.

The aftermath of the forced physical exertion made his muscles feel like they were tearing apart.

'Damn. I overdid it.'

Rian counted to ten in his head. As he counted, the pain gradually subsided. It was an incredible recovery ability he had gained from breaking through his limits every day.

'I can move now.'

As his hearing returned, he heard Bawio's voice.

"Do you think this will always work? I'll get stronger! But that's your limit. You'll live as a loser forever!"

"That bastard...!"

Tess clenched her fists. If it weren't for the evaluation, she would have run over and punched his torn abdomen.

Meanwhile, Rian remained calm. He returned to his seat and draped his training uniform over his shoulder. Without a word, he turned and walked towards the exit of the training ground.

"R-Rian?"

Tess and the other cadets looked at Rian in shock. Kuan's cold voice pierced his back.

"Rian. Sit down. Leaving without permission is a fail."

"Then fail me."

Rian couldn't see any difference between last place and failing. No matter what achievements he showed, the school wouldn't give points to a swordsman who couldn't use Schema.

As Rian left the training ground, the atmosphere turned cold. No cadet had ever defied Instructor Kuan like that, and some were already praying for Rian's soul.

'Is this the limit?'

Kuan wasn't displeased, nor was he worried about Rian. As long as he took responsibility for his actions, he didn't care if the cadets ruined their lives.

But today, he didn't feel light-hearted. Divine Transcendence was a real power, and Rian could wield it.

How long could he endure? One day, his body would fail to withstand the power of his will and break.

Kuan wrote "fail" on Rian's evaluation sheet and added "unauthorized departure" in parentheses.

After the wrestling evaluation ended, Tess went to find Rian without even taking time to wash up. Just then, Rian came out of the dormitory. Despite the turmoil inside him, he looked neat, as if he had even taken a shower.

"Rian! What happened? Do you really want to fail?"

Rian walked past Tess with determined strides. This made her anxious. Once Rian's fire was lit, it spread uncontrollably.

"Please, say something. Leaving during an evaluation is serious. It's not just about last place. You know what happens if you get marked by the instructors, right?"

"I don't care. Whether they mark me or not."

Tess understood Rian's frustration at not being rewarded for his efforts, but this time the situation was really bad.

Defying a superior was never acceptable.

"Rian, think again. You've endured well so far."

"It's not because I can't endure. I'm just sick of it."

Seeing Rian's twisted face, Tess realized he was serious. But what could be done now? Everything was happening too quickly.

Rian arrived at the instructor's office. When he entered, Kuan was sorting evaluation sheets. Glancing at Rian's salute, Kuan turned his gaze back to his desk, uninterested.

"What is it? You left so abruptly."

"I have something to say."

"Go back. You failed. A cadet who acts on their own isn't worth evaluating."

Rian placed an envelope on the desk. Seeing the writing on it, Kuan frowned and looked up. But Rian, having already made up his mind, spoke calmly.

“It's a resignation letter. I'm leaving the swordsmanship school.”

Chapter 349: Swordsmans Conviction (1)

Shirone arrived in Vashka, the capital of Tormia.

Shirone couldn't take his eyes off the view through the carriage window. The streets were neatly paved, and people's attire was colorful, each emphasizing their individuality.

As they entered the city center, tall buildings that seemed to touch the sky lined the streets. Shirone identified the names of institutions he had only read about in books.

The Alchemy Foundation, the Swordsman Association, the Supreme Court.

Finally, they arrived at the towering building of the renowned Magic Association.

The 18-story building could be considered a tower. It was enormous. Even the first floor alone seemed large enough to house several noble mansions.

Shirone looked up to find the top, but the reflected sunlight made him close his eyes. The front was so glossy, like glass, that he couldn't bear to look up.

"Let's go in. This is the Magic Association."

Kangnan, who had paid the coachman, spoke as she passed Shirone.

When they reached the entrance, the guards turned to Kangnan and bowed 90 degrees. As gatekeepers of the Magic Association, even the guards had considerable magical power.

But Shirone knew that everyone working here was a magician.

Regardless of their rank, only those recognized as the best in their class could enter this sacred place of the magical

world.

Experiencing a revolving door for the first time, Shirone looked up and moved quickly. He was pushed by the glass and bounced into the hall. The receptionist at the central front desk was smiling and guiding nobles to their departments.

Kangnan went to the elevator not far from the entrance. The capsule-shaped elevator, made of glass, was constantly going up and down.

'It moves by air pressure. Very convenient.'

Kangnan checked the floor the elevator was on and, finding it inconvenient, turned to the stairs. Shirone, disappointed, followed her.

The stairs were wide enough for 20 people to walk side by side. There were four landings, and the structure was spiral. When they reached the third floor, a monotonous scene of corridors and offices unfolded.

A young woman stood next to an office with a sign that read "Foreign Affairs Department."

She was Ravid Plu, the manager of the third floor of the Magic Association's security department.

She was shorter than average, with long blue hair down to her waist. Her skin was white, and her lips were red, making her look scary from a distance, but up close, her sharp features were not unattractive.

She held a magic staff with both hands, supporting it with her hips. The staff was thin, with a large crystal ball set in a phoenix decoration at the end.

Plu stepped forward to greet Kangnan.

"Hello, Chief Secretary. Did the dispatched work go well?"

"More or less. Where is the Chairman?"

"He went out this morning and is currently away."

Kangnan frowned, looking troubled.

"Where did he go?"

"I'm not sure. I heard it would take about three days."

"Oh no, today of all days..."

Kangnan's mission didn't have a set deadline, so there was nothing she could do.

She couldn't just leave Shirone, who had come from the countryside, waiting indefinitely, so she was lost in thought when Plu pointed to Shirone and asked,

"But who is this boy...?"

"Oh, he's a guest of the Chairman. This is a problem. There's no suitable place for Shirone to stay."

"A guest?"

Plu looked at Shirone in disbelief.

In her two years at the Association, there had rarely been such a secretive visit from someone claiming to be a guest of Gaold. Most of the time, they were top envoys from other countries or high-ranking politicians whose names alone could make people tremble, requiring the Association to undergo a thorough cleaning and even hire a dedicated chef.

'Could it be?'

A thought crossed Plu's mind.

He might be related to the project. The fact that Kangnan asked her about Gaold's whereabouts suggested a desire to avoid the attention of other departments.

'No way. How could such a young child be involved in the project?'

Even Plu, who considered herself part of Gaold's elite guard, was only on the outermost edge of this project.

In such a situation, it was unthinkable that a boy younger than herself would assist Gaold.

'Who is he? Could he be a relative of the Chairman?'

In any case, Shirone's first impression wasn't great.

People who followed the eccentric Gaold all shared a common trait: they wanted his recognition. Even Plu, who couldn't meet the Chairman alone, felt a sense of rivalry with the boy who had come as a guest.

Kangnan, adjusting the schedule, spoke to Shirone.

"Shirone, how about staying here for now? I have to go out right away. Plu, can you take care of Shirone until the Chairman returns?"

"Oh, of course..."

As Plu was about to speak, Shirone turned to Kangnan and said,

"Um, can I go somewhere for a while?"

"Hmm? Where?"

"I have a friend living in the capital. I'll stay there and come back."

Kangnan made a thoughtful sound.

It would be best for Shirone to stay at the Association, but there was no harm in letting him go outside. It might even be better to avoid the eyes of other departments.

"Alright, go ahead. But please maintain security."

"Yes, don't worry about that."

Plu, overhearing their conversation, became even more puzzled.

Kangnan was easygoing except when dealing with Gaold, but she was meticulous in her work. If Shirone was supposed to meet the Chairman, it couldn't be a trivial matter. Yet, he trusted a boy not even twenty years old with security.

'Could he be royalty? Who is he to ask the Chief Secretary of the Magic Association for personal favors?'

Contrary to Plu's expectations, Kangnan wasn't too concerned. If more than two people knew, it wasn't a secret. He had brought Shirone as instructed, and the rest was up to Gaold.

"Come back here when you're done. You need to return within three days. When you come to the Association, find Plu here."

Kangnan also spoke to Plu.

"Plu, when Shirone returns, guide him to the Chairman. Preferably to a quiet place. I'll handle it, but in case I'm not around."

Plu bowed politely.

"Yes, understood."

And she quickly thought.

'Shirone? Then he's not royalty. I've heard that name somewhere. Where was it?'

Something tugged at the edge of her memory, but it was still vague.

Kangnan placed her hand on Shirone's back and turned him around.

"Let's go. I'll see you out."

Shirone alternated glances between Kangnan and Plu, then quickly bowed.

"Oh, yes. Goodbye."

Plu nodded lightly and watched Shirone with sharp eyes.

She was sure she knew the name. It just didn't come to mind because they hadn't met.

'Well, I'll find out if I look it up.'

Plu waited in the corridor until Kangnan disappeared, then quickly turned around.

Leaving the Magic Association through the revolving door, Shirone realized anew that he was in Vashka, seeing the golden streets.

Kangnan checked the time and clicked his tongue.

"Sorry, I have another job to do. Do you know where your friend lives? Can you find it alone?"

"Yes. I know the address. I can ask around. If I can't find it, I'll take a carriage."

"Alright. See you in three days."

Kangnan turned easily.

She wasn't worried. It didn't make sense that the kingdom's top aspiring magician couldn't find his way.

Kangnan stepped onto the main road and raised her hand, and a luxury carriage stopped immediately. When she opened the door, he saw a gentleman with a mustache and an elderly lady already seated. Kangnan jumped in without hesitation, and the carriage departed immediately.

Shirone watched carefully and raised his hand when the next carriage arrived. A blue-lit carriage stopped. When he opened the door and got in, a girl with dimples turned to him and smiled.

"Uh... um."

Shirone was flustered.

In Vashka, sharing a ride was normal, but staying in a small space with a stranger was unfamiliar to Shirone, especially if the stranger was a girl his age.

"Come on in. Where are you going?"

"Oh, to the palace area."

"Great. No need to detour."

Shirone got into the carriage and sat opposite her. After giving the exact location to the coachman, he turned back to see the girl smiling and covering her mouth.

"What's so funny?"

"You're not from the capital, are you?"

"Oh, no. Did it show?"

"Vashka residents never hesitate when sharing a ride. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you're rustic or anything.

Actually, you're quite cool."

Shirone blushed and lowered his head. He wasn't used to this type, just like with Marsha.

On the other hand, the girl skillfully led the conversation as if it were routine.

She was twenty years old and a student preparing for the diplomatic exam. She had two boyfriends, one younger and one a twenty-eight-year-old businessman.

Shirone listened absentmindedly to her story.

At one point, she hinted at meeting separately, but when Shirone's focus wavered, she laughed it off and didn't ask again.

"Well, goodbye. It was nice meeting you."

"Yes. Goodbye."

As the carriage left, Shirone, left on the roadside, looked exhausted after just 30 minutes.

It wasn't just the talking; the cultural shock was overwhelming. Not everyone in the capital had the same personality, but he finally understood where Dante's free-spirited mindset came from.

'Phew, my head hurts already. The capital is definitely different.'

Shirone entered a high-end residential area.

Reina's mansion was located where the Les Mountains flowed like a torrent and the spire of the royal castle was visible. It was much smaller than the main house but still luxurious.

"Well, Reina is a court musician after all."

When he reached the front gate, the attendants who had accompanied him to Kazra Castle recognized him.

"Oh? Isn't this Young Master Shirone? What brings you here?"

"How have you been? I came to see Rian. The swordsmanship school is on break now, right?"

"Yes, but..."

Their trailing words seemed suspicious.

The attendants exchanged glances, and one of them turned around as if they had no choice.

"Please wait a moment. I will return shortly."

It was impolite to leave Shirone, a guest of the Ozent family, standing at the gate. He didn't feel particularly bad, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

The head butler, Louis, came out of the mansion. His intellectual gaze, which had once pressured Shirone, was the same, but he greeted him with a welcoming smile this time.

"Welcome. It's the first time seeing you since Kazra."

"Yes, thank you so much back then. But you're here now?"

"Since the elder works here, I often travel between the main house and here. Please, come in."

Following Louis, Shirone asked,

"Is something wrong? The atmosphere seems a bit strange."

“Well... you'll see once you go inside.”

Reina's mansion was much larger inside than it appeared from the outside.

In front of Clump's room stood two women, one of whom was Reina, and the other was an unexpected person.

“Huh?”

“Shirone!”

Tess, who looked like she was about to cry, brightened up and ran over. She adorably hit Shirone's shoulders with her fists and shouted,

“What, what, what? How did you get here?”

After greeting Reina first, Shirone turned to Tess.

“Haha! I had some business in the capital and thought I'd see Rian's face. Did you finish school safely?”

“Well, actually...”

At this point, Shirone started to feel frustrated.

“What is it? Did something happen?”

Reina spoke with a serious expression.

“Rian dropped out of school.”

“What? Dropped out?”

Chapter 350: Swordsmans Conviction (2)

Clump, seated at the head of the table, had his arms crossed and wore a serious expression. Next to him sat Kuan, who had come from the swordsmanship school at Clump's summons.

Rian, standing before them, kept his back straight and met Clump's gaze without wavering before speaking.

"This is my decision. It's strange to ask for permission for something I've decided, but please accept it."

Clump let out a deep sigh.

The blue-haired lineage was known for being free-spirited and hot-tempered. He roughly understood how much Rian had struggled and could empathize with his frustration at not being able to use Schema. But it had only been a year. It was too early to judge the success or failure of his studies.

"...Are you running away? What do you plan to do after dropping out of school? Are you thinking of returning to the family for personal training?"

"No. I'm going on a knight's quest."

Clump's jaw tightened, causing his beard to twitch. A mix of anger and exhilaration surged within him. How could Rian think so much like he did when he was young?

Even so, he had to oppose it.

When Clump was young, many embarked on knightly quests. The world was in turmoil, and unifying it with the sword wasn't just a dream.

But times had changed.

The sword was a tool for killing. While real combat was the best training, it was a double-edged sword that could end one's life with a single mistake.

"I won't say you're too young. You're almost nineteen. But can you truly say there's nothing left to learn at school? Is the school really that insignificant to you?"

"I've never thought of it that way. I just want to become stronger."

This time, Clump also showed his anger.

Being pleased that Rian resembled him was one thing, but following the same path as his predecessors was another. Above all, he couldn't push his beloved grandson into danger.

"You want to leave on a quest to become stronger? Do you think you can get away with such childishness?"

"It's not childishness! I'm serious about risking my life..."

Clump was firm.

"No means no. You can experience real combat when the time comes. First, you need to build enough skill to face the world."

"No. I've already submitted my withdrawal. The decision is made."

"I canceled it. This old man, nearing seventy, begged your junior to have it rescinded."

"Grandfather!"

Rian raised his voice.

It wasn't just about the withdrawal being rescinded; it was frustrating that Clump had to plead with someone on his behalf.

Just as Rian was about to speak out of his burning emotions, there was a knock at the door.

Clump frowned, annoyed.

"What is it? We're in the middle of a conversation. Come back later."

"Sir, Shirone is here to see you."

Rian turned to the door in surprise. His heart suddenly began to race.

His closest friend and the lord to whom he had sworn fealty. For whatever reason, he was the one person Rian never

wanted to show this side of himself.

Clump also knew what Shirone meant to Rian. After a moment of thought, he made a decision.

"Let him in."

Rian's stubborn personality wouldn't be swayed by family, but Shirone might be able to change the situation.

The door opened, and Shirone entered. Tess peeked in to gauge the room's atmosphere, but Louis quickly closed the door, giving her no chance.

Rian instinctively avoided Shirone's gaze. But Shirone, unfazed, first greeted Clump.

"Hello, sir."

"Yes. Reina told me. You've been through a lot."

He already knew what Shirone had gone through in Kazra. Shirone's aura had become noticeably stronger after his trials.

But now wasn't the time to focus on Shirone's changes. Shirone also knew why Clump had called him and didn't beat around the bush.

"Rian dropped out of school."

Clump exaggeratedly scratched his head in frustration.

"Yes. Try to persuade him. He's being so stubborn."

"I support his decision."

Clump's hand stopped scratching. Even Kuan, who didn't know Shirone, looked surprised.

"Support? Are you saying it's okay for Rian to drop out?"

"Yes. I don't know the details or the reasons, but if Rian decided that, I believe it's the right path."

Clump tried to maintain his composure.

He had hoped Shirone's arrival would be a turning point, but if Shirone was going to defend Rian, it would be even more troublesome. He would be a very difficult advocate.

"Alright. As Rian's lord, your opinion is worth considering. But if you think that way, you must have a valid reason."

Shirone turned to Rian. Seeing Rian still unable to meet his gaze, Shirone continued, looking at Clump.

"There is no valid reason."

"What?"

"I don't know which choice is more efficient for Rian. But I can guarantee one thing."

Shirone spoke with conviction.

"The Rian I know never runs away from anything."

Rian clenched his fists. Those words gave him more confidence than a thousand others.

"It might be a foolish decision. But it's not an attempt to avoid anything. As his friend, I believe supporting him is the right thing to do."

Clump couldn't help but laugh, feeling a mix of frustration and admiration.

It was a beautiful friendship. And it's human nature to want to protect beautiful things.

'Clever boy. He already knows my weak spot.'

Dealing with the family head Bishoff was different. Clump, a man of honor, couldn't firmly oppose such an argument. But as Shirone already knew, Clump wasn't someone who acted solely on emotions.

"I understand your feelings. And your argument is persuasive. But Shirone, that's just your and Rian's perspective. You two don't know the world yet. I've walked the path of a swordsman for decades. Do you think it's just about school? Not at all. One day, this dropout will come back to haunt Rian."

Kuan raised his hand.

"I have something to say."

Everyone turned their attention to Kuan.

Shirone had never seen Kuan before, but he could tell from his aura that he was no ordinary person.

"I didn't come here just for a teacher-student meeting. I needed to deliver this personally."

Kuan took an envelope from his inner pocket.

It was Rian's withdrawal letter.

"I respect and want to help you, sir, but I can't allow the withdrawal to be rescinded. Teaching a student who has already given up on school goes against my educational philosophy."

"Ugh."

For Clump, it was one obstacle after another.

Kuan's stubbornness was well-known at the swordsmanship school. It didn't matter if his opponent was a certified third-grade swordsman general.

"Please, just this once. Can't you let it slide?"

'Grandfather...'

Rian felt suffocated. Seeing his grandfather plead with a junior for his sake made him feel his grandfather's love.

But Kuan was not an easy opponent.

"As a teacher, it's an irresponsible opinion, but Rian has no future at the school. There are technical aspects he can learn, but the main evaluation criteria are Schema. There's a growing opinion that brain enhancement falls under Schema, but it's not something the school can teach. As you know, education and practice are worlds apart. And practice and real combat are entirely different realms. Winning a wrestling match among cadets doesn't count as a score."

Kuan's words didn't sound particularly unpleasant. He was simply giving his honest opinion as someone who had closely observed Rian.

The room fell silent. No one spoke.

Then, the head butler, Louis, announced from outside the door.

"Sir, the second young master has arrived."

Rian's face twisted in anger.

Ozent Rai. Of all times, his lifelong rival had to come home now. He was someone Rian didn't want to see, just like Shirone, but for different reasons.

As Rai entered confidently, Shirone quickly stepped aside. He had only seen Rai once when he worked as the Ozent family's librarian, but his impression was vivid.

Rai had black hair and a cold face. His demeanor was still icy, but his presence had grown significantly stronger. When Reina followed him in, even Louis couldn't close the door this time.

Reina, glaring at Rai, shouted,
"Hey! Why are you so busy that you don't even show your face? Do you know it's been a month since you came home?"

Even the cold Rai couldn't help but frown at his sister's nagging.

"I was busy. I couldn't help it. I'm here to pack for a deployment soon. I'm hungry, so make me some food."

Reina, fuming, glared at the back of Rai's head before whispering to Louis to prepare a meal. After all, her brother had come home after a long time, so she wanted to send him off with a warm meal.

Rai approached Clump and bowed formally. Now that he was also a soldier, he couldn't be casual even at home.

"Grandfather."

"Hmm, you seem to be doing well. Ah, introduce yourself. This is Kuan, a teacher at the swordsmanship school."

Rai's eyes changed.

'Kuan? The Death Magician Kuan?'

After passing the certification exam and joining the military, he had heard stories. Although unconfirmed, the only swordsman who had survived a battle with Feng Zhang was said to be Kuan.

Rai turned to Kuan and bowed.

"Hello. I'm Ozent Rai."

"Yes, I've heard about you. You have a good disposition."

Kuan received the greeting as politely as possible, showing a different attitude compared to when he dealt with Rian.

'So this is the genius swordsman of the Ozent family.'

Last year, he had achieved the 10th rank certification, and now he was already an 8th rank sergeant. His aura was cold and sharp, reminiscent of Kuan's younger days.

Rai stood at attention, allowing Kuan to fully assess him, then turned back to Clump and asked,
"But why is a high-ranking official from the swordsmanship school here?"

Reina, crossing her arms, replied,
"Rian dropped out of school. Grandfather called him to try to change his mind."

"Dropped out of school?"

Rai turned to Rian to confirm, and Rian glared back. He didn't want to lose even a staring contest with Rai, unlike with Shirone.

But Rai just scoffed and said indifferently,
"What's the big deal? If he wants to quit, let him quit."

Reina clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"How can you be so indifferent? Aren't you worried about your brother's future?"

Rai walked past Rian towards the door.

"He was never going to make it. It's better to give up now. Hurry up and get me some food. I'm hungry."

As Rian followed Rai with his eyes, he spoke up.

"Wait a minute."

When Rai turned around, Rian pointed a finger at his forehead.

"You didn't go to school either."

"That's different. I don't need to, and for you, it's a waste of time."

Rian's teeth ground together in frustration.

Chapter 351: Swordsmans Conviction (3)

"Do you think you're something just because you have a rank? Regardless of my grades, I haven't just been playing around. When it comes to the sword, I won't lose to anyone."

"Do you think divine transcendence is such a big deal?"

Reina looked at Rai in surprise.

She had mentioned Rian's divine transcendence in passing before. But for Rai to remember it, given his self-centered nature, was unusual.

"Transcending the body? That's impressive. Should I applaud?"

Rian's eyes flared up.

"What? Are you...!"

"If you rely on that, your body will break first."

Rian's mouth shut.

"Yes, divine transcendence is a difficult state to achieve. But that doesn't mean it's great. The world is full of difficult yet useless things. Moving a mountain with a shovel might be harder. But no one does that. What do you plan to do by transcending the body? You're a human made of flesh and blood. Divine transcendence? You might get a bit stronger than others, but that's it."

It was a harsh truth.

Even Shirone, who had reached a similar state, couldn't refute it this time. Divine transcendence. Surpassing the limits of magic through the power of an avatar. But if you exceed the feedback, your mind will eventually collapse.

Rian gritted his teeth and barely managed to speak.

"Shut up. What do you know? You've never experienced it."

"Yes, I can't. Impressive. I support you."

Rai turned away again. Before leaving the room, he said,

"Congratulations. You've finally done something I can't."

Rian felt his sanity snap. He couldn't control his racing heart, and his body trembled involuntarily.

How effective divine transcendence would be in real combat was uncertain. But it was the only hope that had miraculously come after years of training.

"...Wait."

Rai ignored Rian and kept walking.

"I'm busy. Take care of yourself."

"I said wait!"

Rian's shout echoed through the room. No one was surprised because they had expected this outburst.

Rai turned back, clearly annoyed, and Rian walked up to him.

"Ozent Rai, I challenge you to a duel. Let's settle this with real swords."

Reina rubbed her temples as if she had expected this.

"Rian, you keep..."

"No, I'm serious. If I lose to Rai, I'll go back to school. How about that? Is that a fair condition?"

Rai scoffed.

"I don't care if you go to school or not. Quit if you want. Just don't bother me."

"Haha! Really? You're not running away because you're scared?"

Rai's face twisted slightly.

"Scared of you? That's ridiculous."

"Oh, so you're busy? You always brag about ending me with one strike. Or are you saying a swordsman is just someone who plays with ranks and talks big?"

"Sigh."

Rai sighed tiredly and nodded sympathetically.

"Fine, I'll duel you. Wait for me in the training ground. Get ready."

As he turned to leave, he looked back at Rian.

"And don't provoke me again. You're not good at it."

"That...!"

Rian was about to rush out when Shirone grabbed his arm.

"Calm down, Rian. You're the one who got provoked."

"Oh."

Rian realized this and calmed down.

But his anger didn't disappear. Rai had turned the tables with just one word, making Rian furious. Shirone thought Rian was too naive.

Tess, who had been listening outside, entered cautiously.

"Rian, are you really going to do this? If you lose, you have to go back to the swordsmanship school."

"Hmph, have you ever seen me go back on my word?"

"That's not what I mean..."

Tess glanced at Kuan. Since Kuan had already stated he wouldn't rescind the withdrawal, even if Rian changed his mind, there would be additional problems.

But Rian didn't care.

If he lost to Rai, he would kneel and beg to return to school.

If they didn't accept him, he would wait at the school gate.

"I'll do it. It's a promise. But I'm not going back. I challenged him with the determination to win."

Rian looked at Clump.

"Grandfather, you permit this, right?"

Clump, arms crossed, thought seriously. Finally, his eyes opened wide.

"Let's go to the training ground."

The training ground was behind Reina's mansion. Besides Reina, Clump and Rai lived there, but Rai was always busy with deployments, and Clump mostly stayed at the general's barracks, so it wasn't well-maintained.

In the small clearing, Rai, who had unpacked his gear, stood with a sword at his waist, waiting for everyone. While Rian prepared, Reina approached Rai with a worried expression.

"Hey, are you really going to do this? I don't like it. There's no need for brothers to fight with real swords."

"Let him do what he wants. Otherwise, that fool won't agree."

"What if something happens?"

"We'll deal with it then. Anyway, isn't this good for you? That fool will go back to school."

If the duel ended safely and Rian accepted defeat, Reina would be relieved. But the two were like oil and water, so her concern didn't disappear.

"Alright, just go easy and finish quickly."

"I'm busy too. I'll do that."

Reina shrugged. Rai, despite his self-centered nature, was a sensible brother who didn't need nagging, unlike Rian.

'Well, there's someone else to worry about.'

Rian, glaring at Rai from the corner of the training ground, took deep breaths.

Tess approached and vigorously massaged Rian's shoulders and arms. His muscles were tense, indicating how significant this duel was for him.

"Come on! Relax!"

Tess did her best to boost Rian's spirits. She didn't want him to quit school, but she hated seeing him humiliated even more.

Rian remained silent, focusing on calming his mind. With his family, Kuan, and Shirone watching, he couldn't afford to lose.

Reina approached and placed a hand on Rian's shoulder.

"I'm neutral in this duel. So don't overdo it."

"Hmph, you should worry about Rai. I'm not the same as before."

Reina said nothing.

Rai wasn't considering defeat, and neither was Reina.

Having wielded a sword herself, she knew the gap in their skills better than anyone.

‘Rian has no chance of winning. Rai won't go easy on him for the sake of his brother's pride.’

When Clump and Kuan entered the training ground, Rian took the greatsword his grandfather had given him.

As Rian walked to the battlefield, Shirone spoke from behind.

"Rian, make sure you win."

Rian turned and smiled. The tension had vanished.

"No problem. Leave it to me."

When Rian reached the center of the training ground, Rai drew his black sword. It was longer and thinner than a regular longsword, designed for Ozent swordsmanship, and made of black steel, making it very hard.

Rai swung the black sword in an X shape and then pointed it skyward.

"Let's start quickly. I want to rest."

"You won't be resting; you'll be bedridden. I don't know about your deployment, but you should cancel it."

"Whatever. Just come at me."

Rai didn't even want to respond to Rian's words.

Rian found it frustrating. Rai, who mastered any technique instantly, couldn't see Rian, who had no natural talent, as family.

The sneer Rian had seen during their childhood duel flashed through his mind.

"Anyway, thanks for accepting the duel. Our bad blood ends today."

Rian held the greatsword with one hand and aimed it. The precarious balance, pushing human limits, was intimidating just to look at.

Rai lowered the black sword diagonally. It was so long it almost touched the ground.

The greatsword and black sword were evenly matched in length. But the black sword, being lighter, would be faster.

‘I can't match him in technique.’

Rian planned his strategy. It was as straightforward as his personality.

‘Overwhelm him with strength!’

As he clenched his teeth, his eyes lit up. Powerful footwork propelled his body forward.

"Here I come!"

Rian raised the greatsword and charged. The force of the heavy greatsword falling from a height of three meters was unimaginable.

At the same time, black flashes shot from Rai's body, targeting Rian's openings. Rian couldn't even swing the sword halfway before switching to defense.

Rai's fast and sharp attacks hammered the greatsword's surface like a blacksmith's hammer.

"Ugh!"

Rian's body flinched at the unexpected impact.

It felt different from Tess's light sword. Swift and precise, but with the unique strength of Ozent swordsmanship.

Once he lost the initiative, Rian was endlessly pushed back. The process was so one-sided that regaining control seemed impossible.

Rai moved as if dancing alone in the clearing.

When Rian reached the edge of the training ground, the spectators couldn't help but gasp. Even Tess, who supported Rian, was mesmerized by Rai's swordsmanship.

"Yaaah!"

Rian's sword slashed horizontally. The air sizzled as it burned.

Barely creating space, Rian took a step forward. But Rai's lightning-fast attacks forced him back again.

Rai didn't stop attacking. It was as if he had Rian cornered and was beating him.

Rian's counterattacks decreased, and soon he struggled even to defend.

‘Tsk, no progress at all.’

Rai didn't want to waste any more time on a boring match.

He relentlessly hammered Rian's sword, then reversed his black sword and drove it into the ground. As the blade sank in, a vibration traveled up through Rian's feet.

"What...!"

Rian looked down in surprise as the ground swelled like air was filling it, then exploded with a bang.

"Ugh!"

The shockwave from the exploding ground struck Rian's feet, causing his calf muscles to spasm.

The technique was called Earth Explosion.

It was a sword technique Rai had mastered at just twelve years old, now driven into the ground.

Rian's knees buckled, and he couldn't maintain his balance. He ended up sitting down, lifting the greatsword with only his upper body strength.

When Rai's black sword struck with a loud clang, vibrations traveled up the greatsword.

Rian gritted his teeth and held back a scream.

It felt like his arm muscles were tearing apart. The shockwave that traveled through his body burst out, causing his shirt to rip as if stabbed by dozens of knives.

Rian glared heavily at Rai. Rai's expression remained indifferent as he held the black sword.

The spectators sensed the duel was over. The shockwave had torn through Rian's body, and even if he looked fine on the outside, his muscles were likely too damaged to move properly.

Ozent Rai, the second son of the Ozent family.

His skill was the real deal.

Chapter 352: Swordsmans Conviction (4)

‘Is that the skill of a swordsman who just turned twenty?’

Kuan was deeply impressed by Rai's swordsmanship.

It was not only precise but also exquisite. If the Ozent family had two lineages, this was undoubtedly the era of the black-haired lineage.

“Huff! Huff!”

Rian gasped for air, supporting the greatsword with his trembling arms. It was the first time the greatsword, which he had swung every day for a year except during meals, felt so heavy.

‘Lift it. Lift it.’

Rai's eyes twitched. The greatsword, which he was pressing down with his black sword, was slowly rising.

‘He still has strength left?’

The shockwave from the sword vibration should have left him powerless.

Rai tried to press down harder, but the immense force pushing him back made it seem impossible to hold down. Sensing something ominous, Rai withdrew his sword and created distance.

At the same time, Rian swung his sword and stood up. He tore off his tattered shirt, revealing his bulging muscles.

Rai immediately recognized Rian's characteristic.

‘His recovery is incredible.’

To elevate divine transcendence, which surpasses physical limits, to the level of a technique required unimaginable hardship. It was clear how much grueling training Rian had undergone to increase his feedback.

"I acknowledge that you did your best. But I am the one who will lead the family."

Rai used external force to move to Rian's side and swung his black sword at Rian's unprotected right arm.

In a normal situation, Rian should have taken a defensive stance.

However, Rian instead opened his ribs and raised his greatsword vertically.

'What?'

In that split second, Rai's thoughts raced.

Was he sacrificing flesh to take the bone? Or was the best defense a good offense?

Neither made sense. The greatsword's movements were inherently slower than a light sword.

Then, Rian's greatsword accelerated inexplicably, creating afterimages as it dropped towards Rai's forehead.

Rai twisted his body, creating a shockwave. He slid in a semicircle, following the external force, and escaped the radius.

But Rian's greatsword followed, roaring through the air.

'Damn it! What is this?'

Rai narrowly dodged, feeling a chill down his spine. He had almost lost his head.

Reina, watching the battle, anxiously stomped her feet.

As the emotions of the two clashed, the intensity of their killing intent increased. At this rate, one of the brothers might end up dead.

"This can't go on! We need to stop the duel."

"We can't. Neither Rian nor Rai would want that."

Reina looked at Tess with a mix of disappointment and concern.

"Tess, no matter how much you want to protect Rian, this isn't right. Those two are fighting to kill each other. You should have stopped Rian from the start."

"Rai isn't fighting out of hatred."

Tess vividly remembered the night she brought a late-night snack to Rian's dorm at the swordsmanship school and heard the terrible groans through the door.

"Rian trained to surpass his limits every day. And at night, he suffered in pain. He would bite on a cloth to endure the agony that felt like his body was breaking apart."

Reina couldn't say anything to Tess, who looked like she was about to cry.

Even though they were family, she couldn't understand the pain Rian had endured. Only those who had chosen the path of the sword like Rian could understand him.

Rai's kick struck Rian's solar plexus. Rian, who had been lifted into the air, rolled on the ground and knelt to regain his balance. He had been hit in a vital spot and was visibly struggling.

The cold aura had disappeared from Rai's face.

As time passed, he felt Rian's defense solidifying. It was because Rai was getting emotionally involved. He found it frustrating.

"You idiot! Why don't you realize you're no match for me? Stop being so stubborn!"

Rian slowly stood up. He aimed at Rai in the same stance as before he fell.

"Come at me."

"You little...!"

Rai's eyes flared with killing intent. The ominous aura he emitted reached even those standing on the outskirts of the training ground.

Rai's full-power movements were ghostly. His fast and precise swordsmanship left more cuts on Rian's body, gradually slowing his movements.

The difference in skill was clear. No matter how hard he tried, there was a gap in talent that couldn't be bridged. But the clearer that gap became, the angrier Rai got.

It was foolish for the family to place their hopes on someone like Rian. Rian had no future. Swordsmanship without

technique was just a display of brute strength.

"You fool!"

With a precise technique, Rai deflected the greatsword and delivered a spinning kick, causing Rian's head to spin like a top.

For a moment, it felt like his neck had broken. His body spun and fell with a thud.

Rai, breathing heavily, glared at Rian. Even his collapsed form looked pathetic. With a direct hit to the chin, Rian would likely be unconscious until the next day.

"Heh."

At that moment, Rian's chest heaved. Slowly lifting his head, Rian spoke with a torn smile.

"That tickles. Do you think you can kill me with that?"

Rai was stunned by Rian's resilience, getting up like a zombie no matter how much he was beaten. But he quickly looked at his brother with disdain and spoke coldly.

"Kill you? Do you think you're worth killing?"

Rian's eyes widened.

"Why kill Grandfather's precious youngest grandson?"

There's no need to kill someone like you. I'll just beat you until you lose consciousness. Got it? You're just the youngest of a swordsmanship family with no skill or talent. You're a useless idiot, you fool!"

"Yeah!"

Rian shouted, curling his body.

"I am a useless idiot!"

Rian charged, swinging his sword. It was an attack that would make anyone with a weak heart hesitate just from the sound of the wind.

Rai hurriedly raised his black sword. Bang! The greatsword struck, sending shockwaves down to his knees.

Rian pressed his face close, their swords locked.

Seeing Rian's torn smile reaching his ears, Rai wondered if his brother was sane.

Should he continue like this? Should he call a doctor?

“Mock me all you want. I've heard it all my life. Call me pathetic, call me a fool. Scorn me, despise me, curse me. But I will...!”

Rian pulled back his greatsword and took a full swing stance.

“Never stop!”

The greatsword seemed to grow tenfold in Rai's mind. The overwhelming strike shocked his brain, scrambling his perception of the sword's path.

“Yaaah!”

As Rian shouted, Rai's gaze dropped.

‘Ankle!’

Realizing the sword's trajectory too late, Rai jumped.

The greatsword dug into the ground, lifting a wide sheet of earth.

A black line raced through the center of the sheet. With a tearing sound, it split in half, and Rai burst through the dirt. But waiting for him was another upward swing from Rian's greatsword.

The unexpected follow-up attack made Rai's heart race. As he arched his body, he felt the wind graze his chin. His hair stood on end.

“I hear nothing! Even if everyone mocks me, I will only move forward!”

Rian pushed Rai relentlessly, venting all his pent-up frustration.

For the first time since the duel began, Rai was being pushed back. Even Kuan and the family showed signs of surprise.

‘Rian...’

Reina's eyes filled with pity.

He was a child who had grown up constantly compared to his older brother, who was two years older. Honestly, she didn't think she could beat Rai even if she wielded a sword. Perhaps she had used music as an excuse to pass the burden of the blue-haired lineage onto Rian.

"The blue-haired lineage has always had many troublemakers."

Reina pouted and looked at Clump.

"The black-haired lineage always does its part. They're rational and cold. But the blue-haired lineage often has unpredictable personalities. They're stubborn and single-minded. That's why when a blue-haired person becomes the head of the family, it's considered a gamble."

"What are you talking about all of a sudden? You're blue-haired too, Grandfather."

"Heh, indeed, the existence of troublemaking blue-haired individuals is one reason the Ozent family is limited to the second rank. But looking back at the family's history, it was the blue-haired lineage that made the Ozent name known as a family of swordsmen."

Clump gazed intently at Rian, who was swinging the heavy greatsword like a storm.

"They don't take detours. They don't look back. Even if they break upon impact, they push through. That's the blue-haired conviction. I don't know how far Rian will go. But when he finally looks back from where he arrives, his path will be a straight line without deviation."

"Here I come!"

As Rian charged with an all-out offensive stance, Rai didn't dare clash swords.

It didn't feel like he was facing a person. He couldn't shake the feeling that something absolute was lurking behind Rian.

Divine transcendence? The power of the mind?

Rai's eyes blazed.

"Don't make me laugh!"

Rai launched himself, meeting Rian's sword head-on. Their swords clashed, sparking in the center of their gazes.

The immense shock transmitted through the hilt brought Rai back to his senses. He realized he had been too excited.

But by then, his senses had already left his grasp.

‘What is this? There's a limit to being reckless.’

As Rai quickly retreated, Rian pounced like a wolf, closing the distance unnaturally, as if defying normal inertia.

When the greatsword came close, Rai twisted his ankle completely and spun, simultaneously striking Rian's Achilles tendon with the opposite foot.

“Ugh!”

Rai, twisting like a dragon, rose and slashed at Rian's back with his black sword. It was a move executed in a state of no-mind, where life and death were no longer considered.

“Rian!”

At Tess's shout, Rian twisted his upper body.

In an abnormal posture, he swung the greatsword with one hand, deflecting the black sword and sending Rai's arms flying behind him.

“Wow...”

An involuntary exclamation escaped Rai's lips.

It was a completely unbalanced stance. Yet, Rian had deflected a vertical slash with all his weight behind it using one hand.

‘No, this isn't just that level.’

The law of action and reaction didn't apply to Rian's sword. An absolute force that defied physical laws was embedded in each of Rian's strikes.

“Hoo.”

Shirone exhaled the breath he had been holding. Watching Rian overpower Rai made his heart burn with excitement, even though he wasn't a swordsman.

“Tess.”

Tess, who turned to Shirone, had a face pale with tension.

“Rian has really become strong.”

Tess finally shed tears at Shirone's acknowledgment. She knew who Rian had endured all his hardships for.

Unable to speak, she nodded repeatedly.

“Yaaah!”

Despite the pain that felt like his body was breaking, Rian swung his sword. Now, Rai no longer retreated and parried all of Rian's attacks.

If it was about surpassing physical limits, he wouldn't last long. He just had to block this one time. No, just one more time...

Rai was getting frustrated.

'Damn it! When will this end?'

Suddenly, a thought flashed through his mind.

'Ah...'

Rai finally realized what kind of trap he had fallen into.

'This guy is an idiot.'

At the same time, Rian's greatsword struck the black sword. With a clanging sound, pain shot through Rai's finger joints. His muscles cramped, his hand opened, and the black sword spun into the air.

Chapter 353: Swordsmans Conviction (5)

Everyone's eyes turned to the sky. The black sword spun, blocking the sun, and then plunged into the ground behind Rai with a thud, embedding itself more than halfway.

Rai didn't look back. His gaze remained fixed on Rian.

Rian, frozen in a stance with his greatsword aimed, couldn't move a finger. The aftermath of his divine transcendence brought excruciating pain.

In the prolonged silence, Rai clicked his tongue and turned away.

"I lost. Let's stop."

Rian's eyes widened in shock. It was the first time in 18 years he had heard Rai admit defeat.

But Rai showed no emotion as he pulled out the black sword and sheathed it. He walked over to Clump and bowed.

"I lost. I admit defeat."

"Heh, you got caught up in his pace. But it was nice to see you so fired up for once."

Rai muttered with a smirk.

"This is why you shouldn't get involved with fools."

"But it wasn't so bad, right? Don't you feel a bit relieved?"

After a moment of thought, Rai muttered as he passed Clump.

"...I feel a bit more like a swordsman now."

Reina quickly followed Rai.

"Wait, come here. Is your hand okay? You have a deployment tomorrow, right?"

"It's nothing. I just cramped and dropped my sword."

"Who are you trying to fool? Do swordsmen cramp that easily? Let me see your hand."

Reina grabbed Rai's wrist and examined his hand. The calluses, now as tough as skin, showed that he hadn't reached this point on talent alone.

"Just as I thought."

Reina frowned as she looked at the back of Rai's hand. The left hand, which cushioned the impact when gripping the sword, had lost all its fingernails on the index, middle, and ring fingers.

"Don't make a fuss. Fingernails fall off easily."

"I've never heard that! Ugh, you won't even be able to cut steak like this. Come here, let me bandage it."

Reina took a bandage from the first aid kit in the training ground and tightly wrapped Rai's fingers.

As the tension eased, even the spectators felt the fatigue. But Kuan still looked at Rian with a serious expression.

'Divine transcendence...'

Rian's swordsmanship in real combat was indeed impressive. It was a performance that could never be shown in the step-by-step evaluations of the swordsmanship school.

'But I would have taken a different approach.'

Divine transcendence was dangerous. It wasn't just about increasing power.

The movement that bit Rai at the end was so peculiar that it would have been difficult to create even with external force.

Yet Rai responded to Rian's strong sword with his own.

Was it pride? Lack of experience? Or were there other variables on the battlefield that he hadn't read?

"A swordsman is a technician who handles the sword."

"General."

Clump had approached unnoticed.

"But a sword is ultimately a tool for killing. That's an undeniable truth. So why do we pursue the sword?"

Kuan couldn't answer.

"A single sword can never change the world. But the sword in one's heart is different. A great swordsman wins battles,

but a knight with conviction changes the world. Rai was ignited by Rian's conviction."

"The sword in one's heart..."

"Perhaps divine transcendence is the embodiment of conviction."

Kuan recalled a time long ago.

Before his Achilles tendon was severed, his spirit had been so strong that he chose death over accepting the Wind Guards offer. Now, that determination felt like a distant memory.

"I once had it too."

Clump looked at Kuan with kind eyes. As a soldier and a swordsman, he felt for his unfortunate junior.

"How long will you wander? Return to the military. My direct subordinate is retiring. If you take the position, it would be a great help."

"I'll think about it. Thank you for your concern."

Kuan was sincere, but he had no intention of returning to the military.

Today's duel had made it clear. He was already a broken sword. Without embracing a new sword, he could never reach divine transcendence.

"Grandfather, can I drop out now?"

Rian approached with determined strides, his face covered in cold sweat from enduring the pain. Having proven himself with results, Clump had no reason to stop him.

"Yes, you won. Do as you wish, whether it's dropping out or going on a knight's quest."

"I told you from the start. There was no need for this fight."

Rai, bandaging his fingers, spoke as he changed clothes.

"Don't end up dead somewhere. If you die, I'll have to go looking for you."

Contrary to everyone's expectations, Rian didn't get angry. They had both given their all, so there was no point in dwelling on the duel.

But one question remained.

"Hey, let me ask you something."

Rai paused while buttoning his shirt and turned around.

"The technique that exploded the ground, that's an application of swordsmanship, right?"

"So what?"

"Why didn't you use swordsmanship on me? You could have broken my sword and ended the duel."

Rai tilted his head in confusion. Was Rian mocking him?

But Rian's expression showed no hint of provocation.

'Is he serious?'

Rai looked at Clump.

"Didn't you tell Rian?"

"Heh, what could I do? He took it like a thief. I hadn't even properly chosen a successor. And the Schema opening was a lie too."

Rai snorted at the blatant lie.

"You never intended to give it to me anyway."

"You didn't need it."

"Tch!"

Feeling left out of the conversation, Rian interrupted.

"What are you talking about? Just answer me. Why didn't you use swordsmanship?"

Rai, annoyed, turned towards the exit of the training ground.

"Don't ask me, ask Grandfather. It's a mess. A swordsman who doesn't even know what he's fighting with."

Reina followed Rai.

"Are you really leaving today?"

"No, I'll stay the night. I'm tired. Bring my meal to my room."

As Rai walked away, Rian glared and pointed at him.

"Hey! Where are you going? Why didn't you use swordsmanship? Don't leave me hanging!"

'There's no cure for stupidity.'

Ignoring Rian's shouts, Rai pondered.

The Ozent family had both black-haired and blue-haired lineages.

Why hadn't Grandfather given him the greatsword?

As a child, he thought it was because Grandfather favored Rian, who had the same blue hair. But after today's duel, he had a vague understanding.

At least, the rightful owner of that sword was Rian.

Shirone and Tess decided to stay at Reina's mansion for the night.

The three gathered in Rian's room, catching up on the past six months. The biggest topic was Amy's failure in her graduation exam.

"How's Amy doing? She must be really upset."

They had read about Amy's failure in the Spirit Journal. The article had shockingly covered the news of the Carmis family's prodigy failing early in the graduation exam.

"She was down for a while, but she's okay now. She'll definitely have a different result next year."

"Yeah, Amy will get through it. I miss her. Those were fun times."

Rian also reminisced about their time in Heaven. Realizing divine transcendence while fighting Ymir was a turning point in his life.

"Amy deserves to be a magician. Tell her I'm rooting for her. I'll be there to cheer her on for the next graduation exam."

A year later, Shirone would also take his graduation exam, and Rian wouldn't miss it.

"You're lucky. I can't go. The swordsmanship school ends later than the magic school. Maybe I should drop out too and go on a quest with Rian."

Rian waved his hand dismissively.

"What's this about a top student at the swordsmanship school dropping out? You should graduate at the top of your class."

"But it feels so empty without you. I really want to go with you."

Seeing Tess on the verge of tears, Rian quickly looked for a topic to change the subject. He noticed the sword Shirone had placed next to the desk and asked,

"Shirone, are you carrying a sword now?"

"Oh, that's a gift."

Shirone explained what had happened in Kazra. Since Rian and Tess had also experienced the journey to Heaven, they understood the concept of an object.

Intrigued, they urged Shirone to demonstrate.

First, Shirone performed some tricks with precise control, then activated the Vajra Armor. The sword enveloped Shirone, and an organic robe formed around him.

The eerie yet powerful appearance left even the bold Rian speechless. Tess pointed to the orb floating in the air and asked,

"What is this orb?"

"That's a magic computation device. It replaces a technique called time-sharing, making calculations much faster. And the crystal on the gauntlet is a magic amplification device. Using these two, I can expand the range of my magic."

"That's amazing. I didn't know objects could have such complex functions."

Armand was a weapon that could tempt any swordsman. But his friends showed no interest beyond curiosity. For those who held the sword of conviction, any tool was just a tool.

'I wish Rian could use Armand.'

A knight's quest was on a different level from the swordsmanship school's curriculum.

The world wouldn't provide Rian with a systematic difficulty. He could easily handle third-rate thugs or robbers, but some criminals were so skilled that even the kingdom struggled with them.

In that sense, Armand, which enhanced the user's physical abilities and had its own defensive capabilities, would be helpful.

However, unlike in Dante's case, the magic sword did not respond to Rian.

Armand provides the optimal combat environment for all users, but to achieve 100% efficiency, a high level of tactical understanding and complex system control is essential.

Rian's straightforward and forceful nature made it difficult for him to fully utilize Armand's functions, and Armand seemed to recognize this.

'It's really like a sword, no matter how you look at it.'

But Rian had no intention of relying on anything. His confidence was sky-high after his duel with Rai.

"No need to worry! This is just the beginning! From today, I'll achieve an undefeated record!"

Shirone smiled contentedly as he watched Rian proudly thump his chest.

He was like a fire. One day, he would become a great blaze that would set the world alight and return to him.

That night.

Rian lay curled up under his blanket, groaning.

The aftermath of divine transcendence didn't end with the first wave. The most intense pain came at night when his body was recovering.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Groans escaped his throat, but he bit his pillow to endure.

He couldn't let Shirone, who was sleeping next to him, hear his pain. More than anything, he feared that if he screamed now, he would never be able to endure it again.

His face was drenched in cold sweat, and his eyes were unfocused. Yet, Rian fiercely stared into the darkness of the night, enduring the pain.

'Thank goodness. I'm so glad I won.'

If he had lost to Rai in front of Shirone, he would have fallen into despair and been unable to do anything for a while.

Rai was undoubtedly strong. In terms of technical perfection, he was worthy of being called a genius.

But he wasn't an insurmountable wall.

'The gap has narrowed. It definitely has.'

He couldn't predict that the same result would come from another duel, but in some aspects, he had certainly surpassed Rai. He was confident in that.

'I can do it. I didn't choose the wrong path.'

Just knowing that the distance wasn't unreachable filled Rian with joy. Even as his body trembled with pain, laughter escaped his throat.

"Heh, heh heh heh."

The night of pain and pleasure passed.

Chapter 354: Swordsmans Conviction (6)

After spending a day at the mansion, Shirone headed to the dining room with Rian and Tess. Clump was seated at the head of the table, reading a newspaper, while Reina was busy preparing breakfast.

Shirone rubbed his sleepy eyes and greeted them with a bow.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. Let's eat.”

Rian, rubbing his hungry stomach, sat down and asked Reina,

“Where's Rai?”

“He left at dawn. Do you think he's as idle as you?”

As usual, she started with a joke, but this time there was a hint of concern. As an older sister, she couldn't help but worry about her younger brother leaving on a knight's quest.

“Hey, I only dropped out yesterday! And I'm leaving right after breakfast.”

Reina served chicken stew onto plates and said,

“Why don't you rest for a few days? Shirone is here too.”

Shirone, carrying a plate, said,

“No, I need to head back soon as well.”

He couldn't explain the details due to his promise with Kangnan. Moreover, he was still curious why the chairman wanted to see him.

Since it was the day Rian was leaving, the atmosphere was quite solemn. However, Rian himself devoured three plates of chicken stew and hurriedly packed his things.

His belongings were simple: a backpack with some clothes and a day's worth of food. With a leather scabbard strapped to his body and the greatsword on his back, he approached Clump in the living room.

"Grandfather."

"Yes, are you ready?"

There was one thing left to address.

The fact that he had defeated Rai would give him great courage for his journey. But there was something he needed to clarify.

"What did Rai mean yesterday?"

Clump looked up from his teacup at Rian.

"Why didn't he use swordsmanship? You know, don't you?"

"Oh, that."

Clump smacked his lips and put down his teacup.

He had been putting it off to avoid giving Rian false hopes, but now that Rian was leaving on a knight's quest, it was time to tell him.

"The sword you carry is not an ordinary one. Have you heard of an object?"

"An object?"

Rian's eyes widened as he drew the greatsword. The functions of precise control and Vajra Armor that Shirone had demonstrated the previous night flashed through his mind, making his heart race.

Shirone and Tess also came into the living room, intrigued by the conversation, and focused on the greatsword. It was a sword with no special features other than its imposing design.

Rian held the greatsword vertically and looked up at it.

"So this is an object? Is that why it wasn't destroyed? What abilities does it have?"

Clump crossed his arms and legs.

"The official name of that sword is . Its abilities are as impressive as its name. To put it bluntly, ..."

"In any situation?"

Clump's eyes sharpened as he spoke clearly.

"It cannot be destroyed."

Silence filled the living room.

"And?"

"What do you mean, 'and'? It can't be destroyed. Whether it falls into lava, gets cut with a saw, or hit with a hammer, it won't break. Isn't that amazing?"

In a way, it was a swordsman's dream. But compared to Armand, which had dozens of functions, it seemed disappointingly simple.

"Well, that's... amazing. But it's still an object. If a sword breaks, can't you just buy a new one?"

"Foolish. Do you know how important a weapon's durability is in real combat? Even in yesterday's duel, it would have been much harder without ."

Rian acknowledged this. In fact, he had already been saved by once. It was when he blocked Ymir's straight punch. Ymir had crumpled the steel-made Signa and Exde like paper, but he couldn't destroy Rian's greatsword. If not for , Ymir's punch would have gone through the sword and shattered Rian's body.

"That's the kind of sword it is. Rai didn't avoid using swordsmanship; he couldn't. When he was young, he really wanted that sword."

Rian pouted. He now prided himself on being a respectable swordsman, but as a child, Rai was the family's pride and joy.

"Then why didn't you give it to Rai?"

"He doesn't like crude things. It wouldn't suit him."

The answer was different from what Rian had expected.

As Rian's expression turned sour, Clump laughed.

"Heh heh, what did you expect? That I prepared it especially for you?"

"Who said that? Stop pretending to read minds."

Clump pretended otherwise, but Shirone could guess.

Rai probably really wanted it. Beyond its functions, inheriting the former head's sword was a great honor. But the sword was given to Rian.

Even so, Clump's jokes were his way of not burdening his grandson.

"Since we're on the topic, let me tell you a story about ."

"A story?"

Rian's eyes sparkled with interest. Despite his complaints, he didn't dislike 's unique ability.

"Yes. When I was young, I went on a swordsmanship quest like you. I once single-handedly defeated a band of mountain bandits. They were quite formidable. I managed to annihilate them, but I was mortally wounded. I dragged my injured body down the mountain and found a strange village that wasn't on any map. It wasn't much different from other villages, but the people were oddly quiet and gloomy."

Shirone and the others held their breath, captivated by Clump's story. It was about the man who would become a general of Tormia and his fateful encounter with an object.

"There, I met an old man and his granddaughter who saved my life. When I regained consciousness, my sword wounds were completely healed. I don't know how they treated me. All I remember is the old man repeatedly chanting something like a spell. 'Smile, smile,' he kept saying."

Rian, who had been mumbling the word, asked,

"Smile? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. It could have been a spell or a type of magic. Anyway, the old man chanted it all night. When I came to, I explored the village. There was an antique shop with many strange items. The most impressive thing was that they sold glass bottles filled with colored smoke. When I asked what they were for, the owner wouldn't tell me."

Clump took a sip of tea, signaling he was getting to the main point.

"Then I saw a greatsword hanging behind the counter. That was . I knew at a glance it wasn't an ordinary sword. I

approached the owner as if possessed.”

Rian swallowed hard, his expression tense.

“And then?”

Clump blinked and casually said,

“What do you mean, 'and then'? I paid for it and bought it, of course.”

The tension turned to disappointment, and Rian blurted out,

“Are you kidding me?”

Clump raised an eyebrow in displeasure.

“What? You wanted to hear a story, didn't you?”

Rian scratched his head.

He had been fooled by his grandfather again. Was it so fun to tease an eighteen-year-old grandson?

“You made me nervous for nothing. I thought you had some life-and-death experience.”

“Hahaha! Do you think I'm crazy to risk my life for a sword?

Rian, remember this. A true sword is held not by the hand but by the heart. Anyway, I made a big decision to buy it. Treat it with care.”

“Ugh, you sound like an old man. By the way, how much did you pay? Since it's an object, maybe around 2 million gold?”

“That? 80 million gold.”

Clang! Rian dropped the greatsword.

“Damn! Are you crazy? You paid 80 million for a sword that just doesn't break? You could buy hundreds of fine swords with that money!”

“It's an object, you fool! And it's my money, so why do you care? If you're going to treat it like that, give it back! Or pay me 80 million!”

“No way! You gave it to me, so that's it. No take-backs!”

Rian hurriedly picked up the greatsword and hugged it, afraid someone might take it.

“What kind of swordsman throws his sword on the ground? That sword is too good for you! Hang it in my room!”

“Why? Afraid it might break? Didn't you say a true sword is held by the heart?”

Shirone and Tess watched the argument in disbelief.

"They're so alike."

"Indeed."

After arguing for a while, they finally stopped, exhausted. In the end, Rian won. He sheathed the greatsword and tied the leather strap tighter than usual, as if to show Clump. After a moment of huffing, Clump smiled, remembering something.

It was a moment he had waited 18 years for. Seeing it with his own eyes made the old man's heart swell with emotion.

'The more I see him, the more he resembles me.'

He had little talent for swordsmanship, but Rian was always meant to be the owner of .

He hadn't paid 80 million gold for its functions. An indestructible sword was the perfect symbol of the Ozent family's conviction.

And in this moment, all his philosophy was passed to Rian through .

'It's strange. When I went back after paying 80 million gold, the village had vanished.'

Of course, if 80 million gold had come to a mountain village, the entire village could have moved to a better place.

However, there was a subtle feeling Clump couldn't share with Rian.

Perhaps he had only been lying injured in the mountains, and the month he spent going back and forth between the village and the house was actually a dream he wandered through in a state of unconsciousness.

In any case, it was one of the most inexplicable events in Clump's life. Moreover, the realization he gained that day led him to rise steadily, eventually becoming a certified third-grade swordsman general.

"Grandfather, I'm off now."

Rian had already composed himself and said his farewell with a fiery gaze.

“Yes. The most important thing is to protect yourself. Remember that what you gain from real combat isn't always victory.”

It was advice to avoid fights when possible.

Taking his grandfather's advice to heart, Rian bowed sincerely.

‘Thank you, Grandfather, for believing in your foolish grandson until the end.’

Rian left the mansion, accompanied by his family's and friends' farewells. A carriage was waiting at the front gate. After briefly contemplating his destination, Rian made up his mind and turned to Shirone.

“Shirone, do your best. Even though I dropped out, just think of it as me graduating first.”

“Sure. Take care of yourself. Keep in touch.”

Rian looked at Tess, who was on the verge of tears. She had held up well, but now that he was truly leaving, she couldn't suppress her emotions.

Rian gave her a gentle smile. Tess, despite not being a typical swordsman, was someone he cherished. One day, he would stand proudly before her.

“Tess, I'm off.”

“You jerk. You didn't even discuss it with me...”

“Sorry. I didn't think it through.”

Tess understood Rian's decision. She was the one who needed to understand it the most. But she was also angry at herself for not being able to harshly reject this indifferent man.

“This is the last time I'll tolerate it. If you treat me this coldly when you return...”

Rian embraced Tess with his broad chest.

“I'll come back stronger.”

Tess bit her lip and held back her tears.

‘You don't have to become stronger. Just come back alive...’

She gently patted Rian's back and said,

“Alright. Come back stronger.”

Having said his goodbyes to everyone, Rian got into the carriage. True to his nature, he didn't look back once. As the carriage departed, the four left behind felt an emptiness. That was Rian's presence. Shirone watched the receding carriage and prayed. 'Come back as a great swordsman, Rian. I'll do my best too.' May good fortune be with Rian on his journey.

Chapter 355: Magic Society (1)

Leaving Reina's mansion, Shirone caught a carriage to the Magic Association.

With Rian dropping out and leaving on his knight's quest, the schedule had moved up sooner than expected. Although he could have stayed at Reina's mansion for another day, he chose to head to the Association.

The spark Rian left behind ignited a fire in everyone's hearts. Tess immediately returned home, saying she would start training right away, and Shirone also wanted to immerse himself in the atmosphere of the Magic Association, the pinnacle of magic.

Upon arriving at the Association building, Shirone asked for Plu at the reception desk. After the receptionist relayed the message through an internal line, Plu came down five minutes later.

She frowned as soon as she saw Shirone. With Kangnan also out, there was no one to keep her in check.

"Why are you back so soon? Acting like you're so busy."

"My business finished early. Can I stay here?"

Plu's gaze towards Shirone was far from kind. Without showing any sign of hesitation, he bluntly asked for a place to stay.

This was the prestigious Magic Association, not a hostel for kids with nowhere else to go.

However, since Kangnan had instructed her, she couldn't outright refuse. With many eyes watching, Plu took Shirone to her designated area on the third floor.

"The Chief Secretary specifically asked me to look after you, but you have to follow my instructions. If you disobey or

wander around, I'll kick you out. Got it?"

"Yes."

From the start, Plu's attitude was prickly, leaving Shirone bewildered. He hadn't done anything wrong, yet she had been unfriendly since their first meeting.

"Here, you can stay here."

Plu offered her own quarters, which she used when working late. The small room had bunk beds attached to both walls. Shirone cautiously unpacked his things. But before he could settle in, Plu called him out.

"Follow me. I'll give you a tour."

Plu walked down the corridor with her magic staff held behind her back, her knees straight, and her chin tilted up at a 15-degree angle.

"First, let me introduce myself. I'm Ravid Plu, 22 years old. I graduated top of my class from the Royal Magic School and am currently a certified 8th-grade magician. I'll be a 6th-grade in two years. My current position is the manager of the third floor of the Magic Association's security department."

"Oh, I see. I'm..."

As Shirone began to introduce himself, she stopped and turned coldly.

"I know. Arian Shirone. Attending Alpheas Magic School. Can use the archangel's power, Ataraxia, and specializes in light magic. Your unique Unlocker ability is mass attribution."

Shirone was stunned. Someone who didn't even know his face the day before now knew everything about him. The most puzzling thing was her overly prickly attitude towards him.

"You have a student named Dante at your school, right? He transferred recently."

"Yes. Do you know Dante?"

"Why should I know Dante?"

"Oh, I just thought since he also attended the Royal Magic School..."

Plu's sharp gaze made Shirone shrink. He couldn't figure out what to say to please her.

"When I was a senior, Dante was a junior. I know you beat Dante. But if you think that makes you special, you should stop. If I were three years younger, I'd be the top student in the kingdom, not you."

'I never acted special...'

Shirone swallowed his words. He felt that no matter what he said, he wouldn't get a good response.

As Plu patrolled the third floor, she occasionally introduced the departments. Even the guards with graying hair bowed politely when they saw her. Each time, she nodded briefly with a proud posture.

Plu was trying to show the successful side of a magician. The tour was essentially a way to flaunt her position and train Shirone.

At that moment, a man drenched in sweat and carrying documents walked down the corridor. Plu's confident face momentarily showed tension.

"Hello, Mr. Sakiri. Good morning."

Shirone looked closely at the man called Sakiri.

'So that's Sakiri.'

After the Arcane incident, when Alpheas and Kanis were summoned to the Association, the investigator in charge was named Sakiri.

He looked like a tired old man, but his eyes were sharper than anyone Shirone had ever met.

"Hello. Who's this? A new face."

"Oh, just giving a tour. Part of a special activity."

Plu lied smoothly.

The Magic Association, being the core institution of the kingdom's magical society, received numerous tour requests from students. So Sakiri just nodded and walked away.

Plu let out a small sigh and looked at Shirone. The atmosphere, which had been stiff with her head held high,

now felt awkward.

"That was Mr. Sakiri, a certified 5th-grade magician. He's very famous in the inspection department. Any criminal caught by him won't even have bones left."

"Yes, I've heard of him."

"Really? Hmm."

For the first time, Plu smiled with satisfaction. Knowing that even a mere magic school student was aware of someone she worked with restored some of her pride.

'Now I have a rough idea of how to handle him.'

Thinking this, Shirone licked his lips when a man got off the elevator at the end of the corridor.

Seeing Plu, he approached, his eyes lighting up with interest when he saw Shirone.

"Plu, is that Shirone?"

Plu greeted him with a bright smile.

"Oh, Mr. Gando. Hello."

The man's name was Klein Gando, a member of Gaold's elite guard like Plu.

Known as "Gando of Thunder," he was a combat magician skilled in electric magic, holding the position of head of security at the Magic Association and a certified 4th-grade magician.

He was tall, wore tight leather pants and studded boots, and had purple hair slicked back with one strand left out.

Despite his flashy appearance, his face looked angelic.

Plu led Shirone to greet Gando.

"The Chief Secretary asked me to look after him. Hey, greet him."

Gando extended his hand first.

"I see. Nice to meet you. I'm Gando."

"Oh, hello."

As Shirone was about to bow, he quickly shook Gando's hand.

The awkward combination of a bow and handshake made Gando laugh.

"You look much younger than I expected. I thought you'd have a scary face."

'Is that my image?'

Having rarely left Tormia, Shirone couldn't know. But recalling the articles in the journals, he thought it was possible to be misunderstood.

"Are you on a regular patrol?"

"Yes. Starting from the top floor. How's the third floor? Any issues?"

"No, as usual. Hohoho!"

Plu laughed, covering her mouth with pride as the third-floor manager.

"Good. It seems Ms. Kangnan was summoned by the Chairman. She should be back with him tomorrow. Just relax until then."

"Thank you."

Gando's kind demeanor made Shirone want to complain, "This sister is bullying me," but he knew it would only cause trouble, so he kept it to himself.

As Gando headed back to the elevator, Plu's smiling face turned stern. She resumed scolding Shirone.

"He's in charge of security at the Magic Association. My direct superior. You've heard of Gando of Thunder, right?" Since Shirone knew about Sakiri, she assumed he would know Gando too.

"Yes, I've heard of him."

In truth, Shirone had never heard the name before. He only knew Sakiri's name because of the major incident at Alpheas Magic School. But in this situation, it was best to pretend he knew.

Plu was satisfied with Shirone's compliant attitude.

Feeling that the scolding was enough, she brought up what had been on her mind.

"Do you know why the Chairman wants to see you? It's related to Heaven, right?"

"..."

Shirone remained silent, his expression serious. Even if Plu was someone Kangnan trusted, he had to maintain security. Seeing his sharp gaze, Plu realized she couldn't treat him lightly. She felt both impressed and suspicious, wondering if his previous demeanor had been an act.

"Anyway, it's my job to assist the Chairman. I'll definitely go to Heaven. So don't get cocky just because you got invited once."

Shirone had never been cocky, nor did he intend to be. But her words gave him a clue about her hostility.

"You must really respect the Chairman."

Plu's expression flickered like a fish out of water.

"Of course! Mr. Sakiri and Mr. Gando are impressive, but they can't compare to Mikael Gaold."

"That's true. He's a certified 1st-class Archmage."

"Hohoho!"

Plu laughed condescendingly, making Shirone's blood boil.

"You really don't know anything. Listen carefully. There are four 1st-grade class mages in the Tormia Kingdom. But being the Chairman of the Magic Association isn't just about being strong. It requires political skill and resourcefulness. So why was Mr. Gaold chosen as Chairman?"

Shirone thought about it but couldn't grasp the level of a 1st-grade Grand Magician, so he couldn't answer.

"Is he highly skilled in many areas?"

Plu shook her head.

"No, it's the opposite. He's not just strong; he's overwhelmingly strong."

"Overwhelmingly strong?"

"Right. He can maintain his position as Chairman despite being labeled a madman because of his overwhelming strength, which sets him apart from other 1st-grade Grand Magicians. He's the strongest! To a combat magician like me, he's an idol and an ideal. How could I not respect him?"

Hearing Plu's words, Shirone realized that the Chairman was an even more extraordinary person than he had imagined.

This made him even more curious about why such a person wanted to see him.

Plu turned away without hesitation and said, "Anyway, I have to get back to work, so stay in your room until dinner. The tour is over, so don't wander around without my permission."

"Ah! Um..."

As Shirone called out urgently, Plu turned back.

"Before you go... can I try the elevator just once?"

Plu looked at Shirone and smiled, but then her face turned cold again, and she replied curtly, "No."

Shirone watched her walk away, feeling bewildered.

"What did I do wrong?"

After spending a day that felt as monotonous as prison life, the next morning arrived. Shirone decided to sleep in since he couldn't leave the room until Plu arrived.

As he tried to get more sleep, he heard bustling noises outside. In a daze, he saw Plu burst into the room and shout, "Hey, rookie! Are you still sleeping?"

Shirone groggily opened his eyes and sat up.

"Ah, good morni..."

"Do you think this is your bedroom at home? Get up quickly!"

Now Shirone was starting to get annoyed.

"Um, is there something I need to do?"

"Of course there is. Did you think you could eat and sleep for free? Today, you'll follow me around and assist. I'll give you 10 minutes, so wash up and get ready!"

Shirone felt like he had been hit by a bomb while sleeping. Struggling to wake up, he slowly leaned back and fell onto the bed again.

But he couldn't stay there for more than 10 seconds before he curled up and got out of bed.

"Ugh, this is too much."

Chapter 356: Magic Society (2)

After quickly getting ready and stepping out, Shirone saw the guards lined up in front of Plu. Hesitating for a moment, he quietly joined the end of the line.

Plu glanced at Shirone and then began giving instructions for the day.

"This is the Magic Association, the heart of the kingdom's magic. While many excellent magicians work here, there are also many criminals and a high risk of terrorism. Today, let's guard the third floor with impenetrable security. Remember, the Magic Association is the strength of the nation."

Plu carefully observed the guards' faces before shouting, "Now, disperse to your positions!"

As the guards scattered to their assigned areas, Shirone was left alone in the corridor. Plu beckoned him with a finger and turned around.

"Follow me. Our job is to patrol and manage the facilities. If you see anyone suspicious, question them. If they don't have an approved ID from the Association, you can arrest them immediately."

It sounded like a significant responsibility, but Shirone doubted there would be many suspicious people at the prestigious Magic Association.

As expected, Plu's words were mostly bluster. After observing for about an hour, Shirone noticed that she had little to do. She received greetings from the guards, watched minor incidents, and then resumed her patrol.

'This job seems pretty easy.'

He realized that the reason the job had become so comfortable was that many excellent magicians had held

this position over the years.

Just then, the ceiling lamp turned red, and a siren blared for about three seconds before abruptly stopping, as if someone had cut off the noise.

Shirone looked around nervously, but Plu stood calmly, waiting for someone.

A guard came running from around the corner, but his expression wasn't particularly urgent.

"Excuse me, Chief of Security."

"What happened? The siren went off."

"Well... the control board of the magic control device overheated, and the internal circuit burned out. We've contacted the maintenance team."

Almost all areas of the Magic Association are regulated by magic control devices. Although it's known that they don't work on second-grade Grand Magicians due to technical limitations, they can prevent most terrorist attacks and reduce damage from occasional staff conflicts.

"Hmm, that's been causing trouble lately. Hey, follow me. Let's check it out."

Following Plu to the control room, they found alchemists and magicians working on the wall.

Shirone examined the control board of the magic control device with interest. Although the technology was also used in the 2000 system at the magic school, it was his first time seeing the internal circuit.

As expected, it was a masterpiece of precise magical engineering. Even though Shirone was now at a senior level, he couldn't fully analyze the circuit.

Plu approached the maintenance team and asked,

"How's it looking? Can it be fixed?"

"Ah, Ms. Plu. This will take some time. The board is completely burned out. This is the third time this year. It seems there's an error in the sub-control device, and we'll need to replace it entirely."

Plu was deeply concerned about the malfunctioning magic control on the third floor, which she was responsible for.

"I've already reported it to the higher-ups. They might replace it with a new one in the next quarter's maintenance, but can we do something temporary in the meantime?"

No matter how strong the Magic Association was, it couldn't afford any gaps. A malfunctioning magic control device meant a serious security breach on the third floor, which couldn't be taken lightly.

"If we repair it, it might last another month. But the mutol has melted, and the Janes device needs replacing. These aren't standard supplies, so the Association doesn't have them in stock. We'll need to order them."

"Hmm, but ordering will take too long..."

Plu bit her nails, deep in thought.

The magic control device was also a security matter, so it was under her jurisdiction. Usually, even non-standard supplies were kept in stock, but with 18 floors, the first to use them got them.

Plu looked at Shirone. Watching his blank expression as he examined the board, she finally made up her mind and spoke.

"Hey, you."

"Yes? Me?"

Plu beckoned him closer. When Shirone approached, she led him to a corner of the control room and spoke quietly so the maintenance team wouldn't hear.

"I need you to run an errand."

"An errand...?"

"Take a carriage to Gold Street. Turn right at the central fountain, and you'll find Akim Alchemy Shop. It's the Association's designated supplier. Go there and pick up a few items."

Plu took a notebook from her inner pocket and wrote down a list of items. She tore off the paper and handed it to Shirone.

Holding the note, Shirone read the unfamiliar item names one by one. Although it was a simple errand, he was a bit worried since he was unfamiliar with such things.

“Okay, I'll go. But how do I pay?”

“You don't need to. The Association settles the bill at the end of the month. Just show them this.”

Plu handed Shirone her staff ID. It had a serial number and her name, Ravid Plu, with her certified 8th-grade rank engraved in bronze.

The photo was from two years ago when she had just joined, wearing large, round glasses, making her look quite different from now.

Blushing, Plu glared and shouted,

“Hey! What are you staring at? Put it away quickly!”

“Ah, sorry.”

Shirone quickly put the ID in his inner pocket.

For a woman, certain photos could be terrifying, and Plu regretted it immediately. But it was already done.

‘Ugh, I should have changed it earlier.’

She had thought about replacing the photo before, but work always got in the way, and she kept forgetting.

Feeling embarrassed, Plu cleared her throat and adjusted Shirone's clothes.

“Anyway, be careful. Don't flaunt it; keep it in your pocket.

Not just anyone can carry a Magic Association staff ID.”

Shirone knew the importance of the Magic Association staff ID.

Even the bronze ID allowed access to over 90% of the kingdom's certified institutions and free use of more than 60% of the Red Line's facilities. It also granted arrest and prosecution authority over all classes except royalty within certain areas and allowed unrestricted execution of surveillance, infiltration, special operations, and special dispatch missions with national cooperation.

It looked like an ordinary plastic card, but it contained quantum encryption codes, making it impossible to

duplicate.

Holding such a powerful card made Shirone feel a sense of responsibility. He checked the ID in his pocket once more and nodded.

“Yes. I'll be careful.”

Shirone turned and left the Magic Association. Although he had the chance to ride the elevator he had dreamed of, he was too nervous about the unfamiliar errand and chose the familiar stairs.

Taking a carriage to Gold Street, he found numerous shops arranged in concentric circles. The streets branched out in eight directions, each area specializing in different goods. A central sign indicated "Alchemy Street." Following the arrow to the right, he found a building that looked five times larger than a regular one.

‘This must be Akim Alchemy Shop.’

Entering the shop, he saw eight rows of 20-meter-long shelves. None of the items on the shelves were the same, and even as a magic school student, Shirone couldn't identify most of their uses.

‘Nade would go crazy here. I'll have to come back with him after graduation.’

The counter was at the far end of the shop. There were about 20 customers, and in the corner, alchemists were sitting with dozens of items spread out, examining them. The person at the counter was a sharp-looking young man. He was reading a book titled "Intermediate Alchemy," indicating he was either an alchemist or an aspiring one.

“Excuse me, I have a question.”

As Shirone approached, the man closed his book and stood up.

“Yes, what are you looking for?”

“I'm from the Magic Association. Do you have these items?”

Shirone placed the note Plu had given him on the counter and handed it over. Judging by the variety and quantity of items, he thought it would be impossible to explain.

The man glanced at the list and quickly understood.
“It looks like the magic control device overheated. I'll find the items for you. Can I see your staff ID? We settle transactions with the Association at the end of the month.”
“Ah, yes. Here.”

Shirone handed over Plu's staff ID.

The man went behind the counter and scanned the card. A beep sounded, indicating approval. He returned the ID to Shirone and said,

“Thank you. Please wait a moment.”

The man took a thin metal box and went around the shelves, collecting the items. Some alchemy materials were delicate and couldn't be placed just anywhere.

While waiting, Shirone hummed and looked around, tapping his fingers on the counter. When he turned towards the alchemy books, he saw two people in black hoods quickly turn their heads away.

‘What's that? Why are they wearing hoods? Are they magicians too?’

Shirone watched them a bit longer, but they didn't do anything suspicious and disappeared behind the opposite shelves, pretending to look for items.

Avoiding Shirone's gaze, they moved to a secluded corner.

The man on the right whispered,

“Damn, they're from the Magic Association. What do we do? We can't carry out the plan here.”

“Revolution requires risk. Let's do it here.”

“But if we fail, we can't save our brothers. Let's move to Gold Tower. We prepared an infiltration route for situations like this.”

“Tch, fine. I wanted to save that place for last.”

The hooded figures quietly left the alchemy shop.

Shirone waited at the counter for about five minutes. The man who had collected all the items returned and placed a metal box on the counter. Despite the variety of items, they were surprisingly small and didn't seem too heavy.

"Here are the items. We can deliver them, but they won't arrive until after 5 PM. If you're in a hurry, you can take them now."

"I'll take them now. They don't look too heavy."

"Please handle them carefully. Some items are sensitive to shock."

"Okay, I'll be careful."

Shirone carefully carried the box out of the shop, holding it as if it were a newborn baby. Not knowing how fragile the items were, he walked as cautiously as possible.

As he reached the main street and looked around for a carriage, a loud explosion erupted from a block away. The ground shook, and terrified screams filled the air like a tidal wave.

"What was that?"

People poured out of the alleys onto the main street. The faces of those at the front were filled with fear, and their half-dilated pupils still reflected the shock of the explosion.

"It's a terrorist attack! Gold City has exploded!"

"A terrorist attack?"

Shirone looked up at the sky, where smoke was rising.

A terrorist attack in Vashka, the capital of the kingdom. It was unimaginable.

The citizens' reactions varied. Most frowned as they looked towards Gold Tower, but those busy with work cursed and hurried on their way.

Chapter 357: Magic Society (3)

‘This situation isn't as rare as I thought. What should I do? Should I go?’

A terrorist attack on civilians was a serious crime, and the kingdom would respond immediately. There wouldn't be much he could do at the scene, but ignoring it and returning to the Association didn't sit well with him.

A second wave of people fleeing the scene rushed towards the main street. As they passed by, Shirone could hear more details about the situation.

“It's the Black Revolutionaries! They're holding hostages in Gold City!”

“Damn it. Of all people, it had to be those crazy bastards.”

“What are the anti-terrorism units doing? Haven't they been contacted yet?”

There was plenty of noise, but no one was heading towards Gold Tower.

That was natural and as it should be. There was nothing ordinary people could do against terrorists, so it was better to leave it to the experts.

‘What should I do?’

As a magic school student, he wasn't a professional. But he wasn't so inexperienced that he would just stand by while people were dying.

Amidst the people standing on the sidewalk watching the smoke, he heard someone say,

“Those bastards. They're probably demanding the release of their comrades again. If we don't act quickly, they'll kill all the hostages. They killed three people last time.”

Shirone's resolve began to solidify.

'I should at least go and assess the situation.'

He could protect himself, so it was better to go.

As someone who was at the scene, he could provide initial response, and even as a student, he had enough combat experience.

Having made his decision, Shirone ran towards the rising smoke. People on the sidewalk shouted at him as he ran against the flow of traffic.

"Hey, kid! Don't go that way! It's a terrorist zone!"

Shirone stopped. But it wasn't because of the citizen's warning. The box he was carrying was rattling, making it hard to run fast. He could leave it behind, but he couldn't risk losing the Association's items just to assess the situation.

"Whatever!"

Shirone steeled himself and cast a teleportation spell.

Transforming into a flash of light, he shot through the air, leaving the onlookers staring wide-eyed at the sky.

"What the... He's a magician?"

The terrorist attack was quickly reported to the kingdom's major institutions.

The Magic Association was no exception. When news of the Black Revolutionaries bombing Gold Tower reached them, the Association moved swiftly.

The kingdom's security agency sent a cooperation request, and the Association responded, offering all possible support. However, information wasn't directly relayed to an 8th-grade certified magician. Plu was still in the control room on the third floor, overseeing the maintenance of the magic control device. She did notice the commotion outside.

"What's going on? Keep working for a moment."

Opening the control room door and stepping into the corridor, she saw the guards gathered in a corner, whispering. Curious, Plu walked over to them.

"What's going on? Did something happen?"

"Ah, Chief. There's been a terrorist attack in the city by the Black Revolutionaries."

Plu's expression darkened at the mention of the Black Revolutionaries.

In Radum, the underbelly of Vashka, many non-human races who lost in the conquest wars lived alongside criminals. Due to city policies, non-humans were prohibited from economic activities, leading to widespread discontent. This discontent had accumulated, resulting in the formation of extremist terrorist groups like the Black Revolutionaries.

Their demands were always the same: release their comrades and their deputy leader, Kanimar, who were imprisoned beneath the royal palace.

Naturally, the kingdom couldn't meet these demands, and the Black Revolutionaries responded with increasingly violent and bold terrorist activities, plunging the capital into chaos.

"Filthy scum. What are they thinking, targeting civilians?"

Plu wanted to rush to the scene and crush them. But if everyone started abusing their authority, there would be no one left at the Association.

Calming herself, Plu asked again,

"So, where is it this time?"

"Ah, it's at Gold Tower. They really picked a target."

"What? They breached Gold Tower?"

Gold Tower was a foreign exchange bank where foreign currencies were traded. Although the kingdom's treasury held a certain amount of foreign currency, even a temporary disruption in transactions could lead to significant trade losses.

'Security there is tight. How did they get in?'

Plu's shoulders tensed.

"Wait a minute! Did you say Gold Tower?"

"Yes. Why? Do you have a deposit there...?"

Plu's mind raced.

Gold Tower was just a block away from Akim Alchemy Shop. Shirone couldn't have missed the incident.

‘Wait, what time is it? Considering the time...’

Even accounting for variables, he should be at the scene by now.

Her heart began to pound. What scared her most was the thought of something happening to the guest who was supposed to meet Gaold.

“Damn it!”

Plu abandoned her thoughts and ran down the corridor. A guard she passed asked in surprise,

“Chief, where are you going?”

“I'm going out! I'll be back soon!”

Plu bounded down the stairs.

As she exited the main gate, she saw citizens anxiously looking in one direction. Spotting the faint smoke in the distance, Plu immediately cast a photon transformation spell. Her body turned into light and shot through the sky with a roar.

“Stay still! I'll kill anyone who tries anything!”

There were eight members of the Black Revolutionaries who had bombed Gold Tower. All wore black hoods and carried menacing weapons.

Armed with chain scythes, double axes, flails, and longswords, they roamed the inside of Gold Tower, while the 20 hostages trembled in fear.

“You are now sacrifices for the revolution. Be prepared to give your lives to free our comrades! Those who resist will face a fate worse than death!”

“Waaah! Mommy, I'm scared!”

A four-year-old boy clung to his mother, crying. In the silence, his cries were louder than a siren.

“Shh! Be quiet. Don't cry.”

Despite her low, firm voice, the boy's cries didn't stop. Terrorists don't do these things with a sound mind. Already agitated, the crying child made them even more irritated.

One of the Black Revolutionaries approached the mother and child, shouting,

“Stop crying! If you keep crying, I'll kill you first!”

“Waaah! Mommy! Mommy!”

The mother hugged her child tightly, bowing her head repeatedly.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll quiet him down. He'll stop soon.”

The terrorist had no intention of waiting.

All the hostages here were destined to die for the revolution.

“Shut up! Do you think the revolution is a joke?”

The terrorist kicked the child, sending the mother sprawling to the floor. The child flew several meters and collapsed.

Gasping for breath, a woman quickly ran over, cradling the child and soothing him.

“Why are you hitting a child? He's scared, so of course he's crying!”

A medium-sized terrorist with a scythe approached, swinging the chain.

The woman, with her blonde hair pulled back, looked wealthy, her attire and jewelry luxurious.

Her name was Aria. She was the same woman who had shared a carriage with Shirone a few days ago. She had come to exchange money for a diplomatic internship next week and was now trapped by the Black Revolutionaries.

“Shut up. Nothing is more important than completing the revolution.”

“Hmph! Revolution? You just want money, don't you? Take all the money here and leave!”

“Money?”

The terrorist laughed with a rough voice.

To the Black Revolutionaries, money was like toilet paper. They couldn't use it for any economic activities in Vashka anyway.

The kingdom couldn't eradicate the terrorists in the city's slums, so they focused on economically strangling them.

But this fact became another invisible weapon for the terrorists.

Not being bound by money was often seen as noble. The Black Revolutionaries labeled the kingdom as social evil and rallied more non-humans under the banner of a sacred cause.

“Eek!”

The terrorist grabbed Aria, twisting her arm behind her back. Then he used his arm holding the scythe to choke her. The sharp blade of the scythe glinted menacingly before Aria's eyes.

“Is it because you're a rich girl? You smell amazing. How about showing off your body to everyone?”

A thick, bluish tongue emerged from the darkness of the hood. It was twice as long as a human's, and the saliva reeked. Aria grimaced and turned her head away.

“Hey, we don't have time to play. The anti-terrorism unit will be here soon. Let's get started.”

One of the two men from Akim Alchemy Shop said, looking outside. The terrorist, having no real interest in the woman, complied.

“Fine, let's make her the first target. She's a noble and pretty, so it'll be effective. Too bad, miss. But you've lived happily until now.”

The Black Revolutionaries would stop at nothing to achieve their demands. They only wanted the release of their comrades. Killing one person to make a point was their main terror tactic.

“Please, save me! Save me!”

Aria finally realized the situation and struggled.

But none of the hostages stepped forward to help her. The child's mother just held her child tightly, eyes shut.

The terrorist with the scythe dragged Aria outside through the broken door of Gold Tower.

The streets, now deserted by fleeing citizens, were desolate. Only nearby shopkeepers watched the situation from inside

their stores.

"Listen up! We are the Black Revolutionaries! Release our deputy leader, Kanimar, and our comrades imprisoned in the dungeon immediately! If you don't, we will kill one person every ten minutes! To prove our resolve, we will kill this woman right here and now!"

Aria's face turned as pale as a corpse.

"Ahh! Please save me! Help!"

The shopkeepers watching turned their heads one by one, unable to meet Aria's eyes.

The Black Revolutionaries were known to follow through on their threats. Unfortunately for the poor young woman, today seemed to be her last day.

"Stay still. If you want to blame someone, blame the kingdom."

The terrorist's scythe touched Aria's neck.

He had no intention of killing her quickly. That wouldn't be effective. By cutting halfway through her neck, her life would slowly fade away in agony.

"Die for the revolution!"

The terrorist's voice was so sincere that it convinced Aria this was the end of her life.

Her legs gave out, and she couldn't even scream. The fear of death paralyzed her mind, and her body convulsed uncontrollably.

"Wait! Wait a moment!"

Just as the terrorist was about to slash Aria's neck, someone appeared in the desolate street.

"What?"

The terrorists waiting inside Gold Tower looked out the window to see who had spoken. A boy, not yet twenty, was standing there, holding a metal box and catching his breath.

"Who are you?"

Chapter

358: Magic Society (4)

Shirone was too out of breath to respond. He had been observing the situation from afar but rushed over at full speed when things became critical.

"How can you just kill someone without warning? I don't know what's going on, but can't you resolve this through dialogue?"

"What? Kill someone? How dare you reduce the great cause of revolution to mere murder!"

Aria recognized Shirone's face. He was the boy she had felt a liking for during their encounter in the carriage a few days ago. But now was no time for such thoughts.

Tears and snot streaming down her face, Aria pleaded with Shirone, her only hope.

"Please save me! Please, I beg you!"

"Shut up! The revolution has already begun!"

As a scythe was placed against Aria's neck, Shirone acted quickly and resourcefully. Clutching a metal box to his side, he raised his hand and shouted.

"Wait! In that case, take me as your hostage instead!"

The scythe stopped just before it could pierce Aria's throat. The revolutionary had trained for three years to complete their grand cause, but they had never encountered such a situation before. Who would willingly risk their life for a stranger?

"You want us to take you as a hostage?"

Shirone pulled out his Magic Association ID from his inner pocket, covering Plu's picture with his thumb, and held it out.

"As you can see, I'm an employee of the Magic Association. Taking me hostage would be much more effective than a civilian."

The revolutionary finally caught on to Shirone's ploy. It was a stalling tactic. They had never seen a Magic Association ID before, and verifying it here was impossible. "Hmph! You're a Magic Association employee? You, a kid? Do you really think I'd believe that?"

At that moment, a terrorist standing by the window, who had been observing Shirone carefully, spoke.

"Bring that kid over."

All the revolutionaries in the Gold Tower turned their attention to him. Though his face was hidden beneath a hood, the atmosphere made it clear that they were puzzled.

"Captain, do you really believe him?"

"It's not about believing him. He is a Magic Association employee. I confirmed it at Akim Trading Company. If we capture a Magic Association employee as a hostage, our demands will be much easier to meet."

One of the revolutionaries relayed the captain's message through the window. Since it was the captain's order, there was no need to doubt it.

"Hey, the captain said to bring him. Get him in here."

The revolutionary holding the scythe clicked his tongue and roughly shoved Aria aside. Then he pointed his scythe at Shirone and gestured with a flick of his wrist.

"Fine. Walk over here slowly. If you try anything, we'll kill all the hostages."

"I know. That's why I'm offering myself as a hostage."

Shirone set the metal box on the ground, trying to avoid any suspicion. The revolutionary holding the scythe nervously asked,

"Wait. What's that?"

"This is something I purchased from an alchemy shop."

The revolutionary glanced back for confirmation, and the captain pondered for a moment. While he hadn't seen it personally, he knew the boy had indeed visited the shop to buy something.

"Fine. Bring that too."

For the Black Revolutionaries, currency was meaningless. Even a bundle of cash couldn't buy more than an apple on the black market.

But goods were different, especially items ordered by the Magic Association. Those could likely be traded for a substantial amount of weapons.

"Hey, carry that over your head and come here."

Shirone lifted the metal box with both hands and walked towards the Gold Tower.

As soon as he crossed the entrance, three revolutionaries surrounded him. One snatched the box, another tied his hands behind his back, and the third forced him to his knees, placing a large sword against his neck.

"Stay still. Resist, and you die."

Shirone didn't respond, instead surveying his surroundings. The hostages were gathered in one spot, guarded by three terrorists. Aria knelt nearby, separated from the group.

Aria, realizing she was alive, looked at Shirone with a mix of emotions. She felt guilty and astonished to learn he was a Magic Association employee.

"You're a magician?"

Shirone didn't look back, only giving a bitter smile. Even as a magician, he couldn't access the Spirit Zone inside the Gold Tower due to its magic suppression system.

'I didn't expect the magic control system to be active. Well, it's the Foreign Exchange Bank, so it makes sense. But how did these people infiltrate?'

He glanced at the large hole in the floor of the Gold Tower, suspecting they had dug a tunnel to gain entry. It must have been a months-long effort, meaning this was no impulsive crime.

'This could get dangerous.'

As Shirone pondered, a hulking terrorist holding a flail approached. Even under his robe, his massive frame was unmistakable.

"Haha, a Magic Association brat shows up. What should I do with you?"

His voice was unnaturally deep, almost incomprehensible despite its clarity.

The terrorist crouched, grabbing Shirone's chin with a hand as rough as bark.

After tilting Shirone's face left and right, the terrorist seemed to have an idea and pulled out a dagger from his coat.

"Yeah, this should be fun. Hey, girl."

Aria looked at the terrorist with anxious eyes. Whatever he wanted, it wasn't to let her go home and study.

The terrorist spun the dagger nimbly, then gripped the blade and held out the handle.

"You're grateful to the person who saved you, aren't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Then as a thank-you, stab him once. His thigh should do."

Aria's face turned pale, her jaw trembling with fear.

"W-what? How could I...?"

Even stabbing a stranger would terrify her, but hurting the person who had become a hostage to save her? That was unthinkable.

A terrorist wielding twin axes took an interest and approached.

"Haha, that's a good idea. Hey, do it! Or we'll kill you first!"

The high-pitched and low-pitched voices overlapped eerily. Terrified by the threat, Aria reluctantly took the dagger. But she couldn't bring herself to stab Shirone in the thigh.

"Hah? Even a Magic Association kid stays calm in this situation?"

Shirone continued to look ahead calmly. Reacting now would only amuse the terrorists. Of course, getting stabbed would hurt, but that was still a future event.

Seeing Shirone's stoic demeanor, Aria looked up at him. His expression unchanged, Shirone spoke words that alleviated her guilt.

"I'll be fine. Protect yourself."

The flail-wielding terrorist lost patience and bellowed.

"Hurry up! Stab him! Before I smash your skull!"

As the flail was raised menacingly, Aria burst into tears and brought the dagger toward Shirone's thigh.

"I-I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

The reversed blade trembled violently. She couldn't imagine what it would feel like to pierce flesh with cold steel.

Sobbing, Aria pressed the dagger's tip against Shirone's thigh.

Even then, Shirone's expression didn't change. They wouldn't kill him. He was their most valuable hostage.

"You're surrounded! You're surrounded! Release the hostages and surrender immediately! Failure to comply will result in a full-scale assault!"

All the terrorists turned their heads toward the windows. The Thormia Counter-Terrorism Unit had set up barricades and surrounded the Gold Tower.

The elite forces—emergency response units, special suppression squads of magicians, bomb disposal teams of alchemists, and sniper squads of gunners—were all deployed.

The flail-wielding terrorist spewed unintelligible curses, frustrated at losing his chance to humiliate the Magic Association brat. Or perhaps it wasn't even human language.

For the Black Revolutionaries, nothing was more important than the revolution. Regaining his composure, the terrorist grabbed Shirone by the back of his collar, lifting him off the ground, and dragged him to the window.

"We are the Black Revolutionaries! If you do not release Deputy Commander Kanimar and our comrades immediately, the hostages will die! We will execute one person every ten minutes!"

The counter-terrorism unit didn't flinch. Meeting their demands would only lead to greater ones in the future.

But they couldn't sacrifice the hostages either, especially if any high-ranking nobles were among them. That would create significant political fallout.

"Damn bastards! If you want to die, die alone!"

The unit leader ground his teeth as he glared at the terrorist. A raid was inevitable, but the timing to minimize casualties was critical.

It could happen now, or in five minutes. The burden of how much time to give them rested entirely on his shoulders.

Just then, a deafening roar tore through the air, and a woman wielding an unusually long staff landed with a thud. Plu, who had flown directly from the Magic Association, quickly analyzed the situation.

'The counter-terrorism unit has arrived, and all civilians have been evacuated. But where is that guy...?'

The alchemy shop wasn't far, so he should have been nearby, observing the situation. Yet, no matter how hard she looked, Shirone was nowhere to be seen.

'What? He didn't come? Did he actually run away? Well, that's better for me...'

Her gaze fell on the entrance of the Gold Tower. When she saw Shirone, held hostage by a terrorist with a resigned expression, her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped.

"What the hell are you doing there, you idiot?!"

Her outburst drew the counter-terrorism unit's attention.

"Ah..."

The captain frowned and asked,

"Who are you? You must be a magician if you teleported here."

Plu, regaining her composure, walked confidently towards him. Although she wasn't part of the cooperation team, this area was under the jurisdiction of the Magic Association, so she had authority.

"I'm Plu, Chief of Security at the Magic Association. What's the current situation... huh?"

As she patted her chest, Plu realized with a start that her ID badge was missing.

‘Oh no, I gave it to that kid.’

The captain watched Plu's changing expressions with a steady gaze. If she hadn't teleported, he might have thought she was just a crazy woman from the neighborhood.

"Chief of Security at the Magic Association? Why are you here? We've already assembled the response team."

"Ah, well, I thought I might be able to help..."

Without her ID, Plu's voice was less confident. The captain, looking annoyed, turned back to face the situation.

"Go back. We have enough forces to handle them. The problem is the hostages."

Plu knew from experience that the difficulty in dealing with terrorists was that they used innocent people as shields.

But she couldn't just leave Shirone behind.

‘This is so frustrating. What was he thinking, getting caught by terrorists? Magic doesn't even work there.’

Suddenly, Plu's eyes lit up.

‘Wait, magic?’

Maybe Shirone being captured could be an opportunity.

With a hopeful strategy in mind, Plu pushed through the response team and reached the captain.

"Captain! Captain!"

The captain sighed and turned around.

"What now? We're busy."

"I have a way to save the hostages!"

Chapter 359: Magic Society (5)

The anti-terrorism unit was giving Shirone sharp looks. It was natural since he was serving as an excellent shield for the terrorists, but from the hostages' perspective, it was frustrating.

The terrorist holding Shirone with a flail had immense strength. Realizing that he couldn't escape without magic, Shirone began to feel increasingly anxious.

'What should I do? Am I really going to die like this?'

At that moment, Plu appeared, pushing through the anti-terrorism unit. Even in a life-and-death situation, Shirone felt a pang of fear seeing her fierce expression.

'Why is Plu here?'

Plu pointed and shouted,

"Hey!"

All the Black Revolutionaries turned their attention to her. Unexpected situations were never good.

The terrorist holding Shirone asked threateningly,

"Who is that woman?"

"Uh, well... she's my superior."

Plu continued angrily,

"Are you out of your mind? I told you to go to the alchemy shop, so what are you doing here?"

Shirone hesitated, unsure whether to respond.

Of course, it made sense for her to be angry. But it was a ridiculous thing to bring up in this situation.

'Why is she doing this? Something feels off.'

As Shirone pondered, she pressed on,

"I clearly told you to buy parts for the 'magic control device'! Because of you, 'innocent people' are getting hurt!"

How are you going to 'take responsibility'?"

Shirone's eyes lit up.

'Magic control device?'

He noticed that Plu's eyes were unusually tense.

'Ah, this is a code.'

Piecing it together, it seemed to mean:

They would disable the magic control device. He was to take responsibility for the hostages.

'So there's one chance. But when?'

Plu couldn't convey that part.

They could create as many codes as they wanted, but if they were too long, it would arouse suspicion. Also, in an operation where success or failure was decided in an instant, timing could be a double-edged sword.

From that moment, Shirone began to prepare his mind.

There was no set time. The key was not to miss the opportunity when the magic control device was destroyed.

On the rooftop of an eight-story building 200 meters from Gold Tower, a gunner aimed a crossbow loaded with a magic bolt at Gold Tower. Unlike a regular crossbow, the tiller was long enough to rest on his shoulder, and it used a trigger mechanism.

As the gunner blew a bubble with his gum, a voice came through his communication device.

-Alpha. Do you read?

"This is Alpha. Awaiting orders. Over."

-Your orders are to destroy the magic control device in Gold Tower.

The bubble popped with a loud snap. Destroying the magic control device wouldn't help much with hostages inside.

-This is your one chance. Don't miss.

The gunner stopped thinking and focused on the magic control device through the crossbow's scope. Strategy was for the brains, fighting was for the muscles. He was the nerve of the anti-terrorism unit.

Recalling the internal layout of Gold Tower, lines in his mind formed into a three-dimensional structure. He rotated it freely, calculating the trajectory.

The magic control device was embedded in the wall, invisible to the eye. He needed to use his spiritual vision.

“Roger that.”

Plu exchanged glances with Shirone and bit her lower lip.

There were too many uncertain variables. Even if the magic control device was destroyed, she couldn't guarantee

Shirone could evacuate the hostages.

‘Please. You have to do something. One mistake and it's over.’

Shirone was desperately trying to reshape his mental state.

He chose mass teleportation as his method. He would evacuate the hostages as soon as the magic control device was destroyed.

‘Can I time it right?’

He had to bypass the terrorists and isolate the hostages in the Spirit Zone. Given its unusual form, it was crucial to prepare his mind in advance. For a mental-type magician like Arin, it would be easy, but for Shirone, who excelled in endurance, it was a time-consuming task.

‘This is harder than I thought. Nothing should happen now.’

Meanwhile, the gunner finished his preparations. The rhythm of his gum chewing slowed, and he began to crush it slowly with his teeth.

Slowly... even more slowly, his finger on the trigger tightened.

Click.

As his teeth met, the trigger was pulled. With a ping, the magic bolt shot out like a swallow catching a bug.

‘Just a little more!’

Shirone did his best to reshape his mental state while staying aware of his surroundings.

A flash of light passed over the anti-terrorism unit and through the front door, narrowly missing Shirone.

The sharp metal bolt pierced the wall next to the vault and embedded itself in the magic control device's circuit board. Electricity surged from the bolt, melting the wires, and the overheated device exploded with a loud bang.

‘Now!’

Shirone's eyes snapped open as he entered the Spirit Zone. The hostages, including Aria, were captured in the amorphous Spirit Zone.

“What’s happening?”

The sudden attack startled the Black Revolutionaries. But they quickly regained their composure, having undergone rigorous training.

“They tricked us!”

As the flail came down on Shirone, his eyes flashed. His body turned to light, and all the hostages were caught in the photon transformation spell.

‘Mass Teleport!’

Countless flashes of light erupted simultaneously, twisting like a dragon and escaping outside Gold Tower.

Shirone arrived 20 meters from the front door. He wanted to get farther, but unfamiliar with the area, he was limited to visible space.

Confirming the number of hostages, Shirone used precise control to cut the ropes with Armand. The anti-terrorism unit was arresting the terrorists near Gold Tower.

Werewolves, subterraneans, goblins—their races varied.

The giant with the flail was a Gader, known as a forest keeper. With his developed jaw, he screamed in a deep voice as the knights twisted his arms.

‘One is missing.’

There were only seven captured terrorists. Judging by their sizes, the leader was missing.

“Argh!”

Hearing a sound from above, Shirone looked up. Plu was floating in the air, swinging her magic staff.

With a thud, an invisible object fell to the ground. Moments later, the leader appeared, trembling from the blow to his back.

Plu landed lightly and said,

“Where do you think you're going?”

“Damn annoying magician!”

The leader clutched his chest and tore off his robe.

A man with pale purple skin was revealed. He was bald, with knife-like ears and sharp fangs protruding from his clenched teeth.

“If it's come to this, I'll at least kill you.”

“A vampire, as I thought.”

The ability to turn invisible for a short time was unique to vampires. But since he wasn't suffering from the sunlight, he wasn't pureblood.

‘If he were pureblood, everyone here would be in trouble.’

Plu kept her eyes on the vampire and spoke to the anti-terrorism unit.

“I'll handle him. Block his escape routes. Vampires are experts at escaping.”

The unit immediately blocked the paths around Gold Tower. They knew that if they moved clumsily, the vampire would vanish without a trace.

Plu twirled her magic staff out of habit, then gripped the end and pointed it forward.

“Come at me, scum.”

“Arrogant woman!”

Blades extended from the vampire's ten fingers. His body blurred into an afterimage, moving like a torrent through space.

Vampires were fast. It wasn't physical strength but the unique power of their half-spirit, half-demon transformation.

Plu half-closed her eyes, moving only her gaze left and right.

Wham! As she twisted her body and thrust her staff, the vampire's claws were blocked midway.

“Grr! This...!”

"You underestimated me. A mutt like you can't be faster than the shared senses of the Spirit Zone."

"Shut up! Shut up!"

The vampire slashed his claws at a rate of dozens of times per second.

As the sharp friction sounds rang out, Plu retreated, moving at an invisible speed around her. She gave up the chase and struck her staff into the ground.

"Phoenix Formation."

A giant firebird erupted from the crystal orb, spewing fireballs in all directions.

The firebird, resonating with the Spirit Zone, shot fireballs at everyone within its radius. It couldn't distinguish friend from foe, but its reflex speed was overpowered.

"Argh!"

The vampire, hit by a fireball, rolled on the ground, his body burning. By the time the flames were out, he had no strength left to move.

Plu pressed her staff against his chest and said,

"You can withstand the sun, but not fire. Surrender quietly."

"Don't talk nonsense! Do you know our pain? Do you understand the misery of living in the sewers?"

"I don't. Humans can't even save themselves. We can't afford to care about your situation."

"Foolish and arrogant humans! I was once human too. How long do you think you can rule the world? One day, you'll pay a great price."

"Maybe someday. But not today."

"Heh, we'll see."

The vampire's body began to break apart like a jigsaw puzzle. The grotesque transformation made Plu step back, removing her staff.

"What the...?"

"This is the result of your actions!"

The vampire's body scattered into hundreds of black bats, flying towards the hostages.

Plu immediately aimed her staff. But she couldn't use the Phoenix Formation near the hostages.

"Ahh! Please save me!"

The hostages clung to each other as they saw the swarm of bats.

At that moment, Shirone stepped in front of them and brought his fist down.

'Radiant Burst!'

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

The barrier of light pulsed rapidly, repelling the swarm of bats. The bats, thrown outside the barrier, tangled together and reverted to the vampire's original form, tumbling to the ground.

"Argh!"

The vampire's fingers, stretched out towards the sun, slowly relaxed.

When he finally stopped moving, the emergency response team rushed in to arrest him.

The hostages slowly opened their eyes. The terrorists were being transported one by one to a steel prison.

"It's over. They've all been captured."

"It's over! We're saved!"

The hostages cheered and clapped.

The hero of the moment was Shirone. He had bought time as a hostage and saw the situation through to the end, earning him their gratitude.

"That was amazing! Justice prevails!"

"Such bravery! You deserve to work at the Magic Association!"

Shirone's face flushed with embarrassment. He was uneasy about people mistaking him for a Magic Association employee. Bowing his head, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see Aria.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Thank you so much for today. I'd like to repay you..."

"Oh, no! That's not necessary!"

Aria didn't want to let Shirone go. Not only had he helped her, but she also felt a fateful connection, remembering him from the carriage ride.

"I'm Aria from the Teshia family. My father is the kingdom's top diplomat. If I tell him about today, it could be very helpful..."

At that moment, Plu grabbed Shirone's head and pushed him down.

"That's not necessary."

"What?"

Plu bowed politely to the bewildered Aria.

"I'm sorry. This boy is still a trainee, not a full employee. The Association organized this operation to capture the terrorists, so please understand."

Shirone, still bowing, glanced sideways.

Strictly speaking, he wasn't even a trainee. But seeing Plu's stern expression, he remembered what he needed to say.

"Yes, I'm sorry. This won't happen again."

Aria didn't care whether Shirone was a full employee or a trainee. She just wanted to get to know him better.

"No, I just wanted to express my gratitude..."

Plu firmly cut her off with a wave of her hand.

"He was just doing his duty. Personal rewards are strictly prohibited by the Association. Thank you for understanding.

Let's go, kid!"

"Ouch! That hurts!"

Shirone was practically dragged away by Plu, leaving Gold Tower.

Aria watched them go, feeling a pang of regret.

Chapter 360: Magic Society (6)

Shirone caught a carriage back to the Magic Association, still feeling the sting from the scolding he had received. Holding the metal box tightly, he pouted as Plu scoffed at him.

“What? Upset because you got scolded? Who told you to jump into the scene without permission? Do you know what kind of situation this is? Using magic without a magician's license is against the kingdom's laws.”

“I'm sorry about that. But people were about to die.”

Plu couldn't argue with that.

“Hmph, that's that, and this is this. You did it knowing you'd have to take responsibility, so don't complain.”

Shirone fell silent, knowing she was right. Moreover, the terrorist attack had completely changed his perception of Vashka.

“I've heard about Radum.”

Plu, who had been looking out the window, turned her gaze to him.

“A schoolmate of mine used to live there. They said it was a terrible place.”

“Hmm, that's true. The residents of Radum are prohibited from economic activities.”

“Why does the kingdom leave such a place as it is?

Terrorism is certainly bad, but isn't there a more peaceful solution?”

Plu was silent for a while before speaking.

“Do you know what happens if you don't have a trash can in your house?”

“What? A trash can?”

“Eventually, the whole house becomes a trash can. But in reality, having a trash can keeps the house clean. Radum is like that. It's the capital's trash can. It doesn't produce anything, but its existence has value. That's why even the nobles can't easily get rid of it.”

“But that's...”

“I know what you're thinking, but don't say it. Convictions can't be forced. If you have a conviction, you have to achieve it yourself.”

Shirone lowered his head, feeling dejected. Discussing ideals that couldn't be realized didn't seem to apply in the professional world.

“But today's incident might make the politicians think differently.”

Shirone looked up again.

“Bat mimicry is a unique ability of vampires. But it's never been reported to manifest in broad daylight. Something is changing in Radum. It could be genetic modification or fusion...”

It was certainly a plausible theory.

Radum was a district where many non-human races who had fled the continent lived together. If there was a place for biological experiments, it would be there.

Shirone turned to look out the window. The capital's scenery was as splendid as when he first arrived. But now, he could see the shadows.

Light and darkness. They defined each other. But Shirone didn't know which came first.

As they crossed the threshold of the Magic Association, Plu turned to Shirone.

“I'll go report, so take the items to the maintenance team in the control room. And stay there! Don't wander off again!”

Shirone hadn't wandered off except for errands. But he turned and walked away, understanding her concern. He walked carefully to the control room, worried the items might be damaged.

Fortunately, the maintenance team inspected the items and found no issues.

Relieved, Shirone left the control room, only to find Plu waiting for him. Her expression was colder than before, indicating she had been reprimanded by her superior.

"Did the report go well...?"

"Ugh, seriously!"

Plu suddenly smacked Shirone on the head.

"Ow! Why do you keep hitting me?"

Having reached his limit, Shirone glared at her angrily.

"I can't stand you! Do you know how much trouble you caused with this incident? Acting all high and mighty without even having a license!"

"It wasn't about showing off. People were dying!"

"Quiet! And now everyone knows you're here at the Association! This is a serious problem. The Chairman wanted to meet you quietly, but now I don't know what to do!"

Shirone felt regretful about that.

"There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Oh, so you can just leave and be done with it? Are you trying to drive me crazy? Come with me!"

Plu grabbed Shirone by the ear and dragged him to his quarters. She shoved him inside and pointed a finger at him.

"Don't take a single step out of here! Stay put until things calm down."

Shirone rubbed his sore ear, frowning.

"Isn't this too much? You sent me on an errand."

"And now you're acting all high and mighty...!"

Just as Plu was about to yell again, Gando's voice came from the corridor.

"Plu, what's going on?"

Plu turned with an exaggeratedly aggrieved expression.

"Mr. Gando, this kid..."

Her words were cut off as she froze. Behind the concerned Gando were two people.

Kangnan, the Chief Secretary of the Magic Association. And the man with the black fur coat draped over his shoulders was Mikael Gaold.

Seeing Gaold, Plu felt her heart might burst.

She knew he was returning today, but she hadn't expected to meet him here. Since she had joined, the Chairman had rarely come down to the third floor.

'Why is he here...?'

He could have just sent for Shirone, but he had come to the third floor immediately upon his return.

Moreover, she hadn't yet dealt with the mistake Shirone had made. The news of Shirone's presence at the Magic Association was inexcusable.

Plu instinctively snapped to attention and shouted, "Squad! Attention!"

Gando rubbed his forehead and shook his head. Gaold, on the other hand, smiled with interest.

"Heh, am I the only one who can't see them? There's no squad here."

"Ah... I'm sorry! I was nervous!"

Kangnan, who had been partially hidden by Gaold, asked, "Is everything alright? I heard there was an incident earlier."

Plu, feeling that the moment of reckoning had come, spoke with wide eyes.

"Ah! I have something to report. Shirone was involved in the terrorist incident earlier..."

"It doesn't matter."

Gaold interrupted dismissively and walked past Plu. Her face remained frozen in a rigid expression.

Shirone looked up at Gaold and swallowed hard.

He was taller than Shirone had imagined. The strongest magician in the kingdom, whose reputation had only grown since Shirone arrived, stood before him. It might have been an illusion, but Gaold seemed to tower to the ceiling.

Gaold smiled and said,

"You must be Shirone."

Episode 3: The Strongest Magician

Shirone finally got to ride the Magic Association's elevator, something he had longed for. But the atmosphere was tense, so he couldn't openly show his excitement. Someone needed to press a button, but no one moved.

Gaold stood with his hands behind his back, looking at the floor indicator. Kangnan was meditating in the corner, and Gando couldn't hide his discomfort standing next to Gaold. 'Mr. Gaold...'

Plu, with her head bowed, felt a mix of disappointment and sadness.

She had done her best to uphold the name of Gaold's elite guard. But all her efforts seemed meaningless in the face of Shirone's name.

Shirone's presence at the Association had likely reached the ears of magicians who opposed Gaold. This project was Gaold's life's work, something he had prepared for over 20 years.

Yet Gaold had said,

It doesn't matter.

She felt utterly insignificant.

She had admired him since her school days and had worked for him at the Association for two years, but she felt less valuable than Shirone, who wasn't even a full-fledged magician.

Kangnan suddenly opened her eyes and walked to the panel.

"Alright, let's go down."

Shirone looked puzzled.

'Go down?'

They were on the third floor, so going down meant the first floor. They wouldn't take the elevator to the second floor.

Kangnan took out a key, opened the panel, and placed her fingerprint on a glass plate. A thin light scanned it, and the

internal mechanism activated. A panel with 36 buttons, arranged in a six-by-six grid, emerged. Kangnan took a deep breath and entered a 24-step pattern. Once approved, a female voice announced from the ceiling,

Moving to the 10th basement floor. Level 1 security area.

Gando and Plu glanced at Gaold. They had taken the elevator together, but only Gaold had the authority to decide how far they could accompany him.

"Hmm."

Gaold, unconcerned, observed Shirone. Noticing Shirone's gaze fixed on the panel, he chuckled.

"Fascinated?"

"What? Oh, yes. It's my first time in an elevator. I didn't know it had a password."

"Heh, did you memorize it sneakily?"

"No, I didn't!"

Shirone waved his hands frantically, then blushed and confessed.

"Yes, actually..."

"Haha! Thorough, aren't you? Well, that's how a magician should be. But it won't help. The code changes daily. And the best part is, no one at the Association knows the code." Shirone tilted his head in confusion.

"No one knows? But Kangnan just..."

"Yes, she entered the pattern correctly. But she doesn't know what she pressed."

Was that possible? Shirone wondered.

"How is that possible?"

"The pattern is stored in the subconscious, not the memory. Think of it like playing an instrument. If you practice the same piece every day, your hands move before you think. It's similar. Kangnan spends an hour each day looking at the pattern generated by a random code device. It's important

not to think about it. Then she just presses the buttons as her hands move."

Gaold mimed pressing random buttons in the air.

"Of course, it's different from playing an instrument and requires training, but once mastered, it's more secure than any other encryption system. The more you try to consciously recall it, the harder it becomes."

Shirone was amazed by the extraordinary security system. The fact that such an encryption method, which he hadn't even read about in books, was already in use at the Association spoke volumes about its technological prowess. 'He seems really excited. Is he oblivious because the Chairman is being nice to him?'

Plu, listening to their conversation, glared at Shirone with annoyance.

She had never exchanged more than a few words with Gaold. Yet, Shirone was not only being taken to a Level 1 security area but also receiving a detailed explanation of the encryption system's secrets.

The elevator descended past the first floor into complete darkness. Shirone had assumed the tenth basement level would be about the same distance as ten floors above ground, but he was wrong. The elevator descended for nearly a minute before the doors finally opened.

Both Plu and Gando were tense, as it was their first time in this place. Waiting for Gaold and Kangan to exit first, Plu looked around with excited eyes.

"Where is this...?"

It was a massive underground cavern. The ceiling was as high as the sky, and the interior, devoid of pillars, expanded far beyond the footprint of the Magic Association building. Even Shirone, who had visited many extraordinary places, was astonished by the underground scale. The temples in Miro's space-time and the buildings in Heaven were impressive, but the emptiness here exerted a different kind of pressure.

‘Why did we come here?’

It seemed unnecessarily spacious for a meeting place.

When Shirone looked at Kangnan, she adjusted her glasses and explained.

“This is the largest space in the Magic Association. It's an open area, but it's used as a bunker, so its durability is beyond imagination. It's also one of the few places free from the magic control devices. It was built for multiple purposes, but in peacetime, it's mainly used for demonstrating classified magic.”

“I see.”

Since the Magic Association analyzed all the magic in the kingdom, it made sense to have at least one such space. Then Shirone realized something and looked at Gaold in surprise.

“I’m going to demonstrate magic?”

Gaold smiled and turned to look at Shirone, who flinched. His aura heated the air in the bunker. He was a completely different person from the one Shirone had seen in the elevator.

Chapter 361: Magic Society (7)

"Yes, that's why you're here. So, first... hmm?"

Gaold turned to look at Gando and Plu, who were standing awkwardly. After a moment of thought, he spoke in a puzzled voice.

"Why are you two here? Don't you know this is a Level 1 security area?"

"Ah, well..."

As Gando hesitated, Kangnan sighed.

'He's forgotten again.'

Shirone was a key resource that could bring groundbreaking changes to this project. Even if he didn't show it, it was clear that Gaold was quite excited.

"Go back. We have some private matters to attend to."

"Yes, understood."

Gaold waved his hand dismissively, and Gando awkwardly walked back to the elevator. Even as a senior member of Gaold's elite guard, he had no choice but to follow orders. However, Plu remained in place.

'I was here the whole time. The Chairman brought me along.'

She knew Gaold had memory issues, but that didn't make it any less hurtful. After all, he still remembered Shirone, whom he had just met 10 minutes ago.

"Plu, what are you doing? Let's go."

Gando spoke in a worried voice, but Plu stood her ground. For over two years, she had served in Gaold's elite guard, completing numerous missions. She couldn't accept being dismissed like this.

"Please let me stay."

Gaold, who had been walking towards Shirone, stopped abruptly. He slowly turned his head, his eyes swirling with something abnormal.

"What did you just say?"

Plu, emboldened, shouted even louder.

"Please let me stay! We are also your subordinates, serving you, Mr. Gaold!"

Gando, his face pale, shook Plu's shoulder.

"What's wrong with you, Plu? Are you crazy?"

Plu wasn't standing there calmly. Her heartbeat echoed in her ribs, and her fear-stricken eyes avoided Gaold's gaze, looking up at the ceiling instead.

"Heh heh, heh heh heh."

Gaold bent his knees, hunching his neck like a beast eyeing its prey. Heat waves seemed to rise from his shoulders and head.

"Plu."

"Y-Yes!"

"Since I became the Chairman of the Magic Association, I've never been involved in an assault incident. Do you know why?"

Plu slowly lowered her gaze to look at Gaold. Seeing his grotesquely grinning face, she felt a paralyzing fear.

"Because if I hit someone, they die."

Gando flinched and stepped back.

'Oh no! It's starting.'

Plu's vision darkened, and she saw a hellish landscape of burning sulfur. The agonizing screams of tortured souls clawed at her brain.

"Ah, ah..."

Plu's pupils rolled back. Her knees wobbled like a beaten dog, and the tears streaming down her face felt as hot as blood.

'So scared...!'

She felt she would do anything to escape this moment. But that would be a betrayal of Gaold. Everything she had built

would crumble in an instant.

"Sob! Sob!"

With all her strength, Plu shouted with her eyes tightly shut.

"I respect you!"

The hellish vision vanished.

But her spirit, which had flown far away, showed no sign of returning. In a state of trance, words spilled out of her mouth.

"I respect you! I've admired you since I started learning magic! I'll do anything for you, Chairman! So please let me stay!"

'Plu...'

Gando looked at his subordinate with pity.

Gaold was too far beyond reach to be a life goal. Even as a certified 4th-grade magician, Gando found it hard to suppress his trembling in Gaold's presence.

But this time, he mustered the courage to step forward for his cherished subordinate.

"Please, let us stay! Don't doubt our resolve!"

Gando bowed beside Plu.

Gaold stared at them, lost in thought. But in reality, he wasn't thinking about anything.

"Do as you wish."

His easy acceptance left Gando stunned. Plu, still not fully understanding the situation, continued to sniffle.

Kangnan clicked her tongue in annoyance.

'Honestly... this is why people call him crazy.'

Gaold was bound by nothing. He acted solely on his emotions in the moment.

His brain's memory function was damaged, but he was still alive because no one in the Tormia Kingdom could harm him.

Gaold walked to the center of the bunker and lit a cigar, facing Shirone from a distance. Smoke drifted from his parted lips like a ghost.

"So, Kangnan brought you because she saw potential. Now I'll judge for myself. If you meet my standards, we might have a good relationship."

Being evaluated out of the blue wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't unacceptable given Gaold's position as Chairman. What worried Shirone was what Gaold had done to Plu earlier. What had happened to make the usually confident Plu so terrified and tearful?

'Is this really okay? He seems a bit strange.'

When Shirone didn't respond, Gaold spoke in a bored tone.

"I'm not forcing you. We don't need anyone with weak will. If you don't want to, you can leave now."

"What will you evaluate?"

"There's only one thing I expect from you. Show me Ataraxia."

Just as Shirone had expected. If a certified 1st-grade Grand Magician was interested in a mere student, it had to be because of Ataraxia.

"Do it at full power. This might be the only chance in your life."

'Full power?'

At first, Shirone didn't understand. But seeing the aura emanating from Gaold, a troubling thought crossed his mind.

"Are you telling me to shoot it at you?"

"Yes. Show me your best skill."

Shirone's face turned incredulous.

To him, Ataraxia was a siege spell. It wasn't something to be cast on a person unless he intended to kill them.

"But this isn't the 2000 system."

"Of course not. That's why I brought you here. The true value of magic is best confirmed through the body."

Now Shirone was certain. Gaold was insane. Unless he intended to make him a murderer, how could he make such a request?

"It's too dangerous. You could get hurt."

Gaold squinted and exhaled smoke, then suddenly burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! That's the funniest joke I've heard in a while.

Coming from a kid who hasn't even grown hair yet."

Shirone's face turned red with anger. Whether it was a joke or not, it was completely belittling.

Gaold was indeed the strongest magician in Tormia. But Ataraxia was also the power of an archangel.

"I'm serious. You could die."

Gaold waved his hand dismissively, as if brushing off the remnants of his laughter.

"Alright, alright. Then from that moment, you'll be the Chairman of the Magic Association. Everyone here will be witnesses. How about that? A super-fast promotion."

'He's not even listening.'

Shirone focused his mind, determined to show Gaold what Ataraxia was.

A point of starlight appeared in the air, drawing a circle.

As the halo formed, Plu winced. A sharp pain pierced her temples.

'This is the halo, the embodiment of the Immortal Function.'

The more sensitive one was, the more intense the shock. As expected, Gando seemed to be in considerable pain, squinting one eye and exhaling deeply.

Kangnan, on the other hand, checked the time with a calm expression. Gaold, looking bored, puffed on his cigar, blowing smoke rings as if to say, "Can you do this?"

'He's the real deal...'

It was Shirone's first time meeting someone completely unaffected by the halo.

Calming his excitement, Shirone decided to go further.

As he concentrated Ataraxia, multicolored flashes converged, constructing concepts beyond human knowledge.

"Wow..."

Plu's mouth fell open.

She had only heard rumors about Ataraxia. She knew it was the power of an archangel, but she hadn't expected a student's spell to be so impressive. Even as the top graduate of the Royal Magic School, she couldn't comprehend even 10% of the concepts embedded in the halo.

'How is that possible? How many cores does it use?'

Ataraxia was complete. Hundreds of small magic circles rotated like gears, emitting a brilliant light. Gaold, having seen enough, turned to Kangnan.

"How is it?"

Kangnan checked her pocket watch.

"One minute and two seconds."

"Hmm, a bit faster than before."

Flicking his cigar, Gaold sent the burning tip flying like a firecracker, hitting the wall. He pulled one leg back and faced Shirone diagonally, lowering his stance slowly.

"Shall we begin? Come at me."

As Gaold took his stance, the atmosphere in the bunker changed. If a magician was omnipotent in the Spirit Zone, everything here was under Gaold's control.

Even so, Shirone hesitated. Ataraxia was a trigger-type spell. Once he fired the Photon Cannon, he couldn't control it.

Kangnan's voice reached his ears.

"Shirone, I told you. This is a matter of international importance."

Shirone continued to look at Gaold.

"I can't tell you everything yet, but we're serious too. If your conviction is strong, you can leave now. But if you're bound by moral constraints, know that it's presumptuous."

"Phew!"

Shirone exhaled deeply, as if expelling all distracting thoughts. There was no way out now. The only option was to rely on the title of First-Class Archmage.

"Let's begin."

As Shirone widened his eyes, a photon was born with a pop sound in front of him. The more the mass concentrated, the louder the sound in his mind became, but he resolutely ignored all the noise and increased the power.

'From now on, even I can't control it.'

Shirone gritted his teeth and unleashed the Photon Cannon. As the sphere of light passed through Ataraxia, the bunker was bathed in white.

At the same time, Flu's mind went blank. It felt like being thrown in front of a phenomenon from a transcendent world untouched by human feet—a massive tidal wave of mass.

Bang!

A powerful sonic boom split the roar of the flash.

As the atmospheric pressure in the bunker explosively increased, the energy of the Photon Cannon was compressed in front of Gaold's palm. It was the highest level of air-based defensive magic, the Vacuum Press, which only Gaold could perform.

"How... how is this possible...?"

Shirone couldn't believe what he was seeing.

It wasn't that he endured it or dodged it. He literally caught the Photon Cannon with his hand.

The Photon Cannon, having already lost its energy, floated above Gaold's palm. When he clenched his fist, it vanished with a small pop.

Gaold turned to Shirone with a smile and said,

"Failed."

Silence fell. No one in the bunker could speak.

'Failed? Me?'

Shirone realized belatedly that he had never even considered the possibility of failing. He had only hoped that no one would get hurt by Ataraxia.

Gaold, with his coat blown off by the wind pressure, slung it over his shoulder and walked towards the elevator, looking disappointed.

"Kangnan, you were right. That guy is useless. Send him back."

Chapter 362: Magic Society (8)

All the mages in the bunker walked towards the elevator. Shirone couldn't understand the situation. Why was he disqualified? Even if Gaold blocked the Photon Cannon, it was due to Gaold's greatness, not Shirone's inadequacy. 'Isn't this power sufficient?'

Or, from the beginning, what level had Gaold expected from him?

"Chairman."

Everyone waiting for the elevator turned to Shirone.

"Please give me one more chance."

Flu scoffed in disbelief. How dare he ask a First-Class Archmage for a second chance? It was beyond audacity; it showed a lack of respect for the association.

But this time, she didn't need to intervene. Gaold was already walking towards Shirone with a cold gaze.

He thought the same as Flu. A toy that had lost its value in play was nothing but trash.

"Aren't you mistaken? This place isn't for you. You came here to prove your worth as my tool. But you couldn't even pass that."

Shirone admitted he had misunderstood.

"I'm not asking you to treat me the same as before. If you give me another chance, I don't mind a real battle. So please, give me one more chance to demonstrate."

Gaold's face lost all emotion. Only a cold killing intent remained.

He wasn't a man of authority. But he wasn't kind enough to entertain the whims of a useless novice.

"Attack me? Are you saying you want to fight me?"

"Not fight, but..."

"Shut up."

As Gaold's killing intent surged, Shirone's vision was blocked. Flames surrounded him, turning the entire area into a sea of fire.

Even knowing it was an illusion, the heat felt like it was burning his flesh. His mind was filled with pain, screams, and despair, leaving no room for thought.

Flu's face turned pale, guessing Shirone's state.

'This is bad. He's really going to kill him.'

Those who fell into Gaold's extreme hell were crushed by terrifying fear, their minds destroyed. Over time, this dreadful ability could suffocate a person to death with just emotions.

But Shirone wasn't consumed by fear. He didn't shed tears or tremble. He simply stared calmly at the extreme hell.

"How... how is this possible...?"

Flu couldn't comprehend Shirone's composure. Was this not the extreme hell? But Gaold's monstrous face was exactly the same as when he had terrified her.

'So this is what Flu experienced. No wonder she was scared.'

Shirone even had the leisure to look around. Then, deciding the hell tour was enough, he focused forward again.

His sharp gaze pierced through the front. Though he couldn't see it, Gaold would be standing in the real space.

'Mikael Gaold...'

When he heard about him from Flu, he thought Gaold was just an exceptionally strong mage. But seeing the hell before him, he could guess what kind of life Gaold had lived, or rather, how far he had fallen.

Shirone closed his eyes and focused his thoughts. No matter what unfolded before him, the incarnation defined by perfect law would not waver.

Shirone's eyes snapped open. The sea of fire split left and right, and the hell vanished in an instant. Gaold's face,

showing the whites of his eyes and a monstrous grin, appeared.

"Hehehe, hehehehe."

Gaold laughed with a scratching sound in his throat, his shoulders shaking. Then, with burning eyes, he looked at Shirone and said,

"Mental transcendence."

Kangnan, who had been pessimistic about this, now understood why he brought Shirone. Even if his current skills were lacking, his talent was certainly first-class.

"Mental transcendence? At eighteen?"

Gando muttered in shock.

Flu was equally astonished. She knew what mental transcendence was. But the deeper she delved, the more it seemed like an undefined concept rather than an enlightenment.

"Hmm."

Gaold stroked his chin, lost in thought.

He hadn't considered Shirone for the project because he was strong. There were many stronger than Shirone globally. But his ideas were undoubtedly genius.

Among the Unlockers, he had a unique mass-giving battery. From there, countless practical spells followed.

Shirone could add genius to his team. His talent for finding breakthroughs in any situation was a key code for creating variables in unfavorable conditions.

In that sense, turning the First-Class Archmage's mind was also a talent.

"Real battle? Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes. I know you're not someone who does things moderately. I don't mind dying."

Gando worried about Shirone's recklessness. A mage might speak of death lightly. But in a situation where death was certain, no mage would say such a thing.

"Fine. But first, let me ask one thing."

Gaold's eyes gleamed as he spoke.

"Why do you want to die?"

Shirone remained silent.

Perhaps he was the only one seeing any possibility of life here. That fact made him shiver like the cold of a winter night.

Gaold rephrased his question.

"So, what are you imagining? What's your conclusion? Do you know why you were called? Do you think there's something behind me worth risking your life for?"

"I don't know. But I have a guess."

"Oh? Like what?"

Shirone thought of the Archangel Ikael. A warm and kind angel. But once, she was a powerful archangel who could destroy the ruins of Kergo.

Why did she entrust the future to him?

"There is someone I must meet at least once."

He first thought of this after experiencing the events in the Kazra Kingdom. Specifically, when the security of Goffin was unlocked.

Behemoth, who knew the answer, disappeared with mental transcendence, but the question engraved in his mind still tormented him. That's why he had to meet Ikael.

Shirone's answer wasn't among Gaold's expected choices. He found Shirone interesting but felt he shouldn't go easy on him. He didn't like people who only talked big.

"Are you saying you want to use the association for personal matters?"

Shirone didn't answer. Gaold's question was emotional and missed the point. There was no need to answer such a question.

Gaold turned away as if that was enough.

"Fine, I'll give you one last chance. You have one hour to rest."

Casting Ataraxia must have drained a lot of his mental strength.

But Shirone shook his head. If the opponent was giving him a break, there was something more useful than recovering his mental strength.

"It's okay. Instead, I have another condition."

Shirone took out Armand from his waist.

"Please let me use the Diamond Armor. I think this level of merit is necessary."

Gaold looked at the sword in Shirone's hand. He already knew about the object called before it came into Shirone's possession.

"I thought you were a fool, but you know your place."

Even knowing he couldn't win, giving his best meant he was staking his life on this. Anyway, it would save time, so it wasn't a bad proposal for Gaold.

"But just holding an object won't change anything. So let's set the rules."

Gaold compressed the air in his palm. As the density increased, a transparent sphere shimmered.

"As you can see, I use air magic that anyone can learn.

Among them, the Press series. I'm not talented in magic, so I don't know complicated things. I'm just a bit stronger than others, so I'm here."

A bitter smile appeared on Shirone's lips. If a mage who could block Ataraxia with one hand was just a bit stronger, then all the mages in the world were dead.

Gaold clenched his fist, and the air bubble burst with a pop.

"Anyway, the rule is this. I'll block Ataraxia again with Vacuum Press. The difference this time is that I'll cast an attack spell on you once."

Gaold pointed at Shirone with his index and middle fingers. A small air bubble formed at his fingertips.

"The spell I'll use to attack you is Air Gun, as you can see. The principle is simple. Compress the air and release it. Is this about 10,000 Press? I don't know."

Gaold's arm flicked up quickly. The air bubble, compressed with tremendous force, exploded with a deafening roar.

The Air Gun passed by Shirone and crashed into the end of the bunker. Until then, Shirone hadn't even realized something had passed by. His ears were just ringing. Then he felt the vibration and slowly turned around.

A huge circle was caved in at the center where the Air Gun had struck, with cracks spreading in all directions.

The radius of the cracks was about 20 meters. Also, although he couldn't confirm it, the Air Gun's diameter couldn't have been more than 2 centimeters.

Shirone stared blankly ahead, unable to blink. Gaold was laughing, shaking the hand that had fired the Air Gun.

"Well, it's a child's play spell, but it'll sting a bit if it hits."

Sting? Even the best defensive stance with Diamond Armor would result in instant death if hit. But coming from a First-Class Archmage, it didn't sound like a joke.

"Anyway. Do your best."

Shirone's lips trembled with a smile.

He was a terrifyingly strong person, but that made him want to challenge him even more.

When he fired the Photon Cannon with the four combinations of Armand's magic amplification, Immortal Function, mental transcendence, and Ataraxia, how powerful could it become?

"Diamond Armor."

Armand, held vertically, engulfed Shirone, and the transformation was complete in an instant. The artificial brain Wei spun around like a whirlwind and then fixed itself on Shirone's shoulder.

"Let's begin."

Despite Shirone's changed appearance, Gaold remained calm. He flicked his finger, maintaining the form of the Air Gun. Shirone was drawn forward as if pulled.

A halo was already forming where he stood. Thanks to Wei's parallel processing ability, Ataraxia was accumulating faster than before.

'Parallel processing, huh? And quite fast too. This could be under 50 seconds.'

Shirone created bone-like blades from his gauntlet and swung them. However, Gaold, still focused on Ataraxia, effortlessly dodged all the attacks with just his upper body.

'As expected, I can't win with brute strength. The experience in real combat is different.'

Shirone pressed on desperately. The bunker was so vast that planting tendrils was disadvantageous. However, this allowed him to maximize Armand's physical enhancement abilities.

'What is he doing?'

Flu tilted her head in confusion.

Despite both being mages, neither was casting spells. Gaold could only use the Air Gun once, but it was strange that Shirone insisted on close combat.

"Why isn't he using his specialty? With parallel processing, he has one slot left, right? If he fires attack spells in succession, he might have a chance. The chairman can't use defensive magic."

Gando, without taking his eyes off the battlefield, replied, "Because both of them are serious."

"What?"

Gando, gripped by tension, had no time to explain further. In any case, the movements they were displaying now held no real meaning. The battle would ultimately be decided in an instant.

'Perhaps... something completely unexpected might happen.'

Chapter 363: Magic Society (9)

Shirone continued his relentless assault, swinging his blades blindly. Gaold, calmly dodging each attack, smirked.

'Correct. He got the first question right.'

Shirone wasn't holding back his magic; he simply couldn't use it. Gaold had only one chance to attack, but that one chance would almost certainly kill Shirone.

'Attack magic is out! I have to block it no matter what!'

If Gaold was serious, he wouldn't wait for Ataraxia to be completed. Shirone would die before that. Thus, all his attacks were feints. Instead, he focused all his attention on Gaold's reactions.

'When? When will it be?'

Parallel processing allowed him to complete two spells simultaneously, but there was no room to equip Photon Cannon in the remaining slot besides Ataraxia. He had to dodge the Air Gun. Failure meant death.

'...That's what he's thinking.'

It was as if Shirone's thoughts were audible.

It was the best judgment, but there was one miscalculation: assuming the power and speed of the Air Gun would be the same as before.

'Did you really think you could block it? That's a bit unfortunate.'

Gaold had no intention of going easy on Shirone. He had given him two chances and set a rule allowing only one counterattack. With this balance, Shirone's survival was entirely up to him. If he couldn't win, he would die.

Just before Ataraxia was completed, Gaold extended his finger.

'Goodbye, Shirone.'

At the same time, Armand, waiting to respond to a single reaction, struck the ground with its tendrils and retreated. But that was also within Gaold's expectations.

'This will be on a different level.'

Without giving the same leeway as before, Gaold compressed the air and fired the Air Gun. The air bullet flew at an incredible speed with a sound like shattering metal. Shirone couldn't see or feel it. That was the limit of a human who couldn't open the schema. But he had another escape route: imagination.

He had pre-designed a binary choice. If Gaold attacked before Ataraxia was completed, it meant he intended to kill him. Therefore, there was only one place to defend.

'Dark Sphere!'

A black sphere formed in front of Shirone's face. It was a spell he couldn't reach even through Behemoth's forced rebound, but with the power of mental transcendence, a small gravity field was created.

The Air Gun, aimed at his forehead, was sucked into the darkness with a whoosh.

Although he had a record of consuming a ton of plants in Kazra, Gaold's Air Gun was on a different level. The black sphere, unable to handle the energy, exploded with a shockwave in front of Shirone's eyes.

"Ugh!"

Armand's robe instantly hardened to protect its master. Shirone, blown away by the impact, planted his tendrils into the ground and leaped sideways. Ataraxia, now completed, was shining brilliantly.

'Magic Amplification!'

Shirone extended his hands, focusing on the two magic amplification orbs in his palms. A powerful Photon Cannon was born, creating small bubbles of light around it.

'Now, Immortal Function!'

The Photon Cannon rapidly expanded, pushing the air around it. The golden light vibrated wildly, leaving afterimages on the onlookers' retinas.

'Mental Transcendence!'

As he pushed the mass to its limit, the photon mass, as large as a human torso, shook violently enough to be seen with the naked eye. The noise of the mass's chaotic rotation was louder than thunder.

Flu's face turned pale.

By the rules, Gaold could no longer attack Shirone.

Conversely, Shirone's Photon Cannon was far more powerful than the first casting.

'How can he compress light to that extent?'

Shirone, still unsatisfied, furrowed his brow even more.

'A little more! Just a little more...!'

Gaold couldn't attack him anyway. He would either dodge or block it. So, he had to make it impossible to dodge.

"Ahhhhh!"

Pouring everything he had, a white sphere reminiscent of a supernova was born. It was amplified to the extreme through Ataraxia. The entire bunker would likely be filled with energy.

Gaold muttered with a bitter smile.

"Damn it..."

Flash!

A massive wave of light pushed out in all directions.

Even Kangnan's group, standing behind Ataraxia, turned their heads from the blinding flash that could burn their retinas. The shape was visible even with their eyes closed. But Shirone could see. Thanks to Armand blocking 98% of the light entering his eyes.

Then, a déjà vu-like scene unfolded before him. The edges of the light quickly tightened, and the unimaginable atmospheric pressure trapped the Photon Cannon's energy in the Vacuum Press.

"Ughhhh!"

Gaold grimaced and tightened the Vacuum Press even more. Finally, the energy stabilized, gathering into a small sphere of light no larger than his palm.

Shirone was stunned.

'Is that man... really human?'

Gaold, bent over like a beast, let his arms hang down. His hair was completely bleached white. As he clenched his fist, the Vacuum Press burst, and the Photon Cannon vanished.

"Whew. That was close."

Shirone wasn't the only one surprised. Even Flu and Gando, who had been assisting Gaold, had never seen his hair turn white.

Gaold remained bent over for a long time. Then he looked at Shirone and smiled.

"...You pass."

"He's already fainted."

Kangnan adjusted his glasses and walked to the center of the bunker.

Shirone lay on the ground as if dead. Although using Ataraxia no longer caused him to lose consciousness, this demonstration was undoubtedly his best effort.

"Heh, he really gave it his all. Well, fine."

Gaold shook his numb arm a few times, then picked up the cord on the floor and slung it over his shoulder.

Kangnan stared at Gaold's bleached hair. This Vacuum Press had been Gaold's sincere effort. Hence, Shirone passed.

"You should dye your hair. It looks even older now."

"Leave it. It'll grow back. Isn't bleaching trendy these days?"

"So I've heard. But your face isn't trendy, Chairman."

"Hahaha!"

Gaold laughed heartily and headed for the elevator.

As he pressed the button, he turned to Flu.

"Hey, kid."

"Y-Yes!"

Flu, tense, stood at attention and answered.

She thought she knew Gaold well after two years, but she was mistaken. The Gaold she knew wasn't the real one. Gaold pointed his chin at the fallen Shirone and said, "Take him and let him rest. Bring him to my room when he wakes up."

"Yes! Understood!"

That was all the interest Gaold showed in Flu.

Flu looked at him with sad eyes.

She had cried, snot and tears streaming, shouting her respect. It was the greatest courage of her life. But it seemed to have no effect on Gaold. Or maybe it was already forgotten.

"Flu."

Gando placed a hand on Flu's shoulder.

"I'll take Shirone."

"N-No, I should do it."

"Men are heavy. You can't use magic on the first floor."

Gando entered the bunker, lifted Shirone's arm, and skillfully turned his body to carry him on his back.

Flu, watching for a long time, heard Gando's voice.

"You were impressive, Flu."

It didn't take long for Flu to understand Gando's words. A thin smile appeared on her tearful face.

"Thank you."

Shirone opened his eyes. His head throbbed for a moment, but then he felt refreshed.

He was in the recovery room of the Magic Association. The capsule he lay in had a glass ceiling and a cozy cushion.

As Shirone blinked a few times, the glass ceiling slid open with a clunk. Flu's worried face appeared in the narrow view.

"How are you? Feeling better?"

"Ah, yes. What happened?"

"You lost consciousness in the bunker. That's what happens when you overuse magic. Next time, even if it means reducing the Spirit Zone, increase the density. It'll prevent brain overload."

Flu's voice was gentle, unlike before. It felt awkward for Shirone, but he could see the sadness in her eyes, so he didn't show it.

"Yes, thank you."

Shirone sat up.

Capsules like the one he was in were lined up in rows. Most had their glass ceilings open, but someone was sleeping in a corner.

Flu glanced over and said,

"That's the duty officer. Sleep capsules enhance mental activity. But don't overdo it. They're not perfect."

Shirone got out of the capsule and stretched. He felt refreshed, as if he had slept deeply.

"How long has it been?"

"Two hours. Your recovery is faster than expected. I thought it would take six hours."

Shirone, satisfied with his mental endurance, stretched his body. Then he glanced at Flu. There was an inexplicable distance between them compared to a few hours ago.

"Um..."

"Follow me. The Chairman is looking for you."

Before he could speak, Flu walked towards the exit. Shirone followed her to the elevator. As they waited, she checked the floor number and said,

"In case you didn't hear, you passed."

Having fainted right after casting the Photon Cannon, Shirone hadn't heard Gaold's words. But seeing Flu's dejected look, he had somewhat expected it.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. You'll be going to heaven with the Chairman."

Flu stated what she knew.

From now on, Shirone would be privy to top-level secrets she could never access. There was no need to be cautious anymore.

"And we'll be the second string. Neither I nor Gando will directly assist Gaold. It must be an incredibly high-level operation."

Flu looked back at Shirone.

"I don't know exactly what the mission is, but Gaold said it's a project he's dedicated his life to. If there are collaborators, they'll be the best mages, and it will be an elite group.

You're part of that."

Shirone felt a pang of guilt, realizing what Flu was implying. Being able to work with someone as powerful as Gaold was the highest honor for a mage.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

Ataraxia was a secret Shirone had mastered at the risk of his life. But there were many mages in the world willing to risk their lives to reach a higher level. He couldn't claim superiority.

Flu smiled and shook her head.

Honestly, she had looked down on Shirone, thinking he was chosen by Gaold because of some magic he had acquired from someone else. It hurt her pride.

But after seeing him face Gaold in the bunker, her perspective changed. Flu was willing to die for Gaold, but she didn't have the guts to risk her life like Shirone did.

"Don't think that way. You deserve the Chairman's recognition."

Hearing this from Flu felt different than hearing it from anyone else. The time they had spent bickering as mentor and mentee flashed before his eyes.

Feeling Shirone's sweet gaze, Flu recoiled with a disgusted expression. Quickly regaining her usual demeanor, she pointed at him as if striking an enemy breaching the defense line.

"But you're not there yet! While Ataraxia's power is impressive, you need to refine it to mitigate the risks. A true mage can handle countless unpredictable situations."

Shirone didn't take her words lightly. Flu's skill, proven by subduing vampires in Gold City, was certainly worthy of her position in the Magic Association.

"Yes. I'll do my best, senpai."

"Hmph!"

The elevator doors opened with a clear electronic chime.

Chapter 364: Worst Projects (2)

Shirone reached the 18th floor. Although any staff member could access it, stepping past the Association President's office door was another matter entirely.

Standing in front of the door, Shirone took a deep breath. Flu spoke beside him.

"Listen carefully. Beyond this door is the President of the Association."

Shirone turned to look at Flu.

"Whatever you hear in there, it must never leak out. This is on a different level from what we know. From now on, I won't ask you anything, and you shouldn't reveal anything either."

Shirone sensed Flu's resolve and acknowledged that he, too, had risked everything to get here. He was curious about what Gaold would say but hoped it would be something he could handle.

Flu knocked on the door for him.

"Shirone has arrived."

The door opened, and Gangnan peeked out. She scanned the hallway briefly before turning her gaze to Shirone.

"You've come. You recovered quickly."

"Yes, thanks to your care."

"Come in. Flu, you can head back now. Well done."

Flu wasn't disappointed; he knew this was where his involvement ended.

"I only did what I needed to. I'll take my leave."

Once Flu departed, Gangnan opened the door wide.

Inside, Gaold sat sunk into the old sofa, his newly dyed hair contrasting with the smoky scent of cigars clinging to the

wallpaper.

"You're here? Sit."

Shirone took a seat across from Gaold as Gangnan served tea.

No one spoke. Everyone knew who needed to open the discussion.

"Miro..."

Gaold finally broke the silence.

"She was my classmate at school."

"Yes, I know."

"She was a strange one—no, more like eccentric. One day, she said she could create life. When I told her to prove it, she said she needed a cadaver."

Gaold began his story about Miro. Shirone, curious about Gaold, was equally intrigued by Miro, so he listened intently.

"So, we snuck into the anatomy lab and retrieved a cadaver. Just a few samples—if we'd been caught, we'd have been expelled. But she didn't care at all. Then we went to her lab, where she had this tank on a table, surrounded by bizarre equipment and tangled hoses..."

Gaold waved his hands dramatically, as if mimicking the chaos.

"Yes, I can picture it."

"She stuffed all sorts of strange things into the tank. It was revolting. I was ready to leave, but she wouldn't let me. Said she needed my help. I was stuck."

It was hard to imagine the intimidating Gaold being helpless under someone else's control, but Shirone couldn't help but chuckle at the thought.

"Once everything was set up, Miro handed me a small cup and told me to provide a sample of my semen."

"Cough, cough!"

Caught mid-sip, Shirone choked on his tea.

"D-did you...?"

"Have I lost my mind? Of course, I refused and stormed out. But the next day, she had obtained it somehow—said she

bought it. She continued the experiment, boiling everything into a grotesque liquid. She called it 'primordial soup.' I made a bet with her: if anything came out of that mess, I'd run around the school in my underwear."

Shirone smiled faintly. It seemed school life had hardly changed over the years.

"A month later, I went back to the lab. Miro was ecstatic, completely out of her mind. I didn't understand. Did she really think something would come out of that? I'd just humored her because she was so eccentric."

"Haha, I see."

Then Gaold's face lost all emotion.

"But there was something."

"... What?"

"That grotesque liquid had dried up, leaving the tank coated in sticky mucus. Inside, there was a living organism I had never seen before."

"Couldn't she have brought it from somewhere else...?"

Gaold shook his head.

"No. That was my first thought too. But any living creature humans can imagine is based on pre-existing patterns of knowledge. This was entirely different—something born from a completely independent environment."

Shirone found it hard to believe, but Gaold's eyes were filled with conviction. Even as the foremost Grand Mage, his gaze trembled with the shock of that memory.

"I swear, if you had been there, you would've felt the same—a gut-deep recognition that this creature was utterly alien."

"How did Miro create it?"

Could humans truly create life? The current pinnacle of biomagic was artificial constructs like Harvesters, but no one would dare call those true lifeforms.

"Miro never explained. She swore me to secrecy, saying the world must never know. But now I have a theory: Miro was

the greatest spatial-scale mage. In her created spaces, she could accelerate billions of years of evolution.”

“She... evolved a primordial organism?”

“Perhaps. But that’s not the point. The point is, I lost the bet and had to run around school in my underwear. I was branded a pervert for life.”

‘That hardly seems important...’

Shirone swallowed her unspoken thoughts.

Gaold chuckled, sensing her inner reaction, though he didn’t take back his words.

“Miro knew that lifeform wouldn’t last. It died within a week. She cried a lot that day. You might think, ‘Why create something just to lose it?’ But that was her—unpredictable and strange.”

Shirone nodded. Just from this anecdote, it was clear Miro was far from ordinary.

“It wasn’t just lifeforms. She was a genius of creation, inventing countless, unimaginable devices. I once asked her how she did it, and she said, ‘I just see it.’ When she hears the name of an object, the mechanics instantly come to her mind.”

“Hearing the name...?”

One thought immediately flashed through Shirone’s mind.

“Yes. Perhaps she had access to the Akashic Records.

Regardless, Miro’s genius quickly drew attention in the magical community. She unlocked the Immortal Function early on and could twist spacetime with magnetic fields. But she didn’t care about fame; her mind was consumed by curiosity. That’s how the Paranormal Spiritual Science Society was formed.”

“I’m a member of that group too.”

Shirone felt proud of her affiliation.

“Ha, congratulations on ruining your life. There were three founding members: me, Miro, and some airheaded guy named Saine.”

“Isn’t Saine the Servant Syndrome guy? The one who made Istas’ Master Key?”

“Yeah... not exactly my favorite person.”

Gaold brushed off the topic with a single comment. Shirone was curious about Saine’s whereabouts, but it seemed that would remain a mystery.

“And now... this is the top-secret information you need to know.”

Gaold’s expression turned solemn, and Shirone gulped.

“Miro’s genius brought about disaster. The world’s twelve most powerful leaders—the Holy War—began to monitor her. They had long been watching the affairs of Heaven. This led to the creation of the Valkyries, the Holy War’s army.”

Shirone’s face darkened. She recalled King Orcamp of Kazra summoning her, intending to use Ataraxia to influence the Valkyries.

“Realizing the Final War was near, the Holy War sought a successor to Goffin. Miro was chosen. In an instant, a young girl became humanity’s bulwark. Can you imagine bearing the curse of immortality, trapped in an eternal solitude?”

Shirone couldn’t bring herself to respond.

“Eventually, a tribunal was convened, known as the Judgment of Twenty. Imperial envoys, the Pope of the Lami Church, paragons of virtue, and human rights leaders—all gathered to decide her fate. For balance, even her mentor, Alpheas, and Torhmia’s council auditor, Olivia, had voting rights. The result: 16 for, 1 against, 3 abstained. Miro was condemned to exile.”

“How could they...?”

To Miro, it was a choice between humanity’s survival and her own life. Even if she had agreed voluntarily, questioning the truth was inevitable. For twenty people to arbitrarily end her life was unimaginable.

“Indeed. The process felt overwhelmingly complex to me, yet the world seemed to move forward easily. No one opposed the premise of saving humanity through one

person's sacrifice. Days passed in a blur, and the day of her departure arrived. And Miro..."

Gaold's voice choked, and then he fell silent. His gaze drifted blankly into space as if lost in thought.

His breath quickened, and veins pulsed in his reddening eyes. Tears welled in those unblinking eyes—tears that seemed entirely out of place on his rugged face.

Please, spare Miro! I've lived my life as a faithful servant of God, without a single shameful act. Take my soul if you must, but I beg you, spare Miro...!

You're Gaold, aren't you?

I beg you... Grant this humble servant your grace! Show mercy, oh divine one...!

Even God will forgive us.

Shirone's shocked gaze darted around as the furniture in the room rattled violently, as if an earthquake had struck.

'What... is this?'

Turning to Gaold, Shirone felt her breath catch in her throat. His tears had dried, but within his eyes swirled an uncontrollable storm of emotions.

The scene shifted, engulfed in roaring flames.

This was on a different level from the bunker's terror. The only difference was that this time, Gaold was part of the inferno.

Gaold's eyes rolled upward, whites showing, as his face twisted into a grotesque grimace. His lips curled back, baring teeth in a monstrous snarl.

'This is... too much.'

Even with the strength of her awakened abilities, Shirone felt the sheer physical force pressing down on her. If this continued, the entire 18th floor might explode.

Through the chaos, Gangnan's low, sharp voice pierced the fiery storm.

"Mr. President."

Like a lie, the hellish scene disappeared. Gaold narrowed his eyes as if he had just come to his senses.

Only then could Shirone breathe. He hadn't even realized his entire body was drenched in cold sweat.

Gaold leaned back on the sofa as if nothing had happened. But there would be no more talk about the Judgment of the Twenty.

"Anyway, that's how Miro left this world. Since that day, I've been planning a project, and now it's almost ready to be realized. This is why I called you here."

Shirone calmed his racing heart and prepared to listen.

Gaold, watching him for a moment, suddenly leaned forward.

"I will destroy Miro's spacetime."

"....."

Shirone took in Gaold's words and analyzed their meaning. The realization was even more chilling than the initial shock.

"Destroy Miro's spacetime...?"

It meant he intended to bring Miro back. From Gaold's perspective, it was a given.

But if that happened... this world would be on the path to destruction.

"If Miro's spacetime disappears..."

"Yes. The army of Heaven will invade. Eight archangels, dozens of ordinary angels, hundreds of fallen angels, thousands of demons, giants and fairies, ancient magic, schemas, and subjects armed with the firepower of mecha weapons. No matter who wins, our world will be devastated. This is what I'm telling you."

Gaold did not shy away from the truth. His resolve, unchanged for twenty years, would not waver now.

Shirone rubbed his face with both hands. The fact that his fears were becoming reality was suffocating. No, it was an

even bigger problem than he had anticipated.

It was about rescuing one woman at the cost of all life in this world. He wasn't panicking or overreacting. Faced with an insurmountable problem, his mind felt coldly clear.

"Is there a way?"

If there had been a way to bring Miro back, Gaold would have done it long ago. There must be some nearly impossible condition to fulfill.

"Of course there is."

Gaold smiled pleasantly. He had even more faith in Shirone, who never lost sight of the core issue in any situation.

Chapter 365: Worst Projects (3)

Change the part through the whole. Even if it were possible, tampering with it could lead to serious consequences.

"Is it really okay? If we change the coordinates..."

Even changing the meaning of a single word could completely alter the world. People talk about the erasure of Goffin, but no one knows what the world was like before it.

"It could be disastrous for humans. But that won't happen.

We're not changing the coordinates between planets."

"Then...?"

Gaold raised his index finger.

"We will change the primordial coordinates."

Shirone was speechless for a moment. It took him a while to understand.

"You mean, the beginning of the universe?"

"Yes. The 4D coordinates, which add time to the 3D spatial coordinates. Technically, it's 11 dimensions. Changing the primordial coordinates won't alter events after creation.

Heaven won't be able to find us anymore."

"The absolute value changes, even if the relative value remains the same."

It was different from the erasure of Goffin. It wasn't about resetting the world but changing the reset point.

Gaold nodded, seeing that Shirone understood.

"Exactly. Changing the coordinates will remove the pressure on Miro. Then we can rescue her. After that, we'll seal all the Goffin relics in the world. We'll say goodbye to Heaven forever."

The plan finally felt realistic to Shirone.

Success wasn't guaranteed, but it was theoretically possible. And if it was theoretically possible, humans would eventually achieve it.

'We can avoid the final war. No one has to die.'

With that thought, Shirone asked,

"If I join the project, what will my role be?"

Gaold liked that Shirone used a conditional. He was cautious, which would benefit the team.

"The Akashic Records are in Inguris of Zebul. But Heaven can only move freely from higher to lower realms. To enter Zebul without bloodshed, we must pass through Araboth."

Shirone recalled his experiences in Heaven. If Ikael hadn't invited him to Araboth, he wouldn't have been able to approach Zebul, the angels' resting place.

"The key is how to get through Araboth. Most of Heaven's security is designed with mecha systems. We'll disable the mecha system and infiltrate Inguris."

"Is that possible?"

Having experienced Heaven's sophisticated mecha systems, Shirone was skeptical.

"We'll use the ancient weapon, Tagis. It generates a powerful electromagnetic pulse (EMP). Tagis can temporarily disable the mecha system. But there's one concern."

Shirone's face tensed. It would be his job to address that concern.

"The Akashic Records in Inguris will reboot within two minutes through a backup memory device if shut down abnormally. This means we have only two minutes to change the primordial coordinates."

"What if we use Tagis on the backup memory device?"

Gaold laughed, seeing Shirone had the same thought.

"We considered that. But the backup memory device isn't a mecha system."

Mecha systems, based on electrical power, were similar to magical engineering and optimized for systematically categorizing the Akashic Records.

"If it's not a mecha system, what stores the Akashic Records?"

Something clicked in Shirone's mind.

"Could it be...?"

Gaold nodded seriously.

"Yes. Besides Inguris, Heaven has another Akashic Record. It's Anke Ra."

Shirone's heart raced, guessing what Gaold meant.

"Anke Ra is presumed to be the first life form to recognize the universe. It created Inguris for perfect control. As long as it exists, we'll be racing against time. But if the situation were reversed, our success rate would skyrocket."

Shirone sighed deeply.

"Are you asking me to assassinate Anke Ra?"

Gaold waved his hand dismissively.

"No, no. You're seriously mistaken. I'm telling you to blow up Heaven."

Shirone's eyes widened in shock.

Destroy Heaven? It was absurd and logically impossible.

He could vividly imagine Heaven's vastness. How could he possibly destroy it?

"If you can't do it, how can I?"

It was a pointed question. But Gaold's eyes were filled with conviction.

"You can. Or rather, Ataraxia can. I blocked your attack not because Ataraxia is weak, but because your Photon Cannon was weak."

Shirone couldn't deny that.

Ataraxia's original owner was Archangel Ikael, who had amplified the volcanic activity of Galliant by 20,000 times, wiping out the Kergo tribe in an instant.

"But it's the same. Only I can use Ataraxia, and it's impossible to increase the Photon Cannon's power in a short time."

"That's why I'm asking you. You might find a way."

Shirone felt frustrated. He seemed too immersed in the project to understand.

"Even if you say that, how can I..."

"Shirone."

Gaold's gaze pierced through Shirone.

"You can. No, you must. Increasing the Photon Cannon's power is one way. But if that's impossible, find another way. Ataraxia is stronger than any ancient weapon possessed by the Holy War. Understand everything about Ataraxia. Find a way. Running quickly on a path others have walked isn't genius. Genius is creating something new. You've developed countless spells with your unique battery. I believe in your genius."

Gaold raised his index finger.

"One year. Develop a spell with destructive power greater than Heaven's durability within a year. Ideally, destroy all seven heavens. At the very least, create enough power to prevent the mecha system from recovering."

Shirone was speechless. His mind was about to explode with thoughts. Meanwhile, Gaold returned to his calm demeanor and lit a cigar.

"That's all you can hear as the price of passing. If you succeed, or even grasp a chance, you'll join the advance team in a year."

Shirone thought carefully. Then he played his final card.

"Do you really think I'll do it? Risking the lives of countless subjects?"

"Well. That's something to consider in a year. The decision will be made then. Even if you don't, we'll go to Heaven. We won't blame you. If you join the project, you'll be an enemy of the Holy War and the world. I can't offer you anything."

"I have one condition."

Kangnan turned with a puzzled expression.

It was a life-threatening task, and the mission seemed nearly impossible. If things went wrong, he'd be a traitor to the world. Even if he succeeded, he'd gain nothing.

But Shirone's answer wasn't calculated.

This time, even Gaold was surprised.

'Is he unwavering in his beliefs? Maybe... you could be my savior.'

Gaold pretended to be nonchalant as he lit his cigar.

"Sure, tell me. If it helps the project, I'll support it."

"If I have the power to destroy Heaven and reach that point..."

"And if you do?"

"I must meet someone before I cast the spell. If I can't, I won't do anything."

"Hmm."

Gaold placed the cigar between his fingers and looked at the ceiling. He had a vague idea of who Shirone wanted to meet.

'Ikael.'

The archangel who passed Ataraxia to Shirone.

Meeting her was personal, but now there was another reason.

But was it possible? Considering that would significantly increase the difficulty of the mission.

But refusal wasn't an option. If Shirone found a way to neutralize Anke Ra, the benefits would far outweigh the increased difficulty.

"I won't ask who. But why do you want to meet them? Is it worth turning the world against you?"

Shirone answered with a question.

"Why are you willing to turn the world against you to save Miro?"

Gaold exhaled a puff of smoke from his cigar.

"Heh, I see. You don't need to say it, but today's conversation is confidential. Stay here for now. I'll provide you with whatever you need to help with this task. It will also benefit your school life. You'd like to graduate before you die, right?"

"Thank you."

There was no need to refuse. Now that they were in the same boat, this level of support was expected.

As the conversation ended, Shirone stood up and headed for the door. He hesitated for a moment, then spoke.

"I've met Miro before."

"...Is that so."

The response was surprisingly indifferent.

Only Alpheas and his friends knew about the incident where Miro hijacked Shirone in the realm of infinity, but Gaold, who had been tracking Shirone's actions, had a vague idea.

'Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it.'

He felt a sense of responsibility, but Gaold's calm reaction suggested that the mention of Miro might have touched a deeper wound.

"Well, I'll be going now."

As Shirone pulled the door, Gaold spoke.

"Is she... doing well?"

Shirone recalled the encounter.

It wasn't a particularly pleasant meeting. She had tried to trap him in Miro's spacetime, and he had only managed to return to his original body after passing through a black hole.

Shirone turned to Gaold with a smile.

"Just as I heard, she's quite eccentric."

"..."

Shirone left, and the door closed.

Gaold sat in thought for a long time. Then he chuckled and stubbed out his cigar in the ashtray.

"He's a good kid."

Kangnan, with her usual cold expression, replied.

"Yes. Unlike you, Chairman."

Chapter

366: Special Training (1)

Shirone was officially registered as an intern and began staying at the association. Kangnan thought it was safer to announce this before any strange rumors started circulating.

The first thing Shirone did was write a letter to send home. Kangnan reviewed it, and it was approved.

After sending the telegram in the city and returning, he found Flu waiting on the third floor.

"Did you send the letter?"

"Yes, they said it would take about five days. Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes, the Chief Secretary asked me to."

Shirone was still reeling from the shock of his meeting with Gaold. Hearing that Kangnan had requested something made him nervous.

"From today, I'll be helping with your training."

Shirone had expected some form of assistance from Gaold while he was here, but he hadn't anticipated being taught directly by a professional mage.

The reason he couldn't be happy about it was that it was Flu, the nagger, who would be helping him.

"Why the face? Are you sick?"

"No, it's just so sudden."

"What's sudden? The special training or me?"

"Both, actually."

Flu laughed heartily.

"Well, you're stuck with me. But don't worry too much. I won't be teaching you directly."

"What do you mean?"

Flu rummaged through her inner pocket, sticking out her tongue and rolling her eyes, indicating it was buried deep.

"Ta-da! I got this from the Chief Secretary. Do you know what this is?"

In Flu's hand was a large golden key.

"Well, it looks like a key, but..."

"This is the key to the Magic Association's library! Without the Chairman's approval, no one can enter this area!"

Shirone took a moment to react. He needed to understand what the library was to know whether to be excited or not.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go."

Although it was Gaold's consideration for Shirone, it was Flu who was jumping with excitement.

She led Shirone to the 16th floor of the association.

When the elevator doors opened, a solid iron door blocked their way.

Out of habit, Shirone almost walked into it.

Flu laughed, as if she had expected it, and inserted the key.

The door opened automatically, revealing a grand sight.

The entire 16th floor was a library, with bookshelves stretching out in perfect rows like reflections between two mirrors.

"Welcome. You must be the intern."

A graceful woman in her mid-thirties appeared from beyond the iron door.

She wore a formal black suit, her black hair neatly tied up.

She had light makeup, pink lipstick, thinly groomed eyebrows, and large, deep eyes with double eyelids.

"Hello, Ms. Isabel."

Flu bowed politely and gestured for Shirone to come forward.

"Introduce yourself. This is Isabel, the head librarian and a certified third-class mage."

Shirone was startled and bowed. The disparity between her rank and youthful appearance was jarring.

"Hello, I'm Arian Shirone."

"Yes, I've heard about you from the Chairman. You're a promising talent, so work hard. Come in, I'll show you

around the library."

Isabel turned, and Flu and Shirone followed her inside.

"This is the floor where the magic books are stored. There are about 28,000 volumes. We have most of the regulated magic registered in the kingdom."

"28,000 volumes?"

Shirone couldn't hide his amazement as he looked around. Every book here represented a magic developed by someone. He trembled with excitement.

Flu, as if expecting this reaction, raised her finger.

"See, I told you. It's a huge privilege to be here."

Shirone barely heard Flu's words.

The library had thin books of ten pages and thick ones of up to a thousand pages. The covers and designs varied by attribute and series, and the heights were all different. It looked like an artistic representation of the myriad magics in the world.

'Ah, that's why an archmage has to manage this.'

Magic books contained detailed information about specific magics.

If one could enter the Spirit Zone and had an exceptional mind, they could learn new magic through self-study.

High-level magic books would be incredibly expensive, and the value of 28,000 volumes was beyond imagination.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't believe it at first. Ms. Isabel looks too young to be an archmage."

Isabel covered her mouth and chuckled. Most mages were proud, but she seemed pleased to be told she looked young.

"I understand. But being an archmage doesn't necessarily mean being strong or destructive. I'm in an administrative role. The Red Line rank is determined by reputation and achievement points. When I first came to the library, I was only a certified seventh-class mage. After organizing 1,500 magic books over ten years and my mentor retired, I became a third-class mage. My achievement points skyrocketed, but my reputation is still low."

Achievements and reputation varied greatly by profession. Some high-ranking mages were powerful in combat, while others specialized in different areas.

Having worked in the library for ten years, Isabel likely had little practical experience.

But Shirone was impressed by her in a different way.

"1,500 volumes..."

The process of registering regulated magic involved interviews or correspondence with the magic developer. Once the principles and capabilities were documented in a thesis format, Isabel reviewed, summarized, and bound them into magic books.

This required an exceptional understanding of magic and extensive knowledge.

'Indeed, anyone who organized 1,500 magic books over ten years would become an archmage.'

He knew enduring those ten years was extremely difficult. In that sense, Isabel deserved to be a certified third-class archmage.

"Anyway, just think of me as a friendly sister. Honestly, the title of archmage is a bit burdensome."

Having only met formidable and extraordinary archmages, Shirone found this refreshing.

Thanks to this, he could explore the library more comfortably.

Magic books were broadly categorized by system and then further subdivided chronologically.

There were very old ones and those leading the latest trends.

Seeing a copy of a photonic magic book gave him a slight thrill.

After the introduction, Isabel returned to her desk, leaving them to explore freely.

As she leaned over her desk, a pen moved on its own beside her.

Having worked in the grand library of Ozend, Shirone could imagine how much Isabel's work speed had accelerated over ten years.

'With that level of skill, organizing 1,500 volumes in ten years isn't impossible.'

Flu patted Shirone's back.

"Hey, what are you staring at? Ms. Isabel is married. Is she your type?"

Shirone shook his head, looking serious.

"Absolutely not."

Flu, ignoring him, trembled with excitement.

"The Chief Secretary said you could look at anything. Let's start by choosing the magic you'll practice."

Take anything and learn it. Shirone guessed Gaold's intention.

In addition to training, he wanted Shirone to find hints for magic that could destroy Heaven.

But giving him free access to the library was unexpected. Gaold's promise to spare no support seemed genuine.

Flu, being smart, likely knew Shirone's special training was related to Gaold's project. But as she had vowed before entering the Chairman's office, she showed no sign of it.

'Or maybe she's genuinely enjoying this...'

They went to the section with photonic magic books, Shirone's specialty.

Flu scanned the books on the shelves, offering advice.

"Don't bother with overly simple magic. It's inefficient. For example, what's the point of learning 'Have Fun Making Ping Pong Balls with Photons!'? It might be useful for a performance magician, but not for you."

Shirone took the three-page book Flu mentioned. It described a game of bouncing light balls off mirrors, fun for the whole family and great for dieting.

"Magic developed too long ago is also not worth it. There are many countermeasures for outdated magic. And you

don't have time to learn high-difficulty magic. It would take at least six months, and you have to return to school."

"Ah, I see."

Flu's practical advice snapped him to attention.

He had to consider the time needed to learn the magic. The key was to find magic he could master while at the association.

"Of course, the choice is yours. Preferences affect capabilities. But you need guidelines. First, choose magic that complements your weaknesses. Second, choose magic that synergizes with what you can already do. Third, balance quality and quantity. That should do it."

So Shirone visited the library daily, browsing through the books.

The sooner he chose a magic, the more time he'd have to practice, but he wanted to choose carefully since this opportunity was rare.

'There are so many. It would take years just to look at the photonic series.'

There were trivial magics, ingenious ones, and some with extreme difficulty that seemed impossible.

It was a different world. Like a child in a candy store, he couldn't focus.

'No, stay calm. If I run out of time and can't learn anything, I'll regret it.'

Having adapted to the classification system, Shirone focused on finding magic that fit the guidelines.

He then found an intriguing title in the ten-year-old magic section.

Advanced Teleportation Techniques: Scatter Movement

"Hmm, teleportation."

He was interested because he considered teleportation one of his specialties. The fact that the book wasn't too thick also influenced his choice.

The clean white cover indicated it was a photonic magic book, and below the title was the name of the magic

developer, Kindra Buki.

"Kindra Buki. Never heard of them."

Though he didn't know the person, Shirone respected them. Registering independently developed magic as a regulated magic was up to the mage's discretion until their death. Therefore, while there are countless unregistered spells in the world, mages who willingly share the essence of their magic for the benefit of future generations are particularly admirable.

Without them, there would be nothing to learn at magic schools.

"Well then, I'll read it carefully."

With a reverent heart, Shirone opened the book and read for about ten minutes.

"Oh... I see."

It was quite an ingenious spell.

'This will definitely work. It will be effective in real combat.'

Scatter Movement is a spell that disperses photon output in all directions immediately upon casting teleportation.

To the opponent, it appears as if the mage is spreading out in all directions, creating an illusion.

'Hmm, so it uses passive magic and then transitions to active magic. Since passive magic has a lasting effect, it can be implemented simultaneously with active magic.'

From the middle of the book, detailed techniques and principles were laid out.

As Shirone continued reading, a brilliant idea suddenly struck him.

'What if I combine this with the God Particle?'

In other words, instead of dispersing photon output, he could fire Photon Cannons in all directions while teleporting. If Buki intended Scatter Movement as a distraction tactic, Shirone could evolve it into a movement technique with offensive capabilities.

Chapter 367: Special Training (2)

"Alright. I've decided on this one."

Scatter Movement had a much higher difficulty in execution than in theory.

However, for Shirone, who excelled in the Spirit Zone, this was actually fortunate.

He estimated that he could master it in about a month.

"Then I can learn one more. Let's try something more challenging this time."

Shirone headed to the section with new magic books and looked through the advanced difficulty shelf.

Books with titles like "Time Lock Using Quantum Transformation" and "Magic Circle Interference Based on Wave Principles" were lined up, just reading the titles made him feel overwhelmed.

Moreover, most of them were about information magic, which he didn't need immediately.

"Pass. Pass. Pass on that one too."

Shirone read each title carefully as he walked. There wasn't a single thin book in the advanced section.

"Hmm, what's this?"

Shirone stopped in front of a book on the last shelf.

It was similar in thickness to the other books and wasn't about information magic. But what caught his attention was the title.

Laser Guidance Technology

"Laser..."

It required a high level of energy output, but Shirone could easily achieve it using the God Particle. Converting mass into energy was an incredible advantage.

However, for most mages, it was a skill that required long-term training to master. Therefore, the mage who developed Laser Guidance Technology must have been quite skilled.

"Let's take a look."

The white cover indicated it was a photonic magic book, but it had a red band to signify the laser aspect.

Shirone checked the name of the developer under the title and was surprised.

Louis Jacquebain.

"Ah, Jacquebain..."

He was the head of the Particle Research Institute under the Tormia Dragon Tower, a mage anyone studying photonic magic should know.

When he opened the book, it was filled with complex formulas.

Shirone skipped the theory and went straight to the overview of the magic. As he read calmly, his face gradually lit up.

"This is amazing."

It was a fusion magic combining two principles of photonic magic.

Magic is activated when focused, and thus the thought slot is basically one. Therefore, advanced mages combine two or even three attributes to simultaneously utilize the advantages of various series.

In summary, Jacquebain's magic was a photon equipped with a laser guidance system.

To bend light, you usually need optical fibers or special media, but with laser guidance, you could change the trajectory as much as you wanted.

Moreover, it was possible to track moving targets within the range of inertia.

Jacquebain likely developed this magic for the convenience of information transmission, but Shirone was already envisioning the curved trajectory of a Photon Cannon.

"This is what Flu meant. Magic that complements weaknesses and creates synergy."

A Photon Cannon with mass could be given a spin to achieve some degree of curvature. However, as a predictive shot, its efficiency was too low, and the bending angle wasn't significant.

"But if I master Laser Guidance Technology..."

He could hit the target no matter where it moved. The precision would vary with skill level, but for Shirone, who could generate explosive firepower in a short time, it was the perfect magic to reduce mental strain.

"Great! This will be my first fusion magic!"

Shirone took the magic book and looked for Flu. She was reaching for a high shelf in the fire magic section when she turned around.

"Hmm? Did you choose?"

"Yes, here. Two books."

Flu alternated between the two books and nodded. There was an advanced course, but it wasn't a good idea to be intimidated from the start.

"Alright. They seem to complement each other well. Let's tell Ms. Isabel and borrow them."

When they brought the books to Isabel, she issued a loan certificate.

Then, looking at the Laser Guidance Technology book, she asked with a surprised expression,

"This one is quite difficult. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I already know how to use lasers. Is it that hard?"

"It's a specialized field not covered in school. Especially since it uses radio waves, it might be unfamiliar."

The laser Shirone used was different from other mages.

The God Particle allowed him to leap over high barriers all at once, but without a precise understanding of the theory, his range of application was limited.

"I'll give it a try. I want to master lasers this time."

If he was determined, Isabel had no reason to stop him.

"Well, using photons as attack magic is rare, so I understand your ambition. If you have any questions while studying, ask me. The Chairman instructed me to tutor you if necessary." Gaold's consideration was both appreciated and daunting. He truly believed Shirone could develop magic to destroy Heaven.

"Thank you. I'll probably be back soon."

"Haha! Sure. Come anytime."

To avoid feeling embarrassed later, Shirone gave a heads-up and got on the elevator.

The iron door of the library closed before the elevator did.

As always, it felt like returning from another dimension.

With Flu's help, Shirone got a personal training room.

Strictly speaking, it was Gaold's order.

It wasn't as spacious as the underground bunker, but it was enough for him to unleash the Spirit Zone and train alone.

A sleep capsule was installed in the corner, and the floor material was the same as the 2000 training ground. The simulation device seemed capable of analyzing magic from various angles.

Shirone sat on the cold floor and opened the Scatter Movement magic book.

After quickly reading it from start to finish, he closed the book and organized his thoughts.

"Hmm, it seems both easy and tricky."

The key was the speed of linking passive and active magic.

He had to shoot photon output in all directions immediately upon casting teleportation. The principle was simple, but the linking speed had to feel almost simultaneous for the technique to be valuable.

"Let's give it a try."

Entering the training ground, Shirone cast the photonic transformation magic. With a familiar sensation, the scenery ahead warped and rushed towards him.

Arriving 10 meters ahead, Shirone looked at the ceiling, lost in thought. He intended to cast Scatter Movement, but it

didn't activate.

"Oh, I see."

When teleportation is activated, the slot is empty. But the movement speed was too fast to cast photon output.

"Does the slot need to switch much faster?"

In that case, Shirone had a specialty to boast about: parallel processing.

Focusing on that, Shirone attempted Scatter Movement based on parallel processing.

By sunset, he was getting the hang of it. After recovering his mental strength for an hour in the sleep capsule, he executed the magic with maximum concentration.

Finally, he shot light in eight directions simultaneously with teleportation.

Moving north, the basic route of Scatter Movement, Shirone looked back, unable to hide his excitement.

"I did it! I did it!"

"What did you do?"

Shirone turned towards the door.

Flu was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, looking unimpressed.

"Oh? When did you get here, senpai?"

"Just now. What were you doing a moment ago?"

"What else? Scatter Movement, of course."

"Hmm, really?"

Flu walked into the training ground.

Stopping about 10 meters from Shirone, she looked around as if checking coordinates, then turned back to him.

"Do it again. I'll evaluate it."

Flu's firm tone made Shirone a bit nervous.

But no matter how he thought about it, his Scatter Movement was exactly as described in the magic book.

"Okay. I'll start with the basic route..."

"No need. Do the intermediate course. Go to any of the eight directions you want. From what I saw earlier, you should be able to do that."

Though it sounded like praise, it didn't feel like it. Since he was just learning, Shirone wasn't too worried about failing.

"Let's go southeast."

While Shirone focused, Flu waited with her arms crossed.

'Scatter Movement!'

As Shirone's body glowed golden, light exploded in all directions.

Arriving exactly 10 meters southeast, he clenched his fist.

"Success, it's a success."

His joy was short-lived as he flinched in surprise.

Flu was already in front of him, holding his shoulders with both hands.

Her eyes were half-closed, calm like when she subdued a terrorist.

Usually a nagging sister, at times like this, she was unmistakably a certified eighth-class mage.

"Uh, um..."

"Do you know what your problem is now?"

In form, Scatter Movement was a success. But Flu had pinpointed him among the eight flashes.

Not only that, she moved faster than the caster to block his path.

"Is the linking too slow?"

Flu finally let go of his shoulders.

"Yes. It's not visible, but it can be sensed in the Spirit Zone. Especially for a manipulation-type mage like me, the delay is even more apparent."

"But I did my best."

"It's not about effort. Your linking was excellent. You probably switched at a speed close to parallel processing..."

After a moment of thought, Flu spoke with conviction.

"But that's the problem."

Shirone tilted his head.

Parallel processing is a thought method that rapidly switches two slots.

While thoughts can slow down, there's no faster switching.
"To explain your mechanism: you equip teleportation, cast it, unequip teleportation, then equip photon output and cast it."

Flu demonstrated by putting her fists in and out, representing the linking of the two magics. Going through at least three steps created a delay perceptible in the Spirit Zone.

But that was the limit of Shirone's ability.

"If there's a delay even with parallel processing, what should I do?"

"Collide them."

"What?"

"Collide them. Don't unequip teleportation, hit it with photon output. And as you hit, equip photon output in the slot."

Flu extended both fists forward.

She struck her left hand with her right, causing the left hand to fly away and the right hand to take its place.

This illustrated her earlier explanation.

"That's how you finish unequipping and equipping simultaneously. It shortens the mechanism. You need to do this in the realm of thought. It's about striking an existing thought with a new one. Mages call this 'Force.'"

Flu demonstrated the process again, but this time, she brought her fists close together and quickly collided them, making a "bang" sound with her mouth.

"Do you understand? Skip the unequipping process and just hit it while equipping. If you ever work in the field, you need to know Force. Passive-active linking is used across all series."

Shirone listened in a daze. Replacing one thought with another?

Ordinary people don't think this way, but for mages, it was an extremely efficient method.

"Force... I didn't know such a thing existed."

"Of course not. It's a practical skill. They don't teach it in school."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No, but it's less stable. You have to precisely equip the slot while colliding thoughts. It's heavily reliant on intuition, so it's not suitable for regular education. Parallel processing is also a professional skill. It's impressive that you mastered it on your own. You'll probably learn Force quickly too."

Flu's words restored Shirone's confidence. Although his first attempt at Scatter Movement ended in failure, learning a new skill not taught in school was an achievement.

The key was mastering Force.

Chapter 368: Special Training (3)

The intensive training began in earnest.

Shirone focused on practicing Scatter Movement during practical sessions and studied the theory of Laser Guidance Technology during breaks.

Thanks to an hour of tutoring from Isabel each day, he was gradually getting a grasp on radio waves.

Flu would evaluate his daily progress after returning from her duties.

However, no matter how hard Shirone tried, Flu's strict evaluations never seemed to yield a passing grade.

"Too slow. Again."

Gritting his teeth, Shirone cast Scatter Movement. Each time, Flu would appear in front of him, gripping his shoulders with both hands.

Despite hoping for a lucky break, it seemed professional mages didn't make mistakes.

'How does she keep finding me? Can a human really react this quickly?'

It was hard to believe it was just because Shirone was inexperienced; Flu's sensory perception was incredibly sharp.

Regardless, Shirone couldn't complain about being guided by such an excellent mage, and the days continued to accumulate.

"Ugh!"

With a dull thud, Shirone rolled on the floor, his back arching in pain and his face contorted in agony.

Focusing too much on photon output, he missed the landing point of his teleportation.

Flu looked down at Shirone, who had fallen at her feet, and said,

"Again."

A brilliant flash exploded in the center of the training ground.

Photon output scattered in seven directions, and Shirone safely reached his destination. Flu's face was nowhere to be seen.

'Got it! This time it worked!'

It seemed Flu hadn't been able to track Scatter Movement.

As expected, she hadn't moved from her original spot.

With her eyes closed, she drew a line with her index finger.

"Again."

Panting, Shirone asked,

"Why? The Force was perfect, and you didn't catch me."

"Look where you're standing."

Shirone looked around his feet. The direction was correct, and there was nothing unusual.

"What's wrong with here?"

"You only moved about 8 meters. Don't you usually set your teleportation distance to 10 meters?"

"Oh..."

How could he make such a basic mistake?

"Listen. Your teleportation distance must never waver, no matter the situation. In real combat, hundreds of turns pass in an instant, and you have to navigate complex terrain. If your distance wavers, you die. That's why even high-level mages rarely change their set distance during battle."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

Flu put her hands on her hips and exhaled sharply at his dejected response.

"If your basics are weakening, it means you're becoming more technically proficient. But you can't let your guard down. All applications ultimately come from solid basics."

Shirone clenched his fists and took her words to heart.

Basics, basics are everything.

The next day.

Shirone finally succeeded in Scatter Movement.

Flu didn't move, and the direction was accurate. The teleportation distance was also a perfect 10 meters.

"Ah... I finally did it."

He was so tense that he couldn't even fully appreciate the joy of success.

But Flu still didn't smile. Instead, she approached with a colder gaze, as if the real work was just beginning.

"Now, let's get serious. Your own Scatter Movement."

Understanding Flu's meaning, Shirone quickly adjusted his expression.

Scatter Movement was a good spell on its own, but the reason he chose it from among many magic books was its potential to be converted into an attack spell.

'Don't be nervous. Just replace photon output with Photon Cannon.'

It had taken three weeks to master Scatter Movement. If he didn't pass now, it would delay him by several more days, leaving little time to learn the advanced Laser Guidance Magic.

"Go ahead. I'll take it directly."

Flu's gaze was entirely different from when she evaluated Scatter Movement.

Photon Cannon, unlike photon output, was a complete attack spell. As this was the final evaluation, he had to give it his all.

Shirone took a deep breath and timed his move. Assuming a one-second delay, he cast teleportation at 0.5 seconds to disrupt his opponent's tempo.

As his body glowed, Photon Cannons shot out in all directions, and Flu moved simultaneously.

Shirone arrived in the west. Therefore, the Photon Cannon heading towards Flu, who arrived in the south, was on target.

As the Photon Cannon was sensed through the Spirit Zone, Flu's head involuntarily tilted back.

The Photon Cannon whizzed past her face and crashed into the wall with a thud, shaking the training ground.

"How was that? Will it work in real combat?"

"....."

Flu reviewed the situation.

The pressure of receiving the Photon Cannon was much stronger than expected. The power came from its speed, which distinguished it from other spells.

Sub-light speed is a standard created to define the speed of light implemented by magic.

While not used in physics, it's a speed indistinguishable from light to the human eye.

If you shot an arrow with a light-emitting object at night, it would appear as a flash.

But experiencing the Photon Cannon was much faster than expected. It was closer to the speed of a bullet fired from a gun. This meant the ratio of mass to output was perfectly balanced.

A larger mass than a magic bullet was propelled at bullet speed, causing the target to stiffen.

Even if the original Scatter Movement didn't hit the target, it would at most be a dud, but this was a bang.

"Pass. This will definitely work in real combat."

Shirone's face finally lit up.

"Whew, thank goodness. The three weeks of hard work paid off. Thank you so much!"

There was nothing more gratifying for a mage than learning a new spell, and Flu, understanding Shirone's feelings, replaced her strict expression with a smile.

"You should maintain this feeling. Keep practicing if you want."

"Of course. Remembering the sensation of success is important. Just don't overdo it."

From then on, Shirone practiced Scatter Movement until he was exhausted.

After two hours, he could move to any of the eight directions without any deviation in the power of the Photon Cannon.

"Ouch, my back."

Flu, who had been watching Shirone's training, massaged her back, which had stiffened from dodging Photon Cannons.

If she had dodged with physical strength, it might have been different, but moving with manipulation magic took its toll.

'Once he mastered it, he became proficient in the intermediate level within two hours. Talent is talent, after all.'

According to academic journals, Shirone's strength was his insight. He had an extreme tendency to delve into the core rather than accumulating miscellaneous skills.

This was likely what Gaold had high hopes for.

"Whew."

Finishing his training, Shirone looked up at the ceiling, his face drenched in sweat.

The state of unity derived from a sense of achievement is a miraculous period where skills can improve rapidly.

Mages call this state "fever."

"All done?"

Shirone looked satisfied.

"Yes, I think I've got the hang of it."

"Starting tomorrow, we'll move on to Laser Guidance Technology. But there's something we need to address first."

The joy of success disappeared from Shirone's eyes.

He had to listen to whatever it was.

Living with the professional mages of the association, their mindset had naturally rubbed off on him.

"Watching you for three weeks, I've noticed your balance is way off."

"Huh? Balance?"

Flu twirled her finger, roughly describing Shirone's Spirit Zone.

"The biggest problem is that your Spirit Zone is too large. It feels like it's over 80 meters in diameter."

"Is that a problem?"

"In real combat, the smallest details determine victory or defeat. It's important to maintain the golden balance of density, volume, proportion, and durability. You tend to overdo it. If your opponent's durability is 100, 100 power is enough. But you unconsciously pour in 120, 130."

Since the Spirit Zone is a manifestation of the mind, there's no lying. Reflecting on all his past battles, Shirone realized this was true.

"It's the same now. When our Spirit Zones overlap, the tension pricks at me. I've always wondered why. Unless you've only fought monsters."

Shirone couldn't deny it.

Looking back on the year since he started learning magic, he hadn't faced many equal opponents. By his standards, all his enemies were monsters.

As Shirone remained silent, Flu understood. If he had grown through such battles, it made sense that his Spirit Zone would be in a state of display, like a wounded beast.

"Anyway, that's not good. I'll help you find the golden balance."

Flu went to the wall and turned on the Image Zone switch. As Shirone's Spirit Zone became visible with a bluish light, she turned off the training ground lights to enhance clarity. Shirone watched his beautifully glowing Spirit Zone in silence.

At that moment, Flu hugged him from behind, pressing her body against his.

"Uh, um..."

"Stay still."

Flu's calm voice stopped Shirone from speaking.

As she expanded her Spirit Zone, Shirone's Spirit Zone was clearly conveyed through shared perception.

'He's really tense. Almost like a mage in a war zone.'

Flu closed her eyes and focused, then gave Shirone instructions.

"Close your eyes and take deep breaths. Reduce your Spirit Zone until you feel completely comfortable."

Shirone relaxed his body and let go of his tension.

As his Spirit Zone, which had been taut like a balloon, gradually shrank, his mind felt lighter.

"Good... keep going..."

As he reduced his Spirit Zone further, the tension he hadn't noticed before began to reveal itself.

"A little more..."

Flu used all her senses to feel Shirone.

"More. More... that's it. Good."

At that point, Flu's voice faded away.

Shirone, with his head bowed, felt an overwhelming sense of warmth and peace, as if he were in his mother's embrace.

Flu's eyelids slowly lifted as if waking from sleep.

"...Done?"

"Yes, it feels good."

Flu released her hands from Shirone's waist and quietly moved to the Image Zone device.

She checked the gauge, which read a diameter of 62.8 meters.

When the lights came on, Shirone opened his eyes, feeling refreshed as if he had just woken from a deep sleep.

"Remember this feeling. The size, shape, sensation, density—everything. Everything contained within the 62.8-meter sphere is your current golden balance."

Shirone understood Flu's words. The increased density made his surroundings feel clearer, and his durability felt significantly stronger.

Most importantly, his thoughts flowed smoothly, like water.

"It feels really comfortable. But 62.8 meters isn't much larger than a year ago. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's perfectly fine. Unless you're a sniper, you don't need an excessively large Spirit Zone. How often do you fight enemies at invisible distances? Even learning the four-directional technique doubles your range."

"That's true, but..."

"Trust me. For a search-type mage, a Spirit Zone diameter of at least a kilometer is necessary. Communication mages need an extended Spirit Zone to transmit information over tens of kilometers. But some combat mages have Spirit Zones only 10 meters in diameter, focusing instead on density and durability."

The key was to maintain a mental state that maximized the efficiency of his magic.

"Don't be swayed by numbers. They can solidify your thinking. While gauging an opponent's capabilities by numbers is essential for combat mages, preemptively imagining the outcome is dangerous. No trait is an absolute advantage or disadvantage. The criteria for advantage and disadvantage vary depending on the opponent, and your ability to adapt to various situations determines victory or defeat."

Shirone nodded resolutely.

"Yes, I'll keep that in mind."

Chapter 369: Special Training (4)

Shirone began training in Laser Guidance Magic in earnest. While he had no issues with the execution, the theory was beyond advanced level.

In this regard, Isabel was a savior.

As the head of the magic library, her explanations were easy to understand and always hit the mark.

Light is a type of electromagnetic wave. The Laser Guidance Magic developed by Jacquebain used an active homing system, where the laser observed the waves emitted upon collision with an object to guide the projectile to the target. For this to work, a laser-seeking magic called Seeker had to be used first.

"Ugh! I don't get it! This is just information magic!"

Shirone looked up from his book, frustrated.

The page he was on detailed the algorithm for equipping the Seeker, which to him was like a foreign language.

From across the training ground, Flu, who was reading a magic book, clicked her tongue.

"That's why you should have considered the difficulty when choosing a magic book. You have a month left. Why not give up and find something else?"

Shirone glared at Flu with half-closed eyes. She was so annoying.

"You said it was fine at first."

"Well, I'm not saying it's impossible now. If you push hard, you might manage it in a month. But there's always Plan B, right?"

"Hmm, Plan B..."

Flu was right. If he was going to give up, now was the time.

If he invested more time in this, he might end up returning to school with only Scatter Movement mastered.

"I'll stick with it. I've learned a lot already, like radio waves."

As soon as Shirone finished speaking, Flu closed her book and stood up.

"Alright, if that's your decision, let's get serious."

Shirone looked up at Flu as she approached.

"The most important thing right now is the Seeker. It's the linking magic that fuses the laser and Photon Cannon."

"Yes, but it's really difficult. I'm not good with information magic."

"Not only information mages use algorithms. For example, I can use them too."

"Really? You?"

Shirone squinted in disbelief. Flu grabbed her magic staff and moved to the center of the training ground. She struck the ground with her staff, showcasing her skill.

"Phoenix Formation."

A giant firebird rose from the crystal orb at the end of her staff, hovering in the air like smoke.

Since no one was within its range, the firebird flapped its wings silently.

Flu pointed to herself and said,

"What do you think my specialty is?"

"Uh, fire magic, right?"

"No. While I do handle fire magic, I'm actually a zoner."

Thinking of Etella, Shirone tilted his head.

If a zoner's characteristics were a massive Spirit Zone and highly sensitive senses, Flu didn't fit either.

"It's a special field, so you might not know. When people think of zoners, they usually think of search-type mages.

But a zoner is simply an expert in the Spirit Zone."

Flu held up two fingers.

"Zoners are divided into search-type and manipulation-type. I'm the latter, a manipulation-type mage."

"Ah, so you control that firebird."

"Yes. The Phoenix Formation fires flames at all targets within the Spirit Zone. It reacts much faster than shared perception because it uses the Dawkins algorithm. It's an automatic response of nerves and mind. Blocking the vampire's attack at the Gold Tower was also an automatic response."

Shirone's expression turned blank.

A top graduate of the Royal Magic School and a specialist zoner.

No wonder she could precisely adjust the golden balance of the Spirit Zone.

"The same goes for search-types. If durability is the virtue of combat mages, zoners are obsessed with density. But since the mind isn't a particle, even 100% density doesn't mean it's completely full. It just means intuition is 100% accurate. That's why it's really hard to go beyond 95%."

Flu moved her staff behind her and changed positions.

Shirone's head followed her.

"Of course, a zoner should ideally reach 100%. Then, to enhance clarity, we use a unit called specific gravity. If you consider a normal Spirit Zone as gas, a zoner's Spirit Zone can reach the specific gravity of liquid, clay, or even rock, depending on their level."

When Shirone turned to face her, Flu stopped and held up three fingers.

"Still, the minimum standard for a zoner is 60% density.

Search-type Spirit Zones are incredibly large. If you expand your Spirit Zone to a 2-kilometer diameter without Immortal Function, the density drops to 0%. That's why zoners focus solely on density."

If the density was 0%, the Spirit Zone wouldn't form. But the comparison made it clear.

"So, how do you search a 2-kilometer radius with 60% density? That's where algorithms come in. For example, using the Pisarski algorithm, you can search for metal substances within the radius. It captures the reflectivity of light, so it's less efficient at night."

Shirone was struck by the novelty. While regular magic affected the external world, algorithms were meta-magic that gave unique functions to the Spirit Zone.

Though not as powerful as schemas, mages had developed magic to counter other magic.

How vast is the world of magic?

His heart began to race. It was wide and deep, a giant playground he could immerse himself in for a lifetime without getting bored.

With Flu's help, Shirone gradually learned the algorithm for the Seeker.

It was a series of basics, and Isabel provided intensive guidance on the advanced, complex theories.

Time flew by, and with four days left before leaving the Magic Association, Shirone finally completed the theory stage.

"Finally. It's done."

Shirone closed the magic book and lay flat on the floor. He had never studied this hard, even at school.

It wasn't a matter of effort but biological limits.

Humans need sleep, but the Magic Association's sleep device helped him overcome the impossible.

"I did it. I really did it."

Shirone mumbled in a daze, feeling like steam was escaping from his head.

Flu, who had worked just as hard, looked haggard after a month.

"...You're really stubborn. I told you to give up."

Flu had been enthusiastic at first, but by the middle, she was reaching her limit.

Though she had to handle the association's work during the day, Shirone's determination was impressive even considering that.

"Hehe! How about it? I did it, right?"

Flu maintained her last bit of pride.

"No. Do you know that for an average person, this would have been physically impossible? You've only just finished the theory. So my judgment was correct."

Shirone acknowledged that fact.

Just mastering the theory didn't mean the magic would work.

Still, he persisted with Laser Guidance because, unlike others, he already had the execution down.

"Shall we start then?"

As Shirone slowly stood up, Flu shook her head.

"No, you need to rest today."

"But there's no time."

"No means no! If you practice in that state, you'll really die. And not just you, I'll die too!"

"Then at least use the sleep device..."

"That's not allowed either! Go to your room now! If you don't sleep for at least eight hours, I won't help you anymore!"

Flu pushed Shirone towards his quarters.

Shirone's steps were heavy as he walked back. There was no time. He was so anxious that he didn't even feel tired.

"Just a bit more. At least review before sleeping."

Shirone lay on his bed with the Laser Guidance magic book. And fell asleep in one second.

The next afternoon.

"Ah! This is bad!"

People in the hallway turned their heads at the sound coming from Shirone's room.

The door burst open, and Shirone, with wet hair from a recent shower, ran to the training ground.

There were only three days left.

He had to practice today and get evaluated tomorrow to achieve his goal.

When he arrived at the training ground, Flu was already prepared.

Shirone's eyes widened. Despite oversleeping, Flu should have been at work.

"Huh? What's going on?"

"Did you sleep well?"

Flu checked Shirone's condition.

"Yes. I slept so much it was annoying. But what about your work?"

"I took leave. I'll focus on helping you for the next three days."

"Ah..."

Tears welled up in Shirone's eyes.

Using her precious leave to help a junior train. Today, she looked like an angel.

"Senpai..."

Seeing Shirone approach with a strange expression, Flu recoiled like a turtle and held out her hand.

"W-What are you doing with that look? Stay back! Creepy!"

As Shirone continued to approach, she backed away in a hurry. Only when he stopped did she speak.

"Anyway, since I'm here, I have to see you succeed. So let's do this properly."

Shirone's face turned serious.

"Yes, please take care of me!"

The training continued until midnight, extended to the next morning with the help of the sleep capsule.

They corrected numerous algorithm errors overnight, but there was still a long way to go.

"At least you've equipped the Seeker. Now let's try a proper fusion. Can you do it?"

"Yes, I'll try."

Shirone mentally prepared himself and entered the Spirit Zone.

As his mental sequence accelerated, his eyes widened.

'Homing Photon Cannon!'

Eight Photon Cannons formed around Shirone, glowing with a pale, beautiful light.

The difference this time was the red dot in the center of each sphere.

A laser pointer, the Seeker.

"Fusion successful. Now for the target aiming algorithm."

Following Flu's instructions, Shirone manipulated the Seeker, then asked with a puzzled expression,

"Uh, where's the target?"

Flu clapped her hands together.

"Oh, right! There should be a test drone somewhere."

She rummaged through a supply box in the corner of the training ground, then turned around with a new idea.

"Actually, never mind. I'll be the target."

She moved to the east wall and stood against it.

"You'll be the target, senpai?"

"Yes. We don't have much time. Let's skip the small stuff."

Shirone agreed that it was more efficient.

He aimed at Flu with his Spirit Zone, and the Seeker targeted her according to the algorithm.

Eight laser points marked various spots on her body.

Flu looked at the floating spheres in front of her and swallowed hard.

The Seekers embedded in the Photon Cannons stared at her like the emotionless eyes of a monster, making her feel extremely uneasy.

'This is... much scarier than I thought.'

As she slowly tilted her body, the eight laser points moved in unison, following her.

When she straightened up, the Seekers adjusted their aim again. She felt a slight chill.

'It's already a fast spell. And now it's tracking me?'

Shirone, ready to start, said,

"Senpai, I'll begin..."

"Wait a moment."

Flu raised her hand. Shirone stopped the magic and looked at her blankly.

She cleared her throat and averted her gaze.

"On second thought, let's just use the drone."

Chapter 370: Special Training (5)

Flu rummaged through the supply box again and pulled out a heavy drone with both hands.

The drone, which flew using magnetic levitation, had erratic flight paths, making it suitable for guidance experiments.

"Let's start with level 1. Get a feel for it."

Shirone aimed the laser pointer at the drone. When Flu flipped the switch, the drone vibrated and lifted off into the air.

The laser pointer tracked the drone's path. Then, all eight Photon Cannons shot out simultaneously.

Though slower than the original Photon Cannon, the speed of the photonic magic was still impressive.

Shirone anxiously watched the homing Photon Cannons.

As the drone skimmed past the wall, the eight Photon Cannons curved sharply and struck the target.

A series of explosions followed, and the drone bounced out of the smoke, rolling on the floor.

"It worked! Success!"

Even though he had cast the spell, Shirone couldn't believe it.

Light bending.

When the Photon Cannons curved sharply in front of the wall, he felt a thrill.

Flu also thought it wasn't bad.

"A good start. But it's not ready for real combat yet. A level 1 drone can be hit with just Photon Cannons. Let's set the passing standard to hitting drones that are hard to catch with Photon Cannons using homing Photon Cannons."

"Yes! I'll definitely succeed!"

Shirone's determination burned brighter after the first successful experiment.

The difficulty gradually increased, and finally, it was the day before he was to leave the Magic Association.

Shirone's mental sequence was at an all-time high as he prepared for the final evaluation.

Flu, holding the drone, looked as tense as she was invested.

"Ready? This is level 7 mode. Maximum trajectory deviation is 27 degrees. This is the movement of a professional mage."

"Yes. It needs to be at that level to be useful in real combat. I'm ready."

Shirone launched the homing Photon Cannons more skillfully than before. The eight laser pointers locked onto the drone without fail.

The algorithm was now precise, with the aiming points concentrated into a single spot.

"Starting."

As soon as Flu pressed the switch, she released the drone and stepped back.

The metal drone, which had been vibrating violently, flew lightly and smoothly through the air.

The magnetic levitation path was unfamiliar to the human eye accustomed to gravity. But the homing Photon Cannons vibrating around Shirone kept their red eyes fixed on the drone.

'Let's go! This ends here!'

The eight homing Photon Cannons left Shirone's side and chased the drone. When the drone almost reversed direction, the Photon Cannons curved sharply and pursued it.

Nine flying objects crisscrossed the wide training ground, but Shirone kept his eyes straight ahead.

A three-second chase ensued.

In terms of speed, the Photon Cannons were faster, but the drone used sharp drifts to shorten the distance, avoiding

capture.

However, the Seeker never lost track of the drone, and the gap began to close.

When the leading Photon Cannon struck the drone, it made a thud, and the drone bounced off the floor.

Then, the remaining seven Photon Cannons plunged to the ground, continuously bombarding the rolling drone.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Flu's eyes widened as she shouted.

"Wow! That's amazing!"

The precision of chasing the drone even after it bounced off.

Plus, the power was strong enough to dent solid metal.

Not only was it effective in real combat, but it would also be devastating if caught off guard.

Shirone couldn't believe the result either.

'Magic... has no limits.'

Finally realizing the reality, Shirone looked at Flu with eyes full of emotion.

Their gazes met for a moment before they ran to each other, hugging and jumping up and down.

"Success! We did it, senpai!"

"Well done! If you had failed, it would have been so frustrating! Finally, I'm free!"

Their excited shouts echoed through the training ground.

Only the dented drone looked at them pitifully.

The last night at the Magic Association arrived.

Shirone headed to the first-floor waiting room after being called by Flu.

The empty hallway felt lonely compared to the bustling atmosphere of the day.

"Why the waiting room? We could have met at the dorm."

At the end of the hallway behind the first-floor lobby, light seeped through the crack of a door. The darkness was silent, and no voices could be heard.

"Hello?"

As Shirone opened the door and peeked in, a paper popper went off with a bang.

Startled, he stepped back, and the door opened to reveal four smiling faces.

"Congratulations, Shirone!"

"Huh?"

A cake was set up in the middle of the waiting room, with Flu, Gando, Isabel, and Kangnan standing around the table. Flu lit the candles with a snap of her fingers and gestured for him to come in.

"What are you doing? Come blow out the candles."

Feeling like he was in a dream, Shirone walked over.

"Um, what's the occasion?"

"It's the day you complete your internship at the Magic Association. Come on, hurry up."

When Shirone blew out the candles, everyone clapped. Completing the Magic Association internship. It sounded impressive, but the more he thought about it, the more embarrassed he felt.

"Thank you. But it's just an internship, nothing special."

Isabel, who had let her hair down, spoke.

Having only seen her with her hair neatly tied up at work, she looked much more alluring with it down.

"Still, it's the Magic Association. We can't let the longest-serving intern leave without a send-off. I heard you finished your training well. Flu said you were impressive.

Congratulations."

Flu added another reason.

"And you turned nineteen. Think of it as a birthday celebration."

"Oh, right!"

He had been so focused on training that he hadn't realized the year had changed. The many events of the past year came back to him in a wave of emotions, much larger than anything he had felt before.

Standing a bit apart, Kangnan handed a small box over Isabel's shoulder.

"Congratulations, Shirone. This is a gift from the association."

"Thank you. But what is it?"

While he had formed connections with the people here, there was no reason for the association to care about an intern. Sensing Gaold's influence, Shirone wondered if there was a hidden agenda.

"It's just a gift. Open it."

Inside the box was a silver signet ring. About 3 centimeters wide, with an engraved magic circle in the center.

"Oh? This is a Kubrick, isn't it?"

At Flu's words, Shirone turned his head.

"A Kubrick?"

"A two-dimensional ring. All association staff have one. You know what a two-dimensional ring is, right?"

"No, I don't."

Despite his rapid growth, Shirone knew little about magical tools.

"It's a ring that stores items using scale magic. They sell them at alchemy shops, but they're quite expensive. The ones from the association have a more precise encryption system, so they're pretty good."

A ring that stores items in a subspace would naturally be expensive.

But what Shirone liked most was the Tormia Magic Association emblem engraved inside the ring.

No matter how expensive a Kubrick was, the association's emblem couldn't be bought with money.

Isabel took the ring and placed it on Shirone's ring finger.

"It works like other magical tools. It responds to the Spirit Zone. Flu, could you handle the magic control device?"

Flu went out to the hallway and disabled the magic control device for the waiting room.

Since the head of the magic library requested it, the security chief approved it, and the chief secretary allowed it, there was no problem.

When Flu returned, Shirone entered the Spirit Zone.

A unique magic he hadn't felt before was conveyed through shared perception. Focusing on it, letters appeared before his eyes.

"User registration? Yes, no?"

As Shirone looked around for help, everyone tried to suppress their laughter.

"Um, this..."

Flu, holding back her laughter, said,

"Can you see the letters? They're visible only to you. They appear on your retina through brainwaves."

Shirone thought of the drone he had given to Tess in Heaven.

It must have used similar technology to project the view from the sky onto her retina.

After registration, a circle divided into seven slots like a pie chart appeared. The slots were all the same size, and the top slot's border glowed red.

Knowing no one else could see it, Shirone pointed to the slot.

"Is this where items are stored?"

Isabel replied,

"Yes. You can store up to 45 kilograms based on this world's gravity. If you fill one slot with 45 kilograms, you can't store anything in the remaining six slots."

"Wow, 45 kilograms?"

That was enough to carry a decent military load. Plus, it would be incredibly convenient for long-distance travel, reducing the weight of food supplies.

"Let's practice. Choose an item to store first."

"Okay, then this..."

Shirone took out Armand from his waist.

As a commoner, carrying a sword felt awkward, and as a mage, it was inconvenient to move with metal.

"Alright. I'll teach you how. It's easy, like the four-directional technique."

Though he chuckled at the idea of the four-directional technique being easy, he accepted it as the standard of a third-class archmage.

"A Kubrick distinguishes objects through recognition within the mind. It's the core concept of external regulation. Since you recognize the sword as a complete item, the Kubrick separates it from the world. So you can't store just part of the sword."

"Because I don't recognize it as complete."

"Correct. Next is how to store and retrieve items. It's simple. Touch the ring to the item and think about storing it. When your thought changes, the nature of the Spirit Zone changes slightly, and the Kubrick detects this subtle difference to operate. That's why living things can't be stored. Even the mind of a small creature changes the Spirit Zone, making it a foreign substance to the Kubrick."

Shirone nodded repeatedly, impressed by the Kubrick's sensitivity.

"Alright, I'll give it a try."

As he thought about storing Armand, the sword disappeared like magic.

He could see the now two-dimensional Armand stored in the Kubrick's slot.

'Now to retrieve it.'

When Armand appeared in front of his palm, he instinctively grabbed the handle.

Having fun, Shirone experimented with the function about a dozen times. Once he got the hang of it, he understood the item well.

Flu added an explanation.

"If you go to a large enough alchemy shop in the city, you can upgrade the weight capacity. Up to 100 kilograms costs

about 200 gold per kilogram. Beyond that, the price increases significantly, and if you exceed 400 kilograms, it can cost millions."

"Wow, that's incredible."

The price was high, but so was the weight capacity. With 400 kilograms, you could carry all your belongings on your finger.

"That means there's a high demand. It's also technically challenging to enhance. The current weight limit is around 800 kilograms. There might be one in the entire kingdom." Shirone was simply pleased. Whether it was 800 kilograms or not, he loved the ring he was wearing.

It was a Kubrick with the Magic Association's emblem.

Gando spoke up.

"No matter how convenient it is, it's best not to store important items unless you're traveling."

"Why is that? Could the items disappear...?"

Kangnan shook her head.

"No. They could be stolen. The association-made Kubrick has a complex encryption system, so the risk of extraction is low. But anyone can cut off your finger and take it."

Shirone instinctively covered the ring with his hand.

"I'll protect it."

"There's no need for that. If you're in danger, just throw it away or give it up. Kubricks aren't unique, and you can buy them on the market."

This was advice only the second-in-command of the Magic Association could give.

"Anyway, it's that kind of item. To become a proper mage, you need to know how to use it."

In Kangnan's final words, Shirone heard Gaold's voice.

If he were to go to Heaven, a Kubrick would be essential. It was an unspoken pressure to be fully prepared, from important items to trivial ones.

"Yes, I'll definitely become a mage."

Shirone raised his hand, showing the Kubrick. Everyone smiled through their fingers.

Chapter 371: Iron Gate (1)

The day of the magic school's opening arrived.

Shirone woke up early, folded his blanket, and packed his things.

The Kubrick ring was convenient for everyday use. He distributed various items across its six slots and placed Armand in a separate slot, just in case.

As he came downstairs, Olina greeted him with a smile.

"Are you all set? Where's your bag?"

"I've got it right here."

Shirone showed her the ring on his palm.

Olina, looking at her son's playful face, didn't ask any questions and turned away.

Since the Kazra incident, she had realized her son was a mage.

"Come eat quickly, or you'll be late."

Shirone watched his mother for a long time. She was the only one in the world, his mother.

"I love you, Mom. And thank you."

When Shirone hugged her waist, Olina's hand paused.

At home, he was a doting only child. But a mother's intuition sensed the heavy burden in her son's voice.

'Something is happening again... God, please protect this child.'

Regaining her smile, Olina turned and playfully smacked Shirone's head.

"You rascal."

"Ouch!"

"You're too old to be acting like a baby. And don't touch a lady's belly so casually."

Vincent, having finished washing his face, wiped it with a towel and said,

"That's right! Shirone, I won't give up Mom to anyone. So hurry up and find your own Amy at school..."

"Stop babbling and eat your breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am."

Vincent marched to the table like a soldier. Shirone's laughter filled the kitchen. He wished this happiness would last forever.

Arriving at school in the Ogent family's carriage, Shirone saw the front gate crowded with people.

It was the start of a new semester, and parents were bending down to scold their undergrown children.

As the announcement for the entrance ceremony began, many students rushed past Shirone.

But Shirone was in no hurry. The graduation event was at 2 PM at the Iron Gate, and his dormitory was already arranged, so he planned to spend time with his friends at the research club.

"Hello?"

Hearing Amy's voice, Shirone turned with a smile, but his expression quickly changed to surprise.

"W-What?"

"Why are you so shocked? It's like you've never seen a red-haired girl before."

Amy's red hair was cut to shoulder length. It framed her cheeks and was styled asymmetrically in the front, making her look completely different.

Amy twisted her lips as if holding back laughter and ran her fingers through her hair.

"How do I look?"

"Uh, well... you look pretty."

She playfully hit Shirone's shoulder and laughed.

"Is that all? Do I seem more determined?"

"Uh, yeah. You look sharper."

"Hmm, really?"

Amy, looking satisfied, got lost in her thoughts before snapping back.

"How did it go? Did you finish your work at the association?"

"Yeah. I asked about Heaven and did some tours."

Shirone gave a vague answer, avoiding any lies. Even with his closest friend, he couldn't reveal sensitive information.

Amy smiled subtly and didn't press further.

After two months, she seemed more confident.

"It suits you, but why did you cut your hair?"

"Just felt like it. It was annoying during training, and I wanted a fresh start."

Amy was a strong candidate for graduation, having ranked fifth in last year's senior class.

To break the second-year jinx, she seemed to be starting anew.

"You're early. The event is at 2 PM. Going to meet the idiot duo?"

"Yeah. I'm meeting Iruki and Neide to go up together. What about you?"

Amy pointed her thumb at the distant uphill path.

"I'm heading to the Iron Gate. Got to prepare to welcome you all. Oh, and make sure to say 'me' later."

"Me?"

When Shirone pointed to himself, Amy shook her head.

"No, not you. Just say 'me.' Got it? Just say 'me.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see at the event. You'll be really grateful to me. See you at 2 PM at the Iron Gate."

Amy winked and walked away. Her personality seemed brighter with the new hairstyle, but Shirone still wasn't used to it.

As she walked away, she turned and said,

"Welcome to hell."

"Haha! Thanks a lot."

Amy giggled and walked off, clearly amused.

Shirone shook his head, smiling.

'Finally, we're standing in the same place.'

He understood why Amy was in such a good mood.

Supernatural Psychic Science Research Club.

Iruki stared at the chalkboard filled with equations, lost in thought.

He had finally reached his senior year. But honestly, he had just ended up here somehow.

"Becoming a mage? Me?"

He always thought he could come here whenever he wanted. At least, that's what Iruki believed.

What had held him back was the fear of how his monstrous intellect would be used in the world.

"In the end, I followed Shirone here."

It wasn't a bad feeling. Even with the graduation exam a year away, he felt calm because Shirone was like a giant control mechanism installed in his brain.

"Yeah, Shirone is meant to be a mage. I wonder if he's preparing well."

Honestly, there was nothing to worry about with Shirone.

With a clear goal, he would never stop.

"But Neide..."

He probably hadn't done anything again.

He was likely holed up in a storage room, tinkering with strange devices all day.

It was unfortunate, but there was nothing to be done. Neide didn't want to become a mage.

"Has it really been six years?"

Six years ago, Iruki was expelled from the Royal Magic School and transferred to Alpheas Magic School.

His personality was still difficult, so no one wanted to associate with him.

Iruki also had no interest in making friends. But one person caught his eye—Neide.

A boy who always sat at the back of the classroom, glaring at the chalkboard with a fierce look.

"Hmm, an interesting guy."

After observing Neide for a few days, Iruki shamelessly asked his classmates about him.

"Neide? I don't know him well. He doesn't talk. His grades are okay, I guess."

"I don't like Neide. He's creepy. Kind of perverted."

"Why are you curious about Neide? It's best to leave him alone. His eyes are too scary."

Iruki could roughly guess what Neide's school life was like. A few days later, Neide approached Iruki's desk with a cold look.

Iruki raised his hand casually.

"Hi. What's up?"

"Are you the one snooping around about me?"

If you have a long tail, it gets stepped on. Rumors about Iruki asking about Neide had reached him, so he came directly.

"Snooping? Why would I investigate your butt?"

Someone snickered, and Neide's fist flew into Iruki's jaw. Iruki fell with his chair and couldn't move.

"I'll ask again. Are you the one snooping around about me?"

"Spit."

Iruki spat out blood and slowly got up.

But it was a feint. He immediately lunged, trying to poke Neide's eyes with two fingers.

"Ahcho!"

Iruki's arm stretched out, stopping just in front of Neide's eyes as he leaned back.

Even so, Neide's expression didn't change.

"....."

Iruki withdrew his arm and took a stance mimicking a snake, ready to fight.

The atmosphere quickly chilled, and the lower-grade students turned pale.

"Hoo."

Neide sighed, looking at Iruki's ridiculous stance.

He didn't know how this idiot got into magic school, but it was best to avoid him.

"I'm warning you, don't take an interest in me again. I won't let it slide next time."

"I don't want to. Why should I listen to you?"

A fierce look flashed in Neide's eyes.

"You... will really die."

"I know. I'm human, so I'll die someday. Are you stupid?"

Neide heard the sound of his reason snapping. He didn't punch immediately because he might kill Iruki.

"Meet me after class. Come to the place I mentioned."

"Oh, is this the after-school duel I've heard about? But are you sure? I'm pretty strong."

Neide didn't respond and turned away.

If Iruki was too scared to show up, that was fine.

But if he did show up... Iruki wouldn't be able to attend school from the next day.

"Ouch, that punch was strong."

Iruki set his chair upright and sat down, rubbing his lips.

Class started, but Neide didn't return.

The weather was gloomy, and by the end of class, gray clouds covered the sky.

Iruki rubbed his swollen cheek and looked out the window.

"It's going to rain."

Lightning flashed, followed by thunder that tore through the sky.

In the torrential rain, lightning and explosions chased each other relentlessly.

"Huff, huff."

Iruki lowered his head, breathing heavily. The rain pounding on his head felt hot, and water dripped from his soaked hair. Only his eyes were alive, piercing through the darkness of the rain.

Through the curtain of rain, Neide's silhouette appeared.

As the lightning flickered, parts of the silhouette regained color, but the monstrous face he saw at first never fully emerged.

"This is serious."

Iruki had to admit his calculations were off.
He knew Neide wasn't ordinary, but this was beyond normal.
Iruki's voice cut through the rain.

"What happened to you?"

Splashing through the water, Neide approached. The terrifying expression was gone, replaced by a look of resignation.

"What is it? Why are you interested in me?"

"It's not interest, it's exploration. I've been looking for something recently."

"Looking for what?"

"As you can see, I'm a genius. A real, extraordinary genius. Depending on how my abilities are used, they could become a disaster. I might even kill many people. So, I need someone who can control me."

Neide neither laughed nor took it seriously.

"Kill many people?"

"You should know. With my abilities, it's entirely possible."

"Ridiculous."

Neide spoke coldly.

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

A massive thunderclap shook the world.

Iruki turned away from the chalkboard with a bitter smile. The opponent he had fought to the brink of death had now become his closest friend.

Of course, Neide's personality softened after that incident and some time had passed.

But at least from that moment, Neide accepted Iruki as a friend.

"Hey, comrade. How long has it been?"

Neide burst through the door, stood straight, and saluted. The memories from six years ago made Iruki chuckle.

Chapter 372: Iron Gate (1)

"You're here?"

Neide threw his bag aside and jumped onto the sofa.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted. The road from the central region to the south is so rough."

"I came from the capital."

"Do you think I came in a family carriage? I traveled without food and holding in bathroom breaks. If it had been a Merkodine family carriage, I could have eaten and... well, you know."

"Or done both at the same time."

"Enough! Anyway, how have you been? You didn't betray us and do some special training, did you?"

Iruki didn't deny it.

"Well, now that I'm here, I should aim to graduate, right?"

Neide jumped up from the sofa.

"Really? Damn, if you do that, what about me? What kind of magic is it? Better than Cancellation?"

"It's still at the theoretical stage, so it's not really magic yet. As long as I complete it before the graduation exam, it'll be fine. I'll tell you once I make some progress."

Every senior plans their physical rhythm to peak on the day of the exam.

No matter the process, the result is everything, as seen with Amy.

"Ugh, lucky you. I just played around during the break."

Iruki looked at Neide with a bittersweet expression. Despite his words, he didn't seem particularly upset.

Even as a senior, it was clear Neide still had no interest in becoming a mage.

"But you..."

"Hmm? What?"

Iruki shook his head and swallowed his words.

"Never mind, it's nothing."

"Ugh, you're so bland."

The door swung open more violently than before, and Shirone entered.

A smile bloomed on his face as he reunited with his friends.

"Hey! What's that smell?"

But his good mood was short-lived, and he quickly covered his nose in disgust.

The research club room was a mess, littered with trash. How could these guys stand the smell?

Neide and Iruki looked at each other and laughed.

"Sorry. I sprayed some cologne after a long time. Did you like it?"

"Shut up! Let's clean up first!"

The three of them grabbed cleaning tools and started a major cleanup.

By the time the place, which had looked like a giant trash dump, was somewhat clean, it was almost time for the event.

Exhausted, Neide lay on the sofa and looked at the ceiling.

"What time is it?"

"One o'clock. We should start getting ready."

Shirone suddenly remembered and jumped up from the sofa.

"That's right! I haven't picked up my uniform!"

"I got it this morning. Yours and Neide's."

Neide gave a thumbs up.

"You're always so thorough. But do we really have to wear that? I really don't want to."

The uniform was the magic school's special attire, only worn for significant events, but students found it so ridiculous that they avoided wearing it even once a year.

"Why do we have to wear uniforms for the entrance ceremony? I'd rather watch myself apply hemorrhoid cream in the mirror."

Shirone looked at Neide and asked,
"You have hemorrhoids?"

"It's just a saying! Anyway, let's get ready. Where's my uniform, I mean, my hemorrhoid cream?"

Iruki pointed to the corner. Three boxes were stacked like a tower.

They each took a box with their name on it and unfolded the uniforms. The white robes with stripes along the shoulders fluttered like ghosts.

While they might look magely once worn, it would be better for their mental health to wear masks in crowded places.

"Ugh, we have to meet the Class Two kids in this? They don't wear uniforms. We'll be a laughingstock."

"We have no choice. It's the rule."

Iruki didn't care much. As long as the clothes covered the important parts, like the head, eyes, and heart, he was fine. The three of them stood in front of the mirror, wearing their uniforms over their clothes. They looked like three blobs of liquid monsters.

But contrary to their initial thoughts, their expressions were solemn.

"Will we ever get to wear these again?"

With the busy schedule of senior year, there were few opportunities to wear the uniform. If they didn't pass the graduation exam, this would be the last time they saw themselves in these robes.

Iruki flapped his sleeves, which were longer than his arms, and said,

"It won't be easy. We lack information."

Neide looked surprised.

"Really? I think you and Shirone will definitely pass."

"It's just a feeling. Mathematically, it's one-third. If Shirone, Dante, and Amy are there, two will fail. If Shirone passes, Dante and Amy can't graduate."

Neide couldn't imagine any of them failing.

"No way. All three could pass."

"That's because you know them. People always think their information is the most accurate. But if that were true, no one would fail. Even on average, only 3.3 students per class pass. And we're in the lowest Class Three."

Neide couldn't argue.

They were at the pinnacle of the magic school. The skill gap was narrower than in any other class, and no one thought they would fail.

Shirone smoothed the wrinkles of his robe and said, "If we all plan to pass, we don't need probabilities. Let's start with a fresh mindset."

Shirone was right.

All the processes they went through from the lower to the advanced classes were reset. It was a final showdown among 30 students aiming to become mages.

Twenty minutes before the graduation event, ten students were walking towards the central park from different paths. They all wore their uniforms, and their eyes were more intense than usual.

Shirone's group, the first to arrive, greeted their competitors for the next year.

These were the top ten students based on combined practical, theoretical, and performance evaluation scores. The aura of the gathering students made the air feel heavy. Shirone (ranked 3rd in the advanced class) looked down the eastern path.

Canis (ranked 6th) and Arin (ranked 7th) were walking together.

Shirone had fought them during the Arcane attack and in Heaven. He knew better than anyone that their skills were formidable.

Canis met Shirone's eyes but didn't speak and turned away. He knew that the ten gathered here wouldn't all pass together.

Arin approached instead.

"Hi, Shirone."

"Hi, Arin. How was your break?"

"Just... okay."

Arin smiled shyly.

She remembered Canis's warning not to reveal what they had achieved during the break.

"Hey, you're already here? You're not nervous, are you?"

Recognizing the voice, Shirone turned around.

From the southern path, Boyle (ranked 8th) and Pandora (ranked 9th) were walking together.

Pandora, who had once tried to cozy up to Dante's group but was eventually cast aside, seemed to be back with Boyle.

Despite their frequent arguments, their bond from studying together since childhood was undeniable.

'Boyle, the summoning mage, and Pandora, the scent mage.'

Boyle had lost to Dante before, but his summoning magic was not to be underestimated.

Pandora's scent magic was also tactically challenging to deal with.

"Shirone, look over there."

Neide pointed to the western path.

Dante (ranked 1st) led the way, followed by Closer and Sabina.

Shirone chuckled at Dante's rolled-up sleeves, pinned in place.

Even at the old castle ruins, Dante's desire to stand out was evident.

But today, Shirone was more concerned about Closer and Sabina.

They had undergone intense training under Vice Principal Olivia during the break, and their eyes showed it.

Closer could freely manipulate rocks, and Sabina could scatter dozens of sharp wind blades per second.

They were undoubtedly stronger than during the 2000th duel.

"Why the serious faces? It's a good day. Smile a bit."

As Dante raised his hand and approached, Boyle frowned. "What's with your outfit? Don't you know the uniform rules?" Before answering, Dante scrutinized Boyle's style. As usual, Boyle's hair was slicked back with oil, and his uniform was crisply ironed.

"Isn't that a bit too much? You look like you'd bleed if someone brushed against you."

"What's wrong with it? It's neat and tidy. You might lose points for wearing it like that."

"So what if I lose a few points? As long as I pass the graduation exam."

While Dante and Boyle argued about fashion, Closer and Sabina approached their targets.

Closer (ranked 4th) was most eager to confront Iruki (ranked 2nd).

"So, the day has come for us to face off again? Get ready. Every day might feel like hell."

"If you don't know, there's no need to say it. Are you asking me to teach you?"

"You...!"

Closer's eyes filled with anger. He had never met someone who provoked him so much.

Meanwhile, a different tension was brewing elsewhere. Sabina (ranked 5th) hesitated before finally speaking to Neide (ranked 10th).

"Hi. It's been a while."

"Oh, yeah."

Sabina felt hurt by Neide's indifferent attitude. Or maybe she didn't know what to feel.

She had dated many men in the capital, Bashka, but this was a different kind of thrill.

'My heart must be broken. Or I'm a pervert.'

Regardless, she couldn't stop looking at Neide and couldn't retreat now.

"The uniform... looks good on you."

But Neide only responded with a bitter smile.

For someone who had no intention of becoming a mage, being told the uniform suited him was just painful.

Pandora, watching from a distance, smirked.

In the past, Pandora had flattered Sabina, but after intense training, she now felt confident and unashamed.

'She's cunning as always. Already planning ahead, huh?'

Pandora, who had witnessed Sabina being beaten by Neide, suspected that Neide would be the biggest wildcard among the ten students here.

Though currently ranked 10th, if Neide revealed his true potential, the rankings could shift dramatically.

"Looks like everyone is here. Let's get going and get this over with."

Shirone wasn't the type to take the lead, so Dante took charge.

His position as the top-ranked student in the advanced class helped him command the group.

Of course, once they passed through the Iron Gate, the advanced class rankings would no longer matter.

The Class Three students headed towards the senior building.

At the top of the slope stood the imposing Iron Gate.

Below it, ten Class Two students stood in a line, waiting.

"Hey, juniors! Hurry up! You're so slow!"

"Nice uniforms! Are you going to a school play? Hahaha!"

The taunts from Class Two were a long-standing tradition and felt even more intense than the rumors suggested. But none of the Class Three students showed any reaction.

"Hmph! Seniors, my foot! Once we're in the senior class, we're all the same!"

Boyle gritted his teeth and muttered, trying to psych himself up.

Closer swung his broad shoulders and quickened his pace.

"Yeah, keep talking, losers. I'll cook you all one by one."

Most students glared to avoid being intimidated, but Dante was simply bored.

As he watched his peers' reactions, he turned to look at Shirone.

'He's not nervous at all.'

A slight smile played on Shirone's lips, and his eyes sparkled with passion and excitement.

How could he not be thrilled? It was the scene he had imagined even in his dreams.

The life of a mage he had always wanted. The final gateway was now just ten steps away.

His heart pounded, and his mind felt like it was soaring to another world.

"Come on in! Do you think you can graduate? You're just fertilizer for me!"

"This is hell, you bastards! Your lives end here!"

Shirone clenched his teeth and fists.

A mage. A mage. He would become a mage!

'Fine, I'll enter hell or whatever it takes.'

With each step, the Iron Gate, a symbol of wisdom, seemed to tremble.

Chapter 373: Senior Information Session (1)

The special tradition of Class Two students welcoming the new Class Three students began.

As Shirone crossed the Iron Gate, the jeers abruptly stopped, and the students parted to create a path for him. Shirone walked down the path to the sound of applause. Though it was meant to be welcoming, it didn't bring a smile to his face.

'So these are the Class Two students.'

When ten students graduate from the senior class, the remaining twenty are ranked based on their graduation exam scores. Therefore, the ten students welcoming him were those who had been eliminated relatively early in last year's graduation exams.

Amy was among them, clapping.

She had been the third to be eliminated last year, placing her in Class Two and 18th in the senior class rankings.

Shirone fixed his gaze straight ahead, observing their faces from the corners of his eyes.

Men, women.

That was all he could discern for now.

Although he had observed last year's graduation exams and remembered some students' specialties, they felt like strangers to him now.

'If I can't get past this, I won't make it to the top ranks.'

Class Two students were the core of the senior class, marking the boundary between the upper and lower ranks.

This year's senior class had an average age of 20.6 years.

Shirone was 1.6 years younger than the average, but considering the senior veterans like Fermi, most were

around his age, with some even younger.

After passing through the path made by the Class Two students, the Class Three students circled back to the Iron Gate. They stood face-to-face with the Class Two students lined up in front of them.

"Welcome to the senior class."

A confident-looking young man stepped forward.

Shirone recognized his voice as the one who had taunted them the most before they crossed the Iron Gate.

He was a handsome man with slicked-back blond hair, wearing a blue tracksuit that fit him perfectly, though it was not typical mage attire.

He was about 175 cm tall, with a lean but well-balanced physique that didn't look weak at all.

His sharp eyes and high nose gave him a wolf-like appearance, and his tongue, oddly red, looked as if it were stained with blood when he smiled.

"I am Screamer, ranked first in Class Two."

As soon as Screamer spoke, the same thought crossed the minds of the Class Three students.

'He's 11th overall.'

Screamer's specialty was light magic, but his field differed from Shirone's photonic magic or Dante's information magic. To be precise, he was a magic martial artist.

Like a hybrid of a gunner, he used various light magic to confuse his opponents and employed physical combat skills to deliver critical hits.

Another student in the senior class who could use schema was Amy.

However, unlike Amy, who had only briefly learned it as a child, Screamer's schema was quite advanced.

His flashy teleportation movements and ability to finish opponents with his fists had drawn attention during last year's graduation exams.

He was expected to enter the Colosseum to learn martial arts after graduating from the magic school. If not for these

complex circumstances, he could have graduated earlier. After Screamer, Pony stepped forward.

Her calm, golden hair flowed down her sides, framing her pretty crescent-shaped forehead. Her expressionless face seemed to freeze her beautiful features in place.

With her white face, crescent-shaped eyebrows, sharp nose, and pointed chin, she looked like a doll from a distance.

"I am Pony, ranked 12th. My specialty is hydromancy, in the torrent series."

While Screamer's introduction was lengthy, Pony's was brief. Even so, the Class Three students couldn't take their eyes off her. She was not only beautiful but also had an important detail missing from her introduction.

'Oh, so that's Pony.'

The only royal member of Alpheas Magic School.

Though her maternal lineage kept her away from the core of power, she was still a royal by their standards and not someone nobles could treat lightly.

Of course, competition in the senior class was fair. Pony didn't mention her lineage to avoid unnecessary animosity.

Pony's eyes were filled with royal pride, reminiscent of Prince Zion of Kazra. Though not as intense as Uorin's absolute gaze.

After Pony, the introductions continued.

Shirone listened with interest to each one. Then he felt the gaze of the girl standing in front of him and turned his head.

While everyone else focused on the current speaker, she had been watching Shirone with playful eyes from the beginning.

'Her name was... Maya, right?'

With her brown skin and plump figure, her round face and pleasant features made her look cute.

Shirone remembered her distinctly.

She was the first to be eliminated in last year's graduation exam. He had heard she was also the last in the previous year's exam.

Her specialty was sound magic, using buffs and debuffs through sound, but she hadn't left a strong impression. In short, she lacked talent.

Her sound magic couldn't penetrate a mage's mind, and she relied on basic magic learned in the advanced class.

Her fundamentals were solid, but she wasn't skilled enough to compete with geniuses. She was on the borderline between the advanced and senior classes.

When Shirone looked at her, Maya smiled and raised her hand.

"Hi."

Shirone glanced around. It wasn't polite to talk during introductions.

But she didn't care and leaned in to speak softly.

"I know you. Arian Shirone."

It was an awkward situation to respond to. Shirone hesitated before whispering back.

"Oh, I see."

"I saw you at last year's research presentation. That ghost incident. It was amazing! How did you come up with that? It was so clever. I've been a fan ever since."

Maya still vividly remembered that day.

She had been lying in bed after hearing the midnight bell when a ghost appeared from the ceiling, scaring her out of her wits.

Following the fleeing students, she ended up in the central park. There, the three members of the Supernatural Psychic Science Research Club appeared on the rooftop.

Their presentation, which exploited psychological gaps, was so entertaining that she laughed until she had stomach cramps.

"I also enjoyed the play. You looked great in a dress. What did you use for the chest?"

Screamer frowned and turned around.

"Hey, Maya. We're in the middle of introductions."

"Oh, sorry. I was just excited."

"Ugh, no sense of decorum..."

Maya stuck her tongue out at Shirone with an embarrassed expression.

It was still unclear what kind of person she was. But the Class Two students didn't seem to think highly of her.

Always finishing last, some didn't even consider her a senior class member.

Screamer was one of them.

Missing Class One by one rank, he was annoyed to be in the same class as Maya.

After the introductions, Screamer, now in a good mood, spoke brightly.

"Now that we know each other, let's start the Iron Gate tradition of 'Truth or Dare.'"

Pony muttered with a frown.

"Tradition, my foot... It's so tacky."

"Truth or Dare?"

Shirone raised an eyebrow, waiting for an explanation.

Screamer, with his characteristic grand gestures, began to explain.

"Each Class Two student will ask a question to the person opposite them. For example, 'Who's the most handsome?' Then you point to one of us."

'Hmm, so that's how it is.'

There was no better way to intimidate newcomers.

Though the example was about the most handsome person, no one expected such a pleasant question.

'So that's why Amy told me to always pick her.'

Screamer turned to a young boy.

"Eider, you go first. You're the youngest."

"Ugh, even here, it's about age?"

Eider was seventeen. He was the reason Amy didn't get the title of youngest senior last year.

With his big cat-like eyes and dimples when he smiled, he looked much younger than his age. His short stature also contributed to that impression.

'Why emphasize age?'

Shirone tilted his head.

What did being the youngest mean in a competitive senior class?

Even so, Eider only pouted slightly before complying with Screamer's request.

'Being the youngest must have its advantages.'

Acknowledging his youth might bring minor inconveniences, but the benefits likely outweighed them.

'Even I let my guard down around Eider.'

Eider's target was Arin. The Class Two students watched with interest.

Arin, the first menstruating girl. Whatever question he asked, it would yield interesting results.

After some thought, Eider grinned mischievously.

"Who's the ugliest?"

"Huh?"

Arin hadn't expected that question.

She couldn't properly perceive shapes. This information had spread through the school, so the seniors likely knew.

The Class Two students tensed.

To her, ugliness might reflect inner distortion.

"The ugliest person?"

"Yes. Someone so ugly you wonder how a human could look like that."

"Hmm."

Arin stared at the grinning Eider.

Then she tapped her lips and carefully scanned the Class Two students.

Some avoided her gaze.

'Why ask this? Is he testing me?'

Arin raised her index finger and pointed to someone on her right.

"I'll pick you."

The student was so fat that just looking at him made one feel hot.

Despite the graduation event, he held a bag of potato chips, seemingly addicted to food.

His eyes were buried in his chubby cheeks, and his hair was a messy mop.

Wearing tight clothes that revealed his body shape, he looked awkward.

'That's Luman.'

Luman, ranked 13th in the senior class.

His specialty was trap magic, in the crowd control series.

Though skilled, his unpleasant personality often put him at a disadvantage.

Screamer clapped rhythmically.

"Wow, a woman's intuition is sharp. Even if she can't see well, she can still judge appearances accurately. Who knows, if the outside is a mold, maybe the inside is just as ugly."

Some students laughed.

Among them was Boyle from Class Three. However, his laughter didn't seem genuine.

The psychological battle had already begun, and it seemed they had decided to be aggressive from the start.

Despite being mocked, Luman just kept munching on his potato chips. Then he pointed at Boyle and asked,

"But why are you laughing? Shouldn't you not be laughing?"

Boyle exaggeratedly frowned.

"What? What does it matter if I laugh or not?"

"It doesn't matter. But you're fat too. If you laugh, isn't that self-deprecation?"

Boyle, looking at Luman in disbelief, retorted with the words his mother had always taught him.

"I'm chubby, and you're fat. There's a big difference. I have an air of nobility, and you're just a pig."

Luman paused his chewing for a moment, then quickly resumed. That was his only reaction.

Chapter 374: Senior Information Session (2)

The game of Truth or Dare had begun, and the first question was over. Even that was enough to create a subtle tension among the students.

Though it was an unspoken rule in the senior class never to bring up what was said during the game, the participants couldn't help but feel affected.

Everyone was fiercely engaged in a battle of wits.

'So this is how it is. If I hadn't known, it could have been a disaster.'

Shirone felt a bit more at ease and looked at Amy.

No matter what question came up, he just had to point to her, avoiding early psychological warfare.

Amy met his gaze and shrugged.

She had gone through this process last year in the senior class. For Shirone, a new senior, her help was more valuable than gold.

'Thank you, Amy. Really, thank you.'

The psychological pressure disguised as tradition.

Being able to avoid early psychological attacks from competitors was definitely an advantage in the senior class.

"Haha, alright! Let's move on. Pony, why don't you go next? Everyone has to do it at least once."

Pony, maintaining her icy expression, asked Neide, who stood opposite her.

"Who was the first person you saw when you got here?"

It was a simple question, leaving no room for psychological games. She seemed uninterested in Truth or Dare.

Screamer looked at her, disappointed.

"Really? That's it? Can't you make it more interesting?"

"Forget it. This is childish."

Neide looked at the Class Two students. He could find meaning in any question if he wanted, but since Pony had asked lightly, he answered honestly.

"The first person I saw was that guy."

All eyes turned to the person Neide pointed at.

A tall, lanky man with perfect curls and tanned skin from long sun exposure. His prominent cheekbones made him look even older.

Shirone realized Neide wasn't playing mind games. He had also noticed this person first upon arriving.

'That's Pisho.'

Pisho was the oldest in the senior class at twenty-five, though he looked thirty-five.

His specialty was insect magic, dealing with insects, a unique field among various magics.

Insect magic was more academically developed than magical. Most specialists in this field became scholars, but Pisho stayed in school until twenty-five to get a mage's license for better opportunities.

Screamer, dissatisfied with the dull outcome, decided to take matters into his own hands to change the atmosphere. He couldn't miss the chance to crush the new seniors.

"Alright, I'll ask the next question."

Screamer's opponent was Dante. As the top students of Class Two and Class Three, it felt like a showdown between leaders.

"Who do you think you could easily beat? Someone so weak you could crush them with a finger."

Even though the question wasn't directed at him, Shirone felt tense.

No matter who Dante chose, it would hurt someone's pride. Any choice would leave lingering resentment.

Dante frowned, deep in thought.

The Class Two students watched him with sharp eyes, daring him to choose them.

"Hmm, this is really tough."

Screamer smiled, showing his characteristic red tongue.

"Just be honest. It's an unspoken rule that there will be no retaliation for any choice."

"Can't I just say all of Class Two? They all seem about the same."

The explosive atmosphere deflated instantly. Class Two's expressions turned cold, and Shirone's eyes widened.

Only someone like Dante, once the kingdom's top prospect, could say such a thing.

'Your personality is something else, really.'

Screamer didn't get angry.

He understood Dante's strategy: to spread the animosity among everyone, thus diluting it.

"Sorry, but that's not allowed. You have to pick just one."

That's the rule of Truth or Dare."

Dante casually pointed at Screamer.

"Alright, then I'll pick you. Since you're the top of Class Two, choosing you means everyone else is below me."

'This guy is really crazy.'

This time, even Screamer couldn't help but get angry.

Dante Airhein. The top prospect even at the Royal Magic School.

Even now, he was considered one of the top candidates for graduation.

But that was based on advanced class standards.

Once past the Iron Gate, advanced class rankings no longer mattered.

No matter how skilled, one mistake could lead to a downfall in the competitive senior class.

'This is why I hate rookies. They get pampered in the advanced class and think they're invincible.'

Dante's declaration had a significant impact. The smirking faces of Class Two turned serious.

"Can I ask the next question?"

Maya raised her hand.

She didn't need anyone's permission, but Screamer nodded as if he had the authority.

"Go ahead."

Maya smiled mischievously at Shirone.

Waiting for her question, Shirone swallowed nervously. What would she ask?

At first, he thought it wouldn't be a big deal, but now his heart was racing.

'I just have to choose Amy. We've already agreed on this. No matter the question, it's no big deal.'

Maya's eyes sparkled as she asked,

"Who's so adorable that you want to hug and kiss them right now?"

"Uh... what?"

Shirone's eyes widened.

Even Amy seemed caught off guard by this unexpected question.

Shirone studied Maya's playful smile.

This wasn't about choosing an answer. She had asked the question knowing the answer.

'What should I do? Should I pick someone else?'

He thought it over but couldn't find a better solution than sticking to the plan.

"I... I choose..."

Blushing, Shirone pointed at Amy.

Amy, unable to hide her embarrassment, turned her head to look at the distant mountains.

"Wow! Really? You two are actually dating?"

Eider exaggeratedly reacted, putting pressure on Shirone.

There were rumors in the senior class that Shirone and Amy's relationship was just a cover.

Senior students avoided dating within the school. The chances of a couple both making it to the final ten were slim.

Screamer clapped, trying to lighten the mood.

"Wow, you had the courage to choose honestly. Since it's out in the open, why not show us?"

Ignoring him, Shirone looked back at Maya, who was laughing as if she found it all amusing.

Why had Maya asked him such a question?

He might never get the chance to ask, but this question couldn't pressure a newcomer, nor did it seem like something she would care about.

The game continued, and finally, it was Luman's turn to ask Iruki a question.

Having finished a bag of chips while waiting, Luman stuffed the last crumbs into his mouth and asked,

"Alright, who in Class Two do you think is definitely not a virgin?"

Pony's golden eyebrows furrowed angrily.

"Disgusting..."

This was why she disliked the senior class traditions. Why should a royal like her be subject to such questions?

Regardless of Pony's thoughts, Luman elaborated.

"I mean, who looks like they'd sleep with any guy?"

The female students seemed to burn with indignation.

Despite his excellent crowd control skills, Luman's attitude was one reason he remained in Class Two.

"Hmm, I see."

Iruki rested his chin on his hand, trying to find a basis for his answer.

Of course, he couldn't tell just by looking. But he wasn't one to rely on intuition.

Excluding Amy, he considered the four Class Two girls: Pony, Maya, Suabi, and Dorothy.

First, he looked at Pony. She turned her head slightly, as if insulted.

'A royal...'

Pony's first impression was of a cold, noble ice flower.

As a royal, she likely didn't mingle with common nobles.

Statistically, her pool of male acquaintances would be

smaller.

'Okay, not her. Next, Maya?'

Maya watched with interest, curious about his answer.

Though she was a candidate, she seemed to enjoy the situation.

'She's too openly happy. That's a bit...'

Iruki turned to Suabi.

With her short, braided brown hair, she hadn't spoken a word since the event began and avoided eye contact.

Her gentle, rabbit-like appearance matched her timid demeanor, and she seemed genuinely terrified.

'She's too shy. Isn't she a utility specialist?'

Utility magic supported other mages rather than acting alone.

While sound magic excelled in wide-area buffs, utility magic focused on individual enhancement with excellent effects.

In the professional world, utility specialists were highly sought after, but fewer mages chose it due to its dependency on others.

Given her timid nature, Suabi's choice of utility magic made sense.

'She's extremely anxious. On the other hand...'

Iruki finally looked at Dorothy.

Wearing large glasses and a vacant expression, she seemed oblivious to her surroundings.

Though naturally pretty, she didn't seem to care about her appearance.

Her specialty was manipulation magic, and she always carried a tin can doll, making her seem eccentric.

Shirone also took a special interest in Dorothy.

Having heard about zoners from Flu, he saw Dorothy differently this year.

'So that doll moves with an algorithm. I thought it was like a harvester.'

Iruki made his decision.

He pointed to Dorothy.

"I choose you."

Despite the attention, Dorothy didn't react. It was as if she lived in another world.

Iruki awkwardly lowered his hand.

After a long pause, she returned to reality and spoke.

"Why me?"

Iruki nodded, as if it were a good question.

"I observed resignation and resistance. If someone were truly promiscuous, they wouldn't want to reveal it. Based on that, you seemed the most emotionally detached."

Dorothy, as if wondering what to do, drifted off again. After ten seconds, she returned and spoke.

"You're right."

The boys looked at Dorothy in shock.

The boys looked back at Dorothy with surprised eyes.

There was no need to answer out of the courage of truth.

But once she confessed, she was curious about what would come next.

"I love all men."

For the first time, Dorothy made eye contact with Iruki.

"Iruki. I love you too."

Iruki's eyelids opened and closed quickly.

"And I love women too."

"Huh?"

An exclamation of surprise came from someone.

Regardless, Dorothy hugged the tin doll and slowly lowered her gaze.

"But I hate humans."

"....."

The gazes that had been focused on Dorothy scattered in different directions. It was an instinctive reaction.

'What is she talking about? She's out of her mind.'

Shirone was equally bewildered. Competing with people like this in the future seemed daunting.

Especially since Class One hadn't even stepped up yet.

It seemed like it wouldn't be easy from the first day.

Chapter 375: Senior Information Session (3)

As the courage of truth ended, an elderly teacher walked out of the senior class building.

It was Collie, the head teacher of the senior class.

"Is the event over?"

It was rare for advanced class students to see the face of the senior class teacher, but Collie was a familiar figure even to Class Three.

This was because, during the six-month period when Alpheus stepped down as principal due to the Arcane incident, Collie temporarily served as acting principal until Olivia took over.

Although officially ranked as a 6th-grade teacher, Collie was recognized for decades of dedication to teaching, even if not as skilled as Shina, Etella, or Saad, who were more ability-based.

In any organization, there are those who rise to executive positions at a young age, and those who remain as managers or department heads for years.

However, Collie's eye for evaluating abilities was considered superior to that of younger teachers, so no student let their guard down.

"Nice to meet you. I am Collie, the head teacher of the senior class."

"Hello!"

The students of Class Two were more enthusiastic than those of Class Three.

"From now on, we will have the senior class orientation. Class Three, follow me, and Class Two, enjoy a short break. You know what to do without me saying it, right?"

The faces of Class Two turned pale. However, they did not mind looking grim, as this was the authority of those who had experienced it first.

Collie led Class Three to the conference room on the first floor of the building.

It was empty and a bit cold.

As the ten students sat around the end of the long table, Collie climbed onto the podium across from them.

"From now on, you will have no time to learn anything at school."

At Collie's words, the chatter ceased.

"Basic education ended in the advanced class, and the senior class serves only as a link between school and society. The most important thing here is whether your skills can be applied in real life."

I can apply them.

Everyone had the same thought.

"You were born with talents different from ordinary people, so the school did not treat you as mere children to be taken care of. It may sound inhumane, but if you die during class, 50% of the responsibility lies with you. If it's ambiguous to express in numbers, let me put it this way: the school compensates for your death but does not take responsibility."

This was something mentioned during the magic school entrance orientation. However, Collie's words were much more blunt.

"And the senior class is different. 100% of your life is your responsibility. From now on, this place is not a school but a cooperative institution of the Kingdom's Magic Association, determining whether you can be immediately deployed as a force in the field."

Collie held out a card.

"This is the evaluation teacher certification issued by the Graduation Exam Evaluation Office. From today, all evaluations I record will be formalized and submitted to the

association. Additionally, all institutions under the World Red Line have exclusive access to this information."

An unknown chill spread. The days spent in the advanced class were no longer remembered.

"Now, I will explain the senior class schedule."

As Collie pulled a golden thread, a tent displaying the senior class evaluation items was lowered.

"This is the senior class schedule. It runs for a total of 30 weeks, with six evaluation items rotated weekly."

Pandora raised her hand.

"Can we take notes?"

"No. The first day's evaluation is interpersonal combat. The 30 senior class students will change opponents weekly, with 3 points for a win, 1 point for a draw, and 0 points for a loss. In other words, you will face everyone once over 29 weeks. There is no interpersonal combat in the last 30th week to avoid affecting the graduation exam."

Boyle raised his hand.

"I have a question. You said a draw is 1 point, but can there be a draw in a duel?"

"The one whose mental strength gauge reaches zero loses. However, if both reach zero simultaneously or if there is no winner within the 10-minute limit, it is considered a draw, and each gets 1 point."

'So, there is a time limit.'

Shirone thought that interpersonal combat was optimistic since there were majors not specialized in combat in the senior class.

However, if they strategized defensively, they could endure 10 minutes and earn 1 point.

"The second day's evaluation is mental activity. The location is the Image Zone training ground. Geometric filters made of holograms approach every 3 seconds. You must transform the Spirit Zone to pass through the filters without touching them. The difficulty increases weekly, and points are awarded from 5 to 0 based on success."

'Ugh, that sounds really tough.'

Shirone had also transformed the Spirit Zone to rescue hostages in the Gold City of Bashka. However, it was a challenging task due to its durability.

On the other hand, Arin was relaxed. The mental flexibility of a mental-type magician was unparalleled, so it wouldn't be a difficult item for her.

Knowing this, Canis leaned over and whispered, 'You must get full marks on that.'

Of course, Arin nodded obediently.

"The third day is tactical strategy. It is a group evaluation. The 30 students are divided into six groups based on their rankings from 1st to 30th, and the five members of each group will face simulation monsters in the 2000 training ground. The group that completes the task first gets 5 points, and the last group gets 0 points."

Despite the brief explanation, the students realized the seriousness of the situation.

A rule that ensures someone gets 0 points.

And collective responsibility.

While dividing by rank might mean similar levels, responsibility within the group would still be assigned.

Conflicts among group members were inevitable.

Of course, it was natural that the group with 0 points would have a higher probability of such conflicts.

"The fourth day is specialty enhancement. There are 20 evaluation items prepared according to the major. Each item is divided into 10 levels, and 1 point is awarded for each level. For reference, the 10th level difficulty for the 'caloric' item in the fire category is 1000 degrees Celsius."

'Master level difficulty is 1000 degrees Celsius?'

It was not a student-level difficulty.

Of course, Amy reached 1000 degrees Celsius during the vacation, thanks to the ability to remove entropy with the power of the Red Eye.

'So, it's a professional-level achievement.'

"Specialty enhancement cannot be duplicated. Once you reach a certain level, the points for the previous level are erased. You will register your major during the individual interview tomorrow, so decide carefully."

'That's what it means...'

If you pass the master level and get 10 points, you can't get any more points. However, since you can adjust the points voluntarily and get high scores early on, it was an item that would be a major variable in the competition.

"The fifth day is cognition and judgment. The location is the Virtual Zone. You all experienced it during the entrance test."

Shirone also took the test in the Virtual Zone. She counted the number of balls and described the feeling of hot and cold.

"But the senior class is on a different level. You will experience extreme situations. The key is how long you can survive based on your judgment. This is also graded from 5 to 0 points based on the level."

Shirone rubbed her face. Other students who had confidently passed the steel door also looked grim.

"The sixth day's evaluation is omnipotent implementation. This is also conducted in the Virtual Zone. For example, if the problem is to raise the temperature from minus 27 degrees Celsius to 3 degrees Celsius, you must solve it using the 36 basic regulation spells designated by the association."

Omnipotent implementation was also challenging for Shirone.

Although she scored over 80 in all subjects in the theory exam, it wasn't a competitive edge since other students were the same.

"These are the six evaluation items you will take each week. You will rotate through these for 30 weeks, earning points and having your rankings updated daily based on the total score."

Thud! Thud! As Collie finished speaking, some students banged their heads on the table.

Shirone also folded her arms and lay down.

She just wanted to sleep.

'Is this the first week's evaluation? Amy, how did you endure a year here? No, how did you even think of doing this again?'

Collie smiled and said.

"Rest if you want. You are semi-professionals. But if this is too much for you, you won't be able to graduate."

The students slowly raised their upper bodies. They had a look of 'Let's hear what else there is.'

"There is an overall evaluation. It is held on the last holiday of every four weeks and includes items almost identical to the graduation exam: 'interpersonal combat,' 'hill occupation,' 'magic operation,' 'finishing move,' 'survival,' and 'tactical strategy.'"

It was like a mock graduation exam.

"The overall evaluation allows free group formation. You can form groups with whoever you want. Winning the overall evaluation gives you 20 points. Conversely, losing deducts 20 points."

The students murmured at the significant point allocation.

If you gain 20 points and take 20 points from your opponent, you create a 40-point gap.

'This is... too cruel.'

Amy's words about welcoming them to hell were not an exaggeration.

"Assuming you get full marks in all subjects until the 30th week, the highest score an individual can achieve is 87 points for interpersonal combat, 150 points for mental activity, 150 points for tactical strategy, 150 points for cognition and judgment, 200 points for specialty enhancement, and 300 points for omnipotent implementation, totaling 1,037 points."

Numbers started spinning in the students' heads.

"Adding the 120 points from winning all six overall evaluations, the maximum score is 1,157 points. According to statistics, the average score required to graduate is 1,000 points."

"1,000 points..."

Shirone's mouth hung open. It was a figure that required achieving 86.4% of the total possible points.

"Evaluations are conducted daily except on holidays, so rankings change daily based on scores. While the difficulty is low at the beginning, making the rankings less volatile, it becomes more common for rankings to fluctuate as the weeks progress. This is your one-year journey."

A solemn silence filled the conference room.

"1,000 points? That's not easy. This is really not easy."

It wasn't just about being good at combat or having exceptional talent.

It was about being evaluated on everything required of a magician.

"Now, let me tell you the most important thing."

The students' gazes turned back to Collie.

"The senior class schedule starts in two days, and evaluations will be conducted over 30 weeks. And you..."

Collie lowered the baton and clasped his hands behind his back.

"You have the right to refuse all these evaluations."

The conference room buzzed with the sound of minds processing this information.

"So, we can refuse the evaluations?"

"Yes. To be precise, the scores from the evaluations do not affect the outcome of the graduation exam. If you pass the exam, you graduate, even without participating in the evaluations."

Sabina asked.

"Are there any restrictions if we refuse the evaluations?"

"There are no specific restrictions, but students who refuse the evaluations are barred from entering the training

grounds."

"Hmm... So, no spectating."

You wouldn't be able to observe your opponent's capabilities.

However, since there were factions even in the last graduation exam, having just one person in the faction would allow for strategic planning, so it wasn't a complete restriction.

Nade asked.

"Then what are the benefits of taking the evaluations?"

"It seems there's a misunderstanding. I said you are semi-professionals. This isn't homework. There are no benefits for doing it or disadvantages for not doing it. The decision is yours."

Collie leaned over the podium.

"On the day of the graduation exam, scouts from the Red Line associations of various countries will be dispatched. For the top five prestigious schools, dozens of scouts from different countries will attend."

The students' eyes shone intensely.

"According to Red Line regulations, the school is obligated to provide your profiles. For the scouts, this adds depth to their judgment, but if your evaluation scores are a mess, it will be detrimental. This is about how you will shape your own lives, not about the school."

'I see. Graduation isn't everything anymore.'

The Red Line operates a trade system to prevent line departures of affiliated magicians.

While the first negotiation rights belong to the national association, if negotiations fail, it's not a problem to take them by paying a transfer fee.

What major will you choose, which institution will you join, and what will you ultimately achieve in your life?

From the moment you enter the senior class, your life as a magician has already begun.

"This concludes the orientation. Tomorrow, there will be individual interviews, so choose your major carefully today."

Chapter 376: Senior Information Session (4)

As soon as Collie left the conference room, everyone stood up. The door closed, and they looked at each other, but no one spoke.

The moment they realized the senior class rules, the competition began.

After a while, Dante's group was the first to leave, followed by Boyle, Pandora, Arin, and Canis.

Coincidentally, Shirone's group, who remained until the end, didn't feel the need to leave the conference room.

Shirone, whose legs had given out, collapsed into a chair.

"This is really bad. I never imagined it would be this tough."

"Yeah. I can't do anything but the evaluations. How are we supposed to lead the study group in this state?"

Shirone looked at Nade.

"We don't have anything to do anyway, right?"

Iruki said.

"They said we have the right to give up the evaluations. No one will give up. No one entered the senior class thinking they would get low scores."

"But if you focus too much on the scores, there's a risk of exposing your abilities. Then, you'll be targeted or eliminated in the graduation exam."

A clear example is Amy. Until the last 30th week, she was ranked 5th in the senior class, but she was eliminated early in the exam due to concentrated targeting.

Regardless of whether Fermi colluded, the fact that students were easily swayed was influenced by her being the top graduation candidate.

Nade said.

"Hmm, so it's about whether to focus on evaluation scores or the graduation exam. The process or the result. We need to judge that well."

"If scouts check the evaluation scores, I want to do my best. But if I don't pass the graduation exam, it won't mean anything."

Iruki added.

"The psychological warfare with other students will be no joke either."

Shirone propped his chin and twisted his lips.

"Still, I think it's good to be in the top 10. I don't want to enter the exam room with low confidence."

Nade said.

"Interpersonal combat has the lowest score but the highest differentiation. It's important not to lose points."

"Tactical strategy requires careful observation. If your rank is low, you'll be in a lower group. A maximum of 5 points difference. If you think about that accumulating over 30 weeks, it's depressing."

Iruki said.

"You can adjust your rank to some extent through specialty enhancement. But it's dangerous to go too far ahead from the beginning. It's best to match your pace with the other students' scores."

After combining everyone's opinions, a rough outline was formed. It was a year-long journey, and they needed to decide their steps carefully.

"Let's wait until the interview tomorrow. Let's think after seeing the interpersonal combat schedule and the specialty enhancement items."

The senior class students were called one by one by Collie for individual interviews.

Shirone's rank in the senior class was 23rd, so he was called 23rd according to the order.

The main purpose of the individual interview was to evaluate the students' character and attitude towards their

studies, but no matter how it was phrased, the goal was to register their major.

"Nice to meet you, Shirone."

Collie extended his hand for a handshake. Unlike the previous day's orientation, he had his usual kind demeanor. But Shirone no longer acted like a child in front of him.

"Yes. I look forward to working with you."

As they sat down with the table between them, Collie adjusted his glasses while looking at the documents.

"First, take this. It's your interpersonal combat schedule, Shirone."

Shirone's hand trembled as he held the document. It felt like he had obtained a confidential document that no one should know about.

The document listed the opponents and dates for the interpersonal combat events. The first opponent was Dorothy.

'Ah, Dorothy.'

The 4D girl who always carried a tin doll.

At least in terms of combat power, he didn't seem to be at a disadvantage. But as Flu advised, there was no need to imagine the opponent arbitrarily.

Next, he checked his friends' schedules.

Iruki, Nade, and Amy were all assigned to the second half of the schedule, which resumed after the vacation.

'Hmm, competing against friends is also a variable.'

Personally, he wanted to do his best regardless of the opponent.

But if other participants formed factions and shared points, Shirone would have to think differently.

Collie took out the next document.

"Now, we need to register your major..."

The trailing off of his words indicated some understanding of the situation.

While the Red Line database had evaluation items for Unlocker, Shirone's specialty was unique.

The divine particle that grants mass.

The magic implemented through it was unlike any other magic in the world.

In other words, there was no standard for evaluation.

"After the senior class promotion test, the school sent an official letter to the Red Line. It seemed necessary to have a separate evaluation format. But this is also a bit ambiguous. In other words, your major is something that only you can learn in the world."

In the senior class promotion test, Shirone was comprehensively evaluated on his unique divine particle, the techniques he could use with it, his achievement in the Spirit Zone, and his theoretical understanding.

"The only thing the school can confirm is the magic you used at that time. The problem is that there's no basis for how it will develop, so the standard becomes ambiguous."

"Yes, I understand."

Shirone would have felt the same if he were an evaluator. If evaluating Ataraxia, what level would be considered master difficulty? Photon Cannon? Radiant Burst? Radiant Wings?

Moreover, the school didn't even know that he had developed the Radiant Wings magic.

And probably, all these situations wouldn't work to his advantage.

"So, the association seems to have taken a fundamental approach. That is, they will only measure the phenomena created by the combination of light and mass. Read it over and give me your opinion."

Shirone examined the evaluation sheet he received. There were 20 items related to the divine particle listed.

There were fifteen active magic items and five passive magic items. The active ones were mainly attack and defense, while the passive ones were mainly movement.

As Shirone read through the items, his expression hardened.

It didn't take long for his face to become completely contorted.

'They want me to do this?'

It was too difficult.

Of course, he could easily score 3 or 4 points on each item, and there were items where he could score more than 7 points at the advanced level. But the master level, which was the 10th stage, was a figure he couldn't reach at his current level.

Shirone's gaze moved to the bottom of the form, where the notes were written.

All items are measured with the divine particle applied. In the case of attack magic, only those with an impact of 20 crashes or more are recognized for evaluation.

20 crashes was about the average impact of the Photon Cannon he had used in actual combat.

In the end, even if he applied the divine particle, if he reduced the mass significantly, he wouldn't meet the evaluation criteria.

"Whoo."

Shirone returned to the first item.

The first item was the firing speed measurement, and the difficulty for just 1 point was 60 rounds per minute.

'60 rounds per minute with 20 crash power?'

Of course, Shirone could achieve that now. But that didn't mean it was easy.

When he fought the Ice Queen in the ancient ruins, he showed a firing speed of about 120 rounds per minute.

The problem was that it was the result of his best effort.

The master level standard was 200 rounds per minute.

To get 10 points, he had to cast attack magic more than three times per second and maintain that state for a minute.

Shirone squinted one eye and scratched his head.

Collie, understanding his feelings, waited with his hands clasped until he sorted out his thoughts.

The second item's projectile speed was no different.

The master level was 140 meters per second. Roughly twice the speed of the current Photon Cannon.

'What is this? Why did they set it like this?'

According to Amy's evaluation sheet, even fire magic wasn't this difficult.

The caloric item was naturally difficult as it was the core element of fire, but the other items were at a human level based on the average student level.

In contrast, the divine particle was too harsh. It was practically saying not to graduate from magic school this year.

Even the 'luminance' item in the passive category was the same.

The master level was a whopping 500,000 lumens. It was a figure that could never be reached with ordinary Shining magic.

But the association judged that it was possible if he handled the divine particle.

He had raised the luminance to 300,000 lumens with the Shining Impact magic.

But 500,000 lumens... the association people were greatly mistaken.

500,000 lumens was not an auxiliary magic but an attack magic.

If you didn't cover your eyes with your hands, it was strong enough to cause fatal damage to the retina through the eyelids.

Shirone pointed to the evaluation sheet and looked at Collie.

"Um, this is..."

"Yes, these are the specialty enhancement evaluation items proposed by the association. The difficulty is higher than you expected, right?"

"It's not just high. Even if the senior class is semi-professional, this is a bit..."

Collie nodded as if he understood completely.

"Shirone, I think you are an excellent student. But... when it comes to your specialty, we can't know how excellent you are compared to others. Because there's no comparison." Collie continued, looking down at the copy of the evaluation sheet.

"From the association's perspective, setting a high difficulty isn't particularly risky. It's just unfair to you. On the other hand, lowering the difficulty requires caution. If the difficulty is lowered and you pass too easily, it could directly affect the fairness of all magic schools under the Red Line."

I understood that there were practical issues. It made sense that they would be more cautious about lowering the difficulty than raising it.

"But isn't it also unfair if only my difficulty is high?"

Collie's lips curled into a smile.

"Yes. The association is conservative. I am conservative too. In your words, you might call us old-fashioned."

"No, I didn't mean to criticize..."

"That's the first assumption."

When Collie stopped speaking, Shirone immediately closed his mouth.

"Now, I'll tell you the second assumption. Perhaps, the evaluation sheet you're looking at is the correct standard."

"The correct... standard?"

"Specialty enhancement isn't about how strong you are compared to others. It's about the level of the major. For example, fire magic is more difficult than air magic. Anyone can access air, but not everyone can access fire. The difference in affinity leads to a difference in omnipotence, and omnipotence is closely related to talent. Therefore, the specialty evaluation for fire magic is harder than for air magic because it attracts more talented individuals. Do you think this is unfair?"

Shirone did not answer.

"Shirone, society isn't that lenient. If the association posted a notice urgently seeking one fire magician, dozens of fire

magicians would gather, and the most skilled one would be selected. But none of the rejected candidates would complain that they are stronger than magicians of other disciplines. That's the world we live in."

Shirone swallowed hard.

"The fact that your difficulty is higher than others isn't a problem. Your specialty is different from the start. You have a powerful specialty that others can't imitate. Therefore, the association is saying this: if you can give mass to light, you should at least be able to achieve this level to be considered a professional."

"....."

Collie folded his hands on the table.

"Now, the choice is yours. As the head teacher, I presented two assumptions about the evaluation sheet. One is that the association is conservative and full of old-fashioned people, and the other is that the association's judgment is accurate. The decision is yours. If you choose the former, you can register a different major. If you choose the latter, you accept this."

Chapter 377: One Step Further (2)

Shirone lowered his gaze to the evaluation sheet. The master difficulty levels of numerous items were listed one after another.

'I was an amateur.'

He thought he had reached a professional level in some aspects through real-world experience. He had certainly seen effective results.

But that wasn't the issue.

Whether the Photon Cannon was faster and stronger than other types, whether someone could beat someone else, or whether Ataraxia could be imitated.

The association was conveying through the evaluation sheet that if he couldn't achieve this level, he was just an amateur who had luckily obtained a special specialty.

-Your balance is really off.

It felt like he could hear Flu's voice.

Jonah, the top graduate of the Royal Magic School and a certified 8th-grade magician.

Among the countless 8th-grade magicians in the world, Flu held a special position.

She was a person with a lot of affection but was strict and unreserved when it came to magic.

Now he understood what kind of eyes she had looked at him with when they first met.

Unless he conquered all 20 items on the evaluation sheet, he was still an amateur in her eyes.

'Senior, strangely, I miss you today.'

Imagining Flu shuddering and being startled brought a smile to his face.

"Have you made your decision? Whatever you choose, I will respect your judgment."

If he changed his major, the difficulty would be acceptable. He had learned all the basic specialties, so he might be able to earn points more easily depending on his efforts.

But having already experienced the world after graduation through the Magic Association, Shirone realized it wouldn't mean anything.

"I'll go with this. The divine particle. Please register it as my major."

Collie didn't forget to ask once more.

"Are you sure? Once the evaluation starts, you can't change it."

"Yes, I'm sure. Even if I don't get high scores, I won't regret it."

No regrets.

This is my magic, and this is my life.

"Understood. Then I'll register it as such. Good luck."

"Yes. I'll do my best."

Shirone bowed politely and left Collie's office.

Iruki and Nade were waiting in the hallway.

Iruki, ranked 22nd in the senior class, had just finished his interview, and Nade, ranked 30th, still had to wait longer.

Nade asked with a worried expression.

"How was it? Do you think you can manage?"

A bitter smile replaced a hundred words.

Iruki, who shared the same struggles, waved his crumpled evaluation sheet.

"The master difficulty for the explosive power item is 50 kilobusters in 20 seconds. In other words, they want me to blow up a fruit shop every 20 seconds."

Nade didn't think it was someone else's problem.

Shirone was an Unlocker, but his major, electrical magic, was as difficult as explosive magic.

"Are the association guys crazy? Do they think that's possible at a student level?"

Shirone felt the same frustration.

"Maybe. But if anyone could pass, it wouldn't be a differentiator, so we can't blame them."

"There's a big difference between the 9th level and the master level. I might be able to manage 9 points. But Shirone, you seem surprisingly calm. Are you confident?" Shirone shook his head.

"No. I'm not confident at all. But it's something I have to do."

Iruki and Nade agreed in silence.

As Shirone said, it's something they have to do.

How could they aim to be the best magician without mastering their major?

'Of course, I won't do it,' Nade thought to himself.

The morning of the official start of the senior class schedule dawned.

The first evaluation of the first week was interpersonal combat, where 30 students were divided into 15 pairs to compete against each other.

The location was the second training ground behind the senior class building, a massive 120-square-meter combat arena.

The senior class students gathered in the training ground by class and lined up to wait for the interpersonal combat evaluation teacher.

Shirone stood between Nade and Iruki.

There was occasional conversation among classmates, but overall, the atmosphere was still awkward.

The evaluation teacher arrived on time.

He was a teacher in his mid-50s with graying hair and sharp eyes.

He was known for not speaking about anything other than the evaluation.

"Starting today, the interpersonal combat evaluation begins. Class Two already knows, but I'll briefly go over it for Class Three. According to the Kingdom's Education Law, the

synchronization rate for the second training ground is set at 80%. Of course, it will be 100% for the graduation exam." Even at 80%, it wasn't reassuring.

Considering the superhuman abilities of magic, even 80% power was not something one could withstand if hit directly. Shirone had also fought Dante at a 50% synchronization rate, but it had been an intense battle that hardly felt like a simulation.

"Weapons are not allowed. However, embodied weapons are permitted."

The students of Class Three tilted their heads, and the model student Boyle raised his hand.

"I have a question. What is the criterion for embodiment?"

"The clear criterion is whether it can be removed. Weapons that cannot be removed are considered embodied. Even if they can be removed, if it would impair bodily functions, the association considers them embodied."

According to the teacher, Shirone couldn't use Armand.

On the other hand, Canis could fight with Harvest. It couldn't be removed.

Another person who came to Shirone's mind was Richard from Fermi's group.

Known as Richard the Alchemist, he had modified 35% of his body with alchemy. While the devices could be attached and detached, his body couldn't function normally without them, so they were considered embodied.

If Shirone cut off his right arm and attached Armand, he could use the Golden Armor in the graduation exam, but he had no intention of doing that.

Some of Class Three's students looked displeased.

Even though they knew they couldn't do such a crazy thing themselves, it felt unfair that others modified their bodies.

Boyle looked at Canis and said.

"Good for you, passing."

Boyle's resentment was understandable. As someone who had to use slots for summoning magic, he envied Canis,

who could handle magical creatures without being constrained by slots.

'Don't worry. I can handle someone like you without Harvest.'

Canis didn't even bother to respond.

After the Arcane incident, everyone knew about Harvest's existence.

But only Shirone and Amy knew the true nature of the magical creature.

It's best to save your trump card for the right moment.

Unless it was a critical situation, Harvest wouldn't have a chance to shine.

Of course, Canis didn't intend to entrust his future entirely to the magical creature.

'This time, I'll win, Shirone. If you think Harvest is the end, you're mistaken.'

When the questions ended, the teacher proceeded with the evaluation.

"Now, we will conduct the interpersonal combat in order.

The combat time is 10 minutes. Wear the second training ground bracelet and wait for your turn."

Except for the evaluation group and the waiting group, students could move freely around the training ground.

It was a different atmosphere from the advanced class, which emphasized discipline and principles.

Shirone found a spot with his friends where they could see the training ground well. He unfolded his schedule and said.

"My opponent today is Dorothy. What about you, Iruki?"

"Huh? Oh, it's someone named Binder."

Shirone turned his head to the opposite side of the second training ground and looked at Binder, who was doing warm-up exercises.

He belonged to Class Two and had been seen at the senior class events, but he wasn't a memorable student.

He had light brown hair, wore glasses, and had a sparse beard on his chin and under his nose.

Since he hadn't stood out in last year's graduation exam, Iruki was confident of his victory.

"Well, I guess I can reserve 3 points for this."

"Don't be overconfident. We haven't had a single match yet. Things might change once you're in there."

"I've considered that. My calculations show he's an opponent with no variables."

Shirone was worried about Iruki's overconfidence.

As Flu said, it's foolish to predict the outcome in advance, and battles aren't decided by numbers alone.

'Well, I can't imagine Iruki being nervous either.'

In any case, today's main match for them wasn't Shirone or Iruki.

"By the way, Nade, are you okay?"

Shirone asked, and Nade shrugged.

"Well, I'll give it a try."

His opponent today was none other than Fermi.

Although he had failed the graduation exam, he was a mysterious student who never missed the top spot in the final evaluations.

When Shirone first heard about Fermi, he could only make vague analyses, but now that he understood the significance of rankings in the senior class, he couldn't help but worry.

Other students seemed to have the same thought, as they kept an eye on Fermi's behavior.

At that moment, Fermi, sensing their gaze, turned his head and smiled, waving at Nade, his opponent for the day.

"Is that guy provoking me?"

"No, I think he was just saying hello."

Nade turned to Shirone with a face that looked ready to devour him.

"That's a provocation! Since when did he know me well enough to act familiar? Watch closely. Today, I'll expose his skills completely."

Shirone looked at the training ground where the evaluation was taking place and realized it was his turn. He stood up. "Alright, I need to get ready."

When Shirone entered the second training ground, Dorothy approached, dragging her tin doll.

The tin doll made a clattering noise as it scraped the floor with each step.

Dorothy approached right up to Shirone's face. Her face was small, and her glasses were large, making her look like she was wearing a mask for a masquerade.

Her expressionless face and unfocused eyes served as a major shield, making it impossible to read her emotions.

'What should I do? Should I greet her?'

The waiting process for the interpersonal combat was the same as during the advanced class's second training ground duel.

After confirming the second training ground bracelet in the center of the training ground and returning to their positions, a 10-minute timer would start, and the second training ground would activate.

There was no need to greet each other, so turning away coldly could be a form of psychological warfare.

However, in the first week's evaluation, where friend and foe were not yet clearly identified, erasing humanity might not be the best approach.

Moreover, it didn't suit Shirone's personality.

"Nice to meet you. Since this is an important evaluation for both of us, let's do our best."

"Do you want to call it a draw?"

Dorothy's sudden proposal made Shirone immediately ask back.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Let's call it a draw. Then I'll do something you want."

Before he could analyze the meaning of her words, his face turned red. It might be nothing, but if it was a girl saying it, it was different.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I'll do anything you want. Anyway, you think it's disadvantageous to show your skills from the beginning, right? So let's each take 1 point."

Shirone didn't intend to join in any collusion, but it was important to weigh the pros and cons of any proposal, so he thought about it.

Her proposal certainly had potential uses. It could create variables at important times.

'If she really agrees to my terms.'

If it was a draw, they would each get 1 point. He couldn't tell if the value of the 2 points he would forgo by assuming a win was included in her proposal.

He wanted to win the first match if possible.

A good start would give him confidence for future evaluations and realistically give him an advantage in the ranking competition.

"No, I'll decline. I want to compete fairly. So you should do your best too."

Dorothy still didn't show any emotion. Then, as if understanding, she nodded and turned around.

"Then it can't be helped. Let's do our best."

Shirone stared blankly at Dorothy's back as she dragged her tin doll back to her position.

If it was psychological warfare, it had worked perfectly.

He was really quite disturbed.

'Get a grip. Nothing happened. Just fight as you originally planned.'

When Shirone reached the waiting area, the lights on the second training ground scoreboard changed from green to yellow to red, signaling the start.

Shirone bent his knees slightly to be ready for a quick offense or defense.

As the machine beeped and the light on the second training ground bracelet turned on, Dorothy still didn't move, holding her tin doll.

Shirone equipped the teleportation specialty and raised his omnipotence, leaning forward.

'I'll attack!'

At the same time, Dorothy turned her body and said.

"I lost."

Shirone, who had hurriedly canceled his magic, stumbled forward.

Barely managing to stay upright, he looked ahead to see Dorothy already leaving the training ground.

Chapter 378: Entering the Competitive System (2)

The students' reactions were varied. Especially Class Three, who didn't even understand what had happened.

"Shirone wins. Shirone gets 3 points. Dorothy gets 0 points." Despite the evaluation teacher's firm tone, Dorothy just nodded and returned to her seat, seemingly accepting the result.

She knew there weren't many in the senior class who could match Shirone in interpersonal combat. This was the conclusion Dorothy had reached after watching Shirone's duel with Dante six months ago.

Even if she gave it her all, she might last 10 minutes, but it would be foolish to sacrifice more for just 1 point.

Manipulation-type magicians, especially those like Dorothy who manipulate physical objects, lose 80% of their power if their manipulated object is damaged.

'I can't spend a week repairing my doll.'

If she fought Shirone, who fired photons with mass relentlessly, her doll would end up as scrap metal after 10 minutes.

Since there would be another interpersonal combat next week, the decision she made now was the best one.

Shirone came down from the training ground in a daze. He had won 3 points but was still bewildered.

Iruki and Nade approached with curious expressions.

"What happened? How did it go?"

"Well, you see..."

Shirone explained Dorothy's proposal before the match.

His friends were equally astonished. They hadn't considered that such a method could be used to gain points.

Nade quickly scanned the schedule.

"When do I face Dorothy?"

Iruki smacked Nade on the back of the head.

"Ouch! Why did you hit me? I was just joking..."

"I sensed 10% sincerity. Anyway, Dorothy won't use the same strategy again. She probably made that decision based on Shirone's personality and his relationship with Amy."

Shirone looked back at Dorothy. She was still sitting alone with an unreadable expression.

"It felt like she was trying to use the information from the Courage of Truth. That's why I refused. She must have guessed my nature."

"I thought she was clueless, but she's quite calculating. The same goes for the other students. Their true colors show in real situations."

Nade rubbed the back of his head, looking upset.

"Isn't she just weird? I don't get it. You're not defending her because she confessed to you, are you?"

Iruki raised an eyebrow.

He had been the one Dorothy confessed her love to during the Courage of Truth. Although it was a light-hearted comment not worth paying attention to, it was still the first time a girl had confessed to him.

"Enough nonsense. Just know that from Class Two onwards, they're quite cunning. We need to be on guard too."

Nade still looked skeptical.

"It sounds like you're defending her..."

Iruki changed the subject.

"Anyway, you're up next. Your opponent is Fermi. Do you have any strategy in mind?"

Nade tensed up as his turn approached.

"Well, I'll just do what I usually do. If something comes up, I'll adjust."

"You don't need to overdo it. It's only the first week. Besides, Fermi will likely take the lead this year too. In other words,

today's points aren't that crucial for you."

If Fermi ended up being the top of the senior class, it wouldn't matter much whether Nade won or lost.

But Nade thought differently.

He didn't intend to take any evaluation lightly, especially against someone expected to be Shirone and Iruki's toughest opponent.

"I know. But if I can draw out Fermi's skills, it'll be easier for you to strategize when you face him. I'll aim to win, but even if it's a draw, I'll at least gauge his capabilities."

Another match ended in the second training ground, and the evaluation teacher called out Nade and Fermi's names.

Nade gave a thumbs-up and headed to the training ground.

When he reached the center, Fermi leisurely walked over, admiring the scenery as if he were a salaryman taking a stroll after lunch.

Feeling disrespected, Nade glared at Fermi with cold eyes.

Fermi, however, maintained his smile.

"Wow, those eyes are fierce. Let's take it easy, it's the first day, junior."

Nade didn't even snort.

Regardless of the collusion in the graduation exam, he had a score to settle with Fermi.

Last year, Shirone had been trapped in a time-space maze and fell into a near-death state.

Fermi had led the student council in acknowledging Shirone's death and proceeding with funeral arrangements.

'Do you know how much you pissed me off? Your leisure ends now.'

The two exchanged glances and stepped back. Fermi turned first, followed by Nade.

As they loosened their limbs in their respective positions, the scoreboard lights changed from green to yellow to red.

As soon as the second training ground system activated, Nade charged forward with electricity crackling in his hands.

'I'll uncover everything about you in these 10 minutes!'

Three minutes later.

"Fermi wins! 3 points for Fermi. Nade gets 0 points."

Fermi fanned his face with his hand and said.

"Whew, that was close."

Despite his words, there wasn't a drop of sweat on his face as he left the training ground.

Nade was kneeling in the center of the second training ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Thanks to the 80% synchronization rate, he hadn't lost consciousness, but the psychological shock seemed significant.

Nade's eyes were vacant as he stared at the ground.

Seeing no sign of movement, Shirone and Iruki hurried over.

"Hey, Nade, are you okay? Snap out of it."

"He's completely out of it. Let's just take him away."

The two grabbed Nade's arms and dragged him out of the training ground like a sack of potatoes.

As the students burst into laughter, Amy sighed and shook her head.

'Oh, those fools...'

Though it was a ridiculous sight, she understood Nade's feelings.

The fight had seemed intense, but Fermi's mental strength gauge hadn't dropped below 90%. It meant he had barely taken any effective hits.

In fact, Fermi had driven Nade to a groggy state using only the 36 standard spells, without any special major magic.

Like clothes getting soaked in a drizzle, Nade couldn't even pinpoint what had hit him.

Shirone shook Nade worriedly.

"Nade, snap out of it. Are you okay?"

Nade stood up as if nothing had happened.

"Of course, I'm fine. Did you think I'd be down from this?"

Iruki asked.

"What happened? You said you'd last 10 minutes."

Shirone couldn't hide his disappointment.

"Didn't you respond too poorly? You should have pushed a bit more. You could have landed some effective hits."

Nade turned his head without answering. He stared intently at Fermi's back as he walked to the other side of the training ground.

"Shirone, be careful."

"Huh?"

"That guy... he's really strong."

Shirone sighed softly.

If Nade had pushed just a little more, he could have had a chance.

It seemed like he had let his guard down.

"Of course, he is. He beat you."

Nade's eyes flared with anger.

"I'm serious! Do you think I just lost?"

"Alright. Anyway, don't worry too much about one loss. You won't face the same opponent twice. Just forget about it and do well in tomorrow's evaluation."

Iruki understood Shirone's feelings.

He also felt that Nade could have been more aggressive in the fight.

But Nade... didn't do that.

'Strange. He's calling someone strong.'

It was the first time in six years of knowing him that he had heard Nade say that.

But if Nade said so, it was worth being cautious. He had an animal-like instinct for battles.

'I didn't sense it. Is it beyond my cognitive range?'

If Fermi could thoroughly hide his skills in front of the entire senior class, that was the only explanation.

In any case, Shirone, who didn't know Nade's past, was just heartbroken over his friend's defeat.

Thinking that Nade's loss shouldn't affect Iruki's performance, he quickly changed the atmosphere.

"Iruki, don't let your guard down. Binder hasn't stood out, but unexpected threats often come from such people."

Iruki, as always, was unfazed.

"I never let my guard down. I'll finish it in 3 minutes."

'That's letting your guard down...'

Shirone's thoughts didn't reach Iruki, who had already left.

Iruki faced Binder in the center of the second training ground.

True to his dislike for pretense, he briefly made eye contact and then turned away.

"It's an honor to meet you, Iruki."

Binder spoke to Iruki's back.

His eyes were shining, and his lips curled into a mocking smile.

"An honor?"

"You're the son of Merkodine Albino, the head of Yongroe."

Iruki turned fully around with his hands behind his back.

"That person visits our house sometimes. So what?"

Binder pointed to himself.

"Do you know my advanced class theory score? 100 points.

It's one of the highest in Alpheus Magic School's history. And

no one can break my record. Why? Because it's 100 points."

Iruki scratched his head.

"So, what's your point?"

"I'm going to join Yongroe. No, I'll become the head of Yongroe someday."

The head of Yongroe had been held by the Merkodine family for 300 years.

The family had also designated Iruki as the next head of Yongroe.

Binder was formally challenging not Iruki, but the Merkodine family.

"Listen well, Iruki. The kingdom's greatest intellect won't be you, but me, Binder."

Lost in thought, Iruki strode forward.

Binder, who had been full of confidence, flinched and stepped back as Iruki approached without warning.

"W-what? The duel starts after the second training ground activates..."

Iruki quickly reached out and grabbed Binder's arms firmly.

"Please."

"...What?"

"Please do it. I've heard it since I was born, and I'm sick of it. You take down my father and become the head of Yongroe. I'll cheer for you. Good luck."

Binder stared blankly at Iruki's back as he walked away after saying that.

Then his eyes filled with burning anger.

'What? You've heard it since you were born? Sick of it? Do you even know how many scholars have shed blood and sweat just to get close to the gates of Yongroe?'

Binder's fists trembled.

He didn't want to reveal his full power from the first week, but it was different with Iruki. He intended to crush his future rival completely.

As soon as the second training ground activated, Binder teleported to close the distance.

With a perfect score in the theory exam, his specialty allowed him to execute all basic magic with near-perfect precision.

Fireballs, wind cutters, and ice spears flew in alternation.

Iruki, overwhelmed by the relentless attack, distanced himself and activated the Bomblet Barrier.

Hundreds of small bombs formed a spherical shield. The spells collided with the bombs, causing a series of explosions.

"Hmph! I've already analyzed that!"

Binder extended his finger and fired a barrage of air guns, a basic press-type spell.

Though chilling to Shirone, it was much weaker than Gaold's version.

However, its accuracy was quite high.

As the spells pierced through the dense arrangement of the Bomblet Barrier, Iruki teleported into the air.

Binder's eyes gleamed as Iruki hovered using the Fly spell.

"I knew you'd do that!"

A blazing fireball formed between his palms.

'Did you think just having a perfect specialty would be enough? There's a limit to underestimating people!'

Flames of the Flame Strike spell ignited in Binder's hands.

It was a level difficult to execute without specializing in fire magic, but Binder's perfect specialty easily surpassed basic fusion magic.

"This ends now!"

Confident, Binder extended his hands in a magical action, casting his desperate spell.

"Huh?"

But the fireball, which should have shot out like an arrow, fizzled out right in front of him.

'No way... Cancellation?'

A chill ran down the back of his neck.

Chapter 379: Entering the Competitive System (3)

Iruki landed in the training ground. Smiling, he approached Binder.

"Ugh!"

Even as Binder stepped back, Iruki didn't rush. For him, everything was already over.

"Your specialty is certainly neat. It felt like reading a textbook."

Cancellation analyzes the changes occurring in the opponent's Spirit Zone and reverses all vector quantities. The effect of resetting omnipotence is tremendous, but the humiliation the opponent feels is also significant.

"Don't be ridiculous! My specialty is perfect!"

Binder, unwilling to lose, tried to cast magic again. But now, his omnipotence was being reset even before he could attempt it.

"I know. It's perfect. Perfect."

Binder's upper lip curled like a gorilla's. Then, suddenly, he looked down with a startled expression.

An explosive reaction was occurring below.

'Damn!'

"It's okay. It's just 10 kilobusters."

As Iruki turned around, an explosion occurred.

In the second training ground system, there was no "knockback" judgment in interpersonal combat, so Binder didn't get blown away. However, his mental strength gauge dropped straight to zero.

He could have withstood it if he had cast a defensive spell, but there was nothing he could do in front of Cancellation.

Iruki came down from the training ground, making a victory sign.

At one time, he was jeered for being disrespectful to the loser, but no one in the senior class laughed at him now.

"Cancellation... on the first day."

Their expressions were serious. Iruki had revealed his most powerful weapon among the spells he could use.

'Is he confident he won't lose? Or does he have another spell prepared?'

Revealing his trump card so boldly made their thoughts even more tangled.

"Hmm..."

Fermi watched the battle with his hands in his pockets.

Then, smiling, he asked his companion.

"How many seconds?"

"2 minutes and 11 seconds."

"2 minutes and 11 seconds to restore a broken glass."

No matter how orthodox Binder was, analyzing a senior class-level Spirit Zone within 3 minutes was impossible without a servant's brain.

'If interpersonal combat is included in the graduation exam, that will be quite tricky.'

Calculations related to business quickly ran through Fermi's mind.

The door to the dormitory closed with a thud.

It was past 11 PM when Shirone finally returned to the dormitory, collapsing onto his bed.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted. So tired."

The senior class schedule had already reached the fourth week.

Unless there were special circumstances, most evaluations ended around noon, but there was still no time to rest.

The senior class was literally a wilderness.

No one taught you anything; you had to learn it yourself if you wanted something.

Shirone also continued training with his friends in the training ground all day after evaluations.

He was still doing well in interpersonal combat, and cognition and judgment were favorable subjects for him. Even in terrifying situations, his mental endurance remained unshaken, and his excellent insight led him accurately toward the exit for survival.

However, other students also had professional-level skills in at least one area.

Binder, aiming for Yongroe, scored full marks in omnipotent implementation, and Arin and Dorothy, specializing in mental activities, were noted for their performance.

Those with unique specialties like Pisho steadily earned points in specialty enhancement, maintaining their rankings. Thus, even after rotating through the six subjects four times, the fluctuation in rankings was still minimal.

"It's much harder than I thought."

Considering the 30-week schedule, it was still the early stages.

But the fatigue Shirone felt was beyond imagination.

He had to take evaluations every day, where even a single point slip could drop his ranking. The tension from that carried over into his afternoon personal training, leaving him completely exhausted by the time he returned to the dormitory.

"I want to sleep. I want to sleep. Just one hour of sleep."

Despite his muttering, Shirone got up from his bed.

While other students might be sleeping by now, he had another task to complete.

Fulfilling Gaold's conditions.

The reason for his grueling daily training was not just to raise his ranking but also to avoid a meaningless death in the potential journey to Heaven.

He had to become stronger.

And he had to develop it.

A magic powerful enough to destroy Heaven.

"Me?"

Himself, struggling through the senior class evaluations?

"Haha!"

Shirone let out a hollow laugh and sat at his desk, opening his notebook.

It was filled with ideas he had come up with over the past month.

But none had hit the core yet, so they were still just scribbles.

'Let's approach it conceptually today. A magic to destroy Heaven. What could it be?'

First of all, it had to be a long-range magic.

Casting a wide-area destruction spell at close range would kill the magician as well.

'Or maybe I should consider that too...'

Shirone wrote "Possibility of caster's death" at the edge of his notebook.

'If I can die, would more paths open up?'

Deep in thought, Shirone grabbed his head.

"Ugh, I really don't know."

The key was to use Ataraxia's amplification power.

That much was certain.

But it was extremely difficult to reach the sub-light speed range of light-based magic with a Photon Cannon that had mass.

Someday, it might surpass the speed of sound, but even then, it wouldn't have the power to destroy Heaven.

"I'm just running in circles."

Shirone wrote "Ataraxia" and added "Trigger" next to it.

Ataraxia's strength was undoubtedly its tremendous amplification power, but it had other advantages too.

First, it was particularly threatening to the beings of Heaven.

Even sensitive humans were shocked by the halo, but the Maras, born from the concept of angels, felt instinctive fear on top of that.

"Hmm, it can cause a delay."

Shirone wrote "Delay 1-2 seconds" in parentheses next to Ataraxia.

"The most important thing is the trigger."

Magic that passed through Ataraxia was no longer governed by the magician's Spirit Zone but by Ataraxia.

That was why Shirone defined Ataraxia as siege magic.

"Amplification. Delay. Trigger."

These were the three divine attributes of Ataraxia.

"So, the magic I can use is..."

Shirone listed them sequentially.

For attack magic, there were Photon Cannon, Homing Photon Cannon, and Laser.

For defense magic, there were Radiant Burst and Dark Sphere.

For control techniques, there were Shining Impact, Shining Chain, and Slow. For movement techniques, there were Teleportation, Spatial Movement, Mass Teleportation, Scatter Movement, and Radiant Wings could also be classified as a movement technique.

"That's a lot. I've worked pretty hard."

Feeling proud for a moment, his expression soon darkened. No matter how many spells he had, none could completely destroy Heaven.

No, it was impossible from the start.

How could he, not even a formal magician, destroy Heaven?

"No! This won't work, that won't work, nothing works!"

Shirone drew a big X in his notebook and buried his face in the desk.

After a month of research, all he had was a faint, tickling feeling in his mind.

Even if he learned a new spell, there was a limit to a single type within a year.

'Amplification. Delay. Trigger. Time division. Force. Fusion. And the spells I've learned so far.'

He had to combine all these to create something completely new.

It might be wrong, but he had a strange feeling that it was the right answer, flowing through the channel of insight.

'Find it. Find it. Find a way.'

Repeating the only thought left in his mind, Shirone fell asleep.

For the senior class, a holiday was invaluable.

But Shirone had to wake up early, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

The fourth week's evaluations were over, and today was one of the six annual overall evaluation days.

It was an evaluation where they directly experienced the regular subjects of the graduation exam, so they had to do their best.

The winner would gain 20 points, and the loser would lose 20 points.

With a value of 40 points at stake, even those who had been playing psychological games would be determined to give their all.

In terms of interpersonal combat, it was equivalent to 13 consecutive wins.

In terms of specialty enhancement, it was the same as passing the master level in four items.

'Today's rankings could change significantly. No, they will change.'

Today's overall evaluation was the survival subject.

Since there had to be losers, there was a chance for a significant rise in rankings.

Especially in survival, which was the graduation exam version of Shirone's specialty in cognition and judgment, it was a match he couldn't afford to lose.

The students would enter the massive Virtual Zone together.

They would be evaluated on their mental strength to see how long they could endure in extreme situations.

Judgment was important, but mental endurance was essential.

For Shirone, failing to earn points here would put him at a disadvantage in the future schedule.

Meeting Nade and Iruki, Shirone headed to the training ground with the large Virtual Zone.

Many students were already gathered.

They were still competitors, but the initial awkwardness was gone.

They had also somewhat identified friend and foe.

It was hard to get along with Screamer, Pony, and Luman, but he got along well with Maya and Aider.

He had a neutral relationship with Dorothy, Suabi, and Pisho, and the Class One students didn't even look at Class Three.

When the entire senior class gathered, Collie lined up the students by class and checked each person's eyes.

Since survival was known to be the most dangerous and harsh subject in the overall evaluation, his face was filled with a sense of solemnity.

"Today's overall evaluation subject is survival. Before we start, I'll explain the rules. First, we'll divide into teams. The line drawn over there marks the right side as the red team and the left side as the blue team."

A line was drawn in the wide open space leading into the Virtual Zone.

"Once the teams are decided, everyone will enter the Virtual Zone. The survival program consists of seven stages and lasts for a total of 50 minutes. The team with the last survivor wins, regardless of the remaining results. In other words, the team with the final survivor wins overall, and the losing team loses 20 points."

Boyle raised his hand.

"What's the criterion for deciding teams?"

"Go to the team you want."

Pandora asked.

"Um, shouldn't it be 15 versus 15?"

"It doesn't matter. Even if all 30 are on one team, that's fine."

The atmosphere in Class Three became awkward. Some students looked around as if to say, "Is this for real?"

'If all 30 are on one team, there's no competition. What kind of rule is this?'

Of course, no one would suggest forming a team of 30 to live or die together.

The senior class was a place where everyone was desperate to gain an advantage over their opponents.

But they needed to think about the meaning of the rule.

Considering the senior class's operating principles so far, it wasn't just a competition to earn points and climb the rankings.

It was designed to determine how well you could position yourself among competitors and how accurately you could assess others' abilities.

Iruki said.

"A magician's position in a real party is absolute. It seems the overall evaluation is no exception."

If a magician falters, the party is doomed. Even third-rate adventurers know that.

Just having powerful magic and an excellent Spirit Zone doesn't guarantee passing the graduation exam.

How intelligently you solidify your position among competitors was also an invisible evaluation criterion.

"Now, we'll decide the teams. You have 10 minutes. If you don't decide within the time, you'll be considered to have forfeited. Go to the team you want."

As soon as Collie finished speaking, the 30 students flinched as if stunned.

Someone must have flinched first, but it was an unpleasant reaction speed that couldn't identify the culprit.

They needed to think carefully.

The rule was that even if only one team member survived, the team would earn 20 points.

Therefore, for students who weren't confident in the survival subject, the key was which team they joined.

In a sense, it was a true test of survival ability.
So, those confident in their mental endurance needed to move first.
Some were already thinking of taking the lead.
But choosing between the meaningless red and blue teams was subtly nerve-wracking.
'What was the win ratio between the blue team and the red team so far?'
It was a kind of jinx.
"I'll go first."
Shirone moved first.
Since his goal was to be the final survivor, he didn't need to worry about others' choices.
When Shirone went to the red team, the crowd finally stirred. The second to move were, of course, Nade and Iruki. Shirone's group was on the red team.
With this crucial information, the remaining 27 minds began to work quickly.
"Hmm, then I'll go to the blue team."
Everyone turned to Fermi at his voice. His group followed him confidently as he walked.
Reaching the center of the blue team, Fermi looked back at Shirone and gave a playful smile.
Shirone didn't smile. He couldn't tell what thoughts lay behind those narrow eyes.
Finally, the moment the remaining students had been waiting for arrived.
The formidable newcomers of Class Three and Fermi's group, who had never missed the top spot in the final evaluations, were divided into teams.
Which side had a higher chance of winning?
Now it was a matter of choice.

Chapter 380: The Meaning of Survival (2)

"Then, of course, I'll go with Shirone."

Amy moved to the red team, high-fiving Shirone, Iruki, and Nade in turn before taking her place.

"Tch, eager to stand out. That's why freshmen are no good." Screamer didn't like that Shirone had been the first to make a move.

Even those who had been in the senior class for two or three years were cautious about choosing teams. For Shirone to boldly raise the team's flag was both a disregard for hierarchy and a display of self-importance.

'At least that guy is a bit better.'

Screamer looked at Dante.

Seeing him still deep in thought, it seemed that the top ranks understood each other.

Although he still didn't like him, letting emotions influence evaluations was a shortcut to failure.

"Hey, let's join Fermi's side together. I know from last year. With Fermi, victory is guaranteed. Of course, I won't be easy either."

If he could bring Dante over, he could isolate Shirone. That would attract even more team members.

"Hmm."

Dante didn't even listen to Screamer.

Lost in thought, he moved with his companions.

"Let's go. I've decided."

Screamer's face twisted.

Even Dante, said to be the kingdom's best in talent, was joining Shirone's team.

'What the heck? Are they kids or what...'

When Dante, followed by Canis and Arin, crossed the line to the red team, it was beyond absurd—it was infuriating.

'Are they out of their minds? Do they even know what survival is? If they had just checked last year's results, they'd know.'

Last year's survival evaluation had a ratio of 22 to 8 in favor of the red team.

In the end, the majority's choice was correct.

Naturally, Fermi was among the 22 and became the final survivor after enduring up to the fifth stage.

'Annoying. I have to do this again.'

Screamer shuddered.

The experiences in the Virtual Zone today would be extreme situations that wouldn't even appear in nightmares.

Although the difficulty was prepared up to the seventh stage, there was no need to go that far.

Only one person in the history of Alpheus Magic School had passed the seventh stage of survival.

Even that was just a rumor.

"Fine, whatever. Be a sacrifice for my points. Let's go, Pony."

Screamer turned and headed to the blue team. Pony, who had been watching Shirone, followed him.

As more students chose their teams, Boyle made his decision after much deliberation and spoke to Pandora.

"I'm going to the blue team. You should choose quickly too.

You don't want people saying you just tagged along."

Pandora tilted her head.

"Blue? Do you have a reason for being confident?"

"In my own way. But I won't tell you. I don't want to influence your judgment."

"It's okay, tell me. I won't be swayed."

Finally, Boyle looked around and whispered in Pandora's ear.

"As you know, survival evaluates endurance. It's about patience, not skills."

"So?"

"I heard only one person in the school's history has completed survival. We probably won't last till the end either. So it's best to leave it to someone specialized in this and focus on our records."

"Hmm..."

"You know, Fermi has been the final survivor for four consecutive years."

"I get what you mean. But Shirone isn't easy either. He's an Unlocker. His mental strength must be considerable. He actually showed good results in cognition and judgment."

Boyle sighed regretfully.

Why was the difficulty of the survival evaluation set so high? If even one person could endure, the competition wouldn't exist in the first place.

If someone could definitely pass the seventh stage, everyone would join that person, and the team balance would be 30 to 0.

So, whether it's Shirone or Fermi, they would both be eliminated.

Therefore, Fermi, who had taken the survival test for over four years, was much more advantageous.

The fact that students above Class Two were heading to the blue team without much doubt also supported Boyle's thinking.

"Well, it's your decision. Anyway, I'm going to Fermi's side."

Boyle didn't share his thoughts.

It was a value judgment. Sharing information out of camaraderie was fine, but trying to persuade would crack the alliance.

Pandora watched Boyle join the blue team.

She was also conflicted, but she had seen Shirone's skills with her own eyes.

Most of Class Three being on the red team probably had similar thoughts.

"Well, it's either this or that."

Pandora followed Boyle to the blue team.

Even in the ruthless senior class, she realized the importance of allies.

'If it's 50%, let's live or die together.'

By the time Pandora chose the blue team, the teams' outlines were becoming clear.

Students who hadn't scored high in evaluations were being extremely cautious until the end.

One of them was Maya.

Having been in the senior class for a long time, she knew it was advantageous to join Fermi's side.

'Hmm, I guess...'

Maya turned towards Fermi's side. Then Screamer, already on the blue team, raised his chin and spoke.

"Hey, are you really coming here?"

Collie sternly warned.

"Screamer, no external pressure in team selection."

"I was just asking."

"That's a warning. One more and you're out."

"Tch!"

Screamer clicked his tongue and turned away. But this was also part of his calculation.

Maya was worth pushing away with one warning.

He had suffered significant point losses by being in the same group as Maya in strategy and tactics.

If they were on the same team, the point difference would remain, and he couldn't avoid being in the same group in strategy and tactics.

But if the teams were divided and he won, he could escape from Maya with a 40-point gap.

'Let's split here. You go to Class Three, and I'll go to Class One.'

Feeling dejected, Maya moved to the red team.

Even if it wasn't external pressure, Screamer's hostile attitude made her unwilling to be on the same team.

She approached Shirone.

Since he was the first to choose the red team, she thought of it as Shirone's team.

"Can I join?"

Shirone smiled brightly.

"Of course. The more, the better. And it's not me accepting you; you chose our team."

Iruki and Nade stepped aside, making room for her.

It was a strategic decision to give her a sense of belonging, as well as being angry at Screamer's pettiness.

'Endurance is influenced by psychology. The more who can hold out longer, the better.'

In the end, those with strong endurance would remain, but being with teammates was a powerful weapon in itself.

"I'll join this side too."

Dorothy, with sleepy eyes, joined the red team.

Then Luman followed, and the timid Suabi cautiously moved over, watching the situation.

'Oh, this is unexpected.'

Nade glanced at the three who had just joined.

Luman, who didn't like Shirone, choosing the red team likely meant Dorothy influenced his decision.

Dorothy was almost the only person Luman was somewhat close to, but Suabi, who was indecisive like she had decision paralysis, joining immediately was worth reconsidering.

'Some in Class Two have considerable trust in Dorothy's judgment. So... is Iruki right about the brainwave?'

With everyone having chosen their teams, only Aider remained.

Being the youngest was just as difficult in this situation.

His older friends and sisters, whom he was close to, were split between the two teams, making it hard to decide where to go.

'Hmm, which side should I join to be seen as making the right choice?'

Shirone was looking at him with a kind smile.

Feeling a sense of trust as a team, Aider also smiled and ran over.

"Hmm! Hmm!"

At that moment, Screamer covered his mouth and cleared his throat.

With one more warning, he'd be out, so he had to signal with a sound.

Fortunately, it seemed effective as Aider turned his head.

With Collie's sharp eyes watching, Screamer pretended to be indifferent, stalling for time.

'Screamer...'

Screamer was the one who bossed Aider around the most in the senior class.

But he also took care of him a lot, making him someone Aider couldn't afford to offend.

Changing his mind, Aider bowed to everyone on the red team and then ran to the blue team.

"Teacher! I'm sorry! I'll change teams."

Collie sighed.

But he couldn't give a warning based on suspicion alone, so he concluded the procedure.

Coincidentally, the red and blue teams ended up with exactly 15 members each.

'Hmm, a close match. It's been a while.'

No, it was the first time since Fermi had excelled in the survival test.

'Shirone's presence is that significant.'

The advanced class and the senior class were entirely different worlds, but the title of the kingdom's top prospect was powerful.

The fact that he had earned the title by defeating the former strongest, Dante, also played a part.

"Now that the teams are decided, enter the Virtual Zone."

As the 30 students moved to the center of the Virtual Zone, Collie followed and explained.

"Listen carefully. This is a matter of life and death."

Class Three students, experiencing the survival test for the first time, looked particularly tense.

"The Virtual Zone is not the second training ground. It doesn't transmit information through anti-magic. The runes engraved on the floor use sophisticated magical engineering to inject specific sensations into your Spirit Zone as if they were real."

If the body is under the control of the mind, it's not strange for someone trapped in a room-temperature freezer to freeze to death. This time, however, it was a method of directly injecting information into the extremely sensitive mental state of the Spirit Zone.

"Even though it's virtual, it can still strain your mind. Once you enter the survival test, your brain will go into a semi-conscious state due to shock. Therefore, it's impossible to consciously exit the Virtual Zone."

A dark shadow fell over the faces of Class Three.

"Especially from the fourth stage onwards, it becomes really dangerous, so the teachers will monitor your condition through vision. But remember, since this is an official Red Line evaluation, they won't be able to intervene to save you even in dangerous situations."

Collie held up two fingers.

"There are two ways to exit the Virtual Zone. First, deactivate your Spirit Zone. Second, if deactivation is impossible, shout 'Toako.' Remember this well. It's 'Toako.'"

'Toako' is a word with no meaning, created as a code for the survival test.

Using meaningful words could lead to misuse during the test.

"Teachers will not respond to any words other than 'Toako.' Whether you say 'Help me,' 'I give up,' or 'The Virtual Zone is malfunctioning,' they won't be able to save you."

All the senior class students showed determined expressions.

"What I want to emphasize is, do your best but don't be stubborn. This is just a rehearsal. Also, if you feel any abnormalities after exiting the Virtual Zone, report it immediately to receive mental treatment. Understood?"

"Yes!"

The students' voices echoed through the mountains surrounding the training ground.

Chapter 381: The Meaning of Survival (3)

Collie left the Virtual Zone, and the 30 students divided into red and blue teams.

Shirone took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

The survival evaluation wasn't about fighting people or monsters.

There was no way to win against nature.

Pain was an inevitable fate, and now there were only 10 seconds left until that pain began.

Perhaps because of this, some students who had experienced it last year already had pale faces.

'Damn. If it weren't for this, I'd stay in the senior class for 10 years.'

The number one subject that senior class students wanted to avoid.

That was the survival test.

-Transmitting information to the Virtual Zone. Standby time: 5 seconds. 4 seconds. 3 seconds...

As the female guide's voice was heard, various reactions appeared: students closing their eyes tightly, loosening their shoulders and necks, or calming their minds with a composed expression.

Shirone also stared straight ahead, calming his mind. Then someone tapped his arm. It was Iruki.

"See you on the other side, Shirone."

-Data transmission complete. Activating the Virtual Zone extreme cold program.

The scenery began to ripple beyond Iruki's bitter smile.

The landscape of the Virtual Zone disappeared in an instant like turning the pages of a picture book, and the summit of a

snowy mountain appeared.

Shirone looked around in surprise.

Cold wind entered his nose, and the snow covering the ground sparkled in the sunlight.

The sky felt close enough to touch.

The snowy mountains surrounding him like walls had a vivid color, as if they were coated with condensed milk.

"Is this... the first stage of survival?"

Even students above Class Two were experiencing the situation for the first time, as the survival program was reset for each evaluation.

Iruki turned around and pointed with his finger.

"It starts from there."

Shirone's eyes widened as he looked in that direction.

A massive avalanche, something he had never seen before and would likely never see again, was slowly descending.

"Damn it!"

Boyle, Pandora, and several other students cast teleportation spells and flew in the opposite direction.

But Shirone and a few others just stood there.

The avalanche was approaching much more slowly than expected. It was falling from an enormous height. The fact that it looked so massive meant that an unimaginable amount of snow was coming.

"This isn't a situation you can escape from..."

Boom!

The astronomical mass of snow landed on the summit, pushing the air outward.

A gale strong enough to tear off cheeks swept through, and a 300-meter-high snowstorm engulfed the summit in 0.1 seconds.

"Ugh!"

Shirone gritted his teeth and steadied his mind.

The avalanche, flowing faster than a torrent, mercilessly pushed him off the summit.

'No! Get a grip!'

Swallowing the snow that entered his mouth, Shirone pushed through the snow.

"Phwa!"

The snow was larger than an iceberg, and he was falling towards the unseen ground below.

At the top of the snow mass, Shirone stuck his face out.

"Phwa! Phwa!"

Spitting out everything in his mouth and opening his eyes, he saw the round sun embedded in the clear sky.

Flying into the sky, Shirone maintained the Fly spell and surveyed the surroundings.

Students who had made the same decision as Shirone were popping out of the falling snow one by one.

"Shirone!"

Turning his head at Iruki's voice, he saw him covered in snow, pointing and shouting.

"Slowly descend...!"

Before he could finish, the snow waterfall swallowed Iruki. Shirone's startled gaze turned upward. The once clear sky was now completely blocked by white snow.

"This is insane...!"

A white torrent flowed through the spot where Shirone had been.

"Ahhh, ahhh..."

"It hurts... Help..."

Collie looked sympathetically at the students rolling around in the Virtual Zone.

From the moment they were swept away by the avalanche, all 30 students had fallen into a semi-conscious state.

'How hard it must be. These children who were raised so precious.'

The outcome depended on the final survivor, but no student would easily give up the evaluation for that reason.

Since individual achievements, not just team results, were disclosed to the association and scouts, they would try to endure with all their might.

'This might be a situation they never need to face in their lives. But the world they will live in is even harsher. Simply because it's reality, life becomes hell.'

"It seems to have started already."

Collie quickly unfolded his arms and turned around.

"Principal."

Alpheus, accompanied by Vice Principal Olivia, was watching the Virtual Zone.

"They've all entered a semi-conscious state. Well, that's to be expected."

"Even professionals dread this. It's a subject that less prestigious schools with fewer graduates don't even adopt." The survival evaluation was a controversial subject even within the association.

While it was good to assess practical abilities, there was a risk of students being broken before they could even sprout. Students who didn't graduate were still valuable members of society in the long run. If there were no magicians to open magic shops, become teachers, join the security forces, perform guild commissions, or handle administrative complaints, the magical society couldn't function.

Therefore, the association had instructed that only the top five prestigious schools, which received more than ten graduation tickets, conduct the survival evaluation.

Since it was a subject only the chosen ones took, it became a staple topic at alumni reunions.

If asked to go back to school and do it again, they would shudder, but that sentiment was also part of the pride of attending a prestigious school.

Olivia asked.

"This is the program provided by the association this year, right? Is it currently the first stage, 'Snow Extreme'?"

"Yes. There are 2 minutes left. It will feel like 2 hours to the students."

Olivia's brows furrowed in displeasure.

"But there are no dropouts yet. This will reduce the differentiation among low scorers. I'll have to suggest raising the difficulty in the future."

Alpheus smiled wryly and shook his head.

It seemed the inspector of the teachers' meeting was eager to give her students even more impressive medals.

"Ugh!"

Shirone, seeing the rock rushing towards him, fell with his arms covering his face.

A sharp pain jolted his arm bones, and his nose stung. A snow mass hit him on the head.

He had fallen quite a distance from the summit, so the amount of snow wasn't enough to crush him. Still, the impact was enough to shake his skull.

'My arm, it's broken.'

Even though he had wrapped himself in an air shield, he fell too fast to absorb the impact completely.

Lying on the rock, he looked up to see his broken arm bone protruding through the skin.

It was a virtual world, so it would soon be reconstructed, but the pain transmitted through his nerves was more annoying than in reality.

"Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!"

He had landed on a protruding rock in the middle of a cliff.

It was better this way. He hoped time would pass and the first stage would end.

Crack. Crack.

As if mocking his thoughts, the rock began to crack and show signs of collapse.

Shirone grabbed his broken arm and shook his shoulders.

"Heh, heh heh."

He laughed in disbelief.

"Is this a regular subject? Are they trying to kill us?"

He could imagine the expressions of students if the survival subject was chosen for the graduation exam.

He suddenly felt a deep respect for all the graduates.

"Alright, let's see this through to the end."

With eyes filled with determination, Shirone lifted his head.

As the rock broke, his body fell to the ground.

Splash!

'What?'

Hearing the sound of water, Shirone opened his eyes.

He felt a coldness that seemed to shatter his mind.

Students, regardless of team, were sinking into the foam.

'Is this the second stage?'

There was a process for transitioning from the first to the second stage, but those in a semi-conscious state couldn't perceive it.

It was designed to leave no room for mental recovery.

'Why can't I use magic?'

He couldn't enter his Spirit Zone. Of course, since this world was virtual, magic wasn't actually blocked.

'Let's get to the surface.'

Flailing like a frog, Shirone headed for the surface. He felt like he would freeze to death if he stayed underwater any longer.

As he reached out near the surface, his eyes widened in shock.

He couldn't get out.

What he felt was a cold, hard ice wall.

'What? How do I get out?'

He saw a blurry shadow on the ice above. Bringing his eyes closer, he saw a young boy squatting.

'I need to get out. I'm running out of breath.'

He pounded on the ice wall as if asking for help.

The boy, after staring for a while, nodded as if he understood and pointed somewhere.

'There? I should go there?'

Shirone confirmed by pointing in that direction.

The boy nodded again and started moving as if to show the way.

Shirone pushed against the ice wall, following the boy.
Meanwhile, the cold water was choking him.

'This is bad. I can't hold on any longer.'

He wanted to reach the surface and breathe freely right away. But the boy's pace was excruciatingly slow.

'Hurry! Hurry! I can't...'

The time he could hold his breath by willpower had ended.
Now, he simply couldn't breathe because there was no air.
His body trembled with the fear of cold and death.

Finally, the boy stopped. He looked down at Shirone and pointed to a spot a few steps away.

'There!'

Shirone swam with all his might. Even though there were only 3 meters left, it felt incredibly far.

'Got it! Finally...!'

Feeling a burst of joy, Shirone reached out towards the exit.
Thud.

A solid ice wall blocked him again.

'What...?'

His mind went blank. Shirone looked up at the boy on the ice for an explanation.

The boy grabbed his belly and laughed, then leaned in close to Shirone's face and stuck out his tongue.

Gulp!

A chunk of air escaped from Shirone's mouth.

'No. Stay calm.'

He hurriedly suppressed the anger that was burning his mind.

The boy, taunting him with his tongue in the fresh air, was infuriating. But getting angry wouldn't improve the situation.

'Show me again. Where's the exit?'

Shirone knocked on the ice wall with desperate eyes.
Even with someone in urgent need at his feet, the boy stroked his chin as if pondering.

Shirone's head started to heat up again.

'No, no. Losing my cool means the end.'

The boy finally made a decision. He looked back at Shirone and shook his head, indicating he wouldn't show him.

'Control your anger. I'm a magician.'

The light of life in Shirone's pupils began to fade. As oxygen failed to reach his brain, his bodily functions started to shut down.

'Anger changes nothing. Until the moment I die... I must not lose...'

Gurgle!

A bubble of air escaped from his organs and floated out of his mouth. Cold water flowed into his stomach, replacing the lost air.

It felt like his cells were freezing.

His swimming stopped, and his hand, which had been touching the ice wall, slowly fell away.

He saw the boy laughing as he sank.

The boy stared intently at Shirone's face as he was sucked into the abyss.

Then, as if making a decision, the boy nodded and raised a trident from who knows where.

Crash!

With one strike, the ice wall shattered.

That sight was captured in Shirone's dying eyes.

As the frozen nerves slowly transmitted the fact to his brain, his legs started to move again, and his body began to float up.

"Phwaaah! Gah! Gahhh!"

Breaking the surface, Shirone gulped down air desperately.

At that moment, nothing else mattered.

"Huff! Huff!"

After about a minute, he finally regained his senses.

The ice was peaceful, and the boy had disappeared.

"Phwa! Phwa!"

Students were surfacing one by one. Not far away, he saw Amy.

'She made it.'

Amy, with a look of near-death on her face, took deep breaths. Then she noticed Shirone and made eye contact. Smiling, she blew air to lift her wet hair.

"Haha!"

Shirone laughed. Life was really tough.

And that was his last memory of the second stage, "Ice Prison."

Chapter 382: The Meaning of Survival (4)

Stage 3: Poisonous Swamp.

The location was a swamp stretching to the horizon.

At first, everyone hovered in the air using Fly magic, but one by one, they inhaled the toxic gas rising from the swamp and fell into it.

The real challenge began then.

Students who fell into the swamp screamed in agony, their faces twisted beyond recognition.

It was undoubtedly excruciatingly painful.

The students still in the air gritted their teeth and endured.

But they all knew they would have to go in eventually.

The association conveyed through the survival program that the power of nature couldn't be overcome by magic. The strength to survive until the end lay in the magician's will, not their magic.

Students in the air began to vomit.

Those in the swamp were hit by it, but they were too overwhelmed to even realize something was falling on them.

"Sigh."

Nade's sigh was heard. Slowly tilting, he looked back at Shirone and said,

"See you later, Shirone."

As Nade fell, other students began to follow one by one. Shirone couldn't hold on any longer either. As he fell, a drowsy voice escaped his lips.

"Yeah... Nade."

Students who failed the survival test crawled out of the Virtual Zone one by one.

With ice towels prepared in advance on their heads, they sat away from the device to rest.

Collie checked the Virtual Zone's gauges and said, "Stage 3, Poisonous Swamp, has ended. Currently, there are 8 survivors on the red team and 7 on the blue team."

Olivia said,

"Hmm, more survived than expected? This year's senior class is certainly high-level."

"Class Three has some strong students, and Fermi's group is still in. Of course, there are no weaklings in Class Two either."

Alpheus said,

"Stage 4... 'Death Scythe,' right? This will tip the scales."

The difficulty level set by the Magic Association for certified magicians was Stage 4.

Here, they wouldn't just experience pain but actual death. Dozens of times.

Whooooosh!

Hearing the wind roaring from the abyss, Shirone was endlessly falling.

If the previous stages were extreme natural environments, Stage 4 was a mechanical space.

It was the inside of a massive chimney with an immeasurable depth.

Hundreds of thousands of blades spun fiercely, leaving no gaps, slicing the students into pieces.

Death was something one couldn't adapt to.

Every time horrific and tragic emotions struck their minds, their Spirit Zones were destroyed, and dropouts increased.

Shirone gritted his teeth.

Had he been sliced and reconstituted about ten times? It was as if the program was asking, "Can you still endure this?"

A giant blade, like a tray, was waiting, leaving afterimages. There was probably no way to pass through it alive.

'Endure! Endure!'

Shirone instantly passed through the afterimage of the blade. However, his body was already divided into three pieces.

What words could describe the feeling of watching your legs fall before your face?

Even though people die, no one has experienced death, so human language will never find an accurate expression.

Other students were in the same situation.

Stabbed by blades protruding from the walls, they momentarily stopped falling, then continued their pitiful descent towards the next death as the blades retracted.

"Haaah!"

Reconstituted, Shirone gasped for air like a newborn taking its first breath.

'Ugh! Just kill me, kill me!'

Seeing dozens of interlocking drills waiting like a mat, anyone would think that.

Thud!

Shirone fell there.

Whirr, whirr, whirr, thud!

And in an instant, his body was ground up and poured down like juice.

"Damn it!"

Nade woke up from the Virtual Zone, cursing.

Iruki, Amy, and even Fermi's group couldn't endure the Death Scythe stage and were thrown out, rolling on the ground.

Their heads felt like they were splitting, and nausea surged. Dry heaving and spitting out long strands of saliva were common.

"This is crazy. Why do I always get stuck at Stage 4?"

Amy's expression was grim as she wiped her lips.

Maintaining the Spirit Zone even after death was impossible without a powerful obsession that transcended life and death.

A seeker. A religious person. A murderer.

Whatever it was, from now on, it was a world of mental realms beyond ordinary people.

So it wasn't strange that Iruki had dropped out.

"Dead is dead. What's next?"

From the start, one shouldn't create situations where they would die. His mind, which hated uncertainty, couldn't accept this stage.

The Death Scythe stage met the association's expectations perfectly.

Many dropouts occurred at Stage 4, and most crawled out of the Virtual Zone looking like death warmed over.

"Ugh, I'm dying. Hey, are you okay?"

Nade, massaging his neck, approached Iruki. Iruki's eyes changed to a puzzled look as he turned to him.

"Don't tell me, you dropped out too?"

"Yeah. My head's killing me."

After thinking for a moment, Iruki asked again.

"Why?"

"Why? What do you mean?"

Iruki had thought Nade would pass the Death Scythe stage easily. But as something occurred to him, he understood.

'Maybe it's a natural result?'

Nade didn't think about what came after death. It was probably a deliberate suppression.

If his mind transcended death, it would be impossible for him to remain a normal human being.

"Never mind. Let's get out of here. Dying too much is killing me."

Collie looked at Alpheus and said,

"Entering Stage 5, Insect King, in 30 seconds. Shall we open the vision?"

"Hmm, Insect King..."

Having passed the 'Death Scythe,' the standard for professional magicians, they were now entering a world that couldn't be defined by theory.

Since there was a risk of severe mental damage, it was necessary to open the vision to check the students' conditions.

"Open the vision."

"Yes. Activating the master device."

As Collie operated the device, a large hologram curved concavely appeared in the air of the Virtual Zone.

In the graduation exam, a giant hologram appears on the ceiling from the start, but the current vision also allowed a clear view of the program's interior.

-Entering Stage 5, Insect King, in the extreme cold program.

"Ugh! What's that!"

When the Insect King scene appeared on the vision, the dropouts gathered in front of the Virtual Zone recoiled in horror.

Countless disgusting insects were writhing endlessly. The sight of billions of insects wriggling made it look like the ground was moving.

The survivors were probably somewhere in there, buried in insects and suffering.

Stage 5, Insect King.

It was a place filled with fear, disgust, and pain so intense that death seemed preferable.

The sight of insects writhing together provoked primal human fear, but this time, it wasn't just watching.

They penetrated the skin, nerves, and organs, transmitting real sensations.

The pain of insects burrowing into every hole in the body and eating the flesh didn't end with death.

As those who couldn't endure it increased, the insect-covered ground began to stir.

Someone, covered in insects like a blackened corpse, suddenly stood up and started thrashing and screaming.

"Ahhh!"

Aider, lying in the Virtual Zone, echoed the scream from the simulation.

"Ahhh!"

Thrashing and rolling on the ground, he flailed his limbs, trying to crawl somewhere.

"Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!"

No one helped him. Approaching someone in severe shock could cause even greater trauma.

Still, perhaps due to the talent that got him through the Death Scythe stage, Aider quickly regained his composure.

"Huff! Huff!"

On the boundary between virtual and reality, he looked around in terror, tears welling up.

"Ah, this is really scary."

"..."

How could it not be?

Those who dropped out at the Death Scythe stage felt relieved that it ended there after seeing Aider's state.

On the other hand, Screamer's expression was grim.

He had brought Aider to the blue team because he had scored well in the survival evaluation since last year.

But once again, Aider couldn't get past Stage 5, and the most dangerous opponent, Shirone, was still in the Insect King stage.

'Aider couldn't endure it, but Shirone can?'

Nade had similar thoughts. Watching the Virtual Zone with an ice pack on his neck, he said to Iruki,

"That kid Aider, he made it to Stage 5? Not bad for someone so young."

"He's the youngest in the senior class. Maybe not in skill, but definitely in talent."

The difficulty of the Insect King stage was incomparable to the Death Scythe. Starting with Aider, students began to drop out one by one.

Canis grimaced as he sat up, and shortly after, Arin slowly opened her eyes.

Unlike Aider, they calmly collected themselves.

"Canis, are you okay?"

"More or less. It's much harder than expected. The Spirit Zone becomes too sensitive after Stage 4."

"There are too many insects secreting toxins. It's hard to maintain equanimity when they're stinging your organs."

'Talking about equanimity... these guys are nuts.'

Arin's assessment was fitting for a mental specialist, but those who dropped out before the Death Scythe stage were bewildered.

It was only natural that talking about toxins and equanimity while insects were tearing through their intestines made them seem insane.

But that's why it's called a state of mastery.

The depth of this realm, which cannot be measured by numbers, is a sensation that cannot be understood without reaching it.

'Everyone is amazing.'

While the dropouts gathered in the Virtual Zone, Maya remained in the resting area.

She was the first to drop out, but her recovery was the slowest, and no one paid attention to her.

She could understand the harshness of competition, but the fact that they didn't even consider her a competitor made her sad.

She approached Shirone's friends. They were the only ones who showed her any kindness in the senior class.

"Amy, are you okay? How's your mind?"

Hearing Maya's voice, Amy turned her head.

"Yeah. I think we're okay. How about you?"

"I'm feeling better now. I'm sorry. I dropped out at Stage 2."

Maya lowered her head, feeling ashamed. She felt sorry for not meeting Shirone's expectations after he accepted her into the team.

"It's okay. Honestly, I was really shocked too. Don't worry too much."

Amy comforted Maya. Knowing the pain of Stage 2, she couldn't blame her.

"But... is Shirone okay? He hasn't come out yet."

Amy looked at the Virtual Zone. Everyone had dropped out at Stage 5, and only two people were left lying there.

Shirone from the red team and Fermi from the blue team.

"At least the balance is maintained until the end. Whoever wins there will win overall."

Maya looked at the vision floating in the air.

It was disgusting even from a distance, but seeing the screen up close made her feel nauseous again.

'How can they endure that?'

Stage 2, Ice Prison, was terrifying enough for her. Yet someone was fighting in such a horrific place.

'If it were me, I would have just died.'

Maya couldn't bear to watch the vision. But she didn't look away because Shirone, who believed in her, was fighting.

"Th-there...!"

Boyle pointed at the vision with a horrified look.

The insects wriggled, and Shirone slowly stood up.

"Oh my god..."

Maya's face turned pale.

Other students were also shocked, staring at the vision with their mouths open.

Shirone's appearance was unbearable to look at. Some parts of his body were stripped to the bone, and other parts were swollen and rotting.

Maya couldn't believe that a human mind could endure such things.

With his strength completely drained, Shirone hung his head with his arms limp.

Even as insects tore through his skin, he didn't move, and Alpheus's lips curled into a smile.

"Impressive. Perfect equanimity."

It wasn't that he didn't feel pain or disgust. It was a superhuman state of maintaining focus in any situation.

Chapter 383: The Meaning of Survival (5)

Crack. Crack.

Hearing the sound of insects being crushed, Shirone slowly lifted his head.

Fermi was walking towards him with his hands in his pockets. His face, twisted into a smile, had already turned more than half into a skull.

As he chewed on the insects in his mouth and spat out the shells, the students watching through the vision grimaced. "Ugh!"

Even seeing it on the screen was hard to stomach.

"Fermi is no pushover either."

At Olivia's words, Collie nodded.

"Yes. Last year, he made it to Stage 5 and became the final survivor. But with Shirone here this time, I can't guarantee the outcome."

"Hmm..."

Olivia's gaze remained cold.

She knew Fermi had colluded in ways unrelated to graduation. However, without evidence, she couldn't confront him.

'He's definitely a deviant.'

If recognizing an apple as an apple is normal, recognizing an apple as a strawberry is the deviant's perception.

Cognitive distortion to the point of denying reality.

If he wasn't an Immortal Function user like Shirone or an extreme ascetic like Gaold, he could only be seen as a twisted human from the start.

Smack!

Shirone's right eye burst, and disgusting maggots wriggled out.

Fermi watched calmly, chewing and spitting out insects.

Yet his throat continued to itch.

'This is certainly not a pleasant feeling.'

Honestly, he hadn't expected Shirone to endure this long.

During his time in the senior class, Shirone was the first to follow him to the end of Stage 5.

'I thought it was nothing...'

During the ghost incident, he was just a rookie. But in a year, he had grown tremendously to reach this point.

'Shall we go a bit further...?'

Fermi had never gone beyond Stage 5. He didn't care about winning or points, so stopping here was fine.

But it was different with Shirone.

Fermi couldn't rest until he removed any obstacles to his business by any means necessary.

"We won't settle this here. Let's move on. What's waiting for us next?"

Spitting out another insect, Fermi spoke.

"....."

Shirone remained silent.

The moment his natural state wavered even slightly, his mind would be overturned like a stormy sea.

Smack!

Shirone's remaining eye burst. And with that, Stage 5, Insect King, ended.

"Stage 6! Entering Extreme Heat!"

The usually calm evaluation teacher, Collie's voice trembled with excitement and anxiety.

In his long teaching career, this was only the second time a student had reached this point.

The depth of enlightenment was unrelated to the level of magic or age. But Extreme Heat was a dangerous realm even for ascetics.

"Th-that is..."

The students' eyes reflected the shadows of flames. In a world made entirely of fire, Shirone and Fermi faced each other.

Their clothes began to burn, and soon, fierce flames engulfed their bodies.

"Ugh..."

The students recoiled in horror.

The sight of 3-meter-high flames completely consuming a person was enough to feel the heat without entering the Virtual Zone.

If pain is felt through nerves, fire directly stimulates the nerves, causing extreme pain.

The more horrifying fact was that this was a virtual world where the body was constantly reconstituted.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Like candles on a candlestick, the two burned. Their expressions didn't change, but their minds screamed in agony.

Surviving the brink of death didn't mean transcending it. Humans aren't that strong.

Pain coursed through their bodies, and fear meshed with their minds like gears.

'This is bad. This is really dangerous.'

Shirone's face began to contort. Even with a mind of steel, it was hard to maintain composure.

What kind of life had Gaold lived to freely create such a hell?

But even those thoughts were swept away by the overwhelming pain.

The students watching through the vision no longer cheered.

It was painful just to watch, so how must the participants feel?

Cheering them on would make them seem like psychos.

"Heh heh."

Fermi watched Shirone through the flames. Was he really trying to endure to the end against him?

'Arrogant fool.'

Stage 6 was tough for Fermi too. If he had known it would be this hard, he might have reconsidered.

'That's why it's even more annoying.'

Points didn't matter anymore.

The only thing that mattered was money.

He had to finish Shirone here to ensure his business for the year would succeed.

"You're holding up well. This sauna isn't bad."

Shirone couldn't respond. He wished this were reality so his body would burn away quickly.

But cruelly, his body was reconstituted in real-time, and his nerve thresholds reset every moment.

"Why not give up? It's only the fourth week."

Shirone's face twisted.

His mental state had reached the peak of irritation. He hated everything and was sick of being alive.

Just talking to someone was enough to make him want to leave his Spirit Zone.

Fermi, in the same space, knew this. That's why he was subtly provoking him.

So he had to respond in kind.

"Who... are you?"

The students watching through the vision gulped.

Shirone's question encompassed all the doubts he had while in the senior class.

"Who knows? Who could I be?"

Fermi wasn't in a normal state either. But he mirrored his condition to further irritate Shirone.

"Why did you attack Amy? Why don't you graduate? Why does someone with your skills stay in school?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I just have a strong mentality and endure well."

The students were dumbfounded by their conversation.

Talking about the senior class while burning? They both seemed insane.

'It's coming.'

Fermi sensed his limit. Pretending to be calm, his inner soul was raging.

He couldn't endure with a grimace. Would customers flock to a suffering signboard?

'Promotion is key in business.'

Activating the timer in his mind, Fermi approached Shirone, offering a final chance.

"Whatever you think, it's not true. I know I'm suspected. But in the senior class, the one who stands out gets hit first. It's the natural order of competition."

Shirone glared at Fermi with burning eyes.

'I know. You're using that.'

He concealed his crimes within the students' competitive spirit. Like a guard beating a thief out of anger, unnoticed.

It wasn't pleasant, but it was a brilliant strategy.

"As a senior, let me give you some advice. Standing out isn't good. You'll be eliminated early."

Shirone's nose wrinkled. Flames from his eyes and mouth seemed to represent his anger.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Threatening? It's just advice. 20 points is a lot. But is it more important than doing another year in the senior class?"

It was a threat.

If he didn't give up, Fermi would ensure he failed the graduation exam, just like he did to Amy.

He knew what happened to those marked by Fermi. Even Amy, the great, was eliminated early without a chance to prepare.

No matter the subject, he'd be lynched by everyone. A year's effort would be in vain.

Conversely, if he offered 20 points, Fermi would ensure he passed.

The question of whether 20 points were more important than another year meant he wouldn't have to do another year.

'Give up, you damn rookie. Stop interfering with my business and get out of school. I'll make sure you graduate.'
Shirone clenched his fists. Hot air seeped through his clenched teeth, sticking them together.

Despicable Fermi.

'Because of people like you...'

He now understood how much Amy had struggled and endured to become a magician.

Fermi had ruined it. He made her cry in sorrow all night.

"Eliminate me? Try it if youxx can. I won't lose to someone like you."

Even in the hell of extreme heat, Fermi looked down at Shirone with lifeless eyes.

The negotiation was over.

And Shirone would never become a magician as long as he was in school.

"Fine, then look forward to it."

Fermi turned away. He had reached his limit.

"Wait. I haven't finished..."

As Shirone spoke, Fermi disappeared. He had deactivated his Spirit Zone.

Fermi's eyes snapped open in the Virtual Zone. The pain of extreme heat was still vivid, and he couldn't move a finger. Yet the timer in his mind continued to tick accurately.

'...2 seconds. 1 second. Now it begins.'

The guide's voice was heard.

-Entering Stage 7, Void.

'My gift to you, Shirone.'

Having experienced Stage 6, Fermi knew that even a deviant couldn't endure Stage 7.

Also, if only one person in Alpheus Magic School's history had passed this difficulty, Shirone wouldn't survive either.

'If he gives up, that's fine. But will he...?'

Collie headed to the device to turn off the Virtual Zone. Even if the team won, challenging higher stages for personal evaluation was possible, but not Stage 7, Void.

'This stage wasn't made because humans could do it. It's just the lid defining the limit of the survival test. It must end here.'

Collie placed his hand on the Virtual Zone switch and looked at Alpheus, declaring,

"I will shut down the Virtual Zone."

Fermi, who had risen, pointed at the vision.

"No. I think he'll continue."

"What?"

Collie's head snapped around. Shirone was standing in the darkness on the vision.

'Despicable Fermi.'

For the first time, Shirone found peace.

All the previous stages had felt endlessly long, but the past was now just a series of events that had already happened.

'I will never bow to someone like you.'

Shirone did not deactivate his Spirit Zone.

Even though he had become the final survivor, he didn't feel good because Fermi had played dirty tricks until the end.

From today, Fermi had marked Shirone as his target. It was clear that he would use his manipulative skills to pressure him whenever he could.

'Then I will pressure you, Fermi.'

That was Shirone's strategy to counter Fermi's tactics.

He would never give up the initiative. If they maintained a balance of power, manipulation would be impossible.

Stage 7 of survival was undoubtedly a dangerous challenge, but that made it all the more worth attempting.

'But where is this place?'

Shirone looked around.

It was strange to say he could see darkness, but in reality, there was nothing but darkness around him.

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

He felt vibrations. The entire space was trembling, making it impossible to discern the direction.

"What? What is this?"

Shirone reached out with a sense of foreboding. Darkness pressed in from all sides, starting to crush him.

'Is this suffocation?'

His arms bent towards his body. Even in that state, the darkness continued to increase its pressure.

Chapter 384: The Meaning of Survival (6)

The students' eyes were filled with tension. They were witnessing the seventh stage, something they had only heard about in rumors.

"What is this? He's being crushed continuously. Surely he won't die by being squashed like that, right?"

"No, it can't be that. Otherwise, it wouldn't be different from the Death Scythe."

Collie's face turned serious.

Void wasn't just about suffocation. It was a terrifying stage that could potentially end a magician's career.

'As this is an official evaluation, we must respect the student's decision. But Shirone, you've already won. You don't need to go that far to become a magician. You might lose everything.'

Unable to ignore his conscience, Collie, unusually for an evaluation teacher, requested reconsideration.

"Principal, should we proceed with this? If we miss the timing, even deactivating the Virtual Zone might not get him out."

The students murmured at Collie's words. Was it really possible that he couldn't get out even if they turned off the device?

Amy asked with wide eyes.

"What do you mean he can't get out? Shouldn't you have told us that beforehand?"

"I didn't say he couldn't get out. I said he might not be able to. And information about the survival program is classified. Our school isn't the only one using this program."

Currently, the survival evaluation was being conducted with the same program in all countries within the same time zone, based on the universal standard time.

Even if they had known in advance, they couldn't have said anything. But honestly, they hadn't expected anyone to reach this point.

'It's been 19 years since I've seen this...'

Having exercised his right as an evaluation teacher, the decision now rested with Alpheus.

"Is there a decision to be made? The student wants to do it. They should already know how to exit the Virtual Zone, right?"

"Yes, but Void is..."

"It's on a different level. But that's why there are stages. If you put any student in Stage 7, it would be murder, but Shirone reached it by clearing all the difficulties. He deserves to be evaluated. How can one become a magician without being able to judge their own life?"

It seemed like a harsh educational philosophy, but the students, who had already overcome many dangers to get here, silently agreed.

"Ugh!"

In the vision, Shirone was pushing against the darkness with all his might. But eventually, he couldn't hold on, and his body was flattened.

Collie sighed in resignation.

'So it's happening.'

Now, the Void stage began.

'What happened to me?'

Shirone was trapped in a two-dimensional square. Having lost time and height, he couldn't move a finger.

'What am I supposed to do here...?'

The bottom of the square folded up like paper.

Then it folded from left to right, top to bottom, and right to left in an endless pattern.

It was shrinking.

It was becoming infinitely small, like a one-dimensional point.

While it's impossible to fold actual matter infinitely, the Magic Association implemented the concept of Void through a virtual program.

'Ugh...'

A massive shock struck his head. Even Shirone's Spirit Zone was on the verge of collapse.

Was he shrinking, or was the world growing?

As the scale difference became transcendental, pressure filled his mind, and his eyes rolled back.

With each cycle, he shrank to one-sixteenth of his size. He kept shrinking, smaller than molecules, smaller than atoms.

'No, I can't endure this.'

The students looked blank. They couldn't understand what kind of pain this was.

The vision's focus was on Shirone, so all they could see was the repetitive folding pattern.

But even if they understood the mechanism of Void, their perception wouldn't be different from now.

A realm that couldn't be understood until experienced. That was the profound truth of Void.

"Shirone!"

Amy shouted with a pale face. Shirone's back was arching and twitching in the Virtual Zone.

Collie clenched his fists tightly.

'Shirone, give up! If you give up now, you can live!

Deactivate your Spirit Zone!'

The Void program hammered the maximum scale difference, expressible in cosmic units, into the mind.

Humans, confined to a single planet, didn't even have the sensory organs to feel this kind of fear.

If it continued, even turning off the device wouldn't stop the mind from being sucked into one dimension, eventually becoming a vegetative state, never to awaken.

Shirone's back arched off the ground.

His body, which had been fine even in extreme heat, was now violently convulsing, indicating a dangerous state.

"Move! We need to save Shirone!"

As Amy ran towards the Virtual Zone, Nade hurriedly grabbed her arm.

"Wait! If you interfere, both you and Shirone will fail!"

"I don't care! We can take the exam next year! If something happens to Shirone, I'll never forgive myself!"

Nade saw the burning determination in Amy's eyes. She was serious.

After a moment of hesitation, he turned around.

"You're right. Let's save him together."

Then Iruki stopped them.

"Don't make hasty decisions. It's Shirone."

"What are you talking about! If Shirone...!"

"There's some change, however small."

Amy immediately closed her mouth and turned to the vision.

The same pattern was still repeating.

"Change? What change?"

"The folding is slowing down. Slightly, but surely."

Amy checked with her Red Eyes.

Indeed, the process was slower than before. And... it was getting even slower.

'Ugh!'

Shirone had entered the Immortal Function state.

He was trying to escape the infinitely deep pit of Void by expanding his mind into the infinite realm.

But unless he expanded his mind faster than he was shrinking, he couldn't escape the eternal cycle.

'This isn't enough. I need a greater expansion...'

His mental cohesion began to loosen. An ordinary Unlocker would have already lost their identity, merging with everything.

But Shirone never lost himself.

Mental transcendence.

Breaking the illusion of scale, the Immortal Function escaped the realm of Void, and the folding stopped in the vision.

"It stopped."

The students murmured. Then, Shirone began to unfold in reverse order.

"What? Why is he doing that?"

Something even more astonishing happened in the Virtual Zone.

The students slowly stepped back. Shirone, who had been lying down, was staggering to his feet.

"How is he moving? He's in a semi-conscious state."

"Look! The vision!"

The students' eyes turned back to the vision. The Shirone on the screen was standing in the same posture as the one in the Virtual Zone.

With his head bowed, he raised his arms and began to push the walls of darkness aside.

"That... that is...!"

Collie trembled in disbelief.

The real Shirone and the one in the vision were perfectly synchronized in their movements.

Slowly lifting his head, Shirone's eyes snapped open.

Simultaneously, the darkness in the vision disappeared, revealing the real scenery.

The same space, the same person.

Two Shirones, one in reality and one in the virtual world, stood with their arms outstretched, glaring fiercely ahead.

"He broke out of Void on his own..."

-Stage 7, Void program has ended. Deactivating the Virtual Zone extreme cold system.

As the machine hummed and shut down, Shirone slowly lowered his arms and stepped out of the Virtual Zone.

The students flinched and made way for him.

Even those who had underestimated Shirone instinctively knew not to mess with him at this moment.

He was the one who had passed Stage 7 of the survival evaluation.

As everyone's eyes followed Shirone's path, he stopped in front of Fermi.

"I have something to say since you ran away."

Fermi's eyebrows rose.

"I will become a magician, no matter what. I don't care what you plot, but if you interfere with my dream, I'll drop everything and crush you first."

The students' faces hardened.

It was a declaration of war against Fermi and a message to everyone present.

Don't interfere with my dream.

Faced with his resolve to fight to the death, everyone's minds became complicated.

'Damn. Fermi alone is troublesome enough...'

Anyone in the senior class knew Fermi had some control.

They couldn't oppose him because the first one marked would fail the graduation exam.

Even now, Fermi's influence was significant, but Shirone's presence began to subtly change the atmosphere.

'The second person in school history to master the survival evaluation.'

That meant he had a 100% chance of passing if the survival subject was in the graduation exam.

'Until now, Fermi targeted those he marked. What should I do? If I get swayed, will I be the only one in trouble?'

Now, all eyes were on Fermi. They would have to reassess based on his reaction.

Fermi forced a fake smile. Whatever he said would sound like a loser's excuse.

'I'll back off today.'

As Fermi turned and walked away without a word, the students were shocked.

It was the first time they saw him, who always led situations to his advantage, remain silent.

'Damn rookie. From now on, I'll consider you my greatest enemy. You'll regret making me think this way for the rest of your life.'

Fermi's face, as he walked away, showed an anger no one in the senior class had ever seen.

"Final survivor, Arian Shirone. Red team gains 20 points, blue team loses 20 points."

As Collie announced, the students finally returned to the team competition, not just Shirone versus Fermi.

"We did it! We won! 20 points!"

"Plus, we earned those points by beating Fermi! This feels so satisfying! I knew my judgment was spot on!"

Amy and Nade hugged each other and jumped up and down, while Shirone high-fived Iruki, celebrating their victory.

"Wow..."

Maya, watching from a distance, couldn't help but exclaim in admiration.

Though she was a veteran in the senior class, she had never seen anyone stand up to Fermi directly before.

But soon, her eyes filled with a sense of melancholy.

'It's nice to be strong...'

She had never even dreamed of defying Fermi. Not that he would care if she did.

For her, trying to become a magician to lift her tribe out of poverty, Shirone seemed like someone from another world.

"Shirone! That was amazing! I can't believe you passed Stage 7!"

"I knew it! No matter how great Fermi is, he can't beat an Unlocker!"

Shirone, Shirone, Shirone.

Even students who usually kept their distance joined in to praise Shirone's performance today.

Shirone had climbed at least two stages higher than any other participant, leading his team to victory. Thanks to him,

15 people gained 20 points each. On a day like this, being cold would only harm their relationships.

After comforting the blue team members as they left the training ground, Alpheus finally turned to look at Shirone. His feelings were mixed.

'Is this really the same boy I knew?'

The boy who had climbed over the wall at twelve, asking to be taught magic, had now become a student who broke through Void.

He was proud of his student's growth, but also worried about how quickly it had happened.

It was no coincidence that memories from long ago overlapped in his mind.

Looking at Shirone, Olivia said,

"Mental transcendence, or extreme asceticism. Without one of these, it's impossible to escape Void on your own."

Chapter 385: The Meaning of Survival (7)

Alpheus gave a bittersweet smile.

"The vastness of the universe might be no more than a speck of dust to an external being. So what significance do we hold in this universe? That terrifying truth is what Void aims to convey. Shirone has taken his first step towards that truth."

The two remained silent for a while, knowing they were thinking of the same scene.

"How close has that child come to the truth?"

Nineteen years ago, the first student in the school's history passed the seventh stage of survival.

An Unlocker who had grasped the truth of scale and transcended the essence of humanity.

"Adrias Miro. When I founded the school, I hoped for at least one genius to surpass me. But when I saw Miro, what I felt was fear. Perhaps that child should never have been born."

Alpheus, once a renowned genius in the kingdom, found Miro different.

A student whose brilliance and peculiarity couldn't be fully described by the word "genius."

"Not long after the survival test, there was the Judgment of the Twenty. I can't say it didn't have an impact. Everyone wants to be a genius, but for Miro, it was a curse."

Olivia's eyes calmed.

"Does she... resent me?"

"It was a difficult issue. Miro's sacrifice saved us all. And now, 19 years later, Shirone stands here."

That's why it was unsettling.

History doesn't repeat itself just because of some similarities, but the Judgment of the Twenty was a primordial sin of humanity that should never be repeated.

"Don't jump to conclusions. Just because she broke through Void doesn't mean the 'Holy War' will move. At that time, Miro was already a fully developed scale magician. Even if we had sent her into society, she would have been among the best in the world."

"True. But ultimately, levels are drawn to realms."

The limits were not yet visible. Therefore, there was no guarantee that the feared events wouldn't occur.

Shirone's smiling face, receiving praise from his friends, resembled the clear face of Miro from 19 years ago.

'Miro held the lives of all humanity in her hands. Shirone, what will you hold in that vast vessel?'

The survival evaluation ended on the last holiday of the fourth week.

Week 5: Mental Activity Evaluation.

The mental activity evaluation, which assessed changes in the Spirit Zone, saw a significant increase in difficulty from the fifth week with the introduction of the advanced technique 'Joint.'

As an element opposed to endurance, Shirone was focusing more than usual, performing warm-up exercises.

Shirone was quick and rational in his thinking.

But thinking of this as an evaluation of human-level traits would be a big mistake.

The mental fluidity of magicians specialized in mental activity was unparalleled.

For them, belief meant having no belief.

Their minds had no qualms about assimilating with others, even monsters.

"Arian Shirone. You're next."

At the teacher's call, Shirone entered the Image Zone.

The evaluation standard for the Spirit Zone was a diameter of 20 meters. As the floor became transparent, a sphere of

mental energy appeared around Shirone.

A signal sounded, and the first problem was presented.

It was a figure-eight filter with two circles attached vertically.

The difficulty of the fifth week was to create a symmetrical Spirit Zone by 'jointing' specific sections of the mind.

'What? This is really hard.'

Watching others, he thought there would be enough time, but experiencing it himself, he realized he was mistaken.

Shirone put all his effort into jointing his Spirit Zone.

Meanwhile, the filter approached indifferently.

10 meters. 5 meters.

His heart pounded harder as the distance closed.

With just 1 meter left, the center of his Spirit Zone tightened, and the filter passed through Shirone.

A green light of success lit up ahead.

'Phew, that was close.'

The subsequent problems were variations of the figure-eight filter at different angles.

Unlike the first time, Shirone operated his Spirit Zone smoothly, passing the filters.

Though his mental fluidity was lower, he had another weapon: exceptional insight. Once he grasped the core, his application skills were unmatched.

Having passed all ten problems, Shirone earned 5 points, but his face wasn't bright as he left the Image Zone.

By the fifth week, no student had scored 4 points.

The high level of the students contributed, but mental activity was a learnable skill through training.

Class Two students had already experienced the 30-week evaluation, so they were well-prepared for the fifth week's difficulty.

But that fact wasn't comforting. Class Three also had some exceptional talents.

"Next, Arin. Please come to the Image Zone."

The chatting students fell silent.

It was rare even in society to see a mental magician with the weapon of 'super sense' perform.

The lights in the Image Zone dimmed, and Arin's Spirit Zone became visible, glowing blue.

Among the five patterns prepared for the fifth week, the figure-eight filter Shirone had faced appeared again.

But Arin didn't react.

Even when the filter was just 5 meters away, she simply watched.

"What is she doing?"

As the filter approached her nose, Arin's Spirit Zone rippled like water and tightened instantly.

"Wow..."

There were gasps from Class One. Even Shirone, familiar with Arin's skills, was astonished.

'Unbelievable. How can a human mind change like that?'

For Arin, the world was filled only with sensations.

The murky desires emitted by all kinds of people.

If her thoughts weren't as fluid as water, she would have gone mad, buried under the anger, lust, and hostility directed at her.

That's why Arcane had also rated Arin as the greatest talent in the mental field.

After her near-miraculous performance, the gauge showed a filter volume ratio of 99.9%.

It meant she had shaped the Image Zone's proposed form with no margin of error.

'This senior class isn't easy.'

With all the students' evaluations completed, almost everyone scored 5 points, except Aider, who missed two problems.

The first 4-point scorer in mental activity this year. Shirone felt that dishonor wasn't far from him.

'He seems to have a similar disposition to me.'

Despite his young age, Aider had shown remarkable endurance, reaching Stage 5, Insect King, in the survival

evaluation. He had a similar disposition to Shirone. The difference was that Aider lacked Shirone's insight. 'But he's still young. With 1-2 more years of training, he might actually graduate.'

Aider came down from the Image Zone, looking dejected. Then he gave Shirone a pitiful smile.

"Man, that was really hard."

"You were close. If you had jointed a bit faster, you would have made it."

Aider sighed.

"If it were that easy, I would have done it. I'm not a genius like you."

The implication that he was a decent genius was the youngest's wit. And he wasn't actually incompetent.

"What are you talking about? You're the youngest student in the senior class. That's proof you're on par with us. Plus, mental activity improves with training."

"Honestly, I thought so until last year. But seeing Class Three this time, that thought vanished. Arin and everyone else are incredible."

Shirone also thought the current Class Three squad could rival any prestigious school in the kingdom.

"Plus, my major is in the air element. It's the most common. People say it's for those without talent."

Affinity with an element is closely related to omnipotence. But nothing is absolute.

"That's not true. There are many strong air element users. Sabina is strong, and..."

Shirone stopped.

To boost Aider's morale, Gaold, the head of the Magic Association, would be a perfect example, but he didn't want to risk revealing confidential information.

"Hey, Aider! What are you doing there? Get over here!"

Screamer shouted from afar. Already annoyed by losing 20 points, seeing Aider chatting with Shirone made him furious.

"Oh, I have to go. You know, survival strategy for the youngest."

"Haha! Sure, go ahead."

Aider turned and hurried away. Being still inexperienced, he aimed to benefit from good relationships.

In a way, it seemed sly, but his honesty made it hard to dislike him.

'Do your best, Aider.'

After the evaluation, the students headed to the dining hall. The senior class had flexible meal times, so the food was prepared buffet-style.

Shirone's friends sat across and beside him, continuing the conversation Nade had started.

"Then I got a cramp in my calf. It hurt so much that I curled up, but I squeezed so hard that I farted."

"Hehe, that must have been awkward. What happened then?"

"My leg hurt like hell, but I couldn't stop laughing. So I laughed and cried! Hahaha!"

Shirone clutched his stomach and stomped his foot.

"I can imagine. In that situation, you'd cry."

"Hey, why are you talking about that while we're eating?"

Despite her protest, Amy had a smile on her face. She had found more peace of mind this year with Shirone's group joining the senior class.

"Hi, mind if I join you?"

Maya from Class Two approached with a tray.

"Oh, of course."

Nade pulled out a chair for her, and Maya bowed slightly before sitting down.

"Thanks. It looked so fun, I wanted to join in."

Iruki said,

"You might not want to. Nade's humor isn't exactly dinner-friendly."

"Haha! It's okay. I have a strong stomach. What were you talking about?"

Shirone watched Maya blend naturally with his friends, thanks to his unique ability to connect with people. Her uncommon brown skin and the fact that she always ranked last in the graduation exams were all he knew about her.

Sensing Shirone's gaze, Maya turned her head.

"Hey, why are you staring at another girl when your girlfriend is right here?"

"Huh? No, I was just..."

As Shirone stammered, Amy scoffed.

"Hmph, girlfriend, my foot."

Maya playfully glanced at Amy and took a big bite of her meat, washing it down with a gulp of water.

Shirone's group simultaneously paused their knife work to look at her. It seemed like she was forcing it down rather than enjoying it.

Realizing everyone's gaze, Maya quickly apologized.

"Oh, sorry. That must have looked bad."

Shirone waved his hand.

"No, not at all. It's just a bit unusual. You can't taste the meat if you drink water with it."

Maya nodded bitterly.

"You're right. But I have no choice. I have to eat to maintain this body. I naturally don't gain weight easily."

Nade asked,

"Is there a specific reason you need to gain weight?"

"Of course. My major is sound magic, specifically in the buff category. Increasing my volume expands the effect range and improves efficiency."

Iruki, nibbling on some vegetables, asked,

"Does gaining weight necessarily increase your volume?"

"It might not, but in my case, it seems to help. Honestly, it's because I lack talent. So I'm desperately trying to build up my body."

Understanding her reason, Shirone casually continued eating his salad and said,

"You'd look really pretty if you lost weight."

This time, everyone focused on Shirone.

Seeing his friends' surprised faces, Shirone realized his mistake and quickly explained.

"I mean, you're already pretty, but you'd be even prettier if you lost weight... That's what I meant."

Maya, who had been staring blankly at Shirone, changed her expression to a pleased smile.

"Thank you. Shirone, you're really kind. Amy is lucky."

"Hmph, lucky indeed. You'll find out soon enough how frustrating he can be."

Maya smiled with her eyes and resumed cutting her meat.

"Really? I like him..."

Caught between Maya's and Amy's contrasting attitudes, the three boys could only bury their faces in their trays.

Chapter 386: One Man Team (2)

The senior class schedule had already reached the sixth week.

Competition was becoming increasingly fierce, and rank changes were frequent.

However, no students had changed classes yet.

The teachers were astonished, saying it was the first time in five years. The problem was that the rankings in Class Two, known for their fluidity, had become stagnant.

Class One was dominating Class Two, while Class Three was desperately chasing Class Two.

In other words, the overall level of the senior class was higher than any other year.

An unprecedented situation occurred where 15 students earned 20 points in the survival evaluation, but since most of them were from Class Three, the changes were minimal. Today was the day when the intense competition would shine.

The strategy and tactics evaluation, which organized groups based on rankings, awaited the senior class students.

"Hmm, then I'll be in Group 5."

Shirone knew without looking at the chart. He had already memorized the rankings of all 30 students.

Group 5 consisted of ranks 21 to 25. Naturally, the group leader would be rank 21, and Shirone, ranked 23, was included in Group 5.

Since Dante (rank 21) and Iruki (rank 22) always scored the same as Shirone, their rankings hadn't changed since the first week.

Ranks 24 and 25 were Canis and Closer, making it a squad capable of scoring high points based on the members alone. On the other hand, some groups were troubled by their rankings.

A prime example was Group 4.

This group consisted of the lower ranks of Class Two: Screamer, Amy, Suabi, Maya, and Aider, in that order. Most had maintained their positions, but Screamer had plummeted from rank 11 to 16 in just six weeks.

'Damn it. When will I get out of this mess?'

As a martial artist, Screamer's easiest way to earn points was through interpersonal combat.

However, this year, the matchups weren't favorable, with Class One's skilled students concentrated in the early rounds.

Several students' draw strategies had turned two potential 3-point wins into 1-point results.

Of course, the main reason for his drastic drop was the 20 points lost to the red team in the survival evaluation.

"Hey, everyone, gather around. Let's decide our positions first."

At Screamer's gesture, Group 4 gathered. Watching them, Screamer sighed.

'This balance is a mess.'

Scouts use a metric called 'party contribution.'

It assesses the contributions of members, with a total score of 5 for a 5-person party, distributed based on contribution. While it evaluates party organization, it can't perfectly assess individual abilities but is excellent for determining responsibility.

A contribution score of 1 means the member did their part.

A score of 2 means they did the work of two people.

While this would attract scouts' attention, it also means someone didn't even do their part, indicating poor balance.

The ideal ratio in a party is 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, with everyone fulfilling their roles. But Screamer's group was far from this

golden balance.

The problem was Maya.

In Screamer's view, Maya's party contribution was at best 0.5.

This meant the remaining four had to make up the 0.5 to be competitive.

'If Maya is 0.5, Aider is 0.8, Suabi is 1.1, Amy is 1.2, then I have to be... 1.4? That's crazy.'

A 0.4-point contribution in a party was enormous.

It meant he had to increase the party's combat power by 8% alone.

'Hmm, is it possible? We have two utility members.'

Suabi and Maya were both utility types, despite different majors.

Usually, a 5-person party wouldn't include two utility members, but with Screamer, it was different.

A martial artist with both magic and physical abilities could perform exceptionally well with buffs.

'At least we have Amy. I'll lead, and Amy will follow. I'll have to carry the team.'

Having organized his thoughts, Screamer clapped to boost morale. As the group leader, he needed to unite the team.

"Alright, listen up. We're going to decide positions now. If we strategize well, we can score high."

Screamer pointed to himself first.

"I'm the main dealer. And that's it. You get it?"

"Martial artist's killer strategy?"

Amy's words made Screamer nod.

"Exactly. So, Suabi, buff me with everything you've got.

Haste, Concentrate, Healing, don't hold back. Even in the sixth week, there won't be anyone that strong. Let's secure victory early. Got it?"

"Y-yes, I'll do my best."

Suabi answered weakly. Though lacking enthusiasm, Screamer didn't mind.

Despite his indecisiveness and poor social skills, Suabi was a utility genius who could chain over twenty buff spells, so he'd do his part.

"Amy, you're the secondary dealer. I don't need to give you instructions. And Maya, what spells can you use? Wide-area buffs would be good."

Sound magic's strength was its wide-range effects.

"Oh? My best is Battlefield Aria. It amplifies magic through resonance."

"Hmm..."

Battlefield Aria was effective in real combat.

But with Maya casting it, it was different. Her buff efficiency was far below average.

Screamer adjusted the martial artist's killer strategy slightly.

"Then let's go with debuffs. Any debuffs you can cast?"

"Rhapsody of Agitation. It amplifies anxiety."

"Good, use that. It's more effective on hundreds than on five."

"Okay, I'll do my best."

Maya nodded deeply, determined.

"What about me?"

Aider asked, supporting his head.

Being young, he seemed less burdened by graduation, unlike Maya.

"Multiplayer. I'll cut through, and you finish them off. Make sure they're dead. It's common to lose because one wasn't killed."

"Got it. No problem."

"Alright! Let's do this! Let's show them what we've got."

Knowing Screamer's personality, Amy found his forced enthusiasm cringeworthy.

'He must really want to get out of here.'

Still, she doubted the martial artist's killer strategy would work.

He might have thought he could handle it alone, given his past reputation as a feared fighter.

'Well, my rank is low now. Let's go with it.'

Even as a team member, suggesting opinions required considering the leader's personality for effectiveness.

Meanwhile, Shirone's Group 5 was also waiting for the evaluation, but unlike Group 4, they had no special strategy. Dante was with Closer, Shirone with Iruki, and Canis enjoyed solitude.

Of course, he wasn't alone in the mental channel.

-This school is quite boring.

Harvest had finished decoding the "Book of Light and Darkness" after six months of isolation.

But the intense competition in the senior class had kept him from appearing.

-Endure. In a year, we can do what we want.

-Really? Well, we're much stronger now. Graduation should be easy.

The "Book of Light and Darkness" from Heaven's Akashic Records was a theory to amplify darkness using the power of incarnation.

In essence, light strengthened darkness.

Though not yet fully understood to create specific magic, Canis's power had significantly increased.

-Graduation isn't the issue. This time, I must surpass Shirone and uphold our master's legacy.

-Haha, that sounds fun.

The teacher, having finished checking the second training ground, spoke.

"Five minutes until the match starts. The sixth week's mission is 'Extermination.'"

All 30 students entered the second training ground.

Since the ranking was based on which group cleared the monsters first, the evaluation had to proceed simultaneously.

The massive training ground was divided into six sections, and Shirone entered Group 5's area.

As the members gathered, Dante spoke briefly.

"Well, let's do our best."

Shirone asked,

"Any strategy or tactics? You're the leader and an information processing major, so you should decide."

"Tactics? Hmm..."

Dante, resting his chin on his hand, looked at the members. Explosive Iruki, Radiant Shirone, Dark Closer, and Shadow Canis.

"Just kill them as fast as you can."

"Okay."

The five turned simultaneously and moved to the center of the area.

After warming up for about three minutes, the evaluation teacher spoke.

"We will now begin the strategy and tactics evaluation."

No explanation was needed for the sixth week.

The lights on the scoreboard turned green, yellow, and red in sequence, and the same types of monsters appeared in all six sections.

'It's starting.'

Shirone entered his Spirit Zone.

The first task was to identify the species and numbers.

Bats called Jargols flew in the sky. Each was about the size of an eagle.

On the ground were bipedal monsters called Warwolves.

And starting this week, a new type was added: giant worms called Earthworms, which tunneled underground.

'Another 9-tier week.'

The species were manageable, but the problem was the number, over 300.

Roar!

A Warwolf howled and charged.

Jargols screeched with ultrasonic waves, and dozens of holes in the ground spewed acidic liquid from Earthworms.

Group 5 instinctively took their positions.

Shirone and Iruki bombarded the Jargols with magic. Photon Cannons and Atomic Bombs quickly obliterated the bats.

On the ground, Dante and Closer worked together.

Dante set up a teleportation magic circle 10 meters ahead and scattered instant magic circles around.

Warwolves caught in the instant magic circles were automatically transported to the central main magic circle.

When about twenty had gathered, Closer cast his spell.

"Eruption!"

As the ground heated up from friction, the Warwolves looked down. At the same time, a small volcanic explosion erupted, blowing away the entire main magic circle.

"Hahaha! Send more, Dante!"

"Oh, okay?"

As Dante set up more magic circles on the ground, enemies began entering the main magic circle at a rate of three per second.

Closer unleashed all kinds of magic like a fish in water.

Without worrying about targeting, earth magic, known for its physical power, was the strongest, leaving the monsters with no chance.

The ground rolled up like a wave, and the Rock and Roll spell, growing like a snowball, struck the Warwolves.

Huge rocks from the Heavy Stone spell fell from the sky, crushing the enemies.

Then, with three consecutive Eruptions, all the monsters on the ground were annihilated.

Canis stood with his hands in his pockets.

The acidic liquid from the Earthworms flew from all directions but couldn't penetrate his Dark Skin.

Of course, he wasn't doing nothing. His Spirit Zone detected the location of all the monsters underground.

Finally, his right hand emerged from his pocket.

"If the sky is the world of light..."

His index and middle fingers stood upright.

"Then underground is the world of darkness."

Canis's specialty, the saw-blade-shaped power of darkness, swiftly cut through the Earthworms underground.

Screech! Screech!

The Earthworms, standing vertically, all collapsed, spewing green saliva.

-328 monsters exterminated. Completion time: 3 minutes 28 seconds.

Chapter 387: One Man Team (3)

When the monsters in the sky, on the ground, and underground were almost simultaneously annihilated, an announcement came from the second training ground.

"Phew."

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Shirone looked at the scoreboard.

"Wow! We did well!"

Group 5 was ranked second. First place went to Group 2, which included Fermi.

Group 2's completion time was 3 minutes and 15 seconds. They lost by just 13 seconds, which was disappointing, but considering Group 2 was entirely Fermi's team, it was a good result.

'Well, we are an instant party.'

Closer seemed displeased.

"Tch, Fermi again? How do they always manage to rank together?"

Dante said,

"They've been managing their scores for a long time.

Anyway, second place isn't bad. We're in the top 10 overall.

As long as we stay in the top 10 in each evaluation, we'll eventually graduate."

Dante was satisfied with the second place finish, considering it was a combination of three groups that had never worked together. In terms of party contribution, everyone had done their part.

Iruki had similar thoughts, though his were more detailed.

'If this were the graduation exam, Dante would be 1.01, Closer 0.99, Shirone 1, Canis 1.02, and me 0.98.'

The best player in Group 5 was Canis by a narrow margin, as he single-handedly exterminated the underground monsters.

'To increase party contribution, it's important to choose enemies that match our strengths. The gap will be much wider in the graduation exam.'

Meanwhile, Group 1 was ranked third with a time of 4 minutes and 18 seconds.

"Anyway, let's go down. I want to see the other groups too." Dante led the group down from the second training ground and immediately disbanded the group.

"Good job, Shirone. You too, Iruki, Canis."

Shirone responded cheerfully.

"Yeah, you too. Let's team up again if we get the chance."

Fourth and fifth places were decided next, with times of 4 minutes and 24 seconds and 4 minutes and 28 seconds, respectively.

"Wow, this week is really close."

Although Shirone's group ranked second, the monster tier wasn't high yet, so luck played a big part.

Considering that, the other groups' skills were impressive. Iruki said,

"This trend will likely continue up to the 8th tier. It's impossible to handle alone, but magicians become incredibly strong when they unite. Of course, this is only possible because we're in school."

In the magic school, everyone they met was a magician, but once the 30 senior class students graduated, they would scatter across the world, becoming high-level personnel rarely seen.

As a profession comprising less than 0.0001% of the population, only elite units like the Royal Guard, Capital Guard, or Border Defense Force could maintain a unit of magicians.

Even a third-rate magician guild with about 20 members would have tremendous firepower.

If they fired one fireball every 10 seconds, that would be 1,200 fireballs in 10 minutes.

However, such magicians were expensive, so it was rare for 20 to gather for a profitable commission.

Even if there were, the high-ranking magicians would take them.

There were exceptions for terrorism, but even they were like mice before the cat that was the Red Line authority.

The combat power of an official Red Line unit, a certified magician unit, was on a different level from third-rate magicians.

If a monster outside the tier, like a demon, appeared, the Magic Association would form an elite large party of certified 4th to 6th-grade magicians with the king's approval, called a "Cage."

It meant trapping and beating them, and a group of about 20 magicians, each considered the best in their field, was known to have the power of a walking army.

From 3rd-grade archmages, the number significantly decreased across the continent, so experts believed the strongest party was the Cage unless a global catastrophe occurred.

'Once I enter society, I won't have the chance to form parties with such diverse people. I should learn as much as I can now.'

The second training ground stopped operating.

"Group 4 evaluation complete. The last group to complete the mission, Group 4, scores 0 points."

Shirone looked at Group 4 with sympathy. Of all groups, Amy's group ended up last.

'Balance really is important. Even with an amazing dealer like Amy, it didn't work out.'

Group 4 couldn't hide their bitter expressions.

No one could be singled out for blame.

They had ravaged the enemy with flashy and diverse attacks led by Screamer, but the imbalance meant their

extermination time was longer than the other groups.

'I should have received the buffs.'

Amy regretted that point.

The martial artist's killer strategy gave one person overwhelming combat power, but the sixth week's mission was extermination.

A mission requiring the team to work together to thoroughly eliminate enemies exposed its weaknesses.

'Oh well. I'll aim for next week.'

Amy accepted the 0 points coolly. The stubborn Screamer was the leader, and she had to follow his orders.

If she didn't agree, she could raise her rank and become the leader. That was the unyielding rule of the senior class.

'Damn it. This is so frustrating.'

Screamer, on the other hand, couldn't accept the result.

How could they come in last? Even in last year's senior class, he had never scored 0 in strategy and tactics.

'It's all your fault.'

Unable to contain his explosive anger, Screamer shouted at Maya.

"You idiot!"

The students turned to Screamer at the rare sound of shouting in the senior class.

If the team lost, there was no need to blame individual abilities. But how many weeks had their strategy and tactics evaluation been ruined because of her?

As Screamer approached, Maya's eyebrows furrowed, and her expression hardened.

"Because of you, the monsters became more aggressive!"

Rhapsody of Agitation induced anxiety.

While strategically useful, in extermination missions, it made the enemies more frantic, taking more time.

"No, they became agitated, not aggressive..."

"Shut up! You call that sound magic? What are you going to do now?"

Maya looked aggrieved but then lowered her head.

"I'm sorry..."

No one stopped Screamer.

Maya lacked talent in sound magic, and Screamer was the second-ranked graduate candidate. Opposing him could negatively impact their future evaluations.

"What do you even do? You've been in the senior class longer than me, so you should have some experience. Do you just do what you're told? Can't you figure it out when Warwolves appear?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

Maya kept repeating her apologies. It was all she could say.

"That's why commoners are no good. If you lack talent, drop out. Clinging to the hope of becoming a magician and dragging others down is just being a nuisance."

Maya's shoulders trembled. Tears fell from her face, hidden by her hair.

'So Maya is a commoner...'

Shirone glared at Screamer.

He hadn't known Maya was a commoner, but it didn't matter. Insulting someone's specialty as pig squeals was unacceptable.

Maya's voice was actually too clear for combat sound magic, making it less effective.

It was a personal attack. She wouldn't have heard such words if she weren't overweight.

"I'm sorry... sob... I'm sorry..."

Screamer grew more irritated.

A magician crying because of some scolding? In the senior class?

Everyone's life depended on these evaluations. Wasn't she making him look like the bad guy?

"Enough, get lost! And please, if you lack skill, step down voluntarily. Isn't it unfair to others if you hold on just because you got lucky and raised your rank?"

Screamer turned coldly and walked away. Shirone followed and called out.

"Hey."

Screamer turned back, raising his chin.

"What?"

"Apologize to Maya."

Screamer's eyes filled with disbelief.

He had no reason to apologize, and interfering like this was unwise in the senior class.

'Is he acting out because Fermi marked him?'

When Shirone declared his resolve, Screamer had scoffed.

Magic or not, outside the school, he could make them kneel with one touch, but here they were challenging him.

'Or maybe this is a good opportunity?'

Screamer wasn't stupid. Crushing Shirone, who passed the seventh stage of survival, would boost his reputation.

'Let's poke him a bit.'

Screamer deliberately provoked Shirone.

"Come to think of it, you're a commoner too, right? Or were you royalty? Oh, you were thought to be royalty but turned out to be a commoner. Hahaha!"

It had been months since the trip to Kazura, so the students accepted Shirone's commoner status as fact.

"I don't care if I'm a commoner or not. Take back everything you said to Maya and sincerely apologize."

"No. Why should I? I did my part. It's Maya's fault we came in last."

"No, it's a shared responsibility. And if anyone must take the blame, it's you, the leader."

"What nonsense? Do you know how many monsters I killed?"

Nade joined the conversation.

"Isn't it embarrassing to boast about your contribution when you relied on utilities?"

Screamer's face turned red with anger. Shirone alone was bad enough, but now even a fly was buzzing around.

Iruki added,

"You're the main dealer, but there's no difference between you and the sub-dealer. Do you really think the martial artist's killer strategy suits an extermination mission? Scoring zero points is a failure of leadership."

Screamer frowned.

"Third parties sure have a lot to say. My judgment was correct. There was just a weak link in the team. With Maya in the group, I had no choice but to take risks. Who aims for just 1 or 2 points? I even raised my contribution to 1.4."

"That's your limit. Thinking about party contribution before the results even came out shows you didn't trust your team. Maya is also a legitimate senior class member. There were plenty of ways to score points with her included."

"Haha! Really? Would you say the same if you were in Group 4 instead of me?"

"Of course. If I were the leader, we would have at least made the top three."

"Sigh."

Screamer sighed.

This is why he disliked rookies. They talked without experience.

Maya was hopeless. Regardless of her skills, she didn't have the personality to be a magician.

"Do you really think you could score high with Maya in the team?"

Amy spoke up.

"At least higher than a team with a leader like you."

Screamer turned around. Amy stood with her arms crossed, tapping her foot.

"Are you talking to me?"

Avoiding conflicts with competitors who might clash in the future was a senior class principle.

There was no need to get involved in unnecessary disputes that could benefit others.

Amy knew this well. She had learned it painfully from last year's failure.

But this year was different. Unlike Seriel, who was cautious to avoid mutual harm, Amy now had allies she could fully trust.

Amy walked confidently. Iruki and Nade stepped aside with determined expressions, boosting her confidence even more with their support.

Chapter 388: One Man Team (4)

Amy pointed her finger at Screamer.

"Who else would I be talking to? Honestly, the martial artist's killer strategy failed, didn't it? I could understand up to that point, but why take it out on an innocent team member?"

Screamer's face went blank.

No matter how emotional he was, he usually considered the context.

In contrast, Shirone's group was pushing forward recklessly without any plan.

'Are they all crazy?'

If you let emotions take over, you'll only be used.

And Screamer immediately found a way.

This was an opportunity.

If he could easily gain 20 points at the cost of losing 5, it wasn't a bad deal.

'Any team with Maya will lose.'

Having made his decision, Screamer made a proposal.

"Fine, if you're so confident, how about we test it?"

"Test it?"

"You know there's an overall evaluation in two weeks, right?"

Hill Capture. If you can beat me with Maya on your team, I'll acknowledge it."

Hill Capture involves placing flags in both camps and balancing offense and defense to capture the opponent's flag.

In the graduation exam, it's 15 vs. 15, but in the group evaluation, it's a 5 vs. 5 mini-game.

'As expected of the senior class. They really know how to dig in.'

Shirone saw through Screamer's strategy.

He planned to include Maya, whom he considered a weak link, in their team to secure 20 points.

As Shirone hesitated to answer, Screamer grinned. His red tongue flicked out.

This was why you shouldn't rush in blindly. Whether they refused or accepted, he would win.

"What? Are you scared now that it's time to do it? After all that big talk?"

After a long pause, Shirone spoke.

"It's true that Maya's sound magic is below average."

"Haha! Finally admitting it! So, you realize you're at a disadvantage..."

"But."

Shirone's face twisted in disdain.

"She's still better than having someone like you on the team."

Screamer closed his mouth and wiped his expression. His eyes, which once made gangsters tremble, glared at Shirone.

"Does that mean you're accepting?"

Shirone turned to his friends.

"Guys."

Iruki, Nade, and Amy stepped forward, flanking Shirone.

Amy wiggled her fingers and said,

"Yeah, let's do it. You'll need the best team to stand a chance. But you'll still get crushed."

The one who was most taken aback by the situation was Maya.

She had failed the evaluation and been scolded. Normally, that would be the end of it, but now it had escalated beyond her control.

She was grateful to Shirone's group for standing up for her, but she didn't want to be a burden.

"Wait, I didn't mean for this to..."

Before she could finish, Nade pulled her into a hug.

As Maya's face turned red and she tried to speak, Nade raised his fist and shouted at Screamer.

"Let's settle this!"

Nade's voice echoed loudly.

There were no regrets. It felt like all the pent-up frustration from the senior class was being released.

'Yeah, this is how Shirone's group should be.'

Maya, on the other hand, turned pale. But she couldn't dampen the fiery spirit of Shirone's group.

Screamer controlled his anger.

Logically, it was as good as a victory. They would lose 20 points, and he would gain 20.

"See you in two weeks."

Screamer left the training ground. The students were stunned, unable to believe what had just happened.

Not only had they challenged Fermi's group, but now they had also taken on Screamer, a well-known figure in Class Two.

'What are they, a bunch of brawlers?'

Sabina, standing next to Dante, sighed. She couldn't ignore it since Nade was involved.

"This is crazy. Why do they keep causing trouble? With Maya, they're obviously at a disadvantage. Now Nade's going to lose 20 points. Shouldn't Shirone have stopped them?"

"You didn't know?"

Dante smirked.

"Shirone is the leader of the troublemakers."

Shirone's group gathered at the Paranormal Science Research Club for a relaxing time.

With training and Gaold's mission, Shirone barely had enough time in a day, but he joined his friends to clear his mind.

Lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling on a holiday felt incredibly refreshing.

Why hadn't he appreciated such moments before, always complaining about boredom?

Shirone recalled the events from a few days ago.

"So, Maya is a commoner. I didn't know."

Nade said,

"Me neither. I looked into it after that day, and it turns out she's an outsider."

"An outsider?"

"She's from the Mystique Tribe, a small ethnic group from the south. About 200 of them settled in Tormia, cultivating their traditional herb, Kapura, for medicinal use. But 20 years ago, it was classified as a drug, and they lost everything. They couldn't integrate into society, burdened with debt and the stigma of being a drug tribe."

"I see. So Maya's family must be struggling."

"Probably. She has seven siblings. The tribe pooled their money to support her. If she becomes a magician, it would improve the Mystique Tribe's reputation."

"But how did she get into the magic school? I wouldn't have made it without the Ozente family."

"Teacher Collie recommended her. I don't know the details, but there must have been some connection, like with you."

Though Collie was a strict head teacher in the senior class, he was kind-hearted and likely helped Maya.

"There were rumors at the time. But when her grades turned out to be unimpressive, it just faded away."

Was that a blessing in disguise?

Shirone also wouldn't have faced much resentment if he hadn't stood out in the entrance test.

"Anyway, it's really unfortunate. She must feel immense pressure. The tribe's expectations are on her, and she can't graduate. Seeing her gulping down meat with water to increase her volume was pitiful."

Shirone felt the same.

"Yeah. Especially since Maya is a girl. Who wouldn't want to look pretty? She'd probably look great if she lost weight. But in the senior class, there's no choice."

Iruki said,

"Want to see what Maya used to look like?"

"Huh? How?"

"Back then, Nade collected a lot. Remember? The picture book."

Shirone suddenly remembered.

"Oh, the one published by the Women's Anatomy Research Club?"

Nade sat up from the sofa.

"That's right! We're in the senior class now. Most of the repeaters would be in there."

Without waiting for a response, Nade dove under the desk.

"Iruki, give me the issue and page number."

Iruki, who never forgot, said,

"The latest issue is the most accurate. Issue 48, page 8."

"Issue 48? That's last year's. Maya would have been overweight then."

"You'll see. Just get it."

Nade rummaged through the picture books piled in the safe. Since Shirone joined, he had lost interest, but he couldn't bring himself to throw them away.

"Let's see. Issue 48, Issue 48... Ah, here it is."

Nade placed the picture book on the table, and Shirone and Iruki leaned in.

Page 8 showed Maya's previous appearance.

"Wow..."

For a work by the Women's Anatomy Research Club, it was modest and portrayed her in a sacred manner.

But that wasn't why they were surprised.

"Is this really Maya? She's so pretty."

Though different from Tormia's urban standards, she was a fresh and bright girl anyone would fall for.

Nade nodded.

"I remember. I wondered who she was when I saw this picture."

Iruki explained,

"Maya started gaining weight in her second year of the senior class. But the Women's Anatomy Research Club seems to only draw her previous appearance."

"That's strange. Do they like Maya?"

"Maybe. But it feels more like respect than affection."

Shirone was intensely curious.

"Who are they, the Women's Anatomy Research Club?"

Nade said,

"I don't know. If they're caught, they're expelled immediately. But they must be in the senior class. They couldn't draw the senior class while being in the advanced class."

Thinking about it gave him chills. It meant they saw each other every day during evaluations.

Nade said,

"Let's check the others. Based on last year, there should be girls in the senior class now."

Iruki said,

"Page 14 has Pony, page 16 has Suabi, and the last page has Dorothy. Those three are in the senior class now."

Shirone looked at Iruki.

"You really remember this because of your servant, right?"

Nade pointed to the page.

"Hey, it's Pony."

Pony's appearance was the same as now.

Her symmetrical part emphasized her high forehead, and her golden hair framed her face.

Wearing a dress that exposed her shoulders and collarbone, she exuded royal elegance.

"Oh, here's Suabi."

Kneeling by a stream, Suabi was covered with a blanket over her bare body.

A bird perched on her cupped hands, and she wore a beautiful smile never seen at school.

"It's Dorothy? She looks so different here."

Dorothy wore a black woolen knit, pulling up the hem with a rebellious expression.

Her slender waist and cute belly button were exposed, and she wore only underwear, highlighting her long, giraffe-like legs.

Her tin doll, which she never parted with, was hugging her neck.

"I've always thought, but these drawings are amazing. They look just like the real thing."

Nade closed the picture book with a snap.

"Man, there are so many beauties at this school, but how come none of them are our partners?"

"Shirone has one."

"N-no! I mean, I don't really..."

Nade turned to him with a sharp look.

"Wait, didn't you say you went on a trip with Amy? Did nothing really happen?"

"Huh? Nothing?"

Shirone's face turned red. Nothing had happened, but why was his face heating up?

"Seriously? That sounds suspicious. You better come clean!"

Shirone glanced around. Realizing no one would help him, he resorted to his last option.

"Ugh, whatever! I'm going to sleep! I'm so tired these days. Wake me up in an hour!"

Sleep was the best way to clear his mind.

When Shirone woke up, he got up from the sofa. His friends had already left for the dormitory.

"What time is it?"

A note was left on the table.

"We left early. You looked tired, so get some rest and meet us at the dining hall later. And whatever you do, don't look at the red book in the safe under the table. It's amazing."

Yawning, Shirone crumpled the note and stood up.

"Still, that nap felt great."

He gathered his toiletries and headed to the senior class building. He planned to wash up at school and then go to the dining hall.

As he finished brushing his teeth and washing his face, the bell rang, signaling 5 o'clock.

"Yawn."

Yawning away the remnants of sleep, he walked down the hallway when he heard music from somewhere.

"What's that?"

Someone was singing in the music room at the end of the hall. It wasn't a classical piece but a popular song.

"Wow, they're really good."

The singing was impressively skilled.

'Could it be a professional singer?'

When he opened the music room door, he saw Maya playing the piano and singing.

It was a lively rhythm and blues song called "Nothing is More Beautiful Than You," which she used to hum while wandering through the village.

As soon as he opened the door, her voice hit him, sending chills down his spine.

Nothing is more beautiful than you

It wasn't just that she sang well. Even though he knew nothing about music, he was certain of it the moment he heard her.

Maya's singing was something special.

Chapter 389: Combat Readiness (2)

"What is this feeling?"

Even after the song ended, Shirone remained rooted to the spot, unable to calm her pounding heart.

"Hey? Shirone!"

Maya, noticing her, greeted her with a bright smile.

"Come in. What brings you here?"

"I thought I'd wash up. I heard music, so I came to see."

Shirone lifted her toothbrush to shake off any suspicions of having been eavesdropping.

Not caring, Maya moved from the piano bench and gestured for her to sit.

"Sit here. There's no other chair. Ah, if you're busy, though..."

Since Shirone was battling with the top students of her graduating class, she assumed she didn't have time for idle chatter.

"No, it's fine. I didn't have anywhere else to go anyway."

The piano bench was small, and Maya had a fuller figure. As their arms brushed against each other, an unfamiliar feeling passed through the contact of their skin. Her skin was soft, but slightly cold.

Shirone, feeling awkward, spoke up first.

"Haha, why didn't you tell me you sang so well? I'm not really into music, but it seems like you're way better than a professional."

A hint of sadness flashed in Maya's eyes, and Shirone realized her mistake. With such incredible talent, there had to be a reason why Maya wasn't a professional.

"Ah, sorry. If it's something that hurts..."

Maya smiled and shook her head. She couldn't resist Shirone's earnestness, and it made her feel even more unsettled.

'It was like this from the start.'

On the day of the Paranormal Spiritual Science Research Society's presentation, Maya had first seen Shirone speaking on the rooftop.

Proving the invisible.

The way she had persuaded the entire student body back then had been shocking to her. Shirone had been the brightest star in the school.

"Should I... sing for you?"

"Yes. I'd love to hear it."

Maya placed her hands on the piano keys and began singing. Shirone immediately immersed herself in the music. She had thought it was just sound. But there was a power in her voice that moved people's hearts.

'Ah... I see now.'

For this moment, she wasn't a mage, not concerned with her graduation, her tribe's struggles, or her family's poverty. She was singing only for the happiness of those who listened.

In this moment, Maya wasn't a student either.

She was an artist.

As the celestial song ended, a gentle afterglow lingered. Shirone held her breath, not exhaling until the last note disappeared into silence.

Finally, a quiet sigh escaped from her trembling lips.

"Haaa..."

A diva. A goddess stood before her.

Shirone couldn't resist the intense gaze Maya gave her. The fire of her gaze seeped into her heart. She felt she could accept anything Maya gave her.

"..."

Outside the window, the setting sun was sinking.

Week 8 of the Special Skill Enhancement Time had arrived.

This was a highly competitive subject where students evaluated their proficiency in twenty different areas related to their major, with scores being distributed based on self-assessment. The goal was to gain an advantage in the rankings.

Before the evaluation, students had to report their challenge tasks. For example, if a student decided to challenge three items up to level 7 but failed to reach that level, they would not earn any points for that week.

Therefore, if even one point was needed, it was wise to choose a moderate difficulty. Conversely, if high scores were needed, it was better to take risks and increase the difficulty.

Shirone sat with her friends, watching other students' special skill evaluations.

The reason for her sharp analytical gaze was that after tomorrow, they would face off against the Screamers in a hill capture battle.

Shirone's team was already decided, but the members of the Screamer team were still unknown. Therefore, it was best to analyze as many majors as possible today.

The special skill enhancement evaluation differed from other subjects in that it involved actual magic casting, not just theory.

Each area was equipped with various devices, particularly the impact test, which resembled the maze orb seen in the Kergo ruins.

After seven students finished their evaluations, it was Pisho's turn. The evaluator checked the evaluation sheet and looked up.

"Pisho, what are your challenge tasks?"

"I will challenge three items: gigantification, and mutation. The difficulty levels are 5, 6, and 5, respectively."

Pisho, the oldest in the graduating class at twenty-five, did not stand out in evaluations but his insect magic always

excited Shirone.

"Pisho has raised the difficulty by one level since last week. It's only week 8 and he's already moving into the intermediate level."

"He's twenty-five. He has at least five more years of experience in his major than others. He'll probably pass easily this time too."

"At this point, Shirone, there's something you must know." Nade said with a serious look.

"Pisho is the president of the Ant Language Research Society."

"Ant Language Research Society? Is there such a thing?"

"It's a society that operates in the shadows like ours. They analyze the pheromone language of ants to meet the queen ant. They probably intend to establish a diplomatic agreement."

After thinking for a moment, Shirone asked.

"But why do I need to know that?"

"Idiot! If they make an agreement with the queen ant, they'll attack the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society. It's not just about recruiting a few ants. All the ants under the queen will become enemies!"

Shirone tried to say something but eventually turned her head without a word.

Iruki continued.

"Insect magic is a very niche field. It's good to observe it while we can."

"Is it similar to summoning magic?"

"No. Summoning perfectly mimics a specific target close to reality. Although insects can be included, it's impossible to implement hundreds of species that way."

"Then how does Pisho do it?"

Iruki referred to an explanation he had heard from his father.

"The core battery of the insect field is the egg. It's an undifferentiated functional aggregate that can evolve into various forms. They induce natural occurrence with the

'ecosystem in the mind' theory, which is insanely difficult. They have to calculate from occurrence to evolution and mutation."

"Hmm, that sounds really difficult."

"That's why there are many scholars in the insect field. But once they become magicians, they are highly valued. Even though Pisho is still in the graduating class at twenty-five, he wouldn't lose out if he graduated now."

When Pisho signaled that he was ready, the evaluator presented the challenge tasks.

"First, differentiation. Level 5 is three hundred."

Pisho adjusted the battery with the ecosystem in mind theory. By setting the food chain and predators, the egg began to differentiate into the most suitable number of individuals for survival.

"Grasshopper."

Three hundred grasshoppers flew up from Pisho's feet, covering the sky like dark particles.

The evaluator wrote down three hundred and twelve on the record sheet. Counting insects with synesthesia was not difficult.

"Level 5 passed, 1 point earned. Next, gigantification."

Pisho closed his eyes and concentrated again.

It took about five minutes to adjust the oxygen saturation and environment to differentiate the egg.

A giant ant the size of a person was born, moving its antennae in all directions to survey the surroundings.

Both female and male students grimaced in disgust. That's why Pisho was a loner.

"Surface area 2.02 square meters. Gigantification passed. 1 point earned. Next, mutation."

This time, it took twenty minutes to build the battery. The result was shocking.

A centipede with the protective coloration of a ladybug crawled on the ground. Its scythe-like jaws opened, spraying venom.

"One form change. One function change. Passed."

"Thank you."

It was an amazing demonstration and a shocking sight, but the students just hoped never to see it again.

After Pisho's special skill enhancement ended, it was Maya's turn.

Nade cupped his hands and shouted.

"Maya, fighting!"

Maya smiled slightly and scratched her cheek, showing no other reaction as she entered the evaluation area.

"Huh? What's wrong with her? Did something bad happen?"

Nade licked his lips in embarrassment.

Now that he looked, Shirone's expression didn't seem particularly good either.

"What's going on? Did something happen between you two?"

Shirone had no idea.

Since the incident in the music room, Maya had been keeping her distance intentionally. She wasn't cold, but the warmth from before was gone.

Iruki spoke.

"Maybe we were too rude."

"What do you mean? What did we do to Maya?"

"Even if she was insulted by the Screamers, we should have let her make the choice. Some people don't want to fight."

Nade suddenly recalled the situation. It felt good to drag Maya into the fight and shout, but in hindsight, it was definitely crossing the line.

"Ugh, what should we do? We boasted so much. Shouldn't we apologize and pretend it never happened?"

"Maya doesn't get angry over such things. And she's not angry about that."

Shirone said bluntly.

If it was as Iruki said, she would have felt it when they met in the music room. But she was kinder than anyone and sang with all her heart.

'Then why is she avoiding me? Why?'

Maya's evaluation ended quickly. Her volume, pitch vibration, and sound were all at level 2 and she didn't pass any of them.

"None of her sound magic is above average. At this rate, she won't graduate this year either."

Iruki's words made Nade frown.

"Graduation isn't the problem. Shouldn't we worry about the overall evaluation coming up? You said we could get high scores with Maya on our team. Did you have a strategy?"

"No, I just said it off the top of my head. I couldn't say we did well to the Screamers, could I?"

"What? Then...!"

"Don't make a fuss. Just because I didn't think about it doesn't mean there's no solution. We can think about it now. Anyway, Maya's behavior might be due to her grades. Sound magic doesn't suit her."

"Maybe it's the opposite."

Iruki looked at Shirone.

"What are you talking about? Did something really happen between you two?"

Shirone told them about what happened in the music room. Maya's incredible singing ability and the chills that ran down her spine.

"Hmm, popular songs. It's definitely a different field. Sound magic uses vocal techniques to maximize the voice."

Iruki's mind worked quickly. He thought it might be a key variable in the upcoming hill capture.

Next up was Fermi. As he headed to the training ground, he glanced at Shirone and sneered.

Fermi's major was in the air field and his special skill enhancement score was exactly 100 points. He had cleared all items at level 5.

His speed was similar to the average of Class One, and it seemed unlikely he would drop to Class Two anytime soon. The evaluator changed the evaluation sheet and asked.

"Fermi, what are your challenge tasks?"

Fermi smiled and said.

"I will master all."

The evaluator stopped writing and looked up. The students began to murmur.

Although it wasn't unusual for Fermi to master all special skill enhancements last year, it was too early this time.

Considering that students usually started speeding up after week 12, Fermi's pace was four weeks faster.

'Shirone's presence must have influenced him.'

Having defeated Fermi in the survival test and declared war, this was a strategy to crush her spirit again.

"Alright. Let's measure the first press item."

Fermi extended his index and middle fingers, aiming at the device that measured impact.

Compressed air gathered at his fingertips and shot out with a bang.

The students' eyes turned to the scoreboard beyond the glass.

1,123 press.

It easily surpassed the master difficulty of 1,000 press.

Chapter 390: Combat Readiness (3)

"That's incredible, Fermi! How much did you compress the air to reach 1,000 press?"

"Yeah, even if it hits armor, the impact would be significant."

Shirone was unimpressed. In the past, he would have at least clapped, but it didn't compare to Gaold's air gun.

Fermi steadily conquered the master difficulty. When he finished the 10th level of the movement category, performing acrobatic flying, applause erupted.

The level of skill required to spiral up like a screw, draw a large circle, and then freely glide through the air like a pinwheel was impossible without mastering the basics of both press and blow categories.

"Fermi, all master. 100 points."

It was the moment Fermi reclaimed the top spot in the graduating class.

"He's certainly impressive."

It was rare for Iruki to acknowledge someone.

This time, even Shirone had no grounds to argue. It was an all-master achievement.

"Indeed. His fundamentals seem very solid."

"No, that's not what I mean. Fermi was an all-master last year too. Just in a different major."

Shirone quickly turned his head.

"A different major?"

"Yes. He registered for earth magic. The year before, he was an all-master in fire magic."

Could it really be possible? Changing majors every year and mastering all of them?

For a high-level magician, student-level difficulties might be manageable, but it was an unfair comparison. Fermi was a student.

Shirone stared blankly at Fermi. When Fermi made a throat-slitting gesture with his thumb, the emotions from the survival evaluation resurfaced.

Fermi had achieved all-master and became the undisputed number one.

It was an event significant enough to tip the scales for students who had been weighing Shirone and Fermi.

'It's too late to regret, rookie. I won't let you graduate until you lick my shoes.'

Reading the anger in Fermi's eyes, Shirone stood up and spoke to his friends as he headed to the training ground.

"Iruki, Nade. I'll go up first."

Nade and Iruki looked at each other. They knew Shirone wasn't yet at the level to challenge for all-master.

"What is he thinking? A head-on confrontation won't benefit him. It'll just expose his abilities. If he fails, he'll be completely crushed."

"He must have a plan. Let's trust Shirone."

The students' attention focused on Shirone.

Amy and Arin turned their heads from their conversation, and Canis's eyes sharpened.

Dante, sitting on the ground, propped his chin and watched.

'Fermi achieved all-master. How will you respond?'

The evaluator held the evaluation sheet and asked.

"Shirone, your major is Divine Particle. What are your challenge tasks?"

"Power level 7, projectile speed level 8, firing speed level 7, defense level 7..."

Shirone listed the tasks one after another, just like Fermi.

Up to week 7, Shirone's average special skill evaluation level was 3.6. The levels he was now reciting were more than double that.

"Lastly, movement control, level 10."

The evaluator's eyes sparkled.

Level 10 was master difficulty. Moreover, the movement control category for Divine Particle had much higher standards than the photon category.

It was clear that Fermi's all-master had influenced Shirone's decision.

However, it was also true that this was insufficient to compete with Fermi.

In fact, Shirone had chosen only seven tasks, and except for movement, the difficulty levels were between 7 and 8.

"What is this? If you're going to do it, do it properly. This is half-hearted."

"He's being stubborn. He needs to follow to some extent so that other students will be conflicted between Fermi and Shirone."

"If that's the case, it's a huge mistake. This won't even scratch Fermi. It's a typical first-year mistake. Freshmen can't help it."

This was the opinion of most of Class Two.

Dante withheld judgment and fell into thought. His lips curled as he quickly blinked and calculated.

"Hmm, that method..."

Meanwhile, Fermi's group watching from the hill already had faces of assured victory.

"Heh, is this his last struggle? It's kind of cute, isn't it, Fermi?"

Electric monster Lycan looked at Fermi.

Fermi was smiling. But Lycan, who had spent years with him, knew it was the smile he showed when he was most furious.

'That damn rookie...'

Shirone's first evaluation was the single attribute power category.

This category didn't exist in the photon series but was newly established based on the mass of the Divine Particle.

As he closed his eyes and concentrated, a sphere of light was born, compressing at a terrifying speed as if pushing

space away.

As the suppressed vibrations turned the students' eyes golden, the photon cannon fired with a roar.

The flash embedded in the glass orb spread into fragments of light, and the gauge spun to calculate the power.

2,242 crash.

It far exceeded the 1,800 crash standard for level 7 single attribute power.

When Shirone checked the score and looked at Fermi, the students finally realized something and began to murmur. When converted to energy units, 2,242 crash was roughly equivalent to 8,200 press.

In other words, the destructive power of compressing the atmosphere with 8,200 press was 2,240 crash.

This was 7.3 times higher than Fermi's 1,123 press, showcasing the power of the Divine Particle.

Shirone's evaluation continued.

In the projectile speed category, the photon cannon's speed was an impressive 100 meters per second, far surpassing Fermi's projectile speed.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shirone fired the photon cannon at the target ahead at a tremendous speed.

Even in broad daylight, the surroundings flashed, and the students' vision was filled with golden streaks.

"165 rounds per minute. Level 7 passed."

Fermi's master level for firing speed was 160 rounds per minute.

Having already surpassed Fermi in three categories, the students now grasped Shirone's intention.

"I see. That guy Shirone..."

The seven tasks Shirone presented as challenge tasks were also common to the air category.

"He's surpassing all of Fermi's evaluation tasks."

When the students turned to Fermi, he was watching Shirone with his face covered by his palm.

Only his close companions knew that his eyes were burning with murderous intent.

Shirone didn't achieve all-master.

But even so, he scored higher in the same categories than Fermi, who did achieve all-master.

The students felt the same. Air magic could be overwhelmed by the Divine Particle at level 7.

"That damn bastard..."

Fermi's companions were startled. It was the first time his emotions were so blatantly exposed.

Feeling the gazes of many students, Fermi finally lowered his hand and smiled.

'Oh, right, the business smile. The business smile.'

A businessman must remain composed. Even if debt is choking them and a knife is about to stab their back, confidence can open a way out.

Of course, the crisis was real. In reality, students were halving their expectations of Fermi's success and shifting them to Shirone.

The air category was at the level of the Divine Particle at level 7. The strategy of raising his stock through comparison with Fermi's scores worked perfectly.

"Shirone is truly amazing."

Aider approached from behind Iruki. His major was also in the air category, so it was natural to feel bitter.

"His talent is different. How can we beat someone like that?"

"Talent?"

"Yes. The advantage of the photon category is that it has no mass. But Shirone can even add mass to it. No one can beat that."

Iruki acknowledged Shirone's magical talent. But he didn't think Shirone had come this far just because of that.

Talent is just a tool. The speed of digging the ground with bare hands versus with a shovel is different.

If the ground is magic, the shovel is talent.

But no matter how much you have a shovel, the ground won't be dug unless you use your arms, waist, and legs.

Therefore, even a moment of realization is just the accumulation of daily training exploding.

Shirone dedicated himself every day and broke through his limits daily. Even if progress was slow, it eventually accumulated to achieve results.

All success in the world starts from knowing that the future will surely come.

"I don't think anyone is born empty-handed."

"What?"

Aider looked down at Iruki.

"Some are born with shovels, some with hammers, some with pens. Those with shovels can dig the ground faster, but they can't write well with them. Talent isn't given; it's found and developed by oneself. The air category has something only it can do. Just because you haven't found it doesn't mean you should take lightly what others have found. Talent is also effort."

Aider pondered those words. Although he had spoken out of displeasure at Shirone's efforts being belittled, it was a piece of advice more valuable than gold to him.

"Yes. Thank you, Iruki."

Iruki raised and lowered his eyebrows. His lack of offense and rather grateful attitude was indeed fitting for the youngest. It was why Aider had no enemies.

"Lastly, movement control. Master difficulty. Reaction speed must be below 0.8 seconds."

Shirone took a deep breath and composed himself. Although he felt dizzy after exerting himself in six categories, it was nothing compared to his past practical experiences.

The evaluator activated the Red Line certified evaluation magic, Navigation.

A small sphere was born, and inside it, an arrow indicating direction spun like a compass that had lost its polarity.

Movement control is a category where the magician must accurately execute the movements suggested by the navigation.

The shape, length, and color of the arrow each represent direction, distance, and speed, and the magician must perform them within the reaction time.

The master difficulty for Divine Particle is a reaction time of 0.8 seconds. This is 0.2 seconds shorter than the master difficulty for the photon series, which is 1 second.

At the neural level, 0.2 seconds is a significant gap.

Nevertheless, the association set this standard because they believed rapid acceleration and deceleration using mass would be possible.

"Reaction time of 0.8 seconds?"

The students looked bewildered.

Photon series magicians, of course, differentiate time to pre-construct a series of processes. Applications like Patrol and Rainbow Drop come from this.

However, movement control is not a category where you move as you think.

Navigation will suggest directions, speeds, and distances that are completely unexpected, and the magician must react immediately.

In such a situation, demanding a reaction time of 0.8 seconds seemed too harsh.

'No, the association's judgment is correct.'

Shirone recalled Collie's teachings. The standard exists because someone is achieving it.

He had heard that Etella's reaction time for movement control, called superhuman, was 0.1 seconds.

At that level, one could traverse densely wooded areas with just teleportation. It was also said that one could dodge attacks with just upper body weaving by repeatedly teleporting in place.

Of course, as a student, Shirone couldn't take comfort in what a renowned monk on the continent could do.

But he understood the association's thinking correctly.
Do not judge Divine Particle by the standards of the photon series.

It was a unique ability that only Shirone possessed.

'I will conquer it with my skills.'

Light rose from Shirone's body like flames. The flames, growing in size, became a pair of giant wings that burned brightly.

"What, what is that?"

The students' eyes widened. It was magic they had never seen or even heard of before.

Chapter 391: Combat Readiness (4)

"Photon shaping. It's advanced beyond fractals."

Canis muttered with a tense expression.

Creating wings from light was proof that shaping had transcended the realm of photons.

Shirone had already realized the art of incarnation.

"How much does he know?"

Harvest spoke through the mental channel.

-If he's at the stage of using specific magic, we have to consider him ahead of us. It seems the reason he passed the void wasn't just the immortal function.

That would explain the sense of incongruity Canis felt at the time.

"It's become clearer."

Canis looked at Arin.

"What do you mean?"

"Shirone's wings have become clearer."

Canis tilted her head. It was rare for her to refer to the shape of a specific object.

'Come to think of it...'

On Galliant Island, Arin had asked if Shirone was blonde.

At the time, it didn't seem significant, but now, hearing Harvest's words, it couldn't be ignored.

"How exactly do you see Shirone? Can you explain?"

"Shirone."

"Yes?"

"Shirone is Shirone. I had a vague idea before, but now I know, I was seeing Shirone's incarnation."

Arin couldn't analyze the form reflected in the first sight. But the form of the incarnation born from the law never

changes.

"It's not the art of incarnation. Shirone is the incarnation."

That was Arin's conclusion of mental transcendence.

"Hmm."

Canis looked at Shirone with a serious expression.

There would certainly be a difference between the art of incarnation and the incarnation itself. It was impossible to predict the outcome if they clashed head-on.

"What do you mean by the wings becoming clearer?"

"They were there back then too, on Shirone's back."

"What?"

When they met on Galliant, Shirone didn't have the technique called Light Wings. So how did she see the wings?

"Is it like a feeling?"

Arin shook her head.

"There's no feeling in an incarnation. It's just an incarnation.

But it wasn't as clear as now. It was a transparent form, like made by the wind. But now it's tinged with golden light."

Arin wasn't a precognitive. Therefore, the wings she saw on Shirone were likely those of the incarnation.

'Wings on an incarnation?'

If Shirone continued to strengthen the power of the incarnation, would wings really sprout from his shoulders?

There would probably be no one in the world who could answer that.

Shirone bent his knees, focusing on the navigation magic fixed in front of him.

'One, two...'

Finally, the arrow pointed to the sky.

'Three!'

At the same time, the wings of Light Wings flapped, and his body soared.

The acceleration created by plunging mass at near-light speed was tremendous, and everyone looked up with astonished expressions.

Confirming direction, distance, and speed within 0.8 seconds and casting teleportation was a matter of intuition. The most challenging part was that the navigation's suggestion changed during teleportation. Ultimately, judgment was only possible after the turn ended, resulting in a loss of about 0.2 seconds. That 0.2 seconds was the time the association suggested could be shortened with the Divine Particle.

'Now it begins!'

Light Wings met that standard precisely.

Bang!

As the wings flapped during teleportation, the direction of the flash turned vertically.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

With explosive sounds, Shirone executed the navigation's suggestions without error.

"Ugh!"

The pressure from rapid direction changes due to gravitational acceleration was entirely Shirone's burden. Every time the direction changed, the blood in his veins rushed to one side, and his muscles felt like they were tearing.

If he had Armand's Diamond Armor, it could mitigate the risk factors, but he was currently unarmed.

The stronger the pressure, the more intense the wing flaps became. He couldn't stop, even if his body broke.

It was a flight to become a magician.

"Wow, it really works?"

The 0.2-second difference was also conveyed to the students on the ground. It was a completely different trajectory from ordinary teleportation.

Knowing how strenuous it was to change direction during casting, they felt a chilling sensation.

"Won't he break apart in the sky? He must be enduring several times the gravity."

"But if he can withstand it, it's on a different level from teleportation."

The rhythm of the movement was different.

Such a syncopation was unprecedented, and for the opponent, it would likely be perceived as an entirely new tactic.

Even numerically, it was a significant advantage.

Assuming a 100-turn battle, it meant he could reach the desired coordinates 20 seconds faster than the opponent.

That was the true meaning of the 0.2 seconds Shirone was currently performing.

'When will this end?'

The navigation was persistently tormenting Shirone as if it had cognitive abilities. It demanded reverse directions as a basic, and continuous vertical drops and ascents.

How far had he flown?

The magic school's grounds looked small enough to fit within a circle made by his fingers.

No movement evaluation of any series required such a vast space. What was the association thinking?

'No, this is right!'

Shirone believed blindly. The Divine Particle was his, but there would be no error in the standards calculated by professionals.

Finally, the arrow pointed towards the magic school.

The speed suggested by the navigation was an average of over 300 kilometers per hour. The distance was a whopping 5.4 kilometers.

'Get there in 65 seconds?'

A distance achievable by linking 540 teleportations. The problem was that inertia reset, so he couldn't benefit from acceleration.

It wasn't the photon series from the start. What the association demanded was the dynamics of mass, that is, movement with acceleration.

"Whoo!"

Starting with teleportation, Shirone swung Light Wings at maximum speed. Every time the wings slashed through the air, the sound of breaking through the air flew towards the school.

180 kilometers per hour. 220 kilometers per hour. 280 kilometers per hour.

The moment he covered the 2.4-kilometer distance, he finally exceeded 300 kilometers per hour.

But because he lost time in the initial acceleration phase, he had to fly even faster to match the average speed.

"Ugh!"

The situation, where only the navigation was visible, felt no different from falling off a cliff.

Shirone focused solely on speed. The navigation wouldn't crash a student into a cliff.

340 kilometers per hour.

He doubled the area of Light Wings. The acceleration soared as the power equivalent to the photon cannon flapped.

440 kilometers per hour.

He heard the sound of fire burning in his eardrums. The magic school was approaching at an incredible speed.

'Wait a minute...'

A sudden thought occurred.

Who guaranteed that the navigation wouldn't crash a student into a cliff?

That was just the vague expectation of someone cornered, not a rational judgment.

The only reliable information was that the navigation was merely pointing to the school's coordinates.

'This is driving me crazy!'

Shirone pulled Light Wings towards his body.

The acceleration was already at its peak. But if he lost speed, he would fail. The only safety measure to protect his life was air resistance.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shirone felt intense vibrations as he pierced through the body of the air. It was the first time he realized how solid air was.

The students who spotted Shirone stood up abruptly.

"Get out of the way! If he crashes here, it's over!"

But where could they go? Unable to predict the exact landing point, they could only sway their upper bodies left and right.

The navigation made its final suggestion upon reaching the evaluation area. A dot. It meant it was best to stop here.

"Huff!"

Shirone widened his eyes and swung Light Wings forward. Bang!

A sound like his eardrums were tearing erupted. The dust in the training ground was blown away, spreading a hazy mist ahead.

The students turned their heads, grimacing at the ringing in their ears.

But soon, they moved their gaze to the sight of the dust settling with fearful expressions.

Imagining Shirone's body turned into a bloody mess, they would have preferred the dust not to clear.

"Sh-Shirone?"

Maya moved with a pale face. But her body was stiff, and she couldn't move forward.

"Shirone! Shirone!"

Amy and her friends ran past her towards the evaluation area.

Flap!

A slow, massive sound scattered the dust in all directions.

Nade, who had swallowed dirt, spat and looked ahead.

Shirone, floating 5 meters in the air, was slowly flapping his wings and descending to the ground.

"Shirone, are you okay?"

Shirone responded with a smile and turned his gaze to Maya. When she sat down with a relieved expression, a

thrilling joy surged.

It was undoubtedly a paradoxical emotion.

"I'm fine. Let's finish the evaluation first."

As he folded and dissipated Light Wings, golden fragments spread brilliantly for a moment before disappearing.

The evaluator began recording.

"Shirone, you passed the master difficulty for movement control. The total score for today is 30 points."

Although it didn't reach Fermi's 100 points, the minds of all the graduating class became even more complicated.

Fermi, the all-master. Shirone, who surpassed Fermi's capabilities without being an all-master.

The rivalry between the two was still neck and neck.

'This has made things more difficult. Is Fermi really going to break?'

Except for Fermi's group, it was natural for those who staked their lives on this graduation exam to have conflicts.

Electric monster Lycan spoke with cold eyes.

"This is the first time I've seen someone so tenacious. Fermi, it's about time...!"

Lycan's face froze as he turned his head.

Fermi's eyes were not normal. His right pupil was rolled up, and his left pupil was shifted to the side.

It was the true face of a monster hidden behind the mask of a businessman.

'Damn, this is like a mutual destruction scenario.'

A deviant. No matter how rational his thinking, he was a twisted monster inside.

It was unlikely, but if Fermi started acting emotionally, it would cause massive losses.

'How much do we earn in a month...'

He thought it might be better to just let Shirone go.

"Hey, Fermi. You..."

"An emergency meeting is called. All executives gather at the Golden Wheel."

Fermi gave a short order and walked away.

Like seeing a ghost with its features erased, Lycan couldn't remember Fermi's face from a moment ago.

The hill capture evaluation was two days away.

Students were secretly gathering for strategy meetings, and those who hadn't decided on a team were now at the point of making a decision.

As a mock evaluation for the graduation exam, everything from team composition to matchups was autonomous.

You could designate the team you wanted, and if you were designated by multiple teams or not designated at all, it was decided by drawing lots.

So far, the only team with all members revealed was Shirone's team.

On the other hand, the Screamer team was still shrouded in mystery, at least to Shirone's team.

'Will she be in the music room today?'

Shirone entered the graduating class building. At Iruki's request, he went to find Maya earlier than their scheduled strategy meeting.

As expected, the sound of singing flowed from the music room, and the emotions from that sunset day resurfaced, making his heart race.

He slowly opened the door and entered, and Maya turned her head with a bright smile.

"Oh, Shirone! What brings you here? We were supposed to meet later."

Shirone felt a mix of emotions. Sometimes he felt distant, but at moments like this, she felt closer than anyone.

"Iruki asked if we could start a bit earlier. He came up with a tailored strategy for the Screamer team."

"Oh, I see. Where are we meeting?"

Maya closed the piano and stood up, walking past Shirone towards the door. She smelled like milk, like a child.

Chapter 392: Combat Readiness (5)

Shirone didn't look back. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't understand why she was acting this way.

"Maya."

"Can we have our meeting while eating something delicious? I've always wanted to do that."

"Maya."

Maya turned around at the second call.

"Yes?"

Shirone closed his mouth.

When their eyes met, it felt like the words in his head scattered in all directions. He couldn't talk about something that wasn't clear. The problem was that it wasn't clear.

"If you're fighting the Screamers because of us, you don't have to. It seems like you've been worried lately."

He felt it was cowardly to borrow Iruki's words, but if it solved the issue, it didn't matter.

"Oh, no. It's the overall evaluation anyway. I'm actually sorry because I feel like I'm a burden."

As Maya turned the doorknob to leave, Shirone realized he couldn't hold back any longer.

"Then why are you acting like this?"

Even though Shirone's voice was raised, Maya wasn't surprised. She just smiled awkwardly and scratched her cheek out of habit.

"No matter how much I think about it, I don't understand. Why have you been avoiding me lately? I can feel it."

"Did I... do something wrong?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Then why do I have to be kind to you?"

Shirone stopped in his tracks. It felt like a sharp blade had suddenly pierced his chest.

"What do you want from me? How do you want me to act? Should I always look at you and smile?"

Shirone couldn't understand why Maya was acting this way. If there was a misunderstanding, it could be resolved. But this wasn't a misunderstanding.

"How you treat me is your choice, but..."

Maya gave a bitter smile. She felt she understood a bit of what Amy meant when she said it was frustrating. But she had no intention of going back on the answer she gave that day.

"Then Shirone, can you love me?"

Shirone's face hardened.

Seeing the expected reaction, Maya lowered her gaze with sad eyes.

She too had held the wind that blew in the music room that day in her heart.

'Shirone, I'm different from Amy. I'm neither cold nor strong. If I can't be with you, every day will be like hell. I'll only think of you. If you can't love me, we have to end it here. We have to let it go.'

Shirone's trembling eyes gradually calmed down. His face, which had looked startled like a rabbit, became composed.

Maya prepared herself. Even so, the unavoidable anticipation made her heart race.

What would Shirone say?

I love you? Actually, I like you too?

All sorts of exciting words came to mind, but she already knew the result.

I'm sorry.

She already felt terrible. She wouldn't be able to get over it for a while. She would spend nights crying.

'But this is it. It ends here.'

Having made up her mind, Maya lifted her head. But the moment she saw Shirone's determined eyes, her heart sank.

"Maya, I..."

"Ah, hahaha!"

Shirone's face turned bewildered. As if it was really funny, Maya approached, wiping tears with her index finger.

"I'm joking, joking! Oh, you're so naive."

"Joking?"

"You did this at the graduation event too. If you keep acting like this, I'll tell Amy."

Shirone felt lost. It felt like he was standing in the middle of an unreal world.

"But you haven't been talking lately..."

"Ah, my head's been so full that I didn't have time to think about anything else. My family has high expectations, and my grades keep dropping. I'm sorry. From now on, I'll never! Ever pretend not to know."

Shirone felt drained. He thought he needed to sort out his thoughts, but Maya didn't give him any time.

"Come on, let's go! Iruki is waiting. Hill capture! We're going to win, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

Maya pushed Shirone out of the music room. As she crossed the threshold, she clenched her teeth and closed her eyes tightly.

'Ha, I'm in. What do I do now?'

It felt like crossing the threshold of hell.

In the northeastern mountains of Alpheas Magic School, there is a cave that goes 20 meters underground.

And if you navigate through the complex maze there, you come to the Golden Wheel, where Fermi is the president.

It was a room so large and luxurious that it could be called a mansion.

The table was filled with all kinds of delicacies, and waiters in tuxedos walked around with wine, filling empty glasses.

In the center, beautiful dancers performed, and a seven-member band played gentle music.

The Golden Wheel had 40 top-tier staff members.

The labor cost alone exceeded 700 gold per day, and all of this was for the five members.

Fermi sat on a sofa, enjoying his wine. A white-furred tiger with a collar lay sleeping on the carpet.

On the four sofas placed around him sat the members of the Golden Wheel, known as Fermi's group.

"Finally, the monthly profit has exceeded 7 million gold.

Breaking 10 million is now within reach."

It wasn't an amount a student could handle, but Fermi was indifferent.

The perceptive members kept their mouths shut. On days like today, when an emergency meeting was called, they had to choose their words carefully.

"Arian Shirone..."

As Fermi opened the conversation, the members began to speak the prepared words they had been waiting for.

"Do we really need to worry about him? We'll have to deal with him eventually, but why not focus more on business?"

"I agree. He's just a naive kid. Why not just let him graduate?"

You can't tear down the house to catch a fly.

Since Fermi had shown his emotions, there was no guarantee that such a thing wouldn't happen.

"That's why we can't just leave him alone."

"Fermi, aren't you stressing too much? You can ignore provocations."

"You can ignore provocations. But this is a threat. A threat to the existence of the Golden Wheel."

They would follow anything Fermi said, but they couldn't agree with classifying Shirone as a threat.

"Of course, Shirone is an impressive rookie. But you know? We're professionals. Not just because we make money, but

because of our skills. We can control him in the graduation exam."

Fermi coldly swirled his wine glass.

"Do you know why you can't make big money? Because you don't realize that the problem you're facing now started a long time ago. Or you overlook it even if you know. Today's threat becomes an unmanageable threat in the future. If you don't prepare now, there will be no solution when it hits."

The members fell silent. Once again, Fermi was right.

"From now on, Shirone is classified as the highest level of threat to the Golden Wheel. We'll analyze him thoroughly. He's going up against the Screamers, right? Who are their team members?"

Sona's Hersy reported the results of the eavesdropping.

"Screamer, Pony, Luman, Suavi, and Aider. The team was completed yesterday."

"Hmm, Luman and Suavi. A 2-utility, martial artist killer combination."

As expected, it was a team formed by mobilizing Screamer's connections. It was surprising that Dorothy was missing, but she probably refused. She's a woman with an incredibly sharp intuition.

"As proud as they are, they'll want to prove themselves. It's completely different from strategy and tactics. No matter how good Shirone is, it's not easy to defeat the Screamer team with Maya."

Unless it's a teamwork-centered battle like an annihilation mission, the martial artist killer strategy is quite powerful. In the strategy and tactics situation, Shirone's team annihilated over 300 monsters in 3 minutes and 28 seconds, but Screamer's team, with Screamer alone, killed over 150. They strengthen one person extremely to cause a balance collapse.

This strategy will shine even more in a 5-on-5 battle, and for Shirone's team to win, they need to build a perfect balance.

In such a situation, Maya's presence could be a poison.

"That's not enough. This time, we'll figure out all of Shirone's strengths. We'll scrape out everything he's hiding."

"How are you going to do that? The overall evaluation has high scores, so the participants will do their best. The Screamer team is also fully prepared."

Fermi tapped the sofa a couple of times. A bluish energy shimmered from his body, and under his raised hand, black things quickly moved back and forth with a rustling sound.

Deviant - Depreciation Deal.

With a ting! sound, a casino chip spun and flew up.

Fermi caught the vertically falling chip horizontally and threw it to Hersy.

The center of the chip had a whirlpool pattern, and the edge had a black and white alternating pattern.

"This is..."

Hersy looked at Fermi, surprised.

It was a very precious chip to use for something like this.

Even converted to market value, it was worth over 400,000 gold.

'He's serious.'

Shirone would definitely become a future enemy. It was a chip that could only come out with such certainty.

"Make the deal with that. The contract condition is to make Shirone go all out in the hill capture. If you provoke him, he'll reveal his true colors."

"Got it. Anything else to convey?"

After thinking for a moment, Fermi's lips twisted into a wicked smile.

"Tell them not to worry about the aftermath and go all out."

Hill Capture (1)

It was the day of the hill capture evaluation.

The first thing the 30 students did upon gathering at the training ground was to check the members of the opposing teams.

Shirone also confirmed the Screamer team.

Pony was strategically allied with Screamer, and Suavi and Luman were key factors in the martial artist killer strategy. Including the reliable Aider, they had formed a solid team. Among the six teams gathered, the evaluation instructor explained the rules.

"Today is the hill capture. You should already know your opposing teams. Six teams will be evaluated simultaneously, with no time limit. The first team to score 5 points wins, and the losing team will have 20 points deducted. The battle will take place at the main hill capture battlefield, number 2000."

Shirone examined the battlefield.

It was a rectangular area 200 meters long and 50 meters wide, surrounded by 20-meter-high glass walls. Inside, each side had a 10-meter-high hill with a flag planted in the center.

The evaluation would proceed in rounds, and once a flag was captured, the round would end temporarily, moving on to the next round.

"To deepen strategic tactics, spatial movement is prohibited. Flight height is limited to 20 meters, and exceeding this will result in disqualification. If you touch the flag, you won't be able to use any magic due to the built-in magic control device. Remember this well to avoid complaints later."

While holding the flag, one would be defenseless and vulnerable to enemy attacks.

Therefore, capturing the flag required at least two people to occupy the hill and cooperate.

The instructor continued the explanation.

Upon entering the battlefield, the teams would be divided along the central 100-meter line, with each team member assigned a position to perform their duties.

There were four positions: forward, winger, linker, and guard.

The forward started at the 10-meter mark in their own territory, closest to the center line, and their role was to charge towards the enemy's flag.

Wingers moved along the left and right lines, typically starting at the more defensive 20-meter mark. However, they often moved faster due to less defensive pressure.

Linkers started at the 50-meter mark in the center line, balancing offense and defense.

Depending on the opponent's strategy, they could assist a winger, charge with the forward, or retreat to defend the flag with the guard, making them versatile players.

Finally, the guard protected the flag on the hill. Even if the enemy forward infiltrated, the guard could defend the flag, as the forward couldn't use magic while holding it, making it a defensive position.

Chapter 393: Hill Capture (2)

Shirone's team had decided on their positions the night before.

With his excellent movement skills, Shirone was the forward, while Nade and Iruki took on the roles of left and right wingers.

The versatile Amy was the linker, and the less offensive Maya was naturally suited for the guard position.

In the Screamer team, the main player of the martial artist killer strategy, Screamer, was the forward.

Luman, with crowd control, and Pony, with water power, were the left and right wingers, the utility Suavi was the linker, and Aider was the guard.

The two teams didn't even exchange glances. Regardless of their usual relationships, they were just competitors now.

Going further, Screamer approached Shirone with his chin raised, knowing the importance of an early psychological battle.

"Hey, are you ready? Ready to get smashed, I mean."

Since the survival test, Shirone's stock had risen even higher, which only excited Screamer more.

With Maya on the team, the balance was the worst.

Defeating Shirone in this match would solidify his position in the graduating class.

"You must be nervous, having a hole in your team."

"And you're not embarrassed to say that, being the biggest hole yourself?"

To Shirone, Maya was no longer just a fellow graduate. He couldn't forgive Screamer for insulting her.

"Heh, I'll finish this 5-0. Just wait and see."

Following the instructor's call, the six teams moved to their designated battlefields.

Arin, following Canis, suddenly remembered something and looked back at the Screamer team.

"....."

A giant snake was arrogantly coiled.

It was always a grotesque first sight, but today it was even worse.

"Canis, shouldn't we tell Shirone?"

"Forget it. Shirone is a competitor in the graduating class, just like us. It's not like we've formed an alliance."

Arin didn't ask twice. She too was putting everything on the line for the hill capture and had no room to worry about others.

As they crossed the threshold of the battlefield, Canis added a word.

"He's not someone who will go down easily."

Shirone's team and Screamer's team entered the second battlefield and briefly reviewed their strategies in their respective camps. The thing that Screamer's team found most troublesome was, of course, Ataraxia.

"Listen up. If Shirone uses the magic circle that defeated Dante, we charge no matter what. We just need to cut off Shirone. It seems to take over a minute to cast, so we'll have a chance."

Pony asked.

"What if we fail? If they come out with Guardian Force, we could be countered."

Guardian Force was an extreme defensive formation where all members protected the flag, a tactic Shirone would likely choose if he cast Ataraxia.

"In that case, we retreat. Dig a bunker on the hill and hide. With Luman's crowd control, it will be quick."

Aider spoke.

"So, we start by giving them 1 point?"

"Giving 1 point is fine. He passed out after using it once last time. He can't use such a large-scale magic every round. If we wear down Shirone's mental strength, it's to our advantage."

Even if the power was strong, if it took over a minute to cast, there were many ways to counter it. If possible, they would cut it off, but if not, they would just hide.

"Alright, let's get those 20 points easily. That's why we formed this team. Let's crush them in the first round."

Screamer's team put their hands together and shouted their battle cry.

Meanwhile, Shirone's team was also finishing their review. Iruki gathered everyone and spoke in a low voice.

"We'll use Ataraxia depending on the situation. They'll likely focus their utility on Screamer. We should take the early lead with Sidewinder."

Sidewinder was a strategy where the wingers ran wide along the lines, putting pressure on the enemy team trying to concentrate in the center.

As the announcement for the start of the first round was heard, the ten members scattered to their positions through spatial movement. Of course, once the 2000 system was activated, spatial movement would result in disqualification. Shirone waited at the 10-meter mark on the central line.

The battlefield map was symmetrical, with various cover set up, so he couldn't see his teammates' faces. The only person he could see was Screamer, 20 meters ahead.

Wearing tight training clothes and warming up, Screamer was quickly moving his feet and then relaxing them. There was no sign of tension in his calm warm-up.

'Iruki will face Luman, and Nade will face Pony. Should I go into Iruki's line?'

Although the numbers were equal at 5 vs. 5, strategies and tactics would create constant 1 vs. 2 or 1 vs. 3 situations. The key was to lead local battles advantageously through choice and concentration.

-10 seconds until the start of the first round.

As the lights came on in the battlefield, engine noises were heard.

The lights on the 2000 bracelets came on, and Screamer lightly stepped and twisted his body diagonally. Then, as he quickly moved his feet back and forth in place, it looked as if he was floating in the air.

"Alright! Let's have some fun!"

4 seconds. 3 seconds. As the countdown dropped, Screamer's legs moved even faster.

From a distance, it looked like he was flailing, but from 20 meters away, Shirone could see the speed of the schema, making his hair stand on end.

Could human legs move that fast? It looked like a tightly compressed steel spring ready to launch.

"Uoooooooo! Uoooooooo!"

Screamer's body, shaking his limbs, became blurry. At the same time, the 2000 system activated, and everyone entered the Spirit Zone.

-The first round of hill capture begins.

Bang! Bang bang bang! Bang! Bang!

Colorful fireworks exploded above Screamer's head. Muscle enhancement, agility enhancement, nervous system enhancement, concentration enhancement, muscle endurance enhancement, and more—Suavi's 20 utility magic combat packages were hitting him relentlessly.

With the high-speed force, a specialty of utility magicians, Screamer's movements became even faster. As his limbs reached an invisible speed, a tearing screech erupted from his mouth.

"Kyaaaaaa!"

Screamer Martial Arts - Dragon Kick.

With his shoulders seemingly dislocated, Screamer stretched his arms out to the sides and flew forward with his right leg extended like a cannon.

'Spear to spear?'

A tactic to attack the opposing forward and pressure the entire line.

Seeing Screamer flying like a giant ballista, Shirone reflexively cast a spell.

'Radiance!'

As the curtain of light pulsed, Screamer's physical bullet pierced the mass barrier and struck Shirone.

"Ugh!"

Shirone, who blocked his chest with both hands, flew over 5 meters and fell to the ground.

Even though Radiance had dampened the force, the impact pierced his solar plexus, leaving him breathless.

'This is the martial artist killer strategy.'

The strength of a creature cannot be analyzed by the sum of its numbers.

Just as increasing muscle strength also increases speed, the twenty buffs were each cooperating, creating a synergy effect that exceeded the numbers.

Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang bang!

Suavi continuously applied buffs. The average duration of her active buffs was 2 seconds. The key was rotating the 20 types with precise timing.

Amy stood in front of Shirone. In a spear-to-spear situation, the linker was supposed to back up the central line.

"Wadadadadada!"

Screamer's appearance, flying in with teleportation, was terrifying. His posture changed like a pinwheel with each explosion of light.

"Wada! Wada!"

Screamer's rapid punches omitted the frames of the process. A side kick with his full weight sent her flying in her defensive stance.

"Kyaaaaaa!"

Screamer clenched his fists and trembled. His upper body, with his shirt torn by Radiance, bulged with defined muscles.

With the central line broken, Screamer charged towards the hill without hesitation. Maya tried to attack, but before she could cast a spell, her arm was twisted behind her back, and she was held by Screamer.

"L-Let go!"

"Heh, why? Is this your first time feeling muscles like these? Don't be shy."

Screamer grabbed the flag. The Spirit Zone disappeared, but with the schema, there was no problem subduing Maya. As the pole was pulled out, the 2000 system shut down.

-The first round ends. The second round will start in 5 minutes.

Coming down from the hill, Screamer planted the flag at the bottom and shouted at Shirone's team.

"Hey, isn't this too easy? With such a weak guard, can you even protect the flag properly?"

The martial artist killer strategy was much stronger than Shirone had expected. Screamer's skills were impressive, but Suavi was the real problem.

A skilled user who could rapidly switch between 20 types of buffs. Without cutting her off, it would be difficult to gain the upper hand.

Shirone looked at Maya. She was the key figure who could counter the martial artist killer strategy.

Maya nodded vigorously. Although she felt burdened by the attention, she was willing to do anything for Shirone.

'I'll do my best, Shirone!'

As the second round began, Screamer once again pushed forward with spear-to-spear.

As Shirone retreated into his own territory, Screamer's confidence soared. Even the great Shirone seemed afraid of him.

"Hahaha! No guts at all...!"

Aaaah!

Screamer's steps faltered. When Maya's sound magic hit, it felt like an earthquake in his head.

"Ugh!"

Suavi frowned.

Maya's "Requiem of Death" was a spell that broke the enemy's concentration. However, with her skill level only at stage 2, she shouldn't have been able to produce such power.

'Her voice is different.'

Unlike before, when she used classical vocal techniques, Maya was now singing the Requiem of Death as if it were a song. The range was short, but the amplification was incredible.

Without the buffs, Screamer's power significantly weakened. Shirone's team, which had pulled back the line early on, defended solidly.

As the battle turned chaotic, Screamer retreated to his own territory.

Maya's amplification was impressive, but the range wasn't wide, so Screamer planned to cut off Shirone from their own territory.

"Suavi! Buffs!"

Crossing the central line, Suavi's buffs hit again.

With enhanced leg strength, Screamer shot forward at incredible speed.

Shirone's back, advancing 60 meters into enemy territory, quickly came into view.

"Kyaaa!"

Screamer charged with a Dragon Kick.

Amy, twisting her body to dodge Screamer, shouted.

"Shirone! Behind you!"

"It's too late!"

At that moment, Shirone's body glowed pale and exploded in eight directions.

Scatter Movement!

"Ugh!"

As a beam of light struck his abdomen, an anti-magic force of immense strength hit. Even with the schema's muscle

enhancement build, the impact was overwhelming.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Every time the Scatter Movement burst forward, photon cannons spread across the battlefield.

It wasn't just a movement technique. It was a powerful crowd control skill that tore through Screamer's team's formation.

"Ugh!"

Aider barely dodged the barrage of photon cannons. With Amy backing him up and blocking the path to the flag, Shirone easily grabbed and pulled out the pole.

-The second round ends. The third round will start in 5 minutes.

Although the flag should have been placed back in its original position at the end of the round, Shirone carried it down the hill. He then planted it in front of Screamer's feet, scoffed, and teleported back to his own territory.

"That bastard...!"

The Scatter Movement, combining movement, attack, and crowd control techniques, was a magic only Shirone could perform.

'What? Divine Particle?'

Is there only a god in the world of magic and no devil? What are they doing not catching a guy like that?

Pony approached, looking at Shirone's team's hill.

"Calm down. What happened? Maya's sound magic was too strong."

That was the reason for their loss in the second round. But Screamer couldn't understand how the magic had amplified in such a short time.

Seeing Maya laughing among her teammates, he recalled the strategy and tactics session, feeling even more frustrated.

'Damn it! How did they do it? That talentless girl...'

Shirone's team was in high spirits. The counter to the martial artist killer strategy had worked perfectly.

"Maya! You were amazing! This round is yours."

"I just did what I was told..."

Iruki's advice to exclude classical vocal techniques had hit the mark. Maya, with her innate talent for singing, had abandoned technical skills and focused on extreme amplification.

Of course, this approach had its limits.

The reason sound magicians learn classical techniques is that they are the most specialized in handling the voice technically. Ultimately, fighting with only amplification works at the student level.

But Maya willingly accepted Iruki's suggestion.

She wanted to bring victory to those who fought Screamer for her.

Shirone's team was not a one-man team.

Chapter 394: Hill Capture (3)

From the third round, Screamer's team abandoned the spear-to-spear tactic and employed a more advanced strategy. Pony, the winger, moved to the central line and ran alongside Suavi.

'They've shifted. As expected, they won't go down easily.' With three members in the central line, the left line was essentially abandoned.

As expected, Luman had completely retreated to the hill, covering all three lines.

When they entered the range of the Requiem of Death, Suavi's concentration wavered. At that moment, Pony cast a spell.

Refresh.

A refreshing sensation washed over Suavi's mind, completely nullifying the effects of the Requiem of Death. Although it provided no physical defense, it was an invaluable spell that blocked most crowd control effects. Just having Refresh made it worth including a water-type magician in the party.

"Hahaha! How about this? Can you still stop us?"

Equipped with the combat package, Screamer transformed back into a warrior, sweeping through the battlefield.

Maya maintained her spell until the end. Although she couldn't cut off Suavi, just tying down Pony's presence with Refresh was more than fulfilling her role as a guard.

'As expected, Suavi is the key. She was last year too... That girl is really amazing.'

The duration of the 20 combat package buffs varied, with the vision enhancement buff lasting 1.13 seconds and the

muscle endurance enhancement buff lasting 1.78 seconds. Initially, they were cast in order, but after about 20 cycles, the shorter-duration buffs would cycle 1-2 more times, interrupting the sequence.

Moreover, calculating the time consumed by the rotation made it clear that utility magicians required the highest concentration among magicians.

'Tik-tok-tik-tak. Tok. Tak-tik-tik. Tak-tik-tik.'

Therefore, utility magicians used a unique technique called the cross force, different from the usual force.

They set up a cross-shaped intersection, placed the core in the center, and collided the reserved cores from four directions towards the center.

The reason they could rotate the 20 buff cycles at precise times was due to the unique rhythm of 'tik-tok-tak-tik.'

When struck vertically, it was 'tik,' horizontally, it was 'tok,' and when bounced again in the same direction, it was 'tak,' feeling the 0.something second error through rhythm.

'Tik-tik tak-tik-tok tik-ka-tik-tok tik-tik tak-tik-tok.'

Bang. Bang-bang-bang. Bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang-bang. Iruki closely observed the effects bursting in a unique rhythm above Screamer's head.

'0.11 seconds. 0.23 seconds. 0.38 seconds. 0.49 seconds...'

The cycle was as precise as a machine. The speed at which the cores were switched was also commendable.

'I'll cut it here.'

But that was just a phenomenon occurring within Iruki's servant calculations.

Cancellation.

As Screamer's muscle enhancement buff was canceled, Suavi, maintaining the tik-tok-tak-tik, frowned.

When the vision enhancement and flexibility enhancement buffs also disappeared, the rhythm of the cross force began to tangle.

'Even for a servant, this speed is unfair.'

Cancellation was a difficult spell because it required perfectly reversing the vector quantity of the magic. But that was a separate issue from reading the cores passing by at a speed of 4 times per second. In short, Iruki's thinking speed was faster than Suavi's, even while analyzing the vector quantities of the cores and omnipotence without any error.

"What the hell, Suavi!"

Screamer shouted, looking back. She had never made a mistake in the force before, so the current situation was unacceptable.

"Where are you looking during a battle?"

Screamer hurriedly turned his head. Nade's hands pushed forward, and Lightning Shock exploded.

"Ugh! You bastard!"

Screamer's body was stunned.

"What? The sound of a pig being slaughtered?"

Nade raised his fist in place of Shirone.

"Why don't you cry like a pig being slaughtered!"

Screamer's head twisted to the side as Nade's punch landed squarely on his jaw.

Meanwhile, in Screamer's team's territory, Luman was desperately holding off Shirone and Amy.

Using various crowd control techniques like Blind, Slow Trap, and Air Press, he was buying time, but the forward-linker combination was incredibly annoying.

"Damn it! That cursed Hongan!"

Amy's Hongan was the nemesis of crowd control.

No matter what crowd control spell was used, her self-image memory reset her mind, making it impossible to control her.

'No choice. I'll cut Shirone.'

Shirone's endurance was formidable, but he was more likely to be affected by crowd control than Hongan.

'He's more popular than me despite being uglier.'

Luman acted on personal feelings. He believed he was the best.

Thinking he would be handsome if he lost weight, Shirone was a rival worth eliminating.

"He must have kissed Amy too!"

"What are you talking about, you idiot!"

Luman's Mountain Range exploded, creating a massive 10-meter-high wall that separated the two.

'Amy is out. Now, Air Press!'

As the powerful atmospheric pressure pressed down, Shirone's movements stopped. Seizing the opportunity, Luman kicked off the ground and flew at him.

Amy, who had circled around the wall, widened her eyes. Luman's belly protruded as he bent his back like a bow, exposing his navel. His molars were clenched tightly, and he was grimacing with all his might.

"Shirone! Dodge!"

It was clear that Luman was using his signature move, Spirit Hammer.

A non-attribute anti-magic crowd control spell that caused a stun by colliding Spirit Zones.

Often compared to a headbutt technique, Spirit Hammer was possible because the target also absorbed the impact energy.

'I'll crush him, Shirone or not!'

Luman intended to strike with all his might.

As proven in the survival test, Shirone's endurance was the strongest in the graduating class. But the harder Spirit Hammer struck, the greater the impact on the target.

With the pride of a crowd control magician and the pride of being the most handsome in the graduating class, he aimed to destroy Shirone in one blow.

"Here I come!"

Seeing the menacing Luman, Shirone instinctively prepared a defensive mental state. As his Spirit Zone switched to defense mode, Luman swung his forehead, bouncing his belly.

Clang!

"Ugh!"

Shirone grimaced and stepped back.

Although he wasn't actually hit on the head, it felt like someone had struck his skull with a hammer.

"Shirone! Are you okay?"

Amy hurried over. Even from a distance, it was clear that the Spirit Hammer had hit properly.

'But why isn't there a follow-up attack?'

When Amy turned her head, Luman was standing, panting.

Suddenly, his nose bled, and his heavy body wobbled before he fell on his butt.

Luman's eyes were completely unfocused as he sat on the ground, supporting himself with his arms.

Although anti-magic spells were inherently a seesaw game, Spirit Hammer was a spell where the attacker always had the advantage.

Yet, the shock from casting Spirit Hammer had blown his mind.

Was this what it felt like to hit one's head on a diamond?

'Damn it! What am I supposed to do if he's this tough?'

Having been stunned by his own attack, he couldn't even muster the strength to stand. It seemed his mental strength would only recover by the end of the third round.

"Now! Let's go!"

Shirone ran past Luman and up the hill.

Amy, checking their own territory, saw Nade land a punch that twisted Screamer's jaw and followed behind.

Aider struggled, firing his air gun, but had to retreat outside the range of Shirone's Radiance.

In the meantime, Amy pulled out the flag.

-The third round ends. The fourth round will start in 5 minutes.

Everyone's movements stopped, and the tension eased.

But Screamer's eyes still glinted with murderous intent.

Although he had mellowed considerably since entering the magic school, the humiliation of being punched by a

magician was unbearable.

"Are you crazy? How dare you hit me?"

Nade scoffed and replied.

"Why? Do you think you're something special? If you did something to deserve a punch, you get punched. Why get mad about that?"

Screamer suddenly closed the distance and got in Nade's face.

"Yeah? Then how about we settle this outside? If you're a magician, just use magic. Don't think about throwing punches in front of me."

Nade closed his mouth.

A fight with clear winners and losers didn't excite him. If it were a fight where one had to die, could he provoke so easily then?

"Hmph! Coward!"

As Screamer walked away, Nade turned to his friends with a bright expression as if nothing had happened.

"Alright! We're turning this around! Let's keep it up!"

Shirone asked.

"What happened? What did Screamer say?"

"Huh? I don't know, I forgot. Anyway, Maya! How did I do?"

Maya realized why Nade had punched Screamer. As the one who had dragged her into the fight, he had hit him on her behalf.

"Yeah! It felt great! Thanks, Nade."

She must have felt guilty about keeping her distance recently.

Although it was because of Shirone that she had been cold, she felt sorry and grateful that they had thought that way.

"It's a good thing we have Maya. Even as a guard, she's debuffing the enemies, making them confused."

"Hehe! I'll do my best in the next round too!"

Maya's face blushed, and Nade and Iruki exchanged glances. She was completely different from a few days ago.

'Shirone praised me...'

Maya no longer wanted to hide her feelings.

There had been opportunities to stop, but she willingly jumped into the fray. So, shouldn't she at least enjoy these small moments of happiness?

Meanwhile, Screamer frowned as he looked at Luman, who was sitting like a defeated soldier.

He had used Spirit Hammer on Shirone and ended up like this. No matter how confident he was, it was a ridiculous decision.

"Why did you do that? You know Shirone's endurance."

"Then should I have used it on Hongan? That's like pouring water into a bottomless pit. At least Shirone can be broken. Ugh, but that guy really has a hard head. My head is killing me."

Screamer sighed.

"Anyway, how are you? Can you recover?"

Pony spoke up.

"I've cast Refresh. But I think I need to take it easy until the next round."

Luman looked at Pony and said.

"Don't just stand there, massage my head. It still hurts."

A vein popped on Pony's temple.

How dare he ask a royal to give him a massage?

Especially since Luman was the man she disliked the most in the graduating class, aside from Fermi's group.

'I can't ruin the teamwork. I don't want to hear that we lost because of me.'

With the patience of someone holding back the urge to kill three times, Pony massaged Luman's head from behind.

Every time her slender fingers pressed into his head, a thick groan escaped Luman's mouth.

"Ah, that feels good. By the way, Screamer, you'll introduce me to a pretty girl after this match, right?"

Pony's fingers pressed harder. She couldn't understand Luman's mindset of using a life-changing evaluation for personal gain.

But that was the world of magic.

Luman knew his personality. If you had skills, no matter how eccentric you were, you were recognized as a magician.

"To be precise, if we win. So recover as quickly as possible. It would be embarrassing if we lost."

"Hmph! I'll just recharge this round. Then we'll go straight to 5 points and finish it."

At the moment, Luman's strategy was the most realistic.

Besides, Shirone's team would likely take it easy this round because of Maya.

The guard position had no other tasks besides defense, but Maya had been continuously casting spells for three rounds to hinder Suavi.

'With her basic skills lacking, she must be exhausted.'

Screamer made his decision.

"Alright, let's buy some time. But that doesn't mean we're giving up the round. If an opportunity arises, we'll strike immediately."

Chapter 395: Hill Capture (4)

The fourth round went to Shirone's team. The Scatter Movement was a strategic weapon, and Iruki's Cancellation completely blocked Suavi.

The current score was 3 to 1.

Shirone's team had the upper hand, and unless there were any significant changes, the current momentum seemed likely to continue.

"Huh? The fourth round just ended?"

Students were coming out of the third battlefield. Canis and Arin were among them.

Their opponent was Fermi's team, and the result was a 1 to 5 loss for Canis and Arin's team.

It was a disappointing result for Canis and Arin, but maintaining their extreme dislike for cooperating with others meant they had to accept this kind of evaluation.

Moreover, even with the best team, there was no guarantee of victory against Fermi's team, so neither of them looked particularly disheartened.

Fermi checked the score between Shirone's team and Screamer's team from a spot where he could see the side of the second battlefield.

"Hmm, 3 to 1."

"Shirone's team did better than expected. Initially, it seemed like it would be a close match."

Fermi thought similarly. However, it was just a matter of probability, and there was always the possibility of other variables arising.

"The insight to create variables. That's Shirone. If they get just one more point, this will likely be over."

Saying this, Fermi looked at Screamer's team.

'Of course, it won't end like this.'

Fermi's lips twisted into a wicked smile.

Although the fourth round had ended, Suavi was still staring at Iruki from Shirone's team's camp.

'Merco Dine Iruki...'

If it weren't for the top-tier overpowered magic called Cancellation used by the Servant Syndrome, no one at the student level could have frustrated her this much.

Iruki, with his hands behind his back, calmly accepted Suavi's gaze.

'She must feel very wronged.'

He didn't want to provoke her. After all, in terms of calculation speed, everyone in the graduating class was beneath him.

To beat a Servant, you need intuition, not calculation. The highest level of intuition, on par with a Servant.

"Suavi, let's go."

At Screamer's call, Suavi finally turned around.

A fire burned inside her. She knew there were many strong people in the graduating class and had failed last year's graduation exam. But having her major nullified was a completely different kind of humiliation.

Screamer gathered his team and spoke.

"Let's stick together. We'll break through the central line in the shortest distance. Pony, you go on the offensive now. If we lose this round, a comeback will be nearly impossible."

If the score became 4 to 1, defeat was almost certain.

Shirone's team had Ataraxia, which could guarantee them at least one point.

"No. Pony, keep using Refresh."

Suavi took off her glasses and spoke.

"This time, I'll do it right."

Screamer tilted his head.

They had known each other for over a year, but Suavi had never shown such determination except during the

graduation exam.

'Hmm, she's really pissed off?'

As a martial artist, Screamer had no complaints. He couldn't guess how to counter Cancellation, but since Suavi said she was fine, he decided to trust her.

"Alright, let's consider this the final round. I'll show them what I'm made of."

As soon as the fifth round started, Screamer's team, except for the guard, gathered on the central line.

It was a rush-and-rush tactic with a high comeback rate.

As the combat package hit Screamer, Iruki twitched his eyes and sent out a detached Spirit Zone.

'If it's Cancellation anyway...'

Bang! Bang bang bang bang bang!

At that moment, buff effects exploded in succession. The combat package was hitting all team members except the guard.

Iruki blinked in surprise, but Suavi gritted her teeth and glared at him even more.

'How about this? Can you still do it?'

The number of reserved cores in her mind was a whopping 137. That was the accumulated number in a situation where eight were being consumed per second.

'Tikitikitokitoki tok tok tikitaki tak tak tikitokitokitok!'

Every time the unique rhythm pounded in her brain, the cores in her mind bounced in all directions.

"Hahaha! Yes! This is it!"

Filled with power, Screamer charged into the center of Shirone's team and struck all four members repeatedly.

Then, he took a bold finishing stance like in the first round.

"Kyaaaaaaa!"

Screamer's team's morale soared. Feeling Suavi's determination, the wingers also began to reveal their hidden cards.

'We just need to cut Shirone.'

Luman slowly raised his hands as if drawing energy from his soles.

'Everyone hates me.'

But he didn't care.

For humans, harmony is just a second-best option born from the fear of distrust. If he could control it, others' feelings didn't matter.

'Yes, I am the king of crowd control (self-proclaimed).'

Luman's cheeks quivered, his whites showed, and his mouth stretched to his ears.

"I am the king of the battlefield!"

His secret weapon, the Spiral Hunter, revealed itself.

Rumble!

The ground, swirling in a spiral, turned mushy like mud and pulled Shirone down. Then it solidified into rock, gripping his waist tightly and not letting go.

"Now!"

As Screamer charged, Suavi's concentration soared to its highest level.

Countless cores stormed through her mind like a hurricane.

It was the realm of intuition beyond calculation, and every time a core hit another, her tongue flicked rapidly.

'Tikitakitokitakitokitakitokitakitikitiki!'

Reserved cores: 372.

Iruki's lips curled slightly.

'I'm glad I joined the graduating class.'

He had never wanted to beat someone before. But now he vaguely understood.

He hated losing even more.

'You're amazing, Suavi.'

Countless talents claimed their specialties like stars.

'You must have practiced every day. To hold onto your drifting mind, biting your hand every night, you must have trained hard.'

Iruki lowered his stance and clenched his fists. It was his way of responding to Suavi's sincerity.

'This will shorten my lifespan, but...'

Since entering the magic school, this was the third time, after the bloody battle with Nade in the rain six years ago and getting excited by Canis's provocation in the infirmary hallway a year ago.

His brain cells would be destroyed, but did it matter? It was a matter of pride for Shirone's faction, beyond the battle.

'You will be a great magician. But not now. Only two people in the world can stop me. One is Shirone, and the other is...'

Sparks flew in Iruki's pupils. It was a phenomenon where electricity generated in the cerebral cortex was projected onto the retina.

'It's me, Merco Dine Iruki!'

In the virtual image in Iruki's mind, data amounting to 100 million joules per second surged like a tornado.

As the information processing capacity to handle all events in a city at once was reached, the double Spirit Zone flew through Screamer's team at an astonishing speed, canceling all buffs.

"Unbelievable..."

Suavi was stunned. The overwhelming calculation speed drained her will to fight.

Boom boom boom boom boom!

Shirone, who destroyed the Spiral Hunter with Radiance, led his team in a counterattack.

With the buffs gone, Screamer's team weakened rapidly and was soon on the defensive.

"Hah, we're losing after all."

Aider sighed.

The downside of the martial artist killer strategy was that there was no Plan B. If they lost this round, there would be no chance for a comeback.

The youthful look disappeared from Aider's face. He took out a black-and-white patterned chip and swallowed it.

'It feels wrong, but does it matter?'

He could give up graduation if he could enjoy it. No, he couldn't give up graduation. He had to become a magician to enjoy it even more.

A core was installed in his mind. According to the dealer, it was a high-level air-type technique called 'Ghost Movement.'

Even without understanding the internal principles, he could cast the spell because it was similar to Shirone's Ataraxia.

"Ah, ah..."

Aider's eyelids trembled.

The days he had restrained himself from tasting humans. But now, there was no need for that. With the deal made, his graduation was practically guaranteed.

"Hahahahaha!"

Aider threw off his mask and flew straight into Shirone's camp. It was classified as a reverse position tactic, but it wasn't agreed upon with Screamer's team.

While his allies looked on in astonishment, Shirone's team intercepted with their respective spells.

The first to reach him was the Photon Cannon. But just before being shot down, Aider's movements twisted bizarrely. Like a willow branch, his trajectory wavered, dodging all the Photon Cannons.

"Huh? Ghost Movement?"

Dorothy, watching from outside the battlefield, noticed.

It wasn't a spell a student could use. But Aider's movements couldn't be explained without the AT algorithm.

'Did he join Fermi?'

It was hard to believe he had mastered it in just a few months. The AT algorithm, which controlled turbulence to automatically evade approaching objects, was a core even professionals struggled with.

Nothing could stop Aider. Reaching the hill, he ran towards the flag.

But contrary to everyone's expectations, Aider targeted Maya instead of the flag. Wham! A powerful kick twisted

Maya's jaw, sending her rolling down the hill.

"What...!"

Aider sat on Maya's stomach. His facial muscles twitched with the thought of releasing a year's worth of pent-up desire.

"Sis, this might hurt a bit. But bear with it, okay?"

Aider's fists pounded on Maya. A senseless laugh escaped his lips.

Seeing her terrified expression, a rush of pleasure overwhelmed his reason.

"Ahaha! This is so fun, I'm going crazy!"

Aider's pounding fists, raised like a gorilla's, made him look inhuman. His eyes showed the whites, and drool dripped from his gaping mouth.

His teammates, as well as the students watching from outside, were speechless at his brutality.

"Remember the Truth or Dare game when you asked me a question?"

Arin spoke.

"The ugliest person? At first, I was puzzled. I can't distinguish the shapes of objects. I chose Luman at the time, but the most intense first impression was Aider. According to the mental classification, he's 'evil.'"

Canis listened silently.

"Only those who understand evil can act good. That's the law of good and evil. From beginning to end, all that kid wants is to torment others."

Canis didn't think much of it. Every human in Radum was like Aider.

"I asked the question to test you. When you denied the truth, I acted a bit more."

"Yes. I thought I could use it as a bargaining chip. But today's first impression was more blatant. Probably because he joined Fermi's organization."

"Your presence must have influenced him. With a first impression ability user around, he couldn't act for a year."

Anyway, we've lost one of our cards."

Canis let go of his regrets lightly.

There were still dozens of cards left. It was good to know how much Arin's first impression could pressure the graduating class.

"Maya!"

Shirone's eyes lit up. Seeing Maya curled up and being beaten, his mind went blank.

"Hehehe! Does it hurt? How much does it hurt? Aren't you mad? You must hate me to death, right?"

Aider swung his fists with unfocused eyes.

He didn't care about Shirone's team rushing in from all directions. With Ghost Movement, nothing could hit him.

Zap!

Blue electricity flashed before Aider's eyes.

The AT algorithm activated late, pushing his body over 10 meters away. Nade's face, scratching with his nails, remained on his retina. When he came to his senses, he was already at the bottom of the hill.

Fear mixed with the ecstasy on Aider's face.

'What was that? What did I just see?'

He thought he saw Nade's face, but he couldn't understand what it was. He realized one of his legs was trembling like a dog's.

'Am I scared? Me?'

Nade, the first to arrive, blocked Maya. The face he had when he swung his hand to kill was fragmented and only partially remained.

"Screamer, the flag."

"Ah..."

At Pony's words, Screamer snapped out of it and hurriedly ran to pull out the flag. No one cared.

Shirone approached Maya. Seeing her still trembling and curled up, his heart broke.

"Maya..."

Maya was never suited to be a magician. Her talent for entering the Spirit Zone should be used elsewhere. She was an artist who moved people's hearts and a genius singer.

"Maya, get up."

Shirone spoke in a cold voice.

Maya had a family to support and the honor of her tribe to uphold. If she broke down here, she would never cross the threshold of becoming a magician.

"Get up. We're still in the evaluation. If you get disqualified here, we'll all lose 20 points."

Maya's shoulders twitched.

That cursed 20 points. But everyone in the graduating class was risking their lives for those 20 points.

'I'm... so scared, Shirone. Everyone here, their coldness is terrifying.'

She wanted to give up. She had endured for her tribe and fought for her family, but seeing Aider's eyes, she realized.

This was not where she belonged.

'Shirone...'

Maya slowly stood up.

She had fallen in love with Shirone. It was more desperate than the magician's certification. Everyone in the graduating class would laugh, but Maya was that kind of girl.

"I'm fine... I can still fight."

Seeing Maya trying to hold back her tears, Shirone felt tears welling up instead.

He looked at Aider, who was laughing in the enemy camp. A terrifying rage filled his eyes.

Chapter 396: Hill Capture (5)

"How about my strategy? It worked perfectly, didn't it?"

Screamer licked his lips.

He never thought Aider was a good guy. Even if he was, would there be anyone in the graduating class who trusted others more than themselves?

However, strong self-assertion is often difficult for others to digest.

"Anyway, enough. Reverse position? Were you trying to ruin the game? You should have at least told us in advance."

"Hehe, sorry. It was my trump card, so I kept it hidden. Anyway, now that Maya is down, we have the advantage. I was actually planning to make them lose by disqualification."

Nade's interference had thwarted his plan.

Aider prided himself on being crazy, but Nade's face at that moment was something far beyond normal.

"Aider."

At Shirone's voice, Aider turned around.

"Huh? Shirone, this is our camp. Oh, does it not matter by the rules? Still, eavesdropping on our strategy is cowardly."

"...Why did you do it?"

Aider tilted his head. Then, as if realizing something, he snapped his fingers.

"Oh, you mean Maya? Why? You didn't come all the way here to say something boring, did you?"

"I'll ask again. Why did you do it?"

Aider's expression twisted.

Now that his true nature was revealed, he no longer pretended to be intimidated by his seniors.

"What's the problem? I was just trying to put the guard in a groggy state. Screamer hit, Nade hit. Maya is just too weak. If it were Amy..."

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not here to get angry. That's not what I want to ask."

"Really?"

Aider clasped his hands behind his head.

"I told you clearly after the survival test."

Shirone's eyes turned cold.

"Don't mess with me."

"..."

He had said he would crush anyone who tried to mess with him. In other words, Aider was now on Shirone's hit list.

"Hahaha! So, should I say, 'Oh, I understand. I won't mess with you again'?"

In the past, he might have pretended to be scared, but now, with the power of Fermi's organization behind him, he had nothing to fear.

"As long as you understand. I just wanted to confirm that."

Shirone turned and walked back to his camp.

His friends approached. With only a minute left until the start of the sixth round, they needed to quickly strategize.

"Shirone, let's defend this round. Maya needs time to recover her mental strength."

"No, we'll end it here. I'll handle it, just block Screamer's team. If I'm alone as the forward, they won't come to back him up."

Maya wouldn't be able to recover during the match. Aider's violence had inflicted too deep a wound on her, who had strengthened her omnipotence by excluding her core.

Iruki spoke.

"Shirone, don't get excited. I'm annoyed too, but winning is important. Losing will make you even angrier. You know that, right?"

"It's fine. Really, I'm okay."

Shirone smiled with his eyes, then suddenly turned with a cold expression. The terrifying chill made his friends step aside.

"This is bad. He's really angry."

At this point, no one could stop Shirone.

As expected, as soon as the sixth round started, Shirone flew straight at Aider without looking at anything else.

"Whew, this is chilling."

Aider's smiling lips trembled. It was a strange expression, a mix of fear and excitement.

The one with the strongest mental strength in the graduating class was flying at him to crush him.

"The more, the merrier."

The thought of not being able to touch the enemy he wanted to kill made his body tingle.

Aider dodged through the barrage of Photon Cannons, increasing Shirone's frustration.

"Hahaha! What now? I haven't been hit once. It'll take a lifetime to pay back for hitting Maya."

Shirone didn't respond and landed in front of the flag.

Wind Cutters formed in Aider's hands. He planned to counterattack the moment Shirone grabbed the flag.

"Ataraxia."

As a pale light formed 10 meters above the peak, drawing a huge circle, exclamations erupted from outside the battlefield. It was twice the size of the halo he had used against Dante.

Aider stared blankly at the halo. Then, realizing something, he hurriedly retreated outside its range.

'Damn. This guy is really annoying.'

There was indeed such a method. By deploying Ataraxia above the peak, even if someone grabbed the flag, they couldn't easily approach.

'In that case...'

Aider crouched low, calculating the timing to jump out. Once the magic circle was complete, there would be no

opportunity.

"30 seconds."

Shirone spoke.

"30 seconds left. If you can't stop me within that time, you'll never be able to beat me."

'I know that, damn it.'

Knowing it but being unable to do anything was because he had seen the power of Shirone's magic circle with his own eyes.

If he got caught up in it, he might end up in the infirmary for the next round, regardless of winning or losing.

'He wouldn't kill me, right?'

After all, this was the 2000 system.

In a real battle, he would never make such a choice, but with the filter of simulation, it seemed like a winnable gamble.

'I'm going in!'

The fact that a magician's power drops to less than half in a time-split state also contributed to Aider's decision.

It should have been that way.

But as the Photon Cannon brushed past, his hair stood on end.

'Damn! Is it still impossible?'

In terms of single combat power, Shirone was expected to be among the top in the graduating class.

Even in a time-split state, the power of one shot was beyond Aider's capacity.

'No, it won't hit me. It can't hit me.'

The deal with Fermi had certainly paid off.

With Ghost Movement, he could graduate even without Fermi's gang's help.

"What? Even Shirone is nothing special? That's why you were just sucking your thumb while Maya got hit."

Shirone fired the Photon Cannon at maximum speed.

But Ghost Movement effortlessly pushed Aider's body aside, dodging the flash.

"Hahaha! I told you, it won't work! So from the beginning..."
At that moment, a powerful impact hit the back of his head.
'Huh...?'

Aider's leg wobbled.

The AT algorithm was broken. The fear of that fact was greater than the pain of the anti-magic.

Looking up in disbelief, Shirone's face blurred. The impact was much stronger than expected.

'It was a direct hit.'

But how?

The AT algorithm responds to all objects causing air resistance. Whether it came from behind or rose from the ground, it should have reacted.

"What... is that?"

As his focus returned, he saw the Photon Cannons floating around Shirone.

They weren't particularly large or clear. Just a sinister red dot in the center of the light.

"Laser-guided algorithm."

Dorothy muttered.

It was a high-level core comparable to the AT algorithm. The omnipotence of lasers itself was top-tier.

'That's why I...'

Dorothy's constructs also had functions similar to the AT algorithm. But the laser-guided algorithm was practically a nemesis to the automatic reflection function.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!"

Aider flew around the peak, dodging the homing Photon Cannons. But no matter where he fled, he couldn't shake them off.

He wanted to peel off the skin marked by the red dot.

It was a spell with a power approaching 8,000 press per shot.

'Damn it! What kind of spell is this!'

The flight trajectory of the homing Photon Cannon, which intercepted a level 7 drone, was enough to catch up with

the movements of a frontline professional magician.
Aider couldn't escape the clutches of the laser-guided algorithm and was eventually caught.

"Ugh!"

Just before colliding with the homing Photon Cannon, Aider's body wobbled, and the flash grazed past.

The relief was short-lived; true fear set in.

Eight beams of light slid endlessly over the AT algorithm like hyenas circling their prey.

"Huh? Huh?"

As his body shook involuntarily, nausea surged. But the fear of the impending impact was even greater.

"Aaaah!"

The homing Photon Cannon, coiling around his waist like a snake, exploded on the back of his head.

"Ugh!"

If not for his endurance from passing survival level 4, he would have lost consciousness.

Aider, who had crashed to the ground, lifted his head. His emotions were laid bare, showing a demonic expression.

"This damn...!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang!

The successive impacts from the air drowned out Aider's voice.

The homing Photon Cannon showed no mercy. The unfeeling light bombarded wherever the laser guided.

"Aaaah!"

Aider clutched his head in agony. It felt like hundreds of spikes were drilling into his brain.

Realizing he couldn't win like this, he saw Shirone approaching and hurriedly knelt.

"I-I'm sorry! Brother!"

Shirone's steps halted.

"I was wrong! I won't do it again. Take the flag and end it. Please!"

"What did you do wrong?"

"Hitting Maya. Hiding my true nature and pretending otherwise. I'm originally like this. I can't help it. But I won't do it again. I'll apologize to her."

Magicians know exactly how their actions affect the outside world. Therefore, they do not show anger unless it leads to the best outcome.

"...Make sure to apologize to Maya."

Shirone walked past Aider.

'Ah, Shirone... you really are...'

Aider's eyes flickered as he watched Shirone.

If he could land a proper blow on the back of Shirone's head, if he could see Shirone's eyes filled with blood and beat him...

How thrilling would that be?

The mere thought sent shivers down his spine, almost making him lose consciousness.

The anticipated pleasure led him into the Spirit Zone. With the AT algorithm activated, the Ghost Movement spell began to envelop him.

'I can do it. At this distance, he can't counterattack!'

Shirone looked up at the sky. His burning anger quickly froze over.

The sky was cold.

With 100% concentration, he sharpened his Spirit Zone, and the core and omnipotence created a powerful synergy.

Suppressing even the slightest anger, he added it to his magical power.

That was the anger of a magician.

'Now!'

Just as Aider, eyes wide open, was about to lunge at Shirone, Screamer shouted.

"Idiot! Above! Above!"

Aider's face went blank as he looked up.

Ataraxia was complete. And above it, the laser of the Homing Photon Cannon was aimed at his forehead.

It was different in power and scale from what he had used on Dante. The synchronization rate was 50% back then, but now it was 80%.

"Damn it!"

Aider clutched his head and crouched.

The Homing Photon Cannon pierced through Ataraxia, and a massive flash shot straight down from 10 meters above.

"Aaaah!"

The massive waterfall of energy turned into anti-magic, destroying Aider's mind. His nose bled like a cannon, and tears of blood flowed.

Rumble!

Aider's body began to vibrate at a terrifying speed.

While humans are not subject to the jungle rule, the interaction between spells was clearly implemented.

The AT algorithm, caught in the shockwave, began to function, moving Aider.

The problem was... there was nowhere to escape.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Trapped in the massive flash, Aider bounced at an incredible speed. It was as if someone was shaking his spine at will.

Crack! Crack! The sound of bones breaking echoed, shocking everyone.

The flash lasted only 1.6 seconds, but it was enough time to break every bone.

Aider, flung out of the flash, rolled down the hill. His eyes, staring at the sky, were devoid of pupils.

Shirone walked back to Aider after Ataraxia disappeared.

Even seeing Aider's limbs twisted in impossible directions, his eyes remained calm.

"Keep your promise to apologize to Maya."

If it had been Shirone who was broken, would Aider's actions have been justified?

Was it Maya's weakness, unfit for a magician? Or Aider's extreme cruelty, fitting for a magician?

Was this just part of the harsh competitive system of the graduating class?

There was no need to judge. Shirone would continue forward, and Aider's journey in the graduating class ended here.

For a magician, that was all that mattered.

The doors to the battlefield opened, and medics rushed in.

Chapter 397: Rapidly Changing Political Situation (1)

The shouts of the medics were drowned out by the students' silence. The sight of Aider's battered body on the stretcher spoke louder than any words.

The fate of the first person to challenge Shirone was the epitome of misery. Fear was already taking root in the hearts of some students who had been weighing Shirone against Fermi.

With Aider out of the fight, Screamer's team was disqualified from the hill capture, but Shirone's expression was grim.

No matter how sweet the efficiency of evil, humans have a desire to like and do good.

At least, that's what we want to believe.

But Aider activated the AT algorithm at the last moment.

It wasn't as if a lightning bolt struck from the sky or a giant hand came down to snatch him away.

Are humans truly infinitely free beings? Or are they just part of a vast system beyond their perception?

"Shirone's team wins. 20 points awarded. This concludes the hill capture evaluation."

Walking over to his friends, Shirone placed a hand on Maya's trembling shoulder and apologized.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry we dragged you into such a tough fight."

"I'm fine. I'm more worried about you."

Shirone was a decisive and cold person, enough to completely remove Aider from the graduating class.

But that was just the manifestation of his insight, taking the shortest path to his goal, not strength born from emotion.

'It must be hard for you, Shirone...'

In truth, he didn't want to fight anyone. All his troubles began from there.

What might be an easy choice for someone else was the most complex problem in the world for Shirone.

Aider received emergency treatment outside the battlefield.

When a medic confirmed his heartbeat and shouted, someone nearby ran off urgently.

Electric Monster Lycan, having seen enough, turned to Fermi.

"Aider succeeded. He really got under Shirone's skin."

Fermi shook his head.

If he were someone who acted purely on emotion, he would be easy to manipulate. Though their natures were extremely different, Shirone was similar to him.

"Actually, his emotions have only made him more composed. If he didn't crush Aider, a second or third Aider would appear. He calculated that it was best to nip it in the bud."

"Anyway, the strategy worked. We saw all of Shirone's techniques. Now we can gather spells that can counter him and strike back. Wasn't that the plan from the start?"

"Of course, but..."

Fermi rested his chin in thought.

In an evaluation worth 20 points, anyone would give their best. But it's natural to want to save something like the laser-guided algorithm.

In that sense, Aider met the terms of the deal precisely. Yet, what was this nagging feeling in his mind?

"I understand."

Lycan turned back to Fermi.

"He was hiding it? No, he never hid anything. Light Wings, Scatter Movement, Laser-Guided Algorithm. Even if it wasn't Aider, he would have used those cards if necessary. So why

was I mistaken? Because Shirone's growth rate is far faster than anyone else's."

Before joining the graduating class, he couldn't use any of these techniques. Now he had three new ones.

Even if we knew everything about Shirone now, predicting how much he would evolve by the graduation exam was impossible.

"In just three months, he mastered two intermediate and one advanced spell. In terms of speed, it's almost like the power enhancement I achieve through my financial management."

Without looking back, Fermi spoke to his companions.

"Special bargain sale."

"Huh?"

"Tell all customers there's a 20% discount. And from now on, we only buy advanced spells. Buy as many as possible before the graduation exam."

Sona's Hersy approached with a worried expression.

"But Fermi, that will affect our profits this year..."

"What did I say?"

Hersy's face turned pale under Fermi's gaze. As perfect a manager as he was a deviant, Fermi was terrifying.

"If you don't eliminate minor variables, they become unmanageable when they hit."

As Hersy repeated the words, Fermi turned coldly.

"Do it."

"Got it."

As Fermi left, the remaining four followed, glancing at each other.

The area around the battlefield was still chaotic. Some students were desperately trying to calm Screamer.

They hated meddling in others' affairs, but leaving things as they were might result in Aider's death.

"Let go! I'll kill that bastard! Let go of me!"

"Screamer! Calm down! Aider is seriously injured! If you hit him, he'll die for real!"

There might not be any place left to hit on someone with multiple fractures, but with Screamer's temper, nothing was certain.

"I'm hitting him to kill him! That arrogant bastard dared to ruin my plan?"

Using an unagreed strategy had disqualified the team. Plus, Aider's collusion with Fermi had driven Screamer, sensitive to back-alley loyalty, over the edge.

"Ugh! This is so frustrating!"

Screamer kicked the ground, throwing dirt at Aider. A medic, unable to bear it, glared and pointed a finger at him.

"You! Stay at least 10 meters away from the patient! Or I'll report you to the teacher!"

"Damn it!"

Regaining his senses, Screamer shook off the students' hands and turned away. For now, there was nothing he could do, but once Aider recovered, he would have to be prepared to be half-dead.

Screamer walked to the water fountain, opened a bottle, and drank it all in one go. When Shirone's group approached, he pointed at them with the bottle.

"Don't get cocky just because you won. If it weren't for Aider, the outcome would have been different."

Nade scoffed.

"That's funny! We had the game in the bag anyway. And you promised, didn't you? You said you'd apologize to Maya."

Screamer ground his teeth. He had to apologize because he had said he would, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

There was some injustice. How could they win with a notorious troublemaker like Aider?

"Tch! Apologize, my foot. Here, have some water."

Screamer handed over the bottle as if to end the matter. But the reaction was unexpected.

Maya, still traumatized, flinched and trembled, making Screamer sigh.

'Ugh, scared after a few hits. How can someone like that become a magician...'

Maya had no talent for magic. No, beyond talent, her mindset wasn't that of a magician.

People's personalities vary, and in reality, what matters is who gets their way.

Her swollen face, rabbit-like frightened eyes, and the way she held her hands like someone being punished were all irritating.

"Maya, you..."

Just don't become a magician.

Screamer swallowed the words. It was her life and her choice.

Seeing her as a person rather than a magician, he felt a bit of sympathy for her, looking dazed after being bitten by a mad dog.

"Alright, I'm sorry."

Screamer frowned and handed Maya the bottle.

"I'm sorry for calling it the sound of a pig being slaughtered. You sing well, so keep it up. Don't worry about Aider. I'll send him back to the hospital as soon as he returns."

"Screamer..."

To Maya, Screamer was a difficult person. Always angry, often in the same group, making her heart race just by meeting his eyes. Hearing his apology, all her pent-up sorrow burst out in tears.

"Ugh, I can't stand this. I apologized, okay? I'm leaving."

Screamer shook his head and left the training ground with another bottle.

Two weeks after the hill capture evaluation, on a holiday. Shirone, Nade, and Iruki headed to the advanced class with flowers. They had heard that Shiina had been promoted to a certified level 5 magician after receiving an award for her thesis from the royal city.

Having a certified level 5 magician as a regular teacher at a magic school under the Kingdom of Tormia, except for the

Royal Magic School, was a great honor for Alpheas Magic School.

"But is it okay for us to go? Graduating students rarely leave the Iron Gate. They say it creates a sense of disparity for the juniors."

"We should congratulate her. She took care of us a lot during the presentation."

As they entered the advanced class building, the eyes of the students in the hallway widened.

It was rare to see graduating seniors, let alone three at once.

"Wow! It's Senior Shirone!"

"Senior Iruki and Senior Nade are here too!"

Students poured out of the classrooms, quickly filling the hallway.

Seeing the bright-eyed juniors, Shirone recalled his astonishment at Samuel's ultrasound demonstration.

'Well, I was like that too.'

Now, competing daily with people of Samuel's caliber, it was unimaginable.

So, the juniors he had taken classes with just a few months ago looked much younger.

"Hello, seniors! I'm Oern, the top prospect of Class Four!"

A young boy stepped out of the crowd and bowed deeply. Shirone tilted his head, not recognizing the face from last year's integrated classes.

"Oern?"

"Yes. I enrolled this semester. You wouldn't know me, senior."

"Oh, a transfer student."

Oern shook his head with a smirk.

"No. I started magic late too. Similar to you, Senior Shirone."

Shirone then took a closer look at Oern. Being in Class Four right after entering the magic school meant he had made a significant impression in the entrance test.

'Hmm?'

Sensing a sudden dangerous aura, Shirone instinctively entered the Spirit Zone. Oern's Spirit Zone pierced his chest like a sharp spear.

'Hmm, I see.'

A promising student in the advanced class would surely have heard stories about Shirone.

Moreover, his followers, Mark and Maria, were well-established here.

Aider's departure from the graduating class must have also influenced this. Depending on the graduation schedule, there was a possibility that one student from Class Four could move up, so it was natural for Oern to be highly motivated.

'How about this? You have to acknowledge me now, right?' Oern knew how impressive the skills of the graduating class were. However, he didn't think his talent was inferior to Shirone's, who was currently the most famous at the magic school.

Shirone had started in Class Seven despite entering at eighteen. In contrast, Oern, two years younger, had entered directly into Class Four.

Shirone could only smile.

This was why graduating students rarely left the Iron Gate. If they had to deal with juniors who didn't understand the world, they wouldn't be able to get anything done.

'He certainly has talent. But...'

Suddenly, Shirone widened his eyes and glared at Oern. His Spirit Zone transformed into an offensive mode, with about 200 spikes extending towards Oern.

"Ah!"

Startled, Oern fell to the ground. He looked up at Shirone with a frightened expression.

He had thought he wouldn't be outmatched in the Spirit Zone, but the offensive mode just now was on a different level.

'This can't be. Mark definitely said he was defensive...'

Shirone crouched down to meet his eyes.

"You. You're specialized in offense, aren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

He had thought so. Even from their brief encounter, Oern's energetic personality was evident, similar to Amy's.

"Sharpening your mind isn't everything. In offense, speed and agility are crucial. If you maintain the same mental state like you do, you'll quickly become predictable."

"I-I see."

Oern looked up at Shirone in a daze. The gap was much wider than he had vaguely imagined.

'So this is the graduating class?'

As Shirone took a step forward, the students blocking the hallway parted to the sides like a river.

"He's really bold. Reminds me of when I first met Iruki."

At Nade's words, Shirone grimaced, recalling his first encounter with Iruki.

"No, compared to Iruki, he's really humble."

"Confidence is proportional to skill. In that sense, it's natural for that kid to be more humble than me."

"That endless confidence of yours..."

As they continued their conversation, dozens of juniors watched the three of them walk away down the hallway.

Chapter 398: Rapidly Changing Political Situation (2)

After the celebration for her promotion to a certified level 5 magician, Shiina arrived at her dorm, pleasantly tipsy. Among the many bouquets she received, she brought in the flowers Shirone had given her.

As she took off her shoes, she noticed dozens of congratulatory letters from various institutions.

Gathering the pile of letters, Shiina sat at her desk, pushing her hair back as she looked through them one by one.

There were letters from the Tormia National Defense Magic Research Institute, the Royal Magic Museum, the Climate Association, the Magician's Pension Fund, and many more.

"Whew, I guess I've really made it."

Shiina stood up, taking off her coat. The hangover wasn't a problem, but she had sweated a lot and wanted to wash up. As she threw her top onto the desk, she noticed a unique seal among the letters.

"Kaizen Swordsmanship School?"

Born into the Olifer family and having lived as a magician, she had no particular connection to swordsmanship.

"Did I meet someone at the teachers' association?"

Shiina opened the letter and checked the name.

Parkar Kuan.

"Oh... Mr. Kuan."

Last year, under pressure from the Olifer family, she had gone to meet a potential suitor and met Kuan.

She remembered it as a decent meeting. His tone was cold and his demeanor frosty, but he hadn't crossed the line into

rudeness.

"How did he know to send a letter?"

He might have heard through the teachers' association. But since swordsmanship and magic are entirely different fields, he wouldn't have known unless he had been paying attention.

"I should send a reply."

Still in her underwear, Shiina sat back down. She opened a drawer, took out some stationery, dipped her fountain pen in ink, and brought it to the paper.

Tap.

The dot on the blank page didn't move for a long time.

'Armin...'

The only person she wanted to receive congratulations from was Armin.

The person who had given up his eyes for her when they were children. Without him, she wouldn't have dreamed of reaching this position.

Shiina put the dotted paper back in the drawer. She felt sorry for Kuan, but there was no room in her heart, filled with the lingering image of Armin, who had already left.

'Is he doing well? He doesn't seem to be releasing any new works.'

Since leaving Creas, where he had been working, she hadn't received a single letter from him.

He used to send letters at least once every three months, so she was worried that something might have happened.

'Well, he's much smarter than me.'

Who could worry about whom?

Even as a certified level 5 magician, in front of Armin, Shiina was still the crybaby little sister from her childhood.

Shiina looked up at the ceiling with a sad smile.

"Hehe. Brother, I did well, didn't I?"

It was the most terrifying dream of his life.

From a city-sized hole in the sky, countless Maras invaded.

Beings called demons, evil gods, and gods by humans were devastating the creatures of the earth.

He lost everyone.

Among the corpses strewn like a field, all the people Shirone loved were dead.

'No! No!'

Shirone wept in front of Amy's corpse.

Her unclosed eyes stared resentfully at the dozens of Maras floating in the sky.

'Ahhhh!'

Ataraxia accumulated at a terrifying speed. When all the hair on Shirone's head stood on end, a massive flash tore through the sky.

The Maras were engulfed in light and disappeared.

As the entire world filled with light, darkness quickly surged in from the edges, covering the light.

Shirone was left alone in the darkness. For the last human left in the world, even the name "loneliness" didn't fit.

Shirone knelt and wept, shouting into the darkness to return the lost ones.

"Shi-ro-ne."

A murky voice pierced his eardrums.

A small, thin flash passed by, and the darkness split open, revealing a giant eyeball.

Shirone's eyes widened. In the center of the giant eyeball, his own face, twisted like a demon, was reflected.

"...! ...!"

Shirone screamed, coughing up blood. He had never felt such hatred in his life.

But his voice sounded muffled, as if submerged in water.

The giant eyeball, embedded in the darkness, spoke in a murky voice.

"You have the right and duty to answer the remaining questions."

"...! ...!"

Blood tears flowed from his eyes. He hurled all sorts of curses and insults at the eyeball.

Losing control even in his dream, he pounded the darkness with his fists. Resentment, rage, and longing filled his trembling shoulders.

For the first time, the giant eyeball looked at Shirone. There was no movement in the pupil, but it certainly did.

Suddenly, as if he had gained ears, Shirone finally heard his own voice in the dream.

"What do you mean? What questions do I have to answer?"

"..."

The eyeball asked.

"Gasp!"

Shirone woke with a start, his upper body shooting up. He saw the memo-covered desk divider.

'My room. I'm in my room...'

Shirone collapsed back onto the desk. His forehead was drenched in cold sweat, and he felt exhausted, as if all his strength had left him.

"Whew, what was that? Why such a strange dream..."

Feeling the texture of the paper stuck to his cheek, he sat up. Among the densely written notes, one word caught his eye.

Heaven's Destruction.

He had fallen asleep while researching magic all night. It was literally about developing a mass destruction spell. The stress of having no solution might have contributed to the nightmare.

It was already 5 a.m.

Shirone neatly organized his notes. He already had over ten notebooks filled with ideas related to the Heaven's Destruction spell. His understanding of the Divine Particle had deepened, but the possibility of meeting Gaold's proposed standards was still 0%.

'No, there must be a way. Maybe...'

If completed, it would be the most destructive spell in the world. He couldn't give up because a faint resonance, like an answer, still echoed in his mind.

After washing up with warm water, Shirone packed his notes and pen in a crossbody bag and left his dorm.

The graduating class that had started in winter was now heading towards summer. The nights were shorter, and the air was refreshing, like sparkling water. The forest was filled with the cheerful sounds of birds.

'Can I really reach heaven?'

When he met Gaold, a year had seemed like a short time. But living through the busy schedule of the graduating class, all the promises related to him felt like a distant dream.

"Oh? Shirone?"

Turning his head, Shirone saw Maya sitting on a garden bench, blinking. She held a steaming mug of coffee in both hands.

"Maya, what are you doing up at this hour?"

"Huh? I always get up now. I have to play the morning music. What about you?"

Shirone, who woke up to the sound of music every morning, hadn't considered the small inconvenience it might cause.

"Oh, I see. I woke up early. I had some time, so I decided to take a walk."

"I see."

Although they had grown closer since the hill capture, meeting alone wasn't something that happened often, so an awkward atmosphere lingered.

Maya, looking down and pushing the mug with her thumb, gathered her courage and pointed to the seat next to her on the bench.

"Want to sit?"

Shirone didn't refuse. He had come out to clear his head, but being with Maya wasn't a bad choice.

While magicians drew sharp lines around their domains, Maya stepped beyond those lines to soothe others' pain. As a magician who disliked burdening others with his problems, Shirone had initially found it perplexing.

But now, he had to admit it honestly.

Her kindness was an oasis that gradually softened Shirone's heart, hardened by the intense schedule of the graduating class.

"Want some? It's still warm."

Maya offered him coffee mixed with sugar and milk.

Stressed as he was, Shirone had no reason to refuse something sweet. Of course, it was also because it was Maya offering it that he could accept it without hesitation.

"Thanks."

As Shirone took a sip of the coffee, Maya's face blushed, and she smiled shyly.

"Is something bothering you? You look troubled."

Shirone sighed and leaned back on the bench.

"I've been working on an idea, but I can't find a breakthrough. I haven't slept for days, and today I had a terrible nightmare. So I'm not feeling great."

Maya could see that Shirone had lost a lot of weight. She had thought he had no worries, given his success in the graduating class, but it seemed that even someone at his level had struggles.

"Don't think too hard. Sometimes, when I try too hard to sing well, it doesn't go right because I get too tense."

Shirone had also experienced that insight, where the mind doesn't flow unless it's relaxed.

But that alone couldn't create a great river.

Only when the dam is broken after being squeezed to the limit does the mind become a great torrent, reaching a genius idea.

"Hmm, I don't know. Whether it's easy or hard, it has to make sense. I might go crazy at this rate."

Shirone tilted his head back. Busy birds were flying through the sky, looking for breakfast.

Maya's expression turned sympathetic. How deep must his worries be for such dark circles to form under his eyes?

"Shirone..."

Maya's hand covered Shirone's. Even then, Shirone's gaze remained fixed on the sky.

She couldn't tell if he was unaware or simply allowing it, but just holding his hand made her heart feel like it would burst.

"Shirone, can you tell me what's wrong? Even the most talented people can miss small details. Maybe asking for help from someone else could lead to a solution."

Shirone slowly blinked.

'Hmm, asking for help? That might be a good idea. But this is a state secret, who could I possibly... huh?'

Shirone's eyes remained open and still. From a distance, one might think he was dead, so static was his demeanor.

Maya didn't notice Shirone's change.

She wanted to comfort him. Not just anyone, but herself. To be his woman.

She felt herself leaning towards Shirone. The thought crossed her mind if this was really okay, but if he didn't want it, he would have rejected her when she held his hand.

Maybe Shirone was waiting for what would come next?

Gaining objective courage from her subjective thoughts, Maya slightly parted her plump lips and moved towards Shirone's.

"Shirone, maybe I..."

"Divine Particle."

"Huh?"

Incomprehensible words spilled from Shirone's mouth.

Receiving help. There are limits to what one can do alone.

The faint light in his mind amplified at an incredible speed, sending chills down his spine. Finally, a refreshing clarity filled his mind as if a blockage had been cleared.

"Maya!"

"S-Sorry! I just..."

Maya hastily curled up. Only after regaining her senses did she realize what she had been about to do. It was a situation ripe for misunderstanding, or maybe she really was a pervert?

Shirone set the mug down with a loud clink and stared intently at Maya.

"Um, Shirone, you see, the reason I..."

Without giving her a chance to explain, Shirone hugged her. Maya's eyes widened. Her head felt light, and a sense of euphoria washed over her, as if she had the whole world.

"Thank you, thank you so much! I finally figured it out!"

Shirone, shaking Maya's shoulders vigorously, grabbed his crossbody bag and dashed off like a man possessed.

"Sorry! I have something to do! See you later!"

As Shirone stumbled and nearly fell while running at full speed, Maya stood up abruptly. But before she could call out, he regained his balance and disappeared to the other side of the park.

Maya heard the sound of her own heartbeat. Today wasn't just a lucky day; it was a jackpot.

With a happy smile, Maya shouted.

"Shirone! Do your best! Fighting!"

Shirone responded by raising his fist in the air.

Chapter 399: Rapidly Changing Political Situation (3)

Bang!

Shirone burst into his dorm room, slamming the door shut with the same force, and rushed to his desk.

The neatly arranged notebooks scattered once again.

Shirone grabbed one and flipped through it rapidly until he reached a blank page, then picked up a pen and sat down.

'The core. I need to write down the core first. So, what does core mean? Oh, right, the core...'

His mind was so fully awakened that he couldn't process all his thoughts at once.

His hand, holding the pen, trembled. It felt as if someone might come into his mind and steal his thoughts.

First, he wrote down a large guideline. Feeling relieved that he had avoided the risk of forgetting, he continued.

His hand was still busy, and he began to integrate numerous ideas from his previous notes into the core concept.

The pen moved across the paper as if it were cutting through it.

His handwriting was as messy as his thoughts were fast, and he didn't blink as he followed the journey of his writing.

After the theory, all that remained was the calculation.

Shirone used simple physical theories to verify its feasibility.

Accurate calculations would need expert verification, but even simple formulas could determine usability. It was that kind of problem.

Finally, when the calculations were done, Shirone set the pen down with a loud clack.

On the last page, the final result exceeded the numbers he had hoped for.

Shirone stared at the notebook, dazed.

It was as if his soul had been sucked into it, and he swallowed hard.

Bang!

His fists slammed onto the desk like hammers. Shirone buried his face in his chest and trembled, unable to move for a long time.

"Haaa."

When he finally lifted his head, the initial euphoria of creating a new spell was gone from his face.

"It really... works."

It wasn't a certainty yet. But theoretically, it was possible. Despite the complex constraints, if the conditions were right, Shirone could erase heaven from the map.

A sudden fear washed over him.

The possibility was so slim, or rather, he had thought it impossible, that he hadn't even considered venturing into this territory.

Surely, countering heaven's final war could be seen as a form of self-defense.

Intellect argues that there's no need to go through something unnecessary.

But.

'If I had known Aider's nature in advance, would I have still used the same strategy?'

This was a more difficult question.

If Aider hadn't attacked Maya, and if he had still been removed through a rational decision, would the result be the same as now?

Magicians have two criteria for efficiency: justification and practicality. If Fermi leaned towards practicality, Shirone prioritized justification.

Practicality yields immediate results, but justification leads to a flow that ultimately brings greater benefits.

Neither can be said to be better. However, the matter of destroying heaven was clearly a strategy leaning towards practicality.

"I need to meet Ikael."

Why did she pass on Ataraxia? Did she know that her choice would boomerang back to destroy heaven?

"I need to meet Ikael."

He had one more reason to meet her.

The graduating class schedule had now passed the 12-week mark.

The students had been running non-stop without a break, but recently, the atmosphere at school was chaotic. No, the entire kingdom was in turmoil.

Graduating students always had newspapers in their hands. Whether in the dining hall or the park, they talked about the shocking incident at the Magic Association.

Former Magic Association President Micaiah Gaold, wanted for treason

Shirone read the headline at the top of the newspaper several times before turning to the article.

It mentioned an assassination attempt on King Adolf XII of Tormia 10 days ago.

Adolf wasn't a tyrant and was popular even in Bashka, making it a shocking event.

But even more shocking was that the person accused of being behind the assassination was Micaiah Gaold.

Newspapers were competitively publishing related evidence.

It was cited as evidence that he had stopped visiting the association and gone into hiding two days before the assassination attempt.

Students entering the park were heard complaining.

"Seriously, treason of all things. What was he thinking?"

"Who knows? He used to be the pride of the school, but now he's its disgrace. Treason will hit the school hard too. It's one thing to block the path for future students."

They were speaking freely in Gaold's absence, but their feelings were understandable.

Shirone read the article again.

Gaold had disappeared along with the Magic Association's head of security, Gando, and the third-floor manager, Plu. The lower section of the newspaper recorded the questions and answers from yesterday's National Security Emergency Hearing.

Most of the Magic Association staff listed circumstances that made them suspect Gaold of treason.

Only Isabel, a certified level 3 librarian at the Magic Association, claimed Gaold's innocence, but she was eventually arrested on the spot by the kingdom's intelligence agents and was currently imprisoned.

"Whew, things are getting complicated."

Shirone crumpled the newspaper and looked up at the sky. Gaold had plotted treason.

Was this even possible?

No, for someone of Gaold's caliber, treason might be possible.

But the question was, why?

Nade spoke.

"Even a top-level arch magician has to run when the state moves against them. So what happens now? I saw some strange people at our school earlier. Iruki, do you know anything? You get letters from your father often."

If Albino, the head of Yongrae, had accurate information, Iruki would know, but he shook his head.

"He said it's too early to tell. Besides, it's not something to write in a letter. Those people were probably from the intelligence agency. They'll search everywhere Gaold might hide."

Iruki looked at Shirone.

He knew Shirone had visited the Magic Association during the break. He wasn't sure, but he felt Shirone was hiding something.

"Shirone, do you know anything?"

"..."

Shirone said nothing. Especially in this situation, he had to be even more careful with his words.

If a certified class 3 like Isabel could be arrested on the spot, there was no guarantee that harm wouldn't come to his friends or himself.

'What's going on? What's happening?'

Did Gaold really try to assassinate the king?

The likelihood was very low.

A project that had been prepared for 20 years was now just a few months away. The king's assassination could be part of the project, but even so, it seemed too futile a failure.

'The article says Gaold often showed arrogance. It also mentions he insulted the king to foreign diplomats. But he remained president of the association. There must have been some emotional equilibrium between the two powers. So why did it suddenly break now?'

It was too reckless and monumental an event to happen just before the journey to heaven, which required utmost preparation.

'Or maybe that's why it was inevitable?'

Shirone thought back in time.

'Gaold prepared the project for 20 years. It's impossible to control information perfectly. As the time for ignition approached, actions to extinguish the fire began. That's the most plausible explanation.'

If the assumption was true, it was the worst-case scenario.

Shirone was part of Gaold's project. If the intelligence agency dug deeper, his name would inevitably come up.

'Who's moving? The Kingdom of Tormia? Or something beyond that? How much do they know? How long can I keep this hidden? What should I do to prepare?'

"...rone. Shirone."

Shirone snapped out of his thoughts and looked at Iruki.

"Huh? Yeah?"

"What are you thinking about? Are you okay? You look pale."
Nade looked at him with concern.

"Huh? Really? Shirone, can you tell us what's going on? I didn't want to ask because I thought it might trouble you, but if it's too much to handle alone, we'll fight with you."
Revealing anything was impossible. It would be pushing his friends into danger beyond personal feelings.

Of course, Iruki and Nade would understand that. But they would also understand his current silence.

"Sorry. I'll tell you everything when I get the chance."

Iruki didn't feel disappointed.

Shirone wasn't stupid. If talking could solve the problem, he would have done so already. It just made him angry that he couldn't help his friend.

"Alright. We'll pretend we don't know. But don't be stubborn. The most important thing is you. If you get in danger, I'll start taking action too."

Hearing that from Iruki of the Merco Dine family was reassuring.

Albino might not have written anything in the letter, but Iruki might know more than he let on. It was possible with his family.

"Thanks. But really, I'm fine. I'll head back to the dorm. I have some things to think about."

Shirone stood up coldly, but his heart felt different. He was grateful to have Iruki and Nade. In the worst-case scenario, Amy and Rian wouldn't ignore him either.

Even if something happened to him, they could protect his beloved family.

That was enough for Shirone.

As summer arrived, rainy days became more frequent.

The morning was sunny, but the weather had turned, and it was now raining.

The early monsoon had arrived.

Past midnight, Shirone stood by the window, watching the pouring rain.

Three days had passed since Isabel's arrest, but there was still no news of Gaold.

The newspapers, exaggerating the facts, had turned him into a public enemy.

The people presumed to be from the intelligence agency were no longer visible. But they might have just gone into hiding.

The evaluation schedule continued as normal, but the students' motivation had noticeably declined.

They were disheartened by the fall of the kingdom's top magician, the president of the Magic Association, to such a miserable state.

'Is Isabel okay?'

As far as Shirone knew, Isabel was not part of Gaold's inner circle.

So, had she defended Gaold at the hearing out of simple loyalty?

Or was there something else he didn't know about?

He recalled the beautiful face of Isabel, who had kindly explained the laser-guided algorithm to him.

And the gentle way she had shown him how to use the Cubrick on his finger on the last day.

Knock, knock.

The sound of knocking made Shirone's heart drop.

It was already past midnight.

There was no reason for anyone to visit his room at this hour, not even the teachers.

Knock, knock.

Shirone entered the Spirit Zone. To avoid detection by the person outside, he kept the range extremely narrow.

As he approached the door, silencing his footsteps, he heard no voice from the unknown visitor.

"...Who is it?"

The lack of response meant it wasn't his friends. They would have signaled in some way.

If the door was broken down, he would teleport away. He kept this one guideline in mind as he closed the distance. Finally, reaching the door, Shirone brought his eye to the peephole.

His tense expression turned blank for a moment before he hurriedly grabbed the doorknob and turned it.

"Senior?"

Plu stood there, clutching her injured shoulder.

She looked exhausted, her face pale and her lips blue and trembling. It was clear she had been through a lot.

Her clothes were tattered, and she wasn't wearing any underwear, so her soaked skin was visible through the wet fabric.

The only thing that remained unchanged was the determined look in her eyes behind her glasses.

"Shirone..."

A brief look of relief crossed Plu's face before she collapsed into Shirone's arms.

"Senior. Senior."

Shirone carried Plu to the bed and, after carefully checking the hallway, closed the door silently.

When he returned to the bed, Plu was already sitting up.

She covered her chest with her arms, but it was only out of consideration for Shirone; her expression remained resolute.

The thought of preparing warm tea crossed his mind briefly.

But it remained just a thought.

She had fled from Bashka to the magic school in Creas.

The fact that she had come to him, someone with no power, meant their situation was far more serious than he had anticipated.

"Senior! What happened? I was so worried!"

There was so much he needed to hear, but he didn't know where to start.

Plu seemed to be choosing her words carefully. After a moment, her face twisted with frustration.

"Gando... no, Gando..."

Plu slowly turned to Shirone. A single tear rolled down her sharp, determined face.

"Gando betrayed us."

Chapter 400: Rapidly Changing Political Situation (4)

Kashan Empire.

The emperor's coronation of the Kashan Empire, the ruler of the northwestern continent and holder of one-third of the human realm's territory, was an hour away.

As always, the succession process was unofficial and secretive.

In the 23rd-floor spire of the grand palace Aganos, only the two Terajes, who shared the same memories, and a few who knew personal secrets were present.

The transfer of power from Teraje Mistra to Teraje Uorin.

To outsiders, it appeared to be a typical succession where a parent passed the throne to their child, but some knew the truth.

The only thing that changed was the name.

Teraje was the proper noun for 'something' that had lived through the ages, continuously renewing itself.

"With this, the handover related to the Holy War is complete. Well, if the Holy War is over, everything is done."

Fourteen hours ago, Uorin had visited the World Chamber in the central continent.

There, she was first introduced to the Holy War, and in an hour, she would ascend to the Triumvirate.

Even within the Holy War, the world's most powerful superpower, Teraje's influence was immense.

Below the Triumvirate were the Seven Kings, the rulers of the seven most powerful nations on the continent, and the two military leaders of the fairy and dragon races.

These twelve lords of the Holy War were the pinnacle of the world.

Uorin, who had become the ruler of the world from a princess of Kazra in an instant, showed no joy on her face.

After all, everything was just a subset of the name Teraje.

"No need for idle talk. We've already verified that there are no discrepancies between your memories and mine. But I have a question."

Uorin stopped and looked back at Mistra.

"Why is this happening so quickly? I thought it would take another four years for me to ascend the throne."

Since the memories of the mother and daughter were shared, they were two yet one. Therefore, any inflection point in their thoughts had to be addressed.

"Hmm, well..."

Mistra looked back at Uorin.

While she had black hair and intense eyes, Uorin had white hair and a transparent impression.

Neither her husband, Orcamp, nor she had white hair.

Hence, a mutation.

She was 'herself,' possessing the rare 'future vision' among the abilities of 'history search' that made the current Teraje possible.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Uorin would become the emperor among the many daughters.

However, today's coronation was an irregular move that even Mistra hadn't calculated.

"Don't worry. I'll ensure my disappearance. But there are memories that must be passed on since your birth, so I followed you to Aganos."

Once Uorin ascended to the Triumvirate, there was no reason for Mistra to exist in this world. However, there was something she had to finish in her time.

Advancing the succession by several years and quickly pushing things forward by accusing Micaiah Gaold of treason were for that reason.

Entering the room, Mistra took a locked box from the desk drawer. She handed it to Uorin, who was waiting on the sofa, and sat across from her, crossing her legs.

"This box contains all the answers to your questions. It's a secret of the current humanity that no one knows. If used well, it will be a powerful weapon, but given the situation, I had to act first."

"How do I open it? I can't break it."

"I have the key. I can't show it to you yet. Before that, there's someone I want to introduce to you."

Right on time, there was a knock on the door.

Only a handful of people in the world had the authority to enter the 23rd floor of the grand palace Aganos, so Mistra immediately told them to come in.

A tall man entered. He had a kind impression with narrow eyes, his purple hair slicked back except for one strand.

It was Gando, the former head of security for the Tormia Magic Association.

As the first son of Teraje Mistra, he was biologically Uorin's brother, but psychologically, he was her son. Bloodline meant nothing to Teraje.

Gando bowed to the ambiguous position of his two mothers.

"You called, Mother."

"Yes, come here. You handled this well."

For Gando, who had been adopted into Tormia and raised by the Ganza, the Tormia Magic Association was his whole life.

But it was all a lie.

Even joining Gaold's inner circle was a false life designed by his mother.

In that life filled with lies, the only genuine feeling Gando found was his reverence for Gaold.

But in the end, he had framed Gaold for treason and fled to his mother's arms.

"Oh, why the face? Is it because of Gaold? You didn't have personal feelings, did you?"

"The only person important to me is you, Mother. But... I respect his achievements as a magician."

"Sigh. Gando, you are Teraje's son. There's no need to respect a mere head of the Magic Association."

Gando remained silent.

The Triumvirate had the right to say such things. But having spent most of his life in Tormia, he still couldn't tell which side was true.

Uorin examined Gando and nodded.

"He's definitely different from Zion. This time, you chose well."

"Hehe, right? I didn't expect much from a son. Since he has talent, should we train him as a magician? You can use him if you want."

Gando lowered his head.

Chosen well? Train well?

What was he to Teraje?

A human? A creature? Or just a cog in the clockwork, meant to turn forever?

"Keep him? Hmm, I'm satisfied with Crouch. Well. Gando, come here."

Gando approached Uorin like a slave sold at the market. Every time her gaze pierced him, he felt stripped naked. He couldn't show his discomfort.

Today, his biological mother, Mistra, would disappear. If Uorin abandoned him, only death awaited.

"Well, let's keep him for now. I'll need to focus on Kashan for a while anyway."

"Thank you, Mother."

Gando bowed deeply. His eyes, looking at the floor, trembled.

He would die.

If Uorin was Mistra's incarnation, he couldn't trust any word from her mouth.

"But I have two conditions."

Uorin chuckled. Setting conditions for Teraje of the Triumvirate meant he wanted to live that much.

"Speak. If it's something I can grant..."

"Ensure I don't conflict with anyone in Kashan."

He wanted to be recognized as an independent entity. If he survived and had to assist Uorin, it was a necessary measure.

"Alright. The second?"

"Don't make me criticize you. I'm just a warrior fighting blindly for you."

It was a plea to be treated like a dog. Desperate but unwilling to descend into abject humiliation.

It might have been a cold, rational strategy as a magician, but Uorin didn't care.

Raising a dog wasn't a bad idea.

"You've saved your life, Gando."

"I am grateful for your mercy, Mother."

Mistra waved her hand.

"Leave now. There's still work to do."

This might be Gando's last meeting with Mistra, but there was no maternal warmth in her tone.

As Gando left, Mistra took out a key from her bosom, as if it was time.

"The reason for the accelerated succession is to create variables. Gaold will go to heaven and do something.

Ultimately, it will benefit us."

"Do you think he can succeed? A 20-year plan fell apart in an instant."

"Success doesn't matter. What matters is that something changes. Humans gamble on low odds because the reward of victory outweighs the despair of defeat. I just gave Gaold that chance."

"I still don't understand. I don't know what you're thinking. How can this be?"

"Of course. That's why you need to open the box. It contains a *deja vu* of 'underlying events' that only I know. Reading it

will make my thoughts clear."

Teraje held all memories from ancient times to the present and could quickly search through them with the unique ability 'history search.'

Initially, it was just simple data retrieval.

But with the Goffin Reset, this ability evolved explosively.

The history after the reset created 'underlying events' beneath the existing history.

Two different timelines sharing the same period created a form of future prediction through déjà vu.

With 'future vision' added, Uorin could potentially conquer heaven in her time.

"The reason I hid it until the end was to prevent subjective judgment from interfering with history search. You need to see and judge for yourself. After all, I am you, and you are me."

Mistra walked to the desk. Her life's mission was complete once she handed over the key.

Uorin asked.

"How will you do it?"

"Anything will do, but let's keep it clean."

Mistra picked up a dagger from the desk. The blade, drawn with a swish, scattered the light in the room.

Uorin nodded and inserted the key into the box. Meanwhile, Mistra gripped the handle with both hands, lifted her head, and placed the blade on her neck.

Blinking at the ceiling, she suddenly remembered and looked at Uorin.

"Right, you said you'd take Shirone. Is that still your plan?"

Uorin shrugged as she opened the box.

"Ataraxia, and he's handsome, right? Nothing else seems important. Why, is there a problem?"

"No. Alright then."

Mistra lifted her head again.

She had a slight bad feeling, but it was also a common occurrence. The long history of Teraje was not weak enough

to be affected by a mere boy.

As Uorin opened the box, Mistra's sword moved sharply, and a fountain of blood spurted out. A moment later, there was a thud as Mistra's body fell.

Uorin didn't even glance at her. Her interest was solely in the information inside the box.

The box contained documents on two matters.

The title on the cover of the first document was "Goffin Erasure."

Since the reset was estimated to have occurred 19 years ago, Uorin, born after that, had a hazier understanding of the underlying events than Mistra. However, this was not particularly important information, as it had already been understood by the Holy War and major institutions of various countries.

Uorin set aside the first document, a relic of the old era, and took out the new document underneath.

'This is it...'

Her hand, which had been reaching for the coffee cup, paused and then returned to grasp the document with both hands. She spent a long time savoring the title in the center of the document.

Anke La Erasure

Uorin quickly flipped through the pages. Storage first, analysis later.

In five minutes, she had memorized all 200 pages word for word. She then brought a candlestick and burned the document.

Uorin's eyes, staring at the flames, were sharper than ever. She finally understood what Mistra had intended to convey.

'You were right, Mistra.'

Gando knocked and entered the room. He hesitated for a moment at the completely changed scene but then returned to his calm expression and bowed.

"Mother, it is time for the coronation."

"I understand. I will go now."

Gando turned to look at Mistra, who lay on the floor. She had been beheaded with a sword. Even without looking, he could tell it was a flawless cut.

"What should we do with the body?"

"Dispose of it."

Uorin's short answer indicated not to disturb her thoughts. Gando carefully removed the body, making no noise with his footsteps.

She was his birth mother. But now, Mistra was Uorin. An existence beyond human common sense. That was Teraje. Uorin strode out into the hallway.

At the end of the 23rd-floor tower was a balcony overlooking a square filled with hundreds of thousands of imperial citizens.

Drawing back the curtains and stepping onto the balcony, she saw the massive crowd stretching to the horizon.

A tremendous roar erupted from the ground upon seeing Teraje. The earth shook, and the heat rose to the top.

"Long live the Empress! Long live the Empress! Long live the Empress!"

Uorin raised her hand. The volume, which seemed unable to rise any higher, doubled, deafening her.

The whole world lay at her feet, but Uorin only looked down coldly.

Humans are unique creatures with as many personalities as there are individuals, but when gathered, they become a species bound by the single name of humanity.

Not someone, but the giant monster called humanity was roaring at her.

'Shirone, there is no time. Meet Ikael. You must change things. If not...'

Uorin looked up at the sky. Only the sun was higher than her.

'Humanity will perish.'

Chapter 401

Shirone handed Plu a cup of coffee and asked if she had any spare clothes.

Plu said she had used everything on the way. Bandages, ropes, and other emergency items had been necessary. After changing into the clothes Shirone gave her, she took some time to recover her strength and explained the situation.

The reason Gaold hadn't been captured was due to his near-paranoid distrust of people.

Or perhaps it was because his desire was so desperate that he couldn't trust anything in the world.

This was evident from the one iron rule Gaold had set when he started his project 20 years ago.

If even the slightest variable occurred, cancel all plans and monitor the situation.

There was a time when Gando had been absent from the Magic Association for about two hours without reason.

It might have been a personal matter that could happen to anyone.

But Gaold didn't let it slide. He disbanded his inner circle and left the association himself.

However, the royal response was much faster than expected, and most of his inner circle was captured.

Only Gaold, Kangnan, and Plu managed to escape using force, but the association's pursuers relentlessly followed them.

After being chased and chased, they finally arrived at Gaold's alma mater, Alpheas Magic School.

Shirone looked at Plu with a sympathetic expression.

According to her, it was a miracle they had made it this far alive.

"You've really been through a lot."

Thanks to the sugar intake, Plu's complexion quickly improved.

She extended her arm and activated the Cubrick, and a magic staff adorned with a phoenix appeared in front of her palm.

"There was no suitable place to hide, but that's not the only reason we came here. The president wants to meet Alpheas. But the pursuit was too intense, so he sent me. If I get caught, it's over for me. Anyway, Shirone, we need your help."

With Gaold's skills, normal tracking would be impossible, but the association had many deviants, so it was best not to reveal himself in case of an emergency.

"Where is the president now?"

Plu quickly twirled the magic staff, then swung it behind her back and headed for the door.

"I'll guide you. If you're willing to come, that is."

There was a warning in Plu's words. If he wanted to escape this situation, he should end it here.

"I want to meet him and hear what he has to say first."

Betting his life on false hope was inefficient.

He was already entangled with Gaold the moment he entered the association. In this case, it was better to find a solution directly rather than hiding under the covers.

'You've trained desperately, Shirone.'

Shirone's temperament had changed again from three months ago. Just as life evolves in extreme environments, Shirone had also grown in the fierce competition of the graduating class.

"Alright, listen to the president first and then decide. But if possible..."

Plu swung the staff behind her back and bowed.

"I hope you can help us."

It was something she could never say in front of Gaold. It was also the first time she treated Shirone as a magician.

"Let's go now."

Shirone postponed his decision and opened the door.

Wearing raincoats, the two climbed the mountain behind the building. Using magic would be convenient, but it would almost certainly alert Jonah.

Gaold was hiding on the opposite side of the mountain range surrounding the magic school. It wasn't far in distance, but they had to cross the mountain, so it was already dawn when they arrived.

Climbing a mountain in the rain was no ordinary march, but Plu didn't even take a moment to catch her breath, pushing back her hood and entering the cave.

"President, I've brought Shirone."

After letting Shirone in, she went back outside to guard against any potential pursuers.

Inside the cave, there was only darkness.

At the end of the darkness, a flame suddenly flared up, revealing Gaold's face as if it were floating.

Leaning against the cave wall with one leg up, Gaold smiled and raised his hand.

"Hey, Shirone."

Judging by Plu's condition, it was clear how difficult their escape had been, but Gaold was as robust as ever, with his characteristic manic smile intact.

"You seem to be taking it easy."

"Hehe, being unemployed isn't so bad. Well, I didn't do much work at the association either."

Gaold pointed to a seat in front of him.

"Sit down. I can't offer you tea, but I have a lot of stories you'll like."

Shirone asked directly.

"What happened?"

Gaold rested his chin on his hand and closed his mouth like a clam. His feelings were more of indignation than resentment or frustration.

"Gando exposed my corruption. Most of it was fabricated, of course. This time, even King Adolf couldn't tolerate it. He had been patient for quite a while. The problem is that most of my inner circle has been arrested or is still being hunted."

"Why didn't you anticipate Gando's betrayal? Your inner circle was carefully selected."

"That's a good question. I have no excuse for that. I was completely fooled. But it made it easier to uncover the mastermind. It's likely that Teraje is behind Gando."

"Teraje..."

The Empress of Kashan. Also, Uorin's mother and the leader of the Valkyries, whom he had met in Kazra.

Even listing what he knew, it was easy to guess how powerful Teraje was.

But he still didn't understand why Gando's betrayal was connected to her.

"You met Uorin in Kazra, didn't you?"

"Yes. She helped me a lot. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here now."

"Hmm, she helped you. I see. Hehe."

Shirone frowned. He owed his life to her, so why was that funny?

Gaold's laughter suddenly stopped.

"Teraje is likely... Mitochondrial Eve."

"Mitochondrial Eve?"

"Few people know about it outside the Holy War. The woman you met, Uorin, is likely the Empress Teraje."

"Please explain so I can understand."

Gaold explained about Mitochondrial Eve.

Teraje could pass her memories to her daughter through a mutation in the mitochondria. The timing of memory awakening varied for each individual.

But if Uorin had already awakened at that time, Shirone had met the Empress Teraje, not Uorin.

"In that way, Teraje holds all memories from the dawn of humanity to the present. Through that vast database, she

understands the essence of humanity. To her, you are just another cog in the wheel of history. The proof is the strongest object you carry, Armand ."

Shirone touched the Armand at his waist.

He had suspected it wasn't just a gesture of goodwill, but hearing it made his skin crawl. The most frightening thing was that even now, understanding Teraje's true nature, he couldn't guess the meaning behind the gift.

"Teraje's abilities don't end there. As you know, we live in a peculiar world. The Goffin Erasure. In other words, we've already been reset and are living life again after the reset. This is speculation, but Teraje likely retains memories from before the reset. That would explain how Gando could infiltrate my inner circle despite my paranoid management."

"Gando was planted from the moment he was born, anticipating today's events."

If he understood quickly, there was no need to waste time. Gaold nodded honestly.

"I was completely fooled. No human could predict that far. Only Teraje could."

Indeed, in such a case, even the great Gaold was helpless. In the end, he had lost all his limbs, and the project he had planned for 20 years had turned to dust.

But having lost everything, Gaold had only one choice left.

"How much chance do we have left?"

Gaold would go to heaven. Even if he lost his inner circle, even if the plans he had designed for half his life turned to dust, he would go. He was the kind of person who would sacrifice all of humanity to save Miro.

Gaold leaned back leisurely and crossed his arms.

"As things stand, we can't do anything. But I haven't been idle for 20 years. It's not much of a last resort, but I haven't lost everything. After all, I still have you."

"I haven't agreed to help you yet."

"Hehe! Don't be so tense, kid. The reason I told you my situation is to make you understand the instructions I'm

about to give you. If you do me one favor, we'll part ways. Study hard and graduate."

Shirone was now certain.

At this point, fighting the world, he had no time to worry about a student's safety.

"But you made me an offer, didn't you?"

Gaold raised an eyebrow.

It was a deal made when everything was perfect, and more importantly, when he had a year.

"You're not saying you found a way, are you?"

"Not exactly a way, but..."

"Hmm."

Gaold stroked his beard.

He wasn't a kid who would make a proposal with a clumsy lie. But his tone lacked confidence, making it hard to believe he had found something.

"Alright, let's hear it. How will you destroy heaven?"

"First, promise me. If I meet the conditions, you'll share all the information you know. It's a matter of life and death for me. Also, the final decision to go to heaven must always be mine."

It was an unfair deal.

Gaold would reveal all the information that could endanger him, while Shirone could back out at any time.

"Alright, let's hear it."

Gaold readily agreed.

Negotiation is a process where two selfish individuals meet to find a compromise. If Shirone had spoken emotionally, Gaold wouldn't have trusted him.

It wasn't necessarily a disadvantageous deal, as Shirone had included the condition "if the conditions are met."

Of course, if there was a way to destroy heaven, any risk would be worth taking.

But even with a year given, it was a task taken on with the thought that there was nothing to lose. If it turned out to be an absurd method, it could simply be ignored.

And considering Shirone's current abilities, the result would inevitably be the latter.

'There's no harm in gathering even trivial information.'

That's what Gaold thought.

"Basically, it's a spell using Ataraxia."

"That was expected."

Shirone explained the spell for ten minutes.

Gaold didn't interrupt once. He just listened, looking down at the ground until the story was finished.

"...If that's the case, maybe, just maybe, it could destroy heaven... something like that..."

As Gaold didn't respond, Shirone's voice gradually grew quieter. Speaking it out loud made the obstacles he had only thought about seem even higher, causing his confidence to wane.

Even after Shirone finished speaking, Gaold remained silent. He just kept replaying, replaying, and replaying the story in his mind.

Feeling even more intimidated, Shirone added.

"Didn't you say, if we find even a possibility..."

"Ha."

A metallic sound escaped Gaold's mouth.

"Hehehe! Hahahaha!"

No matter how much he tried to suppress it, laughter scratched at his throat. Unable to hold it in, he threw his head back and burst into maniacal laughter.

"Hahahaha! Hahahaha!"

As the cave echoed with his laughter, Plu entered with a startled expression. But seeing that Gaold was unharmed, she resumed her vigilant stance.

Shirone stared blankly at Gaold, unable to understand the meaning behind his laughter.

Gaold, with a wide grin, glared at Shirone. His eyes, reflected in the flames, burned intensely.

"Crazy... bastard."

It was the highest praise Gaold could give to anyone.

Chapter 402

Middle East. Kingdom of Paras.

On the western map of Paras, the cradle of ancient civilization, the world's largest Akkad Desert is marked in ochre.

An endless sea of sand.

It is extremely difficult for any living creature to survive in this place, heated over eons of time.

Yet, there were human footprints on the smooth, cream-like sand.

The footprints led to a giant pyramid, an ancient ruin, standing tall like a mirage.

The center of the Akkad Desert had dried up all its oases, making it unapproachable even for travelers, but a few people knew that this was the dungeon where the world's most famous magician resided.

A dungeon with an infiltration difficulty of A2.

Walking leisurely inside was Kangnan, the former chief secretary of the Tormia Magic Association.

Wherever she passed, monsters of 5th tier or higher were embedded in the walls, writhing.

The sound of high heels clicking on the stone floor echoed oppressively, crushing their groans.

After a long battle, Kangnan's clothes were in disarray.

Her buttons were missing, leaving her front open, and her stockings were torn in places.

In her right hand, she held a long horn, one of the dozens attached to the tail of a monstrous creature.

The tail was connected to a green body weighing at least 2 tons, with the end of the body being the hideously collapsed snout of the desert king, the Basilisk, dragging along with its tongue hanging out.

Dragging.

Kangnan's appearance, dragging a monster more than 20 times her size, was certainly unusual, but her light steps made it seem like a trivial matter.

Arriving at the end of the labyrinth, Kangnan pushed open a stone door.

It was a vast cavern, with numerous creatures that inhabited the desert mummified and mounted like tree bark. At a table 80 meters away, someone wearing a turban was engrossed in their work, their back turned.

Instead of knocking, Kangnan dragged the Basilisk's tail and threw it.

Boom!

A majestic echo reverberated through the cavern.

"If you knew I was coming, couldn't you just let me in?"

The person in the turban finally turned around. It was a slender woman wearing a desert-colored cloak.

Her large, long eyes had no double eyelids, and her chin was delicately slender. She was sucking on a pacifier, creating a mysterious atmosphere in contrast to her deep, dark eyes.

"It's been a while, Kangnan."

The woman's name was Zulu.

A certified level 1 grand magician of the Kingdom of Paras and the world's strongest summoning magician, capable of summoning a lich, a 1st tier monster.

"Yes. It seems you've been well."

Kangnan spoke in Middle Eastern, but Zulu insisted on using the continental language.

"I haven't gone out much since then."

She still had the habit of adding honorifics to certain endings.

It didn't match the grammar of the continental language, but if it had been a habit from the beginning, it couldn't be helped.

"Sit. I'll bring something to drink."

Kangnan moved with a wary expression.

With Zulu's skills, she could create water on the spot, but the problem was that she didn't. It seemed that a level 1 grand magician developed their own unique rationality, different from common sense.

As expected, Zulu poured an unidentified liquid into a laboratory beaker and placed it on the table.

Kangnan's expression was uneasy as she looked at it.

If it wasn't magic, water in the desert was more valuable than jewels. Even if it wasn't drinking water, a vast amount of moisture was needed to operate the experimental devices in the cavern.

The mummified monsters around, squeezed dry without a drop of moisture, weren't just a quirky taste.

Zulu removed the pacifier and savored the liquid in the beaker. Since it was precious water, Kangnan had no choice but to pretend to drink it.

"Thank you. It's not like the urine of desert maggots from ten years ago, is it?"

"I wouldn't give something like that to someone visiting after a long time. This is very precious water."

Kangnan tilted the beaker slightly to taste it.

As her tongue began to get wet, a sense of euphoria rose from her throat.

"It's good. So, what is this?"

"It's my urine."

Kangnan spat out the water she had been holding in her mouth.

Not spilling it on the floor was a sign of her enthusiastic acceptance of the level 1 grand magician's hospitality.

Zulu smiled and said.

"Don't worry. It's distilled."

"Of course, it should be. But I think I have plenty of this in my body."

"Hehe. You're still the same, Kangnan."

Zulu recalled the first time she met Kangnan ten years ago.

She had been much more rustic and youthful in appearance, but her sharpness, which had tamed the mad Gaold, was no less than it was now.

'You've grown a lot.'

Back then, Kangnan was a bleeding wolf. A beast full of hostility, baring its fangs at anyone.

But now, much of that aggressiveness had been tempered. If she had come down to the 19th floor of the pyramid without Gaold, it meant she had overcome her inner demons.

"The elements of nature are cyclical. There are cycles within cycles. Drinking water is not about possessing it but about entering the great cycle of life and death and creating another cycle. When you entrust yourself to the perfect cycle, with nothing to discard or keep, you can become one with nature."

Kangnan listened to Zulu's words.

She wasn't a magician, but truth meets at the pinnacle.

There was nothing to discard from the teachings of a level 1 grand magician.

"Is that the secret to controlling the king of the dead?"

A lich is a thought-form created from the will of a grand magician. Therefore, it is known that it cannot clear the final stage of summoning, which is annihilation, as it is already a dead entity.

There were rumors in academia that Zulu herself had become a lich and that the summoned creature was just a doppelganger, but having seen Zulu summon a lich ten years ago, Kangnan knew it was a lie.

When she saw it ten years ago, she could only think it was overwhelming, but working as the chief secretary of the Magic Association, she became genuinely curious about the secret.

"How is that possible?"

Zulu turned her head with sad eyes.

"This place is the land of death."

That was all the explanation, but Kangnan understood. A magician who realized the cycle of emptiness and fulfillment had no reason to hide the secret of summoning. It was just too vast to be encapsulated in words, as it was their entire life.

"I see."

The pyramid cavern was Zulu's cradle.

Abandoned here as a baby, she survived without anyone's help.

Did the dungeon monsters become her parents?

Zulu wasn't sure.

When she became aware, she was still alone, with only a small pacifier left by her parents.

From then on, Zulu lived in the vast dungeon as her home.

Death was always on her shoulder. When she slept, when she needed to eat, even when she breathed.

It was a different kind of survival from what people in slums like Radum experienced.

To Zulu, survival wasn't a desire for life but just another form of death.

Kangnan had also lived a rough life, but she couldn't even imagine what Zulu's life had been like.

Spending her childhood with hundreds of monsters in a dungeon where food and water were scarce.

It might have been inevitable that Zulu became the world's strongest summoning magician.

"I came to ask for a favor."

Getting to the point, Kangnan bowed her head to the table and pleaded.

"Please help Gaold."

Zulu stared into the distance, lost in thought. Then she slowly opened her mouth and replied in Middle Eastern.

"Alright."

Kangnan's head shot up at the unexpectedly quick acceptance.

In reality, getting Zulu out of the pyramid was extremely difficult. Many grand magicians, even the royal family of Paras, had begged her to become their close aide, but she had refused them all.

Moreover, Zulu was unaware of the current situation. The plan had completely changed from what was discussed ten years ago, and now she had to bear the risk of almost certain death.

"I'm sorry. There's something I didn't tell you. The situation has changed suddenly..."

"Gaold is like a child."

Zulu recalled the first time she met Gaold.

"He doesn't try to empty anything. Even when he's about to explode from being too full, even when he's in unbearable pain, he clings to everything and refuses to let go."

Kangnan remained silent and listened.

"The reason he could endure was that he was waiting for the time to pour everything out. Now might be that time. If this is part of the great cycle, I think it's time for Gaold to find peace."

"Zulu..."

Kangnan struggled to hold back her tears.

Why did those words, understanding that wretched human, bring tears to her eyes?

Was it sympathy for the madman abandoned after 20 years of hardship? Or...

"And."

Zulu smiled with childlike, beautiful eyes.

"Being with Gaold always brings interesting things."

Kangnan raised the corners of her mouth with wet eyes.

That's it. A pure obsession that ordinary people could never understand.

Perhaps she was captivated by the madness of someone who had bet everything on one thing.

Zulu stood up and prepared to leave.

She put the pacifier in her mouth and packed two water bottles in a small bag. It was a modest load for the departure of a level 1 grand magician.

"Let's go. If we ride Kaidra, we'll reach the continent quickly."

Kaidera, a Tier 3 summoning monster, was a gigantic bird capable of flying 7,000 kilometers in a day.

Kangnan watched Zulu's back as he left the Great Hall and bowed his head in the characteristic manner of the Rammuai.

He was a person she respected in a different way from Gaold.

"Thank you."

Kangnan looked at the beaker on the table.

Circulation. You must empty to fill. If you can't fill, you can't empty.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up the beaker and drank more than half of the water in one go.

"Ugh."

She still couldn't get used to it.

The taste was definitely water, but the subtlety of the One Mind Principle was not something just anyone could achieve.

Wiping her uncomfortable mouth with her tongue, Kangnan followed Zulu out of the Great Hall.

Shirone went to the principal's office as soon as the sun rose.

Gaold's first request was to deliver a note to Alpheas.

Seeing Shirone suddenly appear, Alpheas looked surprised, but after reading the note, he nodded silently.

Shirone also left the principal's office without saying a word. By now, kingdom intelligence agents would be stationed around the school.

Without confirmation that Gaold was coming, the security wouldn't be as tight as in the capital, but it was still too dangerous for Gaold to act alone.

"The principal will take care of it."

With Alpheas, who had been through many battles, he could be reassured.

Moreover, Olivia, a certified second-class grand mage, was also there, so they would find a way.

It wasn't the time to worry about Gaold. Shirone was a suspect involved with Gaold, and if he wasn't careful, she could end his life without achieving anything.

In the face of the global crisis of Heaven, no one would care about Shirone's safety.

He had to make her own decisions and find a way out.

"Ikael..."

She had a reason to meet him at least once, even if it meant abandoning everything, but the situation was different from a year ago.

Even if he returned alive, he would be a fugitive for life.

The fortunate thing was that Shirone still had the initiative.

Having discovered the possibility of Heaven's destruction, Gaold would classify Shirone as a key figure in the project, which meant at least the foundation for survival was laid.

"First, I need to gather information. I have to proceed cautiously, solving one thing at a time."

If the situation had grown uncontrollably large, a more short-sighted approach might be more effective.

The best way was to grope blindly and solve the immediate problems.

Chapter 403

After completing the omniscient implementation evaluation, Shirone headed to the cafeteria with his friends.

Although he scored full marks, there were quite a few uneasy moments, perhaps because his mind was unsettled. His friends had already noticed, and the atmosphere at the table was different from before, more subdued.

Shirone wasn't in the right state of mind to care about others' feelings.

When would Gaold contact him? Even if he did, what choices could he make?

Everything felt uncertain.

"Shirone, is something bothering you lately? You don't look well. Are you sick?" Amy asked, putting down her utensils. Even if it wasn't just Shirone, all the students seemed down, but today his face was especially pale.

"I'm fine. Just not feeling well."

"Sometimes, before midterms, some students can't manage their condition. I was like that last year. Just hang in there a bit longer. The holidays are coming soon."

Shirone forced a smile.

Amy, having already experienced the final year, was probably worried about her own wavering as they approached the 15-week mark.

"Shirone, here's some water."

Maya poured water and handed it to Shirone.

Seeing him barely eating and just playing with his fork was pitiful.

"Thanks."

Shirone accepted Maya's kindness.

He usually measured the distance in relationships before showing emotions, so his attitude towards Maya was

unusual.

Amy pouted and watched Shirone and Maya exchange words.

Maya was kind and cheerful. It wasn't bad for Shirone to get close to her.

But she felt strangely uneasy.

Was it the feeling of losing her place, something she hadn't even realized she had?

Shirone noticed Maya's tray and asked, "Huh? Maya, why aren't you eating?"

"I already ate. I don't eat as much as I used to these days." Since the end of the high ground capture evaluation, Maya had reduced her food intake.

To be precise, she had returned to the amount her body originally required.

Realizing she had no talent for singing, Maya decided to strengthen her sound magic with her natural voice, following Iruki's advice.

Becoming a mage, her primary goal, was necessary for her future.

But more important than her career was the desire filling her heart.

She wanted Shirone's love. She wanted to appear before him more beautifully.

Even just by not overeating, Maya's appearance had noticeably improved.

Her face had slimmed, making her eyes look bigger and deeper, and her nose more defined.

Her once plump body had slimmed down, making her clothes loose, and her shoulders had dropped to her arms.

Even the senior students couldn't openly ignore Maya anymore.

It was a bittersweet reality, but the human tendency to grant power to beauty was undeniable.

Nade and Iruki were also amazed at Maya's changing appearance day by day.

"She's changed a lot. She's starting to look like the face I saw in the picture book."

The strange tension grew stronger.

Amy was always sharp, but Maya was poor at hiding her feelings, so everyone knew she had fallen for Shirone.

Amy suddenly raised her voice.

"Can you eat right now? Even today's omniscient evaluation was like that. You almost got one question wrong. Class Two is competing with Class One. If you make a mistake in the first half, it will be harder in the second half when your stamina drops. Get your head straight."

Amy, who had already failed the graduation exam once, knew this was the most important time.

Even if everyone was discouraged by the Magic Association incident, they had to have a clear sense of purpose.

Skipping a meal wouldn't kill anyone.

If they didn't stay focused now, they would miss the most significant part of their lives.

Amy didn't want Shirone to regret it.

"Shirone, try this too."

Maya cut the meat Shirone liked into bite-sized pieces and placed it in front of him.

It was an action that seemed to block out the nagging, and it was indeed a bit emotional.

Being close as a team, Amy wondered if she truly loved Shirone.

Of course, Maya also wanted Shirone to become a great mage, but she thought what he needed was comfort, not advice, when he was stressed to the point of having nightmares.

"You're too much, Amy. If I were you, I'd be so happy I'd go crazy. I could do anything Shirone asked, but you treat him like this."

Shirone picked up the meat Maya had given him and put it in his mouth.

He chose it because it was in the best condition to eat, but he didn't even know who had placed it there.

His head felt like it was going to explode with all the thoughts tangled up.

Had Gaold met with Alpheas?

If he got caught by the National Intelligence Service, continuing the evaluation could be dangerous.

Just as a navigation system doesn't guarantee a student's safety, entrusting his life to someone else and being optimistic was foolish.

Shirone put down his utensils with a clatter.

Nade and Iruki flinched and turned around, sensing the tension between Amy and Maya.

"Sorry. I'm going back to the dorm first. I'm not feeling well."

Maya immediately stood up, but Shirone left the cafeteria without making eye contact with anyone.

Amy felt frustrated.

She knew Shirone had gone to the association. She wanted him to tell her first.

Like when he went to Heaven, like when he went to Kazra, like when he went to the old castle ruins, she wanted him to come to her first.

"What's the reason? Why aren't you saying anything this time?"

Maya bit her upper lip and looked at Amy as Shirone left.

She had no reason to hate Amy. What made her angry was the current situation where she had to get Amy's permission even for her own feelings.

Feeling Maya's gaze, Amy looked up. Then she quickly turned her head away.

Seeing the firm determination in Maya's eyes, Amy finally realized the inevitable had come.

"Amy, can we talk for a moment?"

Amy's heart sank.

She thought it couldn't be, but deep down, she knew this moment would come, but when it did, she thought, "Just a

little later."

"Can we do it later? I'm a bit busy today..."

"Just one minute. I'll wait outside."

As Maya walked away with her tray, Amy's mind went blank. But eventually, she stood up with a shred of rationality, knowing the future was coming.

Nade and Iruki shrugged as they watched Amy follow Maya as if in a trance.

The book "Seeing the Darkness" tilted at a 45-degree angle and automatically slid into the bookshelf in the principal's office library.

With the sound of gears turning, the lock clicked shut inside the closed library.

A secret place designed long ago by Alpheas to store Erina's memories.

But now all her relics had been moved to the annex, and the room on the 3.5th floor was empty.

Alpheas and Olivia descended the stairs side by side.

Unlike Alpheas, who had a bitter smile, Olivia's expression was fierce. She even seemed tense.

"Hehe, it's been a while, old man."

Gaold, sitting cross-legged on the floor, raised his hand in greeting. Flue was standing next to him.

"Hello. I'm Flue, a certified 8th-level mage."

"It's been a while, Flue."

At Olivia's greeting, Flue lowered her gaze.

She had no shame in front of the sky, but socially, she had become a traitor, so she couldn't face his teacher.

"She was a brilliant child, but why did she end up with someone like Gaold..."

She had been a child Alpheas had kept an eye on since her days as the principal of the Royal Magic School.

But now her bright future was blocked. No, she was a fugitive who couldn't even guarantee her life tomorrow.

All because of Gaold.

How many people had one madman exhausted and how much chaos had he caused in society?

Gaold looked around with an amused expression.

"So this is the panic room that was just a rumor. I didn't think it actually existed. You're quite sly, old man."

Alpheas skipped the small talk.

"Why have you come to see me?"

"Well... Is it too much to ask for a warm welcome for a disciple visiting his alma mater?"

"Because of you, the school has been turned upside down. Agents come every day and ransack the school. If you had come a few days earlier, everyone would have been affected."

"Hehe, even the great Alpheas has changed. The kids here probably don't even know the agents came and went, and if there were still agents, they wouldn't have let me in."

"You know well. So I'll ask again. Why have you come to see me?"

Gaold sighed.

If he had come to make a difficult request, he should have lowered his stance, but he couldn't feel any affection for this school.

"I'm thinking of entering Istas."

"So, you want to meet Miro?"

"Hehe, did you think I came to retrieve something I left behind?"

"Gaold, your actions are causing chaos in the world. Miro doesn't want to see you anymore. She accepted everything and went in on her own."

"How do you know that?"

Gaold's eyes widened.

Sensing the extreme restraint, Flue squinted one eye, but Gaold's face only changed to a fierce expression without emitting any killing intent.

"You know how many people I've sent to their graves trying to approach Istas. Not a single person has entered in 20

years, including me. So how do you know Miro's thoughts?"

"Gaold, Miro..."

"Enough. I'll enter Istas myself. After all, we created it.

Actually, I have one more favor to ask."

Alpheas asked in a resigned voice, "Alright, what is it?"

"As you know, I've lost all my limbs. The association captured everyone. Although the key figures are still intact, I can't do anything with just my head. Lend me some people. Competent ones."

No matter how outstanding Gaold was, it was impossible for him to carry out all operations alone.

He needed someone with a powerful strike, someone to devise tactics, someone to execute them, and someone to support them—a minimum party was necessary.

"There's a bishop from the Karsis Monastery at this school."

Olivia burst out, "Do you think I'll send valuable school personnel to their deaths? And what you're planning goes against the survival of humanity. Isn't it enough that you're a traitor? Now you want to throw the world into chaos?"

"Shut up."

For the first time, Gaold looked Olivia directly in the eye since entering the room.

His restraint didn't explode, but the energy from his gaze alone seemed capable of piercing her body.

"Do you know why I haven't killed you yet? Huh? Do you? Answer me."

Olivia clenched her mouth shut and glared fiercely.

"Because you're not worth killing."

Gaold's teeth ground audibly.

"Abstain? A member of the faculty council, letting a student of the kingdom be dragged into the dimension of terror, and you abstain? Do you know what people like you are called? Hypocrites. You don't like this, you don't like that, holding one of the twenty cards that can determine humanity's survival, and you choose to abstain?"

Olivia's lips trembled. Her gaze, which had been fixed on Gaold, slowly lowered.

"It was... unavoidable."

No matter what she chose, it wouldn't have been the result Olivia wanted. No, in fact, that thought was just an excuse. She was simply scared. She was so terrified that she couldn't choose anything.

Transparent tears welled up in Olivia's eyes, vividly recalling the helplessness of that time.

Gaold turned away with a grim expression.

Recognized as a second-class archmage by the world, but unable to shed the shell of a woman. That's why she was only a second-class archmage.

'This is why I didn't want to come to this school.'

This place was full of the past.

No matter how much he tried to erase it, the past couldn't be erased.

Gaold couldn't remember what happened an hour ago, but he could vividly recall the scene on the day of the Judgment of the Twenty, down to the antennae of the bug on the leaf.

"Sigh."

Gaold looked back at Alpheas.

It was probably the first time anyone had seen such a deeply human expression on his face.

"Please, help me, Master."

"....."

There was a day known as the Judgment of the Twenty.

On that day, twenty people representing the world and Miro's position gathered to decide the future of humanity.

The result was 16 votes in favor, 1 against, and 3 abstentions.

The only person who valued one life more than the lives of all humanity was Mirhi Alpheas.

The only one who stood by Gaold's side, he willingly marked his card with a vote against.

"You know. I don't trust anyone but you, Master. Help me. We need to find Miro. She's not dead. She's still alive over there, so why won't you look for her?"

Alpheas was lost in thought.

Perhaps Olivia's choice during the Judgment of the Twenty was the most rational decision that good could make.

But he knew the feeling of losing someone precious right before his eyes, someone irreplaceable.

It wasn't a choice made for the world. Alpheas was also an inevitable madman.

"I'll ask Etella..."

Etella would probably grant permission.

A bishop of the Karsis Monastery and the previous successor of the Yin-Yang Wave Fist.

If he hadn't lowered his body and mind with the belief of One Thought Three Thousand, he wouldn't have the talent to be in his current position.

He was a suitable candidate for Gaold to use.

"Stay here for now. Olivia and I will handle the agents. Let's prepare to open Istras."

As Alpheas turned with a weary face, Gaold finally regained his smile.

Then, as if he had just remembered something, he raised his hand.

"Oh, wait a moment."

Alpheas turned back at the stairs.

"Since I'm asking, could you recruit one more person?"

Chapter 404

Shirone's team gathered at the park for the first time in a while to discuss their plans for the vacation.

If the second half of the final year was going to be more intense than the first, it was best to start preparing strategies now.

"Last year, I trained alone, but I found out that some students formed teams. So, I was thinking, why don't we form a group and do a training camp together?"

Amy, who had experienced the final year, suggested this, and the friends were considering it positively.

Iruki raised a point of concern, holding up a finger.

"Of course, having a team is advantageous for tasks like capturing high ground or combat. But you know, only ten people will pass. Even if we form a team, we'll have to compete against each other to be in the final ten. So, how much information should we share?"

If you had a trump card, it was natural to want to keep it until the final exam.

It was a problem that needed to be addressed clearly, as it was almost a miracle for all five members to pass.

Amy wasn't unaware of this issue.

"I thought the same until last year. But we don't have to use the entire vacation. We can gather for basic training first, and then each of us can research our special moves individually."

Amy argued that building teamwork might increase their chances of passing more than researching special moves alone.

The reason was that the current controller of the final year was Fermi, and all of Shirone's group had been marked by him.

Since they couldn't predict what might happen on the day of the final exam, sticking together was the only way to reduce variables.

"I think Amy is right."

Nade was all for it.

He didn't care much about the final exam, but training with friends was far more enjoyable than enduring a few months at his dreadful home.

"How about this? We do a short-term training camp for about a month, using the final year's system. We set daily goals and score ourselves."

Iruki nodded in agreement.

"Maintaining the final year's routine is a good idea. It will help us achieve more in a short time, and we can use the remaining time to train our special moves individually."

While various opinions were being presented, Shirone remained silent, just taking in the faces of his friends.

Nothing had been decided yet, but he felt a strange sensation.

If he had to recall something in his last moments, it would probably be the faces of the friends gathered here.

"Huh? Maya, are you sick?"

Shirone asked in surprise, looking at Maya last.

Maya didn't look well. Her face was pale as if she was scared, and her chest was heaving as if she was having trouble breathing.

Nade, noticing Maya's condition late, asked worriedly, "Are you okay, Maya? Should we take you to the infirmary?"

Maya quickly shook her head.

Then, as if she had just regained her memory, she suddenly looked up and turned to Shirone.

"Shirone."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

A silence fell over the park bench.

Nade's mouth was open, and Iruki blinked rapidly. Only Amy waited calmly for Shirone's reaction.

Shirone swallowed hard, staring intently at Maya.

This time, it wasn't a joke. Her feelings, which had dripped like water droplets day by day, had now formed a lake in her heart.

"Uh, should we... give you some space?"

Maya shook her head again.

"I don't think I could muster the courage a second time, so I wanted to say it in front of everyone. I'm sorry, Shirone. But I've come to love you. Please accept my feelings."

Maya took out a letter from her pocket. It smelled of flowers.

"Will you read it?"

Handing the letter to Shirone, she avoided everyone's gaze and stood up from the bench.

"I'll hear your answer then."

Leaving those mysterious words, Maya walked away. Nade glanced at Amy, who still maintained her poker face despite the situation.

Amy leaned over Shirone's shoulder from behind the bench.

"You're lucky. Getting a confession from a girl. What does it say?"

It would be rude to pass around Maya's heartfelt letter.

But considering the delicate relationship between Shirone and Amy, it wasn't something that could be easily dismissed.

As Shirone hesitated, Amy smiled and lightly patted his shoulder.

"I'm kidding. Why so serious? You knew Maya liked you."

"No, it's just so sudden..."

"Go to your room and read it alone. Read it two or three times. Then do what you want. Maya is a good girl. I'll go now. See you tomorrow. Bye."

Amy left without giving Shirone a chance to respond.

Her face was calm, but her voice was angry, and her actions were awkward.

"Hey, what are you going to do? Do you have someone in mind?"

Shirone held the letter and looked into the distance. Amy and Maya. They were such good people that he couldn't bear the thought of hurting either of them.

"I guess I have to make a decision now."

Maybe Maya's confession was a good thing.

Before discussing grand issues like Heaven or humanity, there were things he needed to sort out first.

"Nade, Iruki. I need a favor."

The next afternoon.

Shirone entered the principal's office.

Alpheas silently pointed to the bookshelf and opened a secret door.

As he descended the stairs into the room, he saw both expected and unexpected people waiting.

The former were Gaold and Flue, the latter were Etella and Shiina.

"Teacher?"

"You've come, Shirone."

Shiina didn't look well.

Having heard all about the existence and dangers of Heaven, the conspirators involved in this incident, and the people connected to it, she couldn't help but be emotional. Shirone realized why Gaold had come to Alpheas.

With his limbs cut off, there weren't many people Gaold could ask for help. A teacher from Alpheas' magic school would be a sufficient force.

"You must have had a hard time alone. Don't worry too much now. The teachers will protect you."

As a bishop of the Karsis Monastery, Etella wouldn't hesitate to act in the face of humanity's survival, but Shiina's decision was solely for Shirone.

In a global-scale incident, there was no room for Shirone's life, emotions, or dignity. Shiina chose to go to Heaven with the sole intention of protecting her student.

"Teacher..."

Had he unknowingly felt sorrow?

The days of nightmares, fearing his life would be destroyed by sudden events and worrying he might be executed by the National Intelligence Service, flashed before his eyes.

"You're here? I called you to share all the information as per the contract. Today, we open Istras and meet Miro. We can't talk while in deep meditation, but it's something we must confirm before going to Heaven."

Gaold's voice was excited.

It would be his first reunion with Miro in 20 years. He also knew it could be the last day he saw her.

"But is it okay to go like this? There might still be agents around."

The National Intelligence Service had barricaded Istras and searched the warehouse to find the "upper floor" where Miro's space-time was said to be.

Although they had left empty-handed, there was still a possibility they were lurking.

"Hehe, it's fine. We've come this far, it doesn't matter."

Gaold confidently left the room.

As the most powerful mage in Tormia acted as if there was no problem, the others followed without complaint.

Crossing the barricade of Istras, they saw ninety-eight warehouses scattered like dismantled blocks. They were in the highest level of separation and had stopped functioning.

"Nothing has changed here."

Gaold opened the cover of Istras' control panel.

As he fumbled, unsure of what to touch first, ten National Intelligence Service agents emerged from behind the building.

"Mikael Gaold, you are under arrest for treason under the Kingdom Security Act."

Shirone quickly assumed a combat stance.

Realizing the feared situation had become a reality, he understood how foolish it was to follow Gaold.

Even if he was a first-class grand mage, he had overlooked the fact that Gaold was fundamentally insane.

How could he have entrusted such an easy decision to Gaold? It was as if he had been bewitched.

Gaold didn't even look at the agents, still examining the control panel.

"Hmm, how was this operated? Hey, was it the red button?"

A cold voice came from behind the agents.

"It's the blue button, you idiot."

The agents parted, and a man walked out.

The moment Shirone saw him, he felt a chill run through his body.

He had slicked-back hair, no eyebrows, and thin, indistinguishable lips.

The most bizarre thing was his amber eyes. His irises ticked like clockwork gears.

"Oh, right, it was blue. Getting old makes me forgetful."

Ignoring Gaold's words, the man walked over to Alpheas. To Shirone, it looked like he moved with perfect uniform motion.

"How have you been, Principal?"

"Yes. It's been a while, Sein."

"Sein?"

Shirone finally looked away from the agents.

He was one of the founding members of the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society that Gaold had mentioned. He was also the one who created Istas' master equation.

Etella gently touched Shirone's shoulder and pointed to the agents.

"Shirone, use your synesthesia to examine them."

Following Etella's instruction, Shirone sensed that Sein's spirit zone was split into tendrils, connecting with all the National Intelligence Service agents.

"Mind control?"

"Yes. And it's top-level mind control."

If they came from the National Intelligence Service, the agents' combat abilities would be above average. Additionally, due to their professional nature, they would have undergone resistance training against mental attacks. A person who could successfully mind control such individuals with a 100% success rate.

Arin had mentioned that achieving this would require concentration equivalent to 20 times the mental strength of the opponent.

Istas started operating with a hum.

Gaold, who had taken his hand off the blue button, continued to look at the control panel and introduced Sein to Shirone. This was also part of the contract.

"Sein is a savant and a mental mage. He currently operates under the alias Snake in the Black Line. Despite appearances, he's a triple-A rated criminal designated by the Red Line. You might want to get his autograph."

"Black Line?"

Shirone glanced nervously at Sein.

The Black Line was a group that denied the taboos of magic and practiced magic based solely on personal beliefs.

It was on a different level from simply killing or tormenting people.

Even the notorious villain Arcane was positioned at the far end of the Red Line spectrum.

Only someone like Arius of the Magic Seven, who illegally infiltrated human minds to steal intellectual property, would be classified as a threat capable of collapsing the social system.

"If you were to name the strongest mental-type mages in the Black Line, you'd mention two people. One is Guitar Man of the Magic Seven, and the other is Snake. He'll be giving orders in our team. Of course, I'm the commander, but still." Sein scoffed.

"You're still full of nonsense. Did playing house at the association make you a real fool? The only reason someone

like you can pretend to be a commander is because my orders are precise."

'He has a personality similar to Iruki...'

Shirone saw Iruki's arrogance in Sein.

Living with a calculation ability that transcended humans, it seemed natural for his self-confidence to peak like that.

Chapter 405

"Move aside. You're still hopeless with machines."

Sein pushed Gaold away from the control panel and inspected it himself.

Seeing the former head of the Magic Association being pushed aside was a very unfamiliar sight for Shirone.

But Shirone's eyes soon filled with a sense of nostalgia.

'Ah, I see.'

Nade and Iruki.

If Shirone were to end up in a situation like Miro's, would those two look like this after decades?

Gaold, Miro, and Sein, the founding members of the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society, who were caught in the center of the most horrific incident in the world.

Even after 20 years, their paths had completely diverged, but their time was still frozen.

Gaold flipped his middle finger at the back of Sein's head.

Even an arch mage recognized by the world couldn't help but act childish when meeting an old classmate.

Unable to let go of his attachment, Gaold kept glancing over Sein's shoulder at the control panel.

But to him, machines were just mysterious objects that worked when you stuck pieces of metal together and chanted spells.

Then, suddenly, he had a mischievous thought and laughed wickedly.

"Hehe, you know that using mental magic on a national intelligence agent is a capital offense, right? If you want to live long, you better hope I get reinstated."

Sein quickly manipulated the control panel and replied.

"I don't care about Red Line laws, you idiot. Once they're under mind control, they won't remember anything that happened here. You seem pretty anxious. Should I just bury you alive?"

Etella frowned.

As a bishop of the Karsis Monastery, it was natural for her to be unable to tolerate a Black Line mage who muddled the world.

But she didn't take any action. She trusted Alpheas.

Even if it was due to a cherished student's earnest request, he wasn't someone who would ask for a mission that broke the Karsis Monastery's beliefs.

'He must have a reason.'

When she heard about Heaven, the first thought that came to her mind was that she shouldn't judge anything.

It wasn't a matter light enough to be evaluated by personal beliefs.

The only thing driving her was the mission to see with her own eyes the full story of the great flow that had likely started 20 years ago, or even much earlier.

Sein entered Istas' master mode.

As green letters flashed on the panel, he quickly input information by combining several symbols.

Shiina, who had been waiting patiently, couldn't suppress her curiosity and asked.

"But does the upper floor of Istas really exist? Even the intelligence agents from the National Intelligence Service couldn't find anything and left."

"The upper floor exists. There's just no way to enter it. It was designed that way from the start. Even I, who analyzed all of Istas' patterns, can't access it."

Shirone looked around at the scattered warehouses.

He wondered if a room that couldn't be accessed could exist when all the warehouses were already individually dismantled.

"How is that possible? We can enter all the warehouses now. That's why Mr. Sein created the master key for Iostas."

For the first time since arriving, Sein observed Shirone closely.

He knew Shirone was part of the project since Gaold had introduced him with special attention, but he still seemed like a soft rookie.

"How do you know about the master key?"

"I'm a member of the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society. One of my friends is a savant, and he said that no one could create a more beautiful master equation for Iostas."

Sein didn't smile, but his explanation became more detailed.

"That's probably true. It's an equation that equates a complex four-dimensional diagram to three dimensions."

Mathematically eliminating one dimension is comparable to making an ant understand human language. That's why anyone with the master equation can find the research society.

It's a map that takes the form of three dimensions but actually guides you to four-dimensional coordinates.

"The upper floor isn't limited to space, is it?"

Sein nodded.

Shirone's insight was impressive, but if he couldn't grasp this much, he wouldn't qualify to join Gaold's project in the first place.

"Right. In three dimensions, Iostas is just a warehouse made up of 89 buildings. But the upper floor exists in a higher dimension. That's why the agents couldn't find it."

"So, in addition to a specific space, a specific time must align?"

"Exactly. Take the 333 cube as an example. When you move the cube at coordinates 1.1.1 to coordinates 3.1.3, what changes is not just space but also time. No matter how fast you turn it, it takes at least 0.1 seconds. This is called spacetime. I devised a way to prevent anyone from

accessing Miro by hiding her spacetime at the origin of the cube."

Everyone was now listening intently to Sein.

Even Alpheas, who had once been Sein's teacher, was now in a position to learn after 20 years.

"No matter how you turn the cube, that is, no matter how you change Istas' pattern, the spacetime origin of the cube never moves, and thus the upper floor can be perfectly concealed. The master equation you're using for Istas was created to calculate this."

Shirone swallowed hard.

He hadn't expected such a serious reason behind the master equation, which he had thought was just a playful trick of the underground research society.

Shiina spoke up.

"But didn't we gather here today to go to the upper floor? If no one can enter, what are we waiting for here?"

"Another master key."

As if that word was a keyword, there was a crackling sound of electricity in the open space. It was the familiar noise of flicker magic to Shirone.

A pair of man and woman appeared through the trademark magic of a scale mage.

The woman was small and cute with a permed bob, and the man was tall with long blonde hair down to his waist.

The important thing was that both of them were familiar to Shirone. Probably.

If there couldn't be two identical people in the world, the blonde man with bandaged eyes couldn't be anyone else.

The eternal contemplator, Armin of the Radiant Eyes, was walking towards them.

"Oh, brother?"

Shiina couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Why was Armin, who should be wandering the world capturing landscapes on canvas, at the center of humanity's worst crisis?

"Is it really you, Armin?"

Shiina approached, but Armin coldly ignored her and kept walking.

His wife, Keira, also didn't spare a glance and headed towards Istas.

Shiina seemed to be in shock, standing still. Her mind was tangled, and she couldn't think of anything.

"You arrived at the exact time. Well, it would be rude to say that to the world's greatest time mage."

The world's greatest time mage.

A mage who had conquered the speed of light, so the title didn't seem strange to Shirone. But for Shiina, who knew nothing, it only deepened her confusion.

"A time mage? What are you talking about, brother?"

Armin remained silent to the end.

Sein, judging that confusion was not good before the big event, introduced Armin. It was ironic for Shiina, who thought she knew Armin best.

"To reach the upper floor of Istas, we need the help of a powerful time mage. Armin of the Radiant Eyes is the perfect candidate."

Shiina shook her head.

The more she heard, the more confused she became.

"Keira, what is going on? Are you joking?"

Keira, who always laughed cheerfully and sometimes made annoying remarks, didn't laugh this time.

She lowered her eyes coldly and spoke in a high-handed tone.

"Watch your words, Olifer Shiina. We are mages of the Ivory Tower's Human Safety Enforcement Division, Armin and Keira, affiliated with the White Line."

"White Line..."

Even Shirone, who knew Armin's identity, was surprised this time.

If the association was in the Red Line and factions in the Black Line, the White Line was a completely independent

institution that converged only on the Ivory Tower.

Magic that isn't misused in the world.

Purity that isn't swayed by the ruler's beliefs.

The mages of the Ivory Tower, whose motto was these two principles, pursued the extremes of magic purely.

Their power, known to be on par with an archmage of a nation, was not something a single kingdom could challenge.

When they presented their Ivory Tower credentials, even royalty trembled before the absolute rulers of the magical society.

But Armin was here as a member of the Ivory Tower.

And as a mage of the Human Safety Enforcement Division.

While the Ivory Tower mages didn't differentiate between departments, the Red Line paid the most attention to the Human Safety Enforcement Division, which had some connection to society.

In fact, 32 years ago, when Igor, the dictator of the Kon Kingdom, dabbled in necromancy, a mage from the Human Safety Enforcement Division entered alone, made him kneel, and crawl on the ground, which became a famous story.

Keira approached Gaold and got in his face.

She had come reluctantly because of Armin's stubbornness, but now that they were here, she wanted to make the most of it.

Armin was someone far removed from practicality.

"Since we brought Armin, you must keep your promise. First, the Ivory Tower has the right to record and disseminate information obtained from Miro's spacetime. Second, Olifer Shiina is prohibited from going to Heaven. You know Armin came here because of the second condition, right?"

"Of course. But let's make one thing clear. It's only if Shiina agrees. I really hate persuading people, especially women."

"Well, it's fine. Armin knows that too. But later, you have to tell him that I definitely emphasized the second condition to you."

"Hehe, you really have a tough life."

Keira frowned as if to say, "What's the point of talking?"

Stubborn Armin.

In fact, the Ivory Tower still hasn't made a definitive judgment about Heaven. They believe it's still a problem that human society can solve on its own.

But Armin fell for Gaold's trick.

To open the upper floor of Istas, a top-level time mage is needed, and Gaold, who wanted to reclaim Miro, couldn't be unaware of his existence.

The result of investigating Armin's whereabouts was the same reason the Ivory Tower could hold onto Armin.

Olifer Shiina.

A woman so precious to Armin that he would trade his life for her.

That's why Keira disliked Shiina even more.

'Che, does he like that woman so much? A woman with no charm at all.'

When Sein released the mind control, the ten agents fell to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. This was to ensure there were no variables that could interfere with the operation.

"Let's finish this before the agents regain consciousness. I'm going in now."

With those words, Sein pressed a button on the control panel.

The 89 warehouses began to interlock in a specific pattern. At this moment, even Shirone put aside his thoughts about Armin and focused on Istas.

A time mage from the Ivory Tower's White Line, a first-class grand mage from the Red Line, and the top mental mage from the Black Line.

In the presence of three grand mages who had reached the pinnacle of their respective fields, the upper floor of Istas was about to be opened for the first time in 20 years.

Chapter 406

Rumble. Thud, thud.

The buildings of Istras stacked up, transforming into a massive structure. It looked like a giant with thick legs rooted in the ground.

Sein, who had opened the warehouse on the giant's right leg, spoke to Alpheas.

"Please reactivate Istras once we go inside."

Only those who go to Heaven have the right to verify Miro's spacetime.

At least, that's what Alpheas thought, and he intended to do what he could.

"Let's begin."

The playful look on Gaold's face had disappeared.

Finally, he would meet Miro.

It was fortunate that she was in deep meditation. The anger he had bottled up for 20 years might otherwise have shaken him.

Once everyone was inside the warehouse, Alpheas reactivated Istras.

Following the pattern set by Sein, the cube-shaped buildings began to intricately combine and separate repeatedly.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The heartbeat of Istras could be heard.

With each step, Sein's amber irises ticked.

The left iris tilted left and right at a 15-degree angle, while the right iris rotated at different speeds in each section.

Sein varied his stride instead of his walking speed, controlling space to manipulate time.

"This way."

Sein turned at a right angle from the center of the warehouse and opened a door, connecting it to another

warehouse that rose up, forming a passageway. As soon as they crossed the boundary, the previous warehouse fell below and was overtaken by other blocks, moving away.

This process repeated countless times.

'Amazing. Only a servant could pull this off.'

The warehouse moved, Sein moved, and time moved. It felt like the concept of space he knew was collapsing. Shirone was truly walking through four-dimensional spacetime.

When Sein's steps stopped at the final destination, Shirone's eyes filled with nostalgia.

Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society

The familiar sign was hanging there.

Always tilted, ignoring balance, as if it would tilt on its own.

When they opened the door, the traces of the agents' ransacking were still there.

The formulas Iruki had written on the blackboard were partially erased, and the picture books Nade had cherished were torn to shreds and left scattered.

Sein walked to the sofa.

"In 12 seconds, we will reach the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society. The upper floor of Istas is at those spacetime coordinates. Armin, it's your turn now."

Armin stepped forward, passing Sein.

As a scale mage who handled time and space, he could guess what the upper floor of Istas was without lengthy explanations.

"7 seconds. 6 seconds. 5 seconds."

As Sein began the countdown, a strong wind, like being caught in a storm, could be heard.

It was the phenomenon occurring as the spacetime coordinates of the upper floor approached them.

The objects in the research society blurred, melting into the density of the strong wind, and a stone door, similar to the

one seen in Galliente, overlapped as an afterimage on the table in front of the sofa.

Whooooooooosh!

"4 seconds. 3 seconds."

As time passed, the scenery faded, and the color of the stone door became more vivid.

The objects flickered and became transparent in the receding spacetime coordinates.

"2 seconds. 1 second."

When all the scenery disappeared, and only the stone door reached 100% materialization.

"Now."

Armin cast his spell.

Stop.

"Oh my..."

Shiina's eyes widened in amazement.

Etella and Shirone felt the same.

The upper floor of Istas, hidden in a specific space and time, was revealed, captured by the stop magic.

Twenty years ago, a genius girl who shocked the world appeared. Humanity imprisoned her at a coordinate in spacetime where no one could find her.

This was the truth of the upper floor of Istas, which had been only a rumor at Alpheas Magic School.

'So this is what it was.'

Shirone finally understood Sein's words.

The origin of the cube. The place countless agents couldn't find.

Armin turned from the stone door and spoke.

"As long as time is stopped, the door will remain. But it's best to hurry. If the magic is released, you'll be trapped in Miro's spacetime."

It seemed unlikely, but with their lives at stake, caution was necessary.

Shirone had also escaped Miro's spacetime before, but that was because he was an unlocker.

Moreover, Miro was currently in deep meditation, so they couldn't rely on her help.

Gaold didn't think about future problems.

Despite being a first-class grand mage, his heart was pounding, and his face was more flushed than ever.

"Let's go, Sein."

"Yes."

Sein's irises rotated in opposite directions as he followed.

A phenomenon that occurred when calmness and excitement acted simultaneously.

This ability to perfectly separate emotion and reason was why he could reach the pinnacle of anti-magic.

"Shirone, was it? You should do it."

The door to the upper floor was sealed with an immortal function, similar to the door of Goffin.

There were two unlockers in the team anyway. But since Armin needed to focus on the stop magic, the opening was Shirone's task.

When Shirone unlocked the immortal function, the letters on the stone door glowed, disassembling into small cubes and spreading into a sphere.

As the material melted, a massive black hole formed.

"Um... who goes in first?"

For some reason, it felt like they needed to decide the order. It didn't matter now, but it could be interpreted as a significant historical event later.

"The one who unlocked it should go first. Shirone, you're the first entrant."

Armin gently pushed Shirone with a kind smile.

Shiina, watching this, felt her mind grow more complicated. She felt like she couldn't even remember who Armin was anymore.

"Then, I'll go in."

After a moment of darkness, a view of the center of a massive temple unfolded.

Columns 2 kilometers high supported the ceiling, unmistakably Miro's spacetime.

'I never thought I'd come back here.'

People began to emerge from the black hole one by one. Just like when Shirone first came here, everyone seemed speechless at the enormous scale of the temple, which defied human comprehension.

"Huh? But..."

Shirone quickly turned around. Everyone else was also looking around.

"What? What's going on?"

Miro was nowhere to be seen.

"Shirone, is this place..."

"No. This is Miro's spacetime. It's exactly the same as when I came here a year ago."

Gaold cast a fly spell.

With a pop, his body quickly flew from one end of the temple to the other.

It was a 'jet' type spell that flew by exploding air pressure, not by lift.

Gaold quickly flew around the vast temple.

It was similar to Shirone's flight, but the level of movement was on a different scale.

When Gaold returned to his place, his face began to twist horribly. It looked like the inferno of hell was about to unfold.

"Those damned bastards..."

"Calm down. Nothing has happened yet. It's just that Miro isn't in Miro's spacetime."

Miro wasn't in Miro's spacetime.

It was a fact, but it was something that shouldn't happen.

First, no one could enter Miro's spacetime. Also, if she was in deep meditation, it was impossible for her to leave on her own.

No, if that were possible, Gaold wouldn't have waited 20 years.

"It's hijacking."

Sein concluded.

"It seems Heaven has kidnapped Miro."

Gaold asked.

"Is that possible? Nothing has ever crossed over from Heaven before."

"No, it has."

Armin bent down and picked up debris from the floor.

It was rubble that had fallen from the ceiling when Miro's spacetime was impacted.

Rubbing it between his fingers to check the texture, he spoke.

"I heard Miro's spacetime cracked recently. A lawmaker crossed over to the Kingdom of Tormia. I understand a mage from the Akeanis Temple handled it and reported it."

"But it was just a mental body. A crack isn't enough to kidnap a whole person."

"The Ivory Tower agrees. But that's just human thinking. If it's Heaven, especially the archangels, they might have found a special method."

Sein propped his chin and pondered.

"Why did they take Miro?"

It was a puzzling question.

Heaven had been planning the final war and had consistently shown intentions of infiltration since Miro's spacetime was created.

Shirone asked.

"Isn't it to invade this world?"

Etella spoke.

"No. I don't think that's possible."

Sein agreed.

"Taking Miro alone has no effect. Even if they kill Miro, Miro's spacetime won't be destroyed."

Shirone asked in confusion.

"It won't be destroyed?"

"Miro's spacetime is fundamentally a dimension based on the void. It continuously creates new dimensions within the

dimension. It uses that infinity to create boundaries in spacetime. And Miro accelerated the void's speed through deep meditation. Even if Miro dies, the inertia of deep meditation will continue to strengthen Miro's spacetime. It's a theory, of course, but you wouldn't understand."

As one moves further into the mental world after death, the control of consciousness weakens, and one is influenced by the most intense inertia experienced in life.

Even if the virtual zone is turned off, if one can't escape the void, they will be eternally buried in their mind.

"No, I think I understand."

Sein snorted.

"That's just a delusion. It's a beginner's mistake to think you've grasped the essence just because you understand the context."

How many people in this world truly understand Miro's spacetime?

Probably not many, and certainly not a novice attending a magic school.

Shiina spoke up.

"Shirone has passed through the void."

Sein's eyebrow muscles twitched. It was the maximum expression of surprise he could show.

The only person who had passed through the void at Alpheas Magic School was Miro. He vividly remembered the uproar when a global genius had appeared.

'Hmm. Indeed, Gaold has found someone worthwhile.'

Gaold summarized simply.

"Anyway, they can't kill Miro. If they took her, it means they've found a way. We don't have much time. Once the team is ready, we'll head to Heaven."

Sein had no objections. He had been navigating the Black Line for 20 years for this day.

'But... is this really normal?'

Something felt off.

It was just a feeling.

Could today's outcome be merely a series of small coincidences, an unfortunate event that could happen to anyone?

If so, what was this unsettling sense of discord that wouldn't leave his mind?

If things were going to go wrong like this, they should have gone wrong somehow over the past 19 years, a highly irrational thought.

'Why now? Why is this happening? Am I thinking normally?

The world doesn't flow as we wish. Attributing transcendental meaning to coincidences is no different from superstition.'

He wanted to conclude that way.

But Sein couldn't shake it off.

It wasn't an illogical thought. It was a subtle disturbance occurring in the realm of intuition beyond logic.

'Something is definitely...'

Something was out of place.

Chapter 407

The group gathered in Alpheas' secret room after leaving Miro's spacetime.

Gaold sat cross-legged, resting his hands on his knees, deep in thought.

Although he was disappointed not to see Miro, that wasn't the most pressing issue at the moment.

"The final war might come sooner than expected. We need to move faster. Kangnan is on his way to Galliante. Another person might join, or they might not, but it's time to make a decision."

Gaold spoke to Shirone.

"If the final war breaks out, those who fight the enemy will become heroes. But if you follow us now, you'll be seen as the traitor who hastened the final war."

Hero or traitor, it didn't matter to Shirone.

If someone as skilled as Gaold was risking his life for this mission, Shirone's chances of survival were less than 1%.

"If you give me time, how long can you wait?"

"We leave for Galliante tonight. We'll wait for Kangnan, but no longer than two days. If you decide to go to Heaven, come to Galliante. The old man will handle the school issues. Not that it matters when you're heading to your death."

Gaold didn't hesitate to reveal the danger.

He needed Shirone's abilities, but if Shirone wasn't fully committed, it was better for him not to join the team.

Bringing along a terrified rookie would only lead to their annihilation.

Armin stepped closer to Gaold.

Despite confirming Miro's spacetime, he followed to fulfill the contract.

"Shiina is not going to Heaven."

"Ah, that was the deal. Fine. Shiina, you can't go to Heaven. You're off the team as of now."

Shiina shook her head.

If that was why Armin had come, and if Gaold's reason for recruiting her was only that, it was an insult to her pride as a certified 5th-level mage.

"Why should I follow someone else's opinion instead of the team's? I'm going to Heaven."

"She says so? Then the contract is void."

Light shone from Armin's bandages.

Keira swallowed nervously at the blade-like aura.

"This is no joke. You better honor the contract if you want to go to Heaven in one piece."

Armin revealed his identity, knowing it would hurt Shiina, solely to prevent her from going to Heaven.

Rescue Miro? Nonsense.

Armin, of the Human Safety Enforcement Division, knew Heaven's military power better than anyone.

Gaold was a unique case, specialized solely in combat among the Red Line 1st class, but even if he fought with all his might, it was doubtful he could handle even a low-ranking angel, let alone an archangel.

Of course, it's not impossible.

Nothing is absolute in combat, and even a slim chance can snowball into a strategic advantage.

But Heaven's enemies are unlike anything in the human world.

Without sufficient information, the winner is determined by sheer force.

That's why the Ivory Tower and the Holy War focus on delaying the final war until they gather enough information.

Gaold replied indifferently.

"What do you want me to do? I'm not one to ask for favors.

I'm not a parasite like you. Even if I don't take her, Shiina will come to Heaven on her own."

Veins bulged on Armin's temples.

"Enough, Gaold. If you want to die, go die alone. Your madness is a nuisance to the world."

"Ah, sorry for the trouble. But do you know what really pisses me off? When you talk about the trouble I've caused, you conveniently forget the trouble the world has caused me. I suffered alone, but you all share the burden, so stop whining. It's disgusting to listen to."

Armin scoffed.

"The trouble the world caused you? No, you're just a madman consumed by vile desires. Did Miro really have no choice? On the day of the Judgment of the Twenty..."

"What do you know?"

Gaold's face turned pale.

His wide-open eyes blazed with fire.

"What do you know about Miro?"

"Eek!"

Flue squeezed her eyes shut.

The inferno of hell engulfed the space, accompanied by the screams of demons.

As Gaold's pain spread beyond his body, even the teachers shuddered in agony.

It was an intensity that would drive an ordinary person mad.

Armin's nose wrinkled sharply.

As his radiant eyes lit up ominously, the flames from behind Armin surged towards Gaold.

At the center of where they stood, the worlds of fire and eternity clashed.

"Don't act so high and mighty. Don't think you're the only one who's experienced hell. This is your last warning. Promise you won't take Shiina."

"Hehe, now I understand. You're just a clueless brat. The eternal contemplator? Hiding in an unchanging world, whining..."

Gaold's spirit zone expanded.

"And you dare talk about hell?"

Boom!

The shockwave from their clashing spirit zones spread out in a sphere, denting the walls of the room.

"Ugh..."

As the real power hit, Shirone felt like he was dying.

The only consolation was that he wasn't the only one struggling to endure.

The worlds of fire and eternity intertwined, creating unbearable pressure that squeezed everyone's hearts.

Then, two golden gears pierced through the veil of hell, interlocking and spinning.

As the scenery was sucked in and shattered, the original world began to reappear from the edges.

As hell disappeared, everyone stared blankly at the gears.

They had transformed into Sein's amber irises, glowing like halos and spinning rapidly.

Iron Wheel Eyes - Equilibrium.

Sein's specialty, using two gears to calculate rational and emotional coefficients, neutralizing all phenomena.

Gaold was satisfied to see that his old classmate's skills hadn't rusted, especially before their journey to Heaven.

However, he was displeased to be treated the same as Armin, an ally with the same goal.

"What? Are we going to have a three-way fight now?"

"You're in front of the master. Restrain yourself, at least for now."

Sein's feelings towards Alpheas were no different from Gaold's.

When the whole world abandoned the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society, Alpheas was the only one who stood by them.

Even Gaold had to comply this time.

Alpheas wasn't one to be swayed by such intensity, but if there was one person Gaold didn't want to trouble, it was him.

Sein looked at Armin.

"I apologize for using your emotions. But we need as many skilled people as possible. If you knew this from the start, why not try to persuade Shiina yourself? As I said, if she gives up, we won't force her. This isn't a mission to be carried out by coercion."

Shiina stepped forward.

She didn't want to look at Armin's face, but she couldn't stand others arguing over her.

"Answer me, Armin."

Armin, who hadn't been able to turn his head, spoke desperately as Shiina broke the silence.

"Shiina, I'm sorry for hiding it. But I..."

"Is Keira your wife?"

Keira approached with a bright expression but quickly retreated with a pale face.

She sensed a terrifying killing intent from behind Armin, who had slightly turned his head.

Armin turned back to Shiina.

The killing intent vanished, and he was a gentle lamb again.

"No, Keira is my watcher. There were circumstances. We had a fake marriage for a mission. Shiina, everything was for you. Give me a chance to explain."

Cold breath escaped between Shiina's lips.

A fake marriage? A watcher?

Was he really saying that?

'How much did I suffer...'

Every night, she vowed to forget. She shivered in loneliness, desperately suppressing her desire to take him away, wishing him happiness with Keira.

And it was all a lie?

After deceiving her, acting like a loving couple in front of her, he claimed it was all for her?

"Shiina, you can be angry. But..."

"No, I'll speak."

Shiina raised her hand to stop him.

There must have been circumstances. Even if there weren't, she had no right to be angry at Armin.

She could imagine the life he had lived after losing his eyes to save her.

"You're my lifesaver. No matter why you deceived me, the fact that you gave me a new life doesn't change."

Armin clenched his lips and raised his eyebrows.

You don't have to thank me.

If you want, I can give you my heart right now. If you want, Shiina.

Shiina approached Armin and hugged his waist.

Even though she was in the arms of the man she had longed for, her heart felt like it was being whipped.

"Thank you, brother. I'll never forget. I'll always be grateful for the life you gave me. But we're adults now. We can't treat each other based on childhood feelings. Please, leave me. That's my last wish."

"Shiina..."

Armin wept in his soul.

Without eyes, he couldn't even shed tears, feeling pathetic.

He had to leave. He could do anything Shiina wanted.

And he would wait. On the off chance she might miss him.

Even if she didn't, he would wait forever.

"Okay, I'll do as you say. I'll do anything you want."

Armin reached out to touch Shiina's cheek but clenched his fist and turned away.

"Let's go."

"Armin, you can't..."

Keira tried to shout something to Shiina, but Armin's flicker magic was faster.

With a crackle of electricity, the two disappeared.

The flicker magic, which crossed space even in an enclosed area, reminded them that he was an unlocker.

Gaold spoke with a relieved expression.

"Let's summarize. I can't guarantee Kangnan's recruitment, but if she joins, we'll have no issues on the utility side. If

Shirone joins, our strategic options will expand. Shiina and I will handle the damage dealing. Sein will manage crowd control, and we'll need one manipulator and one scout."

Flue felt immense pride at her mentioned position.

Normally, a certified 8th-level mage wouldn't be part of such a project. This indicated the team's significant power gaps.

As expected, Gaold didn't look satisfied.

"We probably need a hitman. If we can eliminate a key target, our tactical options will greatly increase. Do we have any skilled swordsmen?"

Sein replied, "Where would we suddenly find such a person? Didn't you have a swordmaster in your guard?"

"He's out of contact. Probably dead. Anyway, think about it. We need someone who can eliminate a target even if they die. Someone who doesn't need to be accounted for afterward. Basically, someone who's desperate to die."

"Your requirements are too high."

"If even one condition isn't met, we won't recruit them.

We're a suicide squad. Anyone looking for rewards will only be a liability."

Etella suggested, "How about looking among certified knights? Renowned swordsmen are certainly skilled."

"No. Those with strong beliefs get unnecessarily fired up. We're not going to war. A hitman is perfect for focusing on rescuing Miro."

Sein checked the time and said, "Let's head to Galliante. There might be a swordsman in the Kergo autonomous district."

At that moment, Shiina raised her hand.

"How about a knight without beliefs?"

Everyone turned to Shiina.

Gaold frowned and asked, "A knight without beliefs? Can you even call that a knight? Well, it doesn't matter. Why?"

"I know someone. Someone who knows how to kill properly."

Chapter 408

It was a gloomy day.

Shirone packed his clothes, dry food, and emergency supplies into a military backpack, preparing for any situation.

He grabbed the fully packed backpack with his right hand and placed it into the slot of his Cubrick.

Holding Armand, he inspected the scabbard and stored it in the second slot of the Cubrick.

The total weight was 38.7 kilograms. It was packed optimally, leaving some spare space.

"....."

Shirone checked the room to see if he had forgotten anything and then checked the time.

Seeing that it was close to midnight, he took out Maya's letter from the desk drawer and read it again.

Maya had fallen for Shirone on the day of the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society's presentation.

When Shirone stood in front of Maya at the graduation welcome party, it felt like fate.

The question about who he wanted to kiss was half a joke, half a wishful thought, hoping he might choose her.

Her feelings were fully expressed in the four-page letter. It was a sincere confession, devoid of embellishments.

If you accept my feelings, come to the park at midnight in two days.

Even if you don't come, I will never resent or hate you.

I hope you show your true feelings this time. I love you.

Shirone folded the letter along the crease Maya had made and put it back in the envelope. He carefully placed it in his inner pocket, pressing it gently with his palm.

"Maya..."

Shirone left the dormitory early, not wanting to keep her waiting on such a day.

He arrived at the park ten minutes early.

Under the only lit streetlamp, he waited for Maya to arrive.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

The bell tolled midnight.

Dark clouds thickened, and a storm rolled in. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and cold rain began to fall.

Swoosh!

The sound of countless percussion instruments disoriented Shirone's hearing.

Water streamed down from his wet hair, and his clothes grew heavier as they soaked up the rain.

Shirone watched the path Maya would take.

Dong.

The bell tolled 1 AM.

Maya still hadn't arrived.

He heard the sound of someone walking through the puddles behind him.

Only when the rain stopped falling on his head did Shirone turn around.

Amy stood there, holding an umbrella.

They just stared at each other.

Amy hoped Shirone would speak first, but he had nothing to say to her.

Amy's suppressed emotions finally exploded.

Resentment, anger, confusion, betrayal, and perhaps something more desperate.

Clenching her teeth, she spoke in a trembling voice.

"Why are you here?"

Shirone didn't answer.

"Tell me. Why are you here? Are you really with Maya..."

"This has nothing to do with you."

Amy's heart sank.

She knew Maya was going to confess.

She had agreed, confident in her understanding of Shirone's feelings. She regretted it, fearing Maya's courage.

Unable to bear it, she had run to the park.

Shirone was waiting for Maya. And now, he was looking at her with cold eyes.

"No, it can't be."

Amy's voice trembled.

"Something's wrong, right? You've been acting strange lately. You're strange now. Tell me! What's going on? If you don't tell me, I won't see you anymore."

"Fine. I don't care."

Amy couldn't believe it.

Why was he being so cold?

This wasn't the Shirone she knew. She was scared.

For the first time, she felt completely exposed in front of Shirone.

"Why? Why are you doing this? Why won't you tell me anything? Is it because I'm not like Maya? You fool, I... I also..."

Shirone hugged Amy tightly. He had no other way to hide his contorted face.

Hot tears mixed with the cold rain as they streamed down his cheeks.

"Amy, thank you for everything."

Overwhelmed with sorrow, Amy burst into tears.

She tried to push him away, but her hands slipped.

"No. Don't hug me. Tell me! Why are you doing this? You jerk!"

She had no strength left.

Time pushed her forward, and a cliff awaited her. For the first time, she wished she could turn back time.

Shirone gave her a sad smile and spoke his final words.

"Goodbye, Amy..."

Thud.

The umbrella fell from Amy's hand. The sound of the rain grew louder.

Even as Shirone walked away, she stood there, unable to move, her face blank.

Tears filled her eyes, blinding her.

"Ugh. Ugh."

As the sobs stuck in her throat burst out, the sky roared, crying for her.

Thud! Thud!

Graduation class head teacher Collie woke up to the sound of knocking on the annex door.

Hurriedly putting on a robe and rubbing his sleepy eyes, he opened the door to find Maya, drenched in rain.

"Maya? What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Teacher..."

Unable to control her emotions, Maya threw herself into Collie's arms and burst into tears.

"Waaah!"

Collie was taken aback but checked Maya's condition.

Calming her shivering body seemed the first priority.

Collie lit a fire in the fireplace, sat Maya down, and handed her a towel.

She made cocoa and placed it in front of her, but Maya just stared blankly at the flames.

'She went.'

Collie realized today was the day Maya had mentioned.

During the graduation schedule, she didn't show it, but she had a lot of affection for Maya, whom she had personally enrolled and taught at the magic school.

'A delicate child. Always considering others' feelings, neglecting her own.'

Collie first saw Maya at the opening performance of singer Canary's outdoor concert.

Commoners had the chance to watch from outside the barricades, and the nobles seemed to like this arrangement.

So the concert planner decided to have a commoner perform the opening act to highlight Canary's excellence.

That's how 14-year-old Maya was recruited.

But the planner's scheme backfired. The 14-year-old's popular song was so beautiful it gave everyone goosebumps.

The nobles were naturally displeased and began booing and criticizing as soon as the song ended.

Some even demanded the tribe chief bring Maya to their bed for a large sum of money.

The chief fought back and was beaten and driven away, and Maya gave up her dream of becoming a singer that day.

Collie suggested Maya become a mage.

Though delicate, she had undeniable talent and succeeded in entering the spirit zone within two years.

She didn't expect Maya to become a great mage.

If she could become a mage, uplift her tribe, and someday sing the songs she truly wanted, that would be enough.

"Shirone didn't come out?"

Maya smiled faintly. It was the only happiness she could find in her pain.

"No. He came out. Foolishly, I told him not to. He could have cut ties with me, but he came out. He waited for me for over an hour."

Maya covered her face with her hands.

"And it hurts. Because I like him so much. Because I want to be his woman."

"Why didn't you talk to him? Maybe he came out because he really likes you."

Maya shook her head.

"I knew from the start I couldn't win Shirone's heart. I confessed anyway. I liked him so much, I couldn't bear not to say it. So I walked into hell, knowing it."

Maya looked at Collie with a terrified expression.

"But what do I do? It hurts so much. It hurts so much I feel like I'm going to die. Can I forget Shirone? Can I go back to who I was before I met him?"

Collie spoke honestly.

"Maya, you can't erase past memories. It's something you'll carry with you for life."

"I don't think I can. How can I live with this pain..."

Maya finally broke down, sobbing.

Collie approached and hugged her, patting her back.

"There's no need to be afraid. The scars won't disappear, but as you live, you'll get so many new ones that you won't know which ones Shirone left. And then you'll be okay. You'll just live."

Maya buried her face in Collie's chest.

"That's not living. How can I live without any hope?"

"Maya, we don't live because of hope. We create hope to live. You may never forget, but it'll be okay. You'll create new hope."

"I don't want that. I want Shirone to come to me. I want Shirone to love me."

When cut by a knife, it doesn't hurt immediately. The real pain comes when you realize you've been cut.

So what Maya felt now was not pain but fear. Fear of the pain to come.

'The more delicate the heart, the harder it is. But Maya, an artist is someone who tells human stories. You can't see humans from high above. So remember today's pain. Sing from the lowest place. Then someday, everyone will soothe your wounds.'

Collie patted Maya's back.

Her shoulders trembled pitifully, like a baby bird with broken wings in a storm.

3 AM.

Shirone had never intended to sleep, so he returned to his dorm, washed, and changed into new clothes.

Sitting at his desk, he tried to block out his thoughts, but a sigh tinged with the remnants of tears escaped.

"Is everything settled now?"

He had left the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Society. Nade had been very angry but eventually hugged

him, telling him to come back no matter what.
And today, he had said his goodbyes to Maya and Amy.
He wanted to sever all ties before going to Heaven.
No, he had to.
If he had any lingering attachments here, he might hesitate at a crucial moment. He might waver in a situation where he absolutely had to die.
In a short time, Shirone had managed to sever all his ties. But the faces of his loved ones still floated in his mind. Rian, Tess, and... his parents, who always wished for their son's happiness.
He was glad he had told them he loved them before leaving home.
That was truly the best thing Shirone had ever done in his life.
He opened the drawer and took out a clean sheet of paper. The farewells he hadn't been able to say would now have to be written.
Turning the pen in his fingers, Shirone finally began to write on the paper.
Will.
"Sob. Sob."
Tears of sorrow streamed down his face.
He wanted to graduate from magic school. He wanted to experience the world with his friends. He wanted to feel the excitement he had felt when he held Amy's hand once more.
"Mom..."
To Shirone, his parents were Vincent and Olina. That fact would never change.
He should have known before deciding to go to Heaven.
No, he shouldn't have met Ikael in the first place.
But he had found out.
He hadn't shown it to anyone, but the answer to the question he had carried in his heart all his life was with her.
'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.'

Wiping his tears with his sleeve, Shirone continued writing his will.

He expressed gratitude to those who had helped him, shared that he was happy to have received so much love, and conveyed his respect for his parents.

In this way, he was emptying everything he had held inside for 19 years.

Chapter 409:

Magic Association.

Sakiri, an investigator from the Inspection Division 3 who had previously interrogated Kanis and Arin, was heading to the special criminal detention center in the basement of the association.

Accompanying him was Blenner, the Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Service's Third Division.

The Third Division of the National Intelligence Service, known as the Grand Heaven Information Management Division, is a secretive organization composed solely of black agents whose ranks are not disclosed to civilians.

The reason the head of such a department personally visited the association was to obtain something to thwart Gaold's plan.

It was the confession of the third-class grand mage, Isabel. "Gaold is a problem, a real problem. He's a disgrace to the kingdom. I never liked him from the start. He made everyone tired and then slipped away on his own."

Sakiri wasn't fooled by Blenner's friendly demeanor.

Everyone in the Inspection Division knew that the interim Magic Association president, Lupist, had lobbied Blenner.

"Isabel is really tough too. She looks so pretty, tsk tsk.

That's why mages are no good."

It's never pleasant to hear a non-mage badmouth mages, especially when the target is a third-class grand mage you respect.

But Sakiri didn't show his emotions. He could easily suppress his feelings when necessary.

"I've heard you're the best in the field. Do your best. I'll handle the aftermath. Just make sure to get her to talk."

"It's not easy. Even if she's not a combatant, she's still a grand mage. She won't lie out of fear of pain."

"Haha, that's why I called you. They say no criminal can escape the clutches of Sakiri from Inspection Division 3."

"I'll do my best."

Sakiri answered nonchalantly, lost in thought.

Interim president Lupist had long seen Gaold as a thorn in his side. He would love to use the association's full power to eliminate Gaold.

'But things didn't go as planned.'

He had seized the opportunity to fulfill his long-held wish, but the problem was that Gaold's reputation within the association wasn't as bad as expected.

A madman, but pure because of it, and stronger than anyone despite his nasty temper.

This was clearly outside Lupist's calculations.

Isabel's life-risking defense of Gaold at the National Emergency Hearing left many association mages feeling uneasy.

A non-Gaold loyalist had vouched for Gaold's innocence.

With the endorsement of a third-class grand mage like Isabel, the basis for judgment was shaken, regardless of the truth.

Lupist, with his goal in sight, became desperate.

To officially become the association president, he needed a reason to mobilize the association's full power, so he reached out to Blenner, the Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Service.

'This is the conclusion I've reached. But...'

Questions remained.

Forcing a certified mage to perjure and torturing them is dangerous, even for the National Intelligence Service. How did they get approval?

'Who's behind this?'

Sakiri subtly probed Blenner's intentions.

"How far should the confession go? Is it enough to say Isabel was a Gaold loyalist and that's why she defended him?"

"Hmm, it should be a bit stronger. How about saying she was the mastermind behind the assassination attempt on His Majesty? Whether she planned it or funded it, that's up to you."

'They're planning to completely ruin her.'

No one should know what happens in the basement today. They plan to cut off all loose ends.

That's why Sakiri was to handle the interrogation alone, without any observers.

"As long as she doesn't die, do whatever it takes to get the confession. I've set up recording devices. After that, bring me Obscura B. And you'll get a promotion."

'So that's it.'

The final puzzle piece fell into place in Sakiri's mind.

The torture of the beautiful grand mage would be recorded in full. What better snuff film for the old politicians in their decadent social clubs?

That's all it was.

Outside, there were assassination attempts on the king, changes in the Magic Association presidency, and the world turning upside down, but some people were just indulging in their hobbies.

'Perhaps this is also a very human thing.'

Sakiri understood.

If humans have the ability to do something, they will do it.

When they arrived at the special criminal detention center, Sakiri fixed his gaze on the iron door.

Blenner, aware of the situation, showed no interest in what was inside.

"Then I'll leave it to you. Handle it quickly. We need the confession within 48 hours."

48 hours.

"Don't worry. This is what got me this far."

Blenner patted Sakiri's shoulder reassuringly and turned away.

Only when the sound of footsteps faded did Sakiri touch the security device on the iron door.

Entering the spirit zone, the lock read his personal information and clicked open.

Pulling the half-open door, he entered to find Isabel sitting on a chair against the dark prison wall.

Always maintaining a neat appearance and taking pride in it, she had been a model employee of the Magic Association. But now, with disheveled hair covering her face and her wrists in magic control cuffs on her lap, she was a pitiful criminal.

Three recording devices were set up: two on the sides and one away from the door. Only the one in front blinked red, recording Isabel's state for days.

"Meeting in a place like this feels strange."

Isabel didn't respond.

She just sat there, slumped like a corpse, repeating hollow breaths.

Sakiri ignored it and unbuttoned his sleeves, checking the recording devices.

"Do you know what's the scariest thing I've realized in life? Humans are given infinite freedom. It's true. No matter how absurd, humans can do anything."

Confirming the left recording device was off, Sakiri moved to the right wall.

"Is it impossible to strangle a child you love dearly? If you think so, isn't that a foolish belief? No matter how much you love them, you can just do it. That's human freedom."

After checking the second device, Sakiri looked into the lens of the last active device in front.

"Reset Obscura B for record storage."

Pressing the button, the device shut down, preparing to restart.

Only after all three recording devices were off did Isabel lift her head. Her eyes, devoid of hope, met Sakiri's face.

"Come to think of it, tomorrow is the anniversary of my first son's death."

Sakiri, now a father of two daughters, had once had a son. But he had died at two from Trice disease, which rotted his body.

Sakiri was an irregular eater.

"Well, that's life. Shall we begin?"

Flipping a switch on the wall, the ceiling lights turned on, making the prison as bright as day.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

The walls opened in succession, expanding the prison to the length of the corridor.

Every conceivable torture device and tool was there.

"Most torture rooms are dark, but I prefer bright ones.

Torture is a form of communication. Seeing your body get damaged might feel dirty, but just give up."

Sakiri picked up scissors to cut the prison uniform and checked the blade.

"Where should we start? What's your weakness? Pain?

Foreign objects? Fear? Body modification? Shame?"

Isabel spoke calmly.

"You're kind, Sakiri."

"Take it as an insult. There's no point provoking me before we start. Water torture is a good start. It's better to be clean for the show."

"Otherwise... why are you conflicted?"

Sakiri's hand, playing with the scissors, stopped.

"Conflicted?"

"You should know. No matter what you do to me, I won't retract my statement from the hearing. But your irregular eating 'Scales of Truth' is an exception. I don't know the activation conditions, but there's no need to waste time with this charade."

Sakiri, staring at the scissors, sighed and turned around.

"Hah, you and everyone else just talk."

Clang!

The scissors fell back into place with a clatter.

Standing still, Sakiri slowly turned to look down at Isabel.

"Why did you do it?"

Isabel tilted her head slightly, as if she didn't understand.

"Why Gaold? You're not even a loyalist. Gaold and Lupist both use the association for personal gain. Lupist seeks power, Gaold seeks revenge. So why defend Gaold?"

Isabel's answer was simple.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Sakiri, I don't know. It wasn't a thought-out decision. Yes, as you said, Gaold and Lupist are both self-serving. But the reason I chose Gaold..."

Isabel thought for a moment and then gave a bitter smile.

"I just liked Gaold a bit more than Lupist. That's all."

"....."

Sakiri's jaw twitched.

Turning back to the shelf of torture tools, his face twisted in pain.

'Damn it. There was such an easy way.'

When did the name 'mage' become synonymous with a politician's dog?

Are there no more iron-willed intellects fighting for what they believe is right in the association?

".....48 hours."

Sakiri picked up a 20-centimeter-long tool that looked like an awl.

"In 48 hours, Lupist will move the association, ignoring public opinion. If you perjure yourself, the time will be shorter."

Isabel hadn't considered that situation.

"48 hours. That's quite tight."

"That's how anxious Lupist is. He wants to become the association president with the support of the majority of the

members, but as long as Gaold is alive, even his current position is unstable. In other words, the longer you hold out, the more time Gaold gains."

Sakiri pricked the awl with his fingertip and then turned his cold gaze back to Isabel.

"I'll preserve your last bit of dignity as a human and as a woman. It's not because I have any good feelings towards you. I just don't want to cater to the perverted tastes of old men. But the pain will be considerable."

Isabel didn't care. She just stared at the ceiling, lost in thought, forgetting the terrible time ahead.

'Haha, Gaold. How many people are you really inconveniencing?'

Yes, why?

Why did she defend Gaold, who had nothing to do with her?

'Maybe I, too, am captivated by your madness.'

The recording devices restarted, and the lights came on.

Sakiri activated the remaining two devices and stood where the three focuses converged, announcing the official start of the interrogation.

"From now on, we will begin the interrogation of former Magic Association librarian Isabel."

For the first time, Isabel's eyes showed a spark of life.

'Go, Gaold. Transcend good and evil, surpass the future of humanity, and reach the ultimate state that humans can achieve.'

Sakiri grabbed Isabel's hair and yanked her head back violently.

His eyes widened as he looked at her delicate neck.

'From now on, 48 hours. Endure.'

Screams echoed through the detention center corridor.

Chapter 410:

If you travel about two hours by carriage from the city of Creas, you will reach the small port town of Sanperos.

Galliante is a world-renowned resort, but outside of vacation season, this place was just a quiet fishing village.

Arriving around noon, Shirone bought a handful of dried fish from a stall.

The slightly aged dried fish was chewy like jelly and had a deep sea flavor.

There were no regular ferries, so he would have to hire a captain separately.

The fare was expensive, but the money he had saved up so far would be enough.

When he asked a villager, they said it would take about an hour for the boats that went out at dawn to return with their catch.

With nowhere else to go, Shirone walked to the breakwater and looked out at the distant sea.

It wasn't his first time traveling, and his team members were waiting on the island, but he felt like he was alone in the world.

'It's probably lunchtime at school by now.'

Shirone didn't think about it.

There was no place to return to. There shouldn't be.

"Are you Arian Shirone?"

A woman, dressed in attire completely unrelated to the Kingdom of Tormia, stood behind Shirone.

Despite the warm weather, her sleeves extended below her wrists, and the hood draped over her back was thicker than winter clothing.

The sight of her sucking on a pacifier was extremely odd, but her eyes were deep and mysterious, creating an

atmosphere that made it impossible to look at her strangely. Shirone turned his gaze to the strange creature floating above the woman's head.

It was a squishy, transparent monster, with a rotating sphere inside generating an electric field.

The auto-prism scattered light, creating a transparency effect within a certain range.

It had almost no combat power but was an incredibly useful utility monster, listed as a Tier 4 summoning magic.

Shirone looked at her warily.

In the worst-case scenario, he would draw Armand and fight, but if she could summon a Tier 4 monster, she was likely more powerful than him.

"Who are you? How do you know my name...?"

"I am Zulu. Gaold told me to bring you."

"Huh? Da?"

Shirone was momentarily taken aback by her strange way of speaking, then widened his eyes and looked directly at her face.

"What? Zulu?"

There was no way he wouldn't know the name of the world's only and strongest summoning mage, capable of commanding a Tier 1 Lich.

Unable to believe it, Shirone pointed at her with his finger and asked again.

"...Zulu?"

"Yes, Zulu."

Zulu nodded nonchalantly and said, "We don't have much time. We need to cross the border before it gets dark, so follow me."

"Where is the president?"

"He has already arrived in Galliente and is preparing with Kangnan. Are you coming or not?"

"I'll go."

Abandoning his fruitless search, Shirone approached Zulu, who then deactivated the auto-prism and cast mass

teleportation.

The scenery seemed to be pulled into a single point before expanding into a new view.

They were now halfway up the mountain behind the port.

The breakwater where they had been standing was a small dot at the edge of their vision, and below the mountain, the fishing village was spread out.

Zulu summoned the giant bird Kaidera there.

With smooth, hairless skin and a beak as long as an awl, its massive claws seemed to grip the mountain.

Despite its fierce appearance, Kaidera nuzzled Zulu like a child, then knelt and lowered one wing.

Shirone followed Zulu up the wing.

Kaidera's spine protruded from its skin like a shark's fin, reducing air resistance and providing a stable place to sit in the hollow of its spine.

"Be careful. We'll be flying high."

Kaidera flapped its wings and pushed off the ground with its legs, soaring vertically into the sky.

Shirone, pale-faced, stared at the rapidly approaching sky.

When they began flying on a normal trajectory, the ground was just a distant dot.

"Kaidera is a lift-based giant bird. It doesn't need much oxygen, so it can fly at higher altitudes than muscle-based creatures. This increases the chances of avoiding the search algorithms of reconnaissance drones."

Reconnaissance drones with a basic diameter of 2 kilometers in their spirit zone could easily search the sky.

However, the higher the altitude, the more they had to transform their spirit zone into target or sniper mode, reducing the search range.

Shirone finally felt the reality of the situation.

The person in front of him was indeed Zulu.

"Thank you for coming to get me. Honestly, I didn't expect someone as great as you to come."

"Gaold said the association would move soon. It seems there are enemies within. We decided to prepare quickly and head to Heaven. That's why I'm in charge of transportation. We're on our way to pick up a woman named Shiina."

"Oh, I see."

"Of course, I would have come even if it wasn't urgent. Sein said he would use whatever he could to achieve results. I'll be in charge of utility in the team, so let me know if you need anything."

Zulu's words made sense.

From now on, they had to move organically as a team. Regardless of seniority, everyone had to do their best in their roles.

"Yes! Thank you very much!"

Shirone bowed energetically.

Kentra City.

The meat produced in Kentra, Tormia's famous livestock area, is of such high quality that it is designated as a tribute to the royal castle.

The restaurant business was also thriving, with entire streets filled with restaurants.

People wearing cowboy hats were common, leather clothing was in fashion, and whips were selling like hotcakes.

But the reason Shiina chose this place for the meeting wasn't because the meat was delicious or to buy Kentra specialties.

It was because this was the exact midpoint between Creas and Bashka.

Shiina checked the restaurant sign and opened the door. Compared to Creas, it had a more casual atmosphere, and although she had made a reservation, there were still some empty seats.

She drank the cup of water the waiter poured for her and waited anxiously for the person she was meeting.

There were about 20 minutes left until the appointment, but she still couldn't be sure if he would come.

No, if he was sane, he wouldn't come.

After a matchmaking meeting, she hadn't heard from him, and now she was asking for a lunch meeting just because she received a congratulatory letter for becoming a certified 5th-level mage.

And she sent the invitation via express telegram.

No one would rush to Kentra City for lunch after receiving a telegram at dawn.

'Nothing to lose.'

The door opened with a chime, and a man entered.

Parca Kuan, an instructor at the Kaizen Swordsmanship School.

His cold eyes, observing the atmosphere, were the same as during their matchmaking meeting, but his attire was much more polished this time.

Kuan's icy gaze softened slightly when he saw Shiina sitting at the table.

As he moved with a limp, all the nobles' eyes focused on him.

He had never tried to hide his limp, but at times like this, he always felt like an outcast in the crowd.

Especially when the people's gazes shifted from Kuan to Shiina, he felt an urge to cut down everyone present.

Shiina stood up and raised her hand.

True to her nature, she didn't offer a warm smile, but she didn't care about the people's stares.

There was also Armin, who had sacrificed his eyes for her.

Shiina wasn't bothered by Kuan's limp at all.

Prejudiced gazes couldn't be hidden, so Kuan could sense Shiina's sincerity.

Perhaps that's why he had come this far, despite himself.

"Thank you for coming. I'm sorry for the sudden request."

"I thought there must be a reason for the urgent telegram.

Please, have a seat."

The food arrived, but they still didn't speak. They just focused on cutting and eating the meat.

Neither of them was used to such situations.

But Kuan, being the man, mustered the courage to speak first.

"Congratulations. A certified 5th-level mage at such a young age is truly impressive."

Shiina couldn't delay any longer.

She didn't have much time, and if Kuan refused, she would have to leave for Galliente immediately.

"I sent the telegram because I have a favor to ask."

It was an odd thing to say in response to a congratulatory message, so Kuan blinked, holding his utensils.

Then he nodded and said, "Yes, please go ahead."

Shiina explained the project.

She withheld information that could endanger the team, but since they would no longer have to worry about the world's scrutiny after tomorrow, the content was straightforward and unfiltered.

"...So we need a hitman in the team. I think you're the right person for the job."

Kuan, who had been motionless throughout the explanation, dropped his utensils onto the plate with a clatter. He then gulped down water as if he had lost his appetite.

Shiina waited calmly.

It was no different from asking him to go to his death. It would leave a stain on his name in history.

Persuasion was impossible.

From now on, it was entirely up to his judgment.

Kuan stared at the restaurant floor, lost in thought. Then he looked back at Shiina and spoke.

"May I ask one question?"

"Anything. As long as it's information I can disclose."

"Why me?"

Shiina's gaze turned cold.

"As you can see, my leg is not in perfect condition. And I'm a swordsman who relies on my legs. Why does it have to be me?"

"That's because of your skill, Mr. Kuan..."

Shiina swallowed the flattery she was about to say.

She knew why Kuan had come to this meeting. No man would travel a long distance to have lunch with a woman he didn't like.

Although she had let Armin go in her heart, she didn't want to use Kuan's feelings.

She would simply tell the truth and wait for his decision.

"Mr. Kuan, it's because it doesn't matter when you die."

Shiina spoke firmly.

"I heard you have no parents, siblings, or connections. If you die, there's no one to take action. Even if things go wrong, there's no need to worry about the aftermath."

Kuan stared at Shiina with a blank expression.

No matter what, saying such things to someone's face...

He had thought things were going unusually well since he received the urgent telegram.

"But it's not because I underestimated your skills. Your swordsmanship is..."

"Heh. Heh heh heh!"

Kuan dropped his head and laughed, his shoulders shaking, causing Shiina to stop speaking with a tense expression.

"No need to worry about the aftermath? If you really thought that..."

Kuan's eyes gleamed with a chilling light as he grinned.

"You've come to the right person."

Now he understood why it was this woman.

No prejudice, no pity.

For someone tired of the hypocritical lives of people, her blunt honesty was refreshing.

Kuan retracted his earlier thoughts.

It seemed that God was still watching over his life.

Heaven.

What better place to serve as the grave of a sword demon?

Kuan placed his hands on the table and stood up.

"Let's go. It seems urgent. There's nothing to prepare. I settled my affairs ten years ago."

"I appreciate it, but at least a word of notice..."

"Don't worry. This is the decision of a swordsman. If you resolve yourself at the moment of death, it's too late.

There's no need to look back on the way to the battlefield."

It was an extreme resolve, but it was hard to find someone more suitable for the role of a hitman.

Regardless of his motives, he was part of a suicide squad carrying the future of humanity into the flames.

Shiina sincerely respected his resolve.

"Thank you."

Kuan also gripped his sword handle and bowed his head, swearing as a swordsman.

"The pleasure is mine."

Chapter 411:

As the giant bird Kaidera flew towards Galliente Island, it spotted a cargo ship crossing the open sea and lowered its altitude.

When Zulu dismissed Kaidera, the four people, including Shiina and Kuan, began to fall rapidly towards the sea. Zulu and Shiina used fly magic, while Shirone spread his wings to control his descent.

For Kuan, a swordsman, altitude was not a familiar environment, but he didn't even blink as he confirmed the ship's position.

His ability to generate external force through vibration to counteract gravitational acceleration was no less than a mage's skill.

Shiina was impressed by the skill of the death magician she had only heard about in rumors.

Ten years ago, he was considered unparalleled in swordsmanship movement.

Such a person had lost his Achilles tendon, much like the one who had lost his eyes for her.

'Come to think of it, they are similar.'

The four landed on the deserted aft deck of the ship.

At the same time, Zulu summoned the auto-prism, making them all invisible.

'As expected, things are easier with skilled people.'

How many could infiltrate a ship at sea and reach Galliente without being detected?

If Sein were here, he could have used Equilibrium to block out sound as well.

No matter how dangerous Heaven was, with a team like this, they wouldn't be easily defeated.

The warehouse was filled with goods from the mainland.

The four of them went to a corner where sacks of rice were piled up and sat back-to-back in pairs.

"When we reach the port, I can't summon the auto-prism. There's a risk of being detected by a Jonah. Flue will be waiting at the rendezvous point, so we need to get out without being noticed."

Shiina handed a robe to Kuan.

Zulu could cover her face with her current clothes, and Shirone could use his diamond armor to blend in.

An hour later, the ship docked at the port. There was a commotion outside the warehouse, and the door opened hurriedly.

As soon as the sailors entered, the four slipped out.

The deck was busy with workers loading cargo from the island, so no one paid attention to them.

The dock was bustling with ship mechanics, cargo handlers, warehouse managers, and traders.

Gis, who had a deep connection with Shirone, was also running around the docks, soliciting travelers.

"Hey, hey! I'll carry your luggage! I'll guide you to Galliente's famous Kergo ruins! Translation services available!"

Shirone pulled his robe's hood down and glanced at Gis.

'You're still the same, Gis. Is Yuna doing well too?'

Even though the Parrot Thieves had left, it seemed he was living a decent life.

"Huh? Who's that?"

When Gis turned around, Shirone lowered his head and followed his companions out of the dock.

He wanted to say hello, but there was nothing to say as he was heading towards his death, bidding farewell to the world.

'Be happy, Gis.'

Gis, staring blankly at Shirone, was approached by his friends with worried expressions.

"Ugh, why aren't we getting any customers today? Huh? Gis, what's wrong? Did you see a ghost? Who was that?"

"No, I just felt strange. Those people..."

His friend looked at the hooded figures and frowned. It seemed Gis's bad habit had resurfaced.

"Hey, don't bother with people like that. They look dangerous. If you get involved, you might not survive."

Another friend agreed.

"My instincts as a ten-year hawker tell me the same. Those people reek of danger."

Despite his friends' warnings, Gis couldn't take his eyes off them until they disappeared.

He didn't know why, but a nostalgic feeling washed over him.

'Come to think of it... I wonder how they're doing.'

"Hey! Over here! Need a porter?"

A large man who had disembarked from the passenger ship approached, carrying luggage in both hands.

Gis quickly snapped out of it. He raised his hand and ran over faster than anyone.

"Yes, yes! I'm coming!"

Kergo Ruins.

Gaold, Kangnan, Sein, Zulu, Flue, Etella, Shiina, Kuan, and Shirone.

The nine participants in this project gathered together for the first time.

There was no need for a separate briefing as they had talked along the way.

There were a few agents in the ruins, but Sein, who had been waiting for a day, took care of them all.

Of course, they couldn't let their guard down, so it was best to cover their faces.

However, the main target, Gaold, threw back his hood and even took off his robe, tossing it to the ground.

Kangnan gritted his teeth and spoke.

"Put it on while I'm being nice."

"It's suffocating. Once we go in, it's over. From now on, we're heading to the Kergo autonomous district."

Sein added.

"If there's someone waiting at Goffin's Gate, we'll assess their skills and recruit them. We might add one more person to this team."

The group headed to the stepped altar on the east side of the central temple.

It was the place where Shirone had opened the Immortal Function and passed Miro's test.

A Kergo native was guarding the entrance, but it wasn't the same person Shirone had seen before.

With Chief Kadum's death, the political landscape of the Kergo tribe had likely changed significantly.

When Shirone and his friends visited a year ago, the native had exuded a terrifying aura, but now he seemed nervous, swallowing hard at the sight of Gaold's group.

As a Kergo warrior, the gatekeeper couldn't fail to sense the refined, blade-like aura emanating from the nine of them.

Gaold approached and spoke.

"Kertia, ro Hoima. Akrasia, Widmia Benzen."

Knock on my door, and it will open.

It was a nostalgic password that remained in Shirone's memory.

But the native's reaction was different this time. Shaking his head with a serious expression, he spoke in Kergo.

"Not now. There are too many people waiting to go to Heaven. Come back in three days."

Gaold frowned slightly and swung his hand, sending the native flying with a thud.

Shirone, staring in shock at the motionless native on the ground, asked Sein.

"What did the native say to make him so angry?"

"Gaold doesn't understand Kergo."

"....."

When Gaold activated the device, the wall of the altar collapsed, revealing a door.

Kangnan added a comment.

"But he doesn't like Kergo."

Entering the altar, they descended an endless square spiral staircase.

After about 20 minutes, they reached a corridor. As before, two natives guarded the iron door.

From here, it was the world of Kergo, with no intersection with outside civilization.

The natives had no qualms about displaying their tattoos and were much more aggressive than those guarding the entrance above.

"Wait. How did you get in? From today, entry to Heaven is..."

Gaold struck the native's jaw with the back of his hand, sending him to the ground with a thud.

The other native, about to shout in anger, was silenced by a blow to his jaw from Gaold's other hand.

Shirone, staring blankly at the two unconscious, nose-bleeding natives, thought this wasn't right.

If they opened the Immortal Function in the Hall of Achievement and Sacrifice, they could go to Goffin's Gate with everyone's welcome. There was no need to cause trouble with Kergo.

"Um, can't we just follow the proper procedure? I know some of the natives here, and if we light all eight eyes of the angel..."

"Angel?"

Gaold stopped abruptly and turned his head.

"Shirone, this is just a toy my classmate made."

Shirone fell silent.

He could sense Gaold's terrifying anger, but that wasn't the only reason. He thought he understood why Gaold disliked Kergo.

Inside the iron door was an octagonal room.

Three men guarded the opposite iron door, and in the center stood a man with white tattoos symbolizing a Kergo priest. Even Shirone could see that their level of power was different from those who had blocked their way before. But Gaold ignored him and entered the altar where the eight spheres created by Miro floated.

The priest frowned and moved towards them.

"Who are you? How dare outsiders enter the sacred angel's room..."

Before he could finish speaking, Gaold grabbed a sphere and cast a spell.

A simple air press shook the altar with a thud.

The priest, looking around in shock, quickly turned his gaze to the sphere.

The white light that Shirone couldn't see a year ago was now shining brightly.

Shirone stared intently at the sphere.

It was amazing that the white light was on, but more surprising was the small number displayed.

1,008,000.

"One million eight thousand points..."

Gaold approached the stunned priest, looked him straight in the eye, and said briefly.

"Move."

The priest's legs moved on their own, making way for Gaold.

It was a score far exceeding the passing mark in the language of the gods.

When they reached the Kergo autonomous district, warriors who had heard the news were guarding the entrance.

Their eyes, holding their weapons high, gleamed with vigilance towards the outsiders.

"This is the sacred land of Kergo! If you trespass, we will kill you without question!"

As Gaold walked towards the wall of spears, he compressed an air sphere in his palm.

Compared to the citizens of Heaven, the Kergo here were cute.

Warriors willing to die for Anke La. Moreover, their individual combat abilities were on a different level.

But to Gaold, they were all just Kergos.

"Everyone, lower your weapons!"

Just as Gaold's press magic was about to explode, a sturdy man walked through the warriors.

His black tattoos had turned gold, but Shirone recognized his face immediately.

It was Mahatu, who had opposed Chief Kadum as a member of the Anti-Angel faction.

The golden tattoos indicated that he had become the chief.

As expected, the warriors lowered their weapons and knelt.

"Chief! They are heretics who assaulted the Kergo priest!

Why do you dampen our resolve?"

Mahatu briefly met Gaold's eyes before walking towards the eight companions standing behind him.

"It's been a while, Sir Shirone."

Mahatu had learned the continental language.

He believed in improving the lives of the tribespeople by separating religion from society, a necessary skill for negotiating with the Galliante government.

"Mr. Mahatu, you've become the chief."

"I don't know if I'm qualified, but it happened."

The warriors couldn't contain their anger.

To them, assaulting a priest was the worst crime imaginable.

"Chief! Explain yourself! Who are these people?"

Mahatu asked Shirone with a troubled expression.

"Why didn't you prove the angel's power?"

"Ah, well... there were some circumstances."

Mahatu seemed to understand.

Recently, many people had been flocking to the Kergo ruins.

What on earth was happening in Heaven?

The severity of the situation was evident from the level of the people Shirone had brought.

'What are these monsters?'

As Kergo's greatest warrior, Mahatu could sense it.

Each of them was a master who had honed their skills to the extreme. Especially Gaold, who didn't seem human.

Mahatu, who thought he would never lose in terms of fighting spirit, felt his resolve waver just by briefly meeting Gaold's eyes. Shirone couldn't help it either.

Although extreme conflict was avoided due to ongoing negotiations, the tension between the warriors and Gaold remained intense.

"Punish the heretics who assaulted the priest! We are ready to fight! We're not afraid of you!"

"Yeah, come on! Come at us!"

Kangnan looked at Gaold arguing with the warriors who didn't understand him and rubbed his temples in frustration.

'This guy shouldn't be the commander.'

Yet, he let it go because sometimes Gaold's methods were necessary.

After all, wasn't this the day Gaold had waited for 20 years? No matter how annoying he was, Kangnan couldn't scold him today.

"Everyone, quiet! How dare you defy my orders!"

"Chief! We are ready to die for your command. But compromising with heretics denies the very existence of Kergo!"

"Fools. Do you know who is here?"

The warriors' gazes turned to Shirone.

But having been imprisoned under Kadum's iron rule a year ago, they had no way of recognizing the boy's face.

Mahatu raised his hand and introduced Shirone.

"This is Sir Shirone, the messenger of the gods who punished Kadum's faction and saved us, the Anti-Angel faction."

Chapter 412:

Shirone and his companions followed Mahatu through a complex maze.

Upon learning that he was a messenger of the gods, the warriors all knelt, and even after entering the communal area, they were warmly welcomed by the tribespeople.

Unlike Kadum, who offered massive tributes to the messenger of the gods to gain eternal life, Mahatu transparently managed Kergo's funds.

The lives of the tribespeople improved, and their faces were full of vitality.

Although Shirone hadn't fought for Kergo, opening Goffin's Gate and heading to Heaven made him their savior.

"I'd love to hold a festival, but it seems you're in a hurry."

"Yes. We need to get to Heaven as soon as possible."

Mahatu didn't ask about the situation in Heaven.

The Kergos still worship Anke La and revere the angels, but what mattered most to him was the well-being of his people.

Sein asked, "How many are waiting? I heard it's at full capacity."

Anyone could go to Heaven if an unlocker opened Goffin's Gate, but Miro created the Hall of Achievement and Sacrifice to prevent indiscriminate travel to Heaven, allowing only chosen warriors to pass.

If it was at full capacity, it meant many were waiting for an unlocker to arrive.

Mahatu awkwardly licked his lips.

"Actually, there aren't that many. About seven."

"That's strange. Then why block entry?"

"Well... it's not something I can explain. But you'll understand when you see it."

Gaold didn't care.

The only thing he needed in Kergo was Goffin's Gate.
If there were skilled people among those waiting to go to Heaven, he would take them, but matching the high level of his team would be difficult.

"Fine. Let's go see and get it over with."

Mahatu quickened his pace, showing his sincerity.

They arrived at a massive iron door engraved with a giant's carving.

"This is the Hall of Warriors. The warriors who wish to go to Heaven are waiting here."

When Mahatu opened the door, Gaold entered immediately, followed by the others.

The seven warriors Mahatu mentioned were scattered around, watching Gaold sharply.

A swordsman sitting with a longsword asked, "Are you a warrior or an angel?"

Gaold didn't respond. After assessing the seven, he turned to Sein and said, "They need to be at least certified 6th level. If not, they're not worth evaluating."

A mage in the corner frowned.

"You talk as if you're already a certified 6th level."

"And if I am?"

"Haha! Is that why you're so arrogant? I've killed countless certified mages. Evaluating skill by rank is outdated. Life and death are determined by how much hell you've experienced."

The mage revealed five rings on his right hand and stepped forward.

The swordsman holding his sword spoke irritably.

"Hey, I thought I was first?"

"Doesn't matter. Anyone with skill can go. Isn't that the rule?"

The mage standing in front of Gaold beckoned him with his right hand.

"I'll show you the level beyond ranks."

Gaold pointed his finger at him.

With a bang, the air gun fired, and the mage's body slammed into the wall. Spitting blood, he collapsed to the floor, unable to move.

"Next."

Shirone frowned.

Gaold hadn't intended to kill, but Shirone knew the power of Gaold's air gun better than anyone.

"I also agree with what that man said."

An elderly mage stretched his neck and walked to the center.

"There is a level beyond ranks. But without skill, theory is just delusion. I'm a bit different..."

As the mage's face twisted to one side, Gaold, who had teleported, struck his face with the back of his hand.

The mage's head wobbled like a punchball before he collapsed like a log.

"Next."

The five remaining people, having seen two fall in an instant, didn't move.

This wasn't a team dreaming of quick riches on the outskirts of Heaven.

It was clearly a task force with business in Heaven.

When no one stepped forward, Gaold pointed at the swordsman sitting with his sword.

"Hey, didn't you say something about being first?"

The swordsman glared at Gaold with his mouth shut.

Then he suddenly relaxed and raised his hands in surrender.

"Haha, I give up. Acknowledging skill is also... Ugh!"

Gaold, who had rushed like a dog, punched him.

As the press magic exploded on the swordsman's jaw, his face slid across the floor in the direction he was hit.

"All talk, no action."

The atmosphere in the room rapidly cooled.

Gaold glanced at the remaining four, then turned his head towards the door.

"Get out. If you don't want to die."

Without hesitation, the four scrambled out the door.
With only the unconscious and Shirone's group left, a chilly air filled the Hall of Warriors.

Gaold dusted off his hands and turned to the door.

"That's enough. Nice and clean."

"There's still one more."

Mahatu entered the Hall of Warriors.

While his skill was certainly above those present, Gaold still thought going to Heaven was too much for him.

"What? Are you challenging too?"

"No. Actually..."

Mahatu hesitated, then looked outside the door.

"There is another messenger of the gods. He asked not to let any more warriors in..."

"Huh?"

As Mahatu made way, a familiar man entered.

It was Armin of the Radiant Eyes, the eternal contemplator.

"Oh."

To catch a big fish, you need good bait.

Shiina was perfect for catching Armin.

Shiina's eyes turned cold.

How long would he treat her like a child?

But when she saw Armin's face, her words came out less harsh than she intended.

"Why are you here? Did you forget my request?"

"No, I remember. I didn't come to interfere in your life. I'm here to keep a promise to myself."

Gaold spoke.

"Sorry, but that's not possible. We don't work with the White Line. They're too unpredictable."

"I've left the Ivory Tower. Isn't that enough?"

Shiina's eyes widened.

If he had thrown away the magical utopia that only the world's greatest mages could enter, his resolve was no ordinary one.

"Why? And what about Keira?"

Armin didn't explain the details. His expression briefly showed a hint of heaviness.

"Shiina, nothing in the world is more important than you. Heaven is a dangerous place. I can't let you go alone. Not for the sake of the Olifer School that raised me."

"Shiina is a certified 5th-level mage."

"Mr. Kuan..."

Shiina was surprised that the usually quiet Kuan spoke up.

"I can guess your relationship, but it seems you're underestimating her. And you don't need to worry about Shiina's life. No one will die before I do."

A mage's position is to survive until the end of the party. Regardless of skill, it was a matter of pride for a swordsman if they died first.

'Kuan...'

The sword demon who had cut down two members of the continent's strongest swordsmanship group, Feng Zhang.

Such a person seemed to think highly of Shiina.

In a situation where they had to follow the madman Gaold, it was a comforting fact, but as her brother, he couldn't help feeling hurt.

'Then again, what right do I have...'

Except for Shiina, everyone welcomed Armin's inclusion.

The master of time magic who had conquered the speed of light.

Especially his stop magic, the world's strongest crowd control.

"Fine, if you're not with the White Line, you're in. But I'll be in command. If you disobey, you're out."

Armin had no complaints.

With Shiina as a hostage, fighting for the team was the best option.

Thus, the final team of ten was assembled to reclaim Miro, with Heaven in their sights.

'Wow, seeing them all together is really impressive.'

Shirone couldn't believe he was part of this team.

A task force of the best talents from the White, Red, and Black Lines.

Mahatu provided the remaining rooms.

The ten members, each with their own room, had dinner and gathered in the largest room for a meeting.

The time to open Goffin's Gate was set for 6 AM the next day.

Considering the association's pursuit, leaving immediately was an option, but they would need to sleep first anyway. Since resting in Heaven could be a battle, it was better to spend the night here.

Gaold spread the map Kangnam had given him on the table. It was a spray chart of Heaven, with colored dots marking various zones.

"Heaven is currently undergoing a great upheaval. There's a revolution among the citizens, and rebels are active. This is a real-time threat map showing zones of level 2 and above. Well, not real-time, since it's from three months ago."

Gaold's loyalists, who had been on an espionage mission in Heaven, sent this map as their last communication.

Sein spoke.

"After confirming Istas, we need to revise our strategy. The priority is to check Miro's condition. Depending on the situation, changing the coordinates of the Akashic Records might be meaningless."

Etella spoke.

"If Heaven kidnapped Miro, shouldn't we reassess the enemy's state? It means they're already prepared."

"Right. A preemptive strike through infiltration is difficult. We'll have to see the situation, but we'll use a strategy of causing as much chaos as possible before infiltrating."

Armin spoke.

"Causing chaos in Heaven? There aren't many ways to do that. Are you thinking of using the rebels?"

"That's definitely something to keep in mind. But the rebels won't move easily. That's why we need the ancient weapon,

Tagis. If we can neutralize Heaven's interception system, Aegis, they might reconsider."

Armin shook his head.

"No. Even if we break through Aegis, the chances of the rebels launching a full-scale war are slim. Most of them were once citizens of Heaven, so they know its power better than anyone. If Mecca and Nor were united, Heaven couldn't ignore their strength, but the problem is fear. Deep-seated fear isn't easily forgotten."

"Fear can be removed. Anyway, Heaven's situation will be far from what we expect. We'll adapt as we go. We have the masterpiece, after all."

Shiina asked, "What do you mean by 'masterpiece'?"

Sein looked at Shirone.

"It's you, Shirone. If you succeed, it could have the same effect as mobilizing the entire rebel force. So, let's hear it. How exactly do you plan to blow up Heaven?"

With everyone's eyes suddenly on him, Shirone swallowed nervously.

He had to explain this before they left for Heaven, but the atmosphere was different from when he told Gaold.

From now on, every word would be part of their strategy.

Gaold nudged him, as if to reassure him.

"Hehe, no need to hesitate, Shirone. From what I see, it's a brilliantly insane spell."

'That's what makes it even more unsettling...'

Chapter 413:

"Go ahead and explain, Shirone. It's just a hypothesis. We'll listen and judge," Zulu encouraged.

Gaining courage from Zulu's words, Shirone repeated the explanation he had given to Gaold.

"First, it's a spell based on Ataraxia."

"Of course," Gaold replied.

To have even a 1% chance of destroying Heaven, starting with Ataraxia was the best approach for Shirone.

"The casting direction will be upwards, so I'll deploy the magic circle above my head."

"Upwards? Interesting," Gaold remarked.

It was indeed a unique starting method.

As everyone's anticipation grew, Shirone continued.

"Ataraxia is a trigger spell, so it doesn't have a set range. To maximize that advantage, I thought shooting it upwards would be most effective."

"I understand. So, what will you shoot?"

"A laser."

"A laser?"

Everyone knew what a laser was, but the sky seemed too empty to destroy anything.

"Yes. I'll amplify the laser's linearity with Ataraxia and shoot it as high as possible."

Plu asked, "How high are we talking?"

"Well, it's a rough calculation, but about... 6,000 kilometers."

"6,000 kilometers?" Plu exclaimed.

Shiina added, "It's possible with a laser. It's a single straight wavelength. Combined with Ataraxia's amplification and the trigger characteristic, it could reach even higher altitudes.

So, Shirone?"

Shirone began his detailed explanation.

"At an altitude of 6,000 kilometers, I'll cast dark sphere using the laser's information transmission method. It compresses divine particles to a high degree, and with Ataraxia, I can create a mass of about 10 tons based on planetary standards."

Sein's Iron Wheel Eyes spun rapidly.

Even with just this information, he understood what Shirone intended to do.

Complex but precise calculations began to run through his mind.

Shirone spread his arms wide.

"It will probably take the form of a spear. The shape isn't crucial, but based on omnipotence, it seems likely. So, a spear of light with a mass of 10 tons will be created. And it will..."

Sein, having finished his calculations, spoke.

"Fall."

"Yes. That's it."

That was all.

And everyone was speechless.

The mechanism was much simpler than expected.

But surprisingly, it contained an idea powerful enough to destroy Heaven.

"But is it really possible?" Plu asked.

Gaold looked at Sein. It was now up to his savant's brain to judge.

"It's possible," Sein affirmed.

"Simply put, a mass of 10 tons will fall from an altitude of 6,000 kilometers. If Heaven's gravity is similar to Earth's, it will take about 14 minutes to reach the ground. The spear's mass will accelerate due to gravity, and if it reaches terminal velocity, it will exceed 14 kilometers per second."

Plu's eyes widened.

"14 kilometers per second?"

At that speed, it would be impossible to respond once it entered the visible range.

And the result would be a spear of 10 tons impacting at 41 Mach, quantified as an immense force.

"Exactly. The kinetic energy alone, converted to explosive power, would be about 2.19 million kilobusters. That's beyond Heaven's durability. If it hits the central Aravot, all seven heavens will be devastated."

If Sein said it, there was no error in the calculations.

Yet no one could fully grasp the numbers.

2.19 million kilobusters?

The idea that a mere student could generate such power was beyond comprehension.

"Hehe, what do you think? Didn't I say it was a brilliantly insane spell?" Gaold said.

"What I liked most when I first heard this was that there were no vague assumptions. It clearly distinguishes between what can and can't be done. I thought it was just a graduation student's nonsense, but it wasn't. Shirone's spell doesn't destroy Heaven."

Sein added, "Gravity does. The planet's gravity pulls the spear down, leading to Heaven's self-destruction."

"Exactly. Those who worshipped the gods will be destroyed by the gods' hands. It's called 'Divine Punishment.'"

Shirone looked at Gaold.

"I was going to call it Shining Spear."

"The name doesn't matter. The issue is the trajectory, impact point, and timing."

Sein said, "I can calculate that. Once we reach Heaven, I'll create a chart. It will take about three days to understand the planet's motion, and then we can set the launch time."

Everyone began discussing new strategies and tactics to align with the new variable.

Divine Punishment had the power to completely revise the project's strategy.

While everyone engaged in heated discussions, Shiina looked at Shirone with pride.

Gaold liked that Divine Punishment utilized natural properties, but Shiina thought differently.

Everyone knew that dropping 10 tons from 6,000 kilometers would be immensely destructive.

But no one attempted it because lifting 10 tons required potential energy equal to the kinetic energy.

Thus, Divine Punishment was not just gravity's doing but Shirone's magic.

Amplifying the laser with Ataraxia to transmit information to the altitude, then activating divine particles to gather mass. The result seemed simple, but it was an application that required perfect understanding and analysis of what Shirone had.

'You squeezed out every last drop.'

The best result, compressed like a diamond, from ideas meticulously refined to leave no gaps.

Shiina could genuinely celebrate her student's significant leap.

"But there's a condition," Shirone said, interrupting the heated discussion.

"I received Ataraxia from the archangel Ikael. So, I must meet Ikael before casting this spell. And that was part of the contract."

No team member would be foolish enough to break a contract.

But it was natural to momentarily overlook it after gaining such a powerful weapon as Divine Punishment.

Even the cold-hearted Sein felt the same.

For Divine Punishment to activate, Shirone had to meet Ikael.

Depending on the situation, it could be very easy or impossible.

Regardless of the difficulty, Sein disliked the uncertainty.

"We must honor the contract. You deserve our help. But is that the only option? If you give up on Ikael, we can offer something equivalent. For example, prioritizing your survival even if we all perish."

If uncertainty could be removed, that would be better.

To Sein, Divine Punishment's importance to the project was that significant.

"No. I won't meet Ikael if it endangers everyone. But if it's not dangerous, Divine Punishment isn't necessary. If it becomes dangerous, then I'll have enough motivation to meet Ikael. In such a limited situation, there's no need to bind Ikael and Divine Punishment with other constraints."

"Hmm, I see."

If they were in a situation to destroy Heaven, they were already cornered.

If they had to grasp even a small chance, meeting Ikael was an option.

"Fine. I'll be satisfied with the team's safety being independent of meeting Ikael."

It was the best compromise Sein and Shirone could reach. The next morning.

The ten team members gathered in front of Goffin's Gate. Chief Mahatu and the priests surrounded them, and the warriors formed two lines to send off the Heaven expedition. When Shirone opened the Immortal Function, Goffin's Gate disintegrated into particles, transforming into a massive spacetime tunnel.

As everyone chanted Anke La, Gaold walked with an annoyed expression.

Perhaps they were returning to the beginning of everything.

"I'll destroy your god."

With a terrifying glare, Gaold pushed himself into the dark sphere without hesitation.

Mikael Gaold - Red Line First-Class Grand Mage

Specialty: Transcendent Endurance

Position: Commander

Kangnam watched Gaold disappear with an indifferent expression, but her heart was more turbulent than ever.
'The end of 20 years. Whatever happens, it ends here. I will end it, no matter what.'

Ahoya Kangnam - Last Descendant of the Wolf Tribe

Specialty: Rammuai Striking Technique

Position: Tanker

Sein recalled the Day of Judgment of the Twenty in front of Goffin's Gate.

Since Miro left, Gaold had become a wreck, but Sein envied his pure madness.

He had run tirelessly, unable to go mad, solely for Miro.

'As long as I save Miro, nothing else matters. Even if the world ends...'

Sein's body was swallowed by the dark sphere.

'I will save Miro.'

Castro Sein - Black Line's Strongest Mental Mage

Specialty: Anti-Magic through Iron Wheel Eyes

Position: Order

Zulu held onto nothing. No desire for life, no fear of death.

If today's events were just a point in a vast cycle, she would simply go with the flow.

'Empty without regret. Life exists within death.'

Zulu - Red Line First-Class Summoning Mage

Specialty: Lich Summoning

Position: Utility

Armin looked back at Shiina in front of Goffin's Gate.

Just seeing Kuan by her side made his heart ache.

'You must have felt the same.'

He could somewhat understand her feelings, having to watch him live as a loving couple with Keira.

'But it was for you. To prove that, I will stay by your side.'

Armin erased his thoughts and quickly turned, disappearing into Goffin's Gate.

Even if the end of the world lay beyond, he had no reason to hesitate.

'Shiina, wherever you go...'

Generade Armin - Former Ivory Tower Time Mage

Specialty: Stop

Position: Crowd Control

Only after Armin disappeared did Shiina's eyes fill with sadness.

She wanted to become a mage with her brother and see the countless beauties of the world.

Even though the dream she had cherished since childhood had come true, why wasn't she happy?

'No, don't think about it. It's foolish to get sentimental before a mission. I just need to do what I can.'

Olifer Shiina - Red Line Certified 5th-Level Mage

Specialty: Absolute Zero

Position: Main Dealer

Kuan watched Shiina's retreating figure.

As a swordsman, the lives of all nine members depended on his death.

The chance of him returning alive was slightly higher than the miraculous possibility of all ten surviving.

Yet, he didn't feel entirely bad because, for the first time, he wanted to protect someone.

'Is that my grave?'

A cold smile appeared on Kuan's lips as he headed towards the battlefield.

Parca Kuan - Certified 6th-Level Swordsman, Instructor at Kaizen Swordsmanship School

Specialty: Movement Control

Position: Hitman

'Master, please give me strength.'

Etella closed her eyes and entered a brief meditation.

Since her defeat by Arcane, her sense of mission had burned more fiercely than ever.

As the warm voice of Karsis Jung, telling her to be the light of the world, roared in her mind, her eyes snapped open.

'Destroy evil. That is my mission.'

Romi Etella - Certified 6th-Level Mage, Scout Zoner, Bishop of the Karsis Monastery

Specialty: Yin-Yang Wave Fist Thousand-Armed

Avalokiteshvara Thunder Strike

Position: Sub Dealer

"Hoo. Hoo."

Plu did her best to suppress her adrenaline.

Joining the world's best mage team as a professional mage was an unparalleled honor.

'Don't show any signs of inexperience. Trust in what you've done so far. Yes, I am Ravid Plu. I can do this!'

No matter what hardships came, she would succeed in her mission.

With countless vows etched into her heart, she finally took her first step through Goffin's Gate.

'Even death is an honor. I will do my best not to be a burden to anyone.'

Ravid Plu - Certified 8th-Level Mage, Manipulator Zoner

Specialty: Phoenix Formation

Position: Supporter

Shirone watched as all the team members departed for Heaven. Then, as if reflecting on the years gone by, he looked back.

His life flashed before his eyes like a revolving lantern.

'Goodbye, everyone.'

At the end of life, he found the beginning of life.

For Shirone, this journey held that meaning.

There was no room for fear now.

Even if he lost everything, he would pour everything into Heaven to ensure he didn't regret today's decision.

"Farewell, messenger of the gods."

Receiving Mahatu's farewell, Shirone walked past the warriors and reached Goffin's Gate.

The dark sphere tunnel revealed nothing beyond. Only a vast uncertainty, like everyone's future, lingered.

'From now on, there's no looking back!'

Shirone widened his eyes and leaped into Goffin's Gate.
The distorted spacetime barrier swallowed him, throwing
him into a world no human could reach.

Arian Shirone - Alpheas Magic School Graduate

Specialty: Amplification Magic using Ataraxia

Position: Terminator

Chapter 414:

The Arun Mountains, located in the northeast of the Kingdom of Tormia.

This place, filled with a sinister aura since ancient times, is home to the sealing magic circle of Belkir, which was sealed long ago.

Just as magic existed even before it was understood, the ones who sealed the demon were mages who dealt with the law.

However, after thousands of years, the will of good has faded, and Belkir's evil has slowly crept into the gaps, beginning to erode the law.

This is the story of the resurrection of the demon Belkir. Breaking through 20 meters of underground rock, Belkir's imposing figure emerged in a cavern within the mountains. Standing 15 meters tall and weighing 32 tons, his massive body resembled an octopus, with decayed, dark skin. His two arms looked human but were actually a fusion of colorful snakes.

His reptilian face was grotesque, with eyeless sockets filled with fiery red flames.

As the flames burned, Belkir's 24 tentacles writhed like waves.

"I will destroy the world! All living beings will bow beneath me!"

This was the single law that defined Belkir.

But the great star of thousands of years ago had to face the reality of time.

Human civilization was no longer so fragile as to be destroyed by the appearance of a single demon.

A sect of mages, who had long identified the locations of demons through ancient documents, sent a cooperation

request to the kingdom's intelligence department.

With the king's approval, a Cage-level party was formed, and 21 mages entered the cave in the Arun Mountains.

Now, 8 hours and 37 minutes later.

Cage B Team, composed of certified 4th to 6th-level mages, had severed all of Belkir's tentacles and was launching a final offensive to ensure his complete annihilation.

"Graaaah!"

Belkir writhed through the cave, flailing his snake-like arms. Despite possessing all kinds of regenerative abilities, the power of 21 humans was beyond what he could handle, even with his prowess from thousands of years ago.

"Insignificant humans! How dare you! Gaaah!"

Belkir's body caved in an X shape, splitting open and spewing a viscous liquid.

A fat, bald man jumped into the wound, swinging two cleavers with increasing speed.

"Is the X just decoration? Huh? Decoration? Huh? Decoration? Huh? Decoration?"

The man was currently under the effect of 28 powerful buffs. His arms showed no signs of stopping, endlessly splitting the flesh in an X shape, digging towards the heart.

The man's face lit up as he discovered the pale purple muscle mass.

Then he bit into the demon's heart.

"Delicious! So delicious!"

He pulled the heart with his teeth, cutting the connected parts with his cleavers, causing chunks of flesh to fall off.

As he swallowed, the intense flavor of raw meat exploded in his mind like fireworks.

"Uoooooh! Uoooooh!"

Carnivore Addict Benifis

Certified 5th-Level Combat Mage

Amplifies omnipotence through the ecstasy of eating prey's meat

Special Note: Runs a butcher shop

"Ugh..."

Belkir held on until the end.

Most creatures would have died from such an assault out of sheer decency.

It showed how demons were born from concepts of persistence and obsession.

"I can't... disappear like this..."

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

A pale-faced woman with long white hair down to her waist hugged Belkir, tears streaming down her face.

Every time her hand stroked the demon's body, the writhing flesh that seemed to regenerate stopped moving.

"How painful it must be. How agonizing. Heehee! I'm sorry. I can't help it... Heeheehee!"

Uncontrollable laughter seeped through her sobbing voice.

The contrast between her large, tear-filled eyes and her grotesquely twisted mouth was chilling.

Saint Moriak

Certified 6th-Level Healing Mage

Specializes in large-scale healing magic with a diameter of 100 meters

Special Note: Severe mania

A demon called a demon lord in the human world would be equivalent to a 2nd-tier Mara in Heaven, but now he was just a demon on the verge of annihilation by 21 humans.

Belkir finally realized he was trapped.

The mages' abilities had sealed him off and battered him for 8 hours, leaving him no chance to endure.

As the demon struggled, Cage B Team's leader, Rose, looked for the main dealer.

As expected, he was in the corner, smoking a cigarette and slacking off.

"Hey! Aren't you coming? Do you know how much this party costs per hour? Does the association dig money out of the ground?"

"Ugh, that witch."

Tarvan stubbed out his cigarette and assessed Belkir.
He was definitely softened up, perfect for annihilation.
'Just die already, you persistent bastard.'
Rushing at Belkir, Tarvan spread his hands, emitting a high-frequency sound that pierced the eardrums.
Kaiser Blast.
All the mages who heard the sound scattered.
As Tarvan's hands extended forward, Belkir's massive body began to tremble.
"Remember this, humans! I am...!"
Boom!
With an explosion, Belkir's form vanished without a trace.
Flesh splattered everywhere but melted away in the heat.
"Mission complete."
It took exactly 8 hours and 49 minutes from Cage B Team's arrival to achieve this result.
At that moment, the communication mage, who had been dozing against the cave wall, suddenly opened his eyes.
Information was being displayed on the crystal ball before him.
It took about 400 lines of code to convey a single line of text.
"Team leader. Team leader."
When Rose turned around, the communication mage floated the crystal ball above his palm and spoke.
"The association is calling. All members of Cage B Team are to assemble."
Magic Association.
The 18th-floor corridor, where the president's office was located, was crowded with mages.
The faces of Cage B Team, scattered and waiting for their leader, were filled with discontent.
Cage B Team was composed of the best in their respective fields.
As the busiest mages in the kingdom, they naturally weren't pleased with being called in after a mission.

"What's going on? I need to get home to my kids. They better not have more work for us."

"Why is the team leader taking so long? Do you know anything, old man?"

Tarvan asked Horkin.

As the oldest member and the one in charge of orders, he might know something, but he just wore a mysterious smile. When the president's office door opened and Rose came out, the mages swarmed her.

Her expression wasn't good, indicating it wasn't pleasant news.

"Team leader, what did the president say?"

Currently, Lupist was acting as the interim president, but the staff didn't care who held the position as long as they were paid properly.

"It's an urgent mission. It seems you all need to go out again."

No one spoke, but the cold, murderous glares made the corridor feel uneasy.

Saint Moriak asked, "Why us? There's Cage A Team too."

There was little difference in skill between Cage A and Cage B.

Even though they were the best in their fields, Tormia's defense wasn't so weak that they couldn't field 40 such talents.

Cage A Team had long worked together, while Cage B Team was assembled as needed.

This small difference could lead to feelings of inferiority.

If the association had a mission, it should be for Cage A Team, not them.

"I suggested that too. But currently, Cage A Team is temporarily out of commission."

Horkin said, "Because of Gaold."

"Yes. There's someone in Cage A Team suspected of being a Gaold loyalist. Until the investigation is complete, we're the kingdom's only Cage-level party."

Tarvan said, "But we can't do it. Didn't you negotiate the contract, team leader? And Roche here has a daughter who can't even walk yet. His wife will kill him."

"That's right, team leader. Please exclude me. I'd rather pay the penalty..."

Rose's eyes narrowed.

"Don't be mistaken. This isn't a guild. The payment is just a reward from the association. The kingdom has issued a first-class mobilization order. If you refuse, you'll lose your Red Line certification and face legal consequences. You know the current atmosphere in the kingdom. It's best to comply."

The mages fell silent.

They couldn't imagine their positions outside the Red Line, so they had no choice but to follow orders.

Rose's expression softened slightly.

"As your team leader, I apologize. But the association has promised ample rewards for this mission. Triple the usual payment and reputation points equivalent to a promotion." The mention of reputation points changed the mages' expressions.

From the 6th level, the points required for promotion were immense, so succeeding in this mission would be a significant boost.

Horkin asked, "So, what's our mission?"

Rose hesitated, indicating the difficulty.

Even for a Cage-level team, it seemed too challenging.

"The target is... a human."

"A human? Which human?"

Rose's eyes gleamed sharply.

"Former Tormia Magic Association President, Mikael Gaold."

Heaven's outskirts, Purgatory. The Forest of the Profane.

As Shirone emerged from the tunnel of flowing light, a vast sky unfolded before him.

Beyond the sea of trees, the concentric circles of Heaven were visible, with drones swarming like gnats in certain areas.

Having experienced this before, Shirone took a deep breath and prepared to land.

As expected, his direction shifted sharply, and he fell vertically.

As expected, the direction shifted sharply, and he fell vertically.

The sea disappeared, and the forest rushed past.

He kept his eyes open until the ground was right in front of him, then twisted his body.

"Phew."

His landing was much more stable than before, but no one congratulated Shirone.

The nine who had passed through Goffin's Gate ahead of him were scattered, each looking in different directions, lost in thought.

Sein spoke.

"This is the Forest of the Profane. It's the habitat of the Dokgakgui."

"Dokgakgui, huh? A quiet place. Shall we go?"

A quiet place.

Shirone recalled the time he was surrounded by the Dokgakgui.

Thanks to that, he met Kanya and Lena and entered Heaven, but it was far from a safe place.

'Well, for these people, it might be considered quiet...'

As they walked, Sein explained.

Purgatory is divided into three main areas: the habitat of heretics, the mainland, and the outskirts of the community.

The outskirts of the community, in particular, refer to areas inhabited by non-citizens, who are specifically called border dwellers.

Sein's current destination was the mainland, the only neutral zone where heretics and border dwellers gathered, making it essential to visit for information.

As they passed through the middle of the forest, the ground suddenly began to shake as if an earthquake had struck.

The group, on high alert, waited for any new developments. When the shaking subsided, they exchanged glances and moved forward through the forest.

"My goodness..."

In the plains below the mountain, hundreds of giants were marching in formation.

Giants created through the elixir of myths.

At the time, the mere existence of giants was shocking, but according to Sein, they were currently heading to Jotunheim, the land of giants.

There, they would regain their identity and return to Heaven to uphold the law. If they fell into corruption, they would be banished to Muspel, the land of fire.

"Giants are a force to be reckoned with. But they're just monsters. It's best to ignore them and move on."

The faces of the ten people hidden in the bushes disappeared silently.

Chapter 415:

Shirone and his group headed towards the mainland. Although traveling on Zulu's summoned creature would be faster, it wasn't a good choice given the current conflict in Purgatory. The skies of Heaven were filled with angels, Maras, and drones, so they wanted to avoid being detected from a distance beyond Etella's spirit zone radius. Contrary to their expectations, the Forest of the Profane was eerily quiet.

They had imagined angels patrolling the skies, dealing with heretics and rebels, but this was not the case.

Kangnam asked, "How should we interpret this? An unexpected change? Or evidence that the rebels have been wiped out?"

"Either is possible," Sein replied.

Plu tilted her head. "Is it possible for the forest to be quiet if the rebels haven't been wiped out?"

"Logically, no. But if you think about it, Miro's disappearance is the same. Anything can happen. We have to consider that for now."

Sein was feeling the same unease he had felt in Miro's spacetime.

In fact, the unexpected situation in Purgatory only heightened his anxiety.

'This is something I've been planning for 20 years. So why is it going wrong?'

Should he trust his current instincts?

Perhaps it was just a coincidence. Anyone could match the cause to the result after the fact.

Sein concluded simply.

'Don't overthink it. Just calculate both scenarios. I can do it.'

"Someone's there," Etella said, stopping and turning to the right.

It wasn't something she sensed nearby. Information was flowing in from her spirit zone, which covered a 2-kilometer radius.

About 20 individuals were moving with agility beyond the norm.

The sounds of weapons clashing and explosions were transmitted through her synesthesia.

"It seems they're in combat. About 800 meters away."

Plu glanced at Gaold and asked, "Shall we check it out?"

She needed approval to increase their mobility.

Given the unexpected situation in the forest, staying hidden was one option, but Gaold chose a direct approach.

"Check it out."

As soon as the order was given, the entire team vanished in a flash.

Zulu took charge of moving Kuan and Kangnam, and except for Shirone, everyone was a professional, so navigating the complex forest was no problem.

Shirone had also mastered movement control in his final year, but the difference in skill level was clear.

Especially Gaold, Sein, Zulu, and Armin, who moved through the complex terrain like ghosts.

'How much training does it take to move like that?'

When they arrived, the previous silence was replaced by a cacophony of noise filling the forest.

"Chase them! Rip out their hearts!"

"Kyaaaah!"

The Kergo tribe, clad in black armor, were emitting their characteristic shrieks as they pursued the Mecha tribe.

Their movements, in harmony with their mounts, were like a storm, but the Mecha tribe was not easily caught.

'What is that?'

The Mecha tribe's mobility came from mechanical devices connected to a skeletal frame outside their bodies.

The frame extended from their shoulders to their arms, down their spines, and to their legs.

With each movement, the joints clicked and whirred, propelling them 5 to 6 meters with each leap.

"Strength augmentation device, Piper. They're Mecha tribe combat soldiers."

The Mecha tribe moved through the forest as if they had springs on their feet.

But the Kergo tribe were also excellent hunters.

One of them, driving the Mecha tribe into a trap, suddenly leaped from the forest and swung a sword.

"Hup!"

A Mecha soldier raised an exd.

A holographic shield spread out, creating a shockwave, but the Kergo warrior's strength was slightly superior, and the soldier staggered and fell.

The Mecha soldiers gathered around their fallen comrade, looking around.

The Kergo tribe had blocked their retreat and were emerging from all sides.

The short-haired female squad leader of the Mecha tribe whispered into a drone attached to her wrist.

"This is Recon Team 2. We're surrounded by the Kergo tribe. Requesting support."

There was no response.

But given the nature of radio communication, she couldn't be sure the request hadn't gone through.

'Please, please...'

From 20 meters away, Shirone's group watched the situation.

The Kergo tribe prided themselves on their pursuit skills, but they were powerless against Sein's Equilibrium.

Even their breathing was reduced to a silent level by the Iron Wheel Eyes, rendering their senses useless.

Kangnam asked Gaold, "Which side do we choose? Kergo or Mecha?"

This was the first crossroads they faced in Heaven.
The citizens were divided into three tribes: Kergo, Mecha, and Nor, each with different combat methods, cultures, and mindsets.

Choosing the starting tribe would significantly impact their journey to Miro, so they needed to be cautious.

Rustle.

A Kergo warrior patrolling the perimeter of the formation appeared.

The warrior's eyes widened in shock.

It was natural to be surprised by the sudden appearance of 10 people in a place where even sensory schemas had detected nothing.

His head snapped towards his comrades, and he took a deep breath to shout.

"Ye..."

Gaold's hand moved swiftly.

"Gii..."

With a thud, the Kergo warrior's head flew off.

Shirone and Plu stared blankly at the headless, trembling muscular body before snapping back to reality.

Suppressing emotions and acting rationally was a normal human response, but Gaold's reaction had been purely mechanical.

"In any situation, if you think you need to kill someone, do it. I'll handle the consequences. Even if it's the wrong choice, there's no worse situation than a team member dying."

It was essentially Gaold issuing a license to kill.

It was a thoroughly correct approach for team survival, but saying he wouldn't question the right or wrong of decisions was something only Gaold, who could crush any situation with force, could say.

This was almost the only reason he was chosen as the team's commander.

Kangnam glanced at Gaold and asked, "So, we're choosing the Mecha tribe?"

There were many values more important than another's death, but the Kergo tribe was an organization bound by divine law.

Having already killed one, the barrier to compromise was now higher with the Kergo than with the Mecha.

"For Anke La!"

Gaold's eyes twitched in displeasure.

"We're going with the Mecha."

As soon as he spoke, Kuan sprang into action. This was a job for a hitman.

"Squad leader! We'll be wiped out at this rate!"

The Mecha tribe was barely holding on, taking a beating. The Piper augmented their strength, but it was limited to large muscles, making it nearly impossible to win a close-quarters battle against the Kergo warriors, whose entire bodies were weapons.

"Retreat! I'll hold them off!"

The squad leader charged into the fray.

She knew what happened to those captured in heretic hunts, but she had to buy time for reinforcements.

"Cut off that woman's limbs and bring her torso!"

The mere words made her teeth chatter.

She wanted to run, but the Kergo warriors were already leaping to cut off her arms.

Whoosh!

A powerful gust of wind swept past the Kergo warrior.

"What...!"

The woman's eyes widened in shock.

The Kergo warriors' heads popped off their bodies like corks from bottles.

'Seven left.'

Spinning in midair, Kuan identified the remaining enemies.

He had killed six with one strike, and no one knew there had been twelve subtle changes in that strike.

"An enemy! Kill him!"

Only after losing half their strength did the Kergo tribe realize the attacker's presence and moved.

Kuan's body continued its strange movements, bound by threads of external force extending in three directions. He swung like a pendulum, then suddenly shot forward, spraying blood from the bodies of four warriors he passed. 'Three left.'

Another warrior's head was severed.

'Two.'

The enraged Kergo squad leader's eyes widened.

They also used external force, but only as a supplementary means to cut enemies. Kuan's bizarre movements, which felt like mockery, were a first.

"Don't mock Kergo's techniques!"

As the squad leader swung his crescent blade, Kuan's path curved like magnets repelling each other, and he flew past the leader.

"Haha! Got you!"

A warrior with a ponytail, who had been lying in wait, swung his sword at the incoming Kuan.

"Huh?"

But there was no resistance.

Looking up, he saw Kuan floating in midair, unmoving.

Kuan glared at the ponytailed warrior in annoyance, then slowly turned his gaze aside.

Simultaneously, his body spun like a top, drawing him towards the squad leader as if winding a thread.

"Captain! Behind you!"

Before the squad leader could react, Kuan's sword took his head.

As the external force dissipated, Kuan landed and spun, throwing his sword.

The sword flew faster than an arrow, piercing the falling ponytailed warrior's chest and pinning him to a tree.

With the Kergo tribe annihilated, the forest fell silent.

The dazzling battle had lasted barely five seconds.
Shirone's group finally entered the scene.
They were inwardly impressed by Kuan's skill, which they had only heard about in rumors, but Kuan's face was twisted in frustration.
'Damn it! How much of a mess have I become?'
In the past, he would have cut them all down before a single breath of external force ended.
But now, one remained, and the last one was dealt with using an improvised throw.
"Mr. Kuan, are you okay? Are you injured...?"
As Shiina approached, Kuan quickly wiped the expression from his face. He had no desire for her sympathy.
"I'm sorry. It seems my balance isn't perfect yet."
Shiina tilted her head in confusion.
As a mage, she couldn't possibly understand what Kuan had done wrong.
After a moment of thought, she simply said what she had prepared.
"You were amazing. I haven't seen much swordsmanship, but I feel like my perspective has broadened."
To Kuan, her words were embarrassing.
He just gave a bitter smile and walked past her, leaving Shiina to wonder if she had made a mistake.
Meanwhile, the Mecha tribe gripped their weapons nervously as Gaold approached.
Although these newcomers had saved their lives, it was difficult to clearly identify friend from foe in Purgatory.
Moreover, if a single swordsman had wiped out the Kergo squad, they were clearly outmatched in terms of skill.
"Who are you? Heretics?"
Gaold looked at Sein.
Some team members knew the language of Heaven, but more than half needed translation.
As Sein's mental magic translated the woman's words, Gaold took another step forward.

At the same time, the Mecha tribe flinched and stepped back.

The Pipers attached to their bodies clicked and whirred, adjusting the angles of their joint connections with each movement.

Chapter 416:

Gaold barged into the Mecha tribe's ranks like a bandit, looking down at them with a commanding presence.

"You're rebels, aren't you? Where's your headquarters?"

Finding the rebels' main base was one of the reasons they were heading to the mainland, so getting information from these people would save them some trouble.

However, contrary to his expectations, the woman's face, which had been filled with fear just moments ago, changed upon hearing Gaold's voice.

She stood up abruptly, raising her arc and shouting.

"It's the munitions community! Everyone, arm yourselves! We die here today!"

Following the squad leader's orders, the soldiers took up fighting stances.

With their sigmas and exds at the ready, their expressions showed a resolve to face death.

"Leave this place immediately! Or you'll become food for the arc."

The arc's laser was aimed between Gaold's eyes.

A long-range weapon of the Mecha tribe that fired explosive orbs.

But the woman knew it wouldn't work against him.

"I've staked my life on this, so I might as well try to bluff."

"Heh. Heh heh heh."

Gaold's shoulders shook with laughter, his face wrinkling as if air had been pumped into his lungs.

When he looked up again, his eyes blazed with an unearthly fire.

"You're annoying me with your babbling."

The Great Inferno engulfed the Mecha tribe.

Whether it was a misunderstanding or not didn't matter. Gaold wasn't kind enough to spare those who dared to challenge him.

Caught in the inferno, the Mecha tribe soldiers turned pale, drooling and trembling.

The screams of the damned were so chilling they felt like they could tear their eardrums apart.

It was a fear beyond what humans could endure.

Even the squad leader, who had faced life-and-death situations many times, could only sit down, her jaw trembling.

"Please... stop..."

Only after the Mecha tribe lost their will to fight did Gaold release his restraint.

The tear-streaked woman looked up at him with resentment.

"Why are you tormenting us? We're fighting against Heaven. You're humans too, aren't you?"

"I don't know what nonsense you're talking about, but I'm not from the munitions community. And weren't you the ones who used to call border dwellers 'mockers' and look down on them?"

"That... that was..."

As the woman tried to retort, trees began to fall in the forest behind the Mecha tribe.

Everyone's eyes turned to the source of the noise.

Something massive seemed to be approaching rapidly, but it was still out of sight.

-Magnetic field deactivated. Argon engine activated.

The forest scenery shimmered, revealing the outline of an enormous bipedal armored vehicle.

Standing nearly 4 meters tall, it had a balanced ratio of upper to lower body, with short, reverse-jointed legs and relatively long, thick arms.

The hydraulic cylinders pumped in different cycles, matching the engine's sound.

-Enemy detected. Preemptive strike authorized.

The vehicle extended its four-fingered hand and charged. As Gaold stepped back, it slammed its body into the ground, raising a wall of dirt.

The vehicle, covered in dirt, seemed unable to rise on its own due to its weight, but it kept moving its legs, shoveling away the dirt and regaining its balance.

Meanwhile, Shirone's group maintained their combat intervals, spreading out.

Shirone also activated his diamond armor, pulling up his hood and observing the situation.

'What is that?'

The bipedal vehicle's torso rotated smoothly like oil on water, its upper cockpit scanning the front.

The cockpit was an oval glass sphere with a purple sheen, as if electricity was flowing through it, making it impossible to see inside.

"Guroi. It's a second-stage combat system of the Mecha tribe," Kangnam explained.

Gaold narrowed his eyes.

"Impressive. It looks much better in person."

When he had only seen the specifications on paper, he had thought it was just a walking pile of scrap metal.

But in actual combat, it was highly mobile and could be tactically operated depending on the pilot's skill.

The method of erasing its presence by distorting the magnetic field was the latest technology not yet documented in recent papers.

The upper part of the Guroi rotated and faced the Mecha tribe.

"Is the entire second squad safe? What about the Kergo?"

The voice from the speaker was neutral, but the tone suggested it was likely a man.

"The Kergo tribe has been annihilated. But it wasn't us."

The Guroi's cockpit turned back to Gaold.

"Who are they?"

The woman hesitated.

The bearded man had clearly said he wasn't from the munitions community.

But the illusion he had shown was a form of intangible violence that could only be inflicted with blind hostility. She would rather go mad than enter that hell again.

"They attacked us."

The Guroi issued orders through an internal channel.

-Eliminate them. Switch to attack mode. Increase the argon engine to gear 5.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The five advancing Gurois simultaneously changed the shape of their hands.

The four fingers folded outward, and a massive barrel with a black hole emerged from inside.

-Commence firing!

Bang bang bang bang bang bang bang!

The iron cylinders, weighing hundreds of kilograms, shook violently, producing a deafening roar.

Heavy bullets shot out at a rate of 300 rounds per minute, shattering rocks and splintering trees.

One of the Gurois turned its body towards Gaold.

The black bullets flew rapidly towards Gaold, but their speed suddenly decreased as if they were buried in something.

Thud! Thud thud thud!

The bullets, unable to penetrate the air shield, gathered, forming a wall of black iron.

"Hmm, iron balls."

Gaold waited until the bullets lost their spin, then caught one in his hand.

The Guroi unit's dismay was evident in the shaking of their machines.

"Sir! He caught the bullet with his hand!"

"Keep firing! They seem to be border dwellers! Don't judge the enemy based on past experiences!"

Gaold weighed the bullet in his hand, then flicked it upwards with his thumb.

"It's like an air gun. It would hurt if it hit."

Kangnam glared and said, "Are you going to do it or not? Or should I?"

Gaold caught the falling bullet.

"Get ready. I want to try piloting it myself."

Kangnam gritted her teeth at his flippant remark but didn't intend to overturn the commander's decision.

"Can you capture it without damage?"

When Kangnam asked Sein, his Iron Wheel Eyes began to spin.

"Calculating. It will take about a minute."

Kangnam worriedly surveyed the battlefield. A minute seemed more than enough time for all five Gurois to be destroyed.

"Damn it! Who are these people?"

The pilot of Guroi Unit 3 was in a dire situation.

The AMOLED vision installed in the front of the cockpit provided a 360-degree view with seven split screens, but the man with the sword seemed to jump between the screens, making it hard to track him.

'This world is full of strange things.'

Kuan slashed at various parts of the Guroi.

Each cut split the metal like flesh, sending sparks flying.

'It's thicker than armor. Where's the pilot?'

By chance, he severed an engine artery, causing Unit 3 to lose power and stagger.

"Damn it! This guy!"

The pilot raised both arms to regain balance.

The Guroi, a second-stage Mecha combat system, required the pilot to meet the first-stage criteria.

The first stage was the Piper, with the Guroi's movement mechanisms connected to the pilot's body parts, so those without enhanced strength couldn't easily move an arm.

Struggling to stabilize, the pilot searched for Kuan.

But instead of Kuan, he saw a cute girl with long brown hair and dorky glasses.

"Cute, my foot!"

Despite her appearance, she was a martial artist, and each strike shook the Guroi, causing internal explosions.

"Fine! I'll smash you to pieces!"

The pilot gritted his teeth and swung his fist.

The Guroi's torso accelerated, and the thick barrel struck Etella.

Boom!

The pilot paled as he realized his torso wouldn't turn any further.

Checking the multivision, he saw the woman blocking the Guroi's barrel with her elbow raised to her face.

"How... How is this possible? One arm has 17 horsepower."

"Hoo..."

Taking a deep breath to calm her arm muscles, Etella moved to the Guroi's side.

Yin-Yang Wave Fist - Wall Thunder Palm.

As she struck the Guroi's leg with her palm, the metal resonated with the wave, sending a deafening sound through the pilot's eardrums.

"Aaagh!"

Grabbing his ears involuntarily, the Guroi's arms mimicked the motion, causing it to fall forward.

"Damn it! Someone deal with that big-breasted woman! She's not human! She's a monster!"

"This side first! He's cutting the engine arteries! Take out the swordsman!"

"Who am I supposed to deal with first?"

Kanya, spinning the Guroi's torso and scanning left and right, shouted in frustration.

It was chaos on both sides.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The impacts on the machine made Kanya close one eye.

With her remaining eye, she saw a tentacle monster flying through the forest, anchoring its tentacles to trees.

"That damn monster!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Guroi's bullets shattered all the trees in the area where the tentacle monster was moving.

Despite this, the monster continued to shoot beams of light, engaging in combat.

Thunk! Thunk!

Each time the light hit, the Guroi, weighing several tons, shook, and the impact was fully transmitted to Kanya through the Piper.

"This is really annoying!"

Wasting bullets on a single monster was frustrating.

Due to the munitions community's interference, the rebels' weapons were dwindling daily, so only those capable of delivering the most efficient strikes were selected as pilots. Kanya, an ace shooter with the arc, was one of them.

"Why is that monster...!"

What annoyed her most was that the monster's abilities reminded her of the magic of someone she missed dearly. The incident where Shirone stopped the Elixir of Myths didn't just save Kanya's mother.

The hope he left behind had grown into a massive storm, becoming the first principle of the rebels' beliefs.

Recalling memories of such a precious person because of that monster was deeply unsettling.

"No matter how many bullets it takes, I'll take you down!"

With all the surrounding trees shattered, Shirone's range of movement was severely limited.

Realizing he couldn't win a prolonged battle, Shirone threw off his robe and began casting his spell in earnest.

Light gathered at the center of his spirit zone like a retina, forming a single red beam that shot at the Guroi's leg.

While destroying the torso would be most effective, targeting the leg joints was more practical during combat.

Warning! Internal heat detected! Activating cooling system! Output exceeds allowable range!

"What now?" Kanya checked the dashboard with wide eyes. The interface showing the Guroi's front view had the left leg flashing red.

Energy overload! Energy overload!

The output gauge kept rising. At 240%, 370%, and finally reaching 600%, the knee joint broke with a loud crack.

"Ahhh!"

The Guroi's body tilted, and the cockpit slammed into the ground.

The impact felt like falling from a building, rattling her bones, but Kanya held onto the controls.

"Die, monster... huh?"

As the AMOLED vision cleared, the target in the crosshairs automatically came into focus.

"What... what is this?"

Kanya couldn't believe her eyes.

The face of a boy who had appeared even in her dreams was magnified on the screen.

Chapter 417:

"Shirone?"

Kanya's voice trembled.

It was definitely Shirone. But how could he be here?

No, that didn't matter anymore.

If the person on the screen was Shirone, it meant new hope for the despairing rebels.

"Unit 5 is down! Provide cover!"

Hearing the radio, Kanya snapped back to reality and turned her head to the multivision.

Most of the units were immobilized, but they still had functioning weapons.

And they were all aiming at Shirone.

"Wait, no!"

Kanya hurriedly pressed the radio button.

"Don't shoot! He's not an enemy!"

When there was no response, she wasn't reassured even after sending the message. She checked on Shirone.

He was standing there confidently, fully exposed.

"Damn it...!"

She pressed the emergency escape button, and the reinforced glass of the cockpit shot forward with a pop.

Detaching herself from the Piper in the Guroi's synchro machine, Kanya crawled out of the bushes, raising her hands.

"Stop! Cease fire!"

The voice of the squad leader came from the speaker of Unit 5.

-Commence firing.

Click! Click! Click!

Kanya closed her eyes tightly, but all she heard from the remaining three Gurois was the sound of metal clinking.

"What... what is this?"

Looking around in confusion, Kanya realized the scenery was distorting.

At the center of the distortion, a pair of giant gears were interlocked and spinning.

Sein's Equilibrium had neutralized the chemical reactions in the gas.

"Duds! They're duds, sir!"

"Same here. Check the ignition plugs."

"No issues! Damn it...! Ugh!"

Boom!

Kuan and Etella took down one of the Gurois.

Though it took longer than expected given their skills, it was significant that the two, specialized in fighting large creatures, had destroyed the machine with their physical abilities.

The reinforced glass of the Guroi popped out.

The pilot, hanging from the synchro machine, was unconscious, and Armin stood beside him.

With precise coordinates, a spacetime mage could infiltrate even a sealed space.

The other team members also easily destroyed the Gurois, leaving only the squad leader's unit intact.

Gaold approached the Guroi with interest, stroking his chin as if encountering something unknown.

Instead of offering a handshake, he looked up at the purple-glowing machine and spoke.

"Get down. If you don't want to die."

Pop!

The reinforced glass shot up to the ceiling as the squad leader, still attached to the Piper, lunged at Gaold.

"Die!"

"No, sir!"

Kanya shouted, but the squad leader's sigma was already descending towards Gaold's head.

"Kanya?"

Gaold looked at Shirone. Then, as if it were a separate matter, his fist swung swiftly, striking the squad leader's jaw.

"Ugh!"

He fell pathetically, rolling on the ground with unfocused eyes.

If Gaold hadn't deactivated his press magic, the squad leader's face would have been obliterated.

"Do you know her, Shirone?"

Shirone squinted, looking more closely.

"Kanya? Is that you, Kanya?"

Kanya, finally relaxing, walked weakly towards him.

Thunk! Thunk! She detached herself from the Piper and ran into Shirone's arms.

"Shirone, Shirone! Waaah!"

The sudden shift from a deadly confrontation to a sweet reunion left everyone bewildered.

"Is it really... Shirone?"

There wasn't a single rebel who didn't know Shirone.

The first Nephilim to stop the Elixir of Myths.

The rebellion had been organized after the riots in Shamain District 73, and they called Shirone the "Light of District 73," honoring his legacy.

Kanya wiped her tears and gave a shy smile.

"Sorry. I didn't recognize you with that strange outfit."

Shirone didn't mind. Anyone would have reacted the same if they met an enemy in disguise.

"It's okay. How's Lena?"

"She's with the main force. She'll be thrilled to see you."

"Haha! And your parents?"

"Dad's still going strong."

"...I see."

Shirone didn't ask about her mother.

Even back then, she didn't have much time left, so he could guess what had happened since Kanya didn't mention it.

There is no good death in this world.

But Shirone hoped she had left happily, surrounded by her family.

"How long has it been since I left?"

"Exactly 432 days."

Kanya didn't need to think long. The day Shirone stopped the Elixir of Myths was monumental for the rebels, so there was no need to calculate.

'432 days.'

It wasn't much different from the time where Shirone had lived.

Goffin's Gate distorted space, so there was no time discrepancy due to distance.

The slightly faster time here was likely due to the gravitational field around the planet.

Shirone asked the question that had been on his mind.

"I heard you're at war with Heaven, but I haven't seen any angels or Maras on the way here. Why is that?"

Kanya shook her head.

"We don't know either. We fought fiercely, or rather, we mostly ran, but one day the angels just stopped appearing. Even on the full moon when they always patrolled."

Sein, listening through the mental magic link, interjected with a gleam in his eye.

"When exactly did this change start?"

"About 130 days ago?"

130 days.

Comparing it to the original world's timeline, it was roughly three months ago.

That was also when they lost contact with Gaold's loyalists who had infiltrated Heaven.

'Something definitely happened in Heaven. What is it? Is it related to Miro? Or...'

The squad leader looked at the damaged Guroi with a bitter expression.

If Shirone, the "Light of District 73," was here, there was no need to fight, but they had lost too much.

"This is bad. The damage to the unit is severe."

Shirone approached with an apologetic expression. The Guroi was too damaged to be repaired without extensive maintenance.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. We struck first."

The female squad leader, feeling somewhat responsible, showed her palms in frustration.

"But that man created a bizarre illusion first. If you experienced it, you'd see why anyone would think he was an enemy."

Plu interjected.

"But you aimed the arc first."

"He provoked us first."

"You misunderstood first."

The woman couldn't hold back and shouted.

"How could we not misunderstand with a face like that! He approached like he was going to hit us!"

A moment of silence followed.

When the consensus seemed to be that Gaold's face was to blame, the squad leader decided to drop the argument.

"Enough. Let's recover the units and rejoin the main force. They're not in a good situation either."

Sein asked, "Where is the main force?"

"The Plains of the Dead. They're currently conducting a giant extermination operation."

The squad leader walked towards his Guroi.

"This is the only unit ready for immediate deployment. I'll lead the way... huh?"

Gaold was standing behind the squad leader.

The squad leader, one foot on the unit, looked at him in confusion as Gaold gestured to the side.

"Move. I'm taking it."

"What? You're going to pilot this?"

Kangnam sighed and approached.

"Why do you want to pilot that? It's synced with the Piper, so you can't move it even if you get in."

Gaold's solution was simple.

"Then give me the Piper too."

Kangnam looked at Sein.

It was an official question to the team's order, asking if they should let this man do as he pleased.

Sein nodded.

Shirone would destroy Heaven, but Gaold had to handle the angels. He was the only one who could buy time against multiple angels, so it was best to leave combat matters to him.

"Let him do as he wants."

Five minutes later.

Clang! Clang!

Gaold, equipped with the Piper, boarded the Guroi.

The squad leader, having lost everything, could only stare into the distance.

Shirone, watching with concern, asked Plu.

"Is this really okay? We've just calmed things down, but taking their equipment seems..."

"He must have a reason. He wouldn't mess things up just out of curiosity, right?"

Shirone fell silent.

Plu, feeling a pang of conscience, eventually changed her tune.

"Actually, I don't know either. But everyone here followed him because he's that kind of leader. I just trust him too."

Gaold connected the Piper to the synchro machine.

As he moved his arms inward, the Guroi mimicked the motion.

"Not bad."

Without the reinforced glass, Gaold observed the surroundings as he moved the vehicle.

"Hmm, how about this?"

He rotated the waist joint to its limit, making the Guroi spin like a top.

"Hehe. Kangnam, look at this."

When Gaold playfully attacked with the Guroi's arm, Kangnam dodged with a slight lean and couldn't help but shout.

"Ugh, seriously! Should I just destroy it?"

Having already destroyed four Gurois, Kanya pleaded sincerely.

"Please don't. The Gurois are precious equipment."

"Fine. This guy is stressing me out."

Gaold finally examined various aspects of the Guroi.

While not comparable to the synesthesia of the spirit zone, the multivision provided excellent visibility, and the firepower was comparable to an air gun.

"How many of these do the rebels have?"

"That's classified. I can't tell you."

With a clanking sound, Guroi's gun barrel pointed at the platoon leader.

It was impossible to tell where the joke ended and the seriousness began.

"Even if it's confidential, I don't know. At best, I know the battalion's equipment status. How could a mere platoon leader know the total production of the rebel army?"

Gaold smacked his lips and stopped the machine.

Jumping down from Guroi, he threw off his piper and quietly joined Shiro's group.

Kangnam crossed his arms and glared.

"Why? You acted like you were going to ride all day."

"I'm getting motion sickness. It's worse than talking."

Kangnam snorted.

Meanwhile, Gaold's mind was getting complicated.

'That won't be enough. At least 2,000 units? No, more than that.'

This was the power of the Guroi unit that Gaold calculated was needed to capture a single Heavenly Angel.

At dusk, Shirone's group emerged from the forest. When they reached a hill overlooking the Plain of the Dead, they saw the scene of the giants' procession and the 23rd Battalion of the 1st Command of the rebel army engaging in localized battles stretching to the horizon.

The battalion had a total of thirty Gurois.

However, since one team, including Kanya, was sent as support troops, only twenty-five Gurois were currently in operation.

The Guroi unit, divided into five teams, cooperated with the infantry to lure a few giants at least one kilometer away from the procession and then concentrated their fire.

Every time the giants fell, torn to shreds, Shirone made a horrified expression.

Giants were also human.

The Mecha tribe members, who were once citizens, knew this better than anyone, so Kanya's face was also shadowed.

"The rule is to eliminate giants immediately upon discovery. If they reach Jotunheim and achieve mental unity, they will wield the power of giants."

The platoon leader spoke as if making an excuse, but he wasn't wrong.

If eight egos overlapped, the schema's diagram would become as powerful as an excellent swordsman. At that point, a mere battalion's force wouldn't be able to handle it. The group quickly returned to the main unit after entering the plain.

Seeing the group return with only one Guroi, the company commander initially looked incredulous, then eventually exploded in anger.

"What happened! You said it was a Kergoin! I sent five units to deal with it quickly, not to handle it like this!"

"I'm sorry."

The platoon leader repeated the same words.

After all, he was responsible for the platoon, so he had no excuses.

But Kanya was different.

Shirone had returned. And with much stronger allies than before.

This was a boon incomparable to the loss of tanks.

"Company commander! I have something to report!"

"Who are you! Can't you see I'm scolding the platoon leader! Are you ignoring the command structure!"

Although the Guroi pilot held the rank of a squad leader in the infantry, it was a great discourtesy to report directly in front of the platoon leader.

But Kanya couldn't wait.

With the sound of the giants' invasion line closing in, it was something the highest authority had to know.

"The light of Sector 73!"

"What? What nonsense are you spouting now?"

Kanya shouted, bursting with anger.

"Shirone has returned!"

Chapter 418:

Shirone's group headed towards the command headquarters barracks where the battalion commander was, passing through the battlefield where bullets were flying.

Even though it was called the command headquarters, it was right in front of the battlefield, so they had to shout to be heard.

Only after entering the barracks did the noise subside somewhat.

The company commander, who had already finished his report, was standing at ease in a corner, and Kanya accompanied Shirone's group to facilitate smooth communication.

The battalion commander did not take his eyes off the strategic map even after Shirone's group entered.

"I've heard the story."

He was a cold-looking man with white hair slicked back, and his thick mustache made him look stubborn.

"Are you the Nephilim?"

Shirone did not deny it.

Regardless of the truth, it seemed more effective to use the rebels this way.

The battalion commander moved on to the next question as if he wasn't interested.

"I'll ask directly. Why did you come back?"

Shirone didn't understand the question.

"You are like a myth to the rebels. But myths are most beautiful when they remain myths. Some of the soldiers think of you as an irresponsible deserter. Why did you, who had already left the battlefield, come back here?"

Shirone instinctively knew that the battalion commander was one of those who thought of him as a deserter.

"I have no grand reason. As before, I am just fighting with conviction as a single magician."

"Conviction..."

The battalion commander pulled back the tent flap and looked at the battlefield.

"The light you brought to Sector 73 is now the sun for 70,000 rebels. I don't want to extinguish that light. If you came here just for your conviction, I'd rather not have met you."

Shirone realized that the battalion commander would not move.

What was in his cold eyes was not determination, but a sense of mission driven by the belief that he had chosen the wrong path from the beginning.

"Even a small conviction can have the same purpose. I want to speak directly with the commander. Please let me go to the rebel headquarters."

"I refuse."

The battalion commander's eyes were filled with undisguised hostility.

"Fine, I'll be honest. The war is already lost. No, it was on the verge of defeat. If it weren't for the sudden halt in Heaven's offensive, the war would already be over. The gap was that overwhelming. Many soldiers lost their lives. The only card we have left is negotiation with Heaven. If you plan to recklessly ignite the fire again and run away, the light of Sector 73 will only be a hindrance."

"But the war is still ongoing. And Heaven is currently not moving. This could be an opportunity. If we can accurately grasp the situation, we have a good chance."

"Hey, light of Sector 73."

The battalion commander leaned in.

"Don't evaluate the Mecha tribe with the mindset of the Nor. It was the Nor who started the rebellion in the first place. But now? Only our Mecha tribe is dying. The reason Heaven stopped the battle? Who can find that out?"

"I can find out."

The battalion commander fell silent. His teeth ground together inside his closed mouth.

"Listen well, kid. Do you think I don't know what you're trying to do? No, actually, I don't know. But I can already see that whatever you do, you plan to use us. People call you a myth, but to me, you're just a seed of disaster. A myth with no ability, who barely defeated a fairy chief. Do you know how fiercely we fought while you ran away? What do you plan to change now?"

"I will meet Ikael."

"Pfft..."

The battalion commander let out a breath.

"Puhahaha! Puhahaha!"

It was truly laughable.

The Archangel Ikael. Meeting the highest authority of Heaven's law?

If it were that easy, tens of thousands of citizens wouldn't have died.

"Now I know for sure. You're not a myth. You're a butcher who led countless citizens to their deaths with your silver tongue. Company commander! Arrest this guy! Don't let the soldiers know."

Just as the company commander was reluctantly about to follow the order, the tent flap opened and the adjutant rushed in.

"Commander! Emergency! Giants have broken through the rearmost defense line and are attacking."

"What? Why? Which idiot lured the giants here? What's the reason?"

"It's not confirmed. Since Guroi Team 3 lost contact, the defense line has been continuously breached..."

The battalion commander slammed the tactical table.

"Damn it. Why?"

It's rare for variables to arise in giant elimination operations. The reactions of giants, who have no identity, are always

the same.

But now the rearmost defense line was breached.

He didn't know where the law had gone wrong, but living the same day as yesterday, he could only think of one thing.

The battalion commander grabbed Shirone by the collar.

"See? You're the root of all this. Because of you, Guroi was destroyed, and now there's a tactical hole. Are you planning to annihilate our battalion too?"

Kanya shouted with all her might.

"Commander! That's an unfounded accusation! Shirone is..."

"Shut up! Does a pilot who couldn't even protect his own equipment have anything to say in this situation?"

The adjutant urged.

"Commander! Give us orders! If we leave it like this, we won't last 30 minutes and we'll be annihilated!"

The battalion commander put on the piper hanging on the wall. After pocketing the arc, he grabbed the signa and exd and glared at Shirone as he left the barracks.

"Leave here quickly. I don't want to see you."

Kanya shouted.

"Commander! They can also be of help!"

"Didn't you hear me? Shirone is the main culprit who changed the giants' law! Our job now is to fight the enemy, not hide behind a deserter like him!"

As the battalion commander left, Kanya had no choice but to follow.

She couldn't just watch her comrades die as a soldier.

"Shirone, I'm sorry."

She gave a sad smile as she left the barracks.

"But I'm so glad to have met you."

Shirone knew it was her way of saying goodbye.

But Shirone still hadn't given up hope.

'The change in the law. They said the law could change with the manifestation of will. Maybe really...'

Kangnam spoke.

"The situation is worse than expected. Can we really move the rebels like this?"

Sein spoke.

"There are still many cards to play. Tagis too. The problem is the headquarters. From what I heard about the military community, it seems they are hiding their location, so it's likely we won't get information from the mainland either. We have to do it now."

Zulu spoke.

"I think the change in the giants' law is important. It doesn't make sense that giants, whose only law is to go to Jotunheim, are acting collectively. Can anyone provide an answer to this?"

No one could.

In Heaven, where the Akashic Records materialize, the law is an artificial system, but in the world where Shirone's group lives, it's just the principle of the universe.

Just as a butterfly's wings can cause a storm, it's impossible to pinpoint where the law changed because all minor variables are involved.

Gaold proposed his own method.

"Let's wipe out the giants first. If we save lives, they'll let us meet the commander or whoever."

Shirone raised his hand.

"Leave that to me."

"No. It's too dangerous. You have a special mission. Don't think your life is entirely yours."

"No. I think it's a matter of the law."

Sein asked.

"Do you have any guesses?"

"Yes. But think of it as an experiment rather than a guess. There's something I must confirm in Heaven."

"Attack everyone! Never retreat!"

Seven giants grabbed a Guroi and slammed it to the ground, then began stomping on it.

The cockpit was destroyed, and the terrified pilot screamed. But even that was cut off a second later.

"Damn it! Aaaah!"

The battalion commander, who arrived late, fired the arc repeatedly. It was indiscriminate shooting without any aim. Even so, the giant was hit.

Even so, the fact that it was unharmed made the battalion commander feel miserable.

"Damn it! Damn it!"

From the beginning, they were beings that humans couldn't handle.

What did the elixir of life matter? What did it matter that their lifespan was limited?

Humans lost the path to immortality for defying the gods. And now they were facing extinction.

"Aaaah!"

When the battalion commander struck the giant's leg with the signa, the giant, feeling the pain slowly, turned its head. Seeing the dilated pupils sent chills down his spine.

"Exterminate... the heretic."

His legs trembled, and he couldn't suppress the groan escaping between his teeth.

"Hic. Hic."

As the giant approached, the battalion commander's face turned into a crying expression.

He had witnessed many deaths, but his own death was incomparable to any of them.

"Exterminate... the heretic."

"No, I'm not a heretic..."

When the giant's fist came down, the battalion commander screamed silently and closed his eyes tightly.

Grrrr...

Hearing a tremendous low growl, he slowly opened his eyes to see a beast he had never seen before standing like a black wall.

Hearing a tremendous low growl, he slowly opened his eyes to see a beast he had never seen before standing like a black wall.

Its body was sleek like a leopard with soft, black fur, six legs, a flat face, and fangs over a meter long. The ground was cracked where it had crouched to receive the giant's punch.

"What, what is this?"

"What do you think? It's a Tier 3 monster, a Cougar."

Gaold's group had arrived unnoticed.

Zulu stepped forward and snapped her fingers, and the Cougar turned around with a cute sound that didn't match its size.

"Go play."

Roar!

As the Cougar leaped off the ground, the view opened up as if a black curtain had been pulled back.

Every time the beast's claws swung, the giant's body was sliced apart.

In terms of physical ability alone, the Cougar was considered the strongest of Tier 3 monsters.

The battalion commander, who had been staring at the battlefield in a daze, slowly turned his head.

"Who are you people?"

Gaold grinned.

"Humans. Just like you."

"Lena! Lena!"

"Sister!"

Kanya hugged Lena, who was fighting among the giants, and leaped away.

When the giant's foot stomped down where they had been, their bodies bounced as if they had fallen on a rubber mat.

Lena, terrified by the unfamiliar law, groped Kanya, who was unarmed.

"Sister! Are you hurt? Where's Guroi?"

Before Kanya could speak, tears welled up in her eyes.

Her poor little sister. It was sad to send her off without experiencing anything good in life.

Sensing something, Lena smiled.

"Sister, I'm okay."

Kanya rubbed her cheek against Lena's.

Her smart sister must have known. The bodies of their comrades were all around them.

She had already decided on her last words.

She wanted to say this to her sister, whom she had waited for as much as she had.

"Lena, Shirone..."

"Brother Shirone?"

When Lena looked up at the sky and spoke, Kanya followed her gaze, her eyes shaking with shock.

Shirone was flying in the sky with golden wings.

'Is this Heaven's war?'

The view of the battlefield from above was horrific.

Giants massacring humans looked no different from humans massacring ants.

'But I can end this. If this works...'

Shirone cast Shining Impact. The brightness, comparable to sunlight, blinded everyone.

The effect was even greater in the dim time of day.

"Argh!"

"Damn it! What the hell!"

After a moment, people regained their sight.

The giants, terrified of the sudden blindness, became even more ferocious and started roaring.

Then something flashed in the sky, and a brilliant rainbow-colored light spread across the night sky.

As the rainbow-colored spots shimmered on the plain where the darkness was approaching, both giants and humans looked up.

"That, that is..."

Shirone, who had completed a giant Ataraxia above his head, flapped his radiant wings and looked down at

everyone.

The Mecha tribe was stunned.

Shirone's current appearance was exactly like the being that the citizens had feared.

"Ugh. Ugh."

Hundreds of giants knelt, shaking the ground, and began to cry with their mouths open like fools.

Giants were also beings of the law.

Even in a state of lost identity, Ikael's magic circle exerted a powerful presence from within their instincts.

"Law... Adjuster..."

Thinking that kneeling wasn't enough, the giants pressed their foreheads to the ground and lowered their bodies as much as possible.

Finally, the humans' figures were revealed.

But they, too, only glanced at each other briefly before looking back up at the sky.

"Nephilim..."

A word that had been forgotten in their minds slipped out of the heretics' mouths.

"Sister, Brother Shirone is here."

Lena, in Kanya's arms, burst into tears.

Even if someone called him a deserter, even if they said they regretted being deceived by him and defying the gods, for her, who had never doubted Shirone, this was a miracle.

"Yes, Lena. Shirone... really is the descendant of an angel."

With wings more splendid than an angel's, and a brilliant halo, the symbol of an archangel, above his head, Shirone had returned.

From the light of Sector 73, to become the light of Heaven.

"Nephilim. Nephilim."

"Law Adjuster..."

Everyone knelt at Shirone's feet.

Chapter 419:

Heaven's 6th Heaven, Great World War.

There is an angel with a face as transparent and beautiful as light.

Standing at 2 meters and 30 centimeters tall, with a slender body, he is the pinnacle of intelligence, born knowing all the principles of the world.

Among the many angels, only eight are archangels, and among them, the most beautiful is the Angel of Birth, Kariel. But now, his face was as pale as a sick human's.

His eyes were sunken, and his expression was irritable. The kind and clear facial lines that once overflowed with intellectual beauty had recently become frequently distorted.

In fact, he was in a state similar to being ill.

If an angel's power comes from clear concepts, his current clarity was only a tenth of what it usually was.

All this was the result of the labor he endured to bring one human.

"Kariel, are you really okay?"

Uriel, the Angel of Destruction, looked worriedly at Kariel, whose presence had become faint.

Standing at 3 meters tall, the tallest among the archangels, with a solid body, and a thick breastplate that reached his chin, a golden halo spun angrily at its center.

"I can still endure. I have to. This is just the beginning."

The fatigue Kariel felt could be compared to a human not sleeping for about 40 years.

Any creature subjected to this level of fatigue would have already had all its cells dried up.

But his eyes still burned with emotion.

Uriel turned his head to where Kariel was looking.

Under the galaxy mirror that governed the world's operations, a woman of human standards of beauty was sitting cross-legged.

Adrias Miro.

Could there be a more detestable concept to the beings of Heaven?

Even Anke La, the incarnation of the Akashic Records, couldn't penetrate the barrier she set up, blocking humanity's last bastion against the conquest of the universe.

But even she couldn't withstand Kariel's persistence.

"You finally did it."

Anke La, who had abruptly canceled the war just before the rebels were annihilated, prohibited any investigation into humans.

All angels obeyed the message, but only Kariel continued with the plan to exterminate humans.

What he obtained was Miro's 'body' right in front of him.

"How did you do it? Didn't you say Miro's spacetime couldn't be destroyed?"

A faint smile appeared on Kariel's tired face.

"When we attacked Miro's spacetime with celestial force, Optros slipped through the crack. Its electromagnetic pattern contained information about Miro's spacetime. I analyzed that."

"But Miro's spacetime healed immediately. You couldn't have brought her through the dimensional barrier."

"The dimensional barrier, in fact, has no substance. The reason Heaven's army can't go to the land of Earth is because the protocols are different. It's an independent world without even quantum entanglement."

Uriel didn't try to understand.

A being born for destruction had no obligation to understand its target.

"So?"

"I decoded the protocol with the information from Optros. Then I transmitted Miro to the Great World War through quantum superposition."

"Hmm, so?"

Kariel realized Uriel didn't understand.

"Simply put, I reached into a barrel and kept pulling until I got what I wanted. The barrel's size could be said to be the entire universe."

Uriel understood why Kariel had become so weak.

"So you searched the universe and kidnapped her."

"Well... exactly."

Kariel decided to let it go.

"Hmm."

Uriel looked at Miro's face, lost in meditation.

It was the same young face that had stood alone against Heaven's army, spreading the dimensional wall just before the final war broke out.

"The human mind, in some sense, is formidable."

Currently, Miro's mind, which constitutes her spacetime, is endlessly being sucked into the dimension of emptiness. It was a mental state and concept that a perfect angel from birth couldn't understand.

"Hmph, that's proof of their imperfection. Don't have any sentiments for such insignificant humans."

Uriel didn't respond.

For him, anything he couldn't understand was simply to be destroyed.

But was it the same for Kariel?

The concept of birth is based on the premise of understanding everything.

For Kariel, who handles the elixir of life, not understanding humans might be the greatest contradiction in this universe.

"Humans are truly strange beings. Even now, one human is holding back all of Heaven's power."

Kariel's expression twisted.

Humans. Humans.

Starting with Anke La, everyone applied different standards only to humans.

"That won't happen. I'll destroy them."

Uriel changed the subject. He didn't want to further irritate his twin-like angel, born on the same day but with a different concept.

"So, what will you do now? Even if you kill Miro, her spacetime won't disappear. Why did you bring her here, exhausting her mind to the brink of destruction?"

"Hmph, of course, to destroy Miro's spacetime. I'll pull Miro out of the dimension of emptiness. Once she regains consciousness and is killed, her spacetime will disappear." It was a good method, no, the only method.

"But we can't understand human imperfection. None of the citizens can understand Miro's mind. The Nephilim disappeared after Goffin's erasure."

"They don't exist in Heaven, but they do in the land of Earth."

Uriel tilted his head.

Of course, there are those who awaken as Nephilim in the land of Earth.

But with Miro's spacetime blocking it, bringing someone from there was impossible.

"Are you going to search the entire universe again? You might completely disappear this time."

"There's no need. I don't have the strength left for that."

Kariel flew up to the pillar-shaped central system and connected to the Akashic Records.

Uriel followed and looked at the screen from behind Kariel.

"I found something interesting while searching the Akashic Records."

When Kariel stepped aside, a human's name appeared on the screen.

Reading the description below, Uriel nodded.

"Indeed, interesting."

Coincidentally, it was a human who understood the human mind best.

No, it was correct to say that he had changed to his current state because he understood the human mind best.

"I will summon this person to the Great World War."

When Kariel spread his hands, a law book was born on his palm with a flash of light.

The law book, containing the principles of the universe, had a high-strength metal hardcover, and the pages made of light began to turn.

As the central processing system operated at full capacity, bluish electricity flowed like waves on the floor and gathered in the arch-shaped machinery.

Uriel watched for a moment, then turned back to the central processing unit's screen.

"A grave robber..."

A name that existed only as a concept was flashing.

Morrigan Arius

Rebel 1st Headquarters.

Shirone's group received enthusiastic cheers from the rebels.

Shirone's exploits, subduing hundreds of giants with the power of an archangel, quickly spread through drones and had already become a new myth among the rebels.

Amidst the overwhelming white noise, Shirone's face was solemn.

He was puzzled by the number 1 attached to the headquarters, but any doubts disappeared upon seeing the much larger-than-expected scale of the rebel base.

Dozens of buildings, presumed to be supply warehouses, surrounded the site, and a massive building over 30 meters tall stood in the forest.

'An incredible force. If they move...'

Gaold thought differently.

'It won't work.'

Of course, the headquarters' power was formidable.

But there was no doubt about the battalion commander's words that they were on the brink of annihilation.

It wasn't a matter of asymmetric power.

From the beginning, the beings of Heaven were something different from humans.

If thousands of ants bit a human, they would die, but angels were not humans who would let that happen.

"Hey, there's Shirone. Hey, Shirone! It's me, me!"

A familiar face popped out from the middle of the procession.

It was Clove and Gardrak, who had guided Shirone and his friends to Nor's shelter a year ago in Heaven.

Although the memory of Clove ignoring Amy still lingered, it was nice to see a familiar face at such a moment.

But Shirone couldn't approach them. The crowd, hearing Clove's words, was all trying to rush out.

"Wow! It's true! Shirone really came!"

Clove and Gardrak were buried in the crowd and couldn't be seen.

Except for the people of Sector 73, very few knew Shirone's face, causing this phenomenon.

Shirone widened the distance with a startled expression.

Getting closer could potentially harm people.

Watching Shirone move away, Clove tore at his hair and lamented.

"Ah, who knew that kid would become such an important figure. If I had known, I would have gotten closer to him earlier."

Gardrak smacked his disciple's head.

"Is that the issue now? We're on the verge of being annihilated by angels."

Clove replied with a resentful expression.

"But Master, you also said that if Shirone came, we would be treated well here."

Gardrak remained silent.

Shirone had returned. And at a very opportune time.

The halt in Heaven's attack was certainly a boon for the rebels, but it wasn't enough to bridge the deepening rift between the Mecha and Nor tribes after repeated defeats. The headquarters, unable to reach a consensus, eventually split into the 1st and 2nd Headquarters, and although there were no battles, the situation was already bleak.

At a time when everyone was waiting for self-destruction, the light of Sector 73 began to shine on them again.

'Why now? Did he know and come back?'

A series of events connected by invisible links made it impossible to dismiss Shirone's return as mere coincidence.

"Hehe, I'm so happy to be walking with you, brother."

Meanwhile, Lena, who was holding onto Shirone's arm, did not leave his side for a moment on the way to the command headquarters.

Watching Shirone's stiff back, Plu clicked her tongue and said, "What is she doing? Did she come to Heaven for a romance?"

Gaold didn't mind at all. "Hehe, let it be. It helps with the parade."

For the rebels, who were on the brink of annihilation, the miracle of Shirone's arrival was welcome, and a bit of theatrics wouldn't hurt.

However, Kanya was embarrassed by her sister's behavior.

Unable to bear it, she whispered to Lena, "What are you doing? Let go. Don't you know what Shirone means to the rebels? What if people misunderstand?"

"What misunderstanding? We're not just acquaintances. It's been a year since we met, can't I at least link arms?"

Lena looked at Shirone and said, "Brother, let sister link arms with you too."

Shirone couldn't find the words to respond.

His heart was already racing; how could he walk with two women on his arms?

Kanya's face turned as red as a beet.

"W-what are you talking about? Why would I link arms with Shirone?"

"Oh, come on. You're too weak in these matters. We need to look close to Shirone to get things done at the headquarters. Your Guroi is damaged, right? We need to get a new one here to become pilots again."

Kanya was at a loss for words.

Despite being younger, her sister was more calculating.

Or perhaps, in this case, cunning?

Shirone reassured her.

"Kanya, don't worry too much. I destroyed the Guroi, so I'll make sure to tell the commander."

Kanya, smiling at Shirone, then turned her squinting eyes back to Lena.

'Oh, that fox...'

Whether she knew her sister's feelings or not, Lena, holding Shirone's arm, just smiled contentedly.

Chapter 420:

As they entered the command headquarters building and the iron door closed, the cheers from outside were cut off as if waking from a dream.

The lights on the ceiling of the hallway maintained minimal brightness, and soldiers stood guard at precise intervals along the path.

Armed with the first stage of the Mecha combat system, they never glanced at Shirone's group. However, their gaze was intense enough to pierce through walls.

'They're all elite soldiers.'

The Mecha tribe may not have superhuman physical abilities or magical powers, but they have the technology to compensate for both.

In war, winning is all that matters, so it would be a mistake to think their power is weak just because their physical strength is.

A colonel guided Shirone's group to an underground bunker. The bunker's security system was not inferior to the association's technology, and when the iron door opened, numerous machines were operating.

Technicians were busy moving their hands while monitoring screens, and a man in a commander's cloak stood with his hands behind his back, observing their work.

"Commander, I've brought Shirone."

At the colonel's words, the commander turned around.

He was a man in his late twenties with a long scar running from his temple to his ear.

His thin lips were stubbornly closed, and his eyes behind his glasses showed both coldness and passion.

Rebel 1st Commander Crude.

As Kanya had mentioned, he was a young man.

In war, especially in a situation where defeat seemed imminent, age didn't matter much.

What soldiers wanted was a commander who combined the bravery to charge towards death first and the tactical skill to save as many people as possible.

Crude was a man who met those conditions exactly.

A genius pilot who knew everything about the maintenance, driving, and operation of the Titan, which belonged to the third stage of the Mecha combat system, and a war hero of the Mecha tribe who had defeated a two-horned Mara.

"Are you Shirone?"

Crude extended his hand to Shirone.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Crude, the 1st Commander of the rebels."

"I'm Shirone."

Crude carefully observed Shirone's group.

With his extensive combat experience, he recognized their strength at a glance, but his confident gaze did not waver. However, when he saw Plu, his gaze lingered for a moment, returning to the twenty-eight-year-old engineer who had wrestled with machines all his life.

A petite woman with blue hair braided down to her waist, exuding a sharp and decisive style.

What particularly caught his attention was her eyes. She was the only one in the group whose eyes were full of determination.

Like a woman warrior going to her first battle.

But that was it.

Crude also knew the story of Shirone, the light of Sector 73, but the reality of war was too harsh to rely on myths.

"Let's go somewhere quiet."

Crude led everyone to a strategy room deep within the bunker.

Naturally, no tea was served, and they got straight to the point as soon as they sat down.

"I heard you wanted to meet me?"

Sein sat at the negotiation table as the representative.

"We're going to attack Heaven. We request the cooperation of the rebel headquarters."

"I refuse."

Crude's answer was immediate.

"I heard there was friction with the battalion commander. Of course, a soldier whose spirit is broken is useless to us as well, but thinking rationally, there's no chance of winning a war right now. Thinking that you can attack Heaven just because you subdued giants who lost their identity is nothing but a delusion."

Sein nodded obediently.

He had been worried after seeing the battalion commander soaked in defeatism, but the commander was different.

"So, you haven't given up on the war."

"We always leave room for a truce or compromise. I can't let those who trust and follow me die in vain. But I don't think Heaven sees us as a subject for compromise. If we have to fight, we must win to survive."

"What if we have a strategy to win?"

"Hmph, nonsense."

Even with the addition of the heretics and the citizens from Heaven, the tens of thousands of rebels had only a handful of notable victories against Heaven.

The alliance of Nor and Mecha couldn't even capture a three-horned Mara, let alone a Heavenly Angel. What could a mere ten humans do?

"We will paralyze the Aegis system with Tagis. If we do that, we can infiltrate Heaven and conduct guerrilla warfare."

The Aegis, Heaven's core air defense system, is an impregnable shield that determines interception order with two hundred search methods and can attack seven thousand targets simultaneously.

If they could break through it and enter without bloodshed, it would bring a ray of hope to the rebels.

"Hahaha."

Crude covered his face and shook with laughter.

"I don't know where you heard about Tagis, but it's already a lost technology in Mecha."

When he lowered his hand, he was no longer laughing.

"Think logically. There's no way the angels would leave a technology that can paralyze Heaven's interception system alone. To revive the technology, you'd need to access the Akashic Records. But to do that, you'd first have to break through the Aegis system. Do you get it now? The order is reversed, idiot."

Sein leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"What if... I have that technology?"

"What?"

Crude's face went blank.

"What nonsense is that?"

"Just because it's lost in Heaven doesn't mean it's lost in the land of Earth. I've spent twenty years traveling the world, investigating everything about ancient weapons. And I have the perfectly restored design of Tagis in my head. How about now? Does it make sense?"

Crude's eyes began to show confusion.

"What if you're lying..."

"I can restore it right now. I have no forgetfulness in my head. You're an engineer too, so you'll understand when you see the blueprint."

'So that's why... the Black Line...'

Shirone saw Sein in a new light.

Ancient weapons were top secrets in any kingdom.

He had risked his life, facing execution just for accessing the information, all to save Miro.

"Hmm..."

Crude was now confused too.

Who were these people? Why were they trying to do what tens of thousands of rebels couldn't?

'No, the important thing is whether it will succeed.'

Even if they paralyzed Aegis and entered Heaven, angels, Maras, giants, and fairies awaited them.

Penetrating to Aravot, where Anke La was, would be like carrying gunpowder and jumping into a fire.

'But it's worth a try. Even if there's only a one percent chance.'

Was this a miracle? Or the last desperate struggle of a candle burning brightest before it goes out?

"There are three... conditions."

There were more conditions than expected, but Sein felt more trust. It was proof that Crude was taking the plan realistically.

"Let's hear them."

Crude counted on his fingers.

"First, use Shirone, the light of Sector 73, to persuade the 2nd Headquarters. Even if we infiltrate Heaven, it's like hitting a rock with an egg if Mecha and Nor don't unite."

"Of course. What's next?"

"Second, even if you have the blueprint, we can't manufacture a large Tagis that affects all of Heaven here. You need to borrow a factory from the mainland and get their approval."

Sein recalled his first encounter with the rebels.

"The military community?"

"Yes. Specifically, a defense contractor called 'Yamaeng.' They rapidly grew during Heaven's civil war, monopolizing weapon production by taking over military-industrial complexes. They're detestable to the rebels. But without their help, a full-scale war with Heaven is impossible."

"Alright. What's the last condition?"

For the first time, Crude hesitated to propose.

No matter how great Shirone's team was, it wasn't something a single team could do.

"To manufacture Tagis, you'll probably need Black Elixir."

"Black Elixir?"

"Most of Heaven's creatures generate Elixir by absorbing the Life Stream flowing through the planet. There are five types: Red, Green, Yellow, White, and finally, Black."

"Does it have to be Black? From what I know, Elixir can be bypassed with material mixing and ratios."

"Each type of Elixir has unique effects. Red generates heat, Green involves biochemical elements, Yellow changes energy properties, and White interacts with atmospheric elements. Heaven's rocks are so durable they don't weather even after tens of thousands of years. That's why we need Elixir, which contains the planet's power."

Crude pointed towards the warehouse.

"For example, to cast the metal for one Guroi, you need eight thousand Red Elixirs, but mixing in White Elixir greatly increases heat reaction efficiency. Mixing White and Yellow can generate electricity. Elixir is the means to create everything in this world."

Plu asked.

"Then what does Black Elixir do?"

Crude looked at Plu's face briefly, then turned to Sein and answered.

"Black Elixir, simply put, governs time."

"Time? Like magic?"

"No. To be precise, it reverses or accelerates irreversible phenomena. If you use Black Elixir on a liquid mixed with ink and water, it separates back into ink and water. If you have a burn, using Black and Green Elixir can repair cell damage."

"That's... incredible."

Shirone couldn't believe it.

It defied the chemical laws he had learned in school.

Zulu asked.

"What about acceleration?"

"It shortens reaction time. Green Elixir is the basic element of living things, and mixing it with Black Elixir can cause mutations. In some cases, it produces evolutionary results thousands of years ahead."

Gaold said.

"Philosopher's Stone."

Shirone had heard of it before.

Though not commonly used in magic, it was a substance known as the dream material for alchemists.

A fantastical substance that could turn mere iron into gold and cure incurable diseases, existing in Heaven.

'Could it be...'

A particular incident came to Shirone's mind.

When Kanya's mother became a target of the elixir's magic, a large glass sphere filled with black liquid had appeared.

A horrifying spell that dissolved humans and cast them into giant molds to create giants.

What made it even more terrifying was that it was an inexplicable phenomenon to his mind.

A black liquid that dissolved and reconstituted living beings.

If such a thing were possible in this world, it would undoubtedly be related to the Black Elixir, which defies chemical reactions.

Sein understood Crude's intention.

"You're saying we can use the Philosopher's Stone to shorten the production process of Tagis?"

"Exactly. Tagis can be made with existing Elixirs, but the process of melting rocks to extract and fuse metals would take too much time. We provide the equipment. Whether it's Guroi or anything else, we melt everything with Black Elixir to process the metals needed for Tagis. These are my three conditions."

Armin asked.

"If we collect it through hunting, what are the chances?"

Crude shook his head.

"Zero percent. Black Elixir isn't generated in living bodies. It's an element that can only be obtained from beings that have transcended the flow of time, namely the dead."

Given that different creatures collect planetary energy differently, the abnormality of the Philosopher's Stone made

sense.

"In the eroded valley northwest of the mainland, undead creatures reside. But even if you catch a thousand, you might get one. That's less than a 0.1 percent chance."

Gaold said indifferently.

"So what are we supposed to do?"

"There's one place. A 30 percent, no, a 50 percent chance of obtaining Black Elixir."

Sein asked.

"Where is that?"

Crude hesitated again.

But realizing he couldn't stop now, he opened his eyes wide and spoke.

"The world of the dead, Niflheim."

Chapter 421:

A desperate cry echoed through the Great World War. Arius, shot by electricity, flew 10 meters and rolled on the ground.

The magic Apoptosis, which dives into one's thoughts, trapped him in an eternal concept where time did not exist. It was a kind of mental death, and the shock upon returning was incomparable to the fear of a newborn baby.

"Aaah! Aaah!"

Arius couldn't stop screaming.

Everything was confusing and unsettling.

Only the faint remnants of memories vaguely told him who he was.

At the boundary of that oblivion, a thin thread of intelligence flowed in and connected with his memories.

The scene of casting magic to avoid Captain Walker's sword in the Kazra Palace came to mind, and the screams subsided.

'Damn, I can't keep doing this.'

Wiping the drool from his chin, Arius stood up, feeling suspicious of the unfamiliar surroundings.

"Where is this...?"

If someone had pulled him out of Apoptosis, it would be one of the Seven Magical Sins, and it should be their secret hideout, but the scenery was entirely different.

Everything was in a light purple metallic color, with bizarre machinery emitting light and operating.

"Are you the grave robber?"

Arius turned around with an unpleasant expression.

But he had to look up, and his pupils contracted in surprise.

A halo above the head, wings of light several times larger than the body.

An angel.

'Why is an angel here...?'

As the question filled his mind, he quickly suppressed it with the Flicker magic battery.

He had to escape.

Thinking came next.

Just as his body turned into light with a flash, Uriel's hand moved faster than a moment.

"Ugh!"

Arius, grabbed by the neck, struggled three meters above the ground.

It felt like his neck bone was being held, not just his neck.

"S-save me...!"

When Uriel slammed Arius to the ground, he arched his back in pain and groaned.

Then, struggling, he knelt on one knee and looked up at the angels.

"Damn, who are you?"

"I am Uriel, the Angel of Destruction."

"U-Uriel?"

One of the eight archangels in Heaven.

Arius quickly scanned his surroundings.

He recognized the objects, devices, and the galaxy mirror, realizing it was the Great World War.

'Then the one next to him is Kariel...'

With two archangels present, even Arius of the Seven Magical Sins had no chance of leaving this place alive on his own.

"I have something to show you."

Kariel, who had lifted Arius into the air, flew to the galaxy mirror and threw him again.

"Ugh!"

Falling from his solar plexus, he gasped for breath and then realized someone was in front of him, struggling to lift his head.

A woman was sitting cross-legged.

"A human?"

Uriel spoke.

"Adrias Miro."

Arius's eyes widened in shock.

"M-Miro? This woman?"

To a scale magician, Miro was an unforgettable name.

But even the grave robber Arius had never seen her face before.

So this is what she looks like.

An ordinary girl you could see anywhere in the world. The kind that might catch your eye for a moment if you passed her on the street.

But the adjectives attached to her were all superlatives: best, last, ultimate, strongest.

So Arius couldn't help but stare at the young girl's face, mesmerized.

Beautiful, just by existing.

Quickly regaining his senses, Arius analyzed the situation based on existing information.

Archangels, Great World War, Miro.

'Damn it. So it's come to this?'

Miro being in Heaven could be interpreted as the final war being imminent.

'What the hell is going on? Do they know in the original world?'

He wanted to talk to Miro, but she showed no signs of waking up.

Arius looked at Kariel and asked.

"Did you put her to sleep?"

"No. Miro is in the dimension of emptiness. You can bring her back to her original state."

'Dimension of emptiness...'

Arius's face twisted.

'Damn! It's Samadhi.'

Now he was starting to get the picture.

As long as Miro was in Samadhi, she couldn't be killed. And that was why they had summoned him, the grave robber.

"Destroy Miro's dimension of emptiness."

Arius snorted.

When Uriel had grabbed him, he instinctively begged for his life, but now that he had regained his intellect, death was not a priority.

If he pulled Miro out of the dimension of emptiness, her spacetime would be destroyed, and humanity would face extinction.

'I don't really care, but I don't like the idea of doing what these guys want.'

Still, he had no intention of giving up.

He was about to explore the mind of one of the greatest magicians in human history.

He wanted to know what was inside this woman's head.

What she liked, what she hated, what made her feel shame, and what secrets she would take to her grave.

"Destroy Samadhi?"

Arius frowned.

"Are you kidding me?"

"If you can't, you will die."

"You don't think that's a threat, do you? This woman is the strongest scale magician in humanity. Anyone who dives in will be crushed by the egoist."

"Then you will die."

When Kariel extended his hand, Arius raised both hands as if to calm him down.

"Wait. I didn't say I wouldn't do it. I'm just saying we need to find a way around it."

"A way around? Her mind?"

"If I dive in now, I'll be swept away by Samadhi. But what about Drimo? In Drimo, where any thought flows, I can collect Miro's mind. There, I can find a strong enough keyword to break Samadhi."

"Keyword?"

"Every human has trauma. Trauma so severe that just thinking about it stops their breath. We create a powerful net with those and throw it into the abyss. Then when we pull it, we catch the big fish, Miro."

Kariel stared at Arius, who was excitedly explaining.

Is he sane? How can he be so enthusiastic about destroying humanity?

'I can't understand humans at all.'

Arius set a condition.

"But Drimo is a multidimensional structure, not a place you can investigate at will. So give me some information. You must know something."

"Hmm."

Suddenly, Kariel's halo expanded into a ring.

As Arius's face turned pale, a black sphere emerged, tearing through space.

"Come forth, Brahma."

"Kiiiiii!"

A hooked nose appeared first, followed by a red-skinned face.

The eyes were slanted unpleasantly, and the teeth were irregular.

Three glowing triangles floated on the forehead, and the brain extended beyond the crown, flowing like hair down to the small figure's feet.

Kariel's familiar, the three-horned Mara Brahma.

In some parts of the human world, he was called the god of creation.

"Lowly Brahma greets Archangel Kariel."

"Follow this human to Drimo. Assist him in whatever he investigates."

Arius was dumbfounded.

'Damn, Brahma?'

It was shocking for a magician to see the god of intelligence from mythology looking like that.

But he quickly regained his composure.

This was an opportunity.

With the knowledge of the three-horned Mara, he could access the deepest parts of Drimo, where humanity had never reached.

'Hehe, the god of magic is smiling upon me.'

Arius approached Miro.

He would uncover everything about her.

And when he returned, he would be the god of the world.

"Let's go. Heaven seems quite busy."

Brahma extended a strand of his brain through Miro's mouth into her brain.

As the brain area governing Drimo activated, a small spacetime tunnel appeared before him.

Arius leaped in without hesitation, followed by Brahma.

"Whew."

Only after the spacetime tunnel closed did Kariel sit down.

Summoning the three-horned Mara had drained all his remaining power.

"Are you alright?"

"My strength will return with time. Once Miro wakes up, humanity is finished. I'll have the right to initiate at the archangel council."

"It might not succeed. Brahma is not in a normal state due to the law of familiars."

The combined abilities of the three Maras an angel commands can never surpass the angel's abilities.

This follows the principle that no acquired concept can appear without a preceding concept.

This is the law of familiars.

With Kariel's weakened presence, the three-horned Mara Brahma couldn't exert his full power.

"It doesn't matter. Brahma was born by mimicking my intellect. He can make decisions in a second that would take ten thousand cautious humans to reach a compromise. It will take time, but he can do it."

It would take time. But what did it matter?

After all, it was the last time humanity had left.

The strategy room was engulfed in silence.

Niflheim.

A place even the mainland's border guards were forbidden to approach, inhabited only by evil spirits that once terrified humans.

Crude gave realistic advice again.

"Let me be clear, it's an extremely dangerous place.

Considering the value of Black Elixir, many have tried, but no one has set foot there for thousands of years. The reason is simple. If you go, you die. So choose wisely."

Sein asked.

"Do you think we have a choice in this situation?"

"Even if you don't go to Niflheim, we can maintain our alliance. The opportunity isn't just now. But for the 1st Headquarters to engage in full-scale war, these three conditions must be met."

Choosing the safe route would take a long time. On the other hand, the quick route was too dangerous.

"Gaold, what will you do?"

Sein left the decision to the commander.

But in reality, it was just a formality. With no way of knowing Miro's fate, there was only one choice he could make.

"We're going to Niflheim."

"Hmm."

Crude let out a long sigh.

"I hold you in high regard. That's why I want to dissuade you. Using the light of Sector 73 to expand the rebel forces is also a good strategy. Why are you in such a hurry? Is there a special reason?"

Haste leads to mistakes.

Gaold knew this too, which is why he was desperately trying to stay calm.

But objectively, time was not on their side.

They couldn't kill Miro in Samadhi, but they wouldn't be doing this without a plan either.

"You don't need to know that. We'll meet the three conditions as quickly as possible. Is that satisfactory?"

"Of course. If it's possible."

Crude remained skeptical until the end.

"Now we'll split into teams. Kangnan, Zulu, and I will go to Niflheim."

Sein asked, "What about the rest?"

"Armin, Siina, Etella, and Kuan will handle the military community. Shirone and Plu will persuade the 2nd Headquarters. This is the only way."

Sein agreed, considering the difficulty of the tasks and the distribution of personnel.

"Then I'll stay here and work on the strategy. I also need to understand planetary movements."

To accurately strike Aravot with divine retribution, precise predictions of the landing point were necessary.

Understanding planetary movements was a prerequisite.

"Are you really going to Niflheim?"

Crude couldn't understand Shirone's group.

Even with ten people, or even with the rebels' support, it wouldn't be enough, yet they were splitting up.

"Are you out of your mind?"

Gaold replied as he left.

"No."

Chapter 422:

Shirone and Plu headed to the 2nd Headquarters. Clove and Gardrak guided them, and as they closed the distance using the light spots, they received various pieces of information.

"Research suggests that the angels' 'overlooking' isn't about the observer's gaze leaving but rather pulling the desired location in front of them. It's like opening a drawer in a room and rummaging through it. So how did the rebels avoid being overlooked?"

Gardrak's words were translated through the drone they received from the headquarters.

The drones produced in Heaven didn't have the language of the land, but those from 'Yamaeng' were programmed with the languages of many border guards.

"Hmm, putting a lock on the drawer?" Plu suggested.

Gardrak nodded. "That's the Mecha tribe's way. They use a self-developed magnetic field to disrupt the scenery, making it impossible to focus."

Shirone added, "Then the second way is to create many drawers?"

"Correct. The 2nd Headquarters we're heading to operates in a decentralized manner. It's a classic concealment strategy, but it significantly reduces risk."

Plu asked, "What kind of place is the 2nd Headquarters?"

"I've never been to the headquarters myself. I worked in the 13th Battalion before being transferred to the 1st Headquarters. Unlike the Mecha, who prioritize command, the Nor prioritize individual ability. They believe the strongest should be the commander."

Shirone said, "Then the commander must be very strong."

"I've heard so. The commander is a woman named Raesis, and rumors say her Spirit Force is as high as 32%."

Spirit Force is an indicator of affinity with essence, a mental state much closer to the essence than the Spirit Zone.

Plu asked, "How impressive is 32%? If it reaches 100%, can you control essence freely?"

"That's impossible. It's just affinity. At 32%, it's like providing water for 100 people with a single drop. The average Nor's affinity is only 7-8%. Even a 1% difference exponentially increases magical power."

Shirone vaguely imagined the 2nd Headquarters commander in his mind.

"Anyway, I agree with this journey. The Mecha are strong against giants but weak against fairies. On the other hand, the Nor are strong against fairies. An alliance is essential for survival."

As they talked, Shirone's group arrived at the light spot. Above a sparkling, transparent stream, particles of light floated gently.

Gardrak waded into the stream, extended his fist to the spot, and prepared the light magic Elizer.

Plu watched the light seep into his fist and asked, "Do we have to go further? This is the third time already."

"This is the last one."

He had saved this information in case they were attacked on the way and the information was leaked.

Plu nodded and approached Shirone.

She felt more at ease than when surrounded by her illustrious seniors, but now she had to protect Shirone entirely.

She recalled the conversation with Gaold after finishing negotiations with Crude and leaving the bunker the previous night.

"Plu."

"Yes, Chairman."

Gaold glanced at Shirone and then spoke.

"I'm worried. Other teams have veterans mixed in, but you and Shirone are different."

Plu readily acknowledged this.

Of course, she knew Gaold was concerned not about their safety but about the project's success.

"I fully understand. I will risk my life to ensure we don't let our seniors down."

"In case things go wrong..."

Gaold paused.

To Plu, it was a remarkable moment.

The fact that he, who could be compared to a machine with broken brakes, hesitated, already felt like a reward.

Plu smiled softly and said, "Don't worry. If a life must be lost in this project, I know it will be mine. As a supporter, no matter what happens, I will ensure Shirone returns safely."

Shirone, who joined the team as the Terminator, was the master key of the task force, meant to survive until the end even if most team members died.

As a magician, it was shameful to weigh her life against that of such an important figure and supporter.

Gaold looked at Plu silently for a moment, then turned with a wicked grin.

"Hehe, I'll trust you."

His last words deeply resonated with Plu.

She watched Gaold's broad back with a dazed expression, then saluted with a bright smile.

'I don't mind dying. I'm part of the best team.'

"Um..."

At that moment, Crude, who had been watching from a distance, cleared his throat and approached.

Even in wartime, he believed humans should live humanely, so he cautiously expressed his feelings.

"If there's anything uncomfortable..."

"No."

Plu turned coldly, her smile gone as if it had never been there.

Shirone was playing with minnows, stirring them with his feet.

If not for the mission, he was just an ordinary nineteen-year-old.

She would do her best to protect Shirone.

But in reality, the word "best" had no meaning in actual combat.

Only completing the goal by any means necessary mattered, and for that, Shirone also needed determination.

"Listen. Now that you're here, you're a magician too. You haven't graduated yet, so you're an unofficial magician."

Shirone looked at Plu in confusion.

"So from now on, I'll treat you as a professional. You must stay focused on the mission and not be swayed by emotions. I'm not asking you to do anything unreasonable.

In fact, you might not even be able to distinguish what's unreasonable. That's war. If confusion arises, focus solely on the mission."

Shirone understood.

His seniors, who were like gods to him, would gladly sacrifice their lives to protect him, who didn't even have a magician's license.

What was most nerve-wracking was knowing this and still having to send them into danger without hesitation.

'I must survive. That's my mission.'

Shirone nodded firmly.

"Yes. Don't worry."

No one wants to take on an unpleasant task.

If he didn't do it, someone else would have to bear the burden.

Shirone resolved, or rather prayed.

No matter what situation arises, please let me not hesitate.

"Let's go."

A massive flash of Elizer shot into the sky.

As the world was enveloped in warm light, the forest scenery shimmered.

When the light faded, the scene changed from the valley with the stream to the middle of a dense forest.

Plu looked around and asked, "Is this the headquarters?"

"No. The gatekeeper of the headquarters will lead us. We probably have to go much further."

It was a measure to avoid being followed. It showed how thoroughly they were hiding.

Gardrak put his fingers in his mouth and whistled.

As the sound magic Peri was cast, it sounded like hundreds of birds chirping, flying into the forest sky.

After a while, a man appeared from behind a tree.

"Where are you from? I wasn't informed of any visitors today."

He was a man with a cold impression.

He had blue hair, sharp eyes, and the left side of his head was shaved. The right side of his hair, which reached his shoulders, covered one eye.

Gardrak pointed to Shirone and said, "We're from the 1st Headquarters. You've heard the rumors, right? This boy is..."

"Ah, I see."

The man raised his hand and cast a spell.

The forest magic Oprica.

The trees behind them shook, and numerous vines grew rapidly, flying towards Shirone's group.

"Ugh!"

Clove and Gardrak, terrified, lost their balance and fell, while Shirone and Plu remained still.

The trajectory of the flying vines wasn't aimed at them.

Anyone could have figured it out if they had stayed calm.

The vines struck the ground and grew into an arch.

In an instant, Shirone's group was trapped in an arch-patterned wooden prison.

'This is ancient plant magic.'

From the remnants of his battle with Bosun in Kazra, Shirone knew that even a certified 4th-level magician couldn't produce such rapid growth.

He didn't think the man was stronger than Bosun, but the advantages of ancient magic using essence affinity were clear.

'This won't be easy.'

He was concerned that groups that displayed force from the start rarely negotiated properly.

The gatekeeper cast Oprica again, drawing more branches to aim at the group.

"Why have the traitors of Nor come to us?"

Clove grabbed the prison bars and shouted, "What are you doing? Do you know who this is? This is Shirone, the light of Sector 73!"

The more hostile the relationship, the more active the espionage.

The gatekeeper also knew that Shirone had returned.

"So what?"

"So what? Don't you want to fight the war? Don't you know how much the rebels' morale will rise with Shirone?"

A sharp branch pierced through the prison bars and stopped in front of Clove's nose.

"Ugh!"

Clove hurriedly backed away, hitting the opposite side of the prison.

Oprica was a magic that couldn't be cast without more than 10% affinity.

With only 7% affinity, Clove couldn't resist the man's power.

"What does the light of Sector 73 matter? When did you criticize and denounce Nor, and now you want to fight together? We don't need the power of the Mecha tribe. How can we fight angels with those who rely on machines?"

"How do you know that?"

Shirone spoke.

"We came to see your leader, not you. I don't think you have the authority to decide the fate of the entire Nor tribe."

The man turned his gaze to Shirone.

Shirone's exploits were well-known, but the Nor, who had absolute standards of power, were not easily swayed by mere myths.

If the light of Sector 73 thought that defeating a fairy chief like Iginir would be enough to impress here, he was either quite naive or an overconfident youngster.

"That might be true. But as the gatekeeper, I have authority. Whether it's the Nephilim or the light of Sector 73, what matters in war is power. I don't know how it is in Mecha, but whining in a wooden prison won't make the Nor even snort."
"Is that so?"

Shirone placed his palm on the prison.

As light began to concentrate in his hand, the gatekeeper quickly stepped back.

From what he had heard, Shirone could manipulate light freely, regardless of affinity, and could even destroy objects with it.

"Hmph! Even so..."

The gatekeeper, a skilled practitioner of ancient magic entrusted with guarding the rebel headquarters, gathered all the surrounding vegetation, twisted the vines into sharp spears, and prepared to counterattack.

'What's this?'

But the opportunity to counterattack never came.

The light in Shirone's hand gradually darkened, and the vines began to twist grotesquely.

Dark Light.

The sight of the thick vines contorting left the gatekeeper stunned.

Crack! Crack!

With a sound like bones being crushed, the hemispherical prison was torn from the ground.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Eventually, it twisted towards a void that had formed, being sucked in completely.

Like a glutton swallowing a living creature whole, the trees struggled from their roots but were ultimately consumed, leaving no trace.

Clove and Gardrak's faces turned pale.

Even when Shirone had shattered a rock with light before, they hadn't been this shocked.

"W-what kind of magic is that, Master?"

"....."

Gardrak had no idea. The gatekeeper likely didn't either. All the Nor could only stare at Shirone in a daze.

Chapter

423:

"Th-this can't be..."

The gatekeeper was at a loss for words.

As far as he knew, Shirone was a Nephilim who wielded light magic, but he had destroyed Oprica with dark magic.

The problem was that it was broad daylight, with the sun shining brightly.

Using the power of darkness in a world filled with the essence of light was impossible unless one was free from the laws.

"Are you going to continue?"

Plu pulled out the magic staff 'Phoenix' from her cubrick and swung it.

Shirone had taken the initiative, but if she had been a bit slower, the Phoenix staff would have incinerated the prison. The gatekeeper's face twisted in anger.

"Don't spout nonsense. We are the Nor. We are not swayed by insubstantial myths!"

As the gatekeeper cast the sound magic Peri, an ominous sound like a crow's caw filled the sky.

Three Nor warriors landed behind the gatekeeper, riding the wind magic Aeos.

They were Nor guards who had been on standby nearby.

"Hey, what's going on? You called all of us? Huh?"

A bald man among the guards frowned as he spotted Shirone's group.

"Who are these kids?"

"They're from the 1st Headquarters. That blond one is Shirone, the light of Sector 73."

"Shirone?"

The bald man stared at Shirone.

Like the gatekeeper, his expression twisted in displeasure.

"Ah, that Shirone? The one who sided with the foolish Mecha tribe."

Plu stepped forward and said, "Do you need to call more people? We're busy, so if you're going to do something, do it quickly."

The gatekeeper instructed the guards, "Don't underestimate them. Their magic system is different from ours."

"We know. It's much weaker than ours."

As Plu snorted and raised the Phoenix staff, Shirone placed a hand on her shoulder and stepped forward.

"I'll handle this, senior."

No matter how the Nor perceived Shirone, his crucial role in the war against Heaven wouldn't change.

To rally the tens of thousands of Nor under the headquarters, he needed to demonstrate the Nephilim's abilities.

"Alright. But make it quick."

As Plu stepped aside, Shirone slowly walked towards the gatekeeper.

"Take us to the headquarters. There's no need for a pointless fight, is there?"

"Hmph, you live up to your reputation. But do you know? The true strength of the Nor starts now."

The gatekeeper glared at his comrades and said, "Prepare the Mahagart."

The bald man looked puzzled.

"Mahagart? Do we really need to go that far?"

"Didn't you hear? He uses strange magic. It's best to end this in one go."

"Tch!"

The bald man reluctantly complied.

Regardless of rank, the gatekeeper's judgment was paramount at the entrance to the headquarters.

The remaining three followed the bald man's lead.

Ancient magic wasn't as individualistic as modern magic, but that trait could be an advantage.

It allowed for the casting of group magic.

As the surrounding air grew heavy and condensed, Shirone compressed photons in front of him.

The four Nor cast their magic simultaneously.

"Mahagart!"

A powerful wind, surpassing the density of gas, surged forward.

Once caught, it was a spell so powerful that it would slam the victim into a wall, tearing their limbs apart.

Gritting his teeth, Shirone fired the Photon Cannon.

As the heavy beam pierced the center of the air, the air rippled like waves.

Finally, with an ear-splitting crack, the Mahagart shattered into pieces.

"Ugh!"

The backlash from the Mahagart made the Nor's clothes flutter.

The sound waves alone were enough to make them feel faint.

"Th-the Mahagart..."

The Nor's group magic was as intricate and powerful as the Mecha tribe's third-stage combat system.

It was a spell that required perfect teamwork.

The fact that such a spell was destroyed by one person was a blow to the Nor warriors' pride.

Plu had already anticipated this outcome.

'Fools. They should have considered the difference in density.'

No matter how strong the wind, it couldn't push back a Photon Cannon compressed to a single point.

That's why modern magic had diversified air magic into press and blow types, allowing for various applications.

'He's trained a lot in a short time.'

The Photon Cannon's power was much stronger than when Shirone was at the Magic Association. His final year must have helped.

Having trained together in scatter movement and laser guidance, Plu was as pleased with Shirone's growth as if it were her own.

Shirone's group followed the gatekeeper deeper into the forest.

Though Shirone's display of power was shocking, it hadn't broken the Nor warriors' spirits.

They only obeyed their commander, believing she would lead the Nor to victory.

Even so, they reconsidered because the situation had surpassed their judgment.

They couldn't understand the principles behind it, but Shirone's ability to destroy a four-person spell in one blow was worth reconsidering.

"I'll guide you, but don't think we'll accept you. The commander will never agree to an alliance with the Mecha tribe."

Plu asked, "What caused the split? There must have been a reason."

It wasn't strange for conflicts to arise due to the differing mindsets of the Mecha and Nor, but in wartime, with Heaven as a common enemy, uniting forces was the logical course. She didn't think they had split just because they were different.

"The Mecha tribe is arrogant. They think what they know is the best. The Nor have their own ways. But they didn't acknowledge that. War is fought to win. We don't want to join hands with weaklings again."

The gatekeeper pushed aside some shrubbery.

"We're here. This is our headquarters."

Shirone tilted his head. All he saw was a sheer cliff.

"This is the headquarters?"

As the gatekeeper cast the Peri magic, a distinctive bird call pierced the sky.

Soon, holes appeared in dozens of places on the cliff, and Nor sentries revealed themselves.

The ground shook as the cliff transformed into a fortress. A door opened on the ground, and stone steps descended from above.

'Ancient magic.'

The Nor, using their affinity with nature, had magically shaped the entire mountain into a natural fortress.

Upon reaching the headquarters, formidable-looking individuals surrounded Shirone's group.

A tall, striking blonde woman approached with a dignified stride from the main gate.

She was Raesis, the Nor's grand magician and the 2nd Commander of the rebels.

"What's going on? The sound of Purin's bird call?"

The gatekeeper left Shirone's group and whispered something to Raesis.

Plu switched the drone's translation to an internal channel and amplified the sound.

A warning appeared in her retinal vision, indicating that sound collection was impossible. It seemed they were using magic to block the sound from spreading.

"Hmm, understood."

After hearing the report, Raesis nodded and walked towards Shirone.

A master of ancient magic with a Spirit Force of 32%.

Plu remained on guard, ready to act at any moment.

But Raesis's previously expressionless face suddenly brightened in front of Shirone.

"Welcome, light of Sector 73."

While Shirone was bewildered by the unexpected welcome, Raesis spread her arms and hugged him tightly.

She smelled strongly of perfume.

A scent as thick as blood.

Raesis led Shirone's group into the base inside the cliff.

At that point, Clove and Gardrak left, and the remaining two were guided to the commander's office.

The floor was carpeted, and two three-seater sofas faced each other.

To Shirone, it was a more familiar setting than the Mecha tribe's.

Raesis, seated at the head of the sofas, gestured for them to sit. Shirone and Plu each took a different sofa, as if prearranged.

A position that allowed for easy cooperation in case of an emergency.

Raesis noticed their unusual seating arrangement and smiled slyly.

"So, what brings you here?"

Shirone spoke.

"As you might have guessed, the 1st Headquarters has proposed an alliance."

Raesis rested her chin on her hand and crossed her legs.

"An alliance. What's the point now? What will we achieve by joining forces?"

Shirone relayed the words Sein had used to persuade Crude. After hearing the explanation, Raesis also fell into thoughtful silence.

"Hmm, paralyzing the Aegis system. If that happens, it would be beneficial for us too."

"Once we enter Heaven, we can create variables. So why not join forces with the 1st Headquarters?"

"But before that, I have one question."

Raesis winked and asked.

"If we conquer Heaven, who will be the king?"

"King? What do you mean?"

"I mean, who is this alliance for? We were on good terms when we first started the rebellion. But now, aren't we done with the Mecha tribe? Even if I order an alliance, do you think the troops will follow? We've already split once.

There's no guarantee they won't betray us again."

From the Nor's perspective, it was a valid concern.

As Shirone struggled to answer, Raesis continued.

"So, I have a proposal."

"A proposal?"

Raesis pointed her finger at Shirone.

"If the light of Sector 73, the symbol of the rebel war, joins the 2nd Headquarters, I'll actively persuade the troops."

Plu asked, "It's not a bad proposal, but does it matter? If we form an alliance, we'll be unified again."

"True, it doesn't matter. That's why I'm proposing it. The Nor aren't foolish enough to make an offer that will be rejected. But shouldn't we have some insurance if we win the war? If the Nor hold the symbol of freedom, it will be enough to persuade the troops."

Seeing Plu nod, Shirone agreed.

Just as the Mecha and Nor had their own circumstances, Shirone's team only needed to get the rebels to move.

"Alright. After the war, the Nor can use my name."

Raesis clapped her hands with a bright smile.

"Great! You've made a wise decision. Now, let's get you registered."

"Registered?"

"Since you've joined the 2nd Headquarters, we need to measure your Spirit Force."

Shirone and Plu stood in front of two adjacent changing rooms.

To measure Spirit Force, several tests were required, one of which was a physical examination.

Before entering the changing room, Plu spoke.

"If anything happens, focus on returning here rather than fighting. The most important thing is to regroup."

"Yes. You be careful too, senior."

As they entered their respective changing rooms, two drones followed their owners, splitting up.

Hearing the door close behind her, Plu looked around.

It was an empty chamber with another door leading further inside.

A Nor woman approached.

"Please take off your clothes and give them to me. I'll return them after the examination."

"How much do I need to take off?"

"Everything. We need to sterilize in the disinfection room and collect blood and hair samples."

Plu unbuttoned her blouse one button at a time.

Even though they had joined the 2nd Headquarters, Raesis was still not entirely trustworthy.

She could be ambushed in the worst-case scenario, but being naked wouldn't diminish her combat abilities.

'Well, it's not like my clothes have any defensive power.'

What intrigued her more was the Nor's examination process.

'Collecting blood? What are they planning to do with it?'

As she handed over her last piece of underwear, the woman placed it in a basket and said, "Um, you'll need to remove that ring too... Oh!"

Plu's eyes, which had been calm even while undressing, suddenly turned cold.

Staring intently at the woman, she raised her ring finger and said, "This stays. If the purpose is sterilization, the ring shouldn't matter, right?"

The Phoenix was stored in her cubrick.

As a tool that amplified her magic, she couldn't remove the ring even if she took off her underwear.

"Oh, yes. It doesn't really matter. This way, please."

The woman, pale with fear, hurried out of the room, and Plu finally relaxed her expression.

She had intentionally shown hostility to gauge the woman's reaction.

If the woman had tried to take the ring by any means, it would have indicated that the examination was a trap.

But the woman showed no such intentions.

'Maybe I'm overthinking this?'

Plu followed the woman to the next room.

Chapter 424:

After undressing, Shirone walked through a long tunnel. Jets of gas sprayed from the walls, sterilizing his body.

Wary of any hidden intentions, Shirone held his breath and quickly made his way through the tunnel.

Entering the next chamber, he found himself in a large cave. Sunlight streamed through numerous holes in the ceiling, resembling a starry night sky.

After briefly admiring the ceiling, Shirone focused on the strange object before him.

"What is this?"

A large, gel-like substance sat there like a giant pudding.

As Shirone hesitated, unsure of how to proceed, an elderly voice echoed from above.

"It's a procedure to coat your sterilized body. Just walk through it."

"Hmm."

Shirone sent his drone ahead, took a deep breath, and plunged into the gel.

It was slippery like actual pudding, making it easy to walk through, though it felt quite strange. Sensitive areas were stimulated, causing a slight blush on his face.

In the next room, a warm space bathed in red light awaited him.

The gel quickly dried, perfectly coating Shirone's entire body.

"Ah, I see."

The sterilization was 99.99% complete.

In the final room, Shirone was surprised to see many people bustling about.

Over ten glass tubes filled with various colored liquids bubbled, with hoses carrying the fluids in all directions.

On the tables were glass instruments for experiments and parts of unknown creatures, still stained with blood. People in white lab coats moved busily, and the bald man from earlier stood by with Shirone and Plu's clothes, looking displeased.

Commander Raesis, wearing a red cloak that matched her aura, approached with a seductive smile.

Everyone but Shirone was clothed, making him feel a bit self-conscious, but he had enough field experience not to show weakness during a mission.

"Where is this?"

Feigning nonchalance, Shirone asked, and Raesis, understanding his feelings, changed the subject with a knowing smile.

"How was the Nor's sterilization system? Perfect, right?"

It was indeed impressive, and Shirone acknowledged it.

"Yes, it's quite systematic."

At that moment, the opposite door opened, and Plu entered.

"Ugh."

She barely managed to suppress a sound of surprise.

Unlike Shirone, Plu seemed unfazed by the bustling environment and immediately surveyed the surroundings.

Spotting Shirone, she walked over briskly.

"You got here quickly. Everything okay?"

"Yes."

Plu glanced down at Shirone.

Despite being a magician, he had kept his cubrick intact.

'Well, if he couldn't manage this, he'd just be a kid.'

Shirone had also firmly refused to remove his ring when asked.

However, he didn't check Plu's hand.

He trusted her.

After confirming Shirone was safe, Plu examined the equipment around them.

'A biological laboratory. What are they researching here?'

The sight of scholars dissecting unknown biological specimens reminded her of the underground labs at the Magic Association.

If the source of the blood scent in Raesis's perfume was here, it meant she spent a lot of time in this place.

There was no reason for the scent to linger just for measuring Spirit Force.

'Hmm, definitely suspicious.'

Raesis approached Plu.

"Sorry if it startled you. We should have been more considerate of a woman. But this is the only lab connected to the disinfection room. We need uncontaminated hair and blood samples."

Plu confidently placed one leg to the side and rested her right hand on her hip.

She knew Raesis had done it on purpose.

"A physical exam is unavoidable. But for someone saying that, you're quite bundled up, aren't you?"

Raesis laughed heartily.

"Haha! Well, I am the commander. Just wait a bit. We'll finish quickly and give you your clothes."

A woman with a syringe approached and drew blood from Shirone and Plu in turn. Two others collected their hair samples.

Raesis seemed pleased with their calm demeanor.

"I've studied your magic. It's a system that combines the Nor's spirit and the Mecha's knowledge. But I think you're closer to the Nor."

Plu, who had been watching a dissection, turned to Raesis.

"On what basis do you say that?"

"Because you understand the insignificance of the body. The Nor are a race immersed in the spiritual world. Here, we have many naked and dismembered bodies. When you dissect a human body, it's just a collection of functions. What's truly important is here."

Raesis tapped her head.

"But the Mecha didn't understand that. They happily melted and hammered metal, creating strange things. Biological experiments are the same. But they despised it and rejected the Nor as primitive."

Shirone could guess where the rift between the Mecha and Nor had started.

"The sample collection is complete."

With the procedure finished, the bald man brought their clothes, looking displeased at playing the servant.

Shirone asked, "When do we measure the Spirit Force?"

"We'll start now. Look at this."

The Nor scholars placed portions of the collected blood and hair into a blue liquid.

As it bubbled and turned into a thick greenish liquid, Raesis pointed to an elixir separator.

"It's a secret Nor potion. By mixing Green, Yellow, and White Elixirs in specific ratios and fusing them with biological cells, it creates a substance that reveals biological traits.

Neutralizing it in distilled water allows us to measure affinity."

"Interesting."

Plu leaned in, resting her chin on her hand, watching closely. It was her first time seeing a biological experiment using Elixirs.

"Don't feel pressured. A low affinity doesn't mean you're less skilled. It's just an evaluation of your magical potential." Potential.

For Shirone and Plu, who were still new to the magical society, it was a constant concern.

And since it was a method impossible in the real world, they couldn't hide their curiosity, even beyond the mission.

"Do we do it now?"

"No. According to tradition, newcomers measure their affinity in front of the Nor. If done privately, it could cause issues later. Your rank will be determined by the percentage, and with hard training, you can be promoted."

Shirone and Plu went outside.

Most of the headquarters staff had gathered in the open area.

In the center were two drums connected to glass tubes that curved up from the ground, reaching 10 meters high.

As they examined the setup, the bald man struggled in with two 20-liter water containers.

They contained the biological traits of Shirone and Plu.

Pouring them into the drums, the silver liquid in the underground glass tubes rose to exactly zero.

Raesis shouted from the platform.

"Now we begin the tradition of welcoming new members!"

All the Nor turned to her.

"I guarantee there is no deception in measuring Spirit Force. Their ranks will be determined by today's results. Let's begin the affinity measurement."

"I'll go first."

Plu rolled up her sleeves and approached the device. The bald man explained the procedure.

"Place your hands in the drum and prepare your mind to cast magic. The liquid's pressure will change, raising the glass tube's level."

"Hmm, so I just need to enter the Spirit Zone?"

As Plu placed her hands in the liquid, the bald man, recalling his struggles, smirked.

"For reference, my affinity is 16%."

"So?"

"That's in the top 20% of the Nor. No matter how inferior your magic is, rank is determined by potential. So you'd better give it your all. It won't be easy under my command." The bald man leaned in and whispered.

"Hehe, I saw you earlier. Quite impressive."

Plu squinted her eyes.

'So much for the insignificance of the body.'

She had never trusted Raesis's words, sensing they were always hiding something.

Biological experiments, human bodies—no matter how plausible it sounded, humans were still humans.

'There's definitely something going on.'

Plu set aside her thoughts and focused on the measurement.

If her potential was lower than the bald man's, who was flaring his nostrils like he had found a treasure, she would indeed want to die.

"Let's begin."

As Plu entered the Spirit Zone, the liquid bubbled, and the glass tube's level rose sharply.

"Wow!"

Gasps erupted from the crowd.

Their eyes were fixed on a point over 2 meters high.

"Twenty-eight..."

An affinity of 28%.

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

At 28%, Plu's affinity was among the top ranks in the Nor headquarters.

Even if she started learning ancient magic now, she had the potential to become a powerful magician in a few years.

The bald man, who had been staring at the glass tube with his mouth agape, slowly turned to Plu.

Plu, smiling, patted him on the shoulder.

"Looking forward to working with you, my subordinate."

"N-no, I mean..."

"Don't worry. I'm not interested in your body. Not that there's much to see, haha!"

Leaving the bald man blushing to his scalp, Plu returned to her spot.

Shirone greeted her with a high five.

'As expected of Senior Plu.'

The top graduate of the Royal Magic School.

A future grand magician who had reached the 8th rank at just twenty-two, her talent was among the best in the kingdom.

"Do well. Show them your true power."

As Shirone approached the device, the noise from Plu's measurement instantly died down.

The light of Sector 73, the symbol of the rebels.

It was time for his true abilities to be revealed.

"Whew."

Shirone took a deep breath and placed his hands in the liquid.

As the tense atmosphere pressed on his heart, he focused and entered the Spirit Zone.

Boom!

The liquid in the drum boiled over and shot up like a fountain, splashing everywhere.

"Huh? What?"

The Nor looked up in astonishment.

The liquid had risen over 4 meters high.

"This can't be..."

An affinity of 42%.

Such a high number had never been seen or heard of in Nor history.

"What? Is it broken?"

Every Nor knew that wasn't possible.

Unlike the Mecha tribe's technology, which could malfunction, the reactions of substances didn't lie.

Yet, they wanted to deny the result because Shirone's score far surpassed that of the current commander, Raesis.

Raesis frowned slightly but said nothing.

"42%? Is that even possible?"

Without learning ancient magic, 42% might just be a number.

But in terms of magical affinity, or talent, it was unparalleled.

The bald man shouted.

"There must be a mistake! How can it be 42%? That's not a realistic number!"

Some Nor agreed with him.

They were Raesis's close aides, who would be disadvantaged if her power weakened.

"Right! Even if it's true, it's just potential for Shirone, who doesn't know ancient magic! We can't accept this!"

"Our commander is Raesis!"

Shirone, with his hands still in the liquid, smacked his lips. He hadn't expected such a high score either.

But he wasn't foolish enough to waste the sudden opportunity to bolster Raesis's standing.

He looked back at Plu, who smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

"Go for it."

Turning back, Shirone fully unleashed his Immortal Function.

The liquid level in the glass tube began to rise rapidly.

70%. 80%. 90%.

"Huh? What?"

The Nor's heads tilted back completely.

Finally, with a loud pop, the glass tube shattered, and the silver liquid sprayed brilliantly.

Just as Shirone had expected.

The Immortal Function, which spread his mind across the world, couldn't be measured by mere affinity.

"Whew, is it over now?"

No one spoke.

In everyone's mind, only one thought filled their heads.

Nephilim.

Chapter 425:

Raesis returned to her office, draped in her red cloak, deep in thought.

Her aide, who had followed her in, cautiously asked, "Commander, what should we do about Shirone?"

If Shirone had shown his Nephilim abilities from the start, it wouldn't have been an issue. Nephilim were such beings.

But Shirone had already surpassed Raesis's potential.

This would inevitably affect the Nor rebels, who placed great faith in Spirit Force.

For Raesis, it was a tricky problem.

'I knew they didn't trust me, but I didn't expect them to stab me in the back like this.'

"Commander, your orders...?"

The aide, growing impatient, pressed again.

Outside, the atmosphere was filled with curiosity about Shirone's rank.

The longer Raesis delayed, the more her absolute authority would be questioned.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Raesis threw her head back and laughed, leaving the aide bewildered.

When she stopped laughing, she looked at the aide.

"I've finally found the perfect element to complement my flaws."

"So, Shirone..."

"Yes, I will absorb him. Shirone's immense Spirit Force will be a vessel for any biological trait. I can't miss this opportunity."

The aide's eyes darted around.

He had seen Shirone's Spirit Force with his own eyes, so he had no objections.

But Shirone was a symbol of the rebels.

If public opinion turned against them, everything they had built could collapse in an instant.

Raesis smirked.

"I know what you're thinking."

"I'm sorry, but it's dangerous for you too, Commander."

Raesis swirled her cloak and turned away.

"We'll cultivate a clone from Shirone's genetic sample. After clinical trials on the clone, I'll absorb it once we're sure."

"Is that possible? Shirone isn't a citizen. Human cloning is a sensitive field, and even slight differences in genetic sequences can lead to failure."

Citizens and non-citizens were both human, but they had evolved separately for a long time.

Even with the same number of chromosomes, differences in genetic sequences could make successful cloning unlikely.

"Even if it's possible, it could waste Black Elixir."

"Don't worry. Humans are like machines. There are always ways to design them. I'm already excited about what abilities I can give Shirone."

Raesis's face lit up with excitement, then turned stern again.

"Make a deal with the military community. We need the genes of powerful monsters to combine with Shirone's clone. Only the strongest traits will be selected."

"Understood."

After the aide left, Raesis sat on the sofa, crossing her legs and licking her lips.

Experimenting on a Nephilim's body was unprecedented, but the potential rewards were limitless.

"This will be very interesting."

It was the gamble of Raesis's life.

Shirone was promoted to the leader of the Special Forces under the 2nd Headquarters.

His unit, the 3rd Mobile Unit, carried out direct orders from the commander, unlike the 1st and 2nd units. The members were elite warriors with Spirit Forces over 20%.

Plu, now the deputy leader of the 3rd Mobile Unit, glanced at the three members.

Although her status had risen, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

"They're annoying, aren't they?"

"We expected this from the moment you opened the Immortal Function."

Raesis had promised an alliance with the 1st Headquarters if Shirone joined the 2nd Headquarters, but there were still concerns.

It was wise to prepare a foundation to shake the power balance in case of an emergency rather than fully trusting her.

"Still..."

When Plu turned, the three members watching Shirone quickly looked away.

It was clear they had received specific orders from Raesis. 'It'll be hard to shake them off during missions. Maybe at night?'

As Plu pondered, one of the members approached.

A tall man with a long philtrum, his eyes were intimidating despite his lower rank.

"Deputy Leader, we've received our first mission from the higher-ups. At the Plateau of Corruption..."

"Wait. Why are you receiving the mission?"

Plu interrupted.

"We haven't heard anything. The reporting system is a mess. Shirone is the leader."

The man remained expressionless, then reluctantly bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. There was a mistake. I was the leader before, so I received the orders. I'll report to the higher-ups to prevent this from happening again."

Plu couldn't push further since they had to work together for now.

"Alright. Continue. At the Plateau of Corruption?"

The drone translated Plu's words.

It wasn't fast enough for urgent wartime commands, but it worked for regular conversations.

"There's an ancient ruin at the Plateau of Corruption. The rebels call it the 'Tomb of Angels.' It was once frequented by angels but is now abandoned."

Heaven's history was ancient, even mythical to humanity. But even in Heaven, there was an ancient past, which intrigued Shirone and Plu.

"Hmm, what do we need to do there?"

"The ancient ruins are sealed by angelic magic, so only angels or Nephilim can enter. Currently, Shirone is the only Nephilim among the rebels."

"Ah, I see."

Raesis intended to monitor them while fully utilizing them. Plu didn't know the relationship between the Nor and magicians, but Raesis's approach was certainly magician-like.

"Alright, let's go."

Exploring ancient ruins in Heaven could provide valuable information for their project, beyond personal interest.

'I have to do this. The seniors are on more dangerous missions.'

As the light spirit Elizer activated, the 3rd Mobile Unit was transported to the Plateau of Corruption.

Armin, Siina, Etella, and Kuan.

The four of them camped in the forest and entered the mainland early in the morning.

The mainland reminded them of a world's fair from their own world.

There was no uniformity, and strange creatures roamed the streets.

The buildings along the road varied widely, from huts and wooden houses to brick buildings and mechanical structures, reflecting different eras.

"Wow, this is amazing. You won't see this anywhere else."

Etella smiled innocently, but there was no response.
With only four members left, the distance between Siina and Armin became more apparent.

Siina was the most troubled.

She had expected Armin to explain why he had followed her to Heaven.

'He left the Ivory Tower?'

If it were that easy, why hadn't he mentioned it before?

Before she could finish her thoughts, Siina couldn't hold back her frustration.

"Are you okay?"

Etella, who had been trying to lighten the mood, fell silent, and Armin finally spoke.

"What do you mean?"

"Keira. What happened?"

"....."

It was something he could never tell Siina.

But even beyond that, staying silent was a matter of respect for Keira.

"You're leaving the Ivory Tower?"

Keira glared at Armin.

She wasn't shocked, as she had expected it. The problem was that Armin was bound by a pact with the Ivory Tower. The pact, a power of the Regulators, would activate if the agreement was broken, preventing him from ever using magic again.

So Keira brought out the pact.

At the bottom of the document was Armin's signature, etched in his own hand.

He had signed it under duress, with Siina as leverage, hoping never to have to tear it up.

"If you leave, our relationship ends here. If you're okay with that, go."

Armin smiled gently.

He rarely smiled, so Keira knew it was a farewell.

"Thank you for everything."

Armin knew Keira had supported him in many ways, even if she didn't show it.

"Don't try to convince me. Don't act like you're the only one suffering! Or what? Are you going to stop time and run away again?"

Armin shook his head.

"I can't use Stop Magic like that. I'm just a burden now."

"So what? If I tear up the pact, you're nothing. A blind man who can't even go to the bathroom alone!"

"Then that's how it is. I've caused enough trouble, so I'll let you have your way this time."

Armin walked towards the door.

As he grabbed the doorknob, he heard the sound of paper tearing.

Armin turned in surprise.

The pact's conditions were met, but the target wasn't him.

"Keira..."

One of the torn pacts on the floor bore her signature.

Another pact.

Keira had to sign it to monitor Armin for the Ivory Tower, and now it was destroyed.

"Go. It's settled now. If you care so much about her, go!"

"Keira, I..."

"Don't come near me!"

Keira shouted.

She didn't want to be pitied in her final moments.

"Go to Heaven and protect her. But..."

Keira, her face streaked with tears, looked up.

"Come back alive. Protect her, and come back alive, you bastard!"

Armin turned away silently.

Keira was also a renowned magician of the Ivory Tower.

He didn't think her achievements were any less than his.

"I'll repay you."

Armin cast Flicker Magic and disappeared.

Armin's team arrived at the entrance of the military community, known as 'Yamaeng,' on the outskirts of the mainland.

The massive complex lived up to its name, with smoke rising from every chimney beyond the walls.

"No need to ask further."

Armin walked to the gate.

They had brought a drone for emergencies, but Armin had learned Heaven's language, so it wasn't necessary.

"Excuse me. Is this..."

The guards at the gate closed ranks, blocking the path.

They wore tight suits and dark glasses, unlike anything seen in their world.

"Stop. Who are you?"

"We have a request to make here. Can we speak to the person in charge?"

The gate opened, and about ten guards in similar suits blocked Armin's path with expressionless faces.

"Go back. The boss is in a bad mood today."

"That's unfortunate. But we don't have much time either. At least pass on our message."

A burly guard approached, cracking his knuckles.

"Do you even know where you are?"

As the ten guards simultaneously exuded a menacing aura, an unsettling energy enveloped Armin's group.

'This...'

All four of them realized it at the same time.

It was an aura they could never feel in their original world.

"Be careful."

Kuan drew his sword and said, "These beings are not human."

Chapter 426:

The Plateau of Corruption

A barren plain where the wind carried a strong sulfur smell. The desolate land had no vegetation, and dark clouds stretched to the horizon, spitting lightning.

It was a dry, eerie, and empty place.

The 3rd Special Mobile Unit descended on beams of light, landing with a force unlike any Elizer they had experienced before.

Feeling as if he had been thrown by an uncontrollable force, Shirone rolled on the ground.

"Ouch, my head. Are you okay, senior?"

Shirone's eyes widened as he took in the surroundings.

Eight rectangular panels, each 4 meters high, were erected in all directions. Beyond the panels, 2-meter-long spikes were densely packed as far as the eye could see.

When lightning struck, powerful electricity flowed through the panels, causing an explosion of light inside the area they enclosed.

"This is..."

A team member spoke.

"This isn't a natural area where essence gathers. It's a device designed to collect light artificially."

"Was it made by the Mecha tribe?"

"No one knows who made it. It existed before the citizens lived in Heaven. Only the angels know what happened in this forsaken land."

Thunder struck again.

As the lightning split into thousands of branches and was absorbed by the ground, the earth glowed a bluish hue, like swarming insects.

When a powerful white light burst from the panels, Shirone squinted and gave an order.

"Let's move away. It could be dangerous to stay here."

The 3rd Special Mobile Unit avoided the lightning zone, dodging thousands of spikes.

Although they all had the ability to fly, the air was dangerous in such an environment.

They arrived at a crater 4 kilometers from the light essence. It looked as if something had crashed at a terrifying speed, leaving a deep depression in the ground.

Sweeping the ground at the center revealed a metal plate, indicating something was buried deep underground.

"So this is why it's called the Tomb of Angels."

"Yes. For centuries, many heretics have tried to excavate this site, but all efforts were in vain."

A team member pointed around.

"Some even tried to excavate the entire area, but anyone who dug too deep was electrocuted. Records say hundreds were killed."

"So we need to break this seal."

Shirone examined the metal plate closely.

Though the form was different, it was clearly written in the angels' language, Hena.

As a Nephilim, Shirone might be able to open it. In fact, he probably could.

Shirone looked at Plu.

Entering the Immortal Function wasn't an issue, but from here on, it was uncharted territory.

"Let's open it. If it gets dangerous, we can leave immediately."

Plu wanted to go in.

The fact that heretics had risked their lives for centuries to excavate this place meant there was something of great value buried here.

Moreover, Shirone had Mass Teleport, allowing them to leave quickly if needed.

"Alright, let's start."

As Shirone placed his hand on the metal plate and activated the Immortal Function, the Hena script glowed, and a massive beam of light shot skyward.

As the team members stepped back, a deep rumbling from underground vibrated through their feet.

"Damn! Let's move back."

At a team member's stern suggestion, Shirone quickly exited the crater.

Rumble!

As the metal plate vibrated, a vast amount of soil poured down, and something began to rise.

"What is that?"

The 3rd Special Mobile Unit watched as a massive bell-shaped structure emerged from the ground, covered in Hena script on its sturdy metal surface.

The 3-meter-high structure split open at the bottom, revealing an entrance.

After waiting for a while and seeing no immediate danger, Shirone leaped to the entrance.

Above the dark entrance, letters were engraved on a metal plate.

Since it wasn't Hena, Shirone sent a drone to decode it. The translation was transmitted to his mind.

Babel.

"Ba...bel?"

The team members murmured simultaneously.

Only that word was in the citizens' language, not the angels'.

Plu turned to the team members and asked, "Babel. What does it mean?"

"We don't know. It's in the citizens' language, but we've never heard it before."

It wasn't particularly helpful information.

"Shirone, what now?"

"Let's go in. Our goal is to explore, after all."

Leading the way, Shirone cast Shining Magic and entered the structure.

Stairs led downward, and as they descended, a corridor stretched out before them.

Lights installed at 1-meter intervals lit up as they stepped forward, extending into the darkness.

Shirone stared in awe.

It stretched endlessly. Judging by the distance, the structure above ground was just the tip of the iceberg.

They arrived at a circular space, with a metal plate above the entrance inscribed with the citizens' language: Control Room.

"Hmm, Control Room. At least we can understand that."

Despite the team member's joke, no one laughed as they entered.

Lights flickered on, revealing devices connected by wires, reminiscent of those seen in the Great World War.

Beyond the devices was a massive conical pillar. A similar pillar descended from the ceiling, with an electric mass seemingly trapped between their tips.

"That...!"

The team members were speechless with shock.

The flickering light, unable to maintain a consistent form, was undoubtedly an electric spirit, known to be impossible to collect in its pure natural state.

Plu, observing from a distance, stroked her chin.

"Hmm, what is that? The power source for this place?"

'Foolish. It's not something so trivial.'

The team members all silently mocked Plu's ignorance.

What they were seeing was the result of the unique characteristics of the Plateau of Corruption, a device that collected lightning on a massive scale, and the passage of time, creating the rarest spirit in purgatory.

The team members exchanged cautious glances.

Due to the nature of their unit, often dispatched to remote areas, they had their own regulations.

If they acquired a special item during a mission, the highest-ranking member would decide its disposition, and rewards would be distributed based on mission performance.

While such rules were rarely followed in the field, there was no better way to maintain order.

'That's mine.'

All the team members had the same thought.

They hadn't even properly started the mission, so according to the rules, they would have to hand over the precious electric spirit to Shirone.

But the electric spirit was a once-in-a-lifetime, or even a once-in-a-rebellion, opportunity.

"Let's check it out first!"

Muttering a flimsy excuse, a team member dashed forward.

"Wait! Don't approach recklessly...!"

Before Plu could finish, the team member reached out to contract with the electric spirit.

'Got it. With this, I...!'

Had his heart ever raced this fast?

The overwhelming anticipation was electrifying.

"I'll contract with it!"

As he shouted, spheres shot out from the walls.

The man instinctively covered his face as the spheres struck with a series of loud pops, shaking his body.

"Ugh...!"

Shirone looked around in shock.

The steel walls were pitted with as many indentations as there were spheres.

Yet, none of the spheres had fallen around the man.

They had shot out from the walls and embedded themselves in the opposite wall.

The lack of deviation in their trajectories indicated the immense force behind the spheres.

'Couldn't even react. They all pierced through.'

Thud! The man's knees hit the floor.

As his arms fell limply, his face revealed holes matching the wall's indentations.

Everyone heightened their vigilance.

Mourning their comrade's death would have to wait until they survived and left this place. For now, they focused on the immediate situation.

"It said Control Room. Why are there traps?"

"They're not traps."

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

As Shirone finished speaking, the control room's walls began to detach sequentially.

They weren't traps. The earlier attack was just a procedure to remove the fixed steel doors.

Inside the compartmentalized walls were 2-meter-tall steel golems, standing like corpses in coffins.

Their recessed eyes lit up with red light as they grabbed the walls and stepped out.

"Those who approach Babel will face divine wrath."

Two team members prepared a group spell.

"We'll annihilate them with Gardin."

Though only effective in special conditions like lightning storms, Gardin was known as one of the most destructive group spells.

Even steel golems could be fought in a place where an electric spirit was present.

"Stand back! We're going to incinerate them!"

Despite their words, the team members extended their hands forward without giving Shirone and Plu time to retreat.

"Here we go! Gardin!"

Shirone flinched and stopped, while Plu looked at the team members in confusion.

Despite their grand declaration, no magic was cast from their hands.

"What? Why isn't the essence...?"

Group magic was impossible without precise Spirit Force connection. Yet, not a single spark of electricity gathered. Shirone muttered.

"It's not an electric spirit."

"Eliminate those who approach Babel."

The golems, speaking in mechanical voices, scattered to target different individuals.

"Fight! Everyone, prepare!"

Plu drew Phoenix and struck the ground, casting Phoenix Fire.

Fiery blasts spread in all directions, striking the golems, but their metal bodies remained unscathed.

In the confined space, the Nor warriors could only dodge the golems' attacks with basic wind magic.

"Shirone! Destroy them with lasers!"

Plu called for support, but Shirone remained frozen in place.

"Shirone! What are you doing? It's dangerous!"

Five golems marched forward, shaking the ground.

As a massive fist flew towards Shirone, a shadow crossed his face.

Boom!

The ground shook.

It wasn't the vibration of the control room but the tremor caused by forty golems halting their movements.

Shirone looked up at the golem's fist, which had stopped right in front of him.

The golem's red eyes flickered rapidly, as if calculating something.

Target category: Human.

Attribute: Nephilim.

Code search: Iris pattern recognition.

Data search: Phase 1. Complete. Phase 2. Complete.

Result...

Result...

Result...

The golem's vast amount of stored data was thoroughly searched, leading to a single conclusion.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

All the golems simultaneously extinguished their red lights and collapsed forward.

The weight was so immense that the room shook as if the structure might collapse.

"What happened? Why did they suddenly...?"

The team members, still tense, couldn't move, while Plu, having retracted her Phoenix Fire, approached Shirone.

"What happened? Why did the golems fall?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Then why didn't you attack?"

Shirone was pondering the same thing. Why hadn't he felt threatened by the golems?

'Just like that time...'

When Behemoth merged with his avatar, the physical memories disappeared, but the integrated feeling remained. It was the same now. An emotion, not language, conveyed the situation.

"Senior, I don't know why, but..."

Shirone turned to Plu with a dazed expression.

"I feel like I've been here before."

Chapter 427:

In front of the Military Community Gate.

"Heh, they're all scared. What should we do with them?"

"Kill them? Or maybe take them alive?"

The guards' voices were thin and raspy, as if their vocal cords were strained.

But more surprising was the aura they emitted.

When facing a creature with murderous intent, whether it be a knife, fangs, or claws, one feels a strong presence, but each has a different nature.

A murderer? A beast?

The aura from these guards was entirely different.

An unknown creature. Or perhaps a complex mix of existing creatures.

'I can't be humiliated again.'

Kuan was ready to strike at any moment.

If they revealed their true nature, he would shoot external force in three directions.

First, he would cut down the ones on the left, then use the recoil to accelerate and swiftly eliminate the rest.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

A faint sound, barely noticeable to anyone but a Schema user, reached Kuan's ears.

It was the sound of claws extending from the right hand of the guard facing Armin.

"Everyone, stop!"

A loud voice boomed from beyond the gate.

Kuan immediately grounded himself and neutralized the external force, but his sword had already tasted blood.

Thud! Thud!

The heads of two guards on the left fell to the ground.

Siina shuddered as she realized that Kuan, who had been standing beside her moments ago, was now among the enemy ranks.

She hadn't noticed when he moved or acted.

While most swordsmen use propulsion for surprise attacks, Kuan moved by suction.

An instant acceleration with no preparation or warm-up needed.

She felt fortunate that Kuan wasn't an enemy.

"You bastard! I'll kill you!"

As the guards charged at Kuan, he raised his sword horizontally, ready to fight.

"Stop, you idiots! Didn't you hear the boss?"

The guards froze in place.

Their faces, though not yet transformed, were twisted into monstrous expressions.

With a clanking sound, the iron gate opened, and a large middle-aged man stepped out.

He wore a coat with long, soft fur like mink, and his shoulders were adorned with the taxidermied heads of terrified weasels.

His unkempt hair hung to his shoulders, and he wore dark glasses with pointed lenses.

This was Frankwine, the leader of Yamaeng, who controlled all the hunting grounds near the mainland.

Armin walked up to him and asked, "Are you the person in charge here?"

"Hmm."

Frankwine stroked his beard and examined Armin, then grinned, revealing gold teeth.

"Young and full of energy. Yes, I'm the boss here. What do you want?"

"We have a request for the military community."

"Ah! So you want to do business. Business is essential. Come in, come in."

"Boss! They killed two of our men! Are you just going to let them in?"

Frankwine glanced at the two headless bodies and shrugged.

"So what? Men fight, and sometimes they die, or get their heads cut off. What's the big deal?"

"But boss...!"

Frankwine's face twisted in annoyance.

"Are you going to keep arguing with me? Are you dead? No, you're alive, right? Then stop worrying about others and do your job."

The guards glared at Armin's group but ultimately had to step aside.

Violent and absolute.

That was Armin's first impression of Yamaeng.

As they walked to the office, Frankwine briefly introduced the factories.

Seeing it in person and hearing about it confirmed the immense scale.

They produced food made from Elixirs, weapons, hunting supplies, medicines, and more. The vast amount of Elixirs obtained from renting out nearby hunting grounds made it the largest community on the mainland.

'They're definitely different from anyone we've met before.'

Feeling cautious, Armin probed gently.

"Thank you for your time. I heard you were busy."

"Ah, I drank too much yesterday. Didn't feel great. But what's the point of resting? Might as well do something useful, haha."

Frankwine proudly opened the office door, like a hotel manager showing off a room.

It was a cramped, filthy room, reeking of cigarettes and alcohol.

"Wait here for a moment. I'll finish up and be right back."

After leading Armin's group into the office, Frankwine turned and entered a room at the end of the hallway.

A handsome blond man with slicked-back hair was lounging with his legs on the desk. He jumped up in surprise.

"Boss, you're here."

"I told you, if you sit at my desk again, I'll kill you."

"Who knew you'd catch me? Anyway, how are they?"

This was Meatgun, Yamaeng's second-in-command.

Though Yamaeng had over 300 employees, Meatgun was the only one qualified to guard Frankwine.

Frankwine lit a crumpled cigarette.

"They're capable. Let's give them a try. Do you have the estimate Raesis sent? Give it to me."

Meatgun pulled a paper from his pocket.

Frankwine unfolded it, revealing a list of about ten creatures.

They were ranked in order of difficulty, all challenging to hunt.

"Heh, I'm crazy, but that woman is insane. How are we supposed to get these? Our men wouldn't even come back with their bones."

"But it's a bold offer. She promised to raise the telomere levels of 100 members to level 5."

"Hmm, level 5."

Telomere levels represent the pure energy needed to sustain life.

Higher telomere levels mean greater combat power.

At level 5, one could live up to 400 years without explosive biological activity.

With 100 such subordinates, Yamaeng's future would be bright.

But it was curious why Raesis, who was always cautious, would make such a bold offer.

"What's her plan? She listed only the top predators in the local food chain."

Survival favors those best adapted to their environment, but that alone doesn't make them the best.

Top predators have powerful traits that cover all weaknesses.

"She's a pervert, but this is too unique. Such distinct traits aren't easy to combine with other creatures."

"She must have found a way. She's untrustworthy but not clumsy. Her offer will benefit Yamaeng."

Frankwine crumpled the memo and stuffed it in his pocket.

"So, do you think we should accept this deal?"

"Yes. Whatever she's planning, it's a great opportunity to strengthen Yamaeng. If we aim to dominate purgatory, we must ally with her."

Frankwine swung his arm and punched Meatgun's jaw.

Meatgun flew like a cannonball, crashing into the wall. As he fell to the floor, a huge crack appeared in the wall.

As Meatgun clutched his forehead and stood up, Frankwine opened the door and said, "Sit at my desk again, and I'll kill you."

Thud.

The door closed.

Armin's group sat in the office, all frowning.

The stench of alcohol and cigarettes was mixed with another foul odor.

Siina waved her hand fan and said, "What is that smell?"

The men had an idea but remained silent.

Etella tilted her head and said, "It smells like fish..."

Armin quickly changed the subject.

"Isn't it strange that the head of the military community is suddenly so friendly?"

Siina agreed.

"We can't let our guard down. The guards were odd, and Frankwine's aura was really strange. Something might be happening that we don't know about..."

Etella and Kuan nodded.

But even if something was happening elsewhere, they couldn't know.

Frankwine entered with a cheerful smile.

"Sorry about that. Got a bit behind."

Siina immediately complained.

"Why is this office so dirty? And what's that smell? It's giving me a headache."

Frankwine looked at her as if wondering why she was asking, then burst into laughter.

"Haha! Right! I had a wild night yesterday..."

Armin gestured for him to sit.

"Please, have a seat. We have something important to discuss."

Frankwine sat down, looking sheepish but calculating quickly.

All four were highly skilled, and there were two innocent-looking young women among them.

Such people were rare in purgatory, where survival was everything.

'They're from another world.'

That made things easier. Frankwine wasn't from purgatory either.

"So, what brings such formidable people to this shabby place?"

He hadn't forgotten his subordinates' deaths.

But Frankwine's feelings were more businesslike than mournful.

"We want to rent your factory."

"Oh, starting strong. What do you want to make?"

Armin provided only the necessary information.

The goal was to produce a large Tagis.

They would supply the Elixirs and materials and pay for the factory rental with Elixirs.

Frankwine licked his lips.

He didn't dislike the offer. Every deal was golden to a businessman.

But something felt off.

Raesis's sudden estimate, and now the 1st Headquarters' request to make a large Tagis.

'Something's happening with the rebels.'

Armin emphasized again.

"We'll make sure you're well compensated."

Frankwine snapped out of his thoughts and smiled broadly.

"Of course, you should come to us for such a big job. But Elixirs alone won't do. We're doing too well lately."

"Then what?"

Elixirs were the most common currency for obtaining things on the mainland.

Armin didn't understand why Elixirs wouldn't suffice.

"Hmm, what to do."

Frankwine pretended to ponder, then scribbled something at his desk.

He tore a page from his memo book, crumpled it, and tossed it on the table. Armin slowly unfolded it and read the contents.

His eyes, covered by a bandage, glowed.

Hunting List

☐ Photosynthetic Behemoth Olkir – Hunting Rank: A

☐ Bat Demon Izeremong – Hunting Rank: A

☐ Invisible Spirit Hororos – Hunting Rank: B

☐ True Demon-Type Galtomic – Hunting Rank: S

☐ Infinite Cell Replicant Kenser – Hunting Rank: S

☐ Devourer Spirit Kouzen – Hunting Rank: A

Acid Venom King Muusa – Hunting Rank: B

Armored Mineral-Type Ringer – Hunting Rank: SS

9.

Chapter 428:

Plu couldn't understand what Shirone was saying.

"You've been here before?"

Babel was known as the Tomb of Angels, a place that existed even before the citizens lived in Heaven. It was impossible for nineteen-year-old Shirone to have been here.

"I'm not sure, but..."

"Hmm, maybe it's déjà vu?"

Normally, it wouldn't be something to dwell on, but considering the steel golems had collapsed just before attacking Shirone, it wasn't something to ignore.

"Let's move to another place. This area is too dangerous."

"Wait. Are we just going to leave that behind?"

A team member pointed to the electricity above the cone. Even if it wasn't an electric spirit, it was too valuable to abandon.

Plu felt the same but had a bad feeling about it.

The deceased team member wasn't weak, yet he couldn't even react before being torn apart by the shrapnel.

"Shirone, what do you think?"

Shirone stared intently at the glowing electricity.

It wasn't clear, but a faint sense of familiarity, like a distant memory, washed over him.

'Have I seen that before?'

As Shirone searched his memories, he muttered, "Ultima."

"Huh? Shirone, what did you say?"

"What?"

Shirone turned with a surprised expression.

"You just muttered something. Ultima?"

"Did I?"

Plu nodded.

She was meticulous, so it must be true, but Shirone genuinely couldn't remember.

"We should check it out."

"You know it could be dangerous, right?"

"That's why we need to confirm it. The control device for Babel's traps might be in the control room."

It made sense.

"Alright. But I'll do the investigation."

"Senior, that's..."

"Listen to me. This is the kind of task a second-in-command handles."

Plu approached the electricity, ready to take the risk to protect Shirone at all costs.

She gently touched the electricity with Phoenix, and it crackled angrily but didn't react further.

"Hmm, it doesn't seem dangerous."

At that moment, a team member leaped forward and grabbed the electricity with his hand.

"It's mine!"

It was the man with the long philtrum, assigned by Raesis to monitor Shirone.

Despite his cold demeanor, he was just a human driven by greed.

As the electricity flowed into his arm, he was convinced it was a spirit and shouted, "Spirit, contract with me!"

Blue light spread through the control room as the spirit's power seeped into him.

As the immense concept filled his mind, his eyes rolled back involuntarily.

"This... this is... incredible..."

As he muttered in ecstasy, his face suddenly exploded with a pop.

Shirone and Plu stared in shock at the man's headless body.

"Foolish. How could he just grab it without checking?"

It wasn't a lack of patience. The Nor's desire for spirits was that strong.

Shirone and Plu, who could cast magic anytime through the Spirit Zone, couldn't understand that mindset.

When Plu glared at the last remaining team member, he shook his head and raised his hands, stepping back.

Nothing was more valuable than life, so it was a wise choice.

"Shirone, do you still want to continue?"

Plu asked, suggesting they stop, but Shirone felt more certain after the man's death.

Babel was sealed with Hena and existed before the citizens were born.

"Those who accessed this place were likely angels or Nephilim. The Immortal Function is fundamental here. The steel golems appeared because someone other than a Nephilim entered."

Plu agreed that Shirone was probably right, given the circumstances.

But with two deaths already, she had to caution him.

"Be careful. There could still be unforeseen dangers."

Nodding, Shirone reached out to the electricity.

It didn't sting, and the electricity climbed up his hand like a living creature.

"Gasp!"

He heard a rushing sound in his head, like a drill boring into his skull.

Ultima System - Universal Integrated Information System.

In terms of the law, it was number 1.

Unique concepts, unmatched by anything else, tore through his mind at the speed of light.

"Ugh!"

Shirone realized why the man's head had exploded. His own head felt like it might do the same.

As he opened the Immortal Function, an immense sense of liberation washed over him, and the concepts of Ultima flowed into the infinite passage.

His mind emptied.

Only a thin, blue thread of light connected him to the outside of the passage.

The last remaining team member approached, swallowing nervously.

"What... what was that spirit?"

Shirone turned with a surprised expression.

"Say that again."

"I was curious about the spirit's attribute."

Hearing the man's voice without the drone's translation mode confirmed it.

He couldn't understand the pronunciation, but the meaning seeped into his mind.

'Who created this system?'

It wasn't about the citizens' language. Any symbol in existence could be integrated and decoded into a single signal.

When Shirone placed his hand on the cone, the electricity pierced his hand, activating the machinery.

The flow of information was as clear as blood vessels.

"So that's the control device."

Nodding at Plu's words, Shirone connected to the main circuit and explored Babel.

The structure's layout, vast enough to be called a fortress, freely appeared in his mind.

Thud! Thud!

Opening the control room wall revealed a tube-shaped glass chamber.

A red cylindrical light shot up, spinning rapidly.

"That's the main elevator."

The elevator, similar to the one in Aravot, transported the three of them 100 meters underground in an instant.

"Wow, it's huge."

The control room was so vast it was hard to see the end.

A massive screen, likely ten times larger than life, floated in front, with a conical pillar similar to the one in the control room beside it.

Shirone placed his hand on it without hesitation.
Why did he feel like he'd been here before? Perhaps the answer lay here.

Accessing the control room records through the Ultima System, the screen lit up.

Shirone calmly searched, but to Plu, the pages seemed to flip rapidly, leaving afterimages.

At some point, the screen stopped, displaying strange characters, neither Hena nor the citizens' language.

Only Shirone's pupils moved, following the text.

Through the Ultima's single signal, the meaning was conveyed in a way he could understand.

Record: Babel Project

Light Year Omega 133 - The first humanity, Gaia, overcame all biological challenges such as gender, disposition, and individuality, achieving an integrated mental system.

Omega 187 - Gaia attempted to leave the photon system through the Ultima System but was blocked by Anke Ra's Akashic Record barrier.

Omega 201 - Gaia declared war on Heaven. Ultima System clashed with Akashic Record.

Omega 387 - Anke Ra attempted the first reset. Gaia thwarted it with the Ultima System.

Omega 412 - Anke Ra's second reset attempt failed.

Omega 666 - Gaia lost the final war. 90% of Gaia's population perished.

Omega 689 - First resistance began. Gaia succeeded in implementing Halo by analyzing the angels' infinite algorithm.

Omega 717 - Gaia created a strategic weapon to eliminate Anke Ra, named Babel.

Omega 738 - Babel entered mass production.

Omega 777 - Gaia lost the second resistance.

Omega 799 - Gaia's representative (record deleted) proposed the second photon system exit possibility. Ultima System approval granted.

Omega 892 - (record deleted) met with Anke Ra. Talks failed.

Omega 927 - Anke Ra dismantled the Ultima System with the Elixir of Life.

Gaia split into Kergos, Nor, and Mecha.

Omega 987 - (record deleted) announced Ikael's (record deleted) to the citizens.

Heaven fell into chaos.

Omega 999 - The last Gaia (record deleted) exited the photon system.

End of record.

'What is this...'

Shirone stared blankly.

The file recorded events between Gaia, the first humanity, and Anke Ra before the citizens were born.

Gaia, who achieved an integrated mental system, created an ancient weapon called Babel to kill Anke Ra.

But after losing the final war, Gaia split into three races: Kergos, Nor, and Mecha.

The timeline was divided into percentages, so it was unclear how long a year was, but one thing was certain.

The last remaining Gaia, the one marked as (record deleted), left this record.

'There are two types of record deletions. One is Gaia's name, and the other is the significant crime Ikael committed.'

The screen reset.

A single sentence, likely left by the last Gaia, flashed.

Beyond infinity.

As Shirone stared intently at it, Plu couldn't hold back and approached.

"What are you looking at? You can't even understand it."

Shirone shook his head. He couldn't reveal the Ultima System with the team member listening.

"I'll explain later. There's something we need to check. Follow me."

Activating the control device opened a path through the iron wall.

Babel lay at the end of that path, the ultimate weapon created by the first humanity to kill a god.

'What will it look like?'

As they passed through the corridor, they entered a chamber resembling a womb.

A spotlight-like beam of light illuminated something kneeling below.

It was a sleek, black metallic woman, connected to numerous wires descending from the ceiling.

The team member's face turned pale.

"An angel..."

"No. It's Babel."

Plu asked, "Babel?"

"Babel isn't the name of this place. It's an ancient weapon that mimics an angel's abilities."

"What are you talking about? You've been saying strange things for a while now. Explain properly..."

Whirrrrr!

The facility's systems activated, and power flowed through the wires into Babel, as relayed by the Ultima System.

In this area where lightning struck continuously, there was no issue with power supply, but the output was immense.

Babel's body began to vibrate intensely as it absorbed the entire structure's power.

It was like a fetus finally being born, having absorbed all its mother's nutrients through the womb.

Babel's slender neck straightened, and her kneeling legs rose as if in zero gravity.

Standing over 2 meters tall with a slender figure, her blue wings expanded, revealing her beautiful face.

She looked eerily similar to someone Shirone knew.

"Ikael?"

Babel's eyes lit up with a red glow, and a bright white halo spun above her head, emitting a high-pitched noise close to

a roar.

"Sh-Shirone, let's get out of here."

Plu's shoulders trembled.

The power she felt was beyond imagination, truly mimicking an angel.

'Was the chairman planning to fight something like this?'

Babel, hovering about a meter above the ground, took in the sight of the three people below.

⌘Babel program activated. Applying Kariel algorithm.

⌘Primary objective: Eliminate intruders.

Crackle!

Babel's form shifted into an electric tangle and vanished. At the same time, a blade-like hand stopped right in front of Shirone's face.

Only after hearing the clear sound of the fingertips did Shirone realize his situation.

His arm was frozen in place, and Babel's face slowly approached, examining him.

⚠Warning! Warning!

⌘Higher algorithm deems attack impossible.

⌘Cause analysis: Gaia Code Number 2 detected.

Checking Ultima System application. Confirmed.

⌘Result: Absolute non-aggression target.

Babel, locking eyes with Shirone, slowly withdrew her hand and stepped back with metallic clanks.

⌘Reapplying Kariel algorithm.

⌘Secondary objective: Eliminate all citizens.

Whirrrrr!

As the halo spun, Babel's body lightly floated.

Just as the terrified trio looked up, electricity enveloped Babel, and she shot through the ceiling with a deafening roar.

"Ugh!"

The three, regaining their balance in the shaking room, could only stare blankly at the perfectly round hole in the ceiling.

The black angel had descended.

Chapter 429:

Cage B Team arrives on the mainland.

As the 21 magicians of Cage B Team walked down the road, people instinctively made way for them. In a place with no rules except for the unspoken ones between communities, the inhabitants of the mainland had developed an almost evolutionary sense for detecting strength.

However, Cage B Team wasn't particularly trying to intimidate anyone. Despite being a party composed of 4th to 6th rank magicians, they were mostly young, with only three members—Team Leader Rose, Deputy Leader Horkin, and Communication Magician Weygon—having previous experience in Heaven.

"Ouch, ouch."

A petite woman with a bob haircut and bangs tied above her forehead kept scratching herself.

This was Aroella, a certified 4th rank fire magician known as the Flame of Fire. Despite her fiery personality and the ability to wield flames up to 3,200°C, she had a peculiar history of being swindled out of her entire fortune by three different boyfriends.

"Why am I so itchy? Is it the air here?"

Unable to bear it, she scratched herself directly under her clothes.

Summoning Magician Maloy frowned and asked, "What's with you? Why do you keep groping yourself? Have you decided to be self-sufficient?"

"No... Ever since we got here, my armpits have been itchy. Beam, did some weird bug bite me?"

Insect Magician Beam's response was blunt. "It's because you don't shave."

"Very funny! I don't even have hair there!"

Terminator Tarvan of Cage B Team said, "That's even weirder."

"Shut up! I'm in a terrible mood, so don't mess with me! Or I'll burn you to a crisp!"

Ignoring Aroella, Tarvan turned to Team Leader Rose. "What now? Do we even know where to find Gaold? Should we just leave it to Jonah in the city center?"

Deputy Leader Horkin shook his head. "No. Even for a Cage-level team, the mainland isn't to be taken lightly. If we recklessly spread the Spirit Zone, we might attract unwanted attention and compromise the mission."

Carnivore addict Benifis said, "Old man, isn't it time for you to retire? We're the kingdom's elite force, capable of taking down demons. We don't need to be cautious."

"A Cage-level party can take down demons. But here, even demons form Cage-level groups."

A moment of silence followed.

Team Leader Rose spoke. "Heaven is a dangerous place. Especially since our target is Micaiah Gaold, the kingdom's top battle magician."

Word Magician Mami frowned. Her irregular teeth and prominent cheekbones gave her a hysterical appearance.

"So what? No matter how strong Gaold is, he can't take down a demon alone. We won't lose in combat strength."

Horkin said, "Demons and humans are different. There are ways to strategize against demons, but humans have too many variables. And..."

Horkin's face turned cold as he looked at Mami. "Gaold can take them down alone."

Mami swallowed hard.

Rose continued, "The best outcome is to eliminate Gaold without any team casualties. But it's not unusual for someone to die. We're not talking about numbers for fun. Gaold is special."

The team's expressions finally showed their resolve.

In all their years together, it was the first time the team leader had placed the target above the team.

Meanwhile, Tarvan showed no signs of tension. As the team's most destructive magician, he couldn't afford to be intimidated before the fight even began.

"If we can't use the Spirit Zone, we'll have to do it the hard way."

Tarvan suddenly turned and headed into an alley.

Everyone knew they had been followed since arriving, so the team followed without complaint.

In the alley, armed men appeared.

There were as many of them as Cage B Team, and their eyes gleamed with murderous intent.

"Who are you?"

Mental Magician White connected a mental channel to translate Tarvan's words, but the armed robbers weren't surprised.

The leader, a man with a sharp, drawn sword, approached Tarvan.

"You don't know who we are? We pegged you as country bumpkins the moment you started looking around. Did you think you'd be safe in a group?"

In the mainland, where various lifestyles and creatures mixed, information was as crucial as power.

For newcomers, the first to claim them had the advantage.

"I'm asking because I don't know. Who are you?"

"Heh, let me give you some good advice. First, when someone calls you on the mainland, you run over and kneel. Second, you hand over everything you have. Third, leave the women and run for your lives. Now, get to it."

Tarvan looked at his teammates.

No one wanted to step forward, so he sighed and approached the robber.

"Here or there, it's all the same..."

Five minutes later.

Twenty robbers lay on the alley floor, their faces smashed.

They were so weak that Tarvan hadn't even needed to use his signature move, the Kaiser Blast.

"Please, spare me..."

Tarvan grabbed the leader by the collar and lifted him.

"Let me ask you something."

"Yes, yes! Anything you want to know, I'll find out even if I don't know it!"

It was almost laughable.

At least they were quicker to switch sides than the robbers in their original world.

Communication Magician Weygon smiled brightly and used magic to project an image in front of the leader.

When Gaold's face appeared, the leader's face turned pale with fear.

"Have you seen this man?"

"Uh, well..."

From the leader's reaction, Cage B Team realized he had seen Gaold.

Mental Magician White approached.

"Got lucky, Tarvan."

"Tch, I already calculated this."

Tarvan's words were likely false, but the result made sense.

The lowest tier of the mainland's food chain targeted newcomers.

If they couldn't gauge their opponent's strength, they would have followed Gaold too.

"Hey, you. Spill everything you know."

White's words conveyed through the mental channel revealed the leader's quick thinking.

'Weighing the value of his information against his life.'

"I-I don't know anything. But..."

White didn't listen and turned back to the team.

"It's over. Let's discuss."

As Tarvan raised his fist with a grin, the leader, realizing things had gone wrong, shouted in despair.

"Wait! I saw him! I did!"

"I know."

The leader's face was smashed as he was thrown against the wall.

Tarvan, shaking out his fist, looked at Horkin.

"Disappointing. For a place where demons roam in Cage-level groups, these guys are pathetic."

Horkin was about to respond when a group appeared at the end of the alley.

Sensing their presence, Tarvan's eyes turned calm.

'Who are they?'

"Huh?"

Etella, examining the hunting list Frankwine had given her, looked up at the strange feeling.

Twenty-one people occupied the alley.

Kuan instinctively placed his hand on his sword's hilt. The aura alone indicated they were all masters of their respective fields.

The tension skyrocketed, and dozens of eyes quickly assessed each other.

Tarvan had to swallow his earlier words.

He had thought this was a place for people, but even non-human-like beings could be encountered in the mainland.

Horkin stroked his beard with an intrigued smile.

'Hmm, what to do?'

For those trying to leave, this was a dead-end alley.

If they weren't going to fight, they would have to back up and make way, but no one in Cage B Team would consider such a ridiculous move.

Realizing the other group had no intention of stepping aside, Kuan slowly walked forward.

A limp.

All twenty-one eyes simultaneously examined Kuan's leg.

'Is he going to try alone? Is he crazy?'

Unless he planned to hug and kiss them, there was no reason to approach in a blocked alley.

'Ridiculous. If you want to leave, you go back.'

As Tarvan exuded hostility to block the approach, Kuan's aura amplified like a chemical reaction.

"Wow..."

Someone in the team exclaimed.

No one even thought to scold him, as Tarvan's lips twitched.

'What a killer aura.'

There was no such thing as a friendly killer aura, but the lack of hesitation meant he was fully prepared.

'Yes, this is the kind of resolve needed.'

Kuan limped forward with even steps, never blinking as he stared at Tarvan.

'One more step.'

At that point, he would have to cut.

The moment came quickly, and Kuan's foot crossed the line.

At the same time, Horkin spoke after a long pause.

"Let's not..."

Kuan's sword created afterimages as it slashed, and

Tarvan's body turned into a flash of light, retreating.

"Phew!"

A swordsman's physical reaction speed is faster than a magician's. If Horkin hadn't intervened precisely, the outcome might have been different.

'Did I dodge? Or was I cut?'

His nose felt cold as if it were frozen.

It could have been the wind pressure or an actual cut. But checking with his hand would hurt his pride.

"Huh? Are you from the continent?"

Etella, surprised, pointed at Horkin.

Hearing a familiar language, Cage B Team's hostility slightly eased.

Of course, that didn't mean they would step aside or turn back.

But all twenty-five people in the alley instinctively knew that resolving this situation peacefully was best.

Horkin, skilled in diplomacy, stepped forward.

"Ah, I didn't realize you were from the same place. Nice to meet you. Are you on a mission too?"

Etella shook hands with Horkin, smiling warmly.

"Yes, we almost ended up fighting each other."

'Fighting each other, huh?'

Horkin's lips curled into a slight smile.

They weren't so clueless as to not recognize a Cage-level team when they saw one.

'Are they from the Red Line?'

Weygon, seizing the opportunity for reconciliation, approached. His actions were calculated, aiming to ease the tension.

"We're looking for someone. Have you seen this person?"

When Gaold's face appeared in the magical vision, Etella's eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh? Isn't this Micaiah Gaold?"

Siina added, "I know him as the head of the Tormia Magic Association. Why are you looking for him here on the mainland?"

'Hmm, so that's it...'

Horkin blinked, deep in thought.

To be precise, Gaold was the former head of the Tormia Magic Association.

'Do they really not know? They don't seem to have been on the mainland for long. Well, it's only been less than a month.'

Tarvan spoke gruffly, "It's nothing. Just something we need for our mission."

Given the likelihood of them being on a confidential mission, it was best not to pry too deeply.

"Alright then."

Etella bowed slightly, signaling that they should be allowed to pass.

Some of the younger members of Cage B Team felt a bit of resistance, but Rose's cold voice restored order.

"Let them through."

Cage B Team stepped aside, allowing Armin's group to pass. Most avoided eye contact, but Aroella glared at Siina until the last moment.

'That woman is definitely an ice magician. I'm sure of it.' Aroella's intuition, though subjective, was often accurate. Once Armin's group was out of sight, Rose immediately turned to White.

"Well?"

"What do you think? Of course, it failed. They blocked all thoughts, so I couldn't read anything. And it wasn't a situation where I could aggressively probe."

Rose wasn't disappointed and moved on to the next matter.

"What about that man?"

White glanced at the leader of the robbers.

"He did follow Gaold. But Gaold didn't respond and left the mainland immediately. He had two companions: Kangnan and an unknown woman."

"An unknown woman? Hmm."

Though Zulu was the world's greatest summoning magician, her reclusive nature meant few knew her face.

"But it's strange. If they left the mainland right away, why did they come here?"

"According to his memory, they didn't enter any buildings or rest. They left within an hour of arriving."

"I see. Finding out why will be the quickest way to reach Gaold. We'll retrace their steps."

As Rose led the way out of the alley, the rest of the team followed.

Horkin suddenly stopped and looked back down the road.

"Old man, what's wrong?"

"The woman I shook hands with. I feel like I've seen her before, but I can't remember where. It wasn't in the magical society."

Tarvan didn't think much of it.

"With skills like that, you've probably seen her somewhere. Anyway, let's go. I'm starving."

"....."

Horkin's gaze lingered on the path where Etella's group had disappeared for a long time.

Chapter 430:

Shirone and Plu waited in a room at the 2nd Headquarters. Although the team member called it "waiting," they knew it was essentially isolation.

Plu, having observed the situation outside, sat next to Shirone.

"Now, tell me what happened."

Shirone explained everything that had occurred in Babel's control room, including the Ultima System that unified all signals and the historical records of Babel obtained through it.

Plu took a deep breath and pondered.

She had heard bits about Heaven's history, but this was entirely different.

"The person whose record was deleted in the Babel Project, could it be related to the reset?"

McClain Goffin.

Shirone was almost certain.

What shocked him most was that Goffin was connected to the grave crime committed by Ikael.

"Looking back, Goffin must have had a reason to leave this world, unrelated to its affairs. That's why he chose the complex method of resetting and reconfiguring."

"That makes sense, but I think it might also be related to the Ultima System. How does it work?"

"It's more of a feeling than a language. Just as you feel heat when you touch something hot or a sting when pricked by something sharp, these signals come in almost infinitely differentiated."

"Hmm, I think I get it..."

While she understood intellectually, it was impossible to grasp the sensation without experiencing it.

"In that sense, the Ultima System seems to be the opposite concept of the Akashic Record. If the Akashic Record is perfect even when parts change, the Ultima System clearly distinguishes all parts. If all Gaia were integrated with the Ultima System, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they could have opposed Anke Ra."

"But conversely, the fewer the numbers, the weaker the power, right?"

"Yes. I can only distinguish the meanings of the signals."

Plu had a different opinion on that.

"That's a really useful ability. It will help here, where we don't know the language, and its applications are limitless."

"Yes. If we survive this place."

Plu gave a bitter smile at Shirone's grim joke.

"True. By the way, where did Babel go? Since it's a weapon against Heaven, did it go there?"

"Possibly. We should report this to Sein. It could be a significant variable."

"Right, let's ask Gardrak when we get a chance. He seemed really eager to leave here."

"Clove too."

They chuckled quietly.

Heaven's 6th Heaven, Great World War

Since Arius entered Drimo, Kariel hadn't left the Great World War.

Miro still showed no signs of waking up.

It wouldn't be easy.

Even someone well-versed in the human mind would find it as difficult as releasing a fish into the sea and catching it again ten years later to extract only Miro's essence from Drimo.

'Brahma will handle it well.'

Brahma, the Mara with the greatest insight, was trustworthy. Yet, the beautiful face watching the central processing unit remained shadowed.

Then, a category of data stored long ago flashed on the screen.

The year indicated it was information deeply buried in the angels' memories.

Kariel's eyes lit up with curiosity.

"What is this?"

After staring at the screen for a long time, Kariel tilted his head in confusion.

Babel had descended.

Tracking its location confirmed it. A red dot rapidly flying over purgatory appeared on the screen.

"But how?"

Kariel had been the one to dismantle Babel's production process during the war with Gaia.

As the Archangel of Creation, Kariel disliked Uriel's method of destruction.

It was unproductive, irreversible, and foolish.

Instead, he had modified the algorithm in the Babel program to reset Babel's recognized enemies from Heaven to the citizens.

This was the main reason Gaia's second resistance failed.

"Who activated it?"

Since Goffin's erasure, pure Nephilim no longer existed in purgatory. And no angel would defy Anke Ra's command to awaken Babel.

Kariel transmitted Babel's data to the screen.

From the moment the program activated, Babel's exploration unfolded in a first-person view.

Kariel recognized a familiar face.

As Babel approached, the boy's face zoomed in.

Babel ultimately deemed the target non-hostile.

If the boy on the screen was who Kariel thought, it made perfect sense.

"Heh heh."

Kariel felt a thrill in his soul. A deep, satisfying laugh erupted from within.

"Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!"

Finally, his opportunity had come.

All humans deserved to die, but Shirone was especially detestable.

The human Ikael loved most.

"Can he still hold his head high in front of me after seeing this?"

For the first time in a while, Kariel left the Great World War. The first thing that came to mind was Ikael's pale, stricken face.

Heaven's 7th Heaven, Aravot

In Aravot, where Anke Ra resided, there was a room where Archangel Ikael, once the head of the angels, was confined. Kariel walked briskly down the corridor, a victorious smile on his face.

Of course, he had no intention of handing over Shirone's information easily.

Even with his power sealed, Ikael's name remained a symbol of glory among the angels.

It was too soon.

But the thought of this amusing incident was too tantalizing to keep to himself.

'Let's see that proud face. I hold the reins anyway.'

Just before reaching Ikael's room, a spatial rift appeared before Kariel, and hundreds of glass panels shimmered at different brightness levels.

As the outlines connected, they solidified into the form of a man.

A signal that could store unique information in specific panels.

Ikael's three-horned Mara, Ashur, blocked Kariel with eyes as deep as his dark hair.

"What brings you to Aravot, Angel of Creation?"

"I'm here to see Ikael. She's inside, right?"

Kariel moved forward as if he didn't need an answer, but Ashur quickly blocked his path again.

Kariel's face twisted in anger.

"Is a mere Mara going to stop me?"

He vividly remembered Ashur appearing and drawing his sword just as he was about to capture Shirone.

At that time, he had let it go because Ashur was following Ikael's orders, but this time he wouldn't forgive it.

"Ikael doesn't want to see anyone."

"Anyone? A confined angel has such bold dreams. Move aside, you insignificant Mara."

Kariel roughly shoved Ashur aside and burst into the room before he could be stopped.

The foremost of all angels, the radiant Ikael, sat gracefully on the floor, waiting for Kariel.

"It's been a while, Kariel."

Kariel forced a smile.

Even now, standing before Ikael made his halo shrink, but today he didn't want to show weakness.

"Hmph, sitting on the floor, how ridiculous. Where's the authority you once had as the head of the angels?"

Ikael smiled kindly.

"Your presence has weakened. Well, you've always been so focused on one thing that you couldn't see anything else."

Indeed, Kariel's complexion was noticeably gaunt. Even the spark in his eyes, once full of creativity, had dulled.

"What are you up to that I don't know about? Anke Ra must have forbidden angelic activities."

"Heh heh, what will you do with that knowledge? You have no power left. You're dying to know what I'm planning, aren't you? But what can you do? You're just a puppet angel with nothing but your old reputation."

"You look like a child begging for milk. What are you so afraid of?"

Afraid? Me?

Kariel's eyes widened.

"Ha ha ha! I'm not afraid of anything. I'm even greater than you! Who would I..."

Kariel's words abruptly stopped.

Ikael began to untie her pure white robe.

As she pulled it off her shoulders, the garment slid down. Her shoulders, supporting her proud neck, her slender yet strong arms, and her flawless back revealed Kariel's frozen face.

"Come here, Kariel. My clever child. Come into my arms like before and tell me everything. Then sleep well, and everything will be fine."

"Uh..."

Kariel, with a dazed expression, almost ran to her but quickly regained his senses.

The Ikael he so hated was still beautiful.

The most perfect body in a world of pure white.

The pinnacle of purity, with no particles or impurities.

He wanted to nestle in her arms and rub his cheek against hers, telling her everything.

Yes, that was everything.

That alone had been the ultimate Ataraxia.

'But she... she!'

A mere human had defiled her.

"Shut... up!"

Kariel's halo expanded into a spinning ring.

Everything in the room rattled, and Ikael's golden hair fell over her face.

Kariel approached, shouting madly.

"Shut up! Do you have the right to say that? You... you...!

Ugh!"

Kariel couldn't withstand the mental turmoil and quickly lowered his head.

His already weakened presence was on the verge of collapsing.

'Damn it! Why...!'

Not once, never, had he ever desired to possess or monopolize her.

A pure reverence, entirely different from human desire.

He had once felt absolute happiness just knowing that the archangel Ikael existed.

'Foolish humans! Vile creatures!'

Why couldn't humans leave beauty as it was?

Did they want to possess it so badly? Couldn't they share this beauty with others?

Everyone wanted to be loved by Ikael. Was it out of jealousy that they took her away?

To Kariel, Ikael was no longer an object of reverence. She was a withered flower, broken by the hands of a mere human.

'I can't forgive this. No, I won't forgive this!'

Kariel leaned in close to Ikael, who was still bowing her head, and whispered.

"Listen carefully. I will never forget. So I will do what you hate the most. Because you did what I hate the most!"

As Kariel stormed out of the room, Ikael, with a sorrowful expression, adjusted her clothes and spoke softly.

"Ashur."

At her call, Ashur prostrated himself before her, his expression equally sorrowful after witnessing his master's humiliation.

"Your eternal servant responds to your call."

"Please investigate what Kariel is planning."

Due to the law of familiars, Ashur's power was weakened as much as Ikael's was sealed, but he had no reason to refuse her request. However...

"The atmosphere in Heaven is becoming increasingly tense. If something like today happens again..."

Ikael's bright smile rendered Ashur's concerns moot.

"It won't happen again. Please."

No matter what sins she had committed, Ikael was still Ikael. With just one smile, countless angels and Maras would willingly lay down their lives for her.

Ashur bowed silently.

His body shattered into hundreds of glass panels and vanished in an instant.

Chapter 431:

Secret Underground Laboratory of the 2nd Rebel Headquarters.

Raesis did not reprimand Shirone and Plu for the loss of two Special Mobile Unit members. While her subordinates wanted Shirone's rank revoked to restore the commander's honor, Raesis was more intrigued by the completion of Babel's exploration.

After isolating Shirone and Plu in their quarters, Raesis collected their blood samples again. The official reason was the potential infection by an unidentified pathogen, but the real motive was to secure a clone of Shirone, who had changed after entering Babel.

"The Tomb of Angels... So it was Babel? It really existed? I thought it was just a myth."

With Shirone confirming Babel's existence, Raesis had no choice but to believe it. If the myth was true, she could also guess what spirit Shirone had discovered there.

"Probably the Ultima System. If Shirone learned the ancient language, it would be an excellent opportunity for me."

Raesis approached an iron cage in the laboratory.

A grotesque creature was banging its head against the bars.

"Kiik! Kiik!"

Every time the cage rattled, the biologists recording the creature's state shuddered.

The King of Reproduction, Garas.

An extraterrestrial species with a reproductive instinct 100,000 times stronger than humans, capable of mating with 1,027 known species, including humans. Despite being biologically male, it perceives even men as reproductive targets.

According to academic reports, Garas had a 2% difference in success rates when attempting to reproduce with human females versus males.

Garas has no definitive form, as it can mate with anything from small insects to giant monsters. However, it shares common traits like the "protein palace" organ that manipulates amino acid sequences and rapid cell division to create reproductive organs.

Despite being ten times more intelligent than humans, Garas has not developed an independent intellectual civilization due to its sole interest in reproduction.

Whether it's the ultimate amusement of advanced intelligence or a natural occurrence due to their unique environment is unknown. What is clear is that Garas is a reproductive entity with the powerful ability to break down species barriers, making it one of the highest-risk isolated species in purgatory.

"Commander, why did you bring such a creature here? If it escapes, the headquarters will be doomed. The entire area will become a Garas colony."

"It's fine. As long as we manage it well. Without it, we can't produce Shirone's clone."

Raesis had successfully combined Shirone's genetic information with Nor eggs, but the slight differences in their evolutionary processes prevented implantation. Using Garas's genetic affinity as a bridge could solve the problem. The biologist responded with a troubled expression.

"Then... we'll start today."

"No. Clone Plu first."

"What? Why... Could it be?"

The biologist's face turned pale.

Combining Shirone, Plu, and Garas could indeed produce clones explosively. But even a scientist who had crossed many forbidden lines felt a pang of conscience this time. He was human, after all.

Made of flesh and blood, and deeply averse to pain and death.

'Is this woman really sane?'

That was the biologist's only question.

"Commander, is this really necessary?"

"We're at war. We must accept small sacrifices for victory. You knew that when you agreed to help me."

"But this is..."

Raesis interrupted.

"We don't have much time. If the Babel Shirone explored is the one I know."

"Why? I thought Babel was a weapon created by ancient Gaia to attack Heaven."

"Of course, but..."

Raesis fell silent.

There was no need to cause a commotion in the headquarters prematurely.

The one who sealed Babel back then was Archangel Kariel. Niflheim

The world of the dead, where everything is frozen.

Before Gaold's group lay a vast ice field, surrounded by frozen mountains in the distance.

A world so harsh that ordinary creatures would freeze solid before encountering anything.

If Zulu hadn't summoned a Tier 2 monster, Salamander, to raise the surrounding temperature, they would have been in the same predicament.

After all, this was the place where the body of Ymir, the king of giants, was trapped within the "Wall of Eternal Ice."

The 3-meter-long Salamander lay flat on the ground, emitting heat from its entire body.

Yet, the ice didn't melt, and the Salamander shivered from the cold.

As the flames weakened, the Salamander's true form, a lizard, became visible.

Gaold exhaled frost and asked, "How many do we have?"

Kangnan checked her pouch.

"Twenty-four."

"I see."

Collecting Black Elixir was taking longer than expected.

Rebel 1st Commander Crude had said there was a 50% chance, but the actual probability of obtaining Elixir from capturing spirits seemed less than 20%.

Even so, it was a high probability, and with 24 Elixirs, they could buy anything on the mainland.

But the results were meager for the effort, and they had lost a significant amount of stamina.

'It's cold.'

Kangnan exhaled a long cloud of frost.

Wandering Niflheim for six days was madness for humans.

Zulu hadn't been able to dismiss the Salamander for even a moment, preventing her from sleeping.

Kangnan looked at Gaold's broad back.

How cold must he be?

If Kangnan was cold, Gaold was a thousand times colder.

If Kangnan's fingers were numb with frostbite, Gaold was in a thousand times more pain.

'How can he not show it? How is he enduring this?'

"We'll tire out at this rate."

Gaold looked at their guide.

A Nor with a rat-like face and scars.

He could navigate Niflheim because he had spent his entire fortune to contract with an ice spirit.

But in purgatory, no matter how valuable a spirit was, if one's magical skills were lacking, it was worthless.

The only job he could get was as a guide in Niflheim, a job with a high risk of death.

The terms were strict.

He wouldn't participate in combat but would take 50% of the items collected.

Gaold wouldn't normally agree to such an unfair contract, but after realizing how low the chances of obtaining Black

Elixir were after their first hunt, he reconsidered.

Niflheim was vast, and encounters with spirits were surprisingly infrequent.

They would exhaust themselves or freeze to death before collecting enough.

It was better to head to "Hel," where the ruler of Niflheim resided, and hit the jackpot.

"How much further to Hel?"

"Ah, just a bit further this way..."

The guide, pointing ahead, finally gave up and shouted,

"No! I can't go any further! Let's turn back!"

He was terrified of Gaold's group.

No one approached this land of death, but occasionally, madmen seeking fortune would enter.

The guide had explored Niflheim six times with such people.

Even finding one Black Elixir was profitable, and two meant he could rest for two more years.

Before meeting Gaold's group, he had barely managed to kill spirits on the outskirts, praying for Black Elixir to drop.

But these people were different.

They ignored the outskirts and headed straight for Hel, capturing nearly two hundred Grim Reapers in six days.

The Grim Reaper, the strongest spirit on the mainland, ranked Triple S.

When he saw the 5-meter-tall reaper on a black horse wielding a giant scythe, the guide nearly wet himself.

The thrill of finding Black Elixir kept him going, but he honestly wanted to go home now.

"Really? You can quit anytime."

Gaold agreed readily.

But he added one condition.

"If you break the contract and go alone."

'You bastard!'

The guide gritted his teeth.

He couldn't match their strength, so he had to endure, but the resentment burned deep.

With twelve Black Elixirs, he could live in luxury forever.
No, he would marry a hundred mainland beauties and have a thousand children.

It was a desperate fantasy, but the value of twelve Black Elixirs made it possible.

"Fine, let's go to the end! But my role ends at Hel. I don't know the way from there."

"Do as you please."

Gaold turned and continued walking on the ice.

Though a towering figure to everyone, Gaold's face was gaunt.

Zulu stopped sucking on her pacifier and pointed ahead.

"There's something there."

The guide's face lit up with professional pride as he scanned the area.

'I've lived to see this.'

The reason he could guide in the flawless Niflheim was the bodies of intruders over the ages serving as markers.

As Gaold's group approached, they saw over a thousand frozen creatures.

The times and species varied, but all had expressions of terror.

"Is this the entrance to Hel?"

"Wait. I've never been here. According to my research..."

The guide pulled out a notebook and checked his notes, turning away as if to keep them secret.

As the only Niflheim expert on the mainland, his notes were extensive.

"Hmm, from the body of a Katesis species frozen with one eye closed..."

The guide found a bipedal creature with a lizard face and a long tail and approached.

"The direction indicated by the left index finger."

The guide frowned at the left hand.

'Damn, it only has three fingers. Which one is the index?'

Guessing it was the middle finger, the guide pointed about 15 degrees from their path.

"Hel should be that way. So I'll... Eek!"

The guide fell back in shock as he looked at Gaold.

A terrifying aura emanated from the group.

"Th-that is...!"

A thick mist rose from the ice.

It was a familiar scene for everyone, but this time the situation was different.

A dark horse's silhouette emerged on the ice, letting out a high-pitched scream louder than a woman's.

On its saddle sat a Grim Reaper, shrouded in black smoke, holding a 4-meter-long scythe over its shoulder.

There were forty of them.

This was the maximum number for a single battle.

"Damn it! Dying for twelve Black Elixirs!"

The guide, having given up hope, cried in despair.

No one comforted him.

Zulu also realized this was on a different level of difficulty.

"I'll dismiss the Salamander."

With their stamina already significantly depleted, it would be tough for Kangnan and Gaold to handle this alone.

But Gaold pushed Kangnan back and advanced towards the Grim Reapers alone.

"Stay here. You'll get caught up in it."

"Are you crazy? What are you planning to do? And I'm not weak enough to get caught up in the middle of a fight!"

"I know. But..."

Gaold, leaning as if about to collapse, looked back at Kangnan.

"This time, it's different."

Kangnan's face turned to stone as she sensed something.

Gaold's hair, starting from his forehead, was rapidly turning white.

Chapter 432:

Heaven's 5th Heaven, Matei

Giants born from the Elixir of Life return to Matei after understanding the law through a sacred ceremony in Jotunheim.

As "keepers of the law," their main duty is to maintain order in Heaven and fight external forces.

Accompanied by Uriel, Kariel looked up at the massive castle towering over Matei.

At the appearance of the noble archangel, the 15-meter-tall giants who had reached the 4th stage of the Elixir of Life bowed their heads.

They bent as much as they could, but their enormous bodies couldn't even come close to Kariel's 2.3-meter height.

Kariel scoffed and passed through the main gate.

He was already in a foul mood.

The Giant King Ymir had entered hibernation after destroying the "parts," which was understandable.

But at the very least, the legion commander, Girshin, should have come out barefoot to bow his head.

"These insolent...!"

Heaven's current state was a mess.

Since Shirone, the light of Sector 73, broke the Elixir of Life, the citizens began to doubt Anke Ra, and everything changed.

Kariel wanted to fly to purgatory immediately to crush the rebels, but he couldn't protect himself without Uriel.

'Just wait. I'll end this soon.'

If the structure of the Great World War was perfect, Matei's castle was all about grandeur.

It was built purely from natural materials, stacked by the giants' strength, without any influence from Mecha, Nor, or

Kergos.

The massive pillars, which only giants could transport, revealed their mindset.

As they passed through the hall and climbed the central staircase, which was as high as a wall, they were greeted by giant guards standing tall up to the ceiling.

A force capable of destroying the world.

But they never moved until Ymir gave the order.

"What brings the great archangel to such a humble place?"

A 3-meter-tall giant, possibly the smallest here, approached, dragging a black cloak.

Though not large, his steps were heavy enough to make the floor tremble.

Girshin, the legion commander who had reached the 7th stage of the Elixir of Life.

If Ymir was like a natural rock, Girshin was like a sword tempered a thousand times.

"Legion Commander Girshin greets the archangel."

Girshin immediately knelt on one knee and bowed his head before Kariel.

Even a warrior capable of splitting mountains with a single blow couldn't surpass the law's established hierarchy.

Kariel found this displeasing.

As one of the eight archangels, he had nothing to boast about in terms of strength, so he felt he could see through the minds of those who worshipped power.

"Does reaching the 7th stage make you sluggish? You only moved 100 meters while I came all this way."

Girshin raised one corner of his mouth.

"Giants don't have the infinite spirit of angels. If you had informed me in advance, I would have come to greet you."

Girshin's response was certainly different from Ymir's.

A giant with some cunning knew that nitpicking over past events was a waste of time.

"I came here personally to give you an order."

"An order?"

"Lead the giant army and crush the rebels immediately."

Girshin's brow furrowed.

He had heard rumors of a conflict among the angels in the Great World War.

But acting independently, ignoring Anke Ra's command to forbid angelic activities, was another form of rebellion.

"But Anke Ra..."

"That's why I came to you. Anke Ra's command only applies to angels. Moreover, the rebels are currently exterminating giants born from the Elixir of Life on sight. The giant army has enough justification to move."

Girshin realized he was in a situation with no way out.

But he had no intention of moving the giant army.

They only followed Ymir.

They obeyed Anke Ra's orders because Ymir did.

"I'm sorry. I cannot comply."

Kariel's face twisted wickedly.

The sound of the guards swallowing echoed like a drum, but Girshin's expression remained calm.

"You're refusing? Are you serious?"

Kariel opened the "Great Code," the sacred relic of the Angel of Creation.

It was a blatant threat, implying that the next words would be a matter of life and death.

"You know this, Kariel. The giant army cannot move without King Ymir's command..."

"Argh! Insolent giant!"

Kariel closed the Great Code and struck Girshin's head with it madly.

Screaming and flailing his arms, Kariel's face showed no angelic dignity.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Even with his weakened strength, an archangel's attack was not to be ignored.

Blood trickled down Girshin's forehead as he endured silently.

Uriel, who had been watching with folded arms, thought about the sudden change in the angel he had known from the beginning.

'This isn't like you, Kariel.'

Kariel, the Archangel of Creation, was smashing Girshin's head with the Great Code.

'Do you hate humans that much? No, you must know by now. Your current state is like...'

Uriel snapped out of his thoughts.

A terrifying killing intent was rising from the guards lined up on either side.

Though their rank was lower, giants' pride in their species was as strong as any angel's.

Seeing their legion commander subjected to humiliating violence in front of his subordinates naturally filled them with rage.

Thud.

One giant stepped forward, ready to intervene, but Uriel's halo expanded.

Realizing this, Girshin broke his calm expression and glared fiercely at his subordinate.

"Ugh..."

Overwhelmed by the legion commander's gaze, the guard sheepishly returned to his place.

Each strike of the Great Code cracked the floor and caused the ground to sink, but Girshin took no action.

'Now is not the time to act. Even if we all attack, we can't defeat Uriel, the Angel of Destruction.'

Known for his combat power, Uriel was said to rival Ikael at her peak.

'We must endure until our king, Ymir, arrives.'

Kariel, his hand trembling with fatigue, stepped back.

His halo dimmed, and he felt as if his thought circuits were melting.

"Huff, huff."

Girshin said nothing, merely watching his blood drip onto the floor.

To Kariel, who craved creation, it was a repulsive sight.

"Let's go!"

As Kariel turned and walked away, Uriel finally showed some emotion as he looked at the giants.

The presence of an angel, as defined by the law, made the giant's legs tremble like mountains.

"Restrain yourself, Girshin. You are not Ymir."

Uriel's body, with wings of light, rose beautifully and transformed into a flash, flying towards the main gate.

Gaold's face, now white-haired, was twisted into a terrifying grimace.

A powerful air gun spread shrapnel, piercing all forty Grim Reapers.

Suddenly, the ice vibrated, and the Grim Reapers' forms turned to smoke like raging flames.

Woooooo!

As their hoods disappeared, hideous skulls were revealed.

The ghostly wails, maddening to hear, caused the guide to clutch his head and collapse.

"Aaah!"

He should never have come here.

Black Elixir and a luxurious life were mere fantasies to those who heard this sound.

"Please... stop!"

At the guide's desperate cry, Kangnan sprang into action.

Her expression was still grim, her mind paralyzed by memories of an incident ten years ago.

'That fool!'

A Grim Reaper, emitting a vivid purple aura, swung its scythe wildly at Kangnan.

Each slash surpassed the speed of sound.

Though composed of "matter," they operated on principles entirely different from the physical world.

Dodging with agile movements like a bouncing ping-pong ball, Kangnan kicked the black horse's leg.

The thick leg snapped, and black smoke billowed like flames.

Screeeeee!

The horse's scream pierced her eardrums, but Kangnan gritted her teeth and endured.

She looked around for Gaold, but the rampaging black horses made the world feel shrouded in darkness.

"I can't take this anymore!"

As Kangnan pushed herself up, her stockings tore at the thighs, creating a pattern of holes.

Just as the Grim Reaper's scythe came down vertically, her body shot up 20 meters into the air, as if escaping gravity.

She saw Gaold buried among the Grim Reapers. Each time their forms turned to smoke, a metallic flash slashed at Gaold's location.

The magic protecting Gaold was a simple air shield, something even beginners could cast, but no attack penetrated the sphere he had created.

"Ugh!"

As Gaold's face twisted like a demon's, Kangnan's heart sank.

"No!"

The air pressure around Gaold suddenly spiked.

Pain Sensation 100,000x - Air Pressing.

Rumble!

The ice shook like an earthquake, and the Grim Reapers' smoky forms were flattened like rubber.

"Huff!"

Gaold puffed his cheeks and exhaled deeply.

During this time, the crushed Grim Reapers slithered away and reformed at a distance.

In Niflheim, even the slightest chance to escape allowed for instant regeneration.

Kangnan, now within the Grim Reapers' encirclement, quickened her pace and shouted angrily.

"Are you crazy? Do you have a death wish...?"

Gaold's eyes, glazed over, faintly smiled.

Seeing his face, Kangnan couldn't bring herself to scold him.

The fact that he could smile was absurd.

"Don't come closer. You almost ruined everything."

"Don't talk nonsense. If you die here, everything ends. Don't you know that?"

"Don't worry. It's different from ten years ago."

Kangnan couldn't hold back and shouted, "It was dangerous just now!"

Self-replicating mutation.

Gaold's condition, diagnosed on the Day of Judgment for the 20.

A creature's functional limits are determined by its environment.

Humans burn because they are born in a place without fire, while Salamanders don't burn because they are born in fire. If the environment sets the limits, Gaold had severed the link between himself and the environment through extreme suffering.

Without an environment, there are no limits to the mutations occurring at the stem cell level.

Even in daily life, Gaold's nervous system was at least a thousand times more sensitive than a normal person's, making his world entirely different from that of other humans.

It was literally hell.

Simply breathing felt like inhaling glass shards, and a breeze felt like his skin was being torn apart.

But in return, he gained unparalleled endurance and unimaginable mental strength.

"You know it's extremely dangerous beyond 10,000 times pain sensation! Your hair is already turning white, and you're losing your memory. If you push it further, you'll really die!"

"I won't die."

Gaold turned coldly and walked away.

"Pain alone won't kill me."

Kangnan clenched her fists and bit her lip.

But eventually, she bowed her head and slowly stepped back, resigned.

She knew the truth.

It wasn't the pain that would kill him; it was the inability to die that caused the suffering.

She didn't know why Gaold was cursed like this.

One thing was certain: only he could instantly annihilate forty of the strongest spirits.

Gaold's glazed eyes gradually returned to normal.

With a smile back on his face, he taunted the Grim Reapers with a flick of his finger.

"Come on, you pathetic skulls."

Wooooooo!

Though they couldn't understand his words, all the Grim Reapers expanded their auras as if on cue.

The screams of countless souls echoed through the snowy landscape, and the purple aura swirled like a vortex.

The vortex transformed into thousands of skulls, all aimed at Gaold.

The sky darkened, the sun obscured, and thousands of skull bombs rained down on Gaold from the darkness.

"Heh. Heh heh heh!"

Gaold gritted his teeth and lowered his stance.

With a wicked grin, his pupils disappeared.

Pain Sensation 100,000x - Air Pressing.

Boom!

Everything crashed down, and the massive darkness was crushed with a deafening roar.

Chapter 433:

The ice of Niflheim trembled.

From a high vantage point, one could see the rhythmic movement of ice molecules spreading out like concentric circles on the surface of water.

Gaold stood at the center of that wave.

He stood there, and nothing else existed.

"Ughhh!"

Gaold gritted his teeth like a demon.

The veins that ran up his neck to his temples throbbed like annelids.

The guide, kneeling on the ice, stared blankly at the spot where the Grim Reaper had vanished.

"This, this is impossible."

At that moment, the ice couldn't withstand the wave and cracked, spreading in all directions.

A single crack zigzagged and curved towards the guide as if it had a mind of its own.

"Eek!"

As Kangnan grabbed the guide's collar and threw himself, a 4-meter-wide crack quickly passed through the spot where they had been.

The crack stopped, and the area was completely devastated.

It was Gaold's presence etched into Niflheim.

Whoooosh!

The Grim Reapers attached to the ice began to ascend, vomiting out the life stream they had accumulated throughout their lives.

"Huh? Huh?"

The guide's eyes shook with shock.

It was the first time in his life that he had seen the spectacle of ten or so Black Elixirs simultaneously soaring into the sky. Just seeing it made his heart feel like it would stop from the intense pleasure, and his consciousness became hazy.

Seeing the Elixirs rolling on the ice with a clattering sound, he ran like a madman, flailing his limbs.

He didn't even notice his palms being cut by the cold ice as he frantically scooped up the Elixirs.

Holding them in both hands, they felt quite heavy.

They felt quite heavy, but it was as if he was holding the heaviest thing in the world.

'If all of this were mine...'

The guide's eyes were filled with desire.

But the moment he saw Kangnan's cold face, he snapped back to reality. Words he hadn't even thought of spilled out of his mouth.

"N-no, I mean, half of it is mine..."

"Pick them up. All of them."

Confirming that the guide was hurriedly picking up the Elixirs, Kangnan turned to Gaold.

'What a fool!'

Pain sensitivity increased by 100,000 times.

An experience unimaginable for ordinary humans. But for Gaold, it was just a common reality.

After all, pain is just a special signal transmitted to the brain by the nervous system.

It's just that.

A human who has to live a lifetime enduring extreme pain that he can't escape or reject.

That was the curse placed upon Gaold.

"Are you okay?"

Gaold, who had regained his former self, wrinkled his nose like a mischievous child.

"Heh, what if I'm not okay? Will you give me a kiss?"

Kangnan snorted.

If such a thing were to happen, how would Gaold take it?

The pain of his sensitive sensory organs? The greatest thrill of his life?

"Sorry, but I don't have such hobbies with old men."

"What's this? When we first met, you were so shy you couldn't even lift your head."

That never happened.

But Kangnan reminisced with a wistful expression, recalling that time.

'Did I... really?'

Seeing his bold demeanor, she felt relieved, but the more she did, the more the flames of anger rose within her.

Her already sensitive senses soared a hundredfold in an instant.

Even an ordinary human would scream and roll on the ground if the pain of a cut finger was amplified a hundredfold.

But Gaold was a human with a basic amplification of a thousand times.

It was obvious that he couldn't possibly be okay, even without looking inside.

"Listen carefully. When you increase the pain sensitivity in the future..."

"Now I see a path. Let's go quickly."

Gaold interrupted Kangnan and headed towards the guide.

The guide, facing reality, was completely terrified.

At the beginning of the journey, he had thought he could make a good profit.

But seeing the power that had instantly devastated 40 Grim Reapers, he finally realized where he had been dragged to.

It wasn't a matter of betrayal or backstabbing.

In Niflheim, where there was nothing but wraiths, Gaold was like a god holding his life in his hands.

'He'll kill me. He definitely will.'

The condition of taking 50% of the harvested Elixirs.

In terms of ratio, it was high, but in reality, if he obtained two Black Elixirs, he would get one of them.

At least, that had been the calculation so far.

But as the number of Elixirs increased, the 50% ratio began to feel overwhelmingly significant.

From the perspective of having to pay an enormous amount of Elixirs, there was no reason to keep him alive.

"How many have you collected?"

The guide flinched and opened his pouch.

"Uh, let's see..."

Including the 24 he already had, he had obtained 14 more this time.

Thinking that he had a total of 38 Black Elixirs in his possession, he felt like he was dreaming.

"As you can see, there are 38."

The guide hastily added.

"I, I don't have such great greed... So please..."

"Go back."

"What?"

The guide, who was about to beg for his life, looked up in confusion.

"Leave half and take the other half. From now on, it's beyond your level to guide."

If 40 Grim Reapers appeared simultaneously, there was no guarantee that more enemies wouldn't appear as they got closer to Hell.

It was in the guide's best interest to give up his greed at this point, and there was also the calculation that the proportion of 50% of the large amount of Black Elixirs would continue to grow.

'Go back? Is he serious?'

He was probably serious.

If they wanted to, the strong ones who could kill him at any time had no reason to backstab him.

As the most feared problem was resolved, the guide's mind began to spin quickly.

He would return to the mainland with 19 Black Elixirs.

He could live doing whatever he wanted for 38 years.

'No. Rather, let's use about 10 Black Elixirs to establish a community. Then I can live a life of leisure, commanding subordinates.'

But his heart didn't move as easily as his mind.

If he established a community with 10 Black Elixirs, he would be left with 9.

But the human heart is so peculiar that it felt like he had lost 10 of the 19 he originally should have had.

Moreover, the number 9 felt somewhat insufficient to keep for a lifetime.

'Damn it, if I had just one more, I could give up without regret. What's 9 compared to 10? It's annoying.'

The feeling of having the whole world with just one Black Elixir had already disappeared in the face of greater greed that came after achieving it.

'Yeah, just one more. It's just as dangerous to go back now anyway.'

He had memorized the paths with low Grim Reaper occurrence rates, but the data wasn't 100% accurate.

"How can you break the contract suddenly? I can't back down like this. I'll guide you to Hell."

Gaold stared intently at the guide.

It was a desperate look, as if he was grasping his last chance in life.

"Heh, yeah, a man should go big. Lead the way."

"Absolutely."

The guide quickly stood up and took the lead.

Patting the bundle full of Black Elixirs, he recalled his parents' words from his childhood.

Strike while the iron is hot.

"Get up. It's over."

Shirone and Plu removed the goggle-like devices and got up from the bed.

They had been isolated for seven days, undergoing daily physical examinations, and today was the day for brainwave measurements.

"In my opinion, there are no particular abnormalities. We will lift the isolation measures as of now, so you can return to your quarters."

Shirone sighed in relief.

The situation of being under strict surveillance, unable to even go to the bathroom properly, was finally over.

Shirone and Plu walked side by side towards their quarters. Shirone, who had been careful with his words until now, spoke up.

"Don't you think it's strange? Why are they so persistent in examining us?"

They had suspected from the beginning that the infection by an unidentified pathogen was just an excuse.

Even so, they hadn't shown it because they didn't want to lose the opportunity to counterattack while their hands and feet were tied.

"I wonder about that too. The promised integration of the rebels is also dragging on. Now that the isolation is lifted, there should be some changes. I'll look into it bit by bit while you focus on external activities."

"Is that really necessary? It might have nothing to do with us."

Shirone's team's primary task was to integrate the rebels. Even if there was a secret involving Raesis, if it was an internal matter of the command, there was no need to stir up trouble unnecessarily.

'No, there's definitely something.'

Although they had been completely cut off from external information during the isolation, the small changes she noticed while going to and from the examination room made her uneasy.

'I need to investigate without getting caught.'

A Norin passing by in the corridor glanced at Plu.

Raycis entered the secret laboratory of the Second Command.

As usual, she was wearing a red cloak, and her expression was highly excited.

"You sent the requested item to Yameng?"

"Yes. It's being disassembled now. Please confirm."

On the experiment table, a chunk of meat with thick fat attached to grayish skin smeared with mucus was laid out. On the opposite table was the part corresponding to the creature's face.

Raycis shuddered as she confirmed the elongated nose like a drooping snake and the sharp teeth embedded in the circular mouth.

'It's certain. I've finally obtained it.'

The Bakyo species Isermon.

A creature classified as Rank A in the Purgatory Hunt, possessing the ability of Antithesis, which binds all targets except its own kind.

In other words, it was a law that rejected laws, presumably a unique mechanism of the home planet where Isermon resided.

"We underestimated Yameng. To think they brought back an Isermon so quickly."

"I was surprised too. Even the elite soldiers of the command were completely helpless against the Antithesis."

"They must have found a hunting method or hired an exceptional individual. Maybe both. Anyway, let's begin.

Activate the Fuzix Machine."

Raycis turned to a device with a 4-meter-high glass tube at its center, with large glass spheres placed at each vertex of an octagon.

The Biological Mixer Fuzix Machine.

A device that creates new organisms with complex traits by mixing two or more species.

'I must enhance the Isermon somehow.'

The Bakyo species Isermon already possessed excellent abilities, but combining various traits that could utilize the

advantages of Antithesis would make it an even more perfect weapon.

'An Antithesis powerful enough to suppress the actions of angels. If it can't achieve that level of power, it won't be useful in the war.'

After perfectly dissolving various Elixirs, adding water, and then adding Black Elixir, a black, elongated liquid flowed down the hose into the container.

It was 'Plasm,' used in the Elixir of Legends.

Plasm, which only reacts to organic matter, dissolves organisms and absorbs their genetic information.

When mixed with other Plasm and subjected to electrical stimulation, a new organism with the combined characteristics of the two entities is born, a mechanism identical to that of the Elixir of Legends.

However, since it doesn't use only humans as materials, the more types involved, the higher the failure rate.

The reason Raycis had her eye on Shirone was to control the variables of interspecies combination with the powerful mind of a Nephilim.

"Commander, the Plasm of Isermon is ready."

Raycis's eyes gleamed with joy as she saw the Plasm sloshing in the container.

The stench was so bad it made her want to plug her nose, but to her, it was the sweetest scent in the world.

'I will evolve endlessly.'

It was the water of life that would lead her to the position of a god.

Chapter 434:

One of the eight slots in the Fuzix Machine was filled with Isermon's plasm.

Seven slots remained.

Raycis planned to combine the traits of other creatures—Voltum, Grabber, and Liston—to enhance Isermon's Antithesis ability.

Voltum, which looked like a mosquito magnified a thousand times, had a unique trait called "blood adhesion," which created a bond with the target whose blood it sucked. This was presumed to be a psychological mechanism evolved to suppress hemolytic reactions, and in the lab, it was used as a tool to subjugate organisms.

"I will pour Voltum's plasm."

With the addition of the plasm of Grabber, which had levitation abilities, and Liston, which increased the activity of organisms, the four types of plasm were ready to be mixed in the Fuzix Machine.

Unlike the Elixir of Legends, to draw out unique traits, a main type had to be set. Currently, Isermon was the main type, and the three sub-types would enhance the Antithesis.

"Let's begin."

When the button was pressed, the four types of plasm, which had filled the glass spheres halfway, were all sucked into the central glass tube.

As electricity flowed through the vacuum, the liquid began to bubble and boil.

"Ohhh!"

It was always a marvelous sight.

Researchers who once felt repulsed by inhumane biological experiments couldn't help but feel the joy of creation at this moment.

As electricity discharged in the glass tube, a blinding white light spread out.

While everyone turned their heads, only Raycis watched the changes inside the glass tube with ecstatic eyes.

As the new species was born, the glass tube split into four parts and fell to the floor.

"It's a success!"

The researchers were amazed by the completely different form of the creature, which deviated from their predictions. It was a giant eyeball with a diameter of one meter, covered by a thin epidermis that acted as an eyelid. From the area where the optic nerve would connect, long, dark red tentacles extended and fluttered like a tail.

Biological Weapon - Akamai (Prototype)

A cold shiver ran through the laboratory.

Could this even be called a living creature?

Looking at something organic that had no relation to environmental factors and only served human purposes, it felt like there was nothing that shouldn't happen in the world.

"Haaa."

Raycis's red lips parted slightly.

What a beautiful form!

God had given creatures the potential for infinite change.

"Ugh!"

Raycis's face, which had reached ecstasy, twisted in pain. Her red cloak fluttered as something inside it moved roughly.

A biologist approached with a frightened expression.

"Commander, you need to make the contract now..."

Raycis quickly corrected her expression.

The sensitive stimulus felt like her intestines were spilling out, but fortunately, it soon reabsorbed into her body.

"Right, I almost forgot."

Raycis cut her wrist with her nail and offered her blood to Akamai.

Thud. Thud.

As the blood was absorbed into the epidermis, Akamai's large iris contracted tightly.

Then, as if showing affection, it blinked its eyelid a few times while looking at Raycis.

The blood adhesion of Voltum was complete.

"Is it a success?"

"Of course. It has become my loyal subordinate. Now, let's get serious. Bring Shirone's clone."

When the researcher contacted the underground, the floor split open, and Shirone's clone came up on an elevator.

Currently, Shirone's brain was empty.

He was like an animal with only basic desires such as eating and reproducing.

When the researchers shone a light through a device disguised as a brainwave scanner, the pattern of memories was transmitted through the retina.

It was similar to the method jointly researched by Arcane and Alpheas.

However, the failure factor was the same, and the clone with the implanted memories would soon suffer a mental collapse and die.

Of course, this was not a problem for Raycis.

Once Shirone absorbed all the traits of the creature, she only needed to swallow him.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A rampage was unleashed from the bed where Shirone lay.

Researchers were swept away by the shockwave, and Shirone's body sprang out like a wild beast, seeking a safe zone.

'What is this? Where am I?'

Shirone moved his eyes left and right to gather information.

Laboratory. Raycis. Strange devices he had never seen before.

He still didn't understand the situation.

He had been lying next to Plu, undergoing a brainwave test, and suddenly he was here.

"What have you done to me?"

"Hmm, who knows?"

Raycis tapped her lips.

"I'd like to explain, but I won't. I have a feeling I'll have to say the same thing quite a lot in the future."

When Raycis snapped her fingers, Akamai, floating in the air, activated Antithesis.

"Ugh!"

As if the air had turned into solid iron, Shirone couldn't move a finger.

"This, this is...?"

"Sorry. To use the Nephilim's abilities, you need to have intelligence. It will be over soon."

The Immortal Function began with insight, something a clone with only animalistic instincts could never achieve.

Shirone ground his teeth.

For someone who said sorry, her eyes were far too gleeful.

Shirone, captured by Akamai, was moved into the glass sphere of the Fuzix Machine.

Unlike corpse experiments, it was necessary to confirm mental changes, so it was effective to put him in whole and dissolve him directly.

"Commander, what should we combine him with?"

A Nephilim with 100% affinity could easily embrace the traits of any creature.

And to verify this, it was best to use a creature with advanced functions.

"Combine him with Akamai."

"What? But..."

"It doesn't matter. This is just a prototype. It's the perfect opportunity to experiment with Shirone's clone."

The biologist obediently followed the order.

When the preparations were complete, plasm filled the glass sphere containing Akamai and Shirone.

The black liquid passed Shirone's neck and covered his face. After a while, the level dropped, flowing into the central glass tube, and Shirone's form disappeared without a trace. The researchers watched the glass tube emitting a powerful light with tense faces.

Main type Shirone, sub-type Akamai.

The two creatures melted perfectly and were reborn as a single organism.

"What, what is this?"

The glass tube separated, and Shirone stood there with his eyes closed.

Even though the focus was on function combination, mixing two creatures with different forms should have resulted in some changes.

In the unexpected situation, the biologist adjusted his glasses and examined closely.

"This is just a human. Could the experiment have failed...?"

At that moment, Shirone's eyes snapped open, and a light burst from his differently colored left pupil.

"Aaagh!"

The researchers screamed in twisted postures as their bones contorted.

Raycis, who had quickly distanced herself, wore a dazed expression.

'He only absorbed the functions?'

The changes that occurred in the plasm state were known only to those who had experienced it firsthand.

And Raycis was one of the few humans who had experienced the plasm state the most in the world.

When immersed in plasm, thought ceased. But within the liquid, integrated as a single substance, countless signals flowed.

'It's the Ultima System.'

Therefore, if one could control the unified signals in the plasm state, it was entirely possible to selectively acquire functions and forms.

'This is dangerous.'

No, it was beautiful.

The ability to possess the traits of any creature in existence.

It was literally reaching the realm of gods.

"What have you done to me?"

Raycis's lips trembled.

Shirone had even controlled his consciousness. Akamai had completely submitted.

'I want that ability even more.'

Raycis spread her arms and approached.

"Shirone, let's become one."

Shirone activated Antithesis. The overwhelming binding force stopped Raycis in her tracks.

But she instead savored the thrilling pleasure.

It was a power on a different level from Isermon's Antithesis.

Shirone mercilessly fired a Photon Cannon.

Raycis was slammed into the wall, and the ceiling shook.

With each flash of light, the dust cloud grew larger where she was.

"Haa. Haa."

Shirone's eyes, filled with shock, wavered as he panted and glared ahead.

Emerging through the smoke, half of Raycis's face had transformed into a grotesque monster.

Her eyes slanted upward as if to tear her forehead apart, her pupils were as thin as a snake's, and her lips, which stretched across her lower face, were filled with three times as many teeth as a human's.

"Kii, Shi...rone..."

Shirone, horrified by the sound like nails on a chalkboard, opened his palm to summon Armand.

'Diamond Armor... huh?'

It was then that Shirone realized he didn't have Cubrick.

No one could have taken it. He hadn't lost consciousness from the moment he underwent the brainwave test until now.

'Could it be, I'm not myself?'

Shirone quickly retraced the steps.

He hadn't lost consciousness, but the process from the brainwave test to here was completely cut off.

The liquid he saw in the Elixir of Legends. The changes from being dissolved in it to being reconstituted by the Ultima System.

'I've been cloned!'

Not being the original, he didn't have Cubrick. And Raycis was using this for some experiment.

'A biological combination similar to the Elixir of Legends.'

A strong insight flashed in Shirone's mind.

'Armand, if it's Armand...!'

Something swung from behind Raycis's cloak, and Shirone's neck was severed from his body.

"Whooo."

Raycis quickly retracted the part of her body that had extended.

It was a grotesque form, but the researchers didn't show any reaction.

The moment they assigned meaning to the physical form, they would end up like Shirone, with their heads flying off.

"From now on, double the production of clones. We must find out what changes have occurred."

The biologist spoke with concern.

"It's too dangerous. Shirone controlled the biological combination. If, by any chance, the commander is devoured in reverse, no creature will be able to stop Shirone."

Raycis didn't like that possibility either.

"For now, only experiment with Type A. The clones before Babel. As long as the Ultima System isn't involved, it should be fine."

"But the original is Type B. The danger remains unchanged."

"It doesn't matter. If I set myself as the main type, even the Ultima System won't be able to exert its power."

According to mythology, the Elixir of Legends was created to destroy the Ultima System, but since it was unclear how much of that was true, it couldn't be guaranteed.

Raycis gave a bitter smile.

"Even if I get devoured."

"What?"

"If Shirone and I become one, it will be something that is neither me nor Shirone. That will suffice. As long as I can become one with Shirone, I won't stop the experiment.

Proceed as planned."

Even if the main type was set, the resulting creature would be entirely new.

Therefore, defining herself with specific characteristics wasn't important to her.

But the biologist still felt uneasy.

Raycis thought it was enough to just mix, but the Ultima System perfectly controlled biological combinations.

And the researchers didn't know how that was possible.

'Yes, Shirone can't overturn the situation. At best, he can only become one with the commander.'

Despite this, the biologist's vast experience in the lab made him uneasy.

Being optimistic that nothing would happen meant that the information they had was limited to a narrow scope.

Variables always lie in the unknown beyond perception. And when something starts moving in that darkness...

'Is it really okay to proceed like this?'

A bio-shock will occur.

Chapter 435:

Raycis returned to her room and unclipped her cloak. The red fabric flowed from her shoulders like liquid and fell to the floor.

Through the torn clothes, a burn-like wound from the Photon Cannon was visible.

Annoyed, Raycis threw off her clothes and stood in front of the mirror, looking at herself.

What a grotesque body.

It didn't fit any standard of beauty or goodness; no one could look at it and call it beautiful. It was a monstrosity hanging below her neck.

Withered, twisted, and dull in color, this body was the result of desperate efforts.

"Disgusting..."

Raycis was a divine being, an exceptional one at that.

But she was listed as a subject for the Elixir of Legends because she approached the forbidden Genesis Mythology in Heaven.

She melted, becoming a dreadful giant.

Even showing fear before the sacred magic was a sin, but she knew.

The Elixir of Legends was the most horrific tragedy a human could experience, a fate worse than death.

Like some other subjects of the Elixir of Legends, Raycis secretly obtained the stimulant Epines.

No one knew if it worked, but for someone at a dead end, it was a precious item.

Raycis clutched the Epines like a lifeline and prayed fervently on a bench in the square.

'Please let my mind inhabit the giant's body.'

"Do you want to live?"

A voice responded as if answering her call.

It was a middle-aged man with a kind face and a stylish beard.

She had heard rumors that some people analyzed and approached the Elixir of Legends academically, even when everyone believed it to be sacred magic.

The man was one of those people, and he gave Raycis a secret technique.

"If you want to live, eat this before entering the Elixir of Legends."

What he handed her was a small vial the size of a finger.

"What's in it?"

"A fly."

"Ugh!"

Raycis grimaced, but the man spoke firmly, revealing a crucial fact.

"Swallow it alive. Then you will live."

The thought alone was repulsive, but with her life on the line, Raycis couldn't throw the vial away.

Thus, the Elixir of Legends was performed, and Raycis, thinking she had nothing to lose, opened the vial.

With the vial's mouth in her mouth, she tilted her head back, and something hard moved around in her mouth.

Nausea surged.

Suppressing the revulsion, Raycis swallowed the fly.

A Kergoin came in, stripped her clothes, and led her to one of the eight glass spheres set up next to the giant's statue.

'Please, please save me.'

As the plasm filled up, Raycis, terrified, couldn't even open her eyes and focused on praying.

The black liquid filled the glass sphere, and her body dissolved, mixing with others.

In the place where countless consciousnesses merged, she felt as if she were in a dream.

It wasn't the death she had expected, but it was a hopeless state where she couldn't feel alive either.

The giants born in each area gathered and began their march towards Jotunheim.

As a new day dawned, one of the many giants screamed and knelt.

The giant's body soon separated into flesh and bones, melting like porridge.

In the place reeking of a foul smell, only Raycis remained, kneeling and curling up.

"Gasp! Gasp!"

The first thing she realized upon regaining consciousness was the joy of life.

The man was right.

Swallowing the fly had indeed brought her back from the giant's body.

'Yes! I survived!'

Thud! Thud!

As giants much taller than her shook the ground, she set aside her joy and ran.

She felt much lighter than before, and it felt good.

But she was thirsty.

Thinking that, she surprisingly sensed a spring several kilometers away.

'My senses are sharp. Could it be the giant's ability?'

Even after running and running, she didn't feel out of breath.

Finally, when she reached the spring and bent over to quench her thirst,

"Aaahhh!"

Raycis's scream of despair filled the forest as she saw her reflection in the water.

More than the shock of seeing a terrible face, the cruel part was that it was her own face.

Raycis screamed like a mad person.

"No! Give me back my body! Put it back the way it was!"

The man who had taught Raycis the secret technique slowly approached, parting the forest.

The one who had turned her into a monster.

But now, after many years, she suddenly remembered.

Perhaps that man was the only one who had fully accepted her appearance.

"Why, why did you turn me into this? Why did you do this to me?"

"Because you wanted to live. What could be more important to a living being?"

"Don't talk nonsense! Could you live with such a hideous appearance?"

The man sneered.

"Whatever you become, you are still you. By destroying your form, you have gained infinite forms."

Raycis stared blankly at the man as he walked away.

In the horrifying reality that she could never return to her original form, she had one question.

"Who are you?"

The man stopped and turned his head slightly. He said his name was Satan.

Raycis looked at her reflection in the mirror with cold eyes.

How many humans had she combined with to at least resemble a human form?

Norins, Kergons, Mechans, and even those from the land.

It had given Raycis immense power and vast knowledge, but it also brought severe side effects.

Even a slight lapse in concentration caused abnormal changes in her body, and it moved against her will.

"Shirone. My savior."

Shirone's mind could contain all traits, and she planned to mix it with the most beautiful being in the world.

An angel's body.

Second Heaven, Lakia. The city of fallen angels.

A place where angels who neglected their duties and wielded the law as they pleased were imprisoned since ancient times.

Kariel looked down from the sky above Lakia.

The fallen angels, still indulgent, wasted their near-eternal lifespans in laziness.

"Hmph, useless beings."

Denied support from the giant commander Girshin, Kariel turned her gaze to Lakia.

Even fallen angels had to follow Anke Ra's message, but she was confident there was one exception.

Ikasa, the angel of desire.

A fallen angel who had captured Amy and her group and offered them to Jebul during the incident in Zone 73.

At that time, Ikasa had hoped to be reinstated as a regular angel for bringing three virgins to Kariel, but with Shirone's departure to his original world, she faced even harsher punishment.

While many fallen angels idly killed time, she alone was endlessly turning a giant iron ball in a deep underground pit 300 meters below.

"Haa. Haa."

The 20-meter diameter iron ball rumbled and rolled at a terrifying speed.

In the afterimages of the rotation, Ikasa's pitiful face, blindfolded and gagged, occasionally flashed by.

Kariel watched the trajectory until the iron ball completed a rotation, then reached out towards the returning iron ball.

A holy light flashed and spread into a ring, stopping the massive iron ball with a bang.

"Huuu, huuu."

Ikasa, bound to the iron ball with her back arched like a bow, drooled and groaned in pain.

When Kariel cut the leather blindfold, Ikasa, looking exhausted, lifted her eyelids and immediately shed tears.

"Hawihi... Hahwi..."

Finally, she had come.

Even if everyone else ignored her, she believed the archangel Kariel would recognize her.

"Ikasa, there is something you must do."

Ikasa nodded repeatedly.

"Shirone has returned. It must be a joyous occasion for you."

"Haaai! Haaai!"

A cry of hatred burst from Ikasa's throat.

Nodding in satisfaction, Kariel dismantled her restraints.

Ikasa, who had collapsed to the floor, lifted her head and showed respect without even taking time to tend to herself.

"Please use me, Archangel of Creation."

"Kill Shirone. Make it as painful as possible. Bring his anguished face before me. There is an angel who must see it."

"That would be my pleasure. But I, a lowly being, do not know where the detestable Shirone is."

Kariel opened the Great Law Book and checked the status of Jebul's central processing unit.

The map representing all of Purgatory was being consumed by a red light. The speed was astonishing, considering the area.

"Babel is scanning the skies of Purgatory. By the full moon, all coordinates will be explored. When that time comes, you will have your chance."

Ikasa's eyes gleamed.

Indeed, the full moon was approaching.

The time when the law of yin energy was strongest in Purgatory. Also, the time when she, a fallen angel, would be at her most powerful.

'Wait for me, Shirone.'

Ikasa's eyes swirled with the desire for revenge.

Past midnight, Plu's door opened.

Being a Zoner, she didn't need to show her face.

After confirming the hallway was empty, she closed the door and moved swiftly into the depths of the command center.

For reconnaissance, one was better than two, and the risk was lower if caught.

With Shirone dispatched to a subordinate unit of the Second Command for rebel integration, now was the perfect time.

'No matter how I think about it, something's off. What are they up to?'

Moving along the wall, Plu stopped and quickly turned back. Two guards were walking down the hallway, chatting.

"Ugh, I'm sleepy. Don't they ever sleep? What are we supposed to eat at this hour?"

"Heh, let them eat all they want. They're just livestock anyway."

The guard carrying a tray full of food suddenly stopped as they turned the corner.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I saw something move over there."

The guard handed the tray to his companion and walked towards the shadow cast by the wall.

There was nothing suspicious.

"Strange. I'm sure I saw something."

"Must have been the torchlight."

"Ah, maybe."

Plu, who had descended from the ceiling, landed silently where the guards had passed. A drone flew in and attached itself to her shoulder.

'Phew, that was close. Controlling this thing is harder than I thought.'

But thanks to that, she overheard the guards' conversation.

'They're delivering food at this hour? To whom?'

Plu decided to follow them.

When the guards reached a wall, one of them touched a torch holder, and the wall opened, revealing a secret staircase.

After waiting for about a minute, Plu opened the wall in the same way and descended the stairs.

A much larger space than expected unfolded before her.

Corridors connected in all directions, and there were dozens of laboratories.

'Where are the guards?'

Expanding her Spirit Zone to its maximum, she applied an algorithm to collect sounds, and their voices reached her.

"They eat like pigs. Well, where else would you find a happier life than yours? I'm jealous."

"Heh, if you're jealous, why don't you join them?"

There was a brief silence.

"Ugh, no thanks. It's disgusting. They're literally livestock."

Once the guards left, Plu, who had been watching from a distance, approached the iron door.

It could only be opened from the outside.

'What could be in here?'

Plu pressed her ear to the door and listened, her brow furrowing.

She had a feeling she shouldn't look inside, but she couldn't resist opening Pandora's box.

"This, this is...!"

Plu's eyes widened in shock as she peered through the gap in the unlocked iron door.

Chapter 436:

"Diamond Armor."

When Shirone muttered and held Armand vertically, the blade quickly covered his body, transforming into an organic robe.

The Nor soldiers cheered.

Currently, Shirone was touring the subordinate units of the Second Command, integrating the rebels.

Today was the last day of the schedule, and someone had expressed curiosity about Shirone's sword, leading to a demonstration.

In Heaven, swords were exclusive to the Kergoin, so it was natural for the Nor mages to be puzzled.

'Phew, this feels like a performance.'

The name "Light of Zone 73" was indeed impressive.

At least, the reactions from those on the field were much better than those from the command center.

Focus point shape change. Unified signal system detected.

'Huh?'

Shirone narrowed his eyes at the unfamiliar information.

Focusing on the voice, Armand conveyed new information.

Scanning user's brain. Synchronization. Suggesting integration into a single mental system.

'Ah, the Ultima System.'

When a special change occurred in Shirone's mind, Armand's functions also adapted accordingly.

Armand's computational ability relied on Shirone's brain, so it was natural.

¶Name: Ultima System. If integrated into a single mental system, replication, transfer, and contract termination are impossible.

¶Awaiting user's decision.

'Impossible to terminate? Is that even possible?'

It meant that the contract-based object would change to a bound object, making it a perfect personalized weapon.

In a way, it wasn't bad since it meant completely owning Armand, but it required careful consideration.

'Once it becomes mine, I can't sell it.'

Worth 4 billion gold.

Although Shirone wouldn't sell Armand for any price, removing the possibility of transfer was unappealing.

'What if I integrate it?'

¶Unpredictable.

Armand couldn't find an answer to that.

Armand couldn't analyze what Shirone didn't know.

'Well, I have no choice.'

Shirone decided to share the Ultima System with Armand.

If they exchanged information through a single signal, he could feel Armand almost like his own skin.

Future variables couldn't compare to the current urgency.

In Heaven, there was no tomorrow, and it was rational to cling desperately to any chance of enhancement.

¶Constructing integrated mental system.

"Ugh!"

Shirone threw his head back and opened his chest wide.

Armand's organic material tightened rapidly, pressing against his body.

Dozens of tendrils protruded like spikes, moving erratically before wrapping around him like a whirlwind, changing

shape.

"Wow!"

The rebels watched Shirone with wide eyes.

The ragged robe had transformed into a simple and neat appearance.

Ultima Version (Function Installed: 0)

The ideal mage's robe in Shirone's mind was realized, controlling the organic material down to the last detail.

'Incredible. This is just like my body.'

Previously, they shared information through the brain, but now signals were exchanged in the realm of instinct, bypassing reason.

It was true integration.

Shirone's complex mind was simplified into signals and embedded into the object.

Thus, Shirone and Armand achieved perfect compatibility, connecting down to the nerve endings.

'Two Ultima Systems...'

Another entity capable of unifying and controlling all signals, whether biological or non-biological, had been created.

Shirone didn't know how this would work in the future, but one thing was clear.

"Nephilim, lead us to victory!"

"Until the Light of Zone 73 becomes the Light of Heaven!"

It was a perfect propaganda performance.

Jinma Species Galtomic.

A powerful S-rank species in Purgatory Hunt, it was a gel-type collapse form with no clear shape but could mimic a powerful entity by absorbing the law of evil when attacked. Currently, Galtomic, which was driving Armin's group into a corner, had a form mixed with a human upper body and a horse's lower body.

Every time it swung its fists, black flashes surged, and rocks the size of cliffs shattered.

An S-rank creature meant it was powerful enough to have no natural enemies within a 100-kilometer radius.

Galtomic's true value lay in its immense magical power, which absorbed the law and converted it into its strength.
"Krau! Krau!"

With a unique shout, Galtomic flew up and swung its fists like a storm, devastating the ground as if the distance had disappeared.

Armin's group, scattered in different directions, began their counterattack.

As a blizzard set in and the temperature dropped rapidly, Kuan and Etella surrounded Galtomic.

Their sword and fist movements blended rhythmically, and in the tempo of their seamless attacks, Galtomic was struck and fell to the ground.

When Armin cast a slow spell, Galtomic, trapped in slowed time, was hit by Shina's Glacier Bombing.

As the glacier, weighing nearly 60 tons, fell, the ground shook.

In the rising mist of cold air, Galtomic, using its last strength, charged at Shina like a centaur's spear.

At the same time, Kuan, flying in an S-shaped trajectory, appeared in front of Shina and spun.

As the air vibrations from Kuan's high-speed rotation at 10 revolutions per second pierced the eardrums, his sword split Galtomic in two.

Whooosh.

Kuan's rotational force, combined with Shina's ice magic, made her nose feel cold.

Shina had over ten defensive methods for surprise attacks learned through experience, study, and training, but in this case, she should naturally express her gratitude.

"Thank you. You saved me."

"I was just waiting for a chance to counter."

Shina watched Kuan's back as he walked away.

She had come to understand more about his cold personality since arriving in Heaven.

It was fundamentally different from her own coldness.

'I wish I could have a deep conversation with him at least once...'

Shina was gradually becoming interested in Kuan, but Kuan was sinking deeper into self-loathing.

'Damn it! I've completely lost it.'

There was no technical mistake in cutting Galtomic. The problem was his pounding heart.

The thought that flashed through his mind in that moment was that he wanted Shina to recognize his worth.

It was an unfamiliar feeling for Kuan.

He had never wanted to understand someone's thoughts before.

But now it was different.

He wanted to know how his actions affected her.

'Get a grip. This is a battlefield, and my grave.'

"Shina, are you okay?"

Shina, who had been watching Kuan, quickly changed her expression and turned coldly when Armin approached.

"I'm not a child. I don't need that kind of concern anymore."

Etella mentally organized the emotional arrows pointing in different directions among the three.

Their teamwork wasn't great, but perhaps this situation was creating a strange synergy.

'Anyway, Armin is amazing.'

Galtomic was a powerful creature that could rival any monster on the continent.

Of course, they hadn't faced weak enemies in their hunts so far.

Despite that, their success was largely due to Armin's contributions, in addition to the effective cooperation of the four.

Crowd control provided critical opportunities in battle. And Armin, currently in the party, was probably the world's most powerful crowd control mage.

'If we keep this up, we can start the factory soon.'

As Etella predicted, when they arrived at Yameng, the guards murmured.

Initially skeptical, they were now impressed by the daily capture of A-rank or higher creatures, making the hatred from the first day when Armin beheaded a comrade seem insignificant.

Frankwine, who confirmed Galtomic's corpse, smiled.

"Impressive. I didn't expect you to find a strategy so quickly."

They hadn't thought of a strategy. Armin's crowd control was just that effective.

"Just curious, what Elixirs did you get?"

Etella answered honestly.

"Twelve White Elixirs, thirty-two intermediate Green Elixirs, and fifteen advanced Red Elixirs."

"That's amazing. You've worked hard. How about taking a break? With that, you could live lavishly on the mainland."

Armin replied.

"We're not here for leisure. Once we capture the three monsters—Kuzan the Devourer, Olkir the Photosynthetic Beast, and Ringer the Armored Mineral Species—the contract will be fulfilled."

"Of course. After that, I'll give you an entire factory building. You can make whatever you want."

"We'll be going now."

As Armin's group left the room, Meatgun, who was standing next to Frankwine, spoke.

"Isn't this too fast? Even the top hunters on the mainland take days to capture Galtomic."

"It's probably because of that blind man. The others are good, but that blind man is different. In terms of hunting rank, he's at least Triple S."

Frankwine's instincts were animalistic in both business and hunting.

"That's why I'm concerned. They could become a hindrance to Yameng in the future."

"Don't worry. A merchant doesn't choose customers. Just send the corpse to Raycis. And don't forget our conditions." Meatgun seemed to have more to say but eventually left the room.

Frankwine, now alone, grinned wickedly.

'Heh heh heh, it turns out to be a huge game. Right, Raycis?'

The Fuzix Machine flashed.

As the glass tube disassembled, Shirone, who had undergone biological fusion, emerged.

The Type A clone without the Ultima System was noticeably different from Type B.

While it could still accept certain traits without issue, there was a significant level of collapse, and the form was uncontrollable.

Shirone's body was covered in red scales, and smoke rose from one of his eyes.

It was the day of the comprehensive fusion of the corpses received from Yameng. It was also the first day the traits of the Jinma species Galtomic were added.

"Commander, look at these numbers! They're incredible!"

The readings on the self-developed magic power measurement device were rising exponentially.

The magic amplification of Galtomic was combining with Shirone's incarnation, emitting immense magical power.

As Shirone's magic exploded, Akamai trembled.

Even the enhanced Akamai, stronger than the prototype, was struggling to contain the power, with the Antithesis nearly breaking.

Boom!

Photon Cannons fired in all directions of the laboratory, and Raycis watched Shirone with awe.

"Ah, Shirone. You are so beautiful."

It was a demonic love.

A love with no consideration for the other, driven solely by possessiveness.

"Commander! We need to take action! At this rate, the laboratory will be destroyed...!"

Even as the researcher's cries were drowned out by the roar of the Photon Cannons, Raycis didn't move.

As the fusion progressed, Shirone was approaching the ultimate creature.

And all the information obtained here would be used to further enhance Akamai.

"Hehehe. Shall we start with the first kiss?"

Raycis's skin began to redden, her waist bending and stretching, with vertebrae protruding along her back. Her thighs hardened like rocks, and her feet elongated into reptilian claws.

"Raaaargh!"

Smoke mixed with fire and lightning spewed from her mouth, engulfing Shirone.

"Ughhh!"

Shirone's body melted but regenerated instantly.

It was the trait of the infinite cell proliferator, Kenser.

"Kekekeke! Magnificent, Shirone! Don't you think so too?"

Shirone used the ability of the invisible ghost, Hororos, to disappear.

Without the Ultima System, the various monster instincts were acting directly within his mind.

"He's gone! Find him quickly!"

As the researcher reached the scanning device, a sudden burst of mucus melted him.

"Aaaargh!"

It was the ability of the acidic poison king, Muusa.

A direct hit could even dissolve ultra-strong metals formulated with Elixir.

As the mucus hit the floor, toxic gas rose.

The researchers clutched their throats in agony, and Raycis blocked the mucus with her broad hand.

Her hand melted away, revealing bone, which then crumbled like spent matchsticks.

"Ugh!"

Raycis had reached her limit.

If the fight continued, the laboratory would indeed be devastated, as the researcher had warned.

"Release Akamai!"

The researcher, on the verge of fainting, crawled to the scanning device and pressed the button.

As Shirone's coordinates were confirmed, three additional Akamai entered from the side walls, activating Antithesis.

The eyes of the Akamai, desperately holding Shirone, were bloodshot.

Yet Shirone continued to move slowly.

Raycis's monstrous face twisted in disbelief.

'Even four Akamai can barely hold him.'

It wasn't just because new traits had been added.

Shirone's potential was exploding through biological feedback.

Armin's group faced their first major challenge since receiving the list from Yameng.

The creature that troubled them was the double S-rank armored mineral species, Ringer.

Standing 2 meters tall and weighing 14 tons.

It had four legs but could roll into a ball and move quickly when needed.

Its speed made it difficult to hunt, but the most serious issue was its carapace covered in grayish-white metal.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Wherever Ringer charged, a path was created, and everything, trees and rocks alike, was shattered.

Armin cast two types of slow spells on either side of Ringer.

As the time zones overlapped, Ringer bounced at incredible speed.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

From the perspective of time relativity, even rebar should have been torn apart, but Ringer just rolled around like a ball hit by a wild spin.

"Phew, this is really..."

Armin had never encountered such a creature before.

If there were different types of strength, Ringer was undoubtedly the most durable creature.

Etella, seeing that Kuan's sword couldn't even scratch it, made a decision.

"At this rate, we won't catch it even if the sun sets. Let's cooperate."

Shina spoke up.

"Brother, slow Ringer down. I'll cast Absolute Zero."

Etella agreed with the plan.

"Then I'll finish it off."

After a brief discussion, they moved into action.

As Ringer slowed under the slow spell, Shina hit it with Absolute Zero, the strongest ice magic.

"Kiaaaa!"

At the same time, Etella charged.

Thousand-Handed Avalokiteshvara Thunder Strike.

Etella's body created afterimages as she delivered rapid uppercuts.

As the final double palm strike landed, 68,000 interference waves were generated.

Boom!

Ringer's curled body shook heavily.

Five seconds later, a fine crack appeared on the carapace, and Ringer's body burst open.

"Phew."

Etella sat down, exhausted.

The most astonishing thing was that even the ultimate technique of Yin-Yang Wave Fist could only create a crack in its durability.

"That was insane. Definitely double S-rank."

Armin agreed.

"If it weren't for the wave-type attacks, it would have been much harder to deal with. I'm curious, though. Why is Yameng collecting the corpses of such creatures?"

Clap. Clap. Clap.

At that moment, applause came from the forest.

Feeling a sense of foreboding, Armin's group turned their heads, and silence followed.

It was Cage Team B from the mainland. At the forefront was Deputy Leader Horkin, approaching with his hands behind his back.

"Fancy meeting you here."

Etella smiled broadly.

"Indeed. We must be fated."

"I heard rumors of your impressive skills. By the way... where is Gaold now?"

"Huh?"

Horkin smiled as Etella feigned ignorance without changing her expression.

"Sorry for not recognizing you earlier. Bishop Romi Etella of the Karsis Monastery."

As if on cue, a murderous aura emanated from everyone.

Chapter 437:

Silence.

In the profound silence, various emotions intersected. Etella quickly composed herself and watched Horkin intently.

It was clear he had already figured it out, and in such a situation, the question of "how?" was irrelevant.

"Your acting was superb. If you were with Gaold, you would have known that we are the Cage team dispatched by the association."

Long ago, when Horkin wasn't yet gray-haired, there were rumors of a genius monk emerging from the Karsis Monastery, known across the continent.

While Karsis was renowned, it wasn't common knowledge unless one had a particular interest in the pursuit of enlightenment.

At that time, Horkin had visited the monastery's main temple for a mission and saw a young girl undergoing a succession ceremony.

'I almost missed it. Good thing I haven't gone senile yet.'
It was Romi Etella.

A teacher at Alpheas Magic School.

What were the odds of meeting a teacher from the school Gaold graduated from in Heaven?

Even if it was somewhat realistic, Horkin's intuition told him that Etella was the clue they had been searching for.

"Feigning ignorance was a desperate measure of the terrified? If so, a wise choice. Now, you've stalled long enough. Tell us where Gaold is."

The twenty mages standing behind Horkin exuded a menacing aura, overwhelming Armin's group.

'Dangerous.'

As a mage, Armin judged that a frontal confrontation was difficult.

His team members were incredibly strong, but so were the opponents, each one a Romi Etella or an Olifer Shina.

While everyone watched each other's reactions, only the swordsman Kuan stepped forward.

As a sword demon who had roamed the battlefield, he knew how formidable the opponents were, but a swordsman fights only to cut down the enemy before him.

"Do nothing. If you move even a little..."

Horkin asked back.

"If we move?"

Kuan's body flew and spun in an instant.

But Horkin was already gone from the spot where the strong wind blew.

'Like a rat...'

Ten meters away from Kuan, a man with a weasel-like face was holding Horkin by the scruff of his neck.

It was Stikro, a fifth-grade certified mage specializing in sonar magic.

In a liquid medium, the propagation speed of sonar waves is about 1,500 meters per second.

With a transmission speed exceeding Mach 4, clumsy attacks wouldn't work from the start.

Stikro spoke in a dry voice.

"You're impatient."

"Do nothing means..."

Kuan flew again.

"Don't even wag your tongue."

With Kuan's preemptive strike, all twenty-five people moved simultaneously.

As each displayed their unique movements, Aroela of the Flame targeted Shina.

"Fire Extreme!"

Dense flames dripped from above Aroela's head, forming a torrent of fire that engulfed Shina.

Shina clenched her fists and glared.

With the sound of shattering glass, the air froze.

Thousands of thorny flowers bloomed, and the flames of Fire Extreme rapidly cooled as if plunged into water.

'They're not an easy team.'

Having tested each other's capabilities, the two teams entered a full-scale battle.

As Cage Team B fully engaged, the balance of power shifted rapidly.

Team leader Rose's fragrance magic disrupted mental strength, and Mami's word magic made the ground ripple like waves.

With all kinds of buffs, shields, healing magic, and the combat prowess of battle mages rivaling that of swordsmen, Armin's group was pushed back two kilometers from their original position.

Water Dragon.

A massive stream of water cast by Monglang of the water element swept in all directions.

Absolute Zero.

Even while dealing with Aroela, Shina cast her ultimate magic, freezing the water dragon in its form.

Etella ran over it.

Yin-Yang Wave Fist - Single Wall.

From a distance of ten centimeters, her fist struck

Monglang's side dozens of times.

The heavy liquid defended the impact points, but even that shattered into pieces under the force of the waves.

'At least one must be taken down!'

As she stepped forward to deliver the finishing blow, a bald man grabbed Etella's shoulder and rolled her to the ground.

Pinned down tightly, the veins on the bald man's temples bulged thicker.

'Ugh! What strength...'

Indeed, she was a bishop of the Karsis Monastery.

As Etella tried to get up, the bald man pressed her down with his head and bit her neck.

It was the ability "Survival of the Fittest" of the battle mage Benifis, who strengthened himself by consuming the opponent's flesh.

As Benifis chewed Etella's flesh and lifted his head in ecstasy, Etella raised her upper body and headbutted him. Crack!

Benifis's nose broke.

But thanks to various buffs and healing magic, his grip didn't loosen.

"Now!"

At Benifis's shout, Tarban extended his palms.

It was the vacuum bombardment Kaiser Blast that had shattered the demon Belkir.

Boom!

The wide area was devastated, rendering Armin's group's formation meaningless.

As the thick smoke swayed in the wind, Cage Team B, having finished the battle, walked proudly.

"What the...?"

There was nothing.

There should have been corpses, but all that remained was a plain swept clean as if filleted.

Tarban looked back and asked.

"Who's going to explain this?"

Aroela spoke up.

"It was magic. The blue-haired woman was fighting me up close. There's no reason she would suddenly disappear."

Monoros, an unlocker and irregular, gave his opinion.

"If there's a possibility, it's the man with the bandages. He was an unlocker like me."

Saint Moriak spoke.

"What kind of unlocker magic is this? Could there be a magic in the world that makes twenty-one Cage-level experts disappear without anyone noticing?"

Mami, the word magician with snake-like eyebrows, frowned.

"They didn't disappear. It feels more like... a disconnection? Something definitely broke."

"Stop."

Everyone looked at Horkin.

"Are you talking about stop magic?"

"Yes. I heard there's one in the Ivory Tower. A blind mage who uses stop."

"You can't be sure. Just because he's blind doesn't mean he's the Ivory Tower mage, and there's no guarantee what we experienced was stop."

Horkin's words were simple, but metal mage Roche's rebuttal was reasonable.

There were few blind people in the world, and even fewer Ivory Tower mages.

But there was only one mage in the world who used stop magic.

"Besides, why would the Ivory Tower help Gaold? Gaold fundamentally doesn't trust people. He's kept secrets for twenty years."

Saint Moriak spoke.

"I don't think that's necessarily true. He doesn't avoid people; he just doesn't need to mingle. To save Miro, he can ally with anyone and fight anyone."

"Enough."

Rose stopped the discussion.

"There are too many assumptions. Anyway, the opponent has stop magic or a crowd control technique of similar power. And... they are probably helping Gaold."

Even Rose had to use conjecture.

It was a natural reaction to the significantly increased difficulty of the mission.

Horkin summarized.

"The team leader means this: as long as the blind man is around, it's impossible to eliminate Gaold."

Tarban asked.

"So, we just sit and do nothing?"

Communication mage Wagan interjected.

"Wait. There's a question we need to address first. If they are really helping Gaold, what were they doing here?"

Horkin stroked his beard.

"Hmm, that's true. There's no need to split the team in such a dangerous place. We're also moving very inefficiently."

"Exactly. And Gaold is obsessed with Miro. If he's splitting the team, it must be a significant matter. If we trace what they were doing here, we'll eventually find Gaold."

"Indeed... that's true."

Rose rested her chin in thought.

It was the most logical solution given the current situation.

"Alright. We're returning to the mainland. If we can find out who Etella is working for, we can locate Gaold. But combat is the last resort. The man with the bandages must not interfere."

No one objected.

They weren't the type to follow orders blindly, but they agreed it was best to keep the man with the bandages as far away as possible.

"Let's go."

Twenty-one flashes soared into the sky.

It was early evening when Shirone returned from touring the subordinate units of the Second Rebel Command.

But the moonlight was so bright that it was easy to see around.

"Wow."

Shirone looked up at the night sky, mesmerized.

A moon ten times larger than the one he saw on his original planet hung in the sky.

It was the day of the full moon, known to be when the law of yin was strongest in Purgatory.

Perhaps that's why the cries of beasts in the forest near the command center didn't cease.

"Foreboding. It feels like something is about to happen."

"Don't worry. Angels don't patrol these days. As long as it's not an angel, we can handle it with group magic."

Shirone greeted as he arrived at the command center.

"I'll go in first. Thank you for your hard work."

"Oh, you too, team leader."

Back in his quarters, Shirone collapsed onto the bed, exhausted.

He wanted to lie down, but before he could do anything, the door burst open.

"Shirone!"

Plu entered.

"Oh? Senior?"

Plu, who had briefly checked outside, closed the door and sat close to Shirone.

"I have something to tell you."

"Why do you look like that? Did something happen while I was away?"

"I investigated the underground facilities while you were gone. And there, I found..."

Plu grimaced.

Another headache surged. Even now, thinking about the scene made her grit her teeth.

Shirone, who had never seen her shaken by anything, finally grew curious.

"What happened?"

"Human cloning."

"What? Cloning?"

"I found out why Raycis collected our blood. We need to act immediately..."

Wooooooong!

At that moment, an ominous sound wave shook the command center.

Shirone's heart sank.

He couldn't remember, but he had definitely heard that sound before.

'No way...!'

When Shirone and Plu stepped into the corridor, the command center was already in a state of panic.

It was the vibration of an angel, a sound everyone in Purgatory had heard countless times.

"Hmm, so this is the place?"

Outside the command center, bathed in the light of the full moon, Ikasa floated in the air, her feet together and her chin resting on her hand.

It looked like a mere cliff from the outside, but Babel's search results wouldn't lie.

No matter how well hidden in nature, human dwellings always had a distinct artificial feel.

Babel, having scanned all of Purgatory, identified this place as the most likely location of the rebel command center.

The probability was a staggering 83.3785%.

"Come out, you insignificant humans! Show yourselves!"

Ikasa shouted, but the cliff remained eerily silent.

Of course, she knew they were watching from inside.

"Hehe, so that's how you want to play?"

Ikasa spread her arms wide, absorbing the moon's energy.

A fallen angel's presence was far less than that of a regular angel, but on the night of the full moon, she could easily sweep away humans.

"Haaaa."

With a cold groan, her halo expanded into a ring, and her unique intelligence began to embed itself into the halo.

As the computation completed, numerous dark magic circles spun like gears in the halo.

'I desire.'

Infinite Judicial Halo - Valhalla Action.

Thud! With a dull sound, a fist-shaped imprint appeared on the cliff.

That was the signal. The entire cliff began to be pounded relentlessly, as if a storm of punches was raining down.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The world seemed filled with sound.

Dust rose from the cliff, and the mountain range disappeared.

Norins hiding inside the command center clutched their heads and ran outside as the cliff crumbled from the ground up with a rumble.

'Look at these insignificant beings...'

Ikasa's eyes were glazed.

In the scene where her desire was being realized, a dry pleasure crawled up her spine.

Chapter

438:

Rebel First Command.

Commander Crude stood outside, gazing at the full moon. The memories of losing a unit every time that moon rose stirred a sense of vengeance within him.

'I will win, for the sake of my fallen comrades.'

"You seem to have a lot on your mind."

Crude turned his head.

Seeing Sein approaching, he looked back at the moon and spoke.

"Not really. There's been no report of angel patrols yet. It looks like we'll get through this full moon night safely."

Sein's gaze followed Crude's.

"Indeed."

Crude turned around and suddenly remembered something.

"How's your research going? Is it finished?"

Sein had been tirelessly observing planetary movements day and night to obtain the precise coordinates needed for divine retribution.

"To some extent."

"Astronomy, huh. What does that mean to a mere creature under the sky, especially during a war?"

"It means nothing yet. But soon, it will be the only thing that matters."

Crude raised an eyebrow.

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"I can't reveal it yet. Anyway, it's not bad for the rebels. At least we won't be hit unilaterally."

'A kind of self-destructive tactic?'

Crude could only guess that much from Sein's research on planetary movements.

Even Gaold and Sein had found Shirone's method absurd when they first heard it.

"Salute!"

Kanya, who had come out of the barracks, saluted.

Next to her stood Lena and her father, Witcher.

Having left his deceased wife and come to Heaven, Witcher was now a military officer teaching maintenance skills to Mecha members.

Crude returned the salute.

"So, what brings you here at this hour?"

"Well, it's just that... it felt a bit stuffy in the barracks."

While it wasn't encouraged for soldiers to take nighttime walks with their families, Crude didn't reprimand them.

Every rebel had the right to feel uneasy on the night of the full moon.

Kanya asked Sein.

"Any news from Shirone?"

"Gardrak visited a few days ago. It seems things are progressing smoothly."

The story of Shirone overturning the Second Command with his Nephilim abilities was a secret known only to a few in the First Command.

Like the other officers, Crude was displeased with Shirone being incorporated into the Second Command but didn't show it.

What truly mattered wasn't that.

"Now that I think about it, I don't believe Raycis genuinely accepted Shirone."

Sein turned around.

"There was conflict, right? A difference in views on biological experiments?"

"On the surface. But you don't abandon half your forces over biological experiments during a war. What she did back then didn't make sense to the Mecha or the Nor."

"She crossed the line? What did she do?"

Crude's face twisted cruelly.

"Raycis..."

Screeeeech!

A tearing sound from the sky swallowed Crude's words.

"Ugh!"

Crude grimaced as the sound waves struck his skull directly, and Kanya and Lena clutched their heads and fell to the ground.

Witcher, pressing his two daughters down with his arms, looked up at the sky where electricity flowed in a dome shape.

"It's ultrasound. It collided with the magnetic field."

Sein, with an emotionless face, raised his head, his iron wheel eyes gleaming.

Something reflecting the moonlight was flying in rapidly from the other side of the sky.

\$earch algorithm terminated.

Babel turned off its search function and transmitted the results of its scan of all of Purgatory to Cariel via wireless communication.

Magnetic field detected. Target probability 92.7%.

All she could see was a dense forest, but the program detected that 0.3% of the overall landscape had the same structure as other landscapes.

An artificiality as if light had been copied and pasted. It was the rebel command center.

\$witching to attack mode.

Babel's eyes glowed red.

\$trike approved.

As Babel, flying straight with a sonic boom, entered the command center's airspace, Sein cast mass teleportation. Boom!

A massive crater with a diameter of 30 meters formed at the point where Babel struck the ground.

Emergency sirens blared throughout the command center, and lights began to turn on in the barracks.

"Damn it! What the hell is this?"

As Crude gritted his teeth and moved towards the crater, a tall woman clad in black walked up the crater with clanking footsteps.

Kanya's voice trembled.

"I-it's a machine?"

Eliminate the subjects.

A short command was issued to Babel's program.

Infinite Judicial Halo - Valhalla Action.

Ikasa's unique ability, Valhalla Action, has the power to reverse cause and effect.

When she desires something, the result is realized on the condition that she repays the time and effort required for the action later.

For example, if she desires to go from point A to point B, Ikasa can reach the distance that would normally take 10 seconds instantly.

However, if there are obstacles between points A and B, she must also pay the cost of bypassing or destroying them.

If it takes 5 minutes to destroy the obstacles to reach point B, Ikasa, upon arrival, will be incapacitated for 5 minutes and 10 seconds to repay the cause.

Calculating this causality is the core of Valhalla.

When you press a balloon with your finger, the opposite side bulges. When she sets the desire A, the result B automatically follows.

Therefore, desires beyond Valhalla's calculation ability cannot be realized in reality.

For example, if she desires to enter a rock, it is impossible because there is no space inside the rock.

However, if there is any space inside the rock, even if Ikasa is unaware of it, it will be realized.

This means that Valhalla's computational system is influenced by the Akashic Records, encompassing the whole rather than mathematical truth.

Similarly, desiring to cut off a human's head cannot be realized.

Valhalla cannot calculate a human's future actions, thus preventing the "action."

'I just need to eliminate Shirone.'

Ikasa's eyes, looking down at the rising dust cloud, were filled with cold murderous intent.

To her, who wished to be reinstated as a regular angel, Shirone was a personal revenge target and a necessary kill. She had identified Cariel's suspicious movements in Heaven, but as someone who had committed two serious crimes, Ikasa saw Shirone as her only lifeline.

'They're coming back.'

22 minutes and 42 seconds.

The time it would have taken Ikasa to bring down a mountain with just her fists under normal causality.

Even considering the full moon, it was a celestial feat.

During those 22 minutes and 42 seconds, the rebels on the ground struggled to clear the dust cloud.

They used the group magic Mahagart to blow away the dust, but the smoke from the collapsed mountain didn't dissipate easily.

Shirone and Plu, who had barely escaped before the cliff collapsed, stayed alert without moving.

Plu, who had taken out Phoenix from Cubrick and swung it around, applied the Dawkins algorithm to her Spirit Zone.

A function that automatically reacts when an object penetrates the Spirit Zone at a certain speed.

Following this, Shirone also took out Armand and activated Diamond Armor, and Plu immediately noticed the change. The ragged robe was now clean, and the artificial brain emitted a blue light similar to the Ultima System seen in Babel.

"What happened?"

"I integrated with the Ultima System."

Plu thought about what that meant but quickly dismissed it. That wasn't the most important thing right now.

"Does it have any combat functions?"

He wasn't sure yet.

He hadn't fought with Armand since integrating with the Ultima System.

"I don't know. It changed from sharing thoughts to integration, but how it will work..."

Finally, the dust cloud cleared, and the bright full moon illuminated the ground again.

The revealed landscape was devastating.

The command center cliff was shattered beyond recognition, and Norin corpses were scattered under the debris.

The result of a single surprise attack.

Such abilities that defied common sense were why the subjects feared angels.

"That is...!"

Shirone's eyes widened as he saw the angel floating in the sky. At the same time, unwanted memories resurfaced.

'Ikasa.'

The fallen angel who had made him helplessly watch Amy, Tess, and Arin being kidnapped.

Her movements were so fast that even now, the thought of it sent chills down his spine.

"Shirone, what's wrong?"

"I've seen her before. She's a fallen angel."

Though better than a regular angel, it didn't make him feel any more likely to survive.

Ikasa crossed her arms and descended.

The ominous vibration made the rebels' hearts pound.

"Hehehe, you should have come out when I called. Did you think you could defy me, you worthless creatures?"

As her words, transmitted through the angel's power, reached their minds, one of the surviving officers shouted.

"Focus on me! We'll counter with group magic!"

The officer prepared the grand magic Aruope.

A magic known for its supreme cutting power, utilizing the essence of air.

Ikasa, watching the dozens of mages connecting their Spirit Force to the officer, sneered.

"Fools."

Ikasa moved.

It was like the movement of an electron existing as a probability in space.

Appearing like an afterimage before the dozens of soldiers, she knocked them all down with her delicate wrist.

From lower-ranking mages to officers, the pyramid of ranks collapsed quickly, and the coup ended in an instant.

"Ugh!"

As Ikasa's fist deeply embedded in the officer's abdomen, blood spurted from his mouth.

"Kekeke! Killing humans is always fun!"

Ikasa was strong.

For someone who could bring down a mountain in 20 minutes, a few dozen human mages were no match, even without Valhalla Action.

But she adhered to the concept of origin, and Shirone clearly understood the function of her halo.

'Equivalent exchange of cause and effect.'

The Ultima System accurately sensed this.

As Ikasa, having wiped out the rebels, turned her head, electricity ran down Shirone and Plu's spines.

Her eyes were filled with the desire for revenge.

"Shirone, do you know how long I've waited for this day? You ran away like a rat back then."

"I haven't forgotten what you did."

"Oh, really? You couldn't even move a finger and let the women be taken. Do you think it will be any different now?"

Shirone furrowed his brow and lowered his stance.

"Be careful, Senior. That angel's halo seems to reverse cause and effect."

Plu, having seen the rebels fall, quickly understood.

"Let's go on the defensive. We need to buy time. There are probably rebels surviving underground."

Ikasa puffed her cheeks and laughed.

"Puh! Do you know why I hate humans? Because they are fundamentally delusional. They think they can achieve something, even though they're just human1, human2."

Ikasa charged, swinging her fist in front of Plu, causing the air to vibrate.

Plu's upper body bent like a willow branch against the gale-like attack.

It was the effect of the Dawkins algorithm, but her spine felt like it was about to snap, and she couldn't hold out for long.

"Ugh!"

As Ikasa's left hook landed, Plu's body flew like a laundry line.

She had used Phoenix to cushion the impact by striking her hand, but the shock was still unbearable.

"Hahaha! Struggling is a bug's characteristic!"

As Ikasa laughed and turned, a massive tentacle appeared before her eyes, grabbing her face.

The tentacle arched into the sky and then slammed Ikasa vertically into the ground.

Boom!

Lying spread-eagle, Ikasa blinked, her face still buried in the tentacle.

'What is this?'

The impact was so strong it made her head throb. The speed was so fast she couldn't even react. It was a strange and heavy blow that couldn't be excused as a mere surprise attack.

"You insolent...!"

Ikasa cut the tentacle with a knife-hand and sprang towards Shirone.

"Watch out!"

Plu shouted, but the scene that followed was unexpected. Shirone dodged all of Ikasa's brutal attacks by swaying his upper body.

'I can see it! I can see Ikasa's attacks!'

If Armand's role was to maximize the user's physical abilities, now Armand itself was Shirone's body.

Everything he could do in Diamond Armor was as easy as moving his fingers.

"A mere human? I am an angel's body!"

Ikasa threw a powerful punch.

As her fist reached its target, Shirone's body spun quickly. A heavy tentacle shot out from his robe, striking Ikasa's cheek and sending her flying horizontally.

Boom!

Ikasa crashed into the rubble of the collapsed command center, and Plu stared in disbelief.

In front of Shirone, who was glaring at Ikasa, Ataraxia was gathering at a speed several times faster than before.

Chapter 439:

With the activation of the external artificial brain, the time for Ataraxia to reach its target more than doubled.

Shirone cast his spell, glaring at the colorful halo aimed forward.

'Photon Cannon!'

As the photons compressed and trembled as if about to explode, Ikasa appeared before him.

"Ugh!"

When Ikasa's fist struck his solar plexus, Armand intercepted it, but couldn't completely nullify the shockwave.

The equivalent exchange of cause and effect.

Valhalla Action merely reversed the order of potential and kinetic energy, but for beings living within time, it was an insurmountable challenge.

"How dare you!"

Ikasa unleashed a rapid series of strikes with Valhalla Action, and Shirone deflected the punches with Armand's tendrils. When the Photon Cannon fired at close range, Ikasa evaded the attack with dazzling weaving.

In the battle where martial arts and magic unfolded simultaneously, the surviving rebels couldn't even think of intervening.

"Is that a Nephilim...?"

A human was fighting on equal terms with an angel.

Even a fallen angel was an untouchable existence to the subjects.

For the subjects, it was as shocking as having their ancient beliefs shattered.

'This can't be happening!'

Ikasa couldn't accept the reality either.

A human who couldn't even move a finger a year ago was now fighting on par with him, empowered by the full moon.
"A mere insect!"

Ikasa desired to unleash the most powerful series of strikes on Shirone's coordinates.

As the afterimages of her fists formed a massive wall and surged like a tidal wave, Shirone took an extreme defensive stance.

The Ultima System activated immediately, twisting Armand's robe along his body and thickening it.

Fist-shaped patterns appeared all over Shirone's body.

"Ugh!"

The attack was so fast that he couldn't think of anything but defense.

But once this storm passed, the opportunity would come to Shirone.

'There's a limit to what can be done against a sentient target. If I can endure this, I can win.'

As Shirone endured the bone-crushing pain from Ikasa's final blow, he concentrated Ataraxia.

His prediction was accurate; Ikasa, having accelerated the outcome with Valhalla Action, couldn't move at all.

'But it's delicate. Can I time it right?'

He had no choice.

Considering the angel's durability, this was the only way to end it in one strike.

Ikasa, watching the rapidly accumulating Ataraxia, felt like a condemned prisoner on the gallows.

'That's dangerous.'

The signature move of Archangel Ikael.

If completed before Valhalla Action returned, its mere existence could induce panic.

'Six seconds. Five seconds. Four seconds.'

Ataraxia versus Valhalla Action.

It was a battle to see who could complete their angelic power first.

"Now. Deploy it."

As Raycis, monitoring the situation from the underground command center, gave the order, all creatures on the surface simultaneously froze.

'What?'

Sensing the abnormal change, Plu struggled to lift her gaze. A giant eyeball moved its pupil rapidly, observing everyone on the ground.

Biological Weapon - True Akamai.

The power of Antithesis reversed the law.

As if bound by ropes, Ikasa screamed, narrowing her shoulders.

"Ugh! This...!"

Even for a fallen angel, the restraint was absurd.

It was a law so strong that even a regular angel would struggle to withstand it, let alone one empowered by the full moon.

If Ikasa was restrained to this extent, the others were no exception.

The only one showing any movement was Shirone, enduring with the power of mental transcendence.

'What immense power. What is this?'

Even Armand's robe couldn't withstand it, disassembling back into the magic sword.

A researcher monitoring the situation from the underground spoke.

"All targets restrained. What should we do?"

Raycis discarded the mask of the commander.

With the materials gathered, the rebels on the surface were nothing more than useless meat.

"Imprison the soldiers and bring Shirone, Plu, and the angel. Prepare the Elixir of Life immediately."

Raycis's aides moved at once.

While the Elixir of Life was being prepared, Shirone, Plu, and Ikasa were locked in a cell.

Of course, the real prison was the True Akamai outside the cell, watching them.

Plu gritted her teeth.

She hadn't expected Raycis to act while an angel was invading.

'No, it's that powerful a weapon. How did she create it?'

The three who had been fiercely fighting moments ago were now cellmates.

Plu glared fiercely at Ikasa, who had ruined everything.

But emotions weren't important in this situation, so she first conveyed the necessary information to Shirone.

Raycis was enhancing herself through biological experiments, using Shirone as a material, and utilizing Garas and Plu for mass-producing clones.

Even for the angel Ikasa, it was an absurd story.

"A lowly species trying to become a god? Foolish."

It was hypocritical coming from the angel of desire, but Shirone didn't think much differently.

'They were cloning me? What on earth...'

At that moment, the door opened, and Raycis entered.

"Hehe, an angel and a Nephilim. What a delicious pantry. Or should I say luxurious?"

Ikasa bared her teeth and shouted.

"Do you know what happens to those who defy an angel, you insignificant human?"

"Kekeke! Who's the one caught by a creature made by this insignificant human?"

Raycis fearlessly entered the cell and sat in front of Ikasa, stroking her chin.

A ferocious fallen angel, but her body was undoubtedly that of an angel.

"You're truly beautiful. Perfect to become my body."

Shirone asked.

"Why are you doing this? Even if you become stronger through these inhumane experiments, you'll just be a monster."

"A monster..."

Raycis recalled Satan's words from long ago.

"Form is merely function. Only inferior humans assign aesthetic value to it. Therefore, strength is beauty."

Raycis's facial bones twisted, transforming into a monstrous appearance.

Her eyes slanted, her nose protruded like a beast's, and her lips split to her ears.

Flames flickered in her snake-like eyes, making the surroundings shimmer like a mirage.

As the memory vision showing scenes from the past activated, Shirone felt as if he were in a laboratory.

In the central Fuzix Machine, the bodies of Antithesis Akamai, Devourer Kuzan, Infinite Cell Proliferator Kenser, Jinma Species Galtomic, and Armored Mineral Species Ringer were separately placed.

"How is it? These are the creatures that will lead me to the body of a god."

Shirone smirked.

"Do you think you can become a god with those?"

"Mortality is not inevitable for living beings. Death is merely a function chosen by organisms. If it's for a perfect single entity, death can be eliminated. You and the angel will fill the remaining two slots. By combining all of this into one, I will become the god of the world."

"You're insane."

Plu's eyes filled with hatred.

She had witnessed how Raycis mass-produced clones from start to finish.

"Hehe, you're nothing but excrement that can't even merge with my body. Think whatever you want while you wait to die."

Raycis left the room with those words.

Soon, researchers would drag Shirone and Ikasa to the Fuzix Machine.

There was no flaw in the Elixir of Legends created by Anke Ra.

Even Ikasa's angelic body would dissolve into black liquid when mixed with the plasm.

Plu strained with all her might, but the restraint of True Akamai was so immense that she couldn't move a finger.

"This is bad. If we stay like this, we'll all die."

Ikasa sneered.

"A mayfly talking about death. How amusing."

"Haha, really? Angels have long lifespans, right? It must be frustrating to disappear like this."

Ikasa fell silent.

It was true. While eternal death was impossible as long as the Akashic Records existed, annihilation was one of the most unpleasant events for an angel.

"There is one way."

"A way?"

Shirone asked, struggling to turn his head.

The fact that Ikasa could move even within True Akamai's restraint indicated how strong Shirone's incarnation was.

"Of course. Do you think a noble angel would be defeated by a mere human-made creature?"

Plu asked.

"You're being defeated right now. What's the way?"

Ikasa hesitated for a moment before speaking.

But the feeling that it wasn't worth it lingered.

"Using Valhalla Action to destroy this creature. In other words, bringing the result of destruction forward."

"That doesn't make sense. If that's possible, why are you captured?"

When Plu questioned, Shirone answered.

"Because the cost is too great."

Ikasa no longer hid it.

"That's right. Given the restraint, the cost is at least equivalent to 8 hours of energy. If I destroy this, I'll be incapacitated for 8 hours."

"Eight hours..."

Ikasa, who could bring down a mountain in less than 30 minutes, had to pay 8 hours of labor for this restraint.

It was possible because it was the Antithesis of the law, not physical force, but it still indicated how powerful the creature was.

Shirone understood why Ikasa hesitated.

"I promise to save you. So, free us."

"Hmph, do you think I'll believe a human's words?"

"You have to. If we stay like this, we'll all die."

Ikasa's face twisted in irritation.

"Even if I get out, what difference will it make? This creature isn't the only one. We'll just get caught again and end up back here."

"I have a plan," Plu said. "Garas is imprisoned in the underground lab. If we release it here, this place will become a battlefield for them."

"Hmm."

Ikasa pondered carefully.

The King of Reproduction, Garas, was a notorious creature even she knew well.

"Using Garas to eliminate this biological weapon? Well, if it gets loose, it's not impossible."

"Ikasa."

Shirone, using his mental transcendence, slowly approached Ikasa and met her eyes.

"I promise I'll come back to save you. Please, free us."

The human desire for life was indeed persistent.

It was the reason Anke Ra had to control humans, and it was also why Ikasa had become a fallen angel.

"Hmph, don't compare me to a mayfly human. I'm not afraid of death. It's just a bit annoying."

"But you also..."

Ikasa cut Shirone off.

"Fine. I'll let you go."

Shirone looked surprised, and Ikasa snorted dismissively.

"It's not for you. I just want to see that woman who challenges an angel's authority fail."

"I'll come back to save you. Wait for me."

Ikasa closed her eyes instead of responding.

As her halo expanded, the energy of Valhalla Action began to accumulate in the halo.

'The restraint is much stronger than expected.'

The calculation of Valhalla concluded it would take 9 hours and 43 seconds.

That was the time it would take Ikasa to destroy Akamai with the power of his incarnation.

'But it seems capturing a regular angel would be difficult.'

If she hadn't become a fallen angel, she wouldn't have been caught so easily, a small consolation for her.

'To think I'd rely on a human.'

Ikasa took a deep breath and opened her eyes wide.

Valhalla Action!

"Kiiiiii!"

True Akamai let out a monstrous scream.

Its massive focal point moved rapidly like light, and its gelatinous body shriveled up.

Chapter 440:

The sleek body of the metal angel, reflecting the moonlight, was modeled after the beauty of living creatures, but Sein and his group could see the coldness hidden within its beauty.

Of course, Babel was beautiful.

But it was also chillingly cold. Just looking at it made their bones feel like they were freezing.

Sein's iron wheel eyes spun with a fierce sound. The calculations were faster than ever, but he still felt it wasn't enough.

'What is this?'

There was no unique aura that could only be felt from the strong.

But conversely, there was a sense of unshakable, extreme coldness that seemed like it wouldn't waver against any strong opponent.

Target setting: No priority.

Random target algorithm activated.

Babel's visual lens caught sight of Lena.

No one could see the focal point hidden behind the red panel, but one person, Lena's father Witcher, threw himself forward.

"Watch out!"

Was it extreme paternal love that made him choose Lena over Kanya?

The choice was accurate, and Witcher's body stopped abruptly as he pushed Lena away.

Babel had already approached and pierced Witcher's chest with its cold hand.

"Dad?"

Lena's face turned pale.

She was teetering on the edge of sanity, about to lose her mind.

"Dad!"

Blinded by rage, Kanya charged at Babel.

Enemy approach detected.

Response type: Instant kill.

Babel disappeared without a trace, and Witcher's lifeless body fell.

Due to the extreme relativity created by the high speed, Kanya's brain couldn't process the incoming scenery in order.

In the illusion that Witcher fell first and Babel appeared before her, only one thing was clear.

'I'm going to die.'

Screeech!

Babel's knife-hand stopped just in front of Kanya's neck.

Over her shoulder, Sein's iron wheel eyes spun sharply as he took a combat stance.

One equilibrium calculated from Witcher's death.

But Babel expanded its halo and dismantled the complex cogwheel calculations.

'How is that possible?'

Equilibrium was the ultimate crowd control technique, calculating both rational and emotional coefficients.

The fact that it dismantled such a personalized code in less than a second meant it wasn't a preset program but learned in that moment.

'It's not intuition. Is it a probabilistic algorithm?'

A method of reaching conclusions by repeatedly generating random numbers to understand the target.

No matter how much of a savant Sein was, Babel's computational speed was far beyond his reach.

"Step back."

Sein spoke briefly.

"Dad...!"

"Hurry!"

There wouldn't be a second chance.

If she didn't understand now, she would die.

Fortunately, Kanya still had something to protect, and she desperately held onto her sanity and ran to Lena.

"Lena! Come this way!"

Even as she carried the half-dazed Lena on her back and fled, Babel didn't move.

Its visual lens was focused solely on Sein, analyzing his every move.

Target: Human. Accuracy 99.8%.

Type: Programmer.

Result: Highest level threat. Priority algorithm applied.
Primary target for elimination.

Babel's body slowly turned towards Sein.

Two entities unparalleled in computation, recognizing each other in different ways, glared at each other.

"Emergency! Everyone, prepare for battle!"

Crude's voice echoed through the night sky as he ran to the hangar.

Clone incubation room.

The two aides sent by Raycis prepared themselves, holding a container filled with water.

With the materials needed for the Elixir of Legends gathered, those inside were now just meat.

Raycis's proposed method was to immerse the body of the Acidic Poison King Muusa in water.

Inhaling the powerful acidic gas produced would dissolve any creature's lungs, killing them within 10 seconds. There was enough time to complete the task, but starting it made them feel breathless.

"One sip and it's over. Let's get this done quickly."

"Ugh, but it feels a bit off. Even if they're clones."

"Stop talking nonsense. Have you grown attached? They're just livestock. Let's get it over with."

When they opened the iron door, a wave of heat escaped. The incubation room was just a large room, and the clones, unaware of their impending death, were focused on their tasks.

The man placed the container in the center and took out Muusa's body. As the chunk of meat fell in, the water began to bubble.

"Let's go, quickly."

Covering their noses and mouths with their collars, the two ran to the exit. White smoke began to rise from the container.

With Ikasa's help, Shirone and Plu escaped from the cell and ran through the underground corridors of the command center.

Everyone was focused on the Elixir of Legends, so there were no soldiers wandering around.

Of course, those who hadn't accessed the core information were all restrained.

"We can deal with the soldiers, but the problem is Akamai. It's like a demon caught in a sealing formation."

"It'll be fine as long as Raycis doesn't notice. Let's hurry. Where's Garas?"

"I saw a map in the genetics lab. Let's head there first."

Plu retraced her steps to the genetics lab.

While Plu deciphered the map on the wall, Shirone picked up the documents on the lab desk.

Thanks to the Ultima System, just looking at the sentences converted the signals into a single code.

It was an experimental report containing information about the clones.

Since his clone was also somewhere here, Shirone examined it carefully but couldn't get past the first page without frowning.

"How could they do this... What do they think humans are?"

The report detailed the grotesque process of mass-producing clones through the triangular mechanism of Shirone, Plu, and Garas.

As he quickly flipped through a few pages, his hand stopped again.

His eyes, slowly reading with the Ultima System, shook with shock.

"Hey, Senior. Have you read this file? The clone incubation research data."

Plu, squinting as if she had a headache, was focused on the large map.

"Senior."

"...No. I only checked what was necessary. This drone's decryption speed is too slow."

Shirone let out a long sigh.

He wanted to convey what he had read but couldn't bring himself to say it.

'What should I do? I have to tell her.'

"I found it. The Marmot isolation room. Fortunately, it's not far."

Plu hurried out of the lab.

They didn't know when Raycis would realize they had escaped, so time was of the essence.

Shirone felt somewhat relieved. Sometimes, ignorance was bliss.

Following Plu, they arrived at a tall iron door.

Plu took out Phoenix from Cubrick and cast a fire spell, melting the lock into molten metal.

As they pulled the handles from both sides, a bizarre sight greeted them with a loud noise.

"My God..."

Like an ark from a great flood myth, all kinds of creatures were packed into a 14-story apartment-like structure.

At the end of the isolation room, they found a glass chamber instead of iron bars.

Inside the 2-meter-tall glass chamber, a black creature the size of a human torso squirmed.

The King of Reproduction, Garas.

The fact that it was specially isolated in a place filled with numerous creatures indicated its extreme danger.

Eight spider-like legs clung to the glass wall, and an organ resembling lips on its underside continuously opened and closed as if trying to expel something.

It had a single eye on its gelatinous head, which was fully open, giving it a startled appearance.

"Is this... Garas?"

"Garas has no specific form. This appearance is just one of the countless generations that have passed down."

Garas's gelatinous head folded in half, and its eye focused forward.

As it wiped its eyeball with the eyelids above and below, Shirone felt a chill run down his spine.

With only one desire, it had only one purpose.

There might be creatures stronger than Garas, but no species was stronger than Garas.

Garas turned its gaze to Plu, analyzing her species with its superior intellect.

As its eyelids narrowed halfway, as if smiling, Plu felt a surge of anger.

The scene from the warehouse flashed in her mind, causing a terrible headache on her left temple.

"Kiaaaa!"

At that moment, Garas stretched all its legs stiffly like spears and let out a scream.

"Damn...!"

The force was so intense that Shirone and Plu hastily leaned back.

Feeling their backs damp with sweat, they realized how tense they had been.

"What should we do, Senior? Should we really release it?"

To neutralize Akamai and stop the Elixir of Legends, they needed Garas's power.

But they couldn't bring themselves to open Pandora's box. No, perhaps this was a door to hell.

If Garas regained its freedom, the command center would be devastated.

Anything alive would become a target for reproduction, causing the number of creatures to increase exponentially.

"We have to do it. Release it and run. We'll rescue the captured rebels and then take down Raycis."

It was the only option.

They didn't have the luxury to plan a strategy that included a way to survive.

"Then... I'll open it."

Shirone's hand trembled as he reached for the lock.

No one could predict the outcome as he pressed the button, and the lock clicked open.

Confirming this, the two turned simultaneously. Without looking back, they cast teleportation.

Crash! Garas broke out of the glass chamber and flowed out.

As it staggered on its eight legs, its body began to grow to match the size of the space.

"Kiaaaa!"

Naturally, its scream grew louder, and Shirone and Plu, feeling as if the sound was right next to them, screamed as well.

"Aaah!"

As if on cue, they both leaped to the sides, rolled, and slammed the iron door shut.

Moments later, the sound of countless creatures' screams and the thudding of Garas's movements echoed through the door.

Shirone was now certain.

He had indeed opened the door to hell.

"You fools!"

Raycis stormed into the room.

As the researcher had reported, Shirone and Plu were nowhere to be seen.

The True Akamai, now shriveled like a deflated balloon, lay pathetically on the ground, and only Ikasa remained in the cell.

"I told you to check, didn't I?"

"W-well, since Akamai was here, we thought it was safe to proceed with the experiment preparations..."

With a loud thud, the researcher's face was struck.

The attack was so fast it was invisible, but Ikasa could see it.

The grotesque whip hidden under Raycis's cloak.

"Hmph, you carry that monstrosity around as your body?"

Truly hideous. Even the ugliest Gorgol among the Mara isn't as repulsive as you."

Grrrr!

Raycis gritted her teeth, and a rough growl escaped between her fangs.

"A weak angel dares to insult me? Soon, you'll be inside my belly."

"Hahaha! Yes, you must be desperate to have my beautiful body. But what will you do? No matter what, it seems your hideous appearance can't be fixed."

Ikasa's sharp tongue was relentless.

Though she couldn't move until she repaid the cause of Valhalla Action, her angelic pride was more noble than death.

"I'll tear you apart!"

With each step Raycis took, the ground shook.

Her skin reddened, revealing her monstrous face, and she charged at the cell with her massive jaws wide open.

"Raaaargh!"

Chapter 441:

Shirone and Plu peeked into the warehouse where the captured rebels were held.

Raycis's subordinates, accompanied by Akamai, were guarding the iron door.

"What should we do? If we approach, we'll be caught for sure."

"Akamai seems to contract with its user through blood adhesion. We need to eliminate the user before they can react."

There were three Akamai, floating among seven men. It was impossible to determine which one was contracted with which user just by looking at the spacing.

"We need to take them out all at once."

"It's all about timing. If we give them time to react, we'll be the ones caught."

"What if we approach using teleportation?"

"It's the easiest method, but not guaranteed. They're Nor mages too. If they're Raycis's subordinates, they must be skilled."

Shirone thought of Armand.

After being captured by True Akamai, he had lost the magic sword, but there was something Raycis didn't know.

Armand, integrated with the Ultima System, was connected through a single signal that transcended space and time, allowing information to be shared regardless of distance.

"I'll call Armand."

In Diamond Armor form, he could eliminate the subordinates before Akamai activated.

Given his physical abilities, which allowed him to fight Ikasa on equal terms, it was certainly possible.

"But they'll know our location. What if they don't know we've escaped yet? The more time we have, the better."

"Why not assume they already know? If we free the rebels, they'll find out our location anyway."

Shirone had a point.

The later Raycis realized, the higher the success rate of their plan, but basing a strategy on uncertain assumptions was risky.

"Hmm, alright. Let's do that. But no mistakes."

Shirone reached back and attempted precise control.

He couldn't accurately determine Armand's state, but he could sense its location through a vague feeling.

'This way.'

Feeling a magnetic pull, he amplified the sensation, and Armand flew into his grasp, turning at a right angle down the corridor.

Diamond Armor.

Shirone took a deep breath, watching the subordinates' reactions, then launched himself without warning.

"What the...?"

The blurry afterimage flickering before their eyes was the subordinates' last thought.

As Shirone's body spun, tendrils from Armand sliced through their necks faster than they could react.

Thud. Thud-thud.

Shirone frowned slightly at the unpleasant sensation flooding in through Armand.

He had no hesitation in eliminating those conducting cruel biological experiments, but it felt different from using magic.

'Stay calm. This isn't just my mission.'

Plu observed Akamai's reaction.

The users were dead, but if the blood adhesion remained, there was a chance they could still react.

'Should I deal with it? Or would that cause more trouble?'

Shirone didn't hesitate and attacked Akamai.

His robe fluttered as black afterimages slashed through the air.

The three Akamai were split in half like soft tropical fruits, falling to the ground.

Plu was amazed at the speed, unable to react.

'The Ultima System. It's incredible. With that, it will be a great help in fighting Heaven.'

Shirone and Plu exchanged glances in front of the iron door. Breaking the lock and opening the door, a sharp gust of wind blew from inside the warehouse.

"Ugh!"

Armand's robe, strong against impact but weak against cutting, was nearly shredded.

Feeling the pain of being cut, Shirone quickly crouched and looked inside.

Dozens of glowing eyes appeared.

"Grrr."

The warehouse didn't hold the surface rebels.

Or maybe it did. Shirone recognized some faces.

But their appearances had changed, retaining only a few human traits.

Plu, who had dodged the surprise attack using the Dawkins algorithm, clutched her aching shoulder and grimaced.

"That wicked woman..."

Raycis had turned the rebels with no use into soldiers.

Though not made with the Fuzix Machine, their physical abilities, enhanced to telomere level 5, were formidable.

"Raaaargh!"

The berserk Nor soldiers charged at Shirone.

Over a hundred emerged from the warehouse, none retaining their former intelligence.

Light Curtain!

The light barrier struck the monsters, tearing their flesh and breaking their bones.

But the monsters didn't stop charging.

'What's going on?'

From the destroyed parts, flesh wriggled out, regenerating organs in an instant.

'Infinite Cell Proliferator Kenser.'

Plu, realizing the monsters' state, spoke.

"They have regenerative abilities. Ordinary attacks won't work."

The monsters split into two groups, targeting Shirone and Plu, but the weight of the battle didn't lessen.

Telomeres, the ends of chromosomes that determine a creature's limits, had been enhanced by Raycis to boost physical functions.

Combined with Kenser's trait of unlimited telomere usage, she had created soldiers that wouldn't rot or die.

Originally intended to match the Mecha's Guroi in the war against Heaven, they were now a major biological weapon against the Light of Zone 73.

"Raaaargh!"

Some had snake-like eyes, others had arms like worms, and some had become beast-like wolves. Their forms and abilities varied, but their ferocity was unmatched.

Armand's tendrils moved at incredible speed, slicing through their flesh, but Shirone felt like he was hitting a wall.

'At this rate, I'll tire out first.'

The monsters, closing the distance, pressed Shirone down with their bodies.

"Grrr!"

As the monsters piled on Shirone like a grave, one that hadn't tasted flesh let out a frustrated growl.

Crack!

The grave trembled.

Crack! Crack-crack!

The shaking intensified, and from within the pile of bodies, a monstrous scream rose as if from the abyss.

Crack-crack-crack!

The sound of bones breaking, muscles tearing, and organs and blood mixing filled the air, and everything began to be

sucked towards the center.

"Raaaargh...!"

The last remaining monster crumpled like paper and disappeared into a black sphere.

Shirone struggled to his feet, supporting himself on the ground.

Having cast a shadow three times larger than usual, his body convulsed.

"Huuu!"

The power he had unleashed by pushing his mental transcendence to the limit with Immortal Function had significant aftereffects.

"Shirone, are you okay?"

Plu ran over.

The area where she had been fighting was littered with charred corpses.

If Shirone was a hard puncher who fought with brute force, Plu was an irregular fighter who used precise algorithms. No matter how strong Kenser's regenerative abilities were, once ignited with Phoenix and delayed with the Dawkins algorithm, they couldn't withstand it.

"I'm fine. Just a bit overloaded."

Plu felt a slight chill as she looked at the corridor where 5 tons of weight had disappeared without a trace.

Gathering the monsters in one place and casting a shadow. It was a straightforward, brute-force tactic with no irregularity.

"In the end, the rebels who could help us ended up like this. It's just the two of us now. We have to stop the Elixir of Legends."

Shirone had no intention of retreating.

Not only did he need to eliminate Raycis, but he also had a promise to return to Ikasa.

"There they are! Get them!"

Raycis's subordinates appeared from around the corridor corner.

They were elite combat soldiers who had started searching when Armand left its original position.

But the most despairing thing was that each of them had an Akamai.

They instinctively took combat stances, but the same thought crossed both their minds.

'Damn! We're too late!'

As Akamai's eyes opened and Antithesis activated, Shirone and Plu's movements slowed drastically.

It felt as if they were born unable to move, with no strength in their muscles.

'No, it's still weaker than the one guarding the cell. I can still land a strike.'

The problem was timing.

He had to either decapitate three people at once or eliminate three Akamai in a single attack.

'Wait until they're all within the horizontal slash trajectory.'

As Shirone and Plu couldn't move, Raycis's subordinates relaxed and approached.

"Phew, we finally caught them, those rat-like creatures. We almost got killed too."

Raycis had become extremely violent when the plan went awry, and seven people had died just by being near her. If they had lost Shirone and Plu, they would have met the same fate.

A bald man approached with a sinister smile.

Having had his pride wounded by Plu during the affinity test, he now reveled in the reversal of fortune.

"Well, we meet again like this."

"You piece of trash. Aren't you afraid of the heavens after doing such things?"

"Heavens? You must not know, but this is the heavens. This isn't a place for the foolish humans of the earth to roam freely."

The bald man stroked Plu's chin.

"Hmm, the real thing is different."

"Get your hands off me."

"Kekeke, don't be like that. Your clones are probably all dead by now. You should cherish your one and only life."

Plu kept a close eye on the bald man's movements while meticulously calculating the positions of those in the corridor.

'Just a little more.'

She couldn't strike until all three Akamai were within range. But the man leaning against the corner, smirking, showed no sign of approaching further.

"Hehe, we only need Shirone. So why not just..."

"Kiaaaa!"

A black creature suddenly emerged from the corner, grabbing the man and throwing him to the ground.

Then, like a swarm of insects, dark figures swarmed the corridor, quickly turning their attention towards them.

"Aaaargh!"

The creature that had knocked the man down pressed its body close to the ground, shaking its torso, causing the man's legs to twitch as they stuck out from the corner.

"No, don't! Aaaargh!"

It was Garas.

Although its form was different from what Shirone had seen in the isolation room, none of the Garas looked the same anyway.

Garas attacked all creatures indiscriminately.

"Kiiik! Kiiik!"

The Akamai caught by Garas let out a choking sound, its pupils dilating as it trembled and fell.

The Garas, momentarily restrained by Antithesis, screamed in frustration at losing their breeding targets and charged down the corridor.

"This is...!"

The bald man's face turned pale as Garas, with its mixed traits of various creatures, charged.

Using magic was not even a threat.

Even if his body was torn apart, the creatures would undoubtedly implant their offspring in his belly.

Shirone used the strength he had reserved for a counterattack to pull Plu towards him.

As he embedded his tendrils into the wall and created distance, the horrific scene unfolded before them.

Black creatures swarmed the corridor like a seething mass. From the depths of the darkness, the bald man crawled out, reaching towards Shirone.

"P-please..."

It was a look of utter despair.

"Kill me."

"Kiiik! Kiiik!"

"Aaaargh!"

The bald man's upper body was lifted, his face contorted with shock, fear, and pain all at once.

Shirone and Plu felt their hair stand on end.

It was fortunate they couldn't see Garas's actions hidden in the darkness.

"Let's go, Shirone."

As Plu tugged at his collar, Shirone took one last look at the man, whose eyes had rolled back and was drooling, then turned away.

The jaws of desire were devouring the command center.

Chapter 442:

20 minutes earlier.

After escaping from the glass chamber in the isolation room, Garas attempted to mate with every creature there.

This event aligned perfectly with Plu's intentions, but there was one overlooked fact.

Even Plu, who knew how terrifying Garas was, couldn't accurately gauge its reproductive drive.

Having been confined in a narrow glass chamber for days, Garas was in an extremely anxious state, and its reproductive drive upon gaining freedom was 200,000 times that of a human.

The period for the genetic information Garas injected into other species to grow from embryo to adult was typically 14 hours.

However, driven by the urgency of passing on its genes, the birthing time was reduced to just 3 seconds.

"Kiaaaa! Kiaaaa!"

As the giant creature let out a laborious scream, dozens of Garas burst from its belly.

The wriggling offspring grew into adults within 10 seconds and attacked other creatures.

It was literally exponential.

Garas's offspring were born in every apartment unit, and soon the isolation room reached its capacity.

With a loud bang, the iron door flew open, and Garas of all shapes and sizes flooded the corridor like water bursting from a dam.

The creatures, forming a torrent, collided at the corridor intersections and, following the principles of fluid dynamics, began spreading throughout the entire command center.

"Huff! Huff!"

The corridor Garas had swept through was left with only the gruesome remains of its victims.

Only the bald man who had been attacked by Garas was left, leaning against the wall, gasping for breath.

His belly was swollen as if filled with fluid, and the bloating was increasing at a rate of more than twice per second.

"Huff! Huff!"

His trembling hand grasped a dagger on the floor.

Lifting it with both hands, he reversed his grip and aimed it at his own belly, his face contorted with fear.

"Ugh!"

He had to stab himself. It was the best choice he could make for himself.

But in the end, the man grimaced and threw the dagger away.

"Aaaargh!"

As his belly exploded, a black creature, curled up, spilled out.

When its bent spine fully extended, it reached a length of 1 meter. It supported itself on the floor with its thin arms and backward-bent legs, sticking out its long tongue.

Its face was distorted as if struck by a hammer, it had no eyes, and its brain was exposed on top of its head.

"Kikiki!"

Garas, prowling like a cheetah, detected the scent of a living creature with its keen sense of smell.

"I... am... the king of the species."

Crack!

With four cracks in the floor, Garas's body disappeared.

Shirone and Plu ran down the corridor without daring to look back.

No matter where they went, Garas was there, and they could feel their escape routes narrowing.

"Senior! What do we do? We're going to be surrounded at this rate."

A horde of Garas appeared in their path.

Plu stopped and swung Phoenix, sending a vortex of fire forward.

"Kiaaaa! Kiaaaa!"

The heat melted Garas's skin like porridge.

But soon, the wounds began to regenerate with Kenser's ability.

"Damn! Regeneration this time?"

Garas wasn't inherently a strong creature.

But its bizarre reproductive ability, capable of producing offspring within 10 seconds, combined with the environment of a lab filled with various isolated creatures, had created an absurd species.

As the number of individuals exploded in the confined space, some mutations even attempted to breed with their own kind, making Garas stronger and more evolved.

Shirone gritted his teeth with a grim expression.

He could tell what kind of creatures Raycis had collected just by looking at Garas's form.

"I'll handle this."

An umbra formed before Shirone's eyes, crushing the charging Garas.

He had learned that umbra was effective against Kenser's traits, but it was just luck.

Every creature had a natural enemy, and Garas, thriving in an environment with infinite mutations, was becoming increasingly dangerous the longer they delayed.

"Kirik! Kirik!"

Mucus dripped from the ceiling, transforming into dozens of sacs that hung down.

As the eyes that emerged from the sacs activated Antithesis, the two were immobilized.

"Ugh!"

At the same time, a transparent Garas with the abilities of the invisible ghost Hororos bit Plu's calf.

Seeing the clear bite marks on her white skin, Shirone heightened his mental transcendence and counterattacked.

He crushed the snake-like transparent Garas with his tendrils and fired Photon Cannons at the ceiling, causing the walls to collapse and block the exit.

Without time to think about the aftermath, Shirone checked on Plu.

If Hororos's traits had mixed with those of a toxic creature, it would be disastrous.

"Senior, are you okay?"

Plu looked at her bleeding leg. She could still move.

But seeing Garas grow stronger by the moment, she had already made up her mind.

"I'll lure them away. You go find Raycis. If we don't stop her, the mission fails."

Shirone couldn't respond.

He knew it was the only option, but leaving Plu as Garas's prey was unbearable.

"Senior, I..."

"Hurry! You promised me! We agreed not to hesitate when we had to make a choice!"

Shirone clenched his fists and shouted.

"How can I leave you behind! Let me..."

Slap! Shirone's head turned with the sound.

Plu's cold eyes met his.

"Go. You can do it. You know that, right?"

Shirone wasn't hurt. The pain in his chest was far greater than the sting on his cheek.

"Take down Raycis. Then come back for me."

Both knew that wouldn't happen.

That fact was what saddened Shirone the most.

"The longer you hesitate, the less time you'll have to save me. If you come back and find I died 5 seconds earlier, could you bear it?"

"Senior."

"Two seconds have passed."

Shirone closed his eyes tightly and stood up. For the first time in his life, he lied to someone about their fate.

"I'll definitely come back."

Shirone pushed off the ground and ran, turning the corner. Almost simultaneously, a horde of Garas came charging from the other side.

Plu was no longer afraid.

Instead, she felt a sense of relief from sending Shirone away, and her expression was more serene than ever.

'Thank you. You're a good kid.'

A dry smile formed on her lips.

"Goodbye, Shirone."

Plu stood up, gripping Phoenix, her expression fiercer than ever.

Smoke rose from her body as if she were about to explode. Amplifying her magic to the point where she didn't care if she burned herself, she extended Phoenix.

It was the most powerful magic possessed by Plu, an officially certified 8th-grade mage.

Hellfire!

The blazing flames filled the corridor like a cloud.

Tears wouldn't stop flowing from Shirone's eyes.

But the sorrow that felt like it would crush his chest turned into cold anger as he reached the lab with the Fuzix Machine.

With eyes that could cut through steel, Shirone glared at the lab and slowly opened the door.

In the silence, only the sound of bubbling could be heard.

All he saw were the bodies of researchers.

The glass spheres of the Fuzix Machine, which Raycis had shown through memory vision, contained various creatures.

Shirone stopped in front of one of the glass spheres.

Inside was Ikasa's body, torn to pieces as if chewed by teeth.

Looking at her upside-down face, Shirone's eyes filled with bitter emotions.

'Ikasa.'

He hadn't kept his promise.

But he had to set those thoughts aside for now.

Without looking back, Shirone asked.

"Are you satisfied now? Is this the result you wanted?"

Raycis, with lips as red as blood, walked in calmly.

"You've trapped yourself. You shouldn't have messed with Garas."

Shirone slowly turned around.

"You're in the same situation. Give up now. The command center will be shut down."

"Kekekeke! Do you really think that? Do you think I did this just because I was weak and longed for strength? Not at all."

Crack! Crack!

Raycis's bones twisted, and her muscles swelled like balloons.

"I am already the strongest creature."

Her height grew to 2 meters, then 3 meters, until she touched the ceiling.

Her entire body was covered in red skin, with intestines-like tails tangled in bundles, and her muscular body was covered with various creatures' eyes, noses, mouths, and teeth, all moving.

An indescribable grotesqueness.

A body filled with absolute malice, unrelated to function.

"Shirone, become one with me."

As Raycis's androgynous voice echoed, Shirone reflexively fired a Photon Cannon.

But his target wasn't Raycis; it was the Fuzix Machine.

Boom! Boom-boom!

Raycis moved faster than the Photon Cannon, blocking the Fuzix Machine.

Despite the powerful impact, her solid body didn't budge.

Satan's Law - Incarnation of Evil.

For a human, it was a divine transcendence that would cause the body to collapse, but Raycis's durability, combined with various creatures, was comparable to an angel's.

"Raaaargh!"

As Raycis spewed powerful flames, Shirone teleported to evade and countered with Armand's tendrils and Photon Cannons.

The lab turned into chaos in an instant.

Raycis didn't leave the Fuzix Machine, but even so, Shirone was the one being pushed back.

With flames and lightning mixed together, it became impossible to evade. Raycis lunged, grabbing Shirone by the neck and slamming him against the wall.

"Ugh!"

Without Armand, his neck would have already snapped.

Tendrils from his robe attacked, but they couldn't penetrate her skin.

"Kekeke, did you think you could win? Just because you're a Nephilim, the Light of Zone 73, did you think you could defeat me?"

Raycis's eyes glowed gold.

"I am the Incarnation of Evil, Satan!"

A new consciousness invaded Shirone's mind.

In the fiery space, Satan's incarnation and Shirone's incarnation appeared, mirroring reality.

Shirone's golden wings trembled as if they would break, while Satan's grotesque face loomed closer.

"Poor lamb, a Nephilim is no match for me."

"Ugh!"

Shirone maximized his incarnation's power through mental transcendence.

Satan's face briefly contorted, but he soon focused his strength in his arms.

"Ugh!"

Shirone's back bent painfully, his legs flailing.

Only the extreme of good could counter the extreme of evil.

As a human, Shirone couldn't reach that level.

'Is this how I die?'

His incarnation's presence grew faint, his strength waning.

His physical body was likely on the verge of having its neck snapped.

'Plu, Senior...'

What was she doing now, surrounded by Garas?

'I can't end it like this!'

Shirone gritted his teeth and invoked his incarnation again.

He had to fight to the end, for the senior who had thrown herself into hell.

"How dare you!"

As Shirone's resistance grew stronger, Satan's arm muscles bulged.

Flash!

Simultaneously, Shirone's body was enveloped in pure white light, and another incarnation layered over him.

It was Armand, integrated with the Ultima System.

With mind and body unified into a single signal, Shirone was pushed to a level he hadn't reached before.

Mental Transcendence - Unity of Mind and Body.

"Raaaargh!"

As Satan's roar echoed, Shirone's body transformed into light and exploded.

Chapter 443:

The First Command went into emergency mode.

The headlights of the Guroi, lined up in the warehouse, burst into light one after another as they began to move.

Infantry equipped with pipers carried arcs and flanked the Guroi as they exited the warehouse.

In the midst of the chaos on the battlefield, only Babel and Sein stood still, glaring at each other.

Physically, Sein was no match for Babel.

That was the conclusion Sein reached after seeing Babel's first attack.

'Algorithm.'

But her movements were not human.

If the enemy operated on a probabilistic algorithm, it wasn't entirely impossible.

'There are gaps. They're just hard to find within human capabilities.'

Babel Program: Engaging Anti-Personnel Combat System.

The panel protecting Babel's lens emitted a red light, using all its functions to analyze Sein.

Target: Programmer.

Combat Pattern: Unrecognizable.

Lethal Response Methods: Infinite.

Babel's joints moved independently as it fixed its gaze on Sein, twisting its lower body to the side.

Just that movement reduced the number of lethal response methods from infinite to approximately 32 quintillion.

In reality, if there were 32 quintillion ways predicted to be lethal, it might as well be infinite for a human.

The battle would proceed by blocking future probabilities with specific actions, and Sein prepared countermeasures. 'It will likely aim for the optimal move.'

So what is the optimal move?

The difference in value judgment on that point would determine the outcome.

Babel moved first, and Sein reacted.

As the flashes of teleportation moved three-dimensionally, Babel's metallic sound spread like cold moonlight.

Lethal Response Methods: 2.78 billion.

The number had dropped to a more humanly conceivable figure, but Babel still had more than enough ways to kill Sein.

Amid the faster-than-expected physical movements, Sein blocked her movements with her iron wheel eyes, frowning.

The calculations were much faster than expected.

When Babel made a specific judgment, Sein had to make a new judgment to neutralize it.

Time, space, environment, and state—every variable gave meaning to each coordinate on the battlefield, and Babel calculated all of it.

In contrast, Sein abandoned the method of calculation.

Responding in the same way to a machine performing calculations in the quintillions was madness.

Insight to find the most aesthetically perfect vital point in the tangled coordinates.

Judgments formed by experience and intuition filled the gaps in Babel's algorithm meticulously.

"Damn it! What are we supposed to do?"

Two hundred Guroi surrounded the battlefield in a circle.

All the soldiers could see were flashes and the metallic afterimages reflected in those flashes.

But the trajectories were so sharp that even a layperson could sense the danger, and an engineer could guess what

was happening.

"Hold position. If we intervene, that man will die."

In reality, Sein was desperate.

One mistake and his head would be separated from his body.

Every time Babel's movements blocked her path like a net, her vision blurred.

Lethal response meant an algorithm that moved in a way to eliminate the enemy with 100% certainty.

If Babel's program took even a slight risk, the battle might have already ended in Sein's defeat.

But conversely, it also meant that Sein was delaying a 100% fatal situation caused by Babel.

'It's only attacking in perfect situations. That means it still has a way to eliminate me with 100% certainty?'

A chilling sensation ran down his spine.

Was this how an ant felt in an antlion's trap?

Amid the excitement, Sein smiled.

He had defeated many strong opponents, and some he hadn't, but this was the first time an opponent overwhelmed him in the same style.

'Interesting.'

His iron wheel eyes rotated, forming two halos.

The realm of emotion, intuition, and the realm of reason, calculation.

As the two halos overlapped perfectly, Babel and the world it encompassed began to waver.

Iron Wheel Eyes - Sun and Moon Halos.

Mental Transcendence - Unity of Mind and Body.

Shirone manifested Armand, connected through the Ultima System, into the realm of his incarnation, integrating it with his own.

Just as the physical Armand strengthened Shirone's body, the ideal Armand strengthened Shirone's mind.

As the limit of his mental transcendence soared and his incarnation emitted a powerful light, Satan's incarnation was

obliterated.

Simultaneously, in reality, Raycis released Shirone's neck and was flung back like a cannonball.

"Huff! Huff!"

Shirone gasped for breath.

Armand extracted oxygen from the air, quickly restoring his oxygen saturation.

Regaining his senses, Shirone rubbed his sore neck and glared at Raycis.

Flames and electricity alternated between her teeth.

"Grrr!"

Raycis writhed in pain.

Her incarnation, formed from the fusion of countless creatures, was collapsing from the impact of Shirone's incarnation.

"Craaa!"

Her red skin melted like blood, and even her grotesque form began to crumble.

The blood that had completely melted and spread on the floor defied gravity, rising and transforming into a robust 2-meter-tall body.

Her body was blood-red, with sharp fingertips, and thick horns curved forward from her temples.

But what caught Shirone's attention was the red triangles floating above the monster's head.

They were similar to those seen on Mara, but there were four of them.

'A four-sided Mara?'

Satan's Law of Evil.

If an angel's halo represented endless perfection, Mara's triangle symbolized perfection within imperfection.

Thus, the highest rank of Mara was a three-sided Mara with three triangles.

But Satan had added a fourth triangle, making him the only Mara to escape the Akashic Records.

Even Anke Ra couldn't eliminate the Law of Evil permeating the universe.

Just as Shirone had temporarily merged with Behemoth's incarnation at Kazra Castle, Raycis was now imbued with the extreme Law of Evil.

"A mere Nephilim dares to summon me. Has the Law of Evil weakened this much?"

Shirone gritted his teeth, enduring the pain.

Even Armand recoiled, assessing the opponent's power.

It was a presence he had experienced before.

The aura emanating from Raycis now was comparable to that of Archangel Kariel.

'I can't lose! If I die, everything ends!'

Compressing photons before his eyes, a massive sphere of light exploded into existence.

In a state of unity with Armand, Shirone's mental transcendence far exceeded human limits.

The power gathering was enough to penetrate any obstacle, yet Raycis watched with arrogant red eyes.

Photon Cannon!

As Shirone gritted his teeth and cast the spell, a thunderous roar tore through the air.

Simultaneously, Raycis vanished.

"Huff, huff."

Plu's body was drenched in sweat.

Leaning against the wall, her head tilted back to the ceiling, she couldn't move, her knees bent as if she might collapse at any moment.

Blood flowed from her shoulder and calf.

The bleeding was a problem, but her muscle fatigue had already rendered her body nearly useless.

She had already fended off four waves of Garas.

But the forced movements of the Dawkins algorithm were a double-edged sword, capable of destroying her body if overused.

'Is this... the end?'

"Kik! Kik!"

Ten small Garas, crab-like in appearance, gathered in a semicircle around Plu.

They might have been unlucky enough to combine with weaker creatures, but their reproductive drive was no different from other species.

'I just want to stop now.'

Finding a weaker creature, Plu was overwhelmed by a strong desire to give up.

She knew this was her last chance to die as humanely as possible.

"Kiii!"

The Garas leaped at Plu.

Ponifar Algorithm.

As the counterattack algorithm activated, Plu's body shook, and she swung Phoenix in all directions, striking the Garas. Fragments shattered like crab shells, and Plu's knee hit the floor with a thud.

This attack had left her entire body in tatters.

Of course, she knew that killing the current Garas wouldn't improve the situation.

But a mage could only do what they could.

'Haha, I can't even commit suicide now.'

Plu used all her strength to lean back.

Thud! Her head hit the wall, and she leaned against it, her eyes slowly losing focus.

"Kikiki."

A grotesque laugh that grated on her eardrums.

Plu couldn't even turn her head, only moving her eyes.

A bizarre creature, 1 meter long, approached slowly, crossing its four legs repeatedly.

It was entirely black, making its features indistinguishable, but she could clearly feel it was laughing.

"Human... woman..."

Garas was more intelligent than humans. But this was the first time she had encountered a species that could speak.

The Garas approached the heavily breathing Plu, observing her for a moment before splitting its mouth open.

"Found you."

Shirone was dragged across the floor by Satan's hand and thrown into a glass sphere.

His heart had stopped, and his eyes were rolled back, his face exposed as his robe was pulled back.

"Phew."

Satan, Raycis, finally felt that everything was over and sighed in relief.

Her muscles were torn in places, and smoke still rose from her temple, where she had taken the last hit.

She had underestimated the Nephilim.

"Truly impressive."

Raycis smiled in satisfaction.

Everything was in place.

A Nephilim to integrate traits, an angel to provide a beautiful body, and creatures to perfectly combine everything.

"Today, I become a god."

Stepping over the bodies of her subordinates, Raycis walked to the Fuzix Machine and activated it.

As the engine of the Fuzix Machine roared to life, the central glass chamber lit up.

It was time to begin the Elixir of Legends.

Raycis entered the last remaining glass sphere, closed the door, and sat down.

Soon, plasm began to fill the eight glass spheres.

Raycis slowly closed her eyes.

This was the grand unification, the journey to completion.

When everything melted into one and was reborn in the central glass chamber, she would become the most perfect being in the world.

The level of the black liquid rose quickly, soon covering her face.

The fragmented body of Ikasa and the fallen form of Shirone were submerged in the liquid, no longer visible.

'It's over. With this...'

Wiiiiing!

At that moment, a siren blared from the ceiling.

Raycis's eyes snapped open at the faint sound piercing through the plasm.

'What is that?'

She tried to move her legs, but her body's durability had already weakened rapidly in the plasm, like bait dissolving in water.

This made her even more uneasy.

"Grrr!"

Raycis mustered all her strength to stand.

She managed to rise to the top of the glass sphere, gaining a few centimeters of height to see.

'That, that is...!'

Raycis's eyes widened in shock.

Plu, dressed in Norin clothes, was manipulating the controls of the Fuzix Machine.

'How is she here?'

If she had stolen the clothes of the subordinates, it was likely a clone from the isolation room, but the clones there had no intelligence.

'No, I already ordered them to be killed with gas!'

She couldn't make sense of it.

Was the Plu here a clone? Or the real Plu?

The siren blared again from the ceiling.

Warning! Warning! Main type reset! Changing main type from glass sphere 1 to glass sphere 8!

Gurgle!

Bubbles rose from Raycis's mouth.

The creature in glass sphere 8 was none other than Shirone.

Chapter 444:

"Humans are amusing. Their emotions are so visible," Garas sneered, sticking out its long tongue as it pinned Plu down. Born late and having all its breeding targets taken by its siblings, the human before it was the perfect prey.

As Garas said, Plu's eyes were filled with fear, but not of the horrific events to come.

In truth, she had a vague suspicion.

The persistent headaches and the feeling of something being disconnected.

She was almost certain that even if she were the original, she would have made the same judgment.

Death is a deeply personal experience. The fear of annihilation is the same for both the original and the clone. Plu's ability to smile dryly in the face of death came from the satisfaction of fulfilling her duty as a mage.

"Take this."

Garas didn't understand the meaning of a human raising their middle finger.

In that brief moment of confusion, Plu's eyes slowly closed.

'Shirone, become a great mage.'

The documents Shirone had seen likely contained evidence that she was a clone.

'Thank you for saying that.'

He had promised to come and save her.

She was happy that he had recognized her as Plu, not just a cloned being, until the very end.

A clone's lifespan was only a week.

But it had been a wonderful life.

Plu's hand fell limply to the floor, and Garas realized that the life beneath it had become an object.

Breeding is ultimately a desire for species preservation. It had no interest in a being that couldn't produce offspring. But the emotional drop from the peak of excitement to the bottom was unbearably frustrating.

"Raaaargh!"

Garas grabbed Plu by the neck and threw her against the wall, then raised its upper body and let out a deafening roar. A living creature! It needed a living creature!

Its highly evolved sense of smell, specialized for breeding, detected another creature far away.

"This time, I won't miss it!"

Garas's shadow stretched down the corridor like a black wind as it followed the scent.

Raycis struggled with all her might.

But as her muscle fibers were broken down by the plasm, her limbs moved in directions beyond her control.

'No! I have to reverse this!'

Shirone, trapped in glass sphere 1, was a Type B equipped with the Ultima System.

With the main type set to him, if the Elixir of Legends proceeded, all organic matter would merge around Shirone.

'How did he survive?'

Even seeing Plu with her own eyes, she couldn't believe the situation.

Could she escape the glass sphere? How had things come to this? Was the woman before her really Plu?

She thought she needed to think, but her mind was stuck in a loop of unanswered questions.

Plu, who had modified the Fuzix Machine, slowly turned around. Almost simultaneously, the plasm filled to the top, covering Raycis.

As Plu approached the glass sphere with calm steps, Raycis's palm hit the inside with a thud.

Raycis pressed her face against the glass. Her eyelids were gone, giving her a startled expression, and her eyes were filled with unresolved questions.

Plu raised the ring finger of her right hand. The spot where her Cubrick should have been was much lighter in color than the rest of her skin.

'So, the original? But since when...?'

Plu had removed the Cubrick a week ago, during the time she had investigated the underground lab while Shirone was away.

After examining the clone isolation room, she had intuited Raycis's intention in bringing Shirone to the command center.

To mass-produce Shirone's clones, she used Plu, who shared the same world's genes.

Adding Garas's traits made it possible to rapidly grow the clones to adulthood.

After investigating the Fuzix Machine, the memory transfer device, and the traits of various creatures, she devised a plan.

Transfer the original's memories to a clone in the isolation room.

By cutting off the last memory and giving the drone and Cubrick to the clone, she entered the isolation room herself, waiting for a chance to counterattack. It was physically and psychologically grueling, but highly effective.

The most perfect way to defeat an opponent is to stab them in the back.

Using the psychological blind spots of the entire command center, it was a strategy based on the assassin's adage that even gods can be killed if caught off guard.

'Could she have been hiding in the isolation room?'

Raycis stared at Plu with a blank expression.

Why hadn't she suspected it even once?

The Cubrick, always worn during physical exams. The unconscious belief that translation was impossible without the drone left no room to accept new situations.

"Stop making that dumb face and disappear, you demon."

Raycis couldn't hear Plu's words clearly through the liquid. But the emotions she felt were much stronger than what she heard.

'How dare you...!'

Raycis gritted her teeth. Her rubbery teeth shattered instantly.

"It doesn't change anything! Everything will still become one! I will achieve perfect beauty! I have won!"

Ignoring Raycis's muffled shouts, Plu ran to glass sphere 1, where Shirone was, and banged on the wall.

"Shirone, wake up! Shirone!"

When she had escaped the isolation room and arrived here, the Elixir of Legends was already well underway.

Her first thought was to cancel it, but that was too emotional a decision.

If she canceled it and Shirone was more than half dissolved in the plasm, there would be nothing to gain.

Instead, she decided to proceed and change the main type to Shirone. Even if he became a monster, the project could continue.

Shirone would understand.

Because he was a mage.

"Shirone! Shirone!"

But in her heart, she desperately prayed for Shirone to wake up and do something.

As Plu's voice traveled through the liquid medium, Shirone's stopped heart twitched.

Unlike Raycis, who was 70% dissolved, Shirone's body, protected by Armand, was still intact.

Armand, integrated with Shirone through the Ultima System, attempted a final method based on the basic instinct for life.

A powerful shock strong enough to burst his heart jolted Shirone's body in the water.

Another shock, and as his heart was compressed again, his pupils flew open, and air escaped his mouth.

"Gasp! Gasp!"

The shock of escaping death made Shirone thrash his limbs wildly.

A dull thud echoed from the glass wall, and he faintly heard Plu's voice.

'Senior?'

She was alive. Realizing that, he quickly regained his composure.

If he hadn't experienced the second stage of the survival test, Ice Prison, he wouldn't have recovered his senses so quickly.

'Stay cold. The coldest state of mind.'

Finally, he felt Armand merging with him. That meant he was trapped in the glass sphere, and if this continued, he would be absorbed by Raycis.

'Should I cast Rampage...?'

As he considered breaking the glass sphere to escape, the memory of his near-death experience connected, and he quickly reversed his decision.

Raycis was a four-sided Mara, something he had never heard of.

Having already lost one battle, escaping now would only make him prey for an even stronger Raycis.

Though the process was different, Shirone reached the same conclusion as Plu and withdrew his Spirit Zone, instead strengthening Armand.

'Endure. Just endure!'

He didn't know which consciousness would dominate when the Elixir of Legends ended, but with Armand equipped with the Ultima System, he had a chance against the four-sided Mara.

As Armand's organic material regenerated to its limit, it protected Shirone's body from the plasm.

Finally, after enduring for a minute, the plasm began to drain from the bottom of the glass sphere.

"Grrr!"

Shirone broke through the shell and emerged from the water, pulling Armand down with him.
He had survived, but the outcome was uncertain.
If Armand lost control to Raycis, what would emerge in the central glass chamber would be a demon, not a magic sword.

Kuuuuuu!

Raycis opened her eyes to the sound of burning air.

Everything was clear in the liquid state.

The undulating fluidity, the electrical stimuli triggering life, Ikasa's Valhalla Action, the magic of the Jinma species Galtomic, the hard armor of Ringer—all of it merged and surged in at once.

Everything in the world became one.

The beautiful and the ugly, didn't they all originate from one?

As a blue light descended from afar, turning the world silver, Raycis smiled happily.

In the reflected light, she saw herself before meeting Satan. Pure white skin, a slightly more developed chest than others, firm thighs...

'Haha. My feet are still ugly, though.'

Raycis shed clear tears.

It was the most beautiful form she had ever wanted, so desperately desired.

'Now... it's done.'

The blue light flared like a flash, and everything returned to one.

"Cough! Cough!"

With Plu's help, Shirone emerged from the glass sphere, vomiting the murky liquid.

The pain was immense, as if his stomach had dissolved.

"Shirone, are you okay?"

"No. It hurts so much. But how did you...?"

At that moment, the central glass chamber flashed, signaling the end of the Elixir of Legends.

Shirone and Plu stopped talking and watched with tense expressions as the glass chamber opened with a clunk. Armand, glowing in a rainbow of colors, stood proudly.

"Success, it's a success."

The Ultima System in Armand had acted as the main type, integrating the other traits.

Without time to celebrate, Shirone walked forward. His stomach was in agony, and he needed to activate Diamond Armor as soon as possible.

Boom!

The lab door shattered as countless Garas of various forms poured in. With no more breeding targets left in the underground lab, they all flooded into this room.

"Kiiik! Kiiik!"

Hundreds of Garas, driven to the peak of frustration, were in a state of extreme excitement.

As Shirone grabbed Armand, Plu activated Phoenix.

Even without Phoenix, the power of the Phoenix Flame was immense, but the burning Garas attacked relentlessly, undeterred by death.

"Kikiki! Found you."

Plu, struggling to fend off the Garas, turned her gaze to the door.

All the Garas stopped attacking and made way for a newly arrived Garas.

Plu's upper body bent backward under the immense pressure of the Dawkins algorithm.

All she could see was a dark blur passing before her eyes. In terms of speed, it surpassed her.

"Kikiki! This is fun!"

Seeing a human identical to the one who had raised their middle finger before dying, Garas's excitement soared even higher, activating its cells.

The real-time evolution finally bridged the gap of the missing link, achieving its ultimate form.

Its curved spine straightened, and its face became more human-like, resembling the bald man.

As Plu felt the air around her ripple, she enveloped herself in an air shield, but the air expanded explosively, pushing her back.

'Ugh! Spirit Force...!'

The affinity unique to the Norin. Although Garas was born from the bald man, its power was far greater.

"I should tear off your limbs first!"

Garas turned into a black blur and charged at Plu, who braced herself for the impact.

The Dawkins algorithm might allow her to dodge, but she had to be prepared for her spine to snap.

"Raaaargh!"

At that moment, Garas stopped. Its shoulders hunched as if tied by a rope, and it let out a scream, raising its upper body. Plu quickly turned around.

Shirone, having activated Diamond Armor, was glaring at Garas with a terrifying look.

"Antithesis?"

It was a form of Diamond Armor unlike any she had seen before.

Chapter 445:

Avant-garde.

By human standards, the design of the Diamond Armor was bold and innovative, yet beautiful.

The organic armor clung to the body's curves, with asymmetrical metallic bands running across it, and a fiery red cape flowed from head to toe.

The gloves, made of bone, were jointed like an insect's segments, covering the fingers, with nails as sharp as spikes.

The artificial brain had eyes clearly from Akamai, glaring at Garas.

'Perfect! This will hold it!'

Armand's additional functions were immediately integrated into Shirone's mind through the Ultima System.

Although he had already pushed the limits of his mental transcendence in his battle with Satan, this time he had a variety of options that were incomparable.

"Grrr!"

Unable to escape the Antithesis, Garas released aggressive pheromones.

As the sour smell spread, the Garas waiting nearby, following the king's command, all charged at Shirone.

"Watch out!"

Plu created a fiery barrier with Fire Mist, a natural enemy of living creatures, but Garas's obedience was almost mechanical.

Their sole target was Shirone, and they attacked from all sides, ignoring the burning of their flesh.

Rampage!

As Shirone cast the spell, slamming his fist down, a curtain of light exploded outward.

The power of Rampage, further enhanced by the law of the S-rank creature Jinma species Galtomic, was comparable to the durability of steel.

The Garas struck by the 40 hits per second had their bones crushed and were torn apart like whips.

Seeing this, Plu stopped fighting and retreated behind Shirone.

Garas had likely assimilated all the creatures in the command center's underground.

Given their exponential reproductive ability, defeating the lab's enemies would only result in endless waves.

'Phoenix Flame won't hold. This is beyond my capability.'

Her role in the project was always as a supporter.

While she could assist her team with versatile skills, she was no match for countless Garas.

Shirone, too, was part of the project as a terminator to destroy key factors and facilities, but now he was far beyond that level.

A biological weapon with all kinds of traits combined.

Garas had evolved into a form so powerful that it had no natural enemies among the thousands of species it had diversified into.

"Raaaargh!"

A giant lizard spewed fire, melting Armand, but the armor was restored by the regenerative ability of the Infinite Cell Proliferator Kenser.

Realizing the difficulty, the Garas horde sent feline-like monsters with sharp teeth and claws to attack.

In response, the metal of the Armored Mineral Species Ringer, with its supreme durability, formed, turning Shirone into an impregnable fortress.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Unmatched hardness.

Garas's weapons shattered, and painful screams echoed through the lab.

The silver metal turned back into organic material, and the ends of the cape twisted into red tendrils.

The tendrils, which lashed at the enemies, had the teeth of the Devourer Kuzan, generating volatile energy by consuming organic matter.

As the teeth, locked like ankle traps, bit into Garas, explosive power surged into Shirone's body.

He launched himself into the Garas horde, linking scatter movements to unleash attacks.

With increased size, power, mass, and speed, the flashes that passed by caused Garas's flesh to burst.

"Kiaaa!"

The Garas king, who had been waiting for an opportunity amidst the deaths of its subordinates, emerged and cast a spell.

Compressed air surged like blades sharper than knives.

Ting-ting-ting!

The wind left dozens of silver lines on Shirone's armor.

The metal of Ringer, which hadn't broken under Etella's Yin-Yang Wave Fist, was impervious to the wind.

"I'll swallow you whole!"

Garas pressed down on Shirone's shoulder and opened its jaws to the limit.

As it tried to bite Shirone's face, the artificial brain activated Antithesis.

"Raaaargh!"

With Garas immobilized, tongue extended, Shirone focused his mind and prepared to counterattack.

Galtomic's ability amplified the law, and with a pop, a massive Photon Cannon, nearly a meter in diameter, was compressed.

"Take this...!"

The energy of the flash, created by mass and speed, burned Garas's body to ashes.

"Kik! Kik!"

With the death of their king, the Garas horde fell into disarray.

While Garas would risk death for the sake of reproduction, the predator before them now transcended living creatures. Only a few continued to fight Shirone, while most turned and fled out the door.

"This is bad! We can't let them escape!"

If Garas left the underground lab, the local ecosystem would collapse.

Without a species to counter their influence, the damage would be unimaginable.

'There's no choice.'

Shirone activated Armand's final option.

A halo of black and white rotated above his head, calculating his desire.

Valhalla Action.

The time for his desire to reach the result was conveyed as a vague feeling.

Once approved, Shirone wasted no time deploying the magic circle.

Ataraxia skipped the accumulation process and appeared before him, automatically generating a Photon Cannon that fired forward.

Boom!

Plu closed her eyes and turned her head as the event unfolded without warning.

The bright flash, paralyzing her eye muscles, exploded, and a thunderous roar surged forward.

The flash lasted for a full three seconds.

During that time, the extreme mass wave swept away everything in its path.

Plu, who had been covering her ears and unable to move, slowly opened her eyes and turned her head.

It was a breathtaking sight.

The lab, once blocked like a lump of clay, was now pierced by the flash.

It was so natural in scale that it was hard to believe it was man-made.

Light streamed through the torn ceiling, and there were no Garas corpses in sight.

"Grrr!"

Shirone, with a twisted expression, glared forward.

To fill the cause for the result, Shirone would be incapacitated for about 23 seconds.

Thanks to the heightened limit of his mental transcendence, achieved through unity with Armand, he had gained this time.

Plu muttered in disbelief.

"To absorb even an angel's ability..."

Even with the equivalent exchange of cause and effect, reversing causality was a monumental event for a being that couldn't defy the flow of time.

Especially if he could instantly deploy the Archangel's super magic amplification array, the incapacitation was a minor drawback.

Once the Photon Cannon passed through Ataraxia, few creatures could survive its power.

After waiting comfortably for 23 seconds, Shirone exhaled deeply as the restraint lifted.

Armand, reverting to its sword form, emitted a strange glow.

Using precise control, Shirone floated the sword before him and examined it closely.

It looked as if blood flowed through the metal, a slightly grotesque but mesmerizingly addictive hue.

Ultima Version (Functions Installed: 6)

Ikasa's Valhalla Action: Equivalent exchange of cause and effect. Automatic calculation of exchange possibilities.

Binger's Skin: Generates ultra-strong metallic material. Automatic response.

Baltomic's Magic Amplification: Explosive enhancement of the law.

Kuzan's Metabolism: Consumes organic matter to generate volatile energy.

Kenser's Absolute Restoration: Maximizes cell regeneration speed.

Akamai's Antithesis: Reverses the law to suppress the target's actions.

As Shirone mentally organized Armand's functions, he realized something he had overlooked.

Eight creatures had been combined, but only six options were added.

Excluding Armand, the main type, the missing trait belonged to Raycis.

'What happened? The Elixir of Legends should have been perfect. Is it because she's a four-sided Mara?'

Plu placed a hand on Shirone's shoulder as he pondered.

"Are you okay? After all that fighting, you're not hurt?"

Her voice trembled with excitement, having witnessed Shirone's incredible prowess up close.

With Armand's abilities, Shirone's combat power was formidable enough to face Heaven.

The most encouraging fact was that he was the terminator meant to deliver an unprecedented blow to Heaven.

The greatest fear was Shirone being killed before he could execute divine retribution.

But with the power to protect himself, the success rate of his mission would significantly increase.

"I'm fine. My lungs have healed. But... are we sure Garas is completely wiped out?"

Plu examined the area where the flash had passed.

"We were the only breeding targets in the lab, so they must have all come here."

"But there could be exceptions."

"No, I don't think so. Could a starving person resist the smell of meat after ten days? Garas's desire is much stronger than that."

Faces appeared through the cracked ceiling.

They were survivors buried in the debris.

Shirone sighed in relief.

If there were people to testify to Raycis's atrocities, today's events could be the starting point for rebel unification.

"Are you safe? What happened to the commander?"

"Dead, all of them."

The soldiers, hearing the translation from Shirone's drone, nodded with bitter expressions.

It was fortunate that the mad commander who used even his subordinates as test subjects was dead, but the damage to the command center was irreparable.

As Shirone emerged to the surface, the battered survivors gathered around him in a circle.

With the commander and officers dead, they had no one to rely on but the Light of Zone 73, Shirone.

"Nephilim, what should we do now?"

"Please become our commander. Only you can do it."

Honestly, he didn't want to.

It was a strange irony that those who had rejected Anke Ra and gathered in Purgatory were now looking to deify someone else.

'It might be easier that way. But...'

It was also dangerous.

When people relinquish their judgment to someone else, they can commit atrocities beyond human comprehension.

"Alright. I will carry out the rebel unification operation, but first, return and receive treatment."

It wasn't the way he preferred, but seeing the once despairing soldiers' eyes light up made him think it was

enough.

Most importantly, Gaold's project was crucial, and sticking rigidly to his own ideas could be a dangerous idealism.

'It's over.'

Thus, the events at the Second Command came to an end.

Though they had successfully completed their mission, a heavy silence hung between the two.

There were still weighty matters in their hearts.

Life, creatures, humans.

In this place called Purgatory, where humans were just another species, what did their existence truly mean?

'Raycis...'

How could he explain that she, who preached the meaninglessness of the body, was actually the one most obsessed with it?

Is reason a product of evolution beyond animal instincts, or is it just another desire created to hide true desires?

Exhausted by endless questions, Shirone sighed and looked up at the sky.

A fly that had escaped from the underground flew up into the air.

Chapter 446:

Two iron wheel eyes interlock to form the world, and within it, everything changes.

This is the Sun and Moon Halos.

It is the technique that made Sein the strongest in the Black Line mental series, allowing him to perfectly control the environment within the range of the equalizing horizontal value.

In other words, if the horizontal value is 100, it is possible to reduce speed to 1 while increasing strength to 99.

The transformation values are infinite depending on the settings, so the actual mechanism is not as intuitive, but it holds formidable potential to defeat even far superior opponents depending on how it is handled.

New program detected. Scanning.

Babel's halo immediately recognized the changes in the world.

The biggest change was that Sein's speed now surpassed hers.

Sein hadn't gotten faster, nor had Babel slowed down.

To be precise, it was the result of equalizing the relative speeds of the two entities.

Babel's lethal response methods, which had numbered 2.7 billion, suddenly dropped to a mere 2 million.

It had been a long time since Babel had calculated this much for a single entity, especially a human.

Of course, there were still 2 million ways for Babel to instantly kill Sein.

But what made Babel truly terrifying was that it was a completely emotionless program that didn't even allow for a sense of relief.

No complacency, no anxiety.

Babel simply repeated its calculations, relentlessly pressuring Sein.

'This is really tough.'

Sein, who had equalized hundreds of environments to his advantage, had to reduce his mental strength to match the horizontal value.

Even though his Spirit Zone was as vast as a Joner's, it had now shrunk to a mere 20 square meters.

Babel wasted no time in engaging in close combat.

If the number of lethal response methods increased by 830,000, there was no reason to hesitate.

'It's a monster. There's not a single gap.'

Even Sein, who had faced countless strong opponents, couldn't help but be amazed by its power.

It wasn't a transcendent ability, but the combat power derived from its flawless algorithm was comparable to that of an angel.

Kiing! Kiing!

Every time Babel's knife-hand grazed Sein's cheek, a sharp noise pierced his eardrums.

'I'm already caught in a trap.'

Sein felt that Babel had started to become certain of something.

He couldn't hold out.

If this continued, Sein's head would be severed in 10 seconds.

 Lethal response methods: 32,564.

Causes produce results, and those results become the causes of new results.

All the causality that had occurred since the start of the battle contributed to the current result, exponentially reducing the number of response methods.

And that meant only one thing.

'I'm going to die!'

Even as Sein realized this, the rebels couldn't move.

Only Sein was aware of the imminent death.

Boom!

A massive steel pillar struck down before him.

Before he could confirm Babel pinned to the ground, Sein looked up.

A 30-meter-tall armored figure had struck the ground with its arm.

It was a Titan, part of the third stage of the Mecha combat system.

The rebel command had only three of these, each weighing nearly 3,000 tons and equipped with the most powerful heat flash cannons created by magnetic pulses, the pinnacle of Mecha technology.

Producing one required hundreds of thousands of elixirs and thousands of tons of minerals, and even the system's program couldn't be designed by just anyone.

If a piper was needed to operate a Guroi, a Titan couldn't be controlled without boarding a Guroi.

It took 10 tons of force just to move one of the Titan's arms.

The power was transmitted in the order of piper, Guroi, and Titan, making it an extremely sensitive piece of equipment despite its size, and its combat power varied greatly depending on the pilot's skill.

The person piloting Titan No. 1, which had pinned Babel, was the genius pilot and rebel commander, Crude.

He hadn't intervened because he knew Sein was in danger.

He was confident that he could defeat Babel now.

But that confidence was shattered moments later by the overwhelming force that surged through the controls.

"Grrr!"

With a scraping sound, Babel lifted Titan's massive hand with both of its own.

As Crude pulled the controls, the plasma engine roared with a powerful noise, transmitting force.

The more he did, the faster Babel's halo spun.
Eventually, it spread like a nova, pushing the impossible weight aside and pulling its body out.

Boom!

As Titan's hand fell again, the ground cracked, and a column of earth shot up dozens of meters high.

Sein slid back, surveying the battlefield.

Guroi's fire net filled the sky, and the remaining two Titans fired heat flash cannons at Babel as it flew through the air.

Among the frantically fighting soldiers were Kanya and Lena, who had lost their father.

"Die!"

Kanya fired her weapon with tears streaming down her face. But hitting something faster than a bullet was impossible.

Babel Program: Engaging Wide-Area Combat System.

Target: All.

Combat Pattern: Massacre.

Lethal Response Methods: 7.

With a new algorithm, Babel sped across the battlefield at a terrifying speed.

Every Guroi in its path exploded and fell.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Every time the three Titans struck the ground, the vibrations reached Sein's feet, dozens of meters away.

'Guroi can't defeat it. It's beyond the realm of comparable force.'

Crude skillfully maneuvered Titan to follow Babel.

Though it was too fast for the human eye, Babel's trajectory was still visible on the radar.

But it was only measuring inertia; hitting the target was entirely up to the pilot.

'Here!'

Boom!

Titan's shoulders opened, revealing dark, cave-like barrels that fired heat flash cannons.

Evasion Probability: 0%. Entering defensive mode.

Babel stopped flying and crossed its arms in an X. Simultaneously, the immense flash slammed the metal body into the ground.

Boom!

As the ground melted like lava, Babel knelt, emitting smoke.

'Damn it! What is it made of?'

It was definitely not pure mineral.

But he couldn't think of any alloy that could have such heat resistance.

'Ten seconds.'

If he could concentrate the energy of the heat flash cannons for more than ten seconds, even Babel would melt.

But Crude smiled bitterly, having calculated that far.

Considering what Babel could do in ten seconds, it was obvious.

As time passed, casualties mounted.

Even though Sein had equalized all environments to Babel's disadvantage, he was still being pushed back.

'Something's wrong. Really wrong.'

Sein realized this only after stepping back from the battle.

That machine was not made by humans.

It only looked like a machine; its internal program was far beyond human comprehension.

An angel's creation? Or something even greater?

The strangeness Sein felt from Babel was to that extent.

Changing Combat System.

As the number of rebels decreased to the set limit, Babel finally stopped moving.

"Now! Everyone, attack!"

Crude immediately ordered, and thousands of bullets struck Babel.

Babel's body, sparking with fire, looked like flames themselves.

Activating Map Weapon. Codename: Babel.

Finally, Babel revealed its true purpose.

As it bent its upper body like a bow, its neck detached and fell back, and its chest opened.

A barrel embedded with a glass sphere was revealed, and with its upper body bent back, its arms and legs anchored to the ground as supports.

Rumble!

An electrical phenomenon occurred in front of Babel's glass sphere, aimed at Titan.

"Heat flash cannons! Direct hit!"

Sensing the danger, Crude focused the six barrels of the three Titans.

Directly targeting the ground with wide-area weapons was not in the combat manual, but there was no choice now.

As the six beams of the heat flash cannons converged on Babel, a massive photon cannon fired from Babel's glass sphere.

When the two energies collided, the entire command center lit up like midday, and the world was filled with the sound of burning.

Crude's Titan, with a hole in one shoulder, staggered as if it would collapse.

"Grr! Damn it!"

Babel test fire complete. Engaging rapid fire.

Babel's barrel fired photon cannons in all directions, ignoring the previous power.

It was literally a map weapon.

In less than a minute, the entire command center would be devastated.

"Damn it! No choice!"

Sein ran towards Babel, attempting his last resort.

As he embedded the equalizing of the Sun and Moon Halos into Babel's system, his mind vibrated, and his consciousness blurred as if in a dream.

'What is this...'

Even he, who had trained his mind countless times, was overwhelmed by the vast and complex system.

At the center of the countless circuits, a blue light pierced through.

"Huff, huff."

In the frozen silence of Niflheim, only the guide's breathing could be heard.

Even he, who had contracted with the spirit of ice, couldn't hold out much longer.

Even the 2nd-tier monster Salamander could no longer sustain its flames.

They weren't frozen to death yet, but the shadow of frostbite was slowly creeping up their ankles.

Kangnan barely managed to open her frozen lips.

"Where is Hell? Are we lost?"

The guide answered in a dying voice.

"I just followed what I learned. Beyond that, I don't... know..."

The guide was paying a harsh price for his greed.

The idea of becoming the ruler of the mainland with a mountain of Black Elixirs was nothing but a mirage in the face of reality.

"I can't go on any longer..."

Just as the guide was about to utter his last words, Zulu's steps came to a halt.

The harsh cold had driven her body to a dreadful state, but her face remained calm.

"Gaold, over there."

Zulu pointed to a massive shadow moving beneath the ice. Small shadows from all directions converged and rose, forming a dome shape that emerged above the ice.

An enemy?

Regardless, it was the first sign of change since they had dealt with the Grim Reaper horde.

This was the reason Gaold had patiently followed the guide to this point.

For a moment, no one moved.

It was a natural scene in Niflheim, but as the rising darkness began to take shape, everything changed.

Rumble!

As the ice shook, Kangnam steadied herself and glared at the darkness.

Something wearing a black robe with white stripes, standing 10 meters tall, was rising into the sky.

Its legs were not visible, and the ends of its robe split into dozens of tendrils that fluttered.

'This is... incredible!'

Kangnam gritted her teeth and took a combat stance.

Even the sun was darkening.

Hiss!

Hearing a sound from below, she turned to see the Salamander's flames completely extinguished and starting to freeze.

"W-what?"

The guide let out a startled cry.

Euphoria surged from his toes, but by the time it reached his head, he had already turned into a frozen corpse.

"Such immense magic power."

Zulu erased the Salamander's corpse and focused her mind. What spell she would cast depended on the nature of the opponent.

"I am Hel, the god of death."

Gaold's eyebrows twitched.

"Wanderers of Niflheim, I will claim your lives."

"Kekeke."

Even in the face of an opponent far beyond the Grim Reaper, Gaold walked forward confidently.

With the Salamander gone, she would now have to ignite her own body to create fire.

"So that's what it was. It wasn't the region."

The king of Niflheim, known as the land of death.

That was the true identity of Hel.

Chapter 447:

The Sun and Moon Halos that emerged at the core of Babel's system conveyed all information to Sein.

It was as if Sein's consciousness had flowed into the system, and there he discovered a single blue flash piercing through the circuits tangled like a spider's web of light.

'This is...'

The Ultima System was just a single signal, but Sein couldn't extract any information from it.

It was a highly condensed concept, different from complexity or intricacy.

It was so vast that it was an extreme insight that human cognition couldn't grasp all at once.

'Who on earth created this?'

Sein followed the Ultima System endlessly upward.

Where the blue flash passed, a magic circle formed by an angelic system blocked the center as if obstructing the path. The concept of the magic circle was also difficult for humans to read, but if it was complex, it was fortunate for Sein.

Analyzing the signal of the magic circle with the equalizing of the Sun and Moon Halos, Sein's eyes widened in shock.

'Damn! So that's what it was.'

From what he confirmed, no matter how perfect the angelic magic circle was, it couldn't disrupt this perfect single unified signal.

The only thing the magic circle's algorithm changed was the purpose of the metal angel's mission.

'Someone tampered with the enemy detection settings. It's not the rebels. Rather, this is...'

A weapon to kill angels.

Then Sein had only one task: to disable the angelic magic circle and revert the settings.

If he could do that, he could strike a counterblow to Heaven.
Sun and Moon Halos!

The halo, so clear that it didn't even seem to be spinning,
began to dismantle the angelic magic circle.

"Grrr!"

Sein was overwhelmed by the far greater amount of
information than expected.

'Damn it! This is just the information needed to change one
enemy detection setting.'

He could feel how profoundly intelligent the blue flash
penetrating the system was.

'No. At this rate, it's too late.'

Even with Sein's equalizing as a Savant, it would take at
least 200 hours to completely dismantle the magic circle.

'There's no chance like this. I have to destroy it from the
inside.'

The moment he embedded the Sun and Moon Halos into the
center of the angelic magic circle, the halo's rotation
stopped.

The sudden stop sent a powerful shock through Sein's head,
almost shattering it.

"Grrr!"

The core logic of the magic circle was overwhelming Sein's
logic.

Then the magic circle emitted a brilliant light and began to
attack Sein's logic in reverse.

As the Sun and Moon Halos rotated in the opposite direction
of the caster's logic, blood flowed from Sein's nose.

'Is this even possible? How can such a proposition exist?'

The angelic magic circle was completely negating the
thought processes humans had developed over thousands
of years.

Cracks appeared in the Sun and Moon Halos, drawing
unpleasant lines.

Sein's eyes gradually rolled back, and blood seeped from
between his clenched teeth.

'Is this the end...'

Sein's consciousness fell to the depths of the abyss.

At that moment, the Ultima System expanded its flash and permeated the magic circle.

The reverse rotation of the Sun and Moon Halos stopped.

Awakening from the brink of death, Sein shuddered at the unimaginable phenomenon.

'How can this be?'

The single signal was rapidly severing the complex connections of the angelic magic circle like light.

'What is this system?'

A single signal that perfectly encapsulated the entire universe.

Even the grand logic of angels was nothing more than a fool's babble before the only insight that could oppose the Akashic Records.

Reconnecting Ultima System.

Activating Babel's primitive system.

The small change Sein created made Cariel's logic system slightly inaccurate, and Babel began to reset.

As the magic circle shattered into fragments, Sein activated Equilibrium.

The two gears meshed, grinding Cariel's broken logic back into the void.

The Ultima System remained simple but had grown vast.

As the light expanded, everything finally unified into one.

Wooooong!

Babel's photon cannon ceased as if turning off a faucet.

Then its legs and arms, embedded in the ground, rose, and its upper body stood, returning to its pre-transformation state.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

As the pilot's tension eased, the power transmitted through the piper decreased, and dozens of Guroi knelt.

"What happened? Is it over?"

During the 20 seconds of photon cannon fire, the rebel command center was completely devastated.

Crude's Titan was damaged, and half of the command center's forces were dead.

Resetting Babel's program.

Babel, which had been in a combat stance, lowered its hands.

Then its electric wings disassembled into points, and its head and knees slowly lowered.

No signal.

Awaiting user registration.

Babel knelt, just as it had when it lay dormant in the ancient ruins, waiting for the next user to appear.

To the rebels, it was an infuriating sight.

The cockpit of a Guroi opened, and Kanya ran out with a sign.

"Aaaargh!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Every time she struck Babel's face with the sword, powerful explosions occurred, but not even a scorch mark appeared on the metal surface.

If it could withstand heat flash cannons, a mere sign couldn't harm it.

That made her even angrier.

Babel's unmoving form, as if accepting its punishment, plunged Kanya into despair.

"Sister, stop!"

Lena ran over, crying, and tried to stop Kanya.

Taking out her anger on a metal lump would only hurt the person hitting it.

"Let go! I'll kill it! Let go!"

"What if it starts working again? It's just a machine!"

"Aaaargh!"

Kanya threw the signa and screamed at the sky.

She was furious that she couldn't even avenge her father's death.

"Hoo!"

Sein wiped his nosebleed and slowly stood up.

Crude, who had descended from the Titan, approached calmly.

"You did it in the end. Thank you. You helped reduce the damage."

The damage was immense, but Crude acknowledged Babel's prowess.

"No, the system corrected its own error. I just unlocked it."

Crude looked at Babel with a serious expression.

"I've met many Norins, but I've never seen anyone as skilled as you. If you say that, what is that machine?"

"I don't know the details. The only thing I know is that it wasn't made to fight humans. It's an ancient weapon for archangels."

"An ancient weapon..."

Crude approached the inactive Babel.

Looking up at her face from below, he saw the red light on the panel still blinking.

"The power isn't off. Is it in sleep mode?"

"Probably. It seems the system reset when the angelic magic circle was destroyed."

"I see. Hmm."

Crude's eyes gleamed as he stood up.

"Then... how about we use this?"

Sein hadn't dismissed the idea.

But as someone who had directly explored Babel's system, he could confidently say it was nearly impossible.

"Babel's system is made of an integrated signal beyond human comprehension. We can't decode it."

Babel's capabilities surpassed those of the Titan.

If they could bring it to their side, it would be a tremendous asset, but what human could decode that signal?

'How can we use this?'

As Sein pondered, the cries of the victims seeped into his thoughts.

It wasn't darkness that covered the sun. It was the aura of death accumulated over eons.

As Hel, the ruler of Niflheim, grew in size and displayed its presence, Gaold's party trembled.

Death might be most akin to cold.

The aura of death, which couldn't be measured by temperature, penetrated to the bone, suppressing vitality.

"Hoo!"

Kangnam widened her eyes and infused strength into her body.

She had to overcome it with life.

If she couldn't activate each cell and prove she was alive, she would end up like the guide.

At that moment, Gaold's face twisted like a demon, and a powerful atmospheric pressure slammed into the ground.

Pain Sensitivity 100,000 times.

Boom!

The darkness was swept away like peeling wallpaper, but the aura of death soon reclaimed the space.

Even so, it was a strange phenomenon for Hel.

The aura that even blocked the sun couldn't be erased by mere air pressure.

'The will to live?'

It was a will that surpassed imagination.

"Arrogant one, why do you reject death?"

Hel raised its body and spoke in a solemn voice, but Gaold didn't respond, lost in thought.

'This is definitely tricky.'

Estimating the pain sensitivity needed to suppress an aura stronger than the Grim Reaper's was not easy.

When there was no answer, Hel spoke again.

"Did you walk into death seeking the detestable Miro? But what awaits you is only the god of the dead."

Miro.

The moment Gaold heard that word, he became a completely different person.

His pupils quaked, and all his blood vessels stood on end.

"How... did you know?"

"The dead know everything. They just don't interfere."

"Kekekeke! I see."

The whites of Gaold's eyes showed.

As the aura of extreme self-discipline spread from his body, even the aura of death recoiled in fear.

Sensing the danger, Kangnam approached.

She didn't know the limit of his pain sensitivity, but it had already surpassed the previous limit.

"Do you understand what you're doing? I told you not to..."

"Shut up."

Kangnam's mouth snapped shut.

There was no stopping him now. Gaold's mind was filled only with thoughts of Miro. Nothing else would be on his mind.

"Where is Miro? You'd better tell me. Unless you want to die again."

"Miro is..."

Hel's voice rose to a terrifying pitch.

"Kieeeeeee!"

The following words were a fierce wail that could stop a heart.

As the robe fell away, Hel's face, a composite of all deaths in existence, was revealed.

As the aura of death sharpened like a blade and surged forward, Zulu stepped in front of Kangnam and cast a spell.

"Phosmetary."

A giant bird made of light enveloped the two of them.

The dark aura struck them the next moment, but it passed through without causing any harm.

The Space-Time Bird, Phosmetary.

Though Zulu was famous as a lich summoner, Phosmetary was a 2nd-tier monster that only she could summon.

Phosmetary appeared once every four years on the equatorial island of Kanarika, flying for three seconds before disappearing, presumably to another dimension.

It took Zulu 12 years to successfully summon Phosmetary, having collected records of its sightings over millennia.

Considering it appeared for only three seconds every four years, the actual time spent was just nine seconds, making it a testament to Zulu's genius, celebrated alongside her lich summoning.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Phosmetary transported the two to another space-time for three seconds, during which nothing could affect them.

For the first time, Kangnam could clearly see the aura of death passing before her eyes.

What she had thought was darkness was actually an infinite pattern of the faces of the dead, all screaming in agony.

"Three seconds. I can't hold it any longer."

There was no need to listen to Zulu's words.

As Hel revealed its true form, Gaold was already charging forward with a demonic face.

Miro! Miro! Miro! Miro! Miro! Miro!

Only one word flashed through his mind at the speed of electricity, and that blind conviction drew in even greater pain.

"The god of the dead? You're just an empty shell...!"

Gaold raised his right hand high and swung it down, casting a spell.

Pain Sensitivity 500,000 times - Air Pressing.

Hel's form disintegrated, falling like tens of thousands of water droplets.

Boom!

The delayed shockwave made the entire landscape tremble as if the planet itself was shaking.

Chapter 448:

As the aura of death dissipated, the force meter transported Zulu and Kangan back to their original time and space. Kangan stared blankly at the ice field where the darkness had vanished.

Only Gaold was panting heavily, his shoulders heaving. 'Foolish human.'

Even she, who always accompanied him, had not anticipated the extent of Gaold's rising power.

It wasn't due to special training or enlightenment.

It was the Miro he encountered after 20 years.

The closer he got to her time and space, the exponentially greater the pain he had to endure.

This was what Kangan feared.

Even if Gaold had surpassed the limits of pain due to his self-mutating abilities, a creature's endurance is not infinite.

Just like the day 15 years ago when Gaold first fell into the Great Inferno.

"What are you trying to do...!"

"It's not over yet."

As Kangan approached, Gaold spoke.

As if waiting, darkness surged up from beneath the ice, forming the shape of Hel.

'An incorporeal entity?'

In Gaold's world, ghosts are a prime example.

They traverse the boundary between mind and matter, unaffected by physical influences in their mental state and unable to exert influence.

However, in their material state, they can exert physical force and be affected by it.

Hel had also narrowly escaped being crushed by Gaold's air pressing by shifting from a material to a mental state.

While this ability was troublesome for humans to deal with, it was a blow to the pride of Hel, the ruler of Niflheim.

Hoooooooo!

Hel's hollow pupils swirled like a vortex, pulling Gaold into the depths of the abyss.

The world plunged back into darkness, and the battle between the undying and the immortal began.

The air magic, amplified 500,000 times, had already transcended the realm of the atmospheric attribute.

Air bullets from the air gun were fired at an incredible speed.

Despite the rapid fire, Hel's torso was riddled with holes as if hit by buckshot.

The tattered Hel charged at Gaold.

"Human! I will scatter your ashes over the corpse of the despicable Miro!"

"Grrrrrrr!"

Hel's provocation backfired.

Hundreds of wrinkles formed on Gaold's distorted face, and hot steam escaped from between his clenched teeth.

Gaold's extreme endurance unleashed the Great Inferno.

In the dark space like the night sky, flames of incandescence surged, mingling with the screams of death and the wails of hungry ghosts, blending extreme cold and heat.

Even Hel, the ruler of the dead, could not remain silent before Gaold's powerful endurance.

'Is there such a human?'

Hel immediately revised his thoughts.

'No, is he really human?'

The pain amplified 500,000 times.

No one could imagine the hell Gaold was experiencing.

No one could even guess.

But for Gaold, it was the only reality.

'Miro....'

No matter how painful, he would not die.

‘Miro.’

The reason did not matter.

On that day 20 years ago, when he had to helplessly watch Miro being taken away, Gaold had given up on becoming any kind of being.

Thanks to experiencing countless shocks, even his memories were tangled, but the only thing that never faded in that chaos was Miro’s voice.

-Because you are weak.

Twenty people judged. The whole world clung desperately. And Miro walked into Istas on her own.

But the truth that only Gaold knew was Miro’s voice on the eve of the judgment by the twenty.

-While you can do nothing!

Tears of blood flowed from beneath Gaold's upturned white eyes.

‘Miro!’

Pain amplified 1,000,000 times - Air Pressing.

Hel was crushed with a pop and then reformed in the air.

Had he been a little slower in shifting to a mental state, he would have been annihilated.

A light of confusion passed over Hel's face, as if his soul was escaping.

Hel wished Gaold would die.

For the first time since his existence, he desperately wanted someone's death.

‘Am I afraid? Me?’

The ruler of the dead does not fear death. Thus, what Hel felt was the endless acceleration of fear.

Gaold's endurance, with no measurable limit, seemed like it would accelerate forever, as if on a rail with no end.

“Kieeeee!”

As Hel exerted all his energy, all sorts of dead spirits swam through the air, trailing black smoke.

Seeing the spirits rushing towards the ground, Kangnan and Zulu scattered in different directions.

They could defend with the force meter, but to displace three seconds in time required nearly four years of omnipotence in real time.

Even Zulu, the strongest summoner, needed more than 30% of his mental strength for this magic, and his current usable limit was just one time.

Using it now would not be a good decision if they were to prepare for a decisive moment.

“Ugh!”

Kangnan raised her arms and curled up as the spirits' attacks tore through the space like a vortex.

Every time their claws scratched her, black scars were etched into her skin.

Her body, trained for a lifetime, attempted to counterattack, but it merely passed through the spirits' bodies, which had returned to a mental state.

‘Attack and defense must be simultaneous. The only chance is when the enemy attacks.’

Kangnan assumed the stance of Ram Muai.

Her sharp gaze pierced the enemy through the arms raised in an 11 shape.

Hooooooo!

As the spirits attacked, her body moved.

Every time her straight-line attacks, covering the shortest distance, exploded in succession, the black smoke of the spirits shattered into pieces.

Further away, Zulu was summoning the giant worm Odd Worm to suck in the materialized spirits.

The mindless spirits did not give up, and as their numbers dwindled, the view began to clear.

“Where is Gaold?”

He was in the sky. His face had become so grotesque that it was hard to tell who the ruler of the dead was.

Life and death, endurance and despair collided in the sky.

“Annoying...!”

Gaold's Great Inferno spread on an unprecedented scale, extending beyond Hel's darkness.

Vacuum Press!

At that moment, Gaold's specialty, which even compressed Ataraxia's photon cannon, was activated.

As the vast atmosphere compressed into a single point, Hel's entire body began to tighten rapidly.

'Can't escape?'

Even in a mental state, Hel could not penetrate the shrinking vacuum force.

Endurance.

Finally, Hel realized why he, the ruler of death, felt fear towards a mere human.

It was because Gaold was not afraid.

"Kieeeee!"

Hel continued to be compressed.

From a small sphere to a smaller sphere, to a point, and finally to nothing...

At the moment of annihilation, Hel exploded, scattering countless spirits in all directions.

Their roars were powerful enough to spread throughout Niflheim, and any creature that heard them would lose its life.

As Gaold floated defenselessly, Zulu and Kangnan arrived behind him and used the force meter's power to transport all three to another time and space.

The lion's roar spread, compressing the air in waves, and perfect silence descended like the eye of a storm.

Gaold, who had landed on the ice, raised his head. He listened to the sound of the wind swirling in the transparent void.

Even if you refuse mortality, there is nothing you can grasp forever. Go to Jebul. There, the despicable Miro awaits. She will drive you to true death.

It was the sound of the wind.

“.....”

As everyone remained silent, about a hundred black elixirs fell from the void like rain.

No one in Purgatory could gather so many black elixirs.

Gaold did not smile.

After the terrible pain, the only reality left was the sense of still being alive.

Some memories were erased, and some remained, but what value is there in memories that cannot be arranged in chronological order?

Gaold threw all his memories into the trash bin of oblivion and turned back, holding only Miro.

Since that day 20 years ago, he had lived like this.

“Pick them all up. We’re going back.”

Gaold turned coldly and began to walk.

Kangnan, watching Gaold pass by, bared her teeth.

It was fortunate that the goal was achieved, but the reckless increase in pain could potentially halt the project.

She could no longer watch the thunderous, naked fighting devoid of tactics and strategy.

“Wait. Not like this...!”

As she turned with fierce words, Gaold staggered.

Kangnan, who had unconsciously taken a step forward, stopped.

She must not hold him back. No one could understand his pain.

He had walked alone for 20 years.

‘Yes. Whether he returns alive or is buried dead, it ends here.’

Kangnan resolved. She would take Gaold there by any means necessary.

Shirone returned to the First Rebel Command immediately after integrating all the forces under the Second Rebel Command.

Armin's group, who had been allowed to run the munitions factory, was the first to return, followed by Gaold's group, who delivered the black elixirs to Yameng and returned. All three divided parties perfectly completed their assigned tasks, but Shirone could not smile.

She heard shocking news upon arrival.

The command had already been devastated.

The culprit who massacred countless people was Babel, the metal angel Shirone had unsealed.

She could not bear to face Kanya and Lena.

Clove and Gardrak, who died in the collapse of the Second Command, and now Kanya's father.

All the deaths felt like her fault.

'But... I have to speak.'

Shirone mustered the courage to head to the room where the two were.

She had to confess to them that she was the one who unsealed Babel.

The sisters, who forced a smile upon seeing Shirone, lost their expressions again as they listened to her confession. Even after hearing the shocking truth, Kanya and Lena did not react.

Shirone couldn't tell if they were angry or simply too exhausted to be angry.

"I'm sorry. It's my fault. If I hadn't unsealed Babel...

Everything is my fault."

Lena couldn't hold back her tears and started crying.

Honestly, she didn't know how to react.

Kanya glared fiercely and spoke.

"If Dad had been killed by another angel, not Babel, would it still not be your fault?"

Shirone couldn't answer.

"No, it's all your fault, Shirone. Every death in Heaven is your fault."

Kanya got up from the bed and approached Shirone. She buried her face in his chest and said,

“So fight for us.”

Shirone felt his chest getting wet.

“I couldn’t do anything. Not even revenge... I was too powerless...”

Eventually, Kanya also broke down in tears.

In the face of an unimaginable enemy, she felt that humans were mere insects.

But Shirone was different. And those who came with Shirone were different.

How could they endure such overwhelming might?

Shirone took a deep breath.

He had come to Heaven to meet Ikael, but now that was no longer possible.

“Let’s go to Babel.”

Chapter 449:

Drimo.

A multidimensional space where all the mental energy of the world flows.

In this place, where countless consciousnesses are intertwined, there are no clear rules to define the world. Anything can be achieved, and anything can be denied. A sword can come after the head is cut off, and sometimes the head remains intact even after the sword strikes.

Therefore, for a clear consciousness to wander in Drimo is tantamount to suicide.

Without a high level of mental understanding, everything here is a trap.

Though it was impossible to tell how much time had passed, the tomb raider Arius felt as if he had aged ten years.

Brahma, with his brain hanging like long hair, never left Arius's side, offering solutions.

Even he, who could make decisions in a second that would take ten thousand cautious humans to reach through compromise, had narrowly escaped death several times to reach this place.

"Hoo. Hoo."

Arius slowly dragged his exhausted body into the temple.

If there was no keyword here either...

Miro might not be human.

He extracted all information related to her with just the name Miro.

Mental trauma that must exist because she is a living being, a human.

The original plan was to strike Miro with that trauma to awaken her from the dimension of emptiness, but now even that seemed unlikely.

A temple floating above the clouds.

Could the real Miro's temple look like this?

Arius opened the neat and antique door and looked around with a glimmer of hope.

Then he frowned.

There was no need to examine anything. There was nothing to see.

Only the clean floor of the temple, without a speck of dust, was visible.

"Damn it! How... how can there be no trauma! How!"

Arius gritted his teeth.

As a tomb raider, he had entered the minds of many.

Even the heart of the most virtuous person in the world harbors murky psychology and traumas that can never be revealed.

That is human, and that is why the world is maintained.

But Miro seemed completely free from such rules.

'This can't be. She is human too.'

Nothing does not mean doing nothing.

She also lived as a human. Loved, made mistakes, desired, and hated.

But it did not connect to regret, shame, denial, or self-deprecation.

Literally the pinnacle of nobility. A mind infinitely free because it has no taboos or obsessions.

"What will you do now? You couldn't find the keyword you mentioned."

Brahma asked.

His life depended on the answer, but Arius didn't care.

He had always believed there was no perfect human. That was still true, but it was time to make a choice.

'Did I misunderstand humans? Were humans not inherently imperfect?'

"Arius, can you find it?"

When he didn't answer the second question, Brahma flapped his brain and flew up.

Whether he knew it or not, Arius rested his chin and wandered in one place.

Miro.

A genius of unprecedented scale magic in history.

'Maybe I thought too simply. I need to examine more closely.'

Miro had always been successful. The most shocking event for her would probably be the judgment of the twenty.

'That's it.'

Arius stopped and looked around the temple pillars. Then he started counting with his fingers.

One, two, three. He stood in front of the exact twentieth pillar and looked for anything different.

'Nothing?'

Numbers are key keywords that make up the mind.

If a keyword existed, it should be right here.

'Should I look for something symbolic of judgment? But there is nothing here that symbolizes judgment...'

"Arius, time is up."

Brahma, who approached from behind, revealed an evil expression with a purple glow.

The time given by Kariel had already passed. He had come this far with his own judgment, but he could no longer delay. As Brahma's arm, turned into a blade, swung quickly to cut Arius's neck.

"Ah!"

Arius exclaimed.

The two blades stopped, gripping his neck. Blood seeped from the split skin, but Arius was too mentally preoccupied to feel pain.

"Ah... Ahhh..."

As Arius approached the pillar, Brahma withdrew his blades and watched a little longer.

"It's here. It's here."

In the evenly spaced grid, there was a barely noticeable crack that could only be seen if looked at closely.

'The judgment of the twenty! Something happened that day.'

Arius's fingertips trembled as he reached for the crack.

Brahma activated his ability as he watched.

As the trauma of the crack amplified, the scenery changed.

There was a small well in the completely black space, but the scenery no longer mattered.

Arius hurriedly ran and looked inside.

The only faint scar left in Miro's mind.

The scene of that scar was reflected like a video.

"This, this is...!"

Arius's eyes shook with shock.

It was a completely different, extremely human scene from what he had expected.

"Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha ha."

His whole body tingled as laughter burst out.

"Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!"

The greatest honor and joy of his life.

He had conquered Miro.

He had found the only weakness in the seemingly flawless mind of the mage.

'Only I know this. Miro is now mine.'

Brahma spoke in a cold voice.

"If you've found it, start quickly. Lord Kariel is waiting."

He intended to do it without being urged.

He was dying to see her expression when she was forcibly pulled out of the dimension of emptiness.

"Then... shall we begin?"

Since Miro's mind was connected to the well, Arius jumped right in.

Brahma followed, weaving a net with Miro's only trauma and throwing it into the dimension of emptiness.

Miro's mind, immersed in deep meditation, twisted in pain.

"Ugh!"

Even in an unconscious state, she tried to maintain her mind through inertia.

But the more she denied it, the more a single thought flooded her mind endlessly.
Her heart pounded, and only thoughts of him struck her mind with murky emotions.

“Hah!”

Miro's eyes snapped open as her deep meditation broke. As the infinity of emptiness disappeared, murky thoughts rushed in like a torrent, sweeping Arius and Brahma along. When they regained their senses, the scenery was different from Drimo, it was her own temple.

As Miro, sitting cross-legged, glared sharply, Arius's lips trembled with excitement.

Without answering, Miro turned her gaze to Brahma. Three-sided Mara. The angels must have found a way somehow.

‘Using trauma...’

It had always bothered her, but she never thought it would catch up to her.

“Despicable Miro.”

Brahma floated in the air.

“Everything is over. The only fate left for humans is to follow the will of Anke Ra. Now I will chop your bones.”

‘Where is my body? Has it already been moved to Heaven? If so, there's no turning back.’

Arius added.

“If you think of entering deep meditation again, forget it. You know why, of course.”

Then he approached Miro triumphantly and leaned his face close.

“I was quite shocked. To think you had such a side.”

Miro's eyes trembled.

It was a tremendous shock for someone else to know a thought that no one should know, not even herself.

But that was only by ordinary human standards.

In the end, Arius had chosen the wrong opponent.

“A mere mage.”

“Ha ha ha! Do you have the right to say that? To have your innermost thoughts revealed by such a mere mage...”

Arius stopped speaking.

What he saw was Miro's eyes, larger than the temple.

When the tightly constricted iris grew as large as the previous pupil, Brahma charged.

“Despicable Miro!”

It was Brahma's last words.

Snap!

Arius slowly turned his head again, looking at Brahma's body crushed like an ant by a finger descending from the ceiling.

There was nothing to see. The relativity of scale was expanding infinitely.

Arius trembled as if struck by lightning.

Perfect greatness.

So vast and immense that the highest dignity of the universe, unperceivable by mere mortal senses, was before him.

Ahhhhhhh.

A sound of ecstasy burst out.

The greatest emotion of his life filled his mind, and his heart pounded as if it would burst.

Arius, overwhelmed with emotion, lunged at her.

Passing through dense forests, crossing lakes, leaping over two bulging mountains, and after countless years, he arrived at the end of the world where a giant pillar stood.

‘Ah, ahhh...!’

Arius, leaning on a crutch, struggled to lift his head.

Tears flowed as he saw Miro's giant face floating in the sky.

“Finally, finally, we meet.”

Kneeling on her palm, he spread his arms wide with the happiest expression in the world.

There is nothing as lovely as Miro in this universe. Nothing as precious as Miro in this universe.

This is so beautiful.

Therefore, it must be perfect, and therefore, no weakness should exist.

Before the greatest emotion of his life, Arius tilted his wrinkled face and kissed her palm.

“Woof! Woof woof!”

Then he wagged his hips like a dog.

Arius degraded himself to the most servile animal he could think of.

To think he could possess Miro. How blasphemous.

She is absolute. The absolute must have no flaws.

Therefore, the most worthless thing must be the eyes.

Even these eyes that saw what should not be seen!

Plop!

Arius's hands dug deep into his eye sockets.

‘They should not exist!’

With all his strength, Arius pulled out his eyeballs and raised his trembling hands as if offering them to Miro.

“Great One, please accept this humble servant.”

Miro looked down at Arius indifferently.

Having realized the wall of the dimension, he would never cross it again.

To Arius, Miro was a god.

‘The wall of the dimension has already been broken. I must leave now.’

As Miro closed her eyes, the world went dark.

At the same time, the door installed in the Great World War exploded, and two people were ejected from the meditating Miro in reality.

One was Arius, now blind, and the other was the crushed Brahma.

Kariel crossed hundreds of meters in an instant to arrive in front of Miro.

“We finally meet again.”

Miro's eyelids slowly lifted as she emerged from deep meditation.

“Woof! Grrr!”

At the same time, Arius barked and growled like a dog, lying on the ground.

In his mind, now a servant of Miro, there was only the thought of protecting his master.

But when Kariel kicked him in the face, he whimpered and hurriedly hid behind Miro, rubbing his cheek against her.

Miro, recognizing the angel's face, spoke.

"Kariel, it's been a while."

"Heh, still as arrogant as ever. Well, you're probably the only human who can casually call an archangel by name.

Anyway, Miro's dimension is gone now."

"You got what you wanted. But humans won't be easy to deal with."

"I don't know about that, but it certainly is interesting."

Miro's eyebrows twitched.

"...What do you mean?"

Kariel opened the Great Law Book.

Since Miro's dimension had disappeared, it would be best to kill her immediately, but there was an even better solution currently in Purgatory.

"There's a human named Gaold. It seems he came looking for you."

Miro's brow furrowed slightly.

'That fool...'

Chapter 450:

Command and Control Room of the First Rebel Command. While Shirone took Kanya and Lena away, Crude briefed Gaold's group on the recent battle.

The damage caused by Babel was greater than expected, resulting in the loss of 40% of immediate combat power and 53% of munitions.

The main point of the briefing was that a full-scale war with Heaven was impossible in the current state.

Although Shirone's party had successfully integrated the Second Rebel Command, their headquarters had also been decimated.

"Soon, the production of large Tagis at the Yameng munitions factory will be completed. But we lack the personnel to carry out the operation. Even if we avoid the angels and Mara, it is impossible to approach Aravot through the fairies of the Ministry of the People and the giants of the Guard."

Sein agreed.

Neutralizing Heaven's air defense system, Aegis, was only to break through the outer wall.

From then on, it depended on how long the rebels could hold out and how far Gaold could go.

'And Shirone. To cast God's Punishment, we must at least reach the entrance of Aravot.'

Once mass is gathered at high altitude, it takes about 14 minutes to fall to the ground.

Therefore, Sein had calculated the trajectory to predict the rotation cycle of 14 minutes to the center of Aravot by firing the laser almost vertically.

The reason for setting a high-difficulty close-range strike was that the operation centered on rescuing Miro.

Variables would change in real-time depending on Miro's condition.

Using God's Punishment prematurely would narrow the chances of rescue.

'I want to see the situation through to the very end, even if it means taking risks. In that sense, Shirone's infiltration requirements are crucial.'

As everyone was lost in thought, there was a knock on the door, and Shirone entered with Kanya and Lena, who were unaware of the situation.

Crude, knowing that Shirone had gone to comfort the sisters, looked at him curiously as he entered with them.

"What is it? Do you have something to say?"

"I have a suggestion. Where is Babel now?"

"The metal angel? It's in the Kuroi isolation facility."

"Please take me there."

"What for? The metal angel is classified as a top security level within the command facilities. I understand your grief, but we can't just open it up."

"Maybe I can reactivate Babel."

"Reactivate Babel?"

Crude looked skeptical.

Hadn't Sein said that the metal angel's system was a product of a higher-dimensional existence beyond the angelic information system?

'Have the sisters persuaded him?'

He had clearly seen Kanya trying to destroy Babel with a sign when it stopped functioning.

"Sorry, but that's..."

"Please allow it. Shirone might be able to do it."

"Plu."

Crude, though a cold commander, was a bit warmer towards Plu.

"What do you mean Shirone might be able to do it?"

Plu was the only one who knew that Shirone possessed the Ultima System.

Reporting everything that happened at the Second Command was too much for the busy First Command, and the other team members needed rest.

‘How should I explain this?’

The Ultima System was something only the person involved could understand, and revealing that Shirone had unsealed Babel was sensitive.

Of course, she didn't think Shirone was responsible for the First Command's disaster.

But she wasn't sure if others would think the same.

‘It's best to hide what can be hidden.’

Shirone couldn't ignore his conscience, but Plu was a thorough magician to the core.

“First, take Shirone to Babel. He will explain everything there.”

When Sein formally requested, Crude reluctantly led them to the warehouse where Babel was isolated.

The guards were strict, but their eyes couldn't hide the fear. It was a being that had nearly annihilated the command.

“So, how do you plan to reactivate this?”

Babel was bowing its head as if asleep, but Shirone could already feel it the moment he entered the warehouse.

‘The output is the same. Only the command is gone.’

The flow of charges that made up Babel was clearly transmitted through the Ultima System.

Feeling as if he could wake her up at any moment, Shirone approached slowly, and Crude spoke.

“Wait, are you sure about this? If by any chance...”

Even if Shirone reactivated Babel, if it attacked the rebels again, they wouldn't be able to avoid annihilation.

Sein said,

“No need to worry. The angel's algorithm is completely broken. It's already confirmed by the Iron Wheel Eye.”

Even Sein didn't know how Shirone would reactivate Babel.

He guessed that the system integrated into Babel was a groundbreaking information system that unified all signals

in the world.

The closest thing in the original world would be binary language, but this was a level higher.

‘Connecting to Babel.’

Shirone closed his eyes and resonated with the Ultima System. Babel's eye panels glowed red.

-New user detected. Ultima System connected.

An invisible signal expanded between Babel and Shirone, integrating their information.

‘This is...’

The feeling of connecting with Babel for the first time was astonishing. He could see what Babel saw.

-Babel primitive program activated. Gaia Code Number 2 detected.

-Absolute inviolable target. Entering algorithm setting mode. Shirone's will was converted into the unique programming language that operated Babel and began to input automatically.

-Primary objective: Protect the rebels.

-Secondary objective: If protecting the rebels is impossible, swiftly eliminate the enemy.

-Tertiary objective: If eliminating the enemy is impossible, protect Kanya and Lena.

If the tertiary algorithm was activated, it meant the battle situation was already dire.

It was a program containing Shirone's sense of responsibility for the grief of the two sisters who lost their father.

The algorithm proceeded to the fourth and fifth stages, becoming more complex.

The ability for humans and machines to resonate as one signal was a technology far beyond telepathy.

-Shirone algorithm applied. Babel program activated.

As Babel, who had been kneeling, stood up with an engine sound, the guards aimed their arcs simultaneously.

Even Crude, knowing Babel's overwhelming intimidation, swallowed and took a step back.

Babel, making clanking footsteps, walked straight to Shirone and knelt on one knee, showing respect to Gaia Code Number 2.

"Babel. I will follow Shirone's orders."

Babel's voice, heard for the first time, was calm and clear, unimaginable for a weapon of terror.

"How... how is this possible..."

Crude was shocked as the weapon of terror that had devastated the command showed submission to Shirone. The fact that Babel, who had destroyed the angelic mental system, was subdued meant that the Nephilim's mind surpassed that of the angels.

'Is this the light of Sector 73?'

In any case, having Babel as an ally was the best outcome. Her powerful force could more than restore the combat power lost by the First Command.

But Shirone thought differently.

Using Babel as a combat weapon couldn't be based on efficiency alone.

Who would want to fight alongside a machine that killed their family?

As expected, Kanya's eyes filled with murderous intent, and her fists trembled as she saw Babel stand up.

A detestable machine.

What was more annoying was that it was made of metal so strong that it couldn't be destroyed by human strength.

Shirone spoke calmly.

"Babel, from now on, follow my orders."

"I will follow Shirone's orders."

Shirone looked at Kanya and said,

"If Kanya wants, destroy yourself here."

"Shirone!"

Plu shouted.

Why destroy a powerful ancient weapon that could rival an angel?

On the other hand, Gaold smiled.

War is a clash of everything, and in human battles, emotions are more important than tactics.

With half of the rebels having lost their families, if Babel's treatment wasn't clear, morale wouldn't rise.

'That's just like you, Shirone.'

Shirone's approach was certainly radical.

If Kanya destroyed Babel, it would be seen as humane or bold.

'Heh, well, war is unpredictable.'

Babel spoke calmly.

"If Kanya wishes, I will destroy myself."

As the choice passed to Kanya, the guards who had lost their families watched her carefully.

'I want to kill it. I want to destroy it. But...'

Kanya bit her lip until it bled.

It was strange. She didn't feel any murderous intent from the machine that had brutally massacred the rebels.

There was no murderous intent from the beginning. It was just a machine viewed from a human perspective.

"When this war is over..."

Kanya gritted her teeth and turned away.

"You will pay the price."

As she walked away, Babel responded kindly.

"When the war is over, I will pay the price."

Shirone couldn't sleep until late at night.

It was the only choice he could make for Kanya, but he worried if he had hurt her more.

At that troubled moment, Zulu knocked and entered.

"Were you sleeping?"

Shirone jumped up from the bed.

"No. Come in."

Although they worked as a team, Zulu was still a daunting senior to Shirone.

"How are you feeling?"

Shirone thought he knew why Zulu had come.

He couldn't say that his emotions hadn't influenced the decision to destroy Babel.

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I'll focus to ensure the mission isn't compromised."

Shirone tried to act with clear eyes.

He lacked experience compared to his teammates, but he didn't want to be a burden.

But Zulu's next words were unexpected.

"Shirone, you don't have to try so hard."

A warm, heavy feeling caught in Shirone's throat. His eyes reddened, and he found himself at a loss for words.

"Humans are not that strong. The mind governs the body. So, what governs the mind?"

As Shirone waited quietly for the answer, Zulu gently placed her hands on her chest and said,

"It is the heart."

"The heart..."

"The heart has no substance, and therefore it cannot be trained. Gaold, Sein, and Miro all possess incredible mental strength, but they also know sorrow and sometimes waver. No matter how strong one's mind is, sadness is still sadness."

Shirone confessed honestly.

"The truth is, I feel so tormented. I feel responsible for Kanya's father's death and the deaths of the rebels."

"Accepting sorrow is natural, but holding onto it for too long will only cause harm. Now, let me teach you the secret of the Breath of Emptiness. Try this."

Zulu placed her hand on Shirone's chest.

"The body, mind, and heart are all connected. Envelop yourself in the cycle of breathing. This will allow you to momentarily halt the activity of the heart."

All living beings breathe. Focusing on breathing is a return to the basics of life.

"Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale."

Life is ultimately about breathing.

As Shirone focused solely on his breath, the distracting thoughts in his mind were pushed out of reality.

After a minute, Zulu gently laid the now-sleeping Shirone down and spoke in a Middle Eastern language.

“Shirone, the human heart is a hell. When you find yourself falling into that hell, do not forget the Breath of Emptiness.” With a compassionate look, Zulu stroked Shirone's forehead, then got up, turned off the light, and quietly left the room.

Chapter 451:

Past midnight.

As the war with Heaven approached, Kuan felt a heavy weight in his chest.

It wasn't the fear of death.

What he truly feared was breaking.

To be remembered as a broken sword in the minds of the living and the dead.

'This won't do. I need to become stronger.'

This realization came from his battle with the mineral species Ringer.

Though he had captured it with Etella's Yin-Yang Wave Fist, he should have been able to cut it in two with his own sword.

What bothered him most was Shina.

Failing to demonstrate his skills in front of her weighed heavily on his mind.

"Well done. Let's start the operation tomorrow."

Shina emerged from a door at the end of the hallway.

While those in combat positions had time to rest, strategists worked through the night.

Kuan watched Shina, who was conversing with the rebel commanders with a smile.

He had thought she was cold, but she could surprisingly smile beautifully when handling business.

'She's different from me.'

Dealing with people was always tiring, and the only connection he had was his childhood friend, Kiyora Ellis.

Shina's unexpectedness was a refreshing pleasure.

Shina, who had been smiling, met Kuan's eyes.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise at seeing him awake at this hour, then smiled and nodded slightly.

Kuan also bowed politely.

Just as he was about to speak, Armin of Guang'an emerged from the conference room.

Though his relationship with Armin hadn't improved despite wandering through many hunting grounds in Purgatory, it was different with Shina.

Through their shared experiences and late-night meetings, the cold relationship between them seemed to have thawed a bit.

Even with his dull emotions, Kuan could tell from his keen swordsman's eye that Shina's expression was different when she looked at him.

A slight distance.

But even that was a look of trust between them.

Following Armin, Shina turned back to Kuan and nodded.

At that moment, he didn't want to receive her greeting.

Kuan had a restless night.

The nightmare of losing his achilles to the Wind Guards once again paralyzed him.

"Gasp! Gasp!"

Returning to reality, Kuan clutched his head.

"Damn it!"

Hadn't he given up everything? Hadn't he come to make Heaven his grave and swing his last sword?

'My resolve has dulled. This won't do.'

Kuan strapped on his sword and went outside.

Though it was a time when everyone was asleep, he found a place where people were unlikely to come and drew his sword.

Only the sword.

He thought he could live his whole life swinging a sword.

Some say it's just about swinging it. They ask if it's not just about cutting quickly and strongly.

Kuan had no intention of explaining to them.

He didn't want to prove the harsh pain contained in the metal, the training of a thousand hardships, and the life of

endurance to those who had never held a sword.

A gust of wind cut through the darkness. He advanced, cutting through the air.

His limping leg felt as heavy as a thousand pounds, but he gritted his teeth and swung the hilt.

‘Move! Move!’

No matter how hard he tried, the leg without an Achilles tendon wouldn't respond.

“Damn it!”

Kuan's breathing grew rougher.

As his convulsing leg failed to support his body, he was thrown into the air.

-Kuan handles the sword well.

He had picked up the sword for a trivial reason.

At first, it seemed like he could do anything. His ideas were extremely free, and his movements were the pinnacle of strangeness.

To him, the sword was a dream, a mission, and a hope that could achieve everything.

“Grrr!”

As Kuan landed and spun, a sharp whirlwind swept in all directions.

Only the sword remained. In his empty grip, there was still a cold piece of metal.

That's why he couldn't let go.

The only thing he could do was cut, and he lived believing that was his only value.

‘I am the sword. Only the sword.’

The more he tried to deny it, the more the face of a woman flickered, and Kuan swung his sword irritably.

Why?

It was the first time the sword had seemed so insignificant.

‘What is this?’

For the first time in his life, as he distanced himself from the sword, paradoxically, Kuan transcended a level.

The outward and inward forces alternated faster than the fastest key a human could strike, creating turbulence as hundreds of forces intertwined.

As rotation added to rotation and more rotation, Kuan's sword whirled.

The storm-like wind pushed the atmosphere, and as air cut air, a sonic boom erupted.

'Olifer Shina...'

The level soared endlessly. Yet, he didn't feel the same joy as before.

The more he wanted to let go of the sword he couldn't release, the more new paths opened, but he couldn't find the same joy as before.

'Get a grip. Abandon false hope.'

With a bleeding hand, Kuan gripped his sword.

Without the sword, he was nothing.

Even the beautiful ghost smiling in the air had approached because of his sword.

"I am the sword demon."

Gritting his teeth, Kuan advanced.

The whirlwind he created, dozens of meters in diameter, swept the clearing as it moved.

Whooooosh!

The massive whirlwind split into hundreds of smaller whirlwinds, spreading in all directions.

In the compressed wind like a mirage, Kuan stood still and lowered his sword.

Whooooosh!

The sword marks on the ground were revealed.

The place where the wind had disappeared was completely devastated by the traces of the sword.

"Haaa..."

Kuan let out a weary sigh and looked up at the sky.

The blade was absorbing the blood flowing from his torn palm.

He could faintly sense the sun beyond the mountains.

In the time when no one had yet opened their eyes, Kuan looked towards where Shina was sleeping.

That night, Kuan transcended three levels, and Shina slept peacefully, unaware of the level a man had reached for her.

"The production of Tagis is complete."

Mitgun reported to Frankwine, the leader of Yameng.

Just three days.

Though Yameng produced all kinds of munitions, no one had expected them to produce large Tagis in just three days.

Frankwine took a deep drag on his cigarette and said, "They're crazy. 138 black elixirs? What are these guys doing?"

Mitgun was equally baffled.

"It's not just the number of elixirs, but also using them all for Tagis production. With 100 black elixirs, one could become the strongest even in the homeland."

Frankwine clicked his tongue.

"That's why you don't get it. That's a theory that works in tens, but once you go over 100, you're just the strongest. They must have bigger dreams than the homeland. Like me."

Mitgun paused and then asked,

"What will you do now? The death of Raysis has caused significant losses for Yameng."

"If Raysis is gone, we'll get it from someone else. Send the Tagis first. There's no point in provoking them. Pick the best people, and negotiate afterward."

"Understood."

Following the orders, Mitgun selected only the strongest subordinates to transport the Tagis to the First Rebel Command.

The rail installed in the mountains behind Yameng's munitions factory was used only for handling special items, and the transport team numbered 30.

As several large containers ran in a line, the iron rail suddenly tore with an explosion.

One container derailed and fell to the ground, and Yameng's guards sprang into action with superhuman speed.

"What is it? An attack?"

"No way. Who would dare mess with Yameng?"

The guard captain gave orders.

"Hold your positions. Securing the goods is the priority."

The contents of the containers were top secret, even to the transport team.

If there were attackers, they were likely just bugs hoping to open a treasure chest.

"Well, this is a big catch."

But the guards' expectations were completely off.

The attackers didn't care whether the containers held treasure or dung. More importantly, they were on a different level from mere bugs.

"Sorry to interrupt your busy work. We have some business with you."

An old man walked slowly with one hand behind his back.

He seemed skilled, but the guards, being elite selected by Yameng, looked puzzled.

But the next moment, all 30 guards raised their killing intent and glared ahead.

From the surrounding forest, figures emitting not just strength but auras appeared.

Exactly 21.

They were Cage B Team from the Tormia Magic Association, tracking Yameng to eliminate Gaold.

"Prepare to fight."

At the guard captain's words, all the guards grinned fiercely. Their necks thickened abnormally, and their bodies began to swell accordingly.

As their clothes tore, their skin colors were revealed, and various biological weapons from human experiments appeared.

Humans resembling crocodiles, wolves, and snakes, each with unique traits etched into their bodies.

Aroella of the Flame bent her neck as if to break it and stepped forward.

"What is this, a zoo?"

"Grrr! Attacking Yameng without fear. We'll swallow you whole."

As a man with a snake's face lunged with his mouth open, numerous beastly bodies followed.

Through a deal with Raysis, their physical abilities had been enhanced to Telomere Level 5, equivalent to the Kergog tribe's chiefs.

As Aroella ignited her flames, the guards scattered in all directions.

Though they were well-trained, none of Cage B Team wavered.

Metal mage Roche stepped forward with a sneer.

Though friends with Tarvan, he looked much younger, with a red dragon tattoo symbolizing a dragon on his cheek.

Iron Cutter!

As the metal magic, a particularly unique branch of magic, was cast, iron blades whirled in all directions.

"Graaah!"

At the start of the battle, over ten guards were cut down, and the remaining members of Cage B Team began their activities.

"What are these..."

The guard captain couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The top warriors of Yameng were being taken down without even putting up a fight.

'Even Telomere Level 5 can't handle this?'

If so, he was no match for them either.

If anyone could face them, it would be Yameng's leader Frankwine or Mitgun.

'I need to report this...!'

The guard captain turned, using his subordinates as shields. Ignoring the screams behind him, he ran, but it was already too late.

“Hey~!”

He had vowed never to look back.

But the guard captain turned his head. He sensed death in the man's voice.

The first thing he saw was all his subordinates, now corpses.

Then, Tarvan's mocking laughter as he flew through the air.

“W-wait a minute!”

As the guard captain reached out, Tarvan's hands extended towards him.

Kaiser Blast.

“Ugh...!”

As the guard captain's breath was suddenly cut off, his body exploded from within.

Boom!

As the body burst like fireworks, Tarvan lit a cigarette.

“Well, we've cleaned up. Do you really think Gaold will come alone? No matter how crazy he is, he's not stupid enough to face Cage B alone.”

“He will come.”

Team leader Rose said, checking the contents of the container.

“Because this is everything to him.”

Chapter 452:

"They stole the Tagis?"

Mitgun, who was always confident in front of the leader, couldn't help but bow his head this time.

Yameng's elite troops had been defeated.

There were no signs of a struggle at the battle site he inspected. It was a one-sided beating.

More than half of the bodies showed signs of being killed instantly.

"Yes, that's what happened. We're currently searching for them."

Bang!

Frankwine's punch crumpled the iron table inward.

"You don't know who did it? There must be an organization familiar with the secret routes among those who attacked Yameng!"

"But there's no organization in the homeland capable of taking down my subordinates so easily. You know that."

Frankwine's punch struck Mitgun.

With a loud crack, his tall body slammed into the wall.

"But they were taken down! Who was it? If you don't know, you'd better make something up."

Mitgun got up, wiping the blood from his lips.

If he didn't pull himself together quickly, he might die.

"If I had to guess, it would be them. The ones who have been catching Rank S prey every day."

"Armin, or whatever his name is?"

If they had to name suspects, it was definitely them.

Each of them was highly skilled, and the ability to kill his subordinates was rare even in the homeland.

But why? Wasn't the Tagis being transported to the rebel command?

'Hmm, I guess I need to check it out.'

Frankwine put on his coat and said,

"We're going to the First Command."

Mitgun responded immediately.

"How many subordinates should we gather?"

"Subordinates? Do you think they can handle this? Just you and me."

Mitgun's eyes changed.

It was a signal between the two who had crossed countless deadly situations to settle in Purgatory.

"Understood."

Mitgun gritted his teeth and stretched his neck.

He didn't mind being hit by Frankwine for no reason, but he was itching to deal with the scum who had backstabbed them.

The atmosphere at the First Rebel Command was the tensest it had been since Babel's invasion.

Commander Crude, accompanied by Gaold's group, greeted Frankwine.

The rebel soldiers stood fully armed, but Frankwine walked in as if he owned the place.

"Hmm, do you live in a place like this? It's more rundown than I thought."

It was understandable, given that half of the facilities had been destroyed by Babel's attack.

Crude skipped the details and got straight to the point.

"What happened? The Tagis hasn't arrived even though the scheduled time has passed."

"Why are you asking me? We sent it."

"Are you serious right now...?"

As Crude stepped forward with a glare, Sein placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait. I'll handle this."

Sein looked Frankwine over with a cold gaze.

The leader of Yameng.

He had thought of him as just a merchant from the homeland, but the aura he exuded was extraordinary.

"You said you sent the Tagis a while ago?"

"Yes, we did."

"But it hasn't arrived here?"

"Well, that's your problem, not mine."

Sein couldn't understand why he was so confident.

If he intended to deceive them, he wouldn't risk his life to come here.

'The goods were sent but didn't arrive? Hijacked?'

Sein realized Frankwine's implication.

"Are you suspecting us?"

"Suspecting?"

A violent glint flashed in Frankwine's eyes.

"Are you joking? Do you all want to die?"

"Ugh!"

As if the air had turned toxic, Crude's lungs ached, and he stepped back, holding his breath.

The rebels aimed their arcs but couldn't bring themselves to shoot. The vague thought that they would die the moment they pulled the trigger filled their minds.

"You'd better confess while I'm being nice. This is clearly your doing. Who was it?"

A thought crossed Sein's mind.

'They've finally moved.'

Yameng's strength was said to be the best even in the homeland.

If they had lost subordinates and come all the way here, the hijackers must be highly skilled.

"Let's go somewhere quiet."

In the command and control room, Sein sat Frankwine down and said,

"First, I'd like to hear what happened."

Mitgun tilted his head.

If a massive amount of minerals and elixirs used to make the Tagis had disappeared, it would be natural to rage and

try to pin the blame on someone.

But the man in front of him was more interested in the hijacking process than the goods.

When Frankwine crossed his arms and signaled, Mitgun began to explain.

Of course, he could only describe the state of the bodies after everything had ended.

But it was enough information for Sein.

About ten bodies were cut by something sharp. One body was completely exploded into mush.

And that one body was the leader.

‘Roche of Metal, Tarvan of Vibration. Cage B Team.’

Though not as synchronized as Cage A Team, Roche and Tarvan had been comrades since childhood and were the most powerful dealers in Cage B Team.

Frankwine noticed and quickly spoke.

“You seem to know something. If so, we have a grievance too. As for the goods...”

“The Tagis doesn't matter.”

Frankwine frowned at Gaold's words.

“Doesn't matter? What do you mean?”

“I mean we won't hold you responsible for it.”

Gaold took Sein's place and sat down, and Frankwine's gaze swept over him from head to toe.

‘This guy is on a different level of power.’

Everyone here was skilled, but Gaold had a different nature.

Battle-hardened? No, he had fought battles beyond that.

Just like himself.

“Not holding us responsible means...”

Gaold interrupted.

“Instead, we have a request. There's something you need to find for us. If you're the largest community in the homeland, you can do it.”

“Find what?”

Gaold spoke.

It was a short word, but it was enough to make Frankwine frown deeply.

“Ha ha ha.”

Frankwine's shoulders shook.

“Does this guy think I'm a pushover?”

Bang!

Frankwine kicked the table and swung his fist at Gaold.

Of course, Gaold didn't just take the hit.

Shirone's group was startled by the sudden fight, but Mitgun charged in with his fists raised as if he had been waiting for this.

Etella blocked him, and their rapid punches were exchanged.

As Etella's fist aimed for his side, Mitgun blocked it with his elbow.

Boom!

The vibration of the Yin-Yang Wave Fist spread through Mitgun's body like ripples.

‘A wave?’

Mitgun was pushed sideways and collided with the wall.

But Etella couldn't follow up. The same kind of shock was spreading through his own body.

‘What is this?’

“Annoying...”

As Gaold prepared to cast a spell with an irritated expression, Etella shouted.

“No! That person is...”

A powerful air press crushed the command and control room.

All the equipment on the ground was flattened, and Frankwine and Mitgun's backs bent under the pressure.

‘Mirror Cycle.’

The next moment, all the pressure in the space was directed at Gaold.

Boom!

The spot where he stood caved in, and Gaold felt his own power for the first time.

“Ha ha, I still have a long way to go.”

Gaold grinned, and silence fell over the command and control room.

Frankwine and Mitgun were shocked by Gaold's unscathed state, and the others were surprised to see Gaold affected even slightly.

Sein turned his gaze to Mitgun.

‘What a strange ability. It doesn't reflect the shock but seems to repel the event itself.’

The first thing that came to mind was an irregular type, but even his Iron Wheel Eye couldn't detect any special activation conditions.

The only guess was that they were from another world.

“Phew, this is...”

As Mitgun rubbed his fists and walked out, a crack appeared on his face.

Frankwine, watching Mitgun touch his cheek in disbelief, turned his gaze back to Gaold.

‘The Mirror Cycle broke? This guy is incredibly dangerous.’

In the original world, there weren't many who could match Mitgun.

As he realized this, his cumbersome anger subsided, and his merchant's mind began to work again.

“Fine, I'll find it. But we have conditions too.”

Gaold nodded readily.

He didn't have time to waste fighting Yameng.

“Speak.”

“Give us the facilities of the Second Rebel Command, Raysis's facilities. They're useless to you now anyway.”

“Fine. As long as you find it properly.”

Frankwine snorted and turned away.

Crack. Crack.

As Mitgun moved his facial muscles, more cracks appeared on his face, but they soon healed.

After the two left, Sein asked,

"Gaold, what are you thinking? This wasn't part of the original plan."

"I heard the wind in Niflheim."

Gaold said only that and turned away.

If Miro was captured in the Great World War, it might already be too late to return.

Gaold's clock was ticking faster than anyone else's.

That night.

As the group gathered, Gaold spoke.

"I'll be away for a while. Prepare to attack as soon as the Tagis support arrives."

Plu asked,

"Where are you going? If it's a mission, take the team..."

Gaold shook his head. It was something only he could do.

"I'll be back by tomorrow. Keep the house safe, you mutts."

As Gaold disappeared into the darkness, Shirone asked Sein,

"Is he going to find the Tagis?"

"Probably. If what Hel said is true, Miro's life is hanging by a thread. He knows there's no time to delay."

"But how does he know where to find it?"

"Gaold doesn't need to find it. They'll come to him."

Sein looked at Kangnan with a troubled expression.

"You said his pain threshold increased to a million times?"

"Yes, that's the level of power I witnessed."

"That's dangerous."

"I agree. If even a little..."

"No, that's not what I mean. When I say it's dangerous, I mean his mental state. Since coming to Heaven, Gaold's pain threshold has risen, and his power has increased significantly. And now he knows Miro's location. Even if he doesn't show it, he's probably not in his right mind."

Kangnan suggested,

"Should we track him now?"

"Impossible. As annoying as he is, there's no way to follow him. We have to leave it to him for now."

Shirone looked into the darkness where Gaold had disappeared, feeling a sense of foreboding.

"I've been curious for a while, what happened between the Chairman and Miro?"

It was an innocent question, but everyone perked up their ears.

Only Sein, Gaold, and Miro knew the story.

Sein looked up at the sky.

If Gaold was to return, it seemed the night would be long.

"This isn't the place to talk about it. Let's move somewhere else."

Chapter 453:

Two kilometers from the First Rebel Command.
Gaold was walking through the dark forest.
With his hands behind his back, his eyes were fixed straight ahead, but they didn't take in the scenery.
Twenty years ago, he met a woman.
She was so different from him that, even though he disliked her, his curiosity made him look at her.
Human connections are truly mysterious. The heart has no substance, so you can't predict where it will flow.
Perhaps Gaold was regretting it.
Maybe he hated this reality, where all that was left was hell, because he had given everything to that woman.
But he couldn't cut off the heart he had given away, nor could he take it back. So he walked through this hell and arrived at the center of a quiet clearing.
In the silence, where not even the sound of birds could be heard, Gaold looked up at the open sky.
Countless stars were shining.
It had been a long time since he had seen the sky.
Miro wasn't among those stars. She was somewhere connected to the ground he was standing on, alive.
Thump, thump. Thump, thump.
Calming his pounding heart, Gaold spoke into the deep forest.
"Come out already. There's no need to waste time since I'm alone."
As soon as he finished speaking, 21 figures emerged from the darkness of the forest.
Cage B Team of the Tormia Magic Association.
Once, they had all been Gaold's subordinates, but few of them were familiar faces.

However, as the former head of the Magic Association, he knew well how powerful they were.

Of course, none of them could surpass Gaold in individual combat, but just as scissors beat rock, and the sea beats the wind, there are always unique magical affinities.

Also, if they were a team sent to eliminate him, they would have included irregulars.

Team leader Rose stepped forward.

Her face was marked with a dense killing intent that Gaold had never seen before.

“When did you realize?”

Rose, a certified Level 4 scent mage. They had known each other since his time as the association head.

“Ha, did I need to realize? If you're targeting me, it's obvious.”

It was also why Gaold had come alone.

The 21's goal was to eliminate Gaold, and they would come with the determination that it didn't matter how many of them died to achieve that goal.

If Gaold wasn't alone, they would never move and would wait for an opportunity to strike from behind.

It was something that had to be finished before the project they had prepared for 20 years could begin.

“Surround him.”

At Rose's command, the 20 members intertwined like a net and teleported.

Gaold, still with his hands behind his back, only looked at Rose.

He had no feelings about avoiding the fight or not wanting to kill his former comrades.

But Cage B Team knew Gaold, and Gaold didn't know Cage B Team.

Even if he did know them, the tactical and strategic variations created by the combination of 20 different individuals were nearly infinite.

All he could do was think about what he could do.

Rustle, rustle.

Even the sound of grass brushing against each other sounded like thunder. A few people moved behind him. Carnivore addict Benifis drew his meat cleaver and looked at his comrades on either side.

Beam of insect magic nodded, and Reed of curse magic combined omniscience and omnipotence.

Facing the mage with the greatest physical strength in Tormia, everyone had the same thought.

'This won't take long.'

"Hey, juniors."

At the sound of Gaold's voice, all 21 of them flinched simultaneously.

"Why are you taking so long to prepare? You came here to die."

Killing intent filled the mages' eyes.

As if 21 flames were burning, smoke seemed to rise from their bodies.

A ritual of burning their remaining lifespan, igniting their will.

In Gaold's absence, Sein and eight others gathered in a circle around a torch in the clearing behind the command. Sein's expression was more relaxed than usual.

Perhaps because he was recalling memories from 20 years ago, before he became known as the ruthless mage of the Black Line.

"About the Judgment of the Twenty..."

Sein began to speak.

"There aren't many people in the world who know the details. But the story involving Miro, Gaold, and me is known only to the three of us."

The group waited eagerly for him to continue.

But Sein's mouth didn't open easily.

It was a burden to reveal a very small and personal secret that had occurred within the greatest event in human history.

"I loved Miro."

No one could refute the words he suddenly blurted out, so Sein continued.

"And Gaold loved Miro too."

Sein looked up at the sky, just like Gaold.

"Yes, it may not seem like an important story. But to us, it was everything."

This is the story.

"Twenty years ago, the coldest man in the world, the most outstanding woman in the world, and..."

A man who wanted to live only in obedience to God, but ended up hating, cursing, and mocking God, diving into hell in terrible sorrow.

"The kindest fool in the world was attending Alpheas Magic School."

Sein's story began.

The Tormia Yore Order.

The Yore Order is a global religion that, even during humanity's dark ages, never waged a single war and only bestowed mercy.

There are no ranks among them, and they don't distinguish between commoners and nobles.

The church is inhabited only by the 'Yora,' who preach the order's doctrines. They live in poverty, relying solely on the volunteer work and donations of the believers, earning the love of all.

'Thank you, Yore God.'

A young man knelt under the sunlit order, holding a pendant with a small circle and cross, the symbol of Yore, and praying.

'Today, I hope all the unfortunate people in the world find happiness. Make me your servant. Give me the courage to love even evil.'

The young man had a white face and skin as clean as a child's.

He had a kind impression, filled with nothing but purity. This was Gaold, 20 years ago.

"Are you giving thanks for advancing to the graduation class?"

Gaold finished his prayer and opened his eyes.

Moved, his eyes were slightly wet with tears.

"Yora."

Gaold, blushing with embarrassment, wiped his tears and stood up.

"Graduation classes start today."

Mikael Gaold.

He was an exceptionally kind child, even among the Yore believers.

It was surprising when he said he wanted to enter a magic school.

Magic is power, and power begets violence. But Gaold wanted to learn magic for that very reason.

Even though divinity and magic have similarities, mages deny God.

To understand them, he thought he had to understand magic himself.

"Well, I'm off."

Gaold headed to Alpheas Magic School.

He had barely made it to the graduation class through hard work. Fierce competition awaited, but he was determined not to lose to anyone.

'Yore God, give me strength.'

While the entrance ceremony for the advanced class was taking place, Gaold, who was walking in the park, spotted the person he least wanted to see.

Sein, his rival since Class Seven.

But he couldn't pretend not to see him, so Gaold extended his hand for a handshake.

"From today, the real competition begins. Let's do our best."

Sein didn't even look at him.

"Why should I shake hands with you? If you want to shake hands with me, bring your God here."

Gaold, feeling insulted, raised his voice.

"I've never forced my beliefs on you. Why are you always picking a fight? Your manner of speaking is really..."

Another tedious argument began.

About ten minutes later.

"Hey, you two over there!"

A woman's voice called out from a distance. Sein's eyes sparkled as he turned his head.

Adrias Miro.

Currently the most notable graduation student at Alpheas Magic School.

She had been suspended for a year for burning down a laboratory for personal reasons, but her skills were already famous in other countries.

"Can't you hear me? Come over here."

As the two approached, Miro put down the box of experimental materials and wiped her sweat.

"Phew, this is really heavy. You two are new students, right? Move this to my lab."

Sein raised his head and said,

"Why should we? I heard there's no seniority concept in the graduation class."

"Well... you two seem to be wasting your energy. It would be nice if you could save your strength and help me."

Gaold, finding her words reasonable, stepped forward willingly.

"That's true. I'll help..."

"Wait. I'm not helping."

"Okay. But I will."

"No, I don't understand why you would help. Our argument is pointless? Everything in this world is a fragment that comes from the clash of opinions."

Miro frowned.

"You're really stiff. Are you always like this?"

Gaold laughed heartily.

"Ha ha! Well, this guy is..."

"Sein. You've probably heard the name, even in the graduation class."

As Sein introduced himself, Miro clapped her hands in realization.

"Oh, you're Sein? The Savant?"

Sein continued speaking without changing his expression, as if it was natural for her to know him.

"I've heard you're very skilled. But now that I'm here, I'll be number one. You'd better be prepared."

Miro didn't seem to listen to Sein's words.

"So, you're a cold-blooded human? Do you really not get excited? Can you even be called a person?"

"It's not that I don't get excited, I control it. The most important thing for a mage is composure. I don't waver under any circumstances."

"Hmm, I don't believe it. If you're human, you naturally have emotions and should follow your heart."

'A mage talking about emotions? Maybe the rumors were exaggerated.'

Sein set aside his disappointment and made a suggestion.

"Then how about a test? If you can make me even a little angry, I'll carry this box for you."

"Really? Alright, then... hmm..."

Miro tapped her lips and rolled her eyes before snapping her fingers.

"You can really control it, right?"

"Of course. A Savant..."

Before Sein could finish his sentence, Miro squatted down.

She grabbed Sein's pants and yanked them down, underwear and all.

"..."

Sein looked like his soul had left his body.

But Gaold, standing next to him, wasn't in a normal state of mind either.

"Are you crazy...?"

Miro stared at what was in front of her and made a measuring gesture with her thumb and forefinger.

"Hmm, so this is what it looks like."

Miro looked up and asked,

"How about now? Still no emotional disturbance?"

"Of course not. I never..."

Sein couldn't finish his sentence.

But Miro didn't seem to care and stood up.

"Wow, that's impressive. I didn't think someone like you existed."

Then she clapped her hands as if she had remembered something.

"Oh right! The Pasca root! I forgot it!"

Miro pointed at Gaold.

"What's your name?"

"G-Gaold."

Gaold, not in his right mind, answered out of habit.

"Help me move this to my lab. It's dangerous, so be careful. Please."

"Wait! Where is your lab...?"

Miro didn't listen and ran out of the park.

Gaold smacked his lips and looked at Sein.

Though they were rivals, he could sympathize with what Sein was feeling as a fellow man.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Sein slowly pulled up his pants. Still in a daze, he turned and walked away.

Gaold clicked his tongue sympathetically.

"How could she pull down his underwear? She's really strange."

That was Gaold's first impression of Miro.

Chapter 454:

Flash! As ten or so people simultaneously cast teleportation spells, the surroundings briefly lit up as bright as day.

‘Rampaging Evolution!’

Beam's insect magic, Kraygus, attacked Gaold.

Its basic form was a mantis, standing two meters tall, with the deadly traits of eleven different poisonous insects.

Pooof!

Gas bombs exploded, followed by flames, and various poisonous stingers shot out.

With Rose's pheromones enhancing their power, the effects were multiplied. Black, a crowd control mage, cast petrification magic on Gaold's legs.

Curse magic Influenza was cast on Gaold, and Iron Wall Rider erected barriers in all directions to restrict Gaold's movement.

Kraygus's poisonous gas filled the enclosed space, obscuring vision.

Gaold likely didn't expect anyone else to be in the toxic gas chamber with him.

The key player was the carnivore addict, Benifis.

‘Just one bite, that's all I need.’

Benifis's flesh began to rot.

Already poisoned, he wouldn't live for more than 20 minutes, but he was the only one among the team who could avoid the mage's shared senses.

‘Hurry up and show your skills, you damn bastard.’

Once a spell is cast, it becomes a phenomenon that affects even the caster.

So why was Gaold unaffected by the air press?

Because he cast his magic outside his own range, and Benifis aimed for that moment.

“Ha ha, it's been a while since my blood boiled like this.”

As soon as Gaold's voice was heard, an immense atmospheric pressure crushed the entire space.

Screeech!

Kraygus was flattened, and the gas settled on the ground. In the now-clear landscape, Benifis charged at Gaold from behind.

‘Now!’

As his teeth sank into Gaold's shoulder, the remaining 20 moved simultaneously.

‘Bite!’

At that moment, Gaold's lips curled into a grin that reached his ears.

“Guh!”

Crunch!

Benifis's jaw clenched involuntarily. Before he could swallow the flesh, his neck twisted rapidly.

Crack! Thud!

His body fell away, leaving only Benifis's face on Gaold's shoulder.

Gaold grabbed the bald head, tore the face off, and threw it to the ground.

“One down.”

In the landscape filled with afterimages, Gaold grinned wickedly.

Cage B Team had 20 members left.

“Gaold was...”

Sein continued.

“He was the gentlest and most foolish person I knew. He was inherently kind. He was raised in the Yore faith, but even without it, he would have been the same.”

Religion doesn't define a person's character.

Shirone knew many who had oppressed others in the name of religion.

“Gaold loved flowers.”

“Pfft!”

Plu couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, sorry."

"He loved tending to flower beds. Whenever his grades in the graduation class were bad, he would go to the flower bed and plant flowers."

Kangnan's eyes grew somber.

She didn't know Gaold during his school days, but she had many memories of him.

Sein's gaze turned to the night sky.

"The only thing worth acknowledging was his stubbornness, which was almost foolish. Even in the graduation class of the magic school, he never cast an offensive spell."

"Gaold loses. Three points deducted. Sein wins. Three points added."

After the graduation class's highlight, the duel, Gaold gritted his teeth.

Sein found it amusing.

Honestly, Gaold wasn't particularly talented in magic. The only thing he was somewhat good at was air magic, a basic form of omnipotence.

In such a situation, only defending with non-combat magic, who could he possibly beat?

"There's no need to feel wronged. Even if you had cast offensive magic, you wouldn't have been a match for me."

"I'm not upset because I lost. I'm frustrated because I couldn't prove my faith."

Sein sighed.

Gaold's best magic was air press. To be blunt, it wasn't even a technique, just a way to increase atmospheric pressure to protect himself.

If he could last ten minutes, it would be a draw.

That was the only victory Gaold sought.

'Foolish. The world is full of people who will do anything to win.'

Gaold wouldn't graduate.

He was the epitome of the illogical thinking Sein despised most.

Then one day.

"Hello? Long time no see. You two still getting along?"

Miro approached while Gaold and Sein were in the middle of a religious debate.

The bizarre incident on the first day had led the three of them to often hang out together in the graduation class.

All three were unusual individuals, but they formed a strange golden balance in their precarious relationship.

Recently, however, Miro had been frequently absent from school.

It wasn't against the rules, but not knowing what she was up to frustrated Sein.

"Getting along? Me with this guy?"

While Sein grumbled, Gaold welcomed her with a broad smile.

"Hello? Where have you been this time?"

"Oh, I've been busy. Getting called here and there."

Miro's skin was tanned.

Since it wasn't a particularly sunny season, Sein guessed she had been outside Tormia.

"Ha ha! Sounds like fun."

Gaold simply liked Miro.

As he got to know her, he realized she was far more talented than he had thought.

She was the first person in the school's history to pass the seventh level of the survival test last year.

But what he really liked about her was her open-minded thinking.

"Oh, right. Miro, listen to this. Is it really such a strange logic that God knows love?"

"God doesn't know love. Love is a purely human emotion. If God exists, it would be a being with feelings and thoughts completely different from what we know."

Gaold didn't back down.

"Even if that's true, it doesn't fit your definition of God. God is a perfect being, so it's natural for God to understand human emotions. Therefore, it's only natural for God to know love."

Gaold looked at Miro.

"What do you think?"

Miro didn't answer for a long time.

Gaold, who thought she would naturally side with him due to her endlessly free thinking, found the situation unexpected.

"Gaold, there is no God."

"...What?"

"God doesn't exist. Everything is determined by dimensions. Within the algorithm of dimensions, hierarchies are divided."

Sein also found it strange.

It was the first time she had made a definitive statement about something, especially something metaphysical.

"What are you talking about!"

Gaold felt betrayed.

Even if everyone else denied God, Miro shouldn't.

Because...

"Determined by dimensions? Miro, you haven't seen all dimensions. How can you say that?"

Miro smiled bitterly.

It was only later that they speculated she had met Goffin around this time.

"Yeah! No one knows! Sorry. Let's stop talking about this and eat. Who's buying me lunch?"

"Forget it! I'm leaving."

As the still-angry Gaold left, Miro pouted.

"What, is he sulking? So sensitive."

Being kind-hearted was good, but the problem was his narrow-mindedness.

It was probably because he was soft-hearted, but Miro felt unnecessarily guilty and didn't like it.

"Hey, you."

Sein spoke.

“For the first time, I like you.”

Miro sighed and unfocused her eyes.

As with any school, Alpheas Magic School had its infamous survival test day.

The 30 graduation students were divided into teams, with a ratio of 29 to 1. It wasn't surprising that they wanted to at least break even since Miro had passed the seventh level last year.

What was truly surprising was that Gaold had given up even that.

Seeing Gaold stubbornly standing with the red team, Sein was annoyed just by looking at him.

Of course, he thought Gaold might stand out in the survival test.

He was a sincere believer, and even Sein acknowledged his perseverance.

But there are situations where perseverance doesn't work. No student could match Miro's level, which even the kingdom's professionals acknowledged.

“Gaold, are you really okay?”

Some students asked with concern.

His skills weren't enough to be considered a rival, but his personality was good, so they showed some kindness. But Gaold was resolute.

“Hmph, I will never side with someone who changes their words like a bat.”

Miro, receiving Gaold's sharp gaze, smiled brightly.

“Ho ho ho! Fine, I'll show you the spicy side of this genius girl.”

“Grrr!”

Gaold gritted his teeth.

He was furious at how she could be so confident after hurting his feelings.

The survival test began, and a gruesome hell unfolded in stages.

As people were ejected from the virtual zone, they soon entered the fifth stage, 'Torture.'

When Sein mentioned that he had been ejected at the fifth stage to Shirone's group, he hesitated.

But Shirone thought that just the fact that the logic-focused Servant had crossed the threshold showed the potential of Equilibrium, which manipulates both emotion and reason.

And Gaold... surprisingly reached the sixth stage, 'Extreme Heat.' Even the graduation students couldn't believe it.

"God, sacrifice this lamb to save everyone. Bring love and peace to the world."

In the hellfire, Gaold knelt and prayed with his hands clasped.

The terrifying heat seeped through his teeth, and juice, not tears, flowed from his eyes, but his prayer didn't stop.

He couldn't lose.

To surrender in the survival test he entered in God's name was unthinkable.

The teachers watching through the vision sweated nervously.

Gaold's physical condition in reality was abnormal. A normal person would have already lost consciousness, but somehow he was enduring.

"Give up, Gaold. You'll really die if you keep this up."

Miro spoke calmly.

Even in the extreme heat, her expression remained composed.

"God, please... burn me..."

Miro couldn't leave Gaold like this.

If his body was completely burned away, his spirit would leave his body as well.

"Why are you doing this? This is just a magic school test. What are you trying to prove about God's existence here?"

Gaold finally opened his eyes.

"I'm not trying to prove God. I can endure because God resides within me."

Miro let out a hot breath.

How could someone be so stubborn?

"And..."

Gaold added.

"I don't want to lose to you."

Miro understood.

It wasn't just Gaold; countless mages in the world longed to surpass her.

"Alright. But you don't have to do this. The survival test isn't everything. You can work harder and beat me in the graduation exam."

Gaold closed his eyes again.

"God, I believe in the power of infinite love. Grant me..."

"Why are you doing this!"

Miro grabbed Gaold by the collar and lifted him up.

Just that action made Gaold's body jerk in reality.

"You live under constant criticism anyway! Whether God exists or not, is it worth risking your life over a single word from me? Do you want to die and make me feel guilty? If so, you're mistaken. No matter what..."

"Because I like you."

Miro's words stopped.

All the students watching through the vision were stunned.

Only Sein watched with a serious expression.

"What... what did you say?"

Miro asked, bewildered.

Gaold, knowing everyone was watching, didn't shy away.

"I said I like you. So I want you to understand me. I want you to say I'm right."

Miro let go of his collar. She had no words for the confession she heard in hell.

"So... you want to date me?"

Gaold nodded.

His eyes burned with heat and passion, but Miro responded simply, as usual.

"But I don't like you."

Boom!

The intense heat exploded from Gaold's head, and he lost consciousness.

Thus, Gaold failed the survival test, and Sein recalled that day, saying,

“In a way, Gaold saved face. He didn't fail because of his religious beliefs. But he did become the biggest fool.

Everyone laughed at him, calling him the first man to get rejected in hell.”

In the end, Gaold's pure love was brutally rejected by Miro. But before moving on to the most important event, Sein added one more thing.

The truth is... he still doesn't fully understand it.

Chapter 455:

“Capture him!”

The remaining 18 members of Cage B Team moved even faster.

After killing the carnivore addict Benifis, Gaold targeted the crowd control mage Black and the manipulator Jonah Bang. There was no way to eliminate Gaold through sheer force. They aimed to use non-physical magic to create variables, and Gaold was steadily reducing those possibilities.

‘Amplification mage...’

Gaold aimed at the word mage Mami.

As hundreds of air gun shots targeted her per second, a bluish barrier appeared in front of her.

“Grrr!”

Rider, known for his iron defense magic, was shaken to the point of breaking his Spirit Zone.

Rose surveyed the battlefield.

Three members were already dead. If Cage B Team's power dropped below half, the probability of eliminating Gaold would approach zero.

‘We need to take a gamble. At this rate, we'll fail.’

Rose shouted,

“Activate the final plan!”

The remaining members' eyes gleamed.

From now on, the order of death didn't matter.

Metal mage Roche took the lead, and Rider deployed a barrier.

Torrent mage Mongrang transformed water into a dragon and hurled it at Gaold.

“Foolish.”

Gaold snorted.

No matter what attack they tried, one air press would crush everything to the ground.

At that moment, flowers began to bloom on Gaold's body. It was the magic of White, another crowd control mage, along with the already dead Black.

Facing his brother's death, White had already given up on life. He knew revenge was impossible.

'But you will die.'

A spell solely for that purpose.

White's spirit infiltrated the flowers and directly attacked Gaold's mind.

White collapsed, and his spirit, surpassing the brink of death, made Gaold flinch.

"Grrr!"

As Gaold's extreme endurance activated, the Great Inferno enveloped the space.

No one was surprised by the screams of the hungry ghosts, but White's flowers turned to black ash and disappeared beyond the horizon of hell.

'Ah, my insignificant life...'

Aroella of the Flame charged at Gaold with unprecedented flames in her hands.

'Never had a great love.'

She had given money, body, and heart, but in the end, all the men left.

'But... it was hot, wasn't it?'

Hellfire Infinity!

A whirlwind of scorching flames raged within the Great Inferno. At the same time, Gaold, with a twisted face, crushed the flames with an air press and charged.

Thinking of the smiling face of the last man she dated, Aroella smiled.

A sharp wind passed, and her head fell from her neck.

Gaold smiled back at the smiling Aroella.

'Nice eyes. A great mage.'

Whether his sincerity was conveyed, Aroella, now headless, smiled brightly as she faded away.

Her body, without a head, rushed at Gaold and exploded.

Even the massive explosion, reaching 6,000 degrees Celsius, was crushed by Gaold's atmospheric pressure.

‘Success.’

Rose's trembling lips curled into a smile.

Gaold felt it too. Scale mage and irregular Monoros had stuck a sticker on the back of Gaold's neck.

Irregular - Battle Arena.

A small arena, one meter in diameter, formed under his feet, and Gaold's body shrank to enter it.

‘A scale type.’

To others, it looked like a miniature in a toy, but to the shrunken Gaold, it was a grand and elaborate arena.

Monoros's irregular ability to scale down his opponent to fit a specific space ratio was powerful because it allowed him to control the environment as he wished.

‘How to escape?’

Gaold looked around the arena, pondering an escape method.

With such a strong scale adjustment, external forces wouldn't affect it.

But if Monoros wasn't an idiot, he wouldn't have designed the arena to allow internal physical forces to affect the outside.

‘Time limit, or steps. Without those, this environment couldn't exist.’

“The way to escape the Battle Arena is through steps.”

As everyone looked down at Gaold in the arena, Monoros spoke.

“Defeat the three monsters that appear in the arena, and it will be released.”

Tarvan said,

“But it's the same scale, right?”

Monoros shook his head.

“There are two ways to enter the arena. One is to shrink the scale with a sticker. The other is...”

Monoros rummaged through the bag at his side.

A giant octopus clung to his hand, wriggling.

“A creature that can fit in the arena can be directly inserted.”

“...I see.”

As Tarvan finished speaking, Monoros dropped the octopus.

Gaold saw a large, wriggling gray object fall from the sky.

‘A Voctopus.’

A species from the Mediterranean coast, known for its ferocity and insatiable appetite, attacking even sharks larger than itself.

The Voctopus, having starved for two days, swung its sharp, spiked legs at Gaold as soon as it saw him.

Gaold sharply expanded the air, cutting off the legs, and charged.

The immense air press crushed the arena, but only Gaold felt that way.

The Voctopus, momentarily crumpled, swung its remaining legs as if unaffected.

“Ha ha, what a joke...”

With the scale reduced, the power of magic had also decreased exponentially.

But Gaold didn't worry about the decline in his condition. He didn't know his limits.

Pain Amplification 1,000,000 times - Air Pressing.

Boom!

The octopus was flattened and eventually exploded, unable to withstand the pressure.

Amidst the swirling innards, Gaold frowned.

Using the power he had wielded against Hel on a mere octopus was humiliating, but he had no time to think about that as extreme pain wracked his body.

Cage B Team, watching Gaold's battle, remained silent.

Monoros explained the next strategy.

"Now you see. Even the great Gaold is reduced to struggling against an octopus when scaled down."

"So what now?"

"For the second step, we use this."

Monoros opened the bag on his back. Hundreds of crickets swarmed inside.

Deputy leader Horkin nodded in understanding.

"If it can fit in the arena, numbers don't matter?"

"Correct. Reduce the power with scale, and disrupt with sheer numbers. The final step..."

"I'll handle it."

Tarvan stepped forward.

The most powerful terminator among the team.

But Monoros shook his head.

"You need a sticker to enter. If you shrink to the same scale, the Kaiser Blast will also weaken."

"I'll do it."

Another irregular, Porcol, stepped forward.

To deliver enough power to kill Gaold at the same scale, an irregular ability was the only option.

Monoros agreed. With Porcol's irregular ability, even the great Gaold wouldn't stand a chance.

"Then let's begin."

Hundreds of crickets were poured into the arena. Monoros placed a sticker on Porcol, shrinking him and sending him into the arena.

Irregular - Fantasista.

His body began to glow brightly.

As a few crickets collided with him, powerful explosions shattered them like shells.

The equivalent exchange of aging and explosions.

He could produce 100 kilobuster explosions at the cost of one hour of aging.

Though Porcol appeared in his early forties, he was actually thirty-two.

As time passed, his lifespan would shorten, but irregulars could only find happiness within their trauma.

“What is this?”

Gaold mercilessly destroyed the swarming crickets.

A foul smell filled the air, and grotesque objects scattered, but his eyes remained fixed ahead.

‘Trying to hide behind this...’

Cage B Team knew what kind of person Mikael Gaold, the former head of the Magic Association, was.

The insects were a distraction. The truth was hidden among the numbers and monstrosities.

Irregular - Life is Short and Intense.

Whooooosh!

Porcol accelerated all the aging his body could handle.

His face rapidly aged, becoming emaciated, and finally, a skeletal figure flew at Gaold.

Facing death, his twisted mind, like a greedy old man envying unattainable youth, was filled with madness.

“Ha ha ha ha! I, killing Gaold!”

Even the terrifying sight of the greedy skeleton didn't faze Gaold.

No, he was tense, facing the twisted thoughts of an irregular who had staked his entire life.

Pain Amplification 1,000,000 times.

As Gaold gritted his teeth and cast his spell, Porcol charged at him.

“Damn it!”

As Cage B Team scattered, the arena exploded, creating a mushroom cloud.

Even with the scale drastically reduced, the power was unimaginable.

“That crazy bastard, how long did he plan to live?”

“Irregulars are always crazy. But still...”

Tarvan stretched his shoulders and approached again.

As the step completed and reality returned, Gaold stood amidst the smoke.

Anyone who knew Gaold wouldn't believe the sight.
His shirt was completely blown off, revealing a muscular, scarred body, with his dislocated right shoulder hanging limp.

His hair had turned white, and blood flowed from various wounds.

Tarvan felt like applauding sincerely.

How many people in the world could withstand the equivalent exchange of life cast by an irregular?

"Impressive. Honestly, I respect you."

"Now..."

Gaold spoke with difficulty.

"Seven."

The number of Cage B Team members who had died.

"No, six."

As Tarvan spoke, a thud was heard. Irregular Monoros fell to the ground, his head severed.

Even if everyone else had avoided the explosion, the irregular caster couldn't move far.

But even he hadn't expected Gaold to counterattack without losing his composure after the explosion.

'A monster is still a monster.'

"Don't waver."

Rose approached Gaold.

"He's already critically injured. Even with fewer numbers, we still have the upper hand."

Rose's eyes were as resolute as Gaold's.

Killing Gaold was her mission as a mage affiliated with the association.

"Just give up. If you surrender, I guarantee your life will be spared."

"Ha, that's an enticing offer."

Gaold knew it was a lie.

Rose was the type of woman who would say anything to complete her mission.

But that also meant Cage B Team wasn't entirely confident in their success.

Nothing had changed. He just needed to keep fighting his battle.

"What else do you have? Didn't you mention something about a final plan?"

Rose was at a loss.

They still had utility, amplification, curse, and defense mages, but they had lost many of their dealers.

'If we lose even one more dealer, our chances will be slim. Even if it means abandoning command, I must die.'

So, there was likely only one more chance for a tactical attempt.

Rose bought time to devise a solid plan.

"Human hearts are truly fickle. When immersed in something, they can't see anything else."

Gaold, needing time as well, responded with silence.

"But just as quickly, they can change. Why not let go? Your feelings are nothing more than a childish infatuation for something you can't have. Let it go and move on."

"Maybe you're right."

Gaold spoke slowly.

"But why should I let it go?"

"Well..."

"Rose."

Gaold interrupted.

"You must have truly loved someone once."

Rose thought for a moment and then said,

"Yes."

"Then tell me. As you've grown older and less childish, have you ever felt anything more beautiful than that feeling?"

Rose couldn't answer.

"There is nothing childish about being sincere. There are only those who endure the pain and those who run away from it. And I..."

Rumble!

The atmosphere vibrated, the forest shook, and the air grew as heavy as steel.

Gaold, his face twisted into a demonic visage, glared at the world.

“I never run away from my pain.”

Chapter 456:

After confessing to Miro and being rejected, Gaold became the subject of ridicule among the students.

Although he wasn't particularly laughable, students would burst into laughter whenever they saw him and offer mock words of comfort.

Gaold didn't care about their gazes.

Just as he had fully embraced the Yore faith, he didn't try to distort or rationalize his feelings.

What troubled him was seeing the woman he cherished the most hanging out with the person he disliked the most.

"Look at them, sticking together again today."

"Yeah, they couldn't stand each other at the beginning of the graduation class. Are they really dating, as the rumors say?"

"What about Gaold? That's really sad."

Hearing the students' whispers, Gaold watched Miro and Sein walking together in the park.

Rumors were rampant in the graduation class that the two were dating.

Honestly, he didn't understand why Miro was hanging out with Sein.

'No, it would have been the same with anyone else.'

Gaold turned away with a gloomy expression.

"Damn it."

He didn't want to run into either Sein or Miro.

"Paranormal Psychic Research Society?"

One day, as the distance between them grew, Miro and Sein made a proposal.

Gaold didn't understand why they were starting a research society amidst their busy graduation schedules.

And a Paranormal Psychic Research Society at that?

For someone like Gaold, who lived by the power of faith, it might make sense, but it didn't suit Sein at all.

'Hmph, no principles? Giving up your beliefs for a girl?'

Gaold was annoyed by everything.

"I'm not joining. Find someone else."

Miro looked surprised and widened her eyes.

"Why? I thought you'd like it. It's one of the reasons you're at the magic school."

"I don't know. I don't even want to talk to you."

As Gaold turned away, avoiding her gaze, Miro asked bluntly,

"Don't tell me, you still have feelings for me?"

Gaold couldn't say yes or no and just pouted his lips.

Seeing this, Miro said calmly,

"Alright then. If you don't want to, there's nothing I can do."

Gaold's heart raced.

He didn't think he would care, but when she decided to withdraw, he felt he couldn't let it end like this.

"Fine. I'll join the society."

It took great courage for Gaold, but Miro smiled brightly as if she had expected it.

"You should have said so from the start. Now we can finally collect membership fees!"

"Wait, is that why you wanted me to join?"

"Huh? No. Well, partly. Hehe."

Miro stuck out her tongue and turned to fill out the application.

'If I was going to do it, I should have just agreed from the beginning.'

Gaold felt a wave of regret.

As a member of the society, Gaold's tasks were simple and laborious.

'Damn it, why me...'

He had to go around the magic warehouse Istas and record coordinates.

Sein used those coordinates to calculate something and discussed it with Miro.

Even in the society, Gaold always felt left out.

About a month later, bad rumors spread around the school. It was said that Miro was breaking graduation rules and leaving the school every night.

Some students claimed to have seen her leaving in a carriage adorned with jewels that even the highest nobles couldn't afford.

The students concluded that Miro had found a benefactor. What Miro was giving in return was obvious, even without saying it.

Of course, Gaold didn't believe it.

Miro was a genius and free-spirited.

She might hang out with rich old men for fun, but she wouldn't seek a benefactor.

However, the rumors grew like a snowball, and when Miro was degraded to a woman who sold her body, Gaold couldn't stand it and confronted Sein.

"Hey, you! What's going on?"

Sein, who was writing formulas on the society's blackboard, didn't react to Gaold's agitation.

"What?"

"Miro!"

Gaold shouted.

"Shouldn't we be doing something to stop these rumors?"

"They're calling her a prostitute!"

"So what?"

"What?"

Gaold looked at Sein in disbelief.

Even at that moment, Gaold didn't realize how much inner conflict Miro was experiencing.

"You! How can you say that? Do you really care about Miro?"

Sein finally put down the chalk.

"Aren't you the one who doesn't trust Miro? Maybe deep down, you wish the rumors were true. Then you might have

a chance.”

Gaold clenched his fists and trembled.

“Are you really dating Miro?”

“...Why should I tell you that?”

“You bastard!”

Gaold grabbed Sein by the collar and raised his fist.

Sein, offering his chin, said,

“How low. Are you so blinded by jealousy that you've abandoned your beliefs?”

The Yore faith opposed violence and followed love. Gaold, who had believed in Yore all his life, couldn't bring himself to throw a punch.

“Forget it. I won't associate with someone like you.”

Gaold let go of Sein's collar and left the society.

A few days later, Gaold made a big decision.

He decided to follow Miro when she left the school after midnight.

“Damn it. So it was true? Jealousy, my ass. Cold-hearted bastard.”

A large house carriage was waiting where Miro was heading.

There weren't many people around at that hour, but it stood there proudly.

“Hmph, not afraid of anything, are you?”

Muttering sarcastically, Gaold followed the carriage.

Casting magic outside the school was forbidden, but considering the situation with Miro, it wasn't the time to worry about rules.

He felt uneasy.

The rumors might be true, or they might not.

If they were true, what should he do?

If they weren't, he would just be a petty man snooping on someone else's girlfriend.

‘Whatever!’

Gaold decided to think about the consequences later and continued to follow the carriage.

The carriage stopped in a plain far from the school.

Thanks to the bright moon, he could see everything clearly. A more luxurious carriage than the one Miro had arrived in was parked there, and an old man who looked nearly 100 years old got out.

‘Damn! He's a complete old geezer!’

Gaold's disappointment in Miro doubled, but it was too early to judge.

“Today is the promised last day. Have you made your decision?”

The old man's name was Gustav Havitz XVI.

One of the three emperors of the Holy War, the emperor of the Gustav Empire.

“...”

Miro didn't answer.

A committee for the Judgment of the Twenty would soon be convened. It was certain that Havitz would be one of the twenty.

The power of the three emperors would also have a strong influence within the committee.

“You are truly beautiful. The most noble child in the world...”

She could avoid being trapped in eternal loneliness, bearing the weight of humanity's fate.

But only if she became the beloved doll of Gustav Havitz.

Even so, it was something Miro had to consider.

Wouldn't it be better to be someone's doll than to bear the burden of all humanity?

“From today, you are mine, Miro...”

Havitz extended his snake-like tongue and approached Miro's neck.

He had no more desires left as the emperor of the empire, but Miro was different.

She was the most noble being in the world, the only hope beyond all of humanity.

Having her would be the perfect final amusement for someone who had ruled the world all his life.

"You can live. You can continue to be happy. I will give you everything..."

Even as the snake's breath approached, Miro just stared into the distance.

"You bastard!"

As Havitz's lips touched her neck and he was about to bite her earlobe, a dull sound echoed, and his face turned.

With a groan, Havitz fell to the ground and looked up in disbelief.

A young man with an innocent face was glaring down at him.

Someone had struck the face of one of the three emperors. No, more importantly, where were his guards?

"You insolent fool! Do you know who I am?"

"Who cares? You're a perverted old man! And Miro, I'm really disappointed. No matter how much you like money and power, how could you be with someone like this..."

Miro blinked at Gaold.

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? Of course, I...!"

Gaold couldn't bring himself to be honest.

"The strange rumors were bothering me!"

Havitz stood up and shouted.

"This worthless human! What are you all doing? Cut off his head! No, capture him alive! I'll torture him for three years before killing him!"

Havitz's voice echoed and then faded into silence.

Only then did the emperor realize something was wrong.

Miro's eyes had turned cold.

"Let me make this clear."

"Ugh..."

Havitz's face turned pale as Miro suddenly seemed enormous.

It was the first time in his life he had felt such fear.

"I reject your offer. I am prepared to sacrifice myself for the future of humanity."

Gaold asked,

"The future of humanity? What future?"

Miro ignored Gaold and turned away.

"And... it's best to keep today's events to yourself. Even an emperor can't handle everything."

Havitz finally understood why his guards hadn't responded. From the moment she arrived, he had been trapped in Miro's space.

"Let's go, Gaold."

"Huh? Oh, okay."

Sensing the gravity of the situation, Gaold followed Miro. After a brief silence, Miro left the space-time field and turned to Gaold.

The cold look from earlier was gone, and she laughed heartily, clutching her stomach.

"You're really something. Do you even know who you just hit?"

"Who cares? Who was it?"

"The emperor of the Gustav Empire, Havitz."

"What! The Gustav Empire!"

Gaold, who had tried to maintain his pride, finally widened his eyes in shock.

Hitting an emperor?

This wasn't just a matter of his family being wiped out; it could directly impact the safety of the kingdom.

But Miro shook her head as if it was nothing to worry about.

"It's fine. He won't tell anyone."

"What on earth is going on? The future of humanity? What have you been doing?"

Miro gave a gentle, somewhat troubled smile.

She hadn't wanted Gaold to know, but now there was no choice.

"Before I explain, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If you had known he was the emperor, would you still have done the same thing?"

Gaold hesitated, not because he was conflicted, but to genuinely consider his answer.

"Of course. That filthy old man deserved it."

Miro didn't doubt Gaold's words. From what she had seen in the extreme heat zone of the survival test, he was more than capable of such actions.

"But you used violence. Doesn't that go against the Yore faith?"

Gaold finally realized and looked at his hands.

It was the first time he had ever hit someone.

No, before that, if he really was the emperor, how had he managed to get here without being caught?

"Did you know I was following you?"

Miro didn't answer that and turned away.

"Let's go back to school. I have something to tell you."

Even then, Gaold didn't know.

He didn't realize that what he would hear that night would change the next 20 years of his life completely.

Chapter 457:

In the meeting of the research society, Miro revealed everything to Gaold that she had previously told Sein. After passing through the dimension of emptiness in last year's survival test, an organization called the Holy War began to move.

They revealed the secrets of the world to Miro and even informed her about the existence of Anke Ra.

Miro mentioned that she had been to Heaven, and that experience had trapped her in a loneliness worse than death.

"Why..."

Gaold stood up and shouted.

"Why did you accept such a proposal?"

"If I don't, everyone will die. I will become someone's successor and protect this world. It's an honorable thing."

"No, it's madness! What do you gain from it?"

"Ha, a follower of the Yore faith shouldn't say such things. Isn't it wonderful to be able to give my love to the whole world?"

"But what about my love?"

"Gaold, love isn't something you can do alone. I don't love you."

"You can love alone. You pretended to date Sein just to deceive me, didn't you?"

Miro sighed.

Normally, such emotions would be embarrassing, but compared to her situation, they were nothing.

"Hah. How did we end up like this?"

Gaold pointed a finger at her.

"It's all your fault!"

“Ha ha ha! What did I do? I was just standing still. This popularity...”

Even in a situation where her life was at stake, Miro's tendency to joke infuriated Gaold.

Didn't she care about the feelings of the person who had to send her away forever?

“Fine! Do whatever you want! I'll forget you from now on.”

Gaold left the research society abruptly, but his heart was more inflamed than before.

Miro's tomb.

The design of Istas, created by Sein and Miro, was like crafting her own coffin while waiting for her death.

‘There must be a way. I can save Miro.’

There was no way.

When he started to realistically consider solutions, Gaold realized how enormous the situation Miro was involved in was.

Gaold prayed through the night.

“God, why her? Why does the person I love have to suffer such pain?”

As Gaold grew more emaciated, the world continued to turn, and finally, Sein informed him that the committee of twenty had been convened to decide Miro's fate.

Gaold recalled the names of the committee members.

Miro's mentor, Mirhi Alpheas, Olivia from the Tormia Kingdom's teaching council, King Adolf of Tormia, and the queen.

Having four people from his own country among the twenty might be an excuse for the secret history that would surface later, but Gaold wasn't satisfied.

The committee included the highest authorities in various fields such as state, religion, society, humanities, history, philosophy, and art, as well as the emperors of the three realms and top-level reapers.

‘Gustav Havitz. He will never forgive Miro.’

So Gaold had only one person to rely on.

The religious figures invited were the pope of the world's largest sect, the Lami Church, and Yora Amium, known as the living saint of the Yore faith.

‘Yes, if it's him...’

Though less influential than the Lami Church, Amium's character was recognized worldwide.

If he could influence the committee, he could sufficiently check Havitz.

Thus, the Judgment of the Twenty was being prepared discreetly, away from the world's eyes.

Near Istas at Alpheas Magic School, the space-time dimension of a scale mage opened, and the world's highest authorities gathered there.

After several sleepless nights, Gaold spotted Amium, the symbol of Yore, walking surrounded by his knights.

“Amium! Amium!”

As Gaold rushed out, the knights' blades flew towards his neck.

“Stop.”

Caught between crossed blades, Gaold couldn't move.

Amium ordered the knights to lower their swords.

As the living saint, it was unthinkable for him to kill someone, so the knights obediently followed his command.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”

“I am Gaold, a follower of the Yore faith.”

Amium silently watched the kneeling Gaold.

“Please save Miro! I have lived my life as a servant of God without shame! I will give my soul! Please, just save Miro...!”

“Did you say Gaold?”

“Please... grant this humble servant God's grace! Show mercy to Miro...!”

“God will forgive us as well.”

Gaold's eyes widened.

It was a shock that shattered the faith he had built his entire life on.

Amium intended to send Miro away.

"Yora..."

"Let's go."

Amium walked away with his guards without another word.

"Security is lax."

Those were the last words Gaold heard from Yora.

"Sixteen votes in favor, one against, three abstentions. The Judgment of the Twenty approves Miro's Moon Project."

No one applauded.

Whether they felt guilty or not, everyone knew it was an unforgivable act.

"So it has been decided."

Even after hearing Sein's words, Gaold stared blankly at the wall.

"Forget it. Miro made the best choice. Her sacrifice gives us all new life."

"New life?"

Gaold slowly turned his head.

"No, we've all lost our light. Because one person took everything and disappeared, we've gained an indelible original sin. We will forever rely on the second and third Miro."

"What's wrong with that?"

Sein looked at the coordinates of the space Miro would leave.

"What's wrong with living with original sin? If that's how it turned out, then we live that way. That's humanity."

"I will go to Miro."

Gaold stood up.

"Don't. She's the one suffering the most right now. We can't do anything for her."

"To Miro..."

Gaold gritted his teeth.

"I will go."

The night before Miro was to leave the world, Gaold called her to the park.

Contrary to his expectations, she came willingly, smiling brightly as if she had already made up her mind.

"Wow, I'm so glad. I was bored to death with no one visiting. Sein is really heartless."

As Gaold stared at her in a daze, Miro laughed and patted his shoulder.

"Why so serious? This is a good thing. I will become a myth beyond history. What could be more glorious for a mage? Living like this is boring anyway."

Though she was always talkative, she was even more so now.

Was it because this was her last conversation with someone?

When Gaold realized this, he hugged Miro.

"Let's run away."

Miro remained calm.

"Let's run away somewhere! Leave with me right now! I'll protect you somehow!"

"How will you protect me?"

Gaold grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back. He looked straight into her eyes and said,

"I'll give my life, do whatever it takes..."

"Gaold, this isn't like you."

"I know! But I don't care anymore! Why you? There are so many people in the world! If it were me instead..."

"Because you're weak."

Gaold looked at Miro with sad eyes.

"So I have to do it. Gaold, understand."

"No. Now I can only see you. I can't do anything without you!"

Gaold held her hand and pleaded.

"Let's just run away! Even for a day, no, even for a few hours..."

Miro roughly shook off his hand.

"Why are you doing this to me! You can't do anything for me!"

Tears welled up in Miro's eyes as she raised her voice.

"Then... save me..."

Seeing the slight resentment in her eyes, Gaold trembled as if struck by lightning.

His mind went blank, and an indescribable flash of emotion flowed through him.

Miro suddenly regained her composure and turned away coldly.

"Forget it. I said that because your selfish thoughts were so pathetic."

Even after Miro left and dawn broke, Gaold stood there as if nailed to the spot.

On the morning Miro was to leave, Gaold looked up at the altar of the Yore Church and put on his pendant.

"God."

It was Gaold's first prayer in his life.

"For the first time, your servant, who has obeyed you all his life, is asking for something. I don't care if I fall into hell. I don't care if I cry out in eternal pain. Just please, give me Miro."

Gaold took his first step towards Miro.

In front of the Istas magic warehouse, the committee of twenty, historians, and high-ranking officials from related departments were waiting.

There was no need for words about the already decided matter, and Miro slowly walked towards the tomb she had created for herself.

Having already mastered the essence of scale magic, opening the space-time dimension was no problem for her.

Sein watched her pass by in silence and then spoke.

"Goodbye, Miro."

Miro's steps halted.

Thank you.

Sein wanted to say.

My feelings for you were genuine.

But he remained silent.

Thus, Sein let go of the woman he loved most coldly from his heart.

Just when it seemed everything would end easily, someone shouted.

“Miro!”

Sein's face turned pale as he looked back.

Gaold, wearing the Yore faith's uniform, was running towards them.

“That madman, does he want to die...”

Before Sein could stop him, the highest-ranking knights drew their swords.

“Deal with him.”

“No.”

The imperial official overseeing the matter intervened.

“This is a highly sensitive issue that could change the direction of humanity. There must be no deaths recorded in history.”

“Then?”

At the official's signal, mages and law enforcers cast anti-magic spells and laws to restrain Gaold's movements.

‘I can do it! I can reach her!’

As Gaold got closer to Miro, his heart pounded faster.

Tick. Tick.

At that moment, powerful anti-magic spells attacked his mind, and the laws of the enforcers pressed him to the ground.

“Ugh! Miro!”

With only his head raised, Gaold called out to Miro, but she didn't turn around.

No, she couldn't turn around.

“Argh!”

Using all his strength, Gaold tried to stand, but the mages and enforcers of the committee were the best in the world.

“Grrr! Grrr!”

As the restraints tightened, Gaold's face twisted in pain.

Tick.

“Crush him. As long as he doesn't die, it doesn't matter.”
As the power of the laws increased, Gaold screamed under the crushing pressure that felt like it would break his spine.
“Aaaagh!”

Thud! Thud!

Blood vessels burst in Gaold's eyes, causing tears of blood to flow, and blood seeped from between his teeth. His facial nerves twitched uncontrollably, making his skin ripple.

Pain Amplification 2x.

“What is this?”

The mages and enforcers finally sensed something was wrong.

No normal human could withstand such intensity.

Gaold, with blood-filled eyes, looked at Miro.

She was only 20 meters away.

Tick...

But those 20 meters felt like an eternity.

...Tock.

Those damn 20 meters!

“Aaaagh!”

Crack! Crack!

Feeling the pain of his entire body being twisted, Gaold continued to step forward.

Pain Amplification 4x.

The closer he got, the further Miro seemed to be.

And at that moment, Gaold's clock stopped forever.

Chapter 458:

“Miro!”

Gaold took another painful step forward. He didn't know how it was possible.

All his senses had become extraordinarily sharp, and with that, the pain intensified.

Physical pain turned into mental anguish, which then seeped into his heart, knocking on the gates of hell.

The human heart is hell.

“Miro!”

As the restraining force grew stronger, Gaold's pain threshold continued to rise.

Even in the midst of excruciating pain, Gaold couldn't feel the changes in his body.

It hurt too much.

The heart has no substance, so it has no limits.

“Aaaagh!”

Pain Amplification 100x.

Gaold's face was so contorted it was barely recognizable as human.

Even the world's greatest mages and law enforcers felt a grotesque horror beyond humanity as they watched Gaold break free and move forward.

“H-how is this possible...”

Sein shouted,

“Gaold! Stop! You'll die!”

Gaold didn't give up.

His heightened nerves were focused solely on the receding figure of Miro.

-You can't do anything for me!

‘God.’

Pain Amplification 400x.

Thud! His nerves burst through his skin.
It felt like he had become pain itself, composed only of nerves.
Thump! Thump!
Each step felt like his bones were shattering, and shocks struck his brain.
Being alive had never felt so cursed.
Was this what it felt like to amplify an extremely unpleasant sensation a hundredfold?
“Stop him! Don't let him get close!”
The committee's eyes were filled with shock.
Even under anti-magic, his mind didn't collapse, and he continued forward, rejecting the laws.
“How can such a human...”
“Grrr!”
As his pain threshold exponentially increased, Gaold gritted his teeth.
His eyes lost their focus and burned, and the gates of hell began to open with his rage and hatred for the world.
“Maximize the pressure!”
At the committee's command, the mages and law enforcers poured all their power into restraining Gaold.
An unprecedented level of restraint, the outcome of which even they couldn't predict, was applied to Gaold.
“Grrr!”
At the same time, Gaold's mind shattered like glass.
His pupils rolled back, and blood continuously flowed from between his clenched teeth.
‘God.’
Crack. Crack.
With each movement, Gaold's bones cracked.
‘I said I love Miro.’
Pain Amplification 10,000x.
‘But how dare... someone like you...’
“W-what...”
Everyone watching turned pale.

Gaold's hair stood on end and began to turn white from the scalp.

"Someone like you..."

Pain is an intensely personal experience.

In pain that transcended the limits of living beings, Gaold was left with only himself.

It was a stark reality without gods, ideals, or aspirations.

That was all there was.

Screeeeech!

As the gates of hell in his heart opened, demons that fed on Gaold's pain emerged.

These demons, summoned by pain beyond mortal limits, descended into the world, and everything around began to burn.

It was the beginning of Gaold's Great Inferno of Extreme Endurance.

Boom!

The anti-magic spells restraining him were nullified, and the laws were shattered, causing the law enforcers to collapse.

"Heeee!"

Gaold, his thoughts scattered, opened his mouth and spat out blood-mixed saliva.

All he felt was pain.

Even breathing, even his heartbeat, just being alive was pain.

Yet he didn't stop.

He moved towards Miro.

To close that damnable 20-meter gap he could never reach.

Miro stopped moving, as if thinking or regretting something.

But without looking back, she continued walking towards Istas.

'Miro! Miro! Miro! Miro!'

With his memory shattered by shock, the only concept left in Gaold's mind was Miro, and that blind emotion was the only painkiller in his agony.

"Activate the Royal Formation!"

At the command of the committee's highest authority, the sealing formation, prepared for emergencies, was activated. A sealing formation was drawn under Gaold's feet, pulling the great evil to the ground.

"Aaaagh!"

The shock of Pain Amplification 10,000x was beyond the comprehension of any human or creature.

But Gaold didn't die. His time had already stopped.

From the wide-open gates of hell, a massive avatar of hatred, burning with fire, emerged.

Gaold screamed,

"Grrraaaaagh!"

He unleashed his fury upon the world.

Gods, humanity, the world disappeared, and his hatred for all humans except himself, who was in pain, spread, turning the world into a hellish landscape.

"Grrraaaaagh!"

It was such an extreme emotion that it felt almost pure.

'Damn it!'

Sein gritted his teeth, holding back tears.

Even as a Servant, Sein's heart wavered before Gaold's extremity.

Like gas from molten lava erupting after thousands of years, his steel-like reason was pierced, and he had to acknowledge one thought.

'Yes, Gaold! It's not over yet!'

Gaold's dislocated arms were pinned to the center of the sealing formation, and his legs twisted unnaturally, but his face still turned towards Miro.

At this rate, his body would be destroyed.

Before that could happen, Sein leaped forward.

Unable to hold back his tears, he grabbed Gaold's face and said,

"Live, Gaold! Not now!"

"Grrraaaa! Miro, Miro..."

"It's not over yet. I'll do something! I'll get you to Miro no matter what! So please, live for now!"

"It doesn't hurt... Pain... I..."

"Accept my magic. Just a little longer, just a little more!"

Sein injected a sleep spell into Gaold's mind.

He knew that with Gaold's current endurance, even his teeth wouldn't work, but Gaold had to believe his words.

If it was Gaold, perhaps the purest and most foolish person in the world...

Sein cast his spell with all his might.

"Gaold, hold on. Just hold on. No one else can save Miro."

"Grrr..."

Gaold trembled as he looked at Miro.

Just twenty steps.

The frustration of not being able to close that gap was nothing compared to the pain of losing Miro again.

'Miro, I'll come for you. I...'

Gaold screamed in agony,

"Aaaagh!"

At the same time, Sein's magic finally began to take effect.

From the outskirts of the hellscape linked to Gaold's mind, shimmering light like an aurora closed in, gradually erasing the hellish landscape.

As the sealing formation's power weakened, Gaold's elongated arms fell limply to the ground.

Thud! Gaold collapsed, hitting his head on the ground.

The twenty judges, their guards, and the execution committee were all in a daze.

Even the world's top knights realized they were drenched in cold sweat only after the Great Inferno had disappeared and sighed in relief.

Gustav Havitz of the Three Realms said,

"He's dangerous. We should eliminate him now."

Though he had been struck by Gaold while trying to monopolize Miro, he didn't hold a grudge.

It was an absurd thought, but perhaps Gaold could erase Miro's dimension.

"Let's observe a bit longer."

As Havitz's subordinates moved, a woman's voice interrupted.

It was Terraze Mistra, the biological mother of Uorin and the queen of Kashan.

Even Havitz couldn't treat the queen of Kashan lightly.

Especially if she was Mitochondrial Eve, her decision wouldn't be based solely on personal motives.

Mistra watched as Sein carried away the unconscious Gaold. 'Gaold...'

She thought that perhaps, in the distant future, his existence could bring about significant changes.

Gaold was urgently transported and treated.

He remained unconscious for nearly a month, and even after waking up, he was tormented by extreme pain transmitted through his hypersensitive nerves.

"Are you feeling any better?"

Gaold lay in bed, clenching his fists and trembling.

The pain was so overwhelming that he couldn't hear any words.

"Rest."

Sein turned away.

He didn't know when it would be, but for the project to proceed, Gaold needed to be able to function somewhat normally.

"I had a dream."

Sein stopped in his tracks at Gaold's words.

"I dreamed of going to Miro."

A story that might come true in the distant future.

Sein accepted it as fate and asked,

"Really? How was it? Did you feel like you were flying with happiness?"

Gaold didn't answer that.

"I will go. Keep your promise."

“Not for you. For Miro.”

That was Sein's last visit to Gaold.

It took Gaold another month to get out of bed.

The pain still tormented his nerves, but he couldn't stay lying down forever.

The graduation exam was approaching. To do anything, he had to become a mage first.

Gaold donned his uniform and went to the Yore Church.

As he silently looked at the circular symbol, Yora approached from behind.

“Gaold, it's been a while. How are you feeling?”

“...”

Yora looked at Gaold's back with pity.

She didn't know the details, but the story of a follower who had abandoned his faith had spread like a rumor.

She didn't know the details, but the story of a follower who had abandoned his faith had spread like a rumor.

It was clear that Gaold was that follower.

“Gaold, you must not blame God. There is a purpose in everything He does.”

Gaold finally turned to look at Yora, giving her his usual beautiful smile.

“No, Yora. I will never blame God.”

As Gaold walked past Yora towards the exit, there was a snapping sound.

Gaold's face twisted into a demonic expression as he clutched the pendant around his neck and tore at his chest.

‘From the beginning...’

His nails dug into his flesh, drawing blood.

The immense pain contorted his face, but his mouth stretched into a grin that reached his ears.

‘God never existed.’

Even after Sein finished his story, Shirone and the others silently stared at the burning torch.

The flames flickering before them seemed to mirror Gaold's heart.

“And so, Gaold abandoned God and wandered the world, seeking strength. He had no limits, so he couldn't adapt. Training in such extreme pain was sheer madness.”

Shirone shuddered at the thought.

Even if his pain threshold increased tenfold, he wouldn't want to walk, let alone train in magic.

“But humans are truly strange. He did it.”

“Did he overcome the pain?”

Sein shook his head.

“No. He accepted the pain itself. The pain he felt in his body became nothing compared to the pain of not being able to save Miro. Whether it was a thousand times or ten thousand times the pain, to Gaold, it was just a sensation traveling through his nerves. But Miro was different. She was an event, a phenomenon. When you dream of the impossible, the gates of hell in your heart open.”

Shirone pondered Sein's words.

Humans created the concept of impossibility, yet they also desired it.

The human heart is hell. Shirone finally understood Zulu's words.

Boom.

A distant explosion echoed through the night sky.

Chapter 459:

“Phew!”

Rider of Iron Wall exhaled.

Moments later, his electric barrier shattered like glass.

Blood spurted diagonally from his shoulder to his waist, and his upper body slid to the ground.

‘Defense magic is done.’

Gaold pulled his dislocated shoulder back into place.

For someone with heightened sensitivity to pain, it was excruciating, but his eyes scanned his surroundings.

The remnants of Cage B Team moved like a storm, but it was clearly a coordinated effort.

‘What are they aiming for?’

The dealers hadn't used their strongest attacks yet.

They knew that ordinary attacks wouldn't work.

‘Are they betting on the Terminator?’

That was likely accurate.

‘They wouldn't include more than two irregulars in a Cage-level team. Which means...’

This was their last chance.

Cage B Team was aiming for one perfect attack, and if Gaold could block it, the victory would be his.

With that thought, Gaold's lips curled into a smile.

“Talking nonsense.”

Gaold aimed at the metal mage Roche.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The air gun fired explosively, and Roche hastily erected a metal barrier.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The deafening noise created air bullet marks on the steel surface.

“Grrr!”

Roche gritted his teeth against the vibrations.

He kept thickening the barrier, but the air bullets quickly chewed through the metal.

The metal barrier, crushed like clay, finally shattered, and dozens of holes pierced Roche's body.

It took just one second for the air gun to penetrate the 20-centimeter-thick barrier.

But that one second bought Rose enough time to approach Gaold.

'This will do.'

Pleasure Magic.

A high-level scent magic that stimulated the brain to evoke the most intense nostalgia.

Gaold's face twisted cruelly.

The already fragile emotional impact grew, tormenting him.

"Grrr!"

The gates of hell in his heart opened, and his extreme endurance turned the surroundings into hell.

Though it made the already violent beast even wilder, Rose had a different plan.

They couldn't overpower Gaold with force. Instead, they would excite him to create a cognitive blind spot.

That blind spot was the only opening to subdue Gaold.

"Roche!"

But Rose overlooked one crucial fact.

Though it wasn't intentional, Roche's death was a perfect trigger for Gaold.

Tarvan, who had been friends with Roche since childhood, was consumed with rage, and that emotion clashed with Gaold's fury, creating a new gap.

"Guh!"

Rose's neck was severed by a blade of wind, and Gaold's upturned white eyes locked onto Tarvan's movements.

'It's over.'

Horkin moved towards Gaold, separate from the plan.

Tarvan and all the mages present were young and talented.

'For the future of the kingdom, this must end here.'

Horkin activated his explosive magic.

Suicide, a spell that caused a temporary magic assimilation effect by self-detonation, unleashed a powerful explosion that swept the area.

Unlike the Battle Arena, the scale wasn't reduced, so the radius was immense.

Cage B Team, having quickly moved away, stared blankly at the smoke-filled area.

Horkin's message was clear: he had ended his own life.

As the eldest member of Cage B Team, he had been a father figure to many mages.

"The old man..."

Tarvan gritted his teeth.

It was a mission he should have carried out.

But Horkin had been the ultimate strategist until the end.

The power of Suicide was on par with Tarvan's Kaiser Blast.

"Is he dead?"

Saint Morak's voice was low.

As the smoke cleared, a dark silhouette emerged.

Gaold stood there, blood dripping from his forehead, looking displeased.

"He's alive."

The mission had failed.

Rose, who could strategize, was dead, and they had lost dealers Roche and Horkin.

"There's only one thing left."

Communication mage Weygan spoke.

"Do we go all the way, or do we retreat?"

They had no intention of retreating.

But Horkin's wish for some to survive weighed on their minds.

"We go all the way."

At Tarvan's words, insect mage Beam stepped forward.

"We need to report to the higher-ups. Not everyone can go."

"Pick anyone. I'll stay."

Weygan raised his hand.

"I'll go. I'm not much help in combat anyway."

No one blamed Weygan. To be part of Cage B Team, one had to have pride. Choosing to live with shame was a sacrifice the remaining members appreciated.

"Let's go."

As the remaining members turned, Gaold flew towards them.

He realized further combat was pointless.

"You were a great team. For what it's worth."

Tarvan's eyes filled with killing intent.

"You don't really think it's over, do you?"

If he could withstand Suicide, Kaiser Blast wouldn't work either.

But he had to try. That was the Terminator's way.

"Stop."

Gaold relaxed his body and stood straight.

"The game is over. I let you have your fun, didn't I?"

"Game? Fun?"

Vibrations gathered in Tarvan's hands.

Gaold continued, uninterested.

"And... you can't go back anyway."

Cage B Team looked puzzled, and Weygan asked,

"We can't go back? Why?"

"You planned to return using the Meta Gate provided by the association, right?"

No one answered, but there were no secrets from Gaold, the former head of the Magic Association.

"Miro's dimension is probably gone. The Meta Gate coordinates would be disrupted."

Weygan's brow furrowed.

Heaven's army couldn't threaten humanity because Miro's dimension disrupted information between the two dimensions.

Only Miro, the owner of the dimension, could decode the encryption.

The Meta Gate had fixed coordinates, remembering the coordinates of Miro's dimension.

But if Miro's dimension was gone, the recorded coordinates would likely be null.

"What are the chances Miro's dimension is gone?"

Saint Morak asked.

With no way to kill him, Gaold had no reason to lie.

But the Meta Gate activation time was only one minute.

If Gaold was wrong, they would lose their chance to return.

"Not 100%, but over 80%."

"That high?"

Cage B Team began to murmur.

"According to my information, Miro was captured by Archangel Kariel. The Archangel of Creation would have found a way."

Miro was in Heaven.

The new information complicated everyone's thoughts.

If Miro's dimension was destroyed, Heaven's army would come to Earth.

The association would soon learn this, but by then, it would be too late. Every second counted.

"We have to check."

Morak looked at the team, and Tarvan asked,

"How?"

"We have to go in ourselves."

"So it's a matter of who goes?"

"I'll go."

Weygan raised his hand again.

There were no objections, and Weygan activated the Meta Gate.

Standing before the black sphere, Weygan looked back at his comrades.

With over an 80% chance of death, emotionally, it felt like 100%.

"If the coordinates haven't changed, I'll come right back. Be ready to leave."

With such a plan, even one minute was tight.

Tarvan nodded.

"Come back quickly. Don't get sidetracked."

"Ha ha! Who knows."

Weygan gave a cute smile and entered the Meta Gate.

A minute passed, and he didn't return.

The Great World War.

A small magic circle appeared on Miro's crown and seemed to penetrate her mind.

Miro's brow furrowed slightly.

The restraint was on a different level from human-made magic control devices.

It was a dangerous magic circle that could explode just by entering the Spirit Zone.

"Why don't they kill me? The dimensional wall should be gone."

Kariel sneered.

"Don't worry. It'll be over soon."

Even with Miro's dimension destroyed, Heaven's army wouldn't move without Anke Ra's permission.

To annihilate the detestable humans, an independent force was needed.

So Miro was still useful.

The Archangel Council had already been convened. If he could get the opinions of the eight archangels, he could gather enough force to destroy humanity.

With Gaold's attack on Heaven, even Anke Ra wouldn't be able to remain inactive.

"Look forward to it. I'll prepare a grand execution."

Kariel left for the Archangel Council with a cold smile.

Even with her life hanging by a thread, Miro showed no fear.

'Not killing me means the final war is postponed. But why?'

She still didn't know.

To realize something and start acting, she needed someone's help.

'Gaold has come?'

Then Sein would be with him.

She had caused Gaold a terrible tragedy with her mistake, but with her dimension destroyed, she could only hope they would complete their mission.

'But still...'

"Whimper. Whimper."

Arius whimpered and rubbed his face against his restrained master, feeling sorry for her.

Miro petted his chin like a puppy and raised an eyebrow.

'What have these fools been doing for 20 years?'

The Seventh Heaven, Araboth.

Ikael sat on the floor, meditating quietly.

Ashur had gone to gather information on Kariel's actions but hadn't returned yet.

Even he, who could manipulate signals freely, found it difficult to observe the Great World War without Kariel noticing.

It would take much longer than usual, as he had to assemble information using signal interference.

Ikael's anxiety grew.

Something unusual was happening in Purgatory. What was going on?

As she sighed softly and calmed her mind, a voice echoed in her head.

"Ikael."

Her eyes snapped open.

It was the voice of Anke Ra, one she hadn't heard in a long time.

"Sinner Ikael, you are summoned."

"The time has come for an answer."

"An answer?"

Anke Ra did not elaborate.

"Come before me. Your sins are forgiven."

Her eyes, wide open, began to shine with a light as brilliant as the Milky Way.

'Finally...'

The time she had spent in penance, her powers restrained, for her unforgivable sin, had passed quickly.

She felt neither excitement nor joy.

Her only thought was to reclaim her position as the Archangel and restore order to everything that had been disrupted.

“Understood.”

Ikael stood up abruptly and left the room.

Her body blurred as she soared to the high spire of Araboth in an instant.

Chapter 460:

A White Space.

The Archangel Council Chamber, known as the White Hall, was a pristine, ink-like space that only archangels, born from pure concepts, could enter.

One by one, the archangels appeared, causing ripples in the space.

A perfect circular table rose from the floor, and seven archangels took their seats.

Their wings of light and halos blended into the white surroundings, making them invisible.

Here, they were equals, each presenting only one opinion based on their own perspective.

The only exception was Archangel Ikael.

But she was not present.

"It's been a while since we've all gathered," said Raiel, the Archangel of Light.

He, who controlled electromagnetic forces, was a handsome figure with a slender, three-meter-tall, androgynous appearance.

"One is missing. Ikael," said Metatron, the Archangel of Existence.

He, who controlled gravity, had a voice that drew others in. At two meters tall, he was small for an angel but had broad shoulders and a strong, square jaw.

"Ikael is in penance. She cannot attend the Archangel Council," said Uriel.

Metiel, the Archangel of Union, frowned.

With her beautiful, broad forehead and golden hair swept back, she had a pure appearance but a cold personality and sharp eyes.

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? Archangels cannot abstain from voting. With seven, there can be no ties.”

Originally, there were eight archangels, including Ikael. If the council was evenly split, Ikael’s decision would be the deciding factor.

Ikael had always taken responsibility for everything.

But with only seven present, every issue would be decided. It was a clean solution, but the problem was that they were in the White Hall.

Decisions made by archangels born from pure concepts affected not only Heaven but also Purgatory and all worlds connected to Heaven.

For all beings under the dominion of the Akashic Records, decisions made in the White Hall were akin to divine proclamations.

Satiel, the Archangel of Disintegration, spoke.

“I agree. Operating the White Hall without Ikael is dangerous. Who will take responsibility?”

In the hierarchy of angels, Cariel and Uriel stood side by side, just as Satiel stood alongside Metiel, the Archangel of Union.

Though the beauty of archangels was unparalleled, Satiel’s personality was even more ruthless and cold than Metiel’s.

“I will take responsibility,” said Cariel, who had been waiting to speak.

“Cariel, you? Do you understand what responsibility means?”

The most intelligent of the archangels, he knew the implications.

“Of course. I convened this council, prepared for the possibility of great destruction.”

“Let’s hear the issue,” said Metatron.

Cariel presented his prepared statement.

“There are impure movements detected in Purgatory. Yet Ra has taken no action. I believe it is time for the archangels to intervene.”

Raiel, the Archangel of Light, asked,
“Does Ikael know?”

Cariel suppressed his frustration.

It had always been this way.

Ikael. Ikael.

Everyone relied on Ikael.

White Hall might have always been hers alone.

“She is no longer our leader. We don’t need her opinion.”

Metiel turned her head, her beautiful voice emerging from slightly parted lips.

“They’re just humans, aren’t they? Why the urgency? We can crush them whenever we want. There’s no need to act on something Ra has halted.”

Uriel supported Cariel.

“Ra never forbade punishing humans. He only restricted the activities of angels.”

Metatron spoke.

“Isn’t that the same thing? Why now? Cariel, what are you thinking?”

“Miro’s dimension has disappeared.”

The space of White Hall vibrated with the archangels’ anger.

Satiel, the Archangel of Disintegration, was the first to react.

“Miro’s dimension has disappeared?”

For the first time since their creation, the entire army of Heaven, led by archangels, had halted and retreated before a mere human’s power. It was their greatest humiliation.

Just the thought of Miro’s face in their halos felt like a crack in their pride.

“We can confirm it. Currently, Miro is captured in the Great World War, with all her powers restrained.”

Screeeech!

As the six archangels simultaneously spread their halos, a deafening noise filled the space.

No creature could withstand the sound, but no one at the round table paid it any mind.

After confirming through their abilities, they retracted their halos.

Cariel's statement was true, and now they had to reconsider.

Raiel, the Archangel of Light, asked,

"So, what's the proposal?"

"We use all our power to attack the land of humans."

"Hmm."

Metatron stroked his chin.

Fairies and giants were separate independent units, but 70% of the power lay with the archangels.

The difficulty lay in reaching a consensus among the archangels.

A decision in the White Hall would mean that the angels and Mara they commanded could sweep away the human world.

"But Ra forbade the activities of angels. What do you think about that?"

"That's why we're using the White Hall. We come from Anke Ra, but we follow the original concept, not the laws of the subordinates. If the White Hall decides, even Ra cannot oppose it."

The archangels tilted their heads.

Cariel was right, but their minds worked differently from humans.

"In human terms, isn't that rebellion? Only humans desire to defy higher beings."

Raiel's words made Uriel look at Cariel with a meaningful expression.

What was driving Cariel?

"It's not defiance of Ra. It's time for archangels to make a decision."

"Ymir..."

A rough voice echoed in the White Hall.

"...is not moving."

All the archangels turned to one.

Faiel, the Archangel of Annihilation.

The most enigmatic of the archangels, he was almost human-sized at 1.7 meters, wearing a white robe with a hood covering his face.

Few in the universe knew his face, and even those who had seen it couldn't define it.

Though the last to be born among the archangels, Fael's rank was not determined by order of birth.

He stood in direct opposition to Ikael, the Archangel of Amplification, differing greatly from the mid-ranked archangels.

Metiel asked,

"Ymir's law is the vanguard of war. If he hasn't moved, does that mean there will be no war?"

"It could mean our victory without war."

"Or the opposite."

Cariel was frustrated by the archangels' concern over a mere giant.

"Does it make sense for higher laws to worry about lower ones? Anyway, let's begin. If more than four agree, we annihilate the humans. We'll sweep Purgatory and destroy the land of humans."

The archangels pondered.

Cariel wanted war, but angels didn't have the concept of persuasion.

Their avatars were too clear, and they knew too much to be swayed by unknown variables.

Each had to decide based on their own nature.

As promised, Uriel raised his hand first, followed by Cariel, Metatron, and Raiel.

The only one who didn't agree was Fael.

Despite Ikael's absence and the defiance of Anke Ra's message, most agreed, showing the archangels' unwavering pride.

'This will rid us of those tiresome humans.'

Cariel's halo smiled meaningfully, and Ikael's face flickered in his mind.

At the top floor of Araboth, Ikael paused before the iron door and reached out.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Anke Ra's heartbeat echoed loudly through the door.

"Anke Ra, your servant requests an audience."

A massive body with reddish-brown, mucus-covered skin.

A formless, collapsed shape, symbolizing Anke Ra's entirety.

Inside the 26-ton body, all organs of a living being existed in a pre-manifest state, with nerves extending to the walls, acting like a brain.

The center of the body bulged and split horizontally as if cut by a razor.

The skin peeled back, revealing a giant eye that looked around like a newborn.

Facing Anke Ra for the first time since her penance, Ikael took a deep breath.

Nerves on the floor intertwined, producing a high-pitched sound that gradually stabilized into a low tone.

"Screech! Ikael, screech! Purgatory, screech!"

The grating sound that seemed to tear her eardrums gradually became a low, steady voice.

"Heretics have begun to act."

Ikael prostrated herself.

Anke Ra's first concept. That made Ikael special.

Despite her unforgivable sin, Ra had not cast her down as a fallen angel, a testament to his resolve.

"No heretic can defy you."

"Someone beyond Miro's dimension has attempted change."

Ikael raised her head.

Anke Ra was the Akashic Records.

For someone to attempt change within his all-encompassing concept, it couldn't be an ordinary human.

"That change is guiding the present. Perhaps there will be no time to hear his answer. That is why I absolve your sin."

Ikael pondered.

Anke Ra avoided war to hear an answer.

"I have one question. What answer does Ra seek?"

"Why am I..."

Anke Ra spoke.

"...not?"

Hearing the question, Ikael's eyes softened.

Memories from long ago flowed beautifully across the surface of her halo.

And the face of a young boy.

"I will handle it."

Ikael spoke firmly.

If she reclaimed her position as Archangel, she would have full authority over Heaven.

Though her control over other archangels would be limited, she could at least prevent meaningless sacrifices.

"There is a condition."

"A condition?"

"I will erase the sin you committed."

Ikael's eyes widened.

Erasing it from the Akashic Records meant it wouldn't just disappear from others' memories; it would vanish from her own as well.

No one, not even Ikael herself, would remember it.

The only beauty she had left, chosen with the resolve to become a fallen angel and face great destruction, would be gone.

"There is a human in Purgatory who will bring me the answer. Can you accept this?"

Ikael's halo trembled.

It was fear.

The thought of losing a memory she could never forget, or thought she couldn't forget.

'But...'

Ikael's eyes sharpened.

'That is why I must reclaim my position as Archangel.'

Having made her decision, Ikael nodded.

"I accept."

Anke Ra did not ask again.

His eye opened wide, and the information of the entire world rippled like waves.

Ikael's halo spread into a ring, and a tiny black droplet began to emerge.

'I'm sorry.'

A single tear rolled down Ikael's cheek.

Chapter 461:

Ymir's body resided deep underground in Helheim.

Far below the icy sea, where even light couldn't reach, Suoi, the bioluminescent creatures that coexisted with Ymir, floated around, emitting faint light.

Suoi, like other creatures in Helheim, had the properties of an incorporeal entity, freely moving between solid molecules and transmitting all the world's information to Ymir through quantum communication.

The only place in Heaven that could confine Ymir's body was the eternal ice of Helheim.

But Ymir didn't think so.

No physical force could confine him.

If it could be destroyed, he could destroy it.

His law, the law of war, was the vanguard, and he knew it wasn't time yet.

Suoi drifted away from Ymir's eyes, displaying various images on their translucent bodies.

Ymir's eyes remained indifferent to the affairs of Heaven, the outside world, and even distant worlds.

Then, dozens of Suoi overlapped, showing a scene of a young man, now a youth, wielding a great sword and fighting many opponents.

Suoi's information was just information.

Ymir trusted his judgment, which was never wrong.

'Not yet.'

One corner of Ymir's mouth lifted.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Just that caused a massive 2-kilometer crack in the abyssal ice wall.

'Not yet.'

Ymir simply waited.

Cariel was busy preparing to annihilate humanity. Uriel, watching him fly around the many devices of the Great World War, turned his gaze to Miro, who was bound beneath the Milky Way mirror.

Accompanied by Arius, who had received a holy baptism from her, Miro met Uriel's gaze and smiled faintly.

At that moment, Uriel realized.

Despite being the detestable human who had opened Miro's dimension and humiliated the angels, his anger didn't turn to hatred because he held a reverence for her.

It wasn't confidence or arrogance. It was the absence of worry because she had no heart.

Perhaps it was the ultimate state of mind a human could reach, the state of emptiness.

'This is the first time I've felt curiosity about a human.'

Uriel asked,

"What are you thinking?"

"Thinking? What kind of thinking?"

Miro, resting her chin on her hand, asked back.

"All thoughts. I'm curious about the thoughts flowing through your mind right now."

"Hmm."

Miro removed her finger from her chin and pointed at Uriel.

"You're handsome. Do you have a lover?"

Miro's gaze swept over the Great World War.

"For an angel's device, it's too crude. The aesthetics are sloppy. What's that foolish archangel so busy with? I'm hungry in reality, but there's no food?"

Miro listed her immediate thoughts and smiled bashfully.

"Maybe if I ask to be released, you'll be charmed by my beauty and let me go?"

Uriel landed in front of Miro.

A 4-meter-long staff of light formed and spun rapidly.

Heavenly Galaxy Wheel.

Whooooosh!

As the terrifying sound of the spinning staff approached, Cariel turned in surprise before Miro did.

When the spinning stopped, a sharp noise pierced the air, making everyone's ears ring.

Uriel, stopping the staff next to Miro's temple, spoke sternly.

"Know your place. Making me angry won't end well for you."

"But..."

Still smiling, Miro half-closed her eyes as if sleepy and asked,

"Why did your heart flutter?"

"..."

Angels didn't have hearts, and Uriel didn't even know what a fluttering heart meant.

Yet he couldn't refute her because the more he tried to shake her, the more he felt shaken himself.

Uriel retracted the staff and flew to Cariel. Now, he too wished for Miro's quick demise.

Cariel, watching the central processing unit's screen, said,

"I told you, provoking her wouldn't end well. She's the one who humiliated Heaven's army."

Uriel had to agree.

How many humans could infiltrate the noble mind of an angel and cause a stir?

Cariel pointed to his forces and asked,

"So, how's your side?"

"First, second, and third divisions are all intact. As are the ordinary angels under my command."

"I see."

While Cariel smiled in satisfaction, Uriel glanced back at Miro with unease.

What was she thinking?

"Cariel."

"Hmm?"

Uriel, still looking at Miro, asked,

"What does 'heart flutter' mean?"

After her audience with Anke Ra, Ikael descended in the elevator of light.

She no longer needed to be confined to her penance room. Seeing the outside world with her eyes for the first time in a long while, her gaze softened.

The world was beautiful because everything came from it. She might have forgotten something. But having already forgotten, it wasn't painful.

A sense of relief.

All her sins were erased.

And that was directly connected to the authority of the Archangel, which had once made all creatures tremble.

As she admired the scenery with a beautiful smile, her expression gradually disappeared.

Regaining the dignity of the Archangel, she looked straight ahead and spoke briefly.

"Ashur."

Clang!

Dozens of panels embedded themselves in front of Ikael, and Ashur appeared.

With Ikael's powers restored, his abilities had grown immensely.

"Your servant responds to your call."

Ashur's voice was filled with power, and his eyes gleamed sharply.

Being the third Mara of Archangel Ikael filled him with pride.

"Where is Cariel?"

"As feared, he has convened the White Hall and is gathering the forces of the other archangels. In 24 hours, they will likely depart for Purgatory."

"Relay what you know."

For Ashur, who controlled signals, transmitting information was faster than speaking.

But it was such an honor that he felt fear.

"Ikael, I..."

"There is no time. I permit mental fusion."

Ashur bowed with a grateful expression.
Numerous panels unfolded and merged into Ikael's halo.
The information Ashur had gathered quickly flashed through her mind, revealing all the facts.
Ikael lowered her gaze.
Deciding where to start wasn't difficult.
“Phew.”
Ikael's eyelids lowered slightly, and she inhaled deeply.
The next moment, her eyes snapped open, and she roared in anger.
Ca~ri~el~!
“Grrr!”
Ashur, nearby, gritted his teeth and suppressed his fear.
Ikael's voice, amplified immensely, spread from the center of Heaven, Araboth, in concentric circles to other heavens.
Ca~ri~el~!
From the First Heaven to the Seventh Heaven, all beings heard Ikael's voice and prostrated themselves.
Fairies, giants, even ordinary angels, none could resist the anger in her voice.
Ca~ri~el~!
The echo penetrated iron, shaking the buildings, and reached the Great World War at the edge of the universe.
Ca~ri~el~!
“Waaah!”
Cariel, his face a mix of fearful emotions, cried out.
He didn't know the situation, but Ikael was coming.
Archangel Ikael was coming.
Moving at the speed of light, Cariel grabbed Miro and Arius and flew away.
Without time to activate his abilities, he pierced the ceiling with his body and disappeared. At the same time, Ikael's afterimage reached the Milky Way mirror where Uriel stood, and with a bang, she appeared.
The air displaced, shaking the Great World War as if an earthquake had struck.

“...”

Uriel looked at Ikael's profile.

Her eyes were filled with supreme confidence.

It was the image of the Archangel he remembered from long ago.

“Uriel.”

“Archangel.”

Uriel immediately bowed his head.

“Where is Cariel?”

Anke Ra had likely given her full authority.

Lying was impossible.

“He went to the Second Heaven.”

The city of fallen angels. The best and only place for Cariel to hide.

“Shall I guide you?”

Ikael shook her head.

Cariel could be caught anytime.

Ra wanted to postpone the war until he received an answer. So the first person she needed to meet wasn't Cariel.

“I'm going to Purgatory. Uriel, inform the other archangels that no actions are to be taken without my permission. If they disobey, I will use the authority of the Archangel.”

“I will comply.”

Uriel, having received the order, raised his head and asked, “Are you going to the rebel command?”

“Yes.”

Ikael's eyes sharpened.

“I will meet the Light of Sector 73, Shirone.”

At dawn, Gaold returned to the First Rebel Command, along with the surviving members of Cage B Team.

Shirone's group, who had stayed up waiting for Gaold, ran to meet him.

Gaold looked exhausted, but thanks to Saint Morak's healing, he wasn't seriously injured.

Sein was immediately interested in the cargo Cage B Team had transported.

It was a container holding a large Tagis.

Sein left with the rebel engineers, while the others looked at Gaold.

Having heard about his painful past, they couldn't treat him as casually as before.

Gaold, seeing their reactions, shrugged it off.

"What are you all doing? Aren't you going to assemble the Tagis? The war starts now. We'll attack in 24 hours."

Kangnan approached.

"Are you okay?"

Gaold raised an eyebrow.

It was unusual for Kangnan to speak with concern, without her usual sharpness.

"Why are you acting like this too? Are you sulking?"

Except for Miro and Sein, she had been by Gaold's side the longest, but this was the first time she had clearly learned about Gaold's past.

"Why would I? If I was curious, I would have asked earlier."

"Heh."

Gaold pointed his thumb back at Cage Team B.

"Try to persuade them. They were half-destroyed by me, but they will be helpful when needed."

As the chief secretary, she knew that Cage Team B was by no means weak. If the high-ranking official they targeted had not been Gaold, the outcome might have been different.

Wiiiiing!

At that moment, a siren sounded from the rebel command control room.

As everyone turned to look, a soldier ran in shouting.

"Air raid! Enemy air raid! It's coming at an incredible speed!"

Everyone's gaze turned to the sky, but nothing was visible.

"What?"

Even the soldier had a blank expression.

Calculating the radar's range, it should have already been within visible distance.

Gaold frowned and said,
"Prepare."

As soon as he spoke, Kangnan assumed a combat stance, and simultaneously, something crashed in front of them. Despite its speed, it took quite a while for everyone to register its presence.

During that time, the attacker spread its wings of light and looked around at the rebels with its head held high.

"That, that is..."

The intruder in the rebel's first command was a single angel. With a face imbued with holy beauty, slender arms and legs, and a slim figure.

Shirone felt like his heart had stopped.

The archangel Ikael was looking at him.

Chapter 462:

Second Heaven, Lakia.

The city of fallen angels.

All the buildings were white, but the walls shimmered with a red light like a mirage.

The streets were empty, and from the thousands of spires came sounds filled with mixed emotions.

As many sounds as there were fallen angels.

There were no taboos for them, and their indulgent minds had lost control, racing towards countless pleasures.

Kariel arrived at the building housing Lakia's executive branch.

The massive brick building was as complex as a castle, with three spires piercing the sky.

The Hall of Corruption.

In a place as vast as the Great World War, countless plaster statues of fallen angels were enshrined like heroes.

The poses of the statues revealed numerous acts, some easily understood by humans, others incomprehensible by human standards.

Kariel threw Miro and Arius towards the altar in the Hall of Corruption.

Arius, who rolled on the floor, bared his teeth like a dog deprived of its prey.

"Growl! Growl!"

Kariel ignored him and looked at Miro.

Her intelligent eyes showed she was trying to grasp the current situation.

"There's no need to struggle. You'll die one way or another."

"Heh, you're the one trembling. Your face was quite a sight earlier."

Kariel's expression twisted.

The reason Ikael was feared was not because she was strong.

Pain always comes to the one who gives their heart, and betrayal cuts deeper, making the world feel like it's collapsing in the face of her anger.

"Do you think you've defeated Heaven's army? No, you're just someone's successor. And now, even that power has vanished."

When Kariel snapped his fingers, the plaster statues in the hall glowed red, and hundreds of Maras sprang out, rushing towards Miro.

"Roar!"

Countless grotesque monsters bared their teeth at Miro's face.

"Despicable woman! I'll chew your bones to bits!"

"I'll devour your soul! I'll make you wander the fires of hell forever!"

The chilling sounds came from close by.

Arius, filled with such hostility that he wanted to claw and tear at her flesh, restlessly circled Miro.

In contrast, Miro didn't even blink.

She gave her heart to no one, which is why everyone threw their hearts at her.

Miro's detachment placed her above all emotions, allowing her to feel no fear.

"What are you plotting? It seems your plan has failed."

Ikael's shout of anger reached Miro as well.

And if this was the city of fallen angels, it meant Kariel was already an outsider to Heaven, with his limbs cut off.

Kariel was also thinking about that.

With Ikael as the archangel, the other archangels wouldn't move.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind: maybe ending it here was the best option.

But then his mind changed.

'Ikael.'

The stronger she became, the more he feared her, the greater his desire to stand above her heart grew.

'Is that all there is?'

Without answering, Kariel turned his body.

The numerous Maras retreated from Miro, showing their submission.

"Radiant Archangel, where are you going?"

Given Lakia's nature, it was impossible to station Heaven's forces here.

In that case, there were those who fit perfectly.

"I'm going to Muspelheim."

Kariel transformed into light and flew away.

To the place where the fallen giants were.

"Ikael?"

The rebels were thrown into confusion just by Ikael's appearance.

Her name had more destructive power than any physical air raid.

Once, they too had been citizens of Heaven.

Ikael's exploits, which had eradicated countless heresies and destroyed entire civilizations, were already the most shining part of myth.

Gaold observed Ikael's demeanor.

Just by looking, he couldn't measure her objectively.

Combat is something you can't understand without experiencing it, as it involves numerous variables.

'I can't win against that.'

Gaold acknowledged his opponent's capabilities.

The fully awakened archangel Ikael was not someone to be analyzed in terms of combat.

She was simply power.

Amplification itself existing in nature.

That's why she came alone.

It could only be seen that Ikael herself knew she could annihilate the rebel's first command alone.

'Ikael...'

While complex thoughts ran through everyone's minds, only Shirone's mind went blank.

Before coming to Heaven, and even after arriving, he never imagined he would meet her like this.

His heart pounded, and his fingertips trembled.

But he couldn't find the beautiful smile she once had.

Only the authority of the archangel commanding Heaven was reflected in her expression.

A sharp metallic noise was heard as Babel flew in from the armory.

Babel, newly equipped with an algorithm by Shirone, immediately detected the overwhelming presence of the archangel and maximized its combat power.

"This, this can't be..."

The rebels were shocked.

It only became real when the two beings were in the same space.

Ikael and Babel were perfectly alike.

Of course, Babel's beauty couldn't compare to the real thing, but from height and body curves to the fingertips, they were identical.

'Babel...'

Ikael looked at the machine that resembled her.

She knew it was the only one of its kind in the world, and she knew who made it, but all conversations with that person had already been erased.

Yet, her eyes held a faint emotion.

Even if the memories were erased, the events themselves hadn't disappeared.

Her body, everything except her memories, felt a nostalgic connection to Babel.

Babel moved quickly, charging towards Ikael.

Eliminating angels was Babel's purpose.

As the sharp iron claws aimed at Ikael's forehead, Shirone activated the Ultima system.

'No! Stop!'

Babel stopped its movement, aiming at the capital.
But there was nothing standing there anymore.
Ikael had already flown past Babel's back and was walking towards the rebels.
Sein, who had experienced Babel's speed firsthand, got goosebumps just seeing Ikael's movement.
'Do we have to fight that monster to rescue Miro?'
Ignoring human thoughts, Ikael addressed everyone.
"Follow Ra's will. If you cease the war from this moment, Ra will also liberate you."
"Liberate? Does that mean we win?"
The rebels murmured.
Even with large Tagis, the outcome of the war was uncertain, so it was unexpected for Heaven to propose a truce first.
Commander Crude stepped forward.
"What exactly does liberation mean?"
"State your conditions. If it's within my power, I will accept anything."
Crude looked at Sein.
Honestly, from the moment Ikael appeared, he thought everything was over, so he didn't expect her to come out so submissively.
Sein signaled with a nod.
Of course, he came here to rescue Miro, not to liberate the rebels, but given the situation, it was best to listen.
"Let's move."
When Crude pointed to the command control room, Ikael shook her head.
"No, you're not the one to negotiate."
"Then who?"
When Ikael looked at Shirone, all eyes focused on him.
Of course, Shirone was a symbolic figure for the rebels as the Light of Sector 73.
But in terms of deciding something at the negotiation table, his experience and position were ambiguous.

No one knew why Ikael specifically pointed out Shirone.

"Let him go."

Gaold said.

If Shirone's condition for activating divine punishment was a one-on-one meeting with Ikael, it was the right tactical choice.

Crude, who trusted Gaold's party, eventually agreed, and Shirone and Ikael walked side by side down the corridor of the command control room, guided by an officer.

Shirone's mind was still in turmoil.

What to say first, why she was so cold to him, many thoughts swirled, but it wasn't time to speak yet.

He could only assume that she felt the same way.

"This is the only place where eavesdropping is impossible."

The officer opened the door to the most secure meeting room in the rebel command and let the two inside.

The door closed, and even the guards left.

Ikael's order was to keep a 100-meter radius clear.

Considering Shirone's danger level, it was an unreasonable demand, but they knew she could do anything if she wanted to.

Shirone and Ikael sat facing each other at the table in the meeting room, silent for a while.

Unable to bear the tension, Shirone smiled and spoke first.

"It's been a while."

Finally, Ikael showed a hint of a smile.

"Indeed. I'm glad you returned safely."

Shirone clearly remembered the situation when Ikael taught him Ataraxia.

If it weren't for her, they wouldn't be meeting here again.

Another awkward silence followed.

Ikael pointed out Shirone because of Anke Ra's will.

She also came here to disarm the rebels and negotiate.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to speak.

'What am I missing?'

From the moment she saw Shirone, a scratching sensation continued endlessly.

The Light of Sector 73. The boy she personally taught Ataraxia.

But why did she try to pass on the archangel's power?

As Ikael recalled her feelings from that time, her halo seemed to flinch in surprise.

Her brow furrowed, and an unknown emotion consumed her body.

"Are you okay?"

Shirone asked worriedly.

"I'm fine. First, about the rebels..."

"Before that, I have something to ask."

Shirone needed to hear this first.

When Ikael blinked, as if waiting for an answer, Shirone took a deep breath and carefully began to speak.

"I've been curious for a long time. Do you have anything to tell me?"

Ikael tilted her head slightly.

There was nothing specific she needed to convey to Shirone.

Yet, she couldn't deny the faint, nostalgic feeling that washed over her, similar to when she saw Babel.

"No."

Ikael's voice was firm.

It was a cold voice, desperately trying to deny something.

"I have nothing personal to say to you."

Shirone's heart sank.

He had risked his life to come to Heaven, certain that he would hear something important from her.

But...

"Nothing at all? You have nothing to tell me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

At that moment, Ikael's voice trembled.

Even though she had no memory of it, her heart had already been given away.

She struggled to find the words, but the more she tried, the more an overwhelming sadness engulfed her.

With a pained expression, she finally managed to say, "I have nothing to say to you."

Ikael stared intently at Shirone, as if searching for the source of the torment in her heart.

In that moment, clear tears began to flow from her beautiful, sparkling eyes.

She didn't understand the meaning of the tears she was shedding.

Chapter 463:

The Land of Fallen Giants, Muspelheim.

In a place where unquenchable flames stretched to the horizon, the fire giants lived.

Among the giants born from the elixir of myths, those who harbored the incarnation of hatred had nothing in their minds but burning hatred, with no clear purpose or cause. Kariel walked leisurely through the battlefield of brawling giants, who were screaming and injuring each other.

They, too, had once been bound under Heaven's command structure, and they knew that breathing fire at the beautiful archangel would result in instant annihilation.

Surtr, the leader of the fire giants, came to greet Kariel. Standing at 7 meters tall and clad in armor of flames, his presence was comparable to a deity, but even he knelt in the most reverent posture before the archangel.

"A humble being greets Lord Kariel."

The intense heat enveloped Kariel.

In Heaven, the biologically strongest being was undoubtedly Ymir, but the fire giants were somewhat unique compared to other giants.

They wielded their own unique magic.

This was likely due to the unstructured freedom of thought inherent in fire.

While Ymir's warrior could be compared to Ikael's three-horned Mara, Ashur, the strongest swordsman in purgatory was undoubtedly Surt.

"I have a task for you."

Surt looked up in surprise.

The fire sword Muspel, which he carried, spewed massive flames and dragged along the ground.

For an archangel to request help from a fire giant was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Surt, who dreamed of returning to Heaven.

"Entrust me with anything!"

Kariel nodded in satisfaction.

Anke Ra had entrusted all authority to Ikael, and she would end the war.

If that happened, Kariel's purpose would be thwarted, and with his limbs cut off, he had no way to oppose Ikael.

But they would come.

'Gaold.'

He would surely come, as long as Miro was alive.

'Though I hate to admit it...'

Miro was exceptional.

If humans had the most outstanding magician, the opportunity to change Heaven's situation could come at any time.

Now was not the time to be picky about gathering forces.

"Prepare the elite troops and come to the Second Heaven, Lakia. I will be waiting in the Hall of Corruption."

"It is the most fitting place for us."

The fire giants were banned from entering Heaven, but according to the principles of the law, the city of fallen angels, Lakia, was an exception, which was why Kariel had fled to the Second Heaven.

"There is no time. Depart immediately."

Having given his orders, Kariel flew straight to Heaven.

It was time to welcome the guests.

"You have nothing to tell me?"

Shirone couldn't believe Ikael's words.

No, perhaps it was true.

A vain delusion, or a selfish and utterly human expectation that it would be so.

Such thoughts might have caused the misunderstanding.

But how could he explain the faint memory lingering in his mind, and the feeling of his heart racing whenever he tried

to touch that memory?

"Perhaps..."

Shirone couldn't bring himself to speak.

He couldn't bear to hear the same answer again, so he asked indirectly.

"Who is Goffin?"

Thud.

Ikael's halo trembled again.

If the angels had seen this, they would have been shocked to the point of losing their minds.

Ikael, realizing this, composed herself.

As Heaven's commander, she couldn't show any disarray while negotiating a truce with the rebels.

"Goffin is the last of the Gaia. After losing the war with Heaven, he left the photon realm. Of course, all information is now lost."

Shirone knew about Goffin's erasure.

But how did Ikael have memories of him?

There was only one possible reason.

Just as humans inferred Goffin's existence through his relics, she must have personal memories of Goffin that had become objectified.

For humans who lived only about 100 years, this was impossible, but this was Heaven, the place most deeply connected to Goffin.

"Were you close?"

Ikael shook her head.

Thinking about that time made her head ache.

"No. He was a stubborn human. He didn't know how to compromise. If it weren't for him, the Gaia wouldn't have suffered so many sacrifices."

Her reaction was subtly different from when Shirone first met Ikael in Heaven.

It was only natural.

According to Babel's records, Gaia and Heaven fought fiercely for each other's annihilation.

"So you met as enemies."

"We clashed countless times and argued endlessly. He was strong. Even as an archangel, I couldn't settle things with him."

Ikael's lips curled up unconsciously.

Even recalling the memories of fighting, her eyes shone with happiness.

"Once, there was this incident..."

Ikael suddenly stopped speaking.

She couldn't remember anything.

It felt like a black hole had punched through the space filled with colorful memories.

As she stared into that black space, all her emotions were sucked in, and a crushing pain filled her chest.

Ikael widened her eyes and bit her lip.

'Not now. I can't be underestimated any longer.'

She amplified her voice and addressed everyone.

"I will change the negotiator. The person in charge, come here."

Shirone became desperate.

She clearly knew, and therefore, she had to speak.

"Why are you deceiving me?"

"About what? I'm not deceiving anything."

"You're different from before! There must be a reason you taught me Ataraxia!"

"It was to keep Kariel in check. Thanks to that, I was able to return to the position of archangel."

"No, you have to tell me. You have that responsibility."

"My only responsibility is to Heaven."

"You are...!"

Shirone stood up abruptly.

Both of them were avoiding the core issue, arguing with just their energy.

"You are the one who...!"

Just as Shirone was about to shout, the door burst open.

Commander Crude, Gaold's party, and the officers, having heard Ikael's message, rushed in.

"What's going on?"

As soon as Plu entered the room, she checked Shirone's condition.

Fortunately, the feared incident hadn't occurred, but the atmosphere was tense.

Ikael was glaring at Shirone angrily, and Shirone was clenching his fists and biting his lip.

Ikael turned her head in annoyance and spoke.

"I admit my mistake. I don't want to drag this out any longer. State your demands. Heaven's only condition is the cessation of war."

Ikael had already reverted to the dignified archangel. And to Shirone, that was all she was.

Everyone moved to the command control room and sat around the round table.

Some people had no seats and stood, including Shirone and Plu.

Plu found it strange that Shirone, who had insisted on a meeting with Ikael, was now staring at the wall, ignoring her.

It was puzzling why Shirone had set the condition of meeting Ikael, and she wondered if there could be anything in the world that would make them both blush while sitting alone with an archangel.

Commander Crude spoke.

"These are our conditions. Return the rebels to Heaven. Ban the elixir of life. Also, strip the Kergoin of their sacrificial rights and elect leaders from all races. These three things."

Ikael's eyes calmed down.

Why did humans love equality so much?

Nothing in this world is truly equal. Yet they hold equality as their highest value.

'Because they are weak.'

Yes, they are weak.

Therefore, this is not subjugation but mercy for the weak.

"I accept. You will no longer suffer from the elixir of life."

"That's not enough."

An officer who had been standing against the wall stepped forward.

He had been glaring at Ikael with fierce eyes since he arrived, having lost his family in the war with Heaven.

"Do you know how much we suffered because of you? And now you want to end it as if nothing happened?"

"Debra, restrain yourself."

Crude tried to stop him, but Debra couldn't hold back his anger.

"Shouldn't you suffer the same pain? One of your angels should apologize and commit suicide! That's my condition!"

Equality.

Ikael nodded. She couldn't go against Anke Ra's will.

"Understood. I will comply."

The round table murmured.

Debra might have lost his reason, but no one expected her to allow an angel's suicide.

Then another officer, who had been watching, stepped forward.

"Give us immortality."

He was a man with a malignant tumor spreading through his body, with little time left to live.

"You don't die even if you're killed, right? So what's the big deal about one angel dying? Give us immortality! That's the condition!"

Equality.

Ikael couldn't hold back any longer after three demands for equality.

As her eyes grew cold, tension filled the room. The command control room began to shake as if an earthquake had struck.

"How far will you indulge, humans?"

Chiiiiing!

Ikael's halo expanded, and Ataraxia was instantly concentrated.

As Gaold pressed down with an air press, the round table flattened.

Ikael, who had already left her seat, flew through the ceiling.
"Damn it! Chase her!"

Ikael's trademark Ataraxia amplifies all kinds of power in the world.

That's why it's the strongest.

Even a gentle spring breeze could turn into a typhoon capable of sweeping the world if Ataraxia was applied.

Sein activated Equilibrium with his iron wheel eye, but it wasn't enough to reverse Ikael's information.

"Attack! If we don't capture her now, it's the end!"

Crude glared at the officers who had ruined the negotiations and then rushed outside.

He couldn't blame them. Even he had momentarily hoped for something.

Ikael was amplifying the underground water veins flowing beneath the command center.

The amplification was at least 20,000 times.

The moment the water veins burst through, everything in the command center would be destroyed.

"As the archangel, I command you."

Ataraxia shot a brilliant light into the sky.

"Annihilate."

The ground shook vertically, and cracks appeared on the floor.

As the iron buildings began to tear like paper, despair spread across the humans' faces.

Gaold's assessment was accurate.

Ikael was not something to be defined by the concept of combat; she was sheer power itself.

Target for elimination: Archangel Ikael.

Just as a massive explosion was about to occur, a black object flew rapidly towards Ikael.

To everyone else, it was a blur, but to Ikael, it was clearly Babel, as if it were etched in her memory.

Even though it wasn't an unavoidable speed, she couldn't evade it because of the black hole in her memory.

'What is this? What did I forget that my mind is...'

After what felt like over ten thousand thoughts by human standards, Babel reached Ikael.

She twisted her body leisurely.

At that moment, an unknown force restrained her.

As she quickly turned her gaze, she saw Shirone, transformed into Vajra Armor, activating Akamai's Antithesis.

'Shirone...?'

Bang!

Babel's fist struck Ikael's face.

Exposed to the tremendous force, Ikael's body plummeted vertically, but just before hitting the ground, she spread her golden wings to stop the fall.

"This... this can't be..."

The rebels, ready for battle, stood with their mouths agape. Even Gaold was taken aback this time.

As Ikael gracefully rose from her prone position, Shirone landed on the ground.

The tendrils of the Vajra Armor spread like a peacock's feathers, aiming at Ikael, while Akamai's eyes on the tendrils locked onto her.

'Antithesis, huh.'

Ikael shrugged off the restraining force with a shake of her shoulders.

'It could certainly bind a lower angel.'

He had become much stronger than before.

But what use was it? There was nothing in the world stronger than her.

"Shirone, if you intend to oppose me like this..."

Thud!

The sound of the ground shaking stopped Ikael in her tracks. The metal angel Babel stood beside Shirone, ready for battle.

Ikael frowned slightly.

The fact that a being resembling her was protecting Shirone was extremely displeasing.

Chapter 464:

'Ikael, why...'

Shirone looked at Ikael with sorrowful eyes.

Her face, frowning, was completely different from the kind impression he remembered.

What was she hiding?

No, why had she changed?

The image of her standing on the side of humans after meeting Goffin had disappeared, replaced by the majesty of an archangel controlling humans with powerful authority.

If they had been even a little late, the rebel's first command would have exploded.

Countless lives would have been lost.

More frightening than hitting her was the fact that someone could die by her hand.

"Stop this now. You said you came to make a peace agreement, but now you're changing your words like flipping a hand?"

"Shirone, there is no eternal peace. I only came to propose a truce. But human indulgence has reached the heavens, so I am destroying them by the law."

Anke Ra wants to hear the answer to the question of the one who disappeared. The truce is only for that purpose.

Ra's will, which craves an answer even while prohibiting the activities of angels, was deeply conveyed to Ikael, but she couldn't just leave the arrogant humans alone.

"The negotiations are broken. I will destroy the rebels here and establish Heaven's authority."

"Do you think it will be that easy?"

Gaold's party approached from behind Shirone.

Around them, hundreds of rebels, ready for battle, were mounted on Kuroi. The sound of Titan engines could be

heard in the distance.

From Ikael's perspective, it was laughable.

No human could harm an archangel. The very status of the law was different.

If possible, it would be a law beyond the law. Something that transcends humans.

'Like that person...'

Ikael shook her head firmly.

She would think no more.

"Prepare. They're coming."

A thick fighting spirit rose from Ikael's body.

Even without Ataraxia, the powerful aura made the mountains and rivers tremble, and Shirone's party tensed up.

Gaold glared at Ikael with unprecedented sharpness.

The power of the archangel he faced was indeed formidable.

But he couldn't lose.

Even if he couldn't win, he had a reason why he absolutely couldn't lose.

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The ground where Ikael stood began to crack in a circle as it was pressed down.

Her body was ready to burst out with terrifying explosive power.

Before humans could perceive it, she could reach the entire rebel command.

In other words, the first target would surely die.

Even Cage Team B, who had intended not to get involved in this incident, had to take a defensive stance from a distance.

'The first target to eliminate is...'

Ikael's eyes flashed as she sprang forward.

'Shirone.'

Although Ra had prohibited the activities of angels, archangels born from the original concept were not bound by Ra's law.

Therefore, they were likely already observing the situation here in real-time through 'overlooking.'

Ikael captured the gradually approaching figure of Shirone in her eyes.

The speed was so fast that all the scenery, including Shirone, seemed to freeze in time.

'If I don't show my will, the authority of the archangel will be shaken.'

She had already shown too many ridiculous sides.

If she wavered any more, the archangels would act independently of Ikael's authority, creating a significant obstacle to fulfilling Ra's will.

'Therefore...'

She would eliminate Shirone.

At the point of this thought, her body had already closed half the distance to Shirone.

Then the scenery began to move slowly.

Babel and Gaold leaned in almost simultaneously, followed by Sein, Zulu, and Armin.

Next, Kangnan, then Etella, Shiina, and Kuan took counterattack stances.

Finally, even Plu, performing automatic actions through the Dawkins algorithm, did not move.

In the state of Vajra Armor, cognitive abilities increase tremendously.

Therefore, the immobility was entirely his choice.

Thinking quickly can be unfortunate in some ways.

You see things you shouldn't see and think things you shouldn't think.

Ikael gritted her teeth and raised her claws at Shirone.

She would rip out his heart.

Dodging Babel's strike, she extended her five fingers towards Shirone's heart.

The wind, pushed from tens of meters away, hit Shirone, blowing his robe back.

At the same time, Ikael's hand stopped abruptly.

'Why...'

Shirone's face, filled with sorrow, was revealed.

'Are you crying?'

Tears were flowing from his incredibly lovely eyes.

It was a stronger restraint than the authority of the archangel or even Anke Ra.

How much had she given to this boy?

As everyone froze in their counterattack attempts, Shirone spoke in a trembling voice.

"I just wanted to hold you like before... just once..."

At Shirone's voice, Ikael's halo began to shake violently.

The memory was erased. But the memory of the erasure was not erased.

The small, perhaps even thinner than a particle, edge of the erasure was stained with emotions deeper than the universe.

She truly lost her memory, but she realized that it was a memory she should never have lost.

Whatever it was, she had to accept that it was incredibly precious.

Ikael slowly lowered her hand.

She couldn't hug Shirone, but she couldn't hurt him either.

'I just have to accept it.'

Ikael slowly stepped back.

With each step she took back, the tension weighing on everyone's shoulders seemed to lighten by several tons.

When Ikael returned to her original position, a colorful panel shone in front of her, and the three-horned Mara appeared.

Only a few of Gaold's party knew that Ashur was Heaven's greatest swordmaster.

"Lady Ikael."

"Speak."

Ikael still kept her gaze on Shirone.

The reason for her indifferent tone was that she already had an idea.

"It's a rebellion. Kariel has summoned the fire giants to the Second Heaven, and Uriel has joined him. The remaining archangels have scattered across Heaven with different purposes."

They had realized it too.

Although Ikael had regained her original power, she had a fatal flaw that was different from before.

If she couldn't lead everyone with her powerful strength, the archangels would act according to their own judgments. Of course, only Kariel and Uriel would deviate enough to reject Anke Ra's message after prohibiting angelic activities. But at least the three Maras under the other archangels were free.

'Heaven is indeed in a period of upheaval. But this is also my burden to bear.'

Ikael asked.

"What about the lower angels?"

"They haven't left the temples. As long as they are bound by the higher law of the archangels, they won't do anything foolish."

It wasn't something he could guarantee.

If another archangel caused another rebellion, it would affect the lower angels as well.

"Let's go back. The negotiations are broken."

Ashur, nodding, looked back at Shirone with a troubled expression.

The sins Ikael committed were erased when she was reinstated, but only Ikael had lost her memory.

Therefore, Ashur had some idea about the relationship between Ikael and Shirone.

But it was extremely abnormal and dangerous.

To perfectly reinstate Ikael, it would have been best to reset her. Erasing the incident itself would prevent any variables.

But Ra didn't do that.

'Or couldn't he?'

Could that be the case?

Even the Ultima system couldn't stop Ra's reset. Therefore, the fact that he couldn't do it meant that a situational constraint beyond Ra's ability was at play. 'In other words, Ra is currently unable to attempt a reset.' An electric signal, signifying a shiver, ran through Ashur's body. 'Damn it! That's right. The timeline we're in now...' They had struck before the underlying event was completed. Therefore, the war between Heaven and the rebels was only a visible situation, with a high-level psychological war unfolding behind the scenes. Perhaps someone, a group, an organization, or something larger on the human side. 'That's why Ymir isn't moving. It's completely tangled.' If they were trying to create a variable first, the event they were experiencing now was the first event outside the reset. In other words, it was a raw timeline flowing. Even the supreme spiritual beings, the angels, couldn't predict the variables of time flowing beyond causality. Anke Ra wasn't suppressing the war but rather fighting alone. Against someone controlling the timeline from the human side. 'Then I must keep my mouth shut too.' Not knowing how today's small variable would affect Heaven, he had no choice but to follow Ra's judgment. Embracing the frustration of not being able to predict even the near future, Ashur signaled Ikael to return. As Ikael was about to fly up, Gaold asked. "Where is Miro?" Today's incident had dampened the rebels' spirits, but Gaold would come. That's why Kariel had imprisoned Miro in Lakia. "She is in the Second Heaven." Ikael revealed it without hesitation. She also vaguely sensed what Ashur was thinking.

To lead the seven archangels, it was best to bind the most dangerous elements, Kariel and Uriel, to some extent.

"I see. We'll go find her."

Ikael didn't respond and flew up like light, disappearing from everyone's sight in the command center.

The atmosphere in the rebel command was solemn.

They couldn't blame anyone else for ruining the unprecedented proposal from Heaven.

The officers couldn't decide on the war and held heated discussions all night, while Gaold's party was deep in thought, each contemplating their own ideas.

Regardless of their decision, the project had to proceed.

This was true not only for Gaold but also for Shirone.

'Ikael...'

Why had she treated him so coldly?

If it was just a misunderstanding, he could accept that.

But in the end, she couldn't attack him.

In that hesitant tremor, there was the message Shirone had truly wanted to hear.

There was a knock, and Sein entered, prompting Shirone to force a smile.

The slight bitterness in his smile was because he guessed the reason for Sein's visit.

"How are you feeling?"

It was strange for a savant like him to care about emotions, but it didn't feel bad.

"I'm not sure yet. It doesn't feel real."

"I won't ask about your relationship with Ikael."

Sein was sincere.

That was Shirone's personal matter.

"I understand. Since I've fulfilled the contract conditions, I won't hesitate. Please plan the operation to activate divine punishment."

Sein nodded.

That was the most important issue for now.

"If there was something about Ikael that differed from your expectations..."

Sein brought up the second issue.

"It might be due to Anke Ra's Akashic Record."

"Are you saying Ikael lost her memory?"

"That's a possibility. When a part changes, the whole changes. Anke Ra is the whole, so it doesn't matter how it changes, but we intend to use the variables that come from it. Ikael is also within that range of variables."

Shirone understood what Sein was implying.

The war wasn't over yet.

"You will carry out an independent mission. It would be best if Zulu supported you, but we have some concerns on our side. Plu will accompany you."

Shirone was pleased.

He had felt it at the Second Command as well, but Plu was the most reliable ally.

"Yes, I'm very happy with that."

"Rest. We'll inform you once the plan is set."

Sein finished his brief business and turned to leave.

As he was about to exit, Shirone spoke.

"Thank you."

Sein closed the door, pondering his final words.

"...It's just part of the strategy."

That might be true, but Shirone felt much lighter than before.

'Ikael.'

He would meet her again.

That was the only reason he had come to Heaven.

Chapter 465:

The Dawn of Morning.

The large Tagis engines roared to life.

Powerful electromagnetic waves struck Heaven directly, completely paralyzing Heaven's Aegis air defense system.

"Charge!"

Under the command of the unified rebel headquarters, an army of 150,000 soldiers advanced towards the gates from the First Heaven to the Sixth Heaven, excluding Araboth.

Thus, the war with Heaven began.

"Senpai, this way."

Shirone and Plu successfully infiltrated the Third Heaven, Shehakim, where the immortal citizens resided.

Currently, the rebels were unable to break through Shehakim's gates, but that was part of the strategy.

The most important task was to transport Shirone, the Terminator, to Araboth.

It was an espionage operation to divert the enemy's attention to the outskirts and infiltrate a small number of personnel into the enemy's territory.

Shehakim, which they visited for the first time, was different from Shamain, where the citizens lived.

Although the races of Nor, Mecca, and Kergos were mixed, the place where they stayed was a standardized building called Paradise.

The white brick houses varied in size but were all beautiful.

The people walking around had abandoned their racial characteristics and wore the airy clothes of the immortals. Immortality. Those who had escaped the terror of the elixir of myths.

Despite the ongoing war on the outskirts, their lives had not yet seen significant changes.

"Truly impressive. The confidence of the immortals?"

Plu observed them with a critical eye.

There was no sign of fear in the way they smiled kindly and chatted with the passersby.

"First, let's get some clothes. We can't walk around like this."

With only the two of them as combatants, they couldn't fight their way to Araboth.

The best strategy was to blend in with the crowd.

Shirone and Plu infiltrated the nearest Paradise.

Inside, a family was enjoying tea time by the indoor pool and the glass walls.

Shirone went around the back of the building and jumped to the second floor.

From the high vantage point, he could see many fairies moving about the city.

Given that the war had already begun, security was likely much tighter than before.

Meeting Plu's eyes, Shirone opened the window and entered.

They found Shehakim's clothing in the wardrobe and quickly changed.

After changing clothes and putting their original clothes in the Kubrick, the door opened.

"Huh? Who are you?"

Shirone and Plu froze, watching the girl.

Even with the Spirit Zone deployed, they hadn't sensed her presence.

"Could it be... are you spies?"

Shirone slowly stepped back.

She wasn't human.

It was clear they had walked into a trap from the start.

Plu summoned Phoenix to block the girl's approach.

They already knew she was incorporeal.

But the problem was that they couldn't find a way to escape.

The sense of reality was so strong that it was hard to believe she was fake.

'Is it a space-bound ability?'

Plu shouted.

"Get out of here!"

"Kyah!"

At the same time, the girl screamed and transformed.

Her innocent appearance vanished, replaced by the grotesquely twisted face of an evil witch, who lunged at them. Plu activated Phoenix Formation.

A bird of flame soared up, spewing massive fireballs at the girl.

As the fire spread, the scenery wavered like a mirage.

Shirone activated Vajra Armor in response to the distortion of the landscape beyond the limits of matter.

Regulation Exception - Paradise.

The ability of Orga, the head of citizen management in Shehakim.

A mental magic that materialized Paradise in the mind, causing horrific illusions for those who entered the building. Shirone and Plu headed for the window they had originally entered through.

But outside the window was nothing but a void of darkness.

"We're completely trapped!"

Moments later, the door opened, and monsters with patchy hair, like lepers, rushed in.

"Graaaaah!"

Shirone swung Arman's tendrils, cutting them down in one sweep.

The severed monsters were absorbed by the ability of the devouring ghost Kuzen, which converted them into energy, granting Shirone powerful physical abilities.

As they exited the room, monsters flooded the stairs.

When Shirone unleashed the Photon Cannon, the monsters' bodies caved in as if struck by a hammer, tumbling down the stairs.

Shirone jumped over the railing and descended to the hall. Plu flew across the air and landed on the opposite railing. The paintings on the ceiling materialized and attacked them.

Snakes, bats, gargoyles, and unknown creatures swarmed, turning the inside of Paradise into a battlefield.

No monster could inflict even a small wound on Shirone.

Arman's tendrils grew faster with Kuzen's absorption, eventually moving so fast they were invisible.

Only the sound of a strong wind echoed in the hall as countless monsters exploded like fireworks.

'This won't be enough to stop us. But...'

They couldn't find a way out.

If entering the building triggered the Regulation Exception, finding the door was the closest solution to deactivating it.

"Senpai! The door...!"

Plu somersaulted in the air, striking the monsters with Phoenix.

Landing next to Shirone, she looked around with a pale face.

The doors lining the corridor rattled open, and even more ferocious and gigantic monsters poured in.

"There's only one place where no monsters are coming from."

Shirone had guessed it too.

Without further words, the two of them headed for the basement.

"Graaaaah!"

The monsters blocking their view were torn to pieces by the tendrils.

Even Plu, who had fought alongside Shirone at the Second Rebel Command, was overwhelmed by his immense power. But there was nothing more reassuring for carrying out the mission.

'We can do it! We just need to get to Araboth!'

As they entered the basement, the door closed automatically, and the torches on the walls lit up.

No more monsters appeared, but they knew they could never return to the surface.
The two headed down the dark corridor to the end.
Entering a brightly lit dressing room, they were greeted by a large mirror.
But the reflection was not of the two of them; it was a woman with long black hair and a seductive appearance.
Regulation Exception - Paradise.

✎Mirroring: Equal Rights.

The woman, smiling from within the mirror, stepped forward.
Shirone and Plu heightened their vigilance and slowly backed away.
"Be careful, Shirone. The complexity of the Regulation Exception surpasses human understanding. She's an incredibly powerful fairy."
Shirone had no objections.
No matter how specialized in mental abilities a fairy was, it was difficult to materialize a building in such detail.
'How did she do it?'
"Welcome. I am Orga, the manager of Paradise. I've been waiting for you."
Shirone didn't respond.
He knew they were caught in the Regulation Exception.
As expected, she spoke immediately.
"To leave this place, you must win a bet with me."
Plu asked.
"What kind of bet?"
"Equal rights."
Orga pointed her index finger with cold eyes.
"From now on, we will make 'performable proposals' to each other. And we must follow those proposals. However, when making a proposal, you must also perform it yourself. The one who fails to perform the proposal loses."

Shirone's face grew serious.

He didn't fully understand the intent yet, but he felt the danger.

Plu asked.

"Who performs the proposal? There are two of us."

"Only one of you needs to perform it. That's equal rights."

With the Regulation Exception activated, they had no choice but to comply.

As Shirone and Plu nodded in understanding, Orga made the first proposal.

"Take off your top."

Orga removed her top and threw it on the floor.

Having fulfilled the condition, it was now Shirone or Plu's turn to take off their top.

'She's trying to deactivate the Vajra Armor.'

She couldn't directly propose to deactivate Arman.

In equal rights, the proposal must be performable by both parties, and Orga, without Arman, couldn't perform it.

Plu was glad she was there to support Shirone.

If Shirone had faced Mirroring alone, he would have been disarmed without a chance.

"I'll do it."

If they didn't comply, they would lose.

The result would likely be death.

Plu removed Shehakim's clothing and took off her top.

Noticing that Orga wasn't wearing underwear, she matched the state.

It was the correct answer.

"Good. Now it's your turn to make a proposal."

"I'll do it."

Shirone stepped forward.

The standard approach when dealing with a Regulation Exception user was to understand the rules and find a solution, as Marsha had said.

There was something he needed to confirm.

When physical damage was inflicted, did the real Orga take the damage?

If the woman in front of him was just an illusion, self-harm would only damage Shirone.

'No, that's unlikely.'

The abnormal rules of equal rights were based on the principle of equivalent exchange.

If the ability didn't allow damage to be inflicted on oneself, it wouldn't allow damage to the opponent either.

'She's an incredibly clever fairy. With the principle of equivalent exchange alone, she can strike the opponent and respond to numerous variables.'

Therefore, there was something worth trying.

'If this works...'

Shirone took a step forward and made his proposal.

"Break your left index finger."

Using Kensler's healing ability, it would heal in a few hours.

The key was her condition.

Orga continued to watch Shirone without any change in her expression.

There was no reason for her to follow a proposal that the opponent couldn't perform.

Shirone also didn't avert his gaze and grabbed his left index finger.

Gritting his teeth, he applied pressure until the joint bent outward with a crack.

It hurt, but he had to endure it.

This was war.

Orga slowly lowered her hand and grabbed her index finger. When the sound of the bone breaking was heard, Shirone's eyes sparkled.

He noticed the mirror behind Orga shake for a moment.

'Physical damage works. That means...'

Without giving her time to think, Orga made the second proposal.

"Take off your pants."

Shirone clicked his tongue at her persistent attempt to deactivate the Vajra Armor.

It was only natural, given that it was a powerful weapon capable of sweeping away countless monsters in Paradise Hall.

'Ah, I see!'

Shirone noticed the beautiful ornaments on Orga's body as she stood naked and realized something.

If this continued, they would eventually have to deactivate the Vajra Armor.

Plu, now fully undressed, had only the Kubrick left.

On the other hand, Orga still had two pairs of earrings, a necklace, two rings, and three bracelets.

If Plu discarded even her ring, she would be in a state where she couldn't perform the proposal, according to the conditions.

No matter how abnormal the situation, if it followed the rules, it was a Regulation Exception, and they would be cornered.

'There's no time. I have to settle this in the next proposal.'

If the Vajra Armor was deactivated, they wouldn't be able to handle the monsters in Paradise, and that was what Orga was aiming for.

As Plu began to take off her pants, she muttered.

"Why is it always me..."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Shirone couldn't help but let out a small laugh.

'I'm sorry, Senpai.'

In any case, Plu had come to the same conclusion and complied with the proposal.

And now it was time to end it.

'I can do this. No, it's the only way.'

Shirone glared at Orga with a determined expression.

"My proposal is..."

Chapter 466:

A moment of silence followed.

Though it wasn't their last chance, they knew that if this didn't work, they would ultimately be the ones to lose.

Would it work?

It was a gamble, almost a 50-50 chance.

The biggest issue was that they were currently in a space created by the Regulation Exception.

How much of a gap was there between the Orga in front of them and the real fairy Orga?

If the impact was even slightly indirect, the operation would fail.

'This is an incredibly complex and delicate Regulation Exception.'

The entire building was materialized, with numerous Regulation Exceptions installed in each room.

Was it even possible?

No human could distort so many objects to this extent.

If it were possible...

'The flow of consciousness.'

Shirone recalled his experience with Drimo.

Only the space they were currently standing in was materialized, while the other rooms existed in a state of nothingness.

It was like thinking about your house in your mind, not viewing it all at once but letting your thoughts flow as if you were moving through it.

If that was the case, it was possible to contain another Regulation Exception within a Regulation Exception.

'Though it's not an easy task...'

Therefore, Orga's consciousness was focused on this room.

This was the hypothesis Shirone had formed.

Having organized his thoughts, Shirone proposed to Orga.
"Don't take your eyes off me for one minute."

It was a strange proposal.

But Orga had no right to change the proposal.

"Alright. Let's do that."

Shirone stared intently at Orga.

Once this act was over, it would be Orga's turn.

The outcome would be decided there.

'Valhalla Action.'

In a situation bound by the Regulation Exception, actions outside the rules were likely prohibited.

But Valhalla Action might be possible.

The equivalent exchange of cause and effect would accept even the cause of the prohibition and convert it into a result.

Therefore, the key was the calculation time.

Even with Ataraxia's accumulation time reduced to less than 30 seconds, Shirone proposed one minute to buy some extra time.

As Shirone performed the proposal, Orga stared at him.

Staring meant Orga's mind was fully focused on Shirone.

Clang!

The magic circle of Valhalla Action appeared above his head.

The calculation was instantaneous.

'It's working!'

Exactly 57 seconds.

That was the time it took for Ataraxia to accumulate while under the effect of Mirroring.

Before Orga could say anything in surprise, the cause and effect reversed, and a dazzling Ataraxia appeared before them.

"Kyah!"

Even the head fairy of Shehakim couldn't withstand the magic circle of the archangel, especially Ikael, the highest authority in Heaven.

In fact, the stronger the fairy, the greater the impact.

Cracks appeared on Orga's body, and light began to seep out.

The seal of light grew in size, eventually engulfing her and oxidizing intensely.

Rumble!

As Paradise collapsed, the original scenery was revealed. It was still Paradise, but the plaster on the walls had all shattered and fallen to the floor.

The fragments of plaster were inscribed with various complex patterns painted in red.

'She designed the space and controlled it with her mind.'
Plu felt relieved.

If a fairy could materialize a building to this extent with a Regulation Exception, humanity would have no chance in this war.

"Ugh!"

Orga lay on the ground, her small, frail body writhing in pain.

The sudden Ataraxia attack was like being stabbed with a knife for a fairy specialized in mental abilities.

"Director! Are you alright?"

Numerous fairies assisting Orga rushed to her side, shouting in concern.

Then they turned to Shirone's group with terrifying eyes.

"They're rebel spies! Kill them!"

As the fairies flew at them, Plu stood in front of Shirone. She didn't know how long the price of Valhalla Action would last, but she had to fight until Shirone could move.

"Phoenix Formation!"

Plu raised the firebird high and opened the Dawkins Algorithm to face the fairies.

The fairies of Shehakim were among the top ranks of the 72 classes, and fighting them felt like battling a group of professional magicians from the human world.

Flames spewed out, and the different concepts of the fairies shook Paradise.

'I can't hold out for long!'

The limitation of the Dawkins Algorithm lay in the magician's physical abilities.

No matter how automatic the reactions were, if subjected to continuous attacks like this, her body wouldn't hold up.

'54 seconds.'

The collaboration of the fairy of brute strength and the fairy of suddenness was the most troublesome.

When the immense strength pressed down on Plu, the fairy of suddenness would thrust a thorny spear in an unpredictable trajectory.

'55 seconds.'

Each time, Plu's body twisted grotesquely, and her joints screamed in pain.

"Kill them! If we capture them, the war will end!"

The rebels' firepower was formidable even to Heaven, but capturing Shirone, the Light of Sector 73, would crush the enemy's morale.

Orga's strategy, deducing the espionage tactics from the battle on Shehakim's outskirts, was worthy of being called a fairy strategist.

'56 seconds.'

When the fairy of loud noise fired a sonic wave, it sounded like hundreds of tons of steel beams were being pushed aside right next to her, disrupting Plu's concentration.

"Ugh!"

As the Dawkins Algorithm broke, dozens of fairies rushed in from all sides.

Exactly 57 seconds!

At the same time, Shirone sprang forward from the ground.

Just as the fairy of brute strength was about to crush Plu's head, a blur passed by, and instead, her body exploded.

Then the surrounding fairies began to shatter into pieces.

Orga, barely regaining her senses, stared blankly at Shirone with eyes hidden beneath heavy makeup.

The tendrils were moving so fast they were almost invisible.

While magic might be effective, fairies were vulnerable to physical attacks.

"Ugh!"

"Director! You shouldn't move yet!"

"Request... request support."

Meanwhile, Shirone continued to eliminate all the visible fairies.

"Over there!"

Before the fairies could request support, the giant unit charged in, with the immortal Kergos among them.

They had once been part of the hunting squad, making their combat power overwhelming even among their kind.

"Shirone! We should retreat for now!"

Given that the premise of stealth had been broken, it was best to follow Plu's advice, but escaping now was impossible.

He had already experienced the Kergos' tracking skills in Heaven.

"Hmph!"

Shirone glared at the enemy.

An artificial brain eye emerged, and Akamai's Antithesis bound them.

"Ugh!"

The immense restraining force made even the giants and fairies tremble in shock.

Though a fallen angel, the restraining force that could immobilize the angelic Ikael was not something mere giants could break.

With the added magic amplification trait of the true demon species Galatomic, a photon cannon several times larger than before appeared before Shirone.

The photon cannons multiplied like shadow clones, and finally, twelve massive spheres of light shook, emitting a brilliant glow.

"Now!"

Shirone fired all the photon cannons and turned his body.

As Antithesis was released, the enemies began to move, but the photon cannons had already reached them.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom!

A deafening explosion erupted in Sector 12 of Shehakim, and light flashed.

While the nearby enemies would likely converge, it was actually fortunate for Shirone's group.

"Hurry!"

Shirone and Plu leaped over the Paradise buildings and fled.

"Chase them! Don't let them escape!"

The surviving Kergos quickly pursued them.

The chase lasted for 30 minutes.

Skima's physical abilities shone in urban warfare, and Shirone and Plu managed to evade their pursuers by setting a complex route.

"Huff, huff!"

The two leaned against a wall, gasping for breath.

Arman increased their oxygen saturation, quickly stabilizing their breathing, and Shirone's broken finger had already healed.

'Healing a fracture in just a few hours...'

It was thanks to Kenser's trait of infinite cell regeneration.

"What do we do now?"

"We go to Araboth."

"But we don't know where we are. We're lost. And..."

The enemies already knew Shirone had infiltrated.

The difficulty of the mission had skyrocketed compared to the beginning.

"First, let's find some clothes."

Though they had been severely affected by Orga's Regulation Exception, they couldn't walk around in their current state.

"I found you, Shirone."

At the voice from the sky, Shirone and Plu's faces turned pale.

As the voice reached them, a small creature entered their Spirit Zone.

A small creature. A fairy.

'We have to kill it!'

Plu turned, and Shirone swung his tendrils faster.

The fairy flinched at the sudden attack.

Shirone was able to stop the tendrils because Arman had enhanced his dynamic vision to the extreme.

The sharp needle of the tendril stopped right in front of the fairy's eyes.

Seeing the fairy trembling with her eyes tightly shut, Shirone removed his hood with a blank expression.

"You, you...?"

The spiral fairy, Feope, who had helped Shirone until the end during his last visit to Heaven, slowly opened her eyes.

"Eek!"

Feope recoiled in fear at the needle in front of her.

Then, with a flushed face, she shouted at Shirone.

"What are you doing! Are you trying to kill me?"

Shirone quickly retracted the tendrils.

"Feope! It's you..."

More than anything else, Shirone felt a surge of relief and joy. In the midst of the battlefield, seeing Feope's face brought tears to his eyes.

As Shirone moved closer, as if to embrace her, Feope hastily extended her hands, feigning indifference.

"W-What are you doing? Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

"How did you find me? How did you know I was here? Is it okay for you to be here?"

The rational part of Shirone's mind considered the possibility that Feope might be an enemy. But he pushed that thought aside for now.

If that assumption were true, he wouldn't be able to bear the consequences, no matter the sacrifice.

Feope looked at Shirone with gentle eyes and a soft smile.

Though not much time had passed, her expression now held an intellectual calmness.

"I'm glad you're here, Shirone. I've missed you."

Feope cupped Shirone's cheeks and kissed his forehead.

As the warmth of her lips spread, Shirone's mind was filled with the memory of her voice from before.

"I love you."

Even if it was the confession of an immature fairy whose concepts hadn't fully developed, her sincerity was unmistakable.

'Feope. It's really you.'

Shirone gently lifted Feope into his hands.

Even if everyone else wanted to harm him, he knew she wouldn't. This was a matter of faith, not reason.

"Feope."

"Yes?"

"I have to fight against Heaven."

Feope blinked, waiting for him to continue.

"Can you take me, no, us, to Araboth?"

He said nothing more.

No matter what conversation they had, this was the question he needed to ask, and he knew the answer would soon come from Feope.

Feope thought for a long time, but she never once avoided Shirone's gaze.

Her eyes, filled with a mix of resignation and new excitement, slowly began to smile.

With that expression, Feope nodded at Shirone.

"Alright. I'll take you there."

Chapter 467:

The Seventh Heaven, Araboth.

While the war between Heaven's army and the rebels raged on the outskirts of Heaven, Araboth, located at the center of the concentric circles, remained tranquil.

Under the spire, where neither the sound of cannons nor screams could reach, Ikael stood, gazing at the distant rising smoke.

Her eyes held no emotion. Only the dry, unwavering will to carry out Anke Ra's will remained.

As a piercing presence approached Ikael, her halo expanded reflexively.

Chiiiiing!

The halo spun at an unprecedented speed, indicating that her thoughts were also at their peak.

Few in Heaven could make Archangel Ikael this tense.

"What are you guarding?"

A handsome, androgynous figure approached from Ikael's left.

It was the Archangel of Light, Raiel.

"Or are you waiting for someone?"

From her right appeared Metatron, a being with shoulders twice as broad as other angels, despite his short stature.

Then, in front of her, appeared Metiel and Satiel, the Archangels of Fusion and Disintegration.

"So, the war has begun. And with a humiliating invasion at that. Disappointing, Ikael."

Surrounded by four archangels with the spire of Araboth at her back, Ikael's expression remained cold.

As she briefly glanced at each of them, only one thought crossed her mind.

'Faiel isn't moving.'

The Archangel of Annihilation, Fael.

Though the four archangels present were powerful enemies dealing with fundamental concepts, Fael's presence was special to Ikael.

In terms of sheer power, if Uriel, the Archangel of Destruction, was her equal, Fael was practically her nemesis in the concept of amplification.

Of course, this was true for Fael as well.

In this uneasy situation, it seemed they had chosen to observe for the time being.

'Is that fortunate?'

"Hey, Ikael."

Metatron approached with a creaking neck.

"I know what you're thinking. But aren't you underestimating us too much? Even you can't take on all four of us."

"Why did you rebel? Is it a rejection of Anke Ra?"

As Raiel took a step forward, blue electricity crackled around him.

A being whose essence was light, not magic.

Even Ikael wouldn't be safe if hit directly.

'They haven't summoned their Maras. They've already deployed them to the battlefield.'

Raiel spoke.

"Our stance on Anke Ra is firm. But you are not."

Satiel approached.

"Is Archangel Ikael a thing of the past? Being swayed by a mere human is a greater sin than being a fallen angel. This is your doing."

For the first time, a murderous intent flickered in Ikael's eyes.

"Arrogant fools."

Angered by the provocation, Metatron activated his halo.

An immense gravitational field spread out, making the very landscape seem to bend towards him.

"Perhaps you've been Archangel for too long. Even if you were the first angel, there's no hierarchy among archangels. Let's settle this here."

As Metatron finished speaking, the four archangels simultaneously activated their powers.

Electromagnetic force, gravity, weak force, strong force.

The four fundamental forces of the universe simultaneously pressed down on Ikael.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Four shockwaves exploded simultaneously.

As the archangels disappeared, Ikael's nose wrinkled in anger.

Her halo expanded to a diameter of several dozen meters, and a massive Ataraxia shot up into the sky like a pillar of light.

The immense power swept through Araboth.

Flash!

Everyone in Heaven could see the massive surge of energy rising above the spire.

The Fifth Heaven, Matei.

In the city of giants, where everything was larger than human standards, the main force of the rebel headquarters was fiercely fighting.

Mecca's technology was specialized for the giants, and 2,000 units of their main equipment, Kuroi, had been deployed, accounting for a quarter of their total.

"Advance! Advance!"

Commander Crude, aboard a Titan, fired heat flash cannons in all directions, encouraging his troops.

In response, the Kuroi pilots unleashed massive firepower on the charging giants.

In just two hours since the war began, they had advanced a mere two kilometers.

But the deeper they went, the fiercer the enemy's counterattacks became, and the giants' abilities increased exponentially.

"Damn it!"

The two kilometers they had advanced now felt like a mere two kilometers.

The Kuroi units were helpless against the powerful giant army, whose elixir of myths had reached the third stage. Bullets couldn't penetrate their muscles, and they didn't have a significant advantage in strength either.

"Yaaah!"

Kanya fixed Kuroi's barrel forward and fired madly.

As the war began, her reason evaporated, and she was filled with the rage of losing her father and the memory of her mother, whose life was shortened by the elixir of myths.

"Sister! Stay calm!"

Lena, equipped with infantry gear, shouted.

Even as she shouted, her hand was pulling the handle of the arc.

As the explosive rounds fired, a giant clad in armor appeared before her.

It was Orsimo, the commander of the first battalion of the giant army.

"Uoooooh!"

Bang!

Blocking the bomb with his shoulder armor, he swung a massive greatsword.

The power of Skima in his strike surpassed Mecca's machinery, and Lena couldn't react to the speed.

"Lena!"

Kanya turned her body at the sight of her sister's danger on the multivision.

But Kuroi's response speed couldn't keep up with her urgency.

Why had she forgotten? She still had someone to protect.

'Idiot!'

Tears welled up as regret flooded in.

At that moment, with a clang, someone blocked Orsimo's sword.

"Ugh!"

Orsimo's strong features twisted like a beast.

As the commander of Heaven's guard, he was well-versed in Mecca's technology.

But the equipment blocking his path was something he had never seen before.

"Ba-Babel?"

Lena, weakened and sitting on the ground, looked up.

Babel's back, reflecting the sunlight, shone with a dull light.

According to Shirone's algorithm, Babel was programmed to prioritize saving Kanya and Lena.

In other words, it meant that Babel was always monitoring their status.

Sensing the sisters' danger, Babel had immediately left the battlefield and rushed to their aid.

"Does a mere machine dare to challenge a giant!"

Orsimo gripped his greatsword with both hands and swung with immense force.

But even the strength of a battalion commander couldn't scratch Babel.

With a clear metallic sound, the greatsword was blocked by her arm, and Orsimo's eyes widened in shock.

The vibration transmitted through his hands made it clear how solidly Babel was constructed.

Target eliminated.

Babel deflected the sword and, with a swift chop, severed Orsimo's head.

As she landed gracefully, Lena, who had been watching in a daze, muttered unconsciously.

"Th-Thank you."

Though a machine couldn't have emotions, she was human, and her gratitude to her savior was genuine.

Watching this, Kanya bit her lip.

The complex tangle of emotions, like tangled blood vessels in her heart, transmitted pain through her nerves.

Babel was the enemy who killed her father.

But now, she had saved her beloved sister.

This left her confused.

How should she perceive the metal angel before her?

Ching!

Kanya aimed Kuroi's barrel at Babel.

The image of her father, pierced through, was still vivid. The more she thought about it, the more sinister Babel seemed.

'Sister...'

Babel turned and looked at Kanya expressionlessly.

Aiming the barrel was a clear sign of attack.

But her algorithm didn't include retaliation against Kanya.

Click!

In the end, Kuroi's barrel lowered again.

Kanya shouted at Lena, as if to vent her confused emotions.

"Don't leave my side from now on!"

Leaving those words, Kanya advanced again.

The thought of protecting Lena cooled her head, but the emotional knot remained.

Gradually, a path opened up beyond the bodies of the giants.

The Second Heaven, Lakia.

Gaold's party, except for Shirone and Plu, watched the pillar of light rising from Araboth.

It meant an unknown variable had arisen, as the rebels couldn't have reached Araboth yet.

Armin spoke.

"That's a powerful energy no human could produce. It's likely an archangel."

Zulu said.

"If there's discord among the archangels, it's our chance. We must go now."

Gaold had no objections.

Even if all the archangels gathered to block them, he intended to sweep them aside and advance.

Sein spoke.

"Let's move. Once the operation starts, there's no need for improvisation or assistance. Focus solely on completing your individual missions."

Shirone had infiltrated first through a covert operation, and the remaining members were all tasked with rescuing Miro. Since Miro was likely in the deepest part of Lakia, once they rescued her, they could enter the temple through Araboth.

Kangnan spoke.

"Even if we change the coordinates of the Akashic Record in the temple, we have no way to return. Miro's space-time is already broken."

"We have to trust them."

Gaold thought of Frankwine, the leader of the Night Watch. There was no way out of Heaven except to bring what he had promised on time.

But Gaold didn't care.

For now, rescuing Miro was the top priority.

"Move at full speed. If anyone falls behind, we'll leave them."

As soon as Gaold finished speaking, he took off.

Everyone followed, each using their unique abilities to keep up with his incredible speed.

At the entrance to Lakia, numerous fallen angels and fire giants awaited them with hostile eyes.

'Miro...'

Gaold increased his speed even more.

Finally, they had made it this far.

The gears of time, which had stopped just 20 meters short, began to tick again.

The distance to Miro was 42.7 kilometers.

"Stop them! Don't let them get close!"

The fire giants conjured massive fireballs.

A wave of fire surged over the heads of the giants, who were lined up for hundreds of meters.

"Fire!"

It was a tsunami of heat.

Gaold's eyes sparkled as the fiery wave approached, ready to burn everything in its path.

There was no need to hold back anymore.

Miro was just beyond this.

"Raaaah!"

Gaold's face twisted like a demon's, veins and nerves bulging.

Pain sensitivity increased by 5 million times.

Boom!

An unprecedented shockwave.

The fiery tsunami was instantly obliterated by the overwhelming atmospheric pressure.

Simultaneously, fallen angels with wings of light flew in from both sides.

As Armin cast a stop spell, dozens of angels froze in place.

Iron Wheel Eye - Equalizing.

Sein's eyes spun rapidly, controlling the environment.

Increasing the atmospheric pressure wasn't tactically beneficial, but it was to enhance Gaold's combat power.

"Charge!"

The fire giants rushed towards Gaold.

The once orderly formation began to distort with emotion, all of them charging at Gaold.

The distance to Miro was now 40.3 kilometers.

Chapter 468:

The Second Heaven, Lakia.

On the inner wall of the Hall of Corruption stood Kariel, Uriel, and Surt, the leader of the fire giants.

Since the place wasn't designed for war, the inner wall was higher than the outer wall, offering a clear view of the endless plains beyond.

A massive drawbridge, 1 kilometer wide and 4 kilometers long, spanned the great river crossing the plains, branching into seven paths symbolizing the seven sins, leading to all the gates of Lakia.

Gaold's party would likely enter through one of these seven paths.

The end of these paths was exactly 10 kilometers from this point.

But in some ways, this calculation was meaningless.

No one here believed Gaold would actually show up.

"It's still peaceful. Well, that's to be expected. How are the troops distributed?"

When Kariel turned and asked, Surt immediately knelt on one knee and replied.

"Ten percent of the troops are in the Plains of Lamentation outside Lakia, twenty percent in the capital, thirty percent in the Kespa Mountains, and the remaining forty percent are gathered at the drawbridge. Even if they cross the Kespa Mountains, they will never breach the drawbridge."

"So they say."

Kariel looked down at Miro, who was kneeling at the edge of the wall.

Her hands were bound with cuffs inscribed with henna, and she gazed at the river with a calm expression, as serene as the flowing water.

A collar was around her neck, and at the end of the long chain, Arius knelt, exhausted, with his eyes closed.

"How does it feel to be treated like a pet dog?"

Miro did not respond.

She had given her heart to no one, so even the relationship between master and servant was meaningless.

Her gaze was fixed on the distant Gaold, who was coming.

Miro's space-time had disappeared, and the war with Heaven had finally begun.

If Heaven won, the next event would be the destruction of humanity.

'Don't come, Gaold.'

Gaold must not come here.

Currently, only Kariel and his remnants, who had denied Ra's will, remained in Lakia.

Gaold's combat power should be used to win the war, not to save her.

'Don't come. Think rationally. Go to the temple now. Destroy the Akashic Record.'

Kariel, looking only at Miro's back, seemed to guess her thoughts and smiled.

"What if he does come here?"

Kariel's power was significantly depleted from suppressing Miro's abilities.

Even Brahma had temporarily disappeared due to Miro, so Uriel was guarding him.

"Come forth, Shiva."

When Uriel invoked the law of his followers, a black sphere appeared, and the three-horned Mara emerged.

A man with a bluish body, fangs protruding from his lips, and numerous crescent-shaped swords around his slender waist.

In the human world, he was known as the god of destruction, Shiva.

Even Surt, the greatest swordsman of purgatory, swallowed hard at his appearance.

"Shiva, at the archangel's command."

"Guard the outer gate. Let no one approach."

Shiva's eyes flashed, and he immediately leaped into the air.

With a single bound, he arced towards the outer gate, and Kariel smiled in satisfaction.

"All preparations are complete. Now the festival begins." Whether Gaold arrived first or Heaven won first, it didn't matter to Kariel.

'Just a little more...'

Breaking through the wall of fire created by the giants' bodies, Gaold increased his speed.

Fallen angels attacked from all sides, and their followers trailed behind.

The eight members of Gaold's party were like a single arrow piercing through everything.

Etella and Zulu guarded the rear, Armin was in the center, and Kuan and Shiina ran on either side.

Ahead of them, Kangnan and Sein ran side by side, with Gaold alone at a distance twice as far as the others.

'Go, Gaold.'

Zulu cheered for Gaold in his heart.

A pool of emotions that had stagnated for 20 years.

But it was densely compressed with pure anger, free of any impurities.

A space and time that could only be reached by focusing on a single goal.

'Pour everything out, Gaold. You deserve it.'

"Raaaah!"

Gaold clenched his fist and unleashed his power.

Pain sensitivity increased by 2 million times.

"Aaaah!"

The immense pain drove Gaold's mind into hell.

The great inferno of hell unfolded, and the hungry spirits rampaged.

As the demon of hell screamed across the sky, embodying Gaold's pain, even the fire giants couldn't withstand the heat and writhed as they burned.

As the plains ended, Kangnan looked back and said, "We're about to enter the city."

The capital of Lakia spread out magnificently over the vast land.

The city gates opened, and numerous giants poured out. These were higher-ranking giants, different from those they had faced before.

But more serious was the increasing number of fallen angels.

Armin's stop magic and Zulu's various summons quickly responded to their abilities, but it was a miracle they had held out this long against the bizarre and powerful abilities of the fallen angels.

"Flank!"

As Kangnan shouted, fireballs flew towards Shiina.

The massive flames transformed into giants, cornering Shiina.

As Shiina spread powerful cold around her, an ice wall with sharp spikes surrounded her.

Boom!

The giant's fist shattered the thick ice wall.

Even though fire giants were weak against cold, they were still giants.

The power of Skima wielded by higher-ranking giants was incomparable to that of humans.

"Shiina!"

Armin, running in the center, leaped towards Shiina.

With twenty fallen angels bound by stop magic, he didn't have much time to act, but nothing was more important to him than Shiina's safety.

As he cast flicker magic to pull Shiina out, more fireballs arrived.

Buried in the enemy, with no one able to help, the two were cornered.

Every time the giants' flaming blades wove a complex net, Armin's clothes singed.

"Ugh!"

As a blade passed in front of his bandaged eyes, another giant charged with a greatsword.

Shiina cast freezing magic, but the giant, determined to die together, lunged and thrust the sword.

Clang!

At the sharp metallic sound, the giant's trajectory was deflected.

Kuan, who had been running on the opposite side, appeared and deflected the giant's sword, diving into the enemy.

"Watch out!"

Ignoring Shiina's warning, Kuan spread external force in all directions.

As he freely moved through space, every swing of his sword began to dismember the giant.

Even in the dire situation, Shiina and Armin watched in a daze.

"H-How?"

His skills had improved significantly since they first arrived in Heaven.

Armin could guess the results achieved in such a short time.

'It's not enhancement. It's enlightenment.'

His speed and power hadn't necessarily increased, but the fluidity of his movements was beyond imagination.

His genius movements, which completely broke human thinking, were so unpredictable that even Shiina couldn't follow his trajectory.

'Not yet.'

Kuan cut down everything in his path.

The transcendent trajectory, achieved by ignoring death, flowed through the giants' blind spots, and they died

without knowing what hit them, as if fighting an invisible ghost.

'My grave...'

Kuan felt extreme joy and equal sorrow as he soared.

'This isn't the place!'

Boom, boom, boom!

As centrifugal force was repeatedly added, the sword wind began to rage.

The sharp sword wind, which even blew away the giants' flames, nearly annihilated the unit on Shiina's flank.

Sein, displeased, turned and shouted.

"Hold your position!"

He had instructed them not to worry about others' safety when they first charged, but Kuan's decision to cross to the opposite side, ignoring his position, displeased him.

Kuan heard Sein's voice but smiled faintly.

The external force, which had shot out in sixteen directions, curved back, spinning his body even faster.

As he kicked off the ground with that rotational force, his body flew back to its original position at a terrifying speed.

In the panoramic view of the overlapping scenery, Kuan could clearly see Shiina's face in Armin's arms.

She would probably never forget Armin.

'That's why I can die.'

Unable to win Shiina's heart, unable to express his feelings, he could die happily.

Childish stubbornness. Or perhaps even more childish jealousy.

It didn't matter.

'For you...'

Boom, boom, boom, boom!

As he spun at incredible speed, the scenery was engulfed in darkness.

Dozens of tornadoes rose around Kuan as he returned to his position.

"Raaaah!"

The 12-meter-tall giant fell step by step, as if descending stairs.

He cut the giant's ankle, knee, calf, then waist, chest, and neck.

Everything was swept away by Kuan's seated, spinning sword wind.

'Tch! I can't even complain.'

Having confirmed this, Sein looked forward again.

The capital's main gate was now in sight.

Kangnan increased his speed to catch up with Gaold.

'President.'

For 20 years, Kangnan had watched Gaold's back as he chased Miro.

'Just once... We've come this far, so just once...'

Could he run alongside him?

There would never be another chance to run while looking at his back.

Boom!

Before Kangnan's thoughts ended, the wall ahead flew inward.

Then all the walls within sight began to collapse backward.

'This is insane. He's already surpassed human limits.'

Even Kangnan couldn't gauge Gaold's pain threshold anymore.

And as the distance closed, the phenomenon intensified.

'How much pain is he in?'

Kangnan finally caught up with Gaold.

"President, now..."

But when she looked at Gaold's face, she couldn't say anything.

"Sob! Sob!"

He was crying.

Neither the face of a demon nor a madman could be seen now.

It was pure, genuine emotion.

Finally, he had arrived.

It was the catharsis of releasing all the pent-up frustration of 20 long years.

"Sob! Sob!"

Gaold gritted his teeth and ran.

The tears streaming down his face flew off and touched Kangnan.

'Yes.'

Kangnan slowly reduced her speed, biting her lip.

With a bitter smile, she watched Gaold's back come into view again.

'Go, Gaold.'

"Raaaah!"

Gaold released the pent-up frustration he had never been able to express.

Buildings collapsed as if trampled by a god, and all the giants charging at him turned into a handful of flames and were buried in the ground.

The distance to Miro was now 19.4 kilometers.

Chapter 469:

Gaold opened his eyes.

Dust floated in the sunlight streaming through the window.

Another new morning had arrived.

A morning that felt new every day.

Gaold got out of bed and washed himself.

The slender body reflected in the mirror was smooth, without a single scar.

By human standards, it wasn't particularly impressive, but he liked it. What importance did muscles have for someone who believed in God?

'God? Do I believe in God?'

A sudden question crossed his mind.

Come to think of it... why were there no scars?

"What?"

Gaold tilted his head in confusion and splashed water on his body.

His thoughts drifted away without settling on anything, and before he knew it, he was getting dressed, ready to greet the refreshing morning.

Just as he realized that only one thought wasn't drifting away, the door opened, and Miro entered.

"Hey! How can you still be sleeping? Today is the day of the combat evaluation!"

Gaold hurriedly turned his body to hide his bare skin.

"Whoa! This is the men's dormitory!"

Miro, looking at Gaold with a puzzled expression as he buttoned his shirt with a flushed face, said,

"Why so shy? We've already seen everything."

"Huh? Seen everything?"

"Why are you acting like this all of a sudden? We were together last night too."

Gaold blinked.

'Were we?'

He couldn't remember at all.

Come to think of it, it felt like he couldn't remember anything.

Miro sighed, placing her hands on her hips, and shook her head as if she had no choice.

"You're so coy. I can't believe I'm dating such a softie..."

With that, Miro playfully smiled and lunged at Gaold.

"Hey, wait!"

Before Gaold could say anything, she kissed him, pulling him onto the bed.

As they sank into the bed together, Gaold heard a beautiful song.

Miro's breath tickled his neck, and her hand slipped inside his half-buttoned shirt, caressing his skin.

Miro's soft voice whispered in his ear.

"We have about... 10 minutes left."

He heard his heart pounding.

It was the shock of his heart beating for the first time after being still for a while.

'It hurts.'

Only after regaining his senses did he realize he hadn't felt anything until now.

'It hurts.'

His nerves became sensitive, and the pain of simply being alive surged through his entire body.

"Ugh!"

All he felt was pain, and Gaold gritted his teeth.

Miro was no longer there.

From the chest she had touched, thin, delicate black smoke was rising.

„I just wanted to be happy.

"Sob!"

A sob escaped through his clenched teeth.

Not power, not fame, not material things, just the small happiness that anyone could have, that's all I longed for.

"Ugh!"

As his heart raced, the black smoke rose even more, filling the ceiling.

His heart.

Gaold's heart, which had denied the entire world, looked down with grotesque eyes and a twisted mouth.

The only thing you wanted! The world took even that away from you! You have nothing left! She's there! Miro is there!

"Sob!"

Gaold's eyes, which had been showing only the whites, returned to normal.

In the pain amplified 2 million times, his briefly lost consciousness returned to reality, and the delusion that hadn't existed sank into his black heart, becoming fuel that burned and spun madly again.

"Aaaah!"

What Gaold saw was neither giants nor fallen angels, but just blood and flesh, and the shattered scenery.

Even in his unconscious state, he fought.

He had become a creature that existed only to advance, and nothing could change his momentum now.

"Stop him! If he breaks through here, it's dangerous!"

The giants, given special orders, ignored everyone else and charged at Gaold.

Hundreds of giants converged on Gaold in a triangular formation, but they were grotesquely scattered the moment they collided with him.

Pain sensitivity increased by 4 million times.

"Aaaah!"

Even as he felt transcendent pain, Gaold crushed them. In a situation where it was impossible to distinguish between friend and foe, nothing could remain standing on the ground.

It was as if he had fallen into a vat of pain, the agony gnawing at his entire body and burrowing into his brain, delivering a burning discomfort.

'It doesn't hurt! I can endure it!'

Gaold repeated only one thought.

Pain was just pain.

No matter how painful, it was just a signal sent by the brain. Compared to 'not being able to meet Miro'...

"It's nothing!"

All the enemies within 100 meters ahead were crushed as if rolled over by an invisible force.

The blood, turned to dust, sprayed into the air, filling it.

In the distance, he saw the exit of the capital. He was more than halfway there.

"Let's go! Faster!"

Gaold shouted, holding onto his consciousness that was about to fly away again.

His eyes were already half white.

"Sob! Damn it...!"

Kangnan bit her lip, holding back a sob.

'It must hurt. No, it's beyond just hurting.'

If this continued, Gaold would break.

Like that time, or maybe this time, he might never come back.

"Wait! Let's regroup here first...!"

"Don't stop Gaold."

Sein caught up to Kangnan.

"Don't stop him? If he goes any further, it's really over."

"I know. But if he stops, it's over right there."

"What do you mean...?"

Sein glared at Gaold's rapidly receding back.

"His stride is faltering. His mind is wavering. He's feeling his limits. If his momentum breaks even once..."

Sein gritted his teeth.

"He'll never get up again."

"....."

Finally, as they exited the capital of Lakia, they saw paths stretching out in all directions.

Paths symbolizing the seven sins.

Without thinking, Gaold chose the path right in front of him. It was the 'Path of Desire.'

"Lord Surt! The enemy has exited the capital and entered the Path of Desire!"

At the messenger's report, not only Surt but also Kariel and Uriel turned their heads.

Only Miro continued to glare menacingly at the unseen distance.

"They've already broken through the capital? How is that possible!"

Surt shouted in anger.

Aiming for reinstatement in Heaven, he was furious to receive such a disgraceful report in front of Kariel.

The strongest unit, including fire giants, fallen angels, and Maras, was blocking Gaold's party.

And yet, they had already broken through the capital?

Uriel spoke.

"I find it strange too. Unless the path was deliberately opened, such speed is impossible."

Surt thought the same.

Either the path was opened, or the enemy crushed their forces at a comparable speed.

But his pride denied both assumptions.

"That's absolutely impossible. My subordinates are strong warriors who do not fear death!"

"Anyway, they'll be here soon. What will you do, Kariel?"

Kariel remained calm.

Even if they were mere humans, they had come to rescue the great Miro. He had expected them to be formidable from the start.

"Answer the call, Tiara."

A brilliant light flashed in the air where Kariel stood, and a beautiful and noble fairy appeared.

It was Tiara, the Fairy of Dominion, ranked second among the 72 classes of fairies.

"You called, Archangel."

"Request support from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. You know the situation."

Tiara coldly looked at the seven paths of sin beyond the drawbridge.

"I have a rough idea."

"Stop them. Coming this fast means they've given their all. But if you destroy their hope, humans are creatures that can't move."

"...Understood."

Without another word, Tiara flew towards the Path of Desire. As the commander of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, things would get complicated if humans rescued Miro.

Miro bit her lip.

A grand noise was faintly approaching from the other side of the Path of Desire.

It meant they were almost there.

So now was the only chance to change her mind.

'Don't come, Gaold. You need to go to the temple. If you don't adjust the coordinates in Ingris, you can't stop the final war.'

This wasn't the time to come and rescue someone as powerless as herself.

'Sein, at least you should stop Gaold. You know this is madness.'

"They're coming!"

A giant on the wall shouted.

No one thought they would lose, but the giants felt a chill they couldn't explain.

"They're already here?"

Everyone's eyes focused on the Path of Desire stretching beyond the plains.

It was still just a dot, but that dot was crushing the army as it approached.

"Just a little more! Just a little more to go!"

Sein looked back and encouraged the party.

Even he, with his strong rationality, couldn't hide his excitement at this moment.

He hadn't really believed they would make it this far.

'That fool...'

Things that no one thought possible, things believed to be impossible, were unfolding before their eyes.

'We just need to reach the drawbridge! From there...'

The Law of Dominion.

Boom!

At that moment, an immense mental force crushed everyone.

"Ugh!"

Sein looked up at the sky.

A fairy with wings of light was looking down at them.

Armin spoke.

"She's too high. Stop magic is impossible."

Too high?

And yet, the fact that her form was visible at that distance meant she was enormous.

'Scale magic...'

Sein bit his lip until it bled.

There were limits to a fairy's power, so it wouldn't be like opening an infinite dimension like Congob. But if it was magic that utilized the relativity of scale itself, it was entirely possible with a fairy's mind. The anti-magic currently being used was far beyond what Gaold had faced 20 years ago at Alpheas Magic School.

"Ugh!"

Sein tried to break the mental magic with his Iron Wheel Eye.

But the more he tried, the stronger Tiara's dominion became, and eventually, everyone was pressed flat against the ground.

"President...!"

Kangnan, her face pressed to the ground, looked up in shock.

Even Gaold, whom she had trusted, was on his knees, trembling.

Tiara's dominion suppressed not only their bodies but also their minds.

The moment his momentum was lost, Gaold's dark heart was crushed without a trace.

The momentum was gone.

'Is this the end...?'

Sein, unable to contain his frustration, grabbed a handful of dirt.

They had poured everything into this, running without even thinking of stopping, and had come this far.

But it was only to the Path of Desire.

"It's over."

Kariel said with a smirk.

Everyone was stuck at the exact point where the Path of Desire ended.

"It must be quite miserable. At times like this, shouldn't you at least pretend to be sad?"

Miro still didn't respond.

Boom.

At that moment, a distant rumble was heard.

Boom.

As the ground shook rhythmically, Kariel's gaze turned to Gaold.

And without a word, his mouth slowly opened.

"Ugh!"

Gaold used all his strength to lift his body.

The heart had no physical form, so it had no limits, and the faint smoke bypassed all control and sprouted again.

The sprout grew into a thick stem, branching out into many more, providing Gaold's heart with immense fuel.

Boom!

Due to the nature of the magic that suppressed targets by scale, Tiara in the sky shrank every time Gaold moved.

"Ugh!"

Gaold grimaced and poured his strength into his body.

Though it was still just a black speck, Miro was there, beyond the distant wall.

"I'm coming."

As Gaold took a difficult step forward, Sein couldn't hold back his tears any longer.

'Yes. You're going, Gaold.'

Miro was there.

'Now, even I can see Miro.'

As Tiara's dominion weakened, Sein barely managed to stand.

'To be honest, Gaold, what you're doing isn't love or anything. But that's why I placed my hopes on you.'

A love so pure it was almost grotesque.

'If it's an equivalent exchange of pain and desire, you have every right to desire. No one can blame you. So go.'

Sein's Iron Wheel Eye spun at a terrifying speed, creating two massive halos in reality.

Iron Wheel Eye - Equilibrium.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

As the Law of Dominion was ground down by the gears, Tiara in the sky screamed.

Having used all his strength to break the magic, Sein shouted at Gaold.

"Go!"

Boom!

Gaold's body shot forward like an arrow again.

The immense heart that had risen from his chest enveloped him.

I am your heart, your desire. Go, Gaold!

"Raaaah!"

Gaold roared like a demon as he charged.

Every nerve twitched, blood tears flowed from his eyes, and his blood-soaked tongue hung down to his chin.

The distance to Miro was now 10 kilometers.

"Lord Surt! They've exited the Path of Desire! They're about to enter the drawbridge!"

"I know! Prepare for full-scale assault!"

All of Surt's elite troops descended to block the drawbridge.

As Gaold's form became clearer, Miro slowly stood up.

'He's really... coming?'

Thump, thump.

Cold sweat dripped down Miro's forehead as she listened to the sound of her own racing heart.

Chapter

470:

Gaold's eyes took in the Hall of Corruption.

The moment he saw Miro standing on the wall, his heart turned into an even larger black smoke, enveloping the world.

"He's coming! Stop him at the entrance!"

Elite fire giants blocked the entrance to the drawbridge.

Their average height was a staggering 7 meters, and they all wore heavy armor, numbering in the hundreds.

As the giants charged in formation and struck with their massive swords, the bridge trembled.

Gaold leaped into the air and unleashed a powerful air press.

Boom!

The power of an air press from a mage with pain sensitivity increased by 2 million times was something even the strongest giants had never experienced before.

"Ugh!"

But the giants endured.

Their transcendent physical abilities, enhanced by the fifth stage of the elixir of myths, combined with five layers of Skima and exceptional techniques, allowed them to withstand the attack.

'Is the real challenge starting now?'

Sein, who had arrived late after defeating Tiara, felt a sense of crisis as Gaold's power was nullified for the first time.

Miro, watching from the distant wall, also knew it was a desperate situation.

This was, after all, the strongest unit in purgatory.

'We can't win like this.'

It wasn't just the warriors attacking Gaold.

As fire giants who wielded unique magic, various fire techniques raged across the bridge.

"Here I come!"

Gaold charged into the midst of the giants, tearing through the battlefield.

As air guns fired in all directions, holes were punched through the giants' armor.

The air, solidified by extreme atmospheric pressure, was no longer just air but sharp projectiles.

The sharp air, like spears several meters long, pierced through the giants' bodies repeatedly.

"Get him! One hit is all it takes to win!"

No matter how powerful Gaold was, he was fundamentally a mage.

If a giant's attack landed even once, he would be incapacitated in an instant.

But Gaold's true strength was just beginning to show.

He wasn't called the strongest battle mage of the Kingdom of Tormia just for his power.

The skills he had honed over 20 years of enduring immense pain were deeply ingrained in his body, allowing him to find the most suitable responses even in a state of lost reason.

As he dodged enemy attacks and swung his hands, sharp air cutters sliced through the space.

The bodies of giants with muscles stronger than steel were cut into chunks, and their Skima-less corpses were crushed by the air press, spraying blood particles.

It was a fireworks display with living bodies.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Giants exploded in all directions, and the density on the drawbridge thinned.

"Ugh!"

Gaold gritted his teeth so hard they almost broke as he continued to eliminate the enemies.

Sein's party, who had just entered the drawbridge, could only watch in a daze, unable to come up with any strategy.

'Is that Gaold...?'

Armin erased all the vague images he had of Gaold before coming to Heaven.

Pain, the most extreme form of control for living beings.

Any desire would naturally fade before such pain.

But Gaold chose pain.

For desire.

It was a decision that defied the basics of living beings, a madness unique to humans.

'Human...'

Armin realized why everyone here was following Gaold.

They hadn't come to Heaven just to save Miro or stop the final war.

They had followed Gaold to see how far one human could transcend humanity.

"Raaaah!"

Gaold pushed the giants back with immense atmospheric pressure.

While the air pressure alone couldn't explode a fully intact giant, the momentum of his charge, fully converted into mental strength, pushed the giants' mass backward.

"Ugh!"

The giants gathered at the final barrier were indeed strong. Despite his desperate push, he had only advanced about a kilometer.

Given that a dense formation was advantageous for blocking a charge, the enemies knew this was their last line of defense.

'Bastards...'

Gaold glared ahead with terrifying eyes.

It wasn't directed at anyone in particular, but at the entire world.

'From the beginning... I shouldn't have relied on someone like you.'

If he had refined his strength without depending on a transcendent being.

Maybe then, he wouldn't have had to let Miro go.
It was a thought he could entertain after enduring 20 years of superhuman discipline.

"Close ranks! We can't let him through here!"

As the giants holding back Gaold's atmospheric pressure shouted, more giants crowded in from the rear.

The weight ratio between Gaold and the giant unit was already over 1 to 1,000, but still, the giants were being pushed back.

"This... this is...!"

Gaold drew even more strength.

Slowly, slowly. He just needed to take one step at a time towards Miro.

'I hate you.'

Gaold's heart, now a massive entity larger than the giants, pushed the world.

'You said you could give everything...'

A god that gave nothing.

Tuk! Tuk tuk!

As the heat of extreme discipline rose from Gaold, his shirt began to burn.

His skin, covered in muscles, was adorned with countless scars that could only be etched through blind abuse.

"Hold the line! Don't retreat!"

The giants at the front shouted.

And with their final cries, their bodies burst under the pressure.

"Heh. Heh heh."

A hollow laugh escaped Gaold's torn lips. His black heart was laughing too.

He heard a voice mocking the world and sneering at God.

'Well, there's nothing to hate. From the beginning...'

Gaold's expression twisted as the atmospheric pressure pushing the giants turned into sharp blades and exploded all at once.

'You never existed!'

Boom!

Dozens of giants were blown to pieces, and a path opened.

Once he gained momentum, nothing could stop Gaold.

He tore through the mountain of bodies, finally crossing half the drawbridge.

As the giant unit's mages gathered their energy for a final strike at the end of the bridge, the heat distorted the scenery like a vortex.

'Gods...!'

Gaold, like a creature that could only charge, lowered his head and drew more power.

His heart, now a massive flame, collided with the flames conjured by the giant mages.

Boom!

The unimaginable explosion was clearly heard by Miro, 6 kilometers away.

Miro closed one eye and turned her head.

The hot wind Gaold was sending reached her.

Thump, thump.

Her heart beat faster.

Maybe... just maybe, he could really make it here.

"Raaaah!"

As the density of giants decreased beyond the drawbridge, Gaold charged madly.

He was getting closer, little by little.

"Go! Gaold! Gooooo!"

Sein's voice reached him even in his frenzied state.

The distance to Miro was now 6 kilometers.

"All units, charge!"

At Surt's command, all the giants rushed towards Gaold.

Leading them was Uriel's three-horned Mara, Shiva.

'Foolish human...'

Shiva, wielding crescent swords in both hands, charged at Gaold.

The immense atmospheric pressure clashed first, but as the incarnation of destruction, his strength tore through the air,

closing the distance.

"Raaaah!"

As Gaold and Shiva's power clashed, the other giants spread out, looking for an opportunity.

Approaching Gaold, who had single-handedly crossed the drawbridge, would mean missing a decisive chance and turning into a bloody mist.

No one used explosive techniques, but everything around them burst apart as they moved.

Gaold's abnormality, when faced head-on, was beyond Shiva's imagination.

Even as a three-horned Mara, he was Uriel's subordinate. Being pushed back by a mere human was a first for him.

'No, it's not a matter of pride.'

Shiva acknowledged Gaold.

He was not human.

He couldn't be precisely defined, but he was transforming from a human into something else.

"You are a worthy opponent!"

Shiva pushed Gaold with all his might, and Gaold's combat power increased in response.

Miro was there.

His pain sensitivity reached its highest level in history, and every time the crescent swords cut his skin, it felt like his brain was being torn apart.

"Raaaah!"

Gaold advanced, crushing the vast space with atmospheric pressure.

The thought of defeating Shiva had no place in his mind.

He only moved forward. Towards Miro.

Everyone watching from the wall began to feel a growing sense of urgency.

The distance to Miro was now just 1 kilometer.

'I'm coming!'

Gaold increased his pain sensitivity even more.

Boom!

Even the solid ground was crushed under his pressure, forming a massive crater.

The distance to Miro was now 500 meters.

Shiva gritted his teeth and attacked with all his might. Every swing of his crescent swords, moving at invisible speeds, created gusts of wind that bounced off Gaold's atmospheric pressure and spread in all directions.

Boom! Boom!

Everywhere Shiva's sword wind struck, dust rose, and massive scars over 40 meters in diameter were etched into the ground.

The distance to Miro was now 100 meters.

'I'm coming. I'm coming to Miro!'

Gaold, with his tongue out like a demon, screamed.

He had worshipped God, hated God, and finally erased God from his existence.

"Raaaah!"

He had endured all the world's scorn and ridicule to reach this point.

"Raaaah!"

He had finally arrived.

The cursed 20 meters that had never closed were now right in front of him.

'Now.'

Shiva's eyes flashed.

The only gap in the otherwise perfect Gaold.

At the critical distance of 20 meters, Shiva's crescent sword slashed Gaold's abdomen.

"Aaaargh!"

As his pain sensitivity skyrocketed, the physical impact became an excruciating agony that pierced Gaold's brain.

"Push him back!"

"Raaaah!"

The giants roared and all charged at Gaold.

Gaold quickly regained his senses, but he couldn't fend off the giants' overwhelming physical force.

No matter how much he trained, the giants' strength crushed him, intensifying the pain.

'I hate you... I hate you!'

Gaold's mind flashed back to 20 years ago.

Just like then, Miro was slipping away.

'I'll kill you! I'll mock your name, curse you, and erase you from the world!'

All he felt was hatred for God.

The madness of a human desiring the unattainable, blaming, hating, and ultimately killing a nonexistent God...

'Miro...'

Gaold looked at the wall through the giants' bodies.

He wanted her so desperately.

He wanted her to be his, more than anything.

'Miro...'

Gaold's right hand, trembling, reached out towards Miro.

'God...'

Once again, a human sought God.

'Why, why can't I have it? Even after all this pain, why can't I have it?'

The distance to Miro was 150 meters.

'I would live for eternity in the fires of hell. Just please, let me have her... just her...'

The distance to Miro was 200 meters.

"Push harder! More, more!"

Gaold coughed up blood.

He was filled with resentment, anger, and the frustration of seeing all his efforts turn to nothing. The knot of dark anger boiled up from his gut.

"Sob! Sob!"

Shiva, squeezing through the giants, glared at the sobbing Gaold.

'He must be killed here.'

Gaold, unaware of the sharp blade aimed at his heart, stared into the void.

On the day before the judgment of the 20, Miro's voice thundered in his mind.

Then save me.

"Ugh!"

Gaold's entire body shuddered as an immense discipline spread through him.

As the sea of fire spread to the horizon, his black heart roared, growing large enough to engulf the world.

"Raaaah!"

Pain.

10 million times.

Boom!

Everything surrounding Gaold fell like rain.

The ground shook and rippled, and the giants at the front were swallowed by the earth's gaping maw.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Gaold's body trembled with pain. He stomped his feet and shook his limbs.

"Don't let him get close!"

Finally, Surt, who had been watching from the wall, leaped out.

Gaold flailed his arms and charged towards the wall.

The distance to Miro was 100 meters. 80 meters. 50 meters.

"Uoooooh!"

As Surt, the greatest swordsman of purgatory, swung his flaming sword, Gaold extended his right hand.

Boom!

The air shield around his body blew away the flames, and Surt's eyes widened in shock.

"This... this is..."

As he stared at his sword, now reduced to a bare hilt, Gaold swung his hand.

With a thud, Surt's body exploded and vanished without a trace.

The distance to Miro was 20 meters.

"I'll kill you!"

The giants, now leaderless, charged in a frenzy.

But their rage was nothing compared to Gaold's hatred.

Boom! Boom, boom, boom!

Every giant on the ground died.

The only one left was the giant mage, Deputy Commander

Urotas, but he was too terrified to descend from the wall.

"Huff! Huff!"

Gaold walked to the base of the wall, where no one else stood in his way.

6 meters. 4 meters. 2 meters.

Miro looked down at Gaold with an expressionless face.

His blood-soaked body looked far stronger than it had 20 years ago, covered in countless scars.

Finally, Gaold stopped in front of the wall and looked up at Miro.

The distance to Miro.

"Huff! Huff!"

None.

Chapter 471:

Shirone and Plu, having met Feope, infiltrated Paradise and changed into the citizens' clothes.

While a fairy's abilities could distinguish between the real and the unreal, trusting Feope was an entirely different matter.

Plu hesitated for a moment about whether to follow her, but since Shirone had no objections, she decided not to intervene hastily.

After all, she needed clothes too.

Once outside Paradise, Shirone received a rough explanation from Feope.

Currently, the Aegis system was neutralized, and the interception system was paralyzed.

This meant they could freely climb over the walls from the First Heaven to the Seventh Heaven.

Therefore, the entrance to the wall was guarded by giants, and the airspace was temporarily patrolled by fairies from the Citizen Management Department.

"Does this mean we have to engage in aerial combat to cross over to Araboth? This is tricky."

Plu rested her chin on her hand, deep in thought.

While teleporting over was quick, breaking through the fairy units with different abilities was a highly challenging task.

"There is one way."

Feope said.

"To pass through the fairy units in the airspace, you need a permit from the officials. If you get that, you can safely cross over to Araboth."

Shirone hesitated to answer.

Feope didn't know why Shirone was trying to go to Araboth.

If she knew he intended to activate divine punishment to destroy Heaven, what expression would she make?

'Why... why aren't you asking anything, Feope?'

Come to think of it, it didn't make sense for her, a member of the fairy department, to help him while a war with Heaven was ongoing.

Could she be doing all this just out of personal affection?

Plu, who had the same thought, asked without revealing her intentions.

"Can we get the permit?"

"I don't know. Even if we request it from Lord Igirin, it won't be easily granted. But if you still want to try, I can help."

Shirone asked.

"Where do we need to go?"

Feope pointed to the northwest of Shehakim.

Beyond Paradise stood a conical spire made of white bricks.

"That's the Citizen Management Department of Shehakim."

Shirone and Plu exchanged glances.

They would be walking right into enemy territory.

No matter how much they trusted Feope, they couldn't gamble with such an important mission ahead.

"We should just climb over the wall. Can you guide us to where Araboth is?"

Feope looked at Shirone with sad eyes.

In truth, she didn't want him to go to Araboth.

If he fought against Heaven to the very end, Feope would have to make a decision, and it would only lead to tragedy.

"Alright. Follow me."

Feope turned and flew towards the pointed end of Shehakim's pie-shaped area.

Shirone and Plu also cast fly spells and followed her, advancing about 10 kilometers.

"There they are! After them!"

A group began to chase them, leaping across the rooftops of Paradise.

They were the Kergos who had gained immortality and entered Shehakim.

"Eliminate the heretics!"

"Screeeeech!"

With screeching cries, the Kergos swarmed from all directions.

Gaining immortality meant they had hunted countless heretics for Anke Ra since their time as citizens of the First Heaven.

Their combat power was on a different level from other Kergos wandering purgatory.

"What should we do?"

"Once they've spotted us, we can't shake them off. Their tracking abilities are incredible."

As soon as Shirone finished speaking, the Kergos warriors shot into the sky as if propelled.

Wielding sharp blades, they skillfully manipulated external force and had strength comparable to giants who had completed the elixir of myths.

"Scatter!"

Shirone, Plu, and Feope split in different directions to disperse the enemy's forces.

As they descended to the ground, more citizens occupied the alleys, following them.

There's a bounty on us!

Feope's telepathic message penetrated Shirone's mind. Once they gained immortality, they no longer had animalistic needs.

What they desired were high-level ambitions like honor, pleasure, and power.

"Heh heh heh, if we catch them, we can become officials of the Immortal Council?"

Hearing the noisy voices from the alley, one of the Kergos drew a sword that glowed like a fireball in the sunlight.

It was Murka, one of the Kergos warriors.

His body, now in the prime of youth, was muscular, and his tanned bronze skin gleamed as if oiled, but he was actually 1,023 years old.

"If I become an official of the Immortal Council, I'll have access to Utopia. I'll buy all the fancy clothes I want there."

A Nor woman walked up beside Murka.

Her blonde hair was finely braided, and she wore a golden silk robe, the most valuable of the citizens' attire.

She was Deina, an immortal of the Nor race.

Her well-developed chest gave the robe beautiful curves, and her legs, revealed through side slits, were smooth.

But she was not much younger than Murka.

Clank! Clank!

A young man equipped with a Piper, a Mecca device, performed acrobatics and jumped down from the rooftop of Paradise.

Thud!

Landing on one knee in front of the two, he ran his hand through his hair with a smirk.

He was Raun, an immortal of the Mecca race.

While all Mecca pilots could handle a Piper, his skills, honed over nearly a thousand years, were so precise and refined that he was almost one with the machine.

"It's been a while since the three of us teamed up."

Raun drew his Signa and Exd and turned towards the commotion.

Though human, they had transcended mortality.

Having lived for over a thousand years, they had already achieved enlightenment, making them the strongest among humans in terms of single combat power.

For these immortals with exceptional combat abilities, this war was not a tragedy but an entertaining diversion.

As Deina spun the air with her hands, her body floated up.

"Let's see who catches them first. The winner becomes an official of the Immortal Council."

"Fine by me. Though it'll be me."

Murka gripped his sword in a reverse grip and leaped forward.

Raun manipulated his Piper, zigzagging up the wall and disappearing, while Deina increased the wind pressure and shot straight up.

Boom!

As the wall shattered and the Kergos warriors burst out, Shirone cast teleportation to widen the distance.

No matter where he fled, enemies swarmed from all directions.

This hadn't happened until recently, so his curiosity grew. What was driving them?

"Screeeech!"

Hearing the screech from the sky, Shirone looked up sharply. A warrior, silhouetted against the backlight, was falling headfirst.

The dark sword light grazed his nose, and before he could even retract his sword, Murka charged.

"Hahaha! Jackpot!"

'Jackpot?'

Through the Ultima system, the warrior's voice conveyed its meaning.

It made Shirone realize they weren't fighting a war.

They were chasing him as part of a hunting game, a form of amusement.

'But...'

Murka's movements were more agile and powerful than any Kergos Shirone had seen.

As he spun and unleashed a sword wind, the solid outer wall of Paradise shattered.

Following the mage's principle of creating distance, Shirone fired the Photon Cannon.

At the same time, Murka's eyes flashed, and various Skima techniques enhanced his vision.

Tiny nerves spread throughout his body, glowing momentarily and projecting outside his skin, making his body appear ghostly.

'He's fast! I can't perceive him!'

Shirone immediately spread his palm and activated Vajra Armor.

As the robe enveloped him at top speed, Murka's sword narrowly struck his side.

Boom!

"Ugh!"

Shirone crashed through the wall and into the building of Paradise.

The metallic body of the armored mineral species, Ringer, revealed grotesque scars and gleamed silver.

If he had been a moment slower, his body would have been torn apart.

Shirone tumbled like a flying squirrel, diving deeper into the building.

He had evaded the Photon Cannon with just his physical abilities.

'Is this what an immortal is?'

Even with eternal time, living beings had limits, but Murka's mastery of Skima had surpassed human limits.

"Haha! Are you scared already? Nephilim is nothing special. To think the citizens worship someone like you as the Light of Sector 73. They're really stupid."

Shirone's eyes sharpened.

Sensing his master's irritation, Arman spread its tendrils like a peacock's feathers.

"Oh? You have such tricks too?"

Murka showed no tension.

His thousand-year mastery of Skima allowed him to respond to any variable.

If the opponent was fast, he would slow down. If they were strong, he would evade. If they were durable, he would create the power to destroy them.

Perfect control over the human body.

That was Murka's specialty, earning him the title of the greatest warrior of the Kergos.

Hearing a sound like an insect's wings, Murka's eyes widened, and he twisted his waist.

Whoosh!

The tendrils, swinging with a strong wind, passed Murka and smashed the wall.

A speed far beyond his expectations.

'What is this?'

As Murka twisted his waist in a bizarre posture to observe Shirone, Shirone planted the tendrils in the ground and leaped.

An unknown resentment had built up in his heart.

As a human, Shirone couldn't help but feel a sense of jealousy towards immortality, a feeling only living beings could understand.

'Here I go!'

Photon Cannons fired in all directions, and four tendrils swept wide, clearing any space for evasion.

"Huff! Huff!"

Murka, as if in a training exercise rather than a real battle, controlled his breathing and dodged the attacks.

'He's truly impressive.'

The longer the fight went on, the brighter Murka's eyes shone.

Had he ever faced such a strong human in his thousand years of life?

Upon gaining immortality, humans transcended their mortal status and reached a higher realm.

His current combat power was on par with fairies and giants.

'But I can see it. I'm stronger.'

He would become an official of the Immortal Council and gain even more power. What he needed was right in front of him.

"Let's get serious!"

Murka, unleashing the Kergos' inherent combativeness, shot forward like an arrow and attacked Shirone.

Clang, clang, clang, clang!

Simultaneously, silver scars appeared on Arman's robe, and the shockwaves made Shirone's bones ache.

'That's a very sturdy robe. I like it.'

Murka slipped his sword under his armpit and spun.

As external force spread in all directions, his body rotated, and the sword created a disc-like afterimage as it flew towards Shirone.

'Can he block this too?'

Just as the blade was about to bite into Shirone's neck, an immense restraining force bound Murka's feet.

"Ugh!"

As Shirone retreated, the sword cut through empty air, and Murka struggled to stay upright.

'What is this?'

A single eye in a floating orb to Shirone's left was watching him.

The Antithesis that had even restrained the fallen angel Ikasa.

But Murka was different from Ikasa.

This was why he resided in the higher Third Heaven, Shehakim, rather than with the fallen angels.

"You, what is this...?"

Despite using all his Skima abilities to move, the restraining force grew sharper, piercing his muscle fibers.

It was impossible without a universal law that nullified the target's actions.

Shirone focused the Photon Cannon in front of him.

With the added magic amplification of Galatomic, the massive flash surged forward to obliterate Murka's face.

Boom!

At that moment, a wall of air formed in front of Murka, and the Photon Cannon exploded.

"Huff!"

Though not as powerful as Gaold's, the strong atmospheric pressure made Shirone glance towards the door.

"Hahaha! Struggling this much? You've aged, Murka."

'Who is this woman?'

A woman with a cold expression and a seductive smile floated a meter above the ground, entering Paradise.

Chapter 472:

Plu, running through the alley to escape the Kergos hunters, flinched as a powerful blow struck her from the side.

As the Mecca weapon, Signa, slammed into the ground, a shockwave several meters high erupted.

Pushed by the force, Plu was thrown against the building wall along with the shockwave.

"Ugh! What the...?"

"Damn it. Did I miss?"

Clank. Clank.

The metallic sound pierced her eardrums like a sharp blade.

A man equipped with a Piper appeared, holding a sword and shield.

It was Raun, the immortal.

At 1,010 years old, he had achieved divine transcendence at 450 and perfected his physical synchronization with machinery at 900.

"Well, this isn't so bad. It's a woman, after all."

Raun scrutinized Plu's appearance and gave a sly smile.

Despite enjoying countless pleasures over the ages, the strongest desire for any living being remained reproduction.

For him, who had lost the concepts of love and affection, only the dry memory of pleasure remained in the back of his mind.

"What are you babbling about?"

Hearing Plu's voice, Raun tilted his head and pressed a button on the Piper attached to his head.

His Mecca-level 1 equipment was perfectly customized for him, and its translation function far surpassed that of the Night Watch's devices.

"Ah, I see. You're a feisty woman. The kind that doesn't easily fall into a man's arms."

As Raun's words were translated through the mechanical sound, Plu frowned.

Meanwhile, Raun abandoned his previously gentlemanly demeanor and revealed a face of pure, wicked desire.

"That's my specialty."

As Plu shuddered at Raun's conveyed emotions, the ground shattered with a bang, and Raun's body shot up.

Reflexively looking up, Plu saw Raun floating much higher than expected and sensed something was wrong.

'How is that possible?'

Having been part of the rebel headquarters, she had a rough understanding of the Mecca combat system.

No Piper could enhance its functions to that extent.

It wasn't a matter of performance; the human body couldn't withstand it.

Pipers were meant to assist muscle strength. If they operated faster than nerve transmission speed, just throwing a punch would dislocate a human's joints.

But Raun's movements defied all such logic.

Perfect understanding of machinery.

In reality, Raun's Piper was 30 times more powerful than the devices used by the rebels.

It was a device that couldn't be operated without perfect synchronization of nerves and mind with the machine.

Mega Smash!

As the powerful drive of the Piper, divine transcendence, and the amplified power of Signa combined, a shockwave erupted that seemed to blow the building away.

Recognizing her opponent's capabilities, Plu drew Phoenix and fought back with all her might.

Raun's acrobatics were so dazzling that predicting his movements was impossible, but Plu, as a professional zoner, was no pushover.

Setting up Phoenix and countering with the Dawkins Algorithm, the surrounding buildings shattered.

'I can't lose here...!'

Plu gritted her teeth and dodged the attacks with all her strength.

While both the Piper and Dawkins Algorithm involved involuntary movements, Raun's understanding of machinery far surpassed human limits.

Every time Signa's shockwave swept through, Plu's body staggered.

'He's using some interesting techniques.'

Raun quickly grasped Plu's abilities.

Based on the Nor race's abilities, but with the principles of the Mecca race.

'As expected of hybrids, they're quite a mix.'

Raun licked his lips.

"This should be fun."

Raun sheathed Signa at his waist and raised his fist.

Electricity flowed from his spine, and his fist glowed with a blue light.

Electric Shockwave!

As he approached Plu and slammed his fist into the ground, a wave of electricity spread across a 20-meter radius.

"Ugh!"

Unable to handle the wide-area attack with the Dawkins Algorithm, Plu immediately disengaged the algorithm and went into defensive mode.

Raun, with explosive propulsion, lunged forward and raised his fist.

Plu crossed her arms to shield her face, layering defensive air shields to their limit.

Boom, boom, boom, boom!

Raun's fist easily pierced the heavy air barrier and struck Plu's guard.

Plu's vision blurred from the impact, and she heard the sound of her left arm breaking.

Boom!

When she regained her senses, she was rolling on the ground, not knowing how far she had been thrown.

"Sob!"

Plu let her limp left arm hang down and stood up.

Raun entered the building with a meaningful smile.

"If I had hit your stomach, your organs would have burst, and you'd be dead."

Despite trembling, Plu glared fiercely at Raun.

"But do you know why I hit your guard?"

Raun's face lit up with the anticipated thrill of pleasure.

"Let me teach you."

Inside Paradise, the combined combat power of the three was turning everything to ashes.

In his Vajra Armor state, Shirone was far stronger than without Arman, but the combined assault of the immortals Murka and Deina was formidable.

Murka's divine transcendence was at a level no mortal could achieve, and the magical power from Deina's mental transcendence was overwhelming, even for Shirone, who had experienced many battles.

"Hahaha! What, was it this easy?"

Deina spread wind seals in all directions, as if she had become one with the air.

Even if they could be seen, they were too fast to follow.

Murka swung his sword through the gaps in the wind seals.

With divine transcendence, there seemed to be nothing he couldn't cut, and Shirone was pushed back 100 meters in an instant.

The buildings they passed collapsed, proving the devastating power of their attacks.

'This is combat based on incarnation techniques.'

Shirone realized something new in his battle with them.

He had met many strong opponents, but this was his first time fighting enemies using incarnation techniques.

They manifested power through will.

It wasn't about enhancing strength but twisting the very nature of existence.

Humans, born as humans, made all decisions within the human realm.

But those who mastered incarnation techniques transcended human limits.

If humans had twelve fingers, the entire world would be different. Similarly, those who mastered incarnation techniques had a fundamentally different sense of combat. This created countless variables, and how they were utilized determined the vast differences in combat effectiveness.

"Hahaha! You're completely scared. Did you think a mere mortal could defeat us? Our experience and skill are on a different level!"

Murka, already feeling victorious, spread his arms wide and charged.

Imagining himself cutting Shirone's neck, the position of an official in the Immortal Council seemed within reach.

The Immortal Council, a group of monsters incomparable to these two, was composed of the most powerful immortals. The ten leaders of the council had lived for at least 10,000 years, and the average age of the officials was over 3,000. And now, he, a mere 1,000 years old, would become an official.

All immortals would look up to him, and he would live an even stronger and more splendid life, existing eternally in this world.

'It's not over yet!'

Shirone glared at Murka and Deina charging from both sides.

First, he restrained Deina with Akamai, then unleashed the Photon Cannon on Murka.

The flash's power, far beyond anything before, made Murka's face pale.

'Mental transcendence?'

Even as a master of Skima, the flash's beam was so intense it left afterimages.

It was as if Shirone had caused an explosion, sending everything around him flying.

After sweeping the area with a scatter movement, he fired lasers, causing massive explosions.

But what truly terrified the two was not the explosions but the heat that seemed to melt their flesh.

'What is this?'

Shirone noticed the enemy's counterattacks weakening and observed with curious eyes.

Unlike their previous expressions of enjoyment, they now looked serious.

The biggest difference was their movements.

In a battle that should have been growing more intense, their activity had decreased.

'I see.'

Shirone, as if finding the solution, pressed the attack even harder.

His prediction was accurate, and Murka and Deina couldn't even think of counterattacking, only focusing on evasion.

Finally, as Shirone's Photon Cannon struck Murka's side, he flew back with a look of shock.

Boom!

Hitting the wall, he couldn't even think of checking Shirone's position, focusing instead on healing his side with Skima's regeneration.

Deina retreated towards the exit, her eyes darting as she wondered what to do.

"Now I understand."

Shirone, with Akamai floating beside him, walked slowly.

Looking down at the grinding Murka, he said,

"You are weak."

In all the heavens except for Shehakim, where Shirone had infiltrated, and Lakia, where Gaold's party was, smoke was rising.

The unified rebel headquarters was slowly advancing towards Araboth, breaking through Heaven's army, and the

number of casualties increased as the distance closed. When the giant Titans broke down Heaven's walls, the Kuroi units advanced, firing at everything in sight.

Giants beyond the seventh stage of the elixir of myths charged and toppled the Titans, while fairies destroyed the Kuroi with various spells.

The infantry suffered the most casualties.

Relying solely on Pipers and magic, they had the highest numbers but also the highest death rates.

"Advance! Advance! Never retreat!"

Their fury over their comrades' deaths kept their momentum from faltering.

Kanya and Lena also had no place to retreat and kept advancing.

Tens of thousands had died. The sheer number of deaths, beyond what could be calculated, drove everyone mad.

Their madness turned into fighting spirit, which they unleashed on the enemy, and the enemy's corpses further fueled the rebels' rage, making their anger even more intense.

Every time archangels or their Maras appeared, the stationed units were annihilated.

In close combat, only Babel could hold an advantage, but even she had her limits, and eventually, half of the rebel forces had perished.

"Advance! Advance!"

All the soldiers shouted in unison as they moved forward. Whether they truly wanted to fight or believed they could reach their destination, such thoughts had long evaporated, leaving them to mechanically shout and advance.

It was mechanical, but in a broader sense, it was a deeply biological phenomenon.

Like ants, their individual identities had evaporated, and they were becoming a unified organism with a single purpose.

"Advance! Advance!"

For the first time, Heaven's army felt a shiver of fear.
How could this be? What was driving them?
Objectively, they shouldn't have been pushed back, but the
defensive line was slowly retreating.
'They're strong. They're very strong.'
The leaders of Heaven finally realized.
They weren't fighting Lena, Kanya, or Crude.
They were fighting a perfectly unified organism, humanity
itself.

Chapter 473:

Plu, with a fractured left upper arm, couldn't move easily. If the Dawkins Algorithm activated in this situation, her broken arm would flail uncontrollably, and the pain would directly translate into a loss of combat effectiveness. Not everyone could have the extreme endurance of Gaold. "Ugh!"

Every time Raun approached, Plu had to widen the distance, which severely hurt her pride.

Especially the murky desire in his eyes made her even more uncomfortable.

"Heh, just as I thought."

Raun clenched his fists.

Clang! Clang!

Electricity once again sparked from the area near the Piper's spine, gathering in his fists.

No matter what tricks she tried, she wouldn't be able to dodge two Electric Shockwaves.

"You've never bowed to anyone, have you? You'd rather break than lose, training and honing your mind countless times with that resolve."

Plu glared at Raun without answering.

With the Dawkins Algorithm sealed, her only option was to watch his every move closely.

"I know that competitive spirit made you who you are. But do you know there are beings on a different level? I've gained immortality and will continue to live this life forever."

The mechanical sound from the Piper's translation device grated on Plu's nerves.

She felt she could do anything if it meant crushing his jaw.

"What are you trying to say?"

"The point is, I don't dislike women like you."

Raun spread his clenched fists apart.

"I'll give you a choice. Become my woman. You don't have to worry about being discarded. I'll cherish you until you grow old and die. Of course, in my own way."

As Raun approached confidently, Plu clutched her injured arm and stepped back.

But her eyes had grown cold and calm.

For those who had gained immortality, regret and remorse didn't exist.

They could always start over and had eternal time to make up for any mistakes.

"Now I understand."

Plu bared her fangs, lifting her upper lip.

"You're not a human living an immortal life."

"Hmph, the jealousy of mortals..."

"You're already dead."

Raun stopped talking and lowered his eyelids.

"You're already a dead human. You're missing the most essential thing for a human."

"Missing? Me? What am I lacking?"

"A heart."

Plu swung Phoenix with her right arm, taking a combat stance.

"You have no heart. With nothing to give, nothing matters to you. Your body is just a wooden log, and the slight stimuli running through it are all you have."

Crackle!

Electricity surged from Raun's fists.

He finally realized that he shouldn't have entertained the madness of mortals.

"I'll kill you. I'll show you what true death is."

As soon as he finished speaking, Raun lunged.

'Dawkins Algorithm.'

Ignoring her injury, Plu activated the Spirit Zone again.

Raun's attacks were more violent and persistent than before, but Plu's movements were now unrestrained.

Even if her broken arm flailed uncontrollably or her spine broke, she didn't care.

What mattered to her was not the future but this moment. That's why she could fight with everything she had.

Raun's attacks, synchronized with the machine, were still precise, but Plu charged with her life on the line.

As time passed, Raun's face hardened.

No matter how much he attacked, Plu's momentum only grew, reaching a point where her life was in danger.

The height of her resolve. When she surpassed that threshold, Raun finally realized.

He could die.

"This... this...!"

Feelings he never wanted to acknowledge pierced Raun's heart.

Fear. And a sense of defeat.

Neither was something he could handle.

"Aaaargh!"

He discharged all the electricity from his fists into the ground, spreading powerful currents in all directions.

Plu didn't care and lunged, her citizens' clothes burning away to reveal her bare skin.

'Oh, come on... again?'

Plu gritted her teeth.

Her skin was red and blistered from first-degree burns, but the electric currents shaking her muscles were worse.

'Ugh!'

Even as her body refused to obey, she cast a spell with sheer willpower and swung Phoenix at Raun.

'Phoenix Strike!'

Screeeeech!

As the fiery phoenix, glowing like molten lava, shot out, Raun raised his arms in terror.

His mind went blank, unable to react.

As the immense flames surged, Raun's eyes widened in horror.

More terrifying than pain was death.

Having lived for a thousand years and expecting countless more, the fear of his life ending at this moment was more terrifying than anything.

"No, noooooo!"

Raun screamed.

His scream was the most pitiful cry a human could make.

Plu looked at Raun with calm, indifferent eyes, showing no hint of sympathy.

He was burning.

His flesh charred, leaving only the metallic frame of the Piper.

In the end, he would transform into another substance and be absorbed by another life.

That was life.

Thud. Thud.

Plu turned away from Raun's charred corpse.

But the wounds inflicted by Raun were severe, and she collapsed as soon as she stepped out of the building, her body exposed.

"Haa..."

Immortals were strong, but they had corresponding weaknesses. And Shirone would surely understand those weaknesses.

'There's nothing I can do. I'll have to wait until he comes to help.'

Plu looked down at her burned thigh and pouted.

It couldn't be helped during a battle, but as a senior, her pride was severely wounded.

"Eek!"

Deina, with a terrified expression, kept retreating.

The sight of the tendrils' blades aiming for her neck made her heart shrink in fear.

She was going to die.

Her life, which had promised an eternal future, was about to end here.

Shirone was no longer intimidated.

No matter how skilled they were in incarnation techniques, they had infinitely more to lose in death than mortals.

That's why he could charge forward.

As Photon Cannons spread in all directions, Murka and Deina could only retreat.

The fear of death overwhelmed them, and finally, Murka, the greatest warrior of the Kergos, screamed.

"Aaaargh!"

Shirone seized the momentum and activated Akamai.

As the Antithesis took effect, Murka couldn't move a finger.

The strong figure who had overcome the power that restrained even fallen angels with divine transcendence was gone.

Incarnation was the entirety of a human's being, and with a broken spirit, it was impossible to break free from the Antithesis's restraint.

"S-Save me! Please!"

Murka shouted into the empty air, unable to even turn his head.

His terrified eyes lost focus, the black and white blending like a liquid.

Without hesitation, Shirone leaped in and swung the tendrils, the sharp metal slicing through Murka's neck.

"Save..."

Thud. Thud, thud, thud.

His head rolled on the ground, stopping at Deina's feet.

"Eek!"

She saw death.

Deina lost the will to fight and collapsed.

Meanwhile, Arman absorbed Murka's body, restoring Shirone's strength.

Completely absorbed.

What was a natural fact for living beings was an unbearable reality for Deina, striking her mind.

Long ago, she had also been part of the cycle of eating and being eaten.

But this time, she was the prey, not the predator.

"Please, spare me..."

As Shirone approached, Deina pleaded in a trembling voice. Seeing Shirone's cold eyes, she quickly knelt and begged, rubbing her hands together.

"Please, just spare my life. I'll do anything you say. I'll crawl on the ground, I'll pass between your legs."

Shirone's expression remained unchanged.

Only the four tendrils rose high into the sky, following his emotions.

How many mortals had she killed for fun, just because she had gained immortality?

It was anger, and he had no intention of stopping.

"I don't want to die. Please, spare me. I'm begging you."

Deina, who had lived for a thousand years, cried like a newborn, rubbing her hands together.

Death would be a shock to any living being, but for someone who had escaped the chain of life, the desire to live was incomparably greater.

Shirone's tendrils shot into the air and then hooked down on Deina.

"Aaaargh!"

Her piercing scream echoed as the tendrils' blades pinned her to the ground.

"Knowing how precious your life is..."

Shirone bit his lip and spoke.

"Why do you treat others' lives so carelessly?"

"Ugh, ugh."

Deina was no longer in her right mind.

Her completely broken will was reflected in her incarnation.

Unlike Shirone, who had reached his state by overcoming death, her incarnation technique, gained through gradual self-realization in immortality, was fragile like glass.

"I was wrong. Please, spare me, master. I'll follow you forever."

With her incarnation shattered, her self-esteem collapsed. She had fallen to the most pitiful state a human could reach. Only then did Shirone retract the tendrils and speak.

"Get up."

He didn't set subjective standards for saving or killing people.

But he also didn't believe in objective standards.

Human life couldn't be measured by any standard.

So the reason Shirone spared Deina was simply a rational decision that she was still needed.

"Get up. We need to find Senpai."

"Yes, I'll find her, master. Leave it to me."

Shirone led Deina out of the building.

The immortals they had faced this time were qualitatively different from other hunting units, and judging by the scale of the destruction, it was easy to locate where Plu had fought.

"Senpai!"

Shirone ran towards Plu, who was leaning against the building wall.

Her exposed skin was covered in red burns.

But more serious was her broken arm.

"Are you okay? How did this happen?"

Shirone glanced at Raun's corpse inside the building.

He must have been an immortal, just like the ones Shirone had faced.

Even in the Vajra Armor state with Arman, Shirone had struggled initially, so he could only attribute Plu's victory to her extreme endurance.

Plu, not wanting to show weakness, stood up.

"I won't die from this. But who is she?"

Shirone looked at Deina and asked.

"Can you heal Senpai's wounds?"

Deina, on the verge of tears, shook her head.

"I don't have healing magic. I'm sorry, master."

"Master?"

Plu raised an eyebrow.

It was a long story, so Shirone cut to the chase.

"First, we should find some clothes."

Plu let out a long sigh.

"Master!"

At that moment, Deina turned around and shouted.

Simultaneously, an unknown force completely crushed the three of them.

"Ugh! This is..."

It wasn't the power of the Nor.

As they looked ahead with puzzled expressions, a group of fairies appeared beyond the wall.

Mirka, the Fairy of Awe, ranked second among the 72 classes of fairies, looked down at them with an arrogant expression.

Her elaborate makeup and large wings indicated her high status, but that wasn't what mattered to Shirone at the moment.

"Feope?"

Feope, standing beside Mirka with a sad expression, had her head bowed.

Chapter 474:

The Second Heaven, Lakia.

As Gaold walked towards the walls of the Hall of Corruption, Miro was lost in countless thoughts.

Ever since she heard his desperate cries 20 years ago, she had always felt that Gaold might never give up.

'Foolish human...'

Miro suppressed the urge to curse out loud.

She looked at Gaold's muscular body, hidden under the bloodstains.

His once slender frame was now completely different.

His skin was covered in scars, with no space left unmarked.

Anyone could see that his body had been honed through relentless training.

Was it the contrast that pleased her?

Even in the face of a monumental event that could determine the fate of humanity, Miro wanted to make a joke.

'You've become quite sexy?'

Words she would have easily thrown out before now stayed unspoken.

Perhaps she was a little angry.

Reflecting her feelings, Miro's eyes grew cold.

He had really come.

He had crushed the fire giants, torn apart countless Maras and fallen angels, and made it here.

'But even if he's here...'

What difference does it make?

Just to have me? To possess me? To hear whispers of love meant only for him while lying beside him?

Any human might desire that, but Gaold had already crossed the line.

This was the heart of Heaven's enemy territory, and with her magic sealed by Kariel, her value was reduced to that of a powerless hostage, weighed against the lives of humanity. 'And...'

There were two archangels here.

Kariel and Uriel.

Even if Kariel's power was weakened, teaming up with Uriel, the Archangel of Destruction, made them the worst possible combination.

The conclusion was that even if he came, he couldn't leave. Gaold would die here, and so would she.

The rest of humanity would be slaughtered by Heaven's army.

"Why did you come?"

Miro coldly spat out.

She could control the rising anger, but she couldn't let herself show any affection for Gaold.

Reminding the enemy of the hostage's value would only increase the number of victims.

"Because of you, everything is a mess. Do you even know what you've done?"

Miro desperately wished.

'Go back. Please, even now, go back, you fool!'

Seeing Gaold looking up at her in a daze, Miro added some emotion to her words.

"Put it back! You've ruined everything I've dedicated my life to. So put it back...!"

Thud!

Gaold's eyes lost focus, and his knees hit the ground.

His body trembled as nerves fired along his spine.

At the end of the terrifying pain was a profound, emotionless calm.

His head, which had been hanging limply, slowly rose again.

A small voice escaped his cracked lips.

"I'm sorry."

Miro clenched her lips, struggling to hide the shockwave exploding in her heart.

"I'm sorry. It took too long, didn't it? At first..."

Gaold's words and breaths tangled as his body trembled again.

The 20 years that had been cut off reconnected, and only his feelings for Miro remained clear.

"At first, I thought it would be quick, but it kept getting delayed. I wanted to come sooner, but I couldn't..."

As Gaold's eyes reddened, Miro's eyes also filled with warmth.

The emotions condensed to the extreme in one human couldn't be expressed in mere words.

Even without words, the fact that Gaold had come this far spoke volumes about his 20-year journey.

Realizing this, Gaold stopped explaining and looked up.

His eyes, which had been half-conscious, finally returned to normal.

No one knew, but Miro recognized this as the Gaold from 20 years ago.

"Let's go back, Miro. Let's just... go back."

Miro gritted her teeth.

She couldn't even identify the emotions surging within her. Anger, resentment, or perhaps something else she wanted to disguise as those feelings.

'I must die.'

Her rational mind immediately offered a solution to block her emotions.

She had to die here.

Even though the situation was dire, if there was even a slight chance to prevent the final war, some of those dispatched to Heaven had to survive and leave Lakia.

"I..."

As Miro steeled herself and began to speak, a massive flash of light erupted from the rear of the Hall of Corruption.

The immense energy wave traveled dozens of kilometers to reach them, causing Kariel and Uriel to turn their heads. The shockwave was coming from Araboth, where Anke Ra was.

"Ikael..."

Kariel muttered with a twisted expression.

Currently, the archangels who governed the four fundamental forces were testing Ikael's qualifications as the archangel.

If the archangels of the four forces subdued Ikael, it would be beneficial for him.

They would act according to their own judgments outside the archangel's authority, and his decisions would align with theirs, making them less significant.

On the other hand, if Ikael subdued the archangels of the four forces, the situation would become complicated.

She wouldn't tolerate the angels' reckless behavior, and Kariel, having lost the fire giants, would also be threatened. Therefore, he had to hope that the archangels of the four forces would defeat Ikael, but Kariel found himself unable to choose.

A part of him couldn't accept the idea of Ikael losing to anyone.

'No, that's not true.'

Kariel shook his head.

She had to be defeated.

But the one to do it had to be him, and no one else.

'I will crush her. Only I have the right to crush her.'

An even stronger energy wave swept through Lakia.

The high spire of Araboth shook from deep within the ground.

Boom!

The area where the wave passed was left spotless.

It was the epitome of purity, unseen in the human world.

"Huff, huff."

Ikael knelt on one knee, breathing heavily.

Around her, the archangels lay as if dead.

'She's strong.'

The thought simultaneously crossed the minds of the archangels of the four forces.

'Indeed, the supreme law of Heaven, Ataraxia.'

Her amplification was unique, beyond the reach of intellect, a concept before existence and non-existence.

The archangels of the four forces were each powerful in their own right, but even with all four of them combined, they could only bring her to a groggy state.

"Phew, let's consider this test concluded."

Metatron was the first to rise.

"For now, Ikael, you are still the archangel. We trust you and leave the judgment regarding Shirone entirely to you."

Shirone.

Ikael thought of that name as she slowly stood up.

Perhaps she could have persuaded them with words alone.

But she had defended her judgment regarding Shirone, even if it meant a show of force among angels.

Why?

What was that boy to her?

The remaining three archangels rose from their positions.

"We agree with Metatron's opinion."

"But as archangels governing Heaven, we cannot overlook human recklessness. We will not engage in the war by Anke Ra's command, but we will intervene through our Maras."

Ikael didn't stop them.

She couldn't, and as the archangel on Heaven's side, it didn't make sense to prevent the punishment of humans.

"Anke Ra's command was only to prohibit angelic activities."

As Ikael indirectly expressed her agreement and emphasized once more, the archangels of the four forces nodded briefly and looked at each other.

The battles were taking place in all six heavens except Araboth.

Each would oversee one and handle it.

"Then, let's go."

As the four archangels simultaneously spread their wings of light, a sacred vibration created a harmony that shook the world.

Watching the archangels disappear in an instant, Ikael turned coldly and headed for the spire of Araboth.

The only one she had to protect was Anke Ra.

Thud.

Uriel moved for the first time.

As he jumped down from the wall and landed on the ground, the entire scenery seemed to bend towards him.

As he took a step forward, Gaold stepped back at the same pace.

Having never retreated before, Gaold's followers, including Sein, could guess the pressure he was under.

'So this is how it ends.'

Sein controlled his emotions.

They had made it this far, but the true challenge wasn't the fire giants, the Maras, or the fallen angels.

It was the archangel standing before them.

Gaold had managed to deal with his three-horned Mara, Shiva, with extreme endurance, but Uriel's power, based on the law of his followers, was expected to far surpass Shiva's.

"Gaold."

"I'll handle this."

Gaold, still not taking his eyes off Uriel, responded to Sein's voice.

"Rescue Miro in the meantime."

Sein knew it was an impossible plan.

Even if all ten of them attacked Uriel, it was doubtful how long they could hold out, let alone Gaold facing him alone.

'But we have to try.'

As everyone, led by Sein, steeled themselves, a powerful aura exploded from Uriel's body.

Pure destruction.

The aura was so overwhelming that any being, no, any existence, buried in it would be utterly destroyed, leaving no bones behind.

"No one can pass me. The only thing you can do here is die."

Gaold spoke.

"Go."

Zulu moved first, followed by the others.

They might be annihilated upon approach, but without trying, there was no way to save Miro.

The seven members scattered left and right, passing Uriel.

'What is this?'

Without any time to gather his thoughts, Kangnan broke through the castle gate with a powerful stomp and charged inside.

Just before entering the Hall of Corruption, Sain turned around.

Uriel was still staring solely at Gaold.

'Was he testing us?'

Though he clenched his teeth in frustration at the sense of mockery, missing such an opportunity would have been foolish.

Sain led everyone in their infiltration of the Hall of Corruption.

Gaold slowly curled his lips into a grin.

"Are you offering mercy, befitting a great archangel?"

Uriel gave no reply.

Even knowing they will die, they charge forward.

That is humanity.

And among all humans, the one standing before Uriel now—Gaold—gave off the most bizarre impression.

"What are you dreaming of? There is no hope for you."

"Hope?"

A concentrated sphere of atmospheric pressure formed in Gaold's right hand.

It was the Vacuum Press, powerful enough to block even the Photon Cannon of Ataraxia.

“Hope is nothing more than an illusion born of despair. What drives humanity isn’t hope. It’s something far more brutal...”

Gaold’s body shot forward like an arrow.

In an instant, he reached Uriel’s flank and swung his right hand, unleashing the Vacuum Press.

“It’s despair.”

Chapter 475:

Gaold's Vacuum Press struck Uriel's face directly.

Boom!

The tremendous shockwave exploded, pushing the air out of the hall and then sucking it all back in.

Even those on the walls couldn't escape the storm's aftermath and turned to look in the shaking atmosphere.

"What... what is that...?"

Everyone's eyes were filled with shock.

Despite taking Gaold's powerful Vacuum Press head-on, Uriel stood in the same spot as before.

Looking at Gaold's twisted expression, Uriel spoke calmly.

"Is this the despair of humanity you spoke of?"

Uriel's halo flashed and expanded into a radiant ring.

"Then it is indeed a pitiful despair."

As Uriel's golden halo spread, the Celestial Galaxy Wheel was born.

The Celestial Galaxy Wheel.

As the wheel spun with a thunderous roar, Gaold widened the distance and applied immense atmospheric pressure around him.

As the Galaxy Wheel scraped the ground and charged forward, the earth split open, threatening to swallow Gaold.

Gaold's eyes widened.

It wasn't a collision of objects.

Everything that touched the Galaxy Wheel disintegrated like foam in its path.

Boom!

As Gaold's press crushed the ground, the shockwave from the Galaxy Wheel split his defensive barrier.

Boom!

The ground split beside Gaold as he twisted his body, and the indirect shockwave alone shook his insides, making him cough up blood.

"Ugh!"

Gaold's power was ineffective.

This realization was despairing for Sein and his group.

"Damn it! Hurry!"

Sein quickly regained his composure and led the group into the Hall of Corruption.

Judging by the power gap, Gaold could only hold out for a minute at most.

If they didn't reach Miro within that time, they would all be annihilated.

It wasn't the fear of death.

What truly terrified them was seeing their lifelong project fail right before their eyes.

As some archangels and Maras blocked their path in the Hall of Corruption, Kangnan took the lead.

She would reach Miro.

She would meet the woman who had driven a man's life to ruin after chasing her all his life.

'Uncle...'

Kangnan's nose wrinkled like a wolf's as she spotted a massive one-horned Mara charging from the front.

"Ugh!"

"Not a step further from here."

The three-meter-tall one-horned Mara, with a gorilla-like upper body covered in fur, swung its six arms simultaneously.

Kangnan bent low, taking the lowest possible stance, and twisted her waist.

As her right foot swung and struck the Mara's shin, there was a crack, and the leg broke.

"Aaaargh!"

Before the scream ended, Kangnan moved behind the Mara, spun twice, and kicked again.

Boom!

With the Skima of the Wolf Tribe in action, the Mara's neck broke, and its body flew several meters.

'Miro...'

Kangnan looked up to see where Miro was.

From the outside, it was just a sheer wall, but inside, it was a complex structure with numerous intersecting stairs.

The sky was already occupied by various Maras, and several fallen angels guarded key points on the stairs.

They weren't as strong as the enemies they had faced so far, but with Gaold fighting Uriel, they were still formidable opponents.

"Let's go!"

Kangnan gathered strength in her legs and leaped, her stockings tearing as her body rose vertically.

Numerous Maras swarmed her, but soon they were flung away, screaming in their death throes.

"She's impressive."

Kuan and Etella knew better than anyone how formidable Kangnan's martial prowess was.

They were also skilled in Skima, but Kangnan's body itself was a weapon.

Watching her fight, it seemed as if every part of her body was made solely for destruction.

"She fights well. Is that why she's the secretary of the Magic Association?"

"That's not it."

Zulu, following beside Sein, spoke.

"If Gaold brought us this far, now Kangnan must lead us."

Sein pondered Zulu's words.

Since the Heaven Project began, they had walked different paths and hadn't kept in touch.

But at some point, Kangnan had been by Gaold's side.

There must be a story behind it, but Sein quickly dismissed the thought.

In a situation where one mistake could ruin the operation, they had to use everything at their disposal. Even if it was a precious human heart.

"Damn it!"

Kuan spun and flew, sweeping away enemies in all directions.

Finally, their view cleared, revealing the top of the Hall of Corruption.

Nothing had changed from what they had seen below.

Kariel remained composed, and Miro continued to watch Gaold and Uriel's battle without turning her head.

But Gaold was in a dire state.

Pushed back a kilometer, his body was battered and bruised from Uriel's relentless attacks.

All that remained were muscles ground like meat, protecting his bones.

"Huff, huff."

Gaold, with his arms hanging limp, glared at Uriel, breathing heavily.

Muscles weren't particularly important for a mage, but for someone whose power source was pain, the additional suffering was no help.

The problem was that his Air Press wasn't as powerful as before.

'Damn, bad luck.'

Miro muttered.

"Gaold can't win."

"Ugh?"

Arius, lying beside her, groaned and looked at her for an answer.

"It's not a matter of his body."

Miro narrowed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

'That's why you're a fool, Gaold...'

It was the catharsis of releasing what had been condensed for 20 years in one burst.

Humans could do anything to release that one emotion, but once it was out, it took time to reach that level of passion again.

'It's not your fault.'

She had pushed Gaold away.

So Gaold wouldn't have expected anything.

He hadn't come thinking he would be welcomed like a prince on a white horse, or that she would kiss him with tears of joy.

He had come because his heart ached so much that he would go mad if he didn't see her.

It was selfish to the extreme, but because all his emotions were directed at Miro, it was also selfless.

'If only I could...'

There was only one way to reignite Gaold's extreme endurance.

"Miro!"

Boom!

Covered in Mara's blood, Kangnan blasted away a group of enemies and reached the wall.

"Say it!"

Miro didn't even glance at Kangnan, keeping her mouth shut.

Kangnan took a deep breath.

She had finally made it here.

What kind of woman was she? What kind of woman could drive a man to such madness? The figure she had imagined every night was now in front of her.

"Tell Gaold..."

Kangnan shouted with all her might.

"Tell him you love him!"

Her voice echoed, reaching the battlefield a kilometer away, where shockwaves raged.

Gaold stopped fighting, and Uriel responded.

For Uriel, the Archangel of Destruction, war was as familiar as life itself, but he wanted to know.

Why were humans so chaotic?

As if time had stopped, everyone turned to Miro.

Under the silent pressure, Miro finally opened her mouth.

"The one I love is myself..."

Her head slowly turned to Kangnan.

"...and no one else."

Since she had thrown herself into existence for humanity 20 years ago, she had let go of everything.

She was just a wall, a system, a phenomenon.

Kangnan ground her teeth.

"What do you know?"

Yes. What did Miro know?

Could she be so shameless just because she had held a man's heart 20 years ago?

She knew nothing of his life, his pain, or how he had come this far, yet all she could say were those words?

'I will take you. I will make you kneel before Gaold!'

As Kangnan kicked off the ground and charged, Kariel raised his hand.

"Come forth, Erg."

A black sphere expanded in front of his palm, and the one-horned Mara Erg appeared.

Unlike other Maras, Erg resembled a giant insect with a metallic body, and a single metal lens was embedded in the center of its long, horse-like face.

Its nickname was the Computational Device of All Principles.

Kariel mainly summoned this Mara when he went into full defense mode.

Bzzz!

Electricity flowed through the dozens of glass bells on Erg's back, and numerous magic circles spread around them.

The 420-layered magic circles created barriers against all attributes, and Kangnan had to stop in front of the physical magic circle.

"What are you dreaming of, foolish human?"

Kariel spoke with a mocking tone.

"The only thing left for you is the punishment for angering the divine."

Kariel's finger pointed to the vast sky.

Darkness fell over everyone's faces as they looked up.

Countless fallen angels were flying towards them.

"Is this the backlash?"

The enemies they had bound with stop magic had regained their freedom.

It didn't feel unfortunate.

In fact, thanks to the absurd ability to stop time, they had reached Miro so quickly.

But the situation had reached its worst.

Sein quickly gave orders.

"I'll break the magic circle. Hold off the enemies in the meantime. But no stop or force meter magic."

Even if they destroyed Erg's barrier, there were still two archangels here.

The only magic that might give them a chance to escape with Miro was stop and space-time force meter magic.

No one failed to understand, and the group quickly found advantageous positions and prepared for battle.

Seeing this, Uriel turned to Gaold.

"It's unfortunate. You've been rejected again by the one you longed for so desperately."

Uriel's words were dignified but lacked sympathy. And that was precisely why Uriel was not human.

"Heh. Heh heh heh."

Gaold's lips twisted into a grin as he lifted his head.

"As expected... you're the best, Miro."

When he heard Miro's words through the archangel's resonance, it felt like the world was collapsing.

It was probably true, but it was also effective.

"Are you going to keep struggling? Is that what it means to be human?"

"You know nothing about humans."

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The air around Gaold began to swirl.

It was different from before, or rather, the same overwhelming force that had swept away countless enemies was swirling again.

Boom!

A vacuum sphere formed in front of Gaold's hand.

His muscles were already shredded, and he couldn't even swing his arm, but he pushed forward with all his might.

"What would you know?"

'Danger!'

Uriel quickly raised his arm and swung the Celestial Galaxy Wheel in front of him.

Through the rapidly spinning afterimages, Gaold's ghostly face, swinging his limp arm, came into view.

Yes, what would he know?

The more unattainable something is, the more one desires it...

"The vile desires of humans."

Pain Sensitivity 10 Million Times - Vacuum Press.

Boom!

The torn atmosphere thundered and shot up into the sky, covering a radius of several kilometers.

Chapter 476:

"It went in!"

Gaold was certain.

The moment the thrilling explosion of the Vacuum Press occurred at his fingertips, he clearly felt that Uriel had been shaken.

It was a certainty delivered by ten million times the pain.

There wasn't a speck of dust left nearby, but the wrinkles in the atmosphere had completely obscured his vision.

As the air spread outwards, a backdraft incomparable to a typhoon swept through the battlefield, which had momentarily fallen into a vacuum state.

The air swirled and gathered, turning into turbulence and creating hundreds of vortices.

In the movement of that wind, Uriel, who was crouching and defending his body with the Nirvana Shield, was visible.

"Is this really human technology?"

Uriel knew that superiority in martial arts alone did not guarantee victory, having fought countless battles.

Even if it was just a hypothesis, it wouldn't be shameful for a human with technology that even angels couldn't predict to be temporarily pushed back.

While Miro was a representative figure, Gaold had reached this point solely through martial arts.

"Ugh!"

Gaold, with his white hair flying, charged repeatedly.

The Vacuum Press was a powerful defensive technique, but depending on its use, it could also become a bomb that exploded with ultra-high-density air pressure.

"Interesting."

The Nirvana Shield clashed with the Vacuum Press with a loud noise.

As the frictional heat burned the air, a massive fire cloud rose as if a bomb had exploded.

The intense heat reached those on the fortress walls, and Sein, who was breaking Erg's magic circle, became even more anxious.

"Damn it. He might be dead."

The air literally turned into fire.

It was a power that even the great Gaold might not survive.

Sein activated the Sun and Moon Wheel and shouted.

"Cover me!"

As two gears penetrated Erg, Sein's consciousness was completely cut off from external information.

To protect the defenseless Sein, Zulu and Armin arrived.

A slow magic field unfolded, and Zulu's summoned cougar swung its sharp claws at the approaching enemies.

But as time passed, the number of fallen angels only increased.

"We can't hold out much longer here either."

There was no way to confirm Gaold's life or death, and the battle on the fortress walls was gradually being pushed back.

"Is this the power of an angel?"

The gap between angels and fallen angels was like heaven and earth, but their abilities, derived from their concepts, had a distinctiveness that set them apart from any mage's magic.

"We were never meant to win from the start."

Zulu said, commanding the cougar.

"We just need to focus on buying time. There's still one more chance left."

"Do you think Gaold is alive?"

"No."

Zulu looked at Kangnan, who was fighting the fire giant mage Urotas at the forefront of the battlefield.

"It's not about living or dying. It's about whether you can give up or not."

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Every time Urotas's fist struck the ground, Kangnan felt her heart sink.

The last remaining fire giant.

But he was a deputy commander and a unique mage among giants.

"The Seal of Fire!"

When Urotas, who had stopped his attack, clasped his hands and cast a spell, a burning seal of fire was engraved on Kangnan's forearm.

"Damn!"

The fire immediately materialized and began to burn, draining the strength from Kangnan's arm.

Urotas's magic was seal magic.

It was the ability to engrave a seal on the target with the gaze of fire and burn the control right.

Once the seal was engraved, it was as if the nerves were cut off, making it impossible to move.

The conditions for determining the application range seemed quite tricky, but considering that the opponent was a mage with the strength of a giant, it was undoubtedly an annoying technique.

"I will avenge my clan!"

Realizing that this was not an opponent she could fight with stubbornness alone, Kangnan twisted her body flexibly and dug into the opponent's chest.

When the straight and domineering attack unique to the Rammoai was launched, Urotas hurriedly widened the distance and cast the seal magic again.

As fire burned on her right thigh and she lost control, Kangnan stomped the ground with her opposite foot as if striking it.

She darted forward like an arrow and struck Urotas's side with a whip-like kick, pushing the giant's body back.

"Ugh!"

Urotas's eyes burned with fire as a seal was engraved on Kangnan's solar plexus.

"Ugh!"

As the fire burned and the control right was momentarily burned away, her heart stopped for a moment.

When Urotas's fist flew in, Kangnan covered her face with both arms.

It was a reflexive movement she had reached after countless repetitions every day.

As the impact pierced through her guard, Kangnan's consciousness blurred.

"Ugh!"

When she came to, what she saw was the towering fortress wall.

Tears flowed from her eyes.

"I am..."

She couldn't become like that person.

Even though she had risked everything, she couldn't even stay at the edge of where he had reached.

"Hmph!"

Kangnan clenched her fists and stood up.

Emotions didn't matter.

She had come here, abandoning everything, to achieve one purpose.

"I will definitely... definitely bring him back."

By now, the battle on the fortress wall had reached its climax.

When Shina's ice magic bound the Maras, Kuan flew in and cut down their frozen bodies.

Etella was blasting the giant Mara's body with Yin-Yang Wave Fist, and Zulu and Armin were using all their skills to block the bizarre abilities of the fallen angels.

And Sein... finally reached the central processing unit of the first-class Mara Erg.

As he passed through the tangled circuits like a net, he deactivated all connections with the Sun and Moon Wheel.

As the light of the magic circles in reality gradually dimmed, Kariel's face twisted slightly.

They were holding out much longer than he had expected. For someone who regarded humans as insignificant as insects, it was truly unpleasant.

"I want to sweep them away right now, but..."

But Kariel's way of thinking was fundamentally different from Uriel's.

"There is a much simpler solution."

Realizing it was time to execute the second plan, Kariel approached Miro and extended his hand.

If he detonated the magic circle implanted in her head, her face would explode entirely.

Even after guessing Kariel's intention, Miro silently watched the battlefield.

In front of the Hall of Corruption, the ground was uneven with large and small craters created by Gaold's atmospheric pressure, and deep valleys formed wherever Uriel's touch reached.

"You've gotten stronger, Gaold."

Looking at Gaold, who was sprawled on the ground, Miro smiled for the first time.

Gaold was strong, but he couldn't defeat an archangel.

That was the fundamental concept.

Not the destruction of one, not the destruction of a thousand, just destruction.

The universe flows from beginning to end, and humans, who are the latecomers to this principle, cannot surpass the preceding concept.

"Why am I doing this? I'm just a woman too."

Just the fact that Gaold could fight an archangel for over a minute showed how far he had come.

"Still, honestly, it was a bit touching."

As the magic circle in her head prepared to detonate and sent vibrations, Miro slowly closed her eyes.

"Goodbye, everyone."

Gaold looked at the sky with empty eyes.

"Let's stop."

Had he ever poured out so much of himself in his life?

It was a sense of accomplishment that made him feel like he had achieved something, even though he had achieved nothing.

"Yes, let's give up. It was never mine from the start."

When he thought about it, it was simple.

Why couldn't he forget her? It was just a matter of changing his mind, like flipping his palm.

"I should become the chairman again. I'll meet a woman much better than Miro. I could become incredibly wealthy. I could have the most powerful authority in the world. I'm sick of it."

Gaold shed hot tears.

It was the end.

If he could just forget Miro... the world would be his.

Just Miro...

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Gaold gritted his teeth.

"Damn it! Because I can't do that...!"

He needed nothing.

Not a woman, not wealth, not honor, not even happiness.

"I'm going through this hell because of that!"

Only Miro.

If he could laugh with her for just one day, no, even for one minute, he would pay any price.

"Damn it. Why can't I even have that...?"

The dark thoughts reignited his hell, engulfing the world in flames.

"Are you still going to try?"

Gaold stood up from his lying position.

With his entire nervous system writhing like a monster, he bent his upper body and compressed the Vacuum Press as he sprang forward.

Boom!

As the scorching wind that seemed to melt his skin swept through, Miro's eyes opened again.

Kariel also looked at the battlefield with interest but soon widened his eyes and turned his head.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Erg's magic circles shattered in succession, and Sein's consciousness returned to reality.

"Now! Go in!"

"Damn it...!"

Kariel accelerated the detonation of the magic circle implanted in Miro's head.

As the loud noise from her brain echoed, Miro's brow furrowed, and sweat dripped from her temples.

"Run! Quickly!"

As Sein's group rushed towards Miro, the fallen angels hurriedly ran in to form a barrier of flesh.

The angels' desperation was evident from their single-minded focus on just filling the space, without considering either attack or defense.

Confirming Miro's condition, Sein urged, "Break through! There's no time!"

Kuan, Etella, and Shina gave their all to open a path.

As soon as a very narrow path was opened, everyone infiltrated through it.

Boom!

A fallen angel descended from the sky at top speed and blocked the path again.

She landed almost crouching, raising her red eyes, which lacked pupils, and grabbed her wrist.

"Pulse Barrier!"

As everyone's biological rhythms synchronized and their movements stopped for a moment, Sein's face turned pale. The explosive light of the magic circle was leaking through Miro's skull.

"Too late!"

"Yaaah!"

At that moment, a piercing battle cry was heard from below the fortress wall.

Kangnan, with one knee raised, flew like a cannonball and struck the fallen angel's cheek, sending her flying.

There were about 0.8 seconds left until Miro's head would explode.

In that brief moment, the only person who could finish all the calculations was Sein.

Sein, who had widened the gap with his nerve reaction speed, finally broke through the path and reached Miro.

"Hmph, it's already too late."

Kariel, who was thinking even faster, smirked.

"0.4 seconds! Can I make it?"

There was barely enough time to equip the Sun and Moon Wheel.

0.3 seconds.

The iron wheel turned, and Sein's consciousness began to focus on Miro.

0.2 seconds.

At that moment, the servant's calculation made a definite decision.

"About 0.03 seconds too late."

As emotions surged faster than light, his chest tightened.

"Damn it...!"

0.1 seconds.

The magic circle attached to Miro emitted a radiant glow and burned intensely.

And... time stopped.

Stop.

When Armin, who had crossed the distance with the Flicker magic that transcended time and space, cast the Stop magic, Kariel's mental action stopped, and the detonation situation froze at 0.1 seconds.

"Huh? Huh?"

A tear fell belatedly, and Sein, despite being a servant, momentarily lost his composure.

But no one could blame him.

Even Miro, who had maintained her composure until now, showed emotion in her eyes.

"Hurry! Escape!"

As Armin shouted, Sein and Miro, who were looking at each other, moved simultaneously.

Miro reached out her hand, but Sein hugged her waist.

"Sorry, Gaold. Please understand this."

And without a moment to look back, he cast a teleportation spell and flew outside the fortress wall.

"Gaold!"

As Gaold, who was on the ground, looked up, Sein, overwhelmed with emotion, shouted with a contorted face.

"Let's gooooo!"

Chapter 477:

Gaold, with his head raised towards the sky, accepted the situation without a shred of doubt.

In the 20 years of working on the project, had he ever truly believed this was possible?

But because he had never gone a single day in those 20 years without thinking about today's situation, he felt that what had to happen had simply happened, rather than feeling doubt or anxiety.

"We must escape."

That necessity quickly shifted Gaold's thinking.

From now on, there was no need to look back.

The only task left for him was to get out of this place.

"Ugh!"

Gaold's concentration delved deep into the end of his mind, reaching the realm of death, and the immense Air Press crushed Uriel.

Even the archangel of destruction was momentarily immobilized by its power.

That alone was enough for Gaold at that moment.

"Run at all costs!"

Sein landed behind Gaold, and the rest of the group followed immediately.

Turning his body one last time, Gaold saw Kariel frozen in place within his rotating gaze.

As long as the Stop magic wasn't lifted, not even an archangel could transcend time.

But the hordes of fallen angels madly charging beyond Kariel would be different.

"We're getting out at top speed!"

As soon as Gaold finished speaking, the mages cast teleportation spells and sprang out.

Being top-tier mages in their respective fields, the flashes quickly left the plains and finally entered the drawbridge. Sein cut Miro's collar first.

Arius, attached to the collar, was cumbersome, and if they started to speed up, it could choke her and put her in danger.

Arius rolled on the ground, hurriedly regained his balance, and moved forward straight.

Though he had lost his sight, he was once one of the Black Line's Seven Magical Sins, and escaping alone was not a problem for him.

"Activate it!"

At Sein's command, Kangnan kicked open the door to the engine room.

She found a large operating lever that seemed impossible to pull without being a giant, and with a kick, the iron handle rang and pushed forward.

While it wouldn't have much effect on the flying fallen angels, it could temporarily block the approach of the ground-walking Maras.

Additionally, raising the drawbridge had the advantage of blocking the enemy's long-range attacks.

When they came out, Gaold's group had already entered the drawbridge.

Rumble!

The center of the drawbridge split into two and began to rise slowly towards the sky.

Raising a drawbridge 1 kilometer wide and 4 kilometers long was impossible with human technology.

"Miro! Recapture Miro!"

The fallen angels charged, targeting only Miro.

They knew that if they captured her, everyone's movements would be restricted.

Having forgotten even the noble memories of their original angelic status, the fallen angels became a single spear and surged onto the drawbridge.

The bridge was quickly filled with enemies, and another battle ensued on the increasingly tilted bridge.

Even the fallen angels' full-force attacks were terrifyingly powerful.

Gaold's group painfully realized how crucial Armin's Stop magic had been in this project.

"But now we can't use Stop. We have to do it ourselves."

Stopping time didn't mean canceling the event.

The current Stop field was cast on Kariel, and if the field was lifted, Miro's head would explode without any chance to intervene.

Meanwhile, instead of chasing Gaold, Uriel flew to the fortress wall to check on Kariel, who was trapped in the Stop.

"Kariel..."

Miro's issue was secondary to Uriel.

After all, Kariel had planned all this, and Uriel had helped him from a somewhat detached position.

But seeing Kariel, Uriel experienced significant mental shock.

There was no radiance to be found in the archangel frozen in time.

"A mere human has incapacitated an archangel."

The Nirvana Shield spun with a whistling sound, but Uriel couldn't bring himself to destroy it.

After all, he would also be frozen, trapped in the field.

"It can't be reversed immediately."

To accelerate and reverse the stopped time at the speed of light, the help of the archangel of light, Raiel, was needed.

"But..."

Uriel turned his head towards Gaold's group, who were moving far away.

"I must retrieve what was taken."

As Uriel's body turned into light, he flew in a parabola to the center of the bridge, several kilometers away.

Boom!

When Uriel landed, the vibration was transmitted to everyone's feet as if they were standing on a wave. They were currently 1 kilometer away from the drawbridge's entrance.

Unless Gaold's group were pushovers, it would be difficult to pursue them once they left the one-way path.

"I will destroy your will."

As Uriel spun the Nirvana Shield, Gaold applied the Air Press.

Once again, the atmosphere burned, and a fierce explosion erupted on the bridge.

"Ugh!"

Gaold's group was thrown in all directions by the shockwave.

Even without seeing it, the result showed that Gaold was overpowered.

Gaold, with his strength drained, staggered while keeping his gaze fixed on Uriel.

He had to protect them.

Even if it meant dying here, he couldn't let Uriel pass.

With each step Uriel took, the pressure doubled and quadrupled.

When the energy pressing down on him was enough to stop his heart, Uriel halted.

"That's just like you, Kariel."

"Kariel?"

Hearing that name, Gaold suddenly felt fear.

As he turned around in surprise, he heard Sein's voice.

"Miro!"

He saw Miro flying high into the sky, having escaped from Sein's arms.

Her arms and legs were ablaze with flames manifested by the Seal of Fire.

Seal Magic - Prison of Fire.

On the opposite drawbridge, which had risen to a 30-degree angle, the fire giant mage Urotas shouted with his hands

raised.

"Ha ha ha ha! I did it! I did it, Lord Kariel! Remember the name of Urotas!"

After dropping Kangnan onto the fortress wall and receiving orders from Kariel, he had hidden himself.

It was Kariel's trump card to recapture Miro if things went wrong.

"No!"

The sense of despair that surged as they watched Miro, caught in the seal magic, quickly move away was unbearable even for the best party.

Gaold took a step forward and then fell to his knees.

His mind was filled with thoughts, but they were all jumbled and black.

In that darkness, he found one possibility.

"Dog!"

When Gaold shouted, Kangnan immediately turned her body.

"Bite!"

Kangnan, who had kicked off the ground, quickly moved her legs, aiming at Miro crossing the sky.

While some fallen angels returned towards Miro, others charged at Kangnan.

Thump! Thump!

Kangnan calculated their movements, hearing her heartbeat reach her eardrums.

Not a single pause was allowed.

In the scene of enemies rushing like leaves swept by a storm, Kangnan shook her upper body.

She narrowly avoided the dangerous attacks as if she were in a spinning blade and broke through the fallen angels' formation, jumping and stepping on them as she charged.

"Hmph!"

The drawbridge's angle had now risen to 45 degrees.

For a normal human, not only would their speed decrease, but it would also be impossible to run on such a slope.

However, Kangnan's speed did not decrease at all.

"Faster, faster!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

As she kicked off the ground with powerful leg strength, the stones shattered, and fragments flew backward.

Miro had already flown to the other side, and all she could see was the sky.

"Ugh!"

Kangnan gritted her teeth and put more strength into her legs.

Despite the uphill slope, her speed increased, and finally, she kicked off the broken end of the drawbridge with all her might, which had tilted to almost a cliff level.

"Yaaaah!"

Boom!

As the end of the bridge exploded and shattered, Kangnan's body flew.

A blue river sparkling in the sun flowed 1 kilometer below, and she ran through the air with nothing to catch her body. She saw Miro disappearing beyond the opposite drawbridge. And beyond that, the giant Urotas was aiming his fiery gaze at her.

As the Seal of Fire was engraved on her heart, the blood flow that had been circulating rapidly throughout her body suddenly braked, causing a shock.

In her mind, which had turned white, Kangnan's consciousness flowed into a time of purpose and mission she had never forgotten.

"Kangnan?"

A man had asked the last descendant of the wolf tribe, who wandered the sewers with broken fangs.

"The soul of a wolf."

And he had smiled gently and said,

"It's a wonderful name, Kangnan."

"Yaaaah!"

Kangnan let out a monstrous cry and moved her limbs.

With a pop, the flames of the seal exploded, and her heart started beating again.

Urotas's hideous face, looking at her in astonishment, was getting closer.

Kangnan was not the strongest warrior of the Rammoai. But she was the best warrior.

"I am the last descendant of the wolf tribe!"

The voice of the master who had passed on the secret technique echoed in her ears.

"Do not rely on fangs. Have jaws that can crush anything."
Crunch!

Kangnan's stomach, which had stretched like a bow, began to harden like a stone.

And finally, her body, shot like an arrow, passed Miro and approached Urotas.

Rammoai Strike Technique - Arang's.

"Hmph!"

Kangnan tightened her abs with all her might, pulling her elbows and knees together as if curling up.

When her attack hit Urotas's crown and jaw, there was a cracking sound as the giant's rock-hard face shattered into pieces.

It was the jaw of a wolf crushing the giant.

Thud!

Almost simultaneously with Urotas's fall, Kangnan landed, grimacing in pain.

Her abdominal muscles were completely torn, making it impossible for her to stand.

She gritted her teeth and twisted her body. Then, she caught the flying Miro and activated her external force.

"Ugh!"

The drawbridge's angle was approaching 70 degrees, and if it tilted any further, everything would be over.

Clinging almost vertically to the bridge, Kangnan and Miro were able to look into each other's eyes for the first time.

Miro didn't know who Kangnan was.

But the emotions in her eyes in that brief moment said it all.
"So, this child is..."

Even while being swept up by centrifugal force, Miro shook her head.

She shouldn't throw herself. What really needed to be thrown was...

When Miro signaled that she couldn't do it, Kangnan gave a dry smile for a fleeting moment.

But then, like a warrior of the wolf tribe, she wrinkled her nose and let out a battle cry.

"Yaaah!"

With all her strength, she threw Miro into the air. With a whoosh, Miro's body traced back the path she had flown and began to leap over the bridge.

"Ugly duckling..."

Finally, Kangnan's feet left the drawbridge, and she began to fall into the abyss below.

"If you call me a mutt one more time..."

Kangnan, her body flipping upside down, could no longer hold onto her fading consciousness and slowly closed her eyes.

The last thing she remembered was the faces of numerous fallen angels pouring down from the sky.

Chapter 478:

Gaold looked up at the sky and waited.

The bridge, which had become much steeper since Kangnan started, now formed an almost vertical cliff.

Thus, the height was a staggering 2 kilometers.

It was a perfect height for a warrior like Kangnan or Miro, who couldn't use magic, to fall to their deaths.

But that was only if they crossed the drawbridge.

Uriel hadn't taken action yet, but that fact was even more concerning.

"Damn it."

He didn't care about Gaold's group at all.

The only thing he was interested in was Miro, the one and only in all of humanity.

And finally, when Miro appeared over the bridge, Uriel reacted.

If he could reclaim Miro, everything would return to square one.

He didn't know how Kariel would judge, but he believed that this time, his intellect and his intuition would align.

Boom!

As the drawbridge shook and Uriel soared vertically, Gaold followed behind.

A new hope sprouted as Miro came back over, but that sprout was rotten somewhere.

"Mutt..."

Kangnan didn't make it over the bridge.

She had faithfully carried out her mission by sending Miro flying.

His heart pounded, and a strange flame rose in his chest. It was a flame different from desire.

It was another kind of hell, different from anger or hatred, that Gaold experienced for the first time in his life.

"Argh!"

As he crushed the atmosphere with the Air Press, Uriel's speed, which had been soaring with his wings of light, rapidly decreased.

Screech!

Uriel turned his body towards Gaold, spinning the halo of destruction.

To be honest, Gaold was a nuisance.

If his opponent could match him, he could enjoy the contest. Conversely, if the enemy was weak, he could just destroy them.

That ambiguous borderline.

No matter how much he trampled them, they would stand up again, and they couldn't harm him.

Uriel thought.

Perhaps that was the confusing essence of humanity.

Humans were a bundle of contradictions, with good and evil, life and death, strength and weakness all mixed together, making it impossible to define any one thing.

"I see."

Uriel suddenly realized.

Why he hadn't unleashed all his power to end them.

"He was afraid."

He was uneasy about the possibility that he might not achieve results even if he gave his all to these weak creatures.

"Anke La, the reason you were wary of humans was..."

Gaold's air gun hit Uriel directly.

It was a powerful attack that could pierce steel, but to the archangel of destruction, it was just a sting.

In that slight unpleasant stimulation, Uriel delved deeper into his thoughts.

It excited the pinnacle of intellect, Kariel, and made the incarnation of destruction, himself, hesitate to destroy.

"Human chaos..."

Finally, Uriel reached a conclusion.

"It collapses the absoluteness of the world."

"Argh!"

Gaold's rapid-fire attacks struck Uriel's body more powerfully and quickly.

Finally, a sensation that could be defined as pain, though angels had no such definition, was transmitted, and Uriel's halo expanded to an enormous size.

"I am absolute."

Infinite Judicial Halo - Ragnarok.

As the concept of destruction accumulated in the halo, white electricity spread in all directions.

"I can't stop it."

As the thought flashed through Gaold's mind, his hand was already reaching out to Miro.

Pulling her with the Air Net, Gaold dived towards the ground with all his might.

Uriel dissolved the Nirvana Shield.

Surrounded solely by the concept of destruction, his body needed no tools, being a weapon in itself.

"Ugh!"

Uriel fell vertically.

As his body, surrounded by white electricity, became a streak of light and crashed into the bridge, Zulu's summoning magic activated.

Space-Time Bird - Posmetery.

The frictional heat from Uriel's fall generated immense heat, evaporating everything made of matter.

In the place where the light sphere, born and extinguished in an instant, disappeared, only a hemispherical crater with a diameter of 5 kilometers remained.

Complete destruction, literally.

Standing at the center of the hemisphere, Uriel slowly raised his head to look at the sky.

This was why he didn't want to do it.

"Humans..."

He had been struck from behind again.

What was it?

The giant bird made of light that appeared to Gaold's group at the moment of destruction.

When the bird enveloped them, it was as if they had crossed into another dimension, and the concept of destruction was not conveyed.

"Where is Kariel?"

Uriel flew up immediately and arrived at the wall of the Hall of Corruption in an instant.

Kariel, still trapped in the Stop field, was motionless.

All the fallen angels flew in and knelt before him.

They trembled with guilt for failing to recapture Miro, but Uriel didn't seem to care.

"What happened to that woman?"

A fallen angel at the rear dropped the unconscious Kangnan to the ground and said,

"We've captured her for now. It seemed better to take her alive..."

Kariel would have praised them.

He believed everything in the world had value and could create new value.

On the other hand, Uriel, the archangel of destruction, didn't like that approach.

It wasn't because he was simple-minded.

He was absolute destruction, and before that, any value became worthless.

"What should we do?"

Uriel turned his body.

"I will go to Raiel."

He needed to bring the archangel of light to restore Kariel.

"Handle the humans as you see fit."

Leaving those words, Uriel disappeared into the sky.

The fallen angels, left without their commander, drooped their shoulders with sullen expressions.

If they had achieved merit in this battle, it wouldn't have been impossible to be reinstated as angels, but in the end, everything had failed.

"There is still a chance."

A fallen angel with golden hair cascading down like a veil to her chest said,

"Let's take this woman hostage and negotiate."

A fallen angel with sharp fangs scoffed.

"Do you think that's possible? What's important to them is Miro. This woman has no value as a hostage. It would be better to torment her and at least get some small pleasure."

"That's a good method too."

A burly fallen angel interjected.

"But ignoring even the slightest possibility isn't effective.

No, maybe the solution lies here."

"What do you mean?"

"Humans have something called affection. They have a tendency to understand others' pain as their own."

"I see."

The golden-haired fallen angel nodded and looked down at Kangnan with cold eyes.

"The point is, as long as we don't kill her, right?"

Kangnan was still in a deep sleep.

The flash of teleportation landed in the forest with a loud noise.

Casting it without fully understanding the terrain was akin to suicide, but Gaold's group had no time to be picky.

"Ugh!"

As they crashed to the ground and rolled at tremendous speed, no one lay sprawled.

They immediately regained their balance and cast teleportation spells, delving deeper into the forest.

They had to get as far away as possible.

The terrifying power that imprinted death in the deepest part of their brains was enough to make them flee.

If it weren't for the Posmetry they had saved until the end, no one would have survived.

"Gaold! We have to go back!"

Miro, struggling in Gaold's grip, shouted.

"We have to go back, you fool!"

"Shut up. Stay still."

Gaold's voice was harsh.

For 20 years, he had lived with only the thought of rescuing Miro in his mind.

And now, Miro was in his arms.

The stopped clock was ticking again, and from now on, everything that happened was a terrifyingly pure white future for Gaold.

The expression "lost his way" was accurate.

He couldn't judge anything, and he didn't even know what the fear rising in his heart was.

"We can save her now! As long as I'm here, they won't kill her recklessly!"

"Shut up."

Miro was frustrated.

He couldn't possibly not know. That's why Gaold was making the wrong decision now.

"You idiot, that girl..."

Electricity sparked in Gaold's eyes, and he opened his mouth wide enough to dislocate his jaw and shouted.

"Shut up!"

The group's steps halted.

Gaold, rolling his eyes in confusion, roughly threw Miro to the ground and turned around.

"Damn it!"

When he punched a tree trunk, the bark flew off with a thud, and immense pain surged in.

Even so, one thought wouldn't leave his mind.

Kangnan. Kangnan had been captured.

What tormented him the most was the certainty that she was still alive at this moment.

To the group, Kangnan was just a brief companion in this project, but Gaold was different.

The moment he realized she wasn't by his side for the first time, he understood that Kangnan had always been there.

"She is a warrior of the wolf tribe. She acted according to her beliefs. She chose, and we must respect that."

"Don't talk nonsense."

Miro stood up from where she had fallen and grabbed Gaold by the collar.

"Get a grip! We can save her now! This has nothing to do with me!"

The group's feelings were the same as Miro's.

If they could save her, they should.

But no one could speak up.

Having lived in hell for 20 years, Gaold's judgment was paramount unless they could share even a tenth of his pain.

For the first time, Sein lied for his friend.

"The resolution we made when we came here was that the project takes priority under any circumstances. Miro, we all risked our lives to save you. Now, breaking that rule isn't easy."

Miro glared at Sein and then turned back to Gaold.

"Is that what you think too? Is this really what you want? Are you choosing to let that girl die just because you want me?"

Gaold remained silent.

He seemed like a newborn child, unable to extend his thoughts in any direction.

Miro, looking at him with pity, grabbed Gaold's chin and shouted.

"Look at me! Look into my eyes!"

Gaold's gaze slowly moved to her.

His pupils held an emotion as if something had been completely drained from him.

"Are you that scared? Afraid that everything you've done for 20 years will be in vain, so you're going to abandon that girl?"

"I..."

Before he could finish, Miro pulled Gaold's neck and kissed him.

Gaold, his eyes shaking with shock, reflexively pushed Miro away.

"What are you doing! Does this look like a time to joke around?"

Miro didn't give up. She approached again, grabbed Gaold's wrist, and placed it on her chest.

"Just do it here. Take me! Then go save her, you fool!"

Gaold frowned.

Everyone was making him feel like a fool.

"You, right now..."

At that moment, a beautiful voice, a mixture of many voices, spread from the sky.

It was the ability called Gospel, spread collectively by the angels.

"To the human with Miro. We have captured your kin. If you do not bring Miro by noon tomorrow, we will kill her.

Remember, the sooner you come, the less pain she will suffer. This is our final message. We are..."

The Gospel repeated the same words and then disappeared. It was a huge sound, but it ended cleanly without even an echo.

Gaold, staggering and sitting down on a rock, bit his thumbnail and fell into thought.

Noon tomorrow.

"Time is tight."

The fallen angels were those who had broken taboos, and the Maras they commanded were extremely ferocious.

Even at this moment, there was no telling what might be happening to Kangnan.

Crunch. Crunch.

Gaold's teeth, which had quickly bitten off his nail, began to gnaw at the bone of his thumb.

Crunch. Crunch.

No one could speak to him as he performed this grotesque self-harm, amplified a thousand times by his heightened sense of pain.

Chapter

479:

Plu, with her injured body, stood in front of Shirone. Mirka, who ranked second among the 72 ranks of fairies, exuded a different kind of aesthetic power compared to angels.

While the beauty of angels was grand and reverent, Mirka's beauty came from a charming, fairy-tale-like quality.

Of course, such facts were of no importance to Plu.

She was barely clothed, and the pain from her burns was clawing at her brain through her nerves in real-time, but the mental strength of a professional mage unerringly created a Spirit Zone.

"Tch, I knew it. I had a bad feeling."

Plu's gaze turned to Feope, who was standing beside Mirka. Was she feeling guilty?

Feope kept her head bowed, which only made Plu angrier.

The revered fairy Mirka approached with a stern face.

"A lowly human group disturbing heaven and tormenting countless subjects. Even now, receive the aura and seek forgiveness. Then leave this world cleanly."

"Feope."

Ignoring Mirka, Shirone called out Feope's name, causing her to flinch and slowly raise her head.

Her large eyes were filled with deep fear.

Seeing the fear of the harm Shirone might suffer, Shirone said nothing more.

It wasn't that she didn't suspect Feope. She had simply erased such doubts from her mind.

Because she...

'She was willing to die for me.'

The scene of Feope willingly sacrificing her life for Shirone in Jebul still lingered in Shirone's mind.

'No, that's not it.'

Shirone suddenly realized.

Perhaps, deep down, she had wanted this.

A battle with heaven was inevitable, and in the end, the two of them would become enemies.

And with this, the feelings they had for each other were withdrawn.

"Feope."

Feope still didn't respond.

She was just waiting for Shirone's words with fearful emotions or perhaps a glimmer of hope.

As the power amplification function of the Vajra Armor activated, Shirone's robe fluttered fiercely.

"I will kill you."

As if to firmly root her true feelings, Shirone's words sent a cold murderous intent into the fairies' minds.

Feope also felt a chill from Shirone's killing intent.

But her face soon turned cold as well, and thus their hearts closed off from each other.

"Do it if you can. I'm not the same as before."

Feope had indeed become stronger.

When Shirone first came to heaven, Feope was the youngest among the fairies, but now she held a mid-level position among the 72 ranks.

The reason for her rapid rise in status was largely due to her relationship with Shirone.

As the rebellion that started in Shamain accelerated, the Ministry of Internal Affairs valued Feope, and she rapidly improved her skills by learning from fairies with high mental stages.

Thus, she couldn't turn her back on the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

When Shirone returned to heaven, Feope's heart raced more than anyone else's, but in the end, she chose the fairies of heaven who had accepted her.

"Arrest Shirone."

As Mirka extended her hand, dozens of fairies flew in from behind.

Shirone and Plu stepped back, assessing the situation around them.

The best plan was to get to Araboth as quickly as possible, but the fairies surrounding them were not to be underestimated.

Even without exchanging glances, Plu's energy was conveyed.

They needed a timing and a trigger to escape this place.

"Wait a moment!"

At that moment, Deina, who had lost her sanity, knelt before Mirka.

"I am the great immortal. Please spare me! They tried to kill me!"

Mirka looked at Deina with disdain.

The reason Anke La was wary of humans was because they had the ability to actively seek death.

When humans began to actively seek death, they could exhibit something beyond human.

But Deina had lost humanity's greatest strength after gaining immortality.

Of course, not all immortals were as weak as her.

In fact, members of the Ten Thousand-Year Council, who were over ten thousand years old, were known to have transcended even the cycle of life and death.

"Foolish creature. What greatness could a being like you possess? For the crime of defiling Ra's grace, you too shall be executed."

Execution.

The word pierced Deina's mind, a word she had never considered in a thousand years, and her avatar screamed again.

The fear of death, which she hadn't felt in a thousand years, completely shattered her already half-mad mind.

"Noooooo!"

Deina mustered all her strength to draw upon her magic. The magic of a mad person resonated with her mind, soaring endlessly, but without reason, it lacked purpose. Even so, a powerful atmospheric flow enveloped the surroundings.

"No! You die!"

As Deina extended her hands to cast ancient magic, her neck twisted with a crack.

Feope, the spiral fairy, used her powerful spiral force to quickly rotate Deina's neck, completely tearing it from her body.

As Deina's shocked face soared into the air, Shirone and Plu simultaneously realized.

'Now!'

Their bodies turned into light and shot into the air as Mirka shouted.

"Chase them! They must be caught in Shehakim!"

Araboth was the most sacred area of heaven where Anke La resided.

For humans to infiltrate from the fairies' perspective was an unprecedented disgrace in the history of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Even though it happened suddenly, the fairies moved without hesitation.

Dozens of fairies chased after Shirone, and at the same time, fairies flew up from all directions in Shehakim like flocks of birds.

This confirmed that the core personnel of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were watching Shehakim.

"Feope..."

There was no doubt that Feope was a key figure in this incident.

Their identities had already been exposed, and with all the fairies chasing them, the only option left was to infiltrate Araboth by the shortest route.

"Shirone, go ahead!"

Plu, injured, couldn't keep up with Shirone's flying speed. Thinking that at least one person had to escape, she stopped flying and turned around.

Numerous fairies were charging at her.

Activating the Dawkins Algorithm, she dodged the fairies' magic and ignited flames.

Shirone, flying vertically, spotted Plu struggling in the distance and deployed Photon Cannons in all directions. But even he was being swarmed by at least a hundred fairies.

Though not as advanced as angelic abilities, the fairies' magic, imbued with their unique essence, was sufficiently threatening.

Even with Armand's body enhancement abilities, it was impossible to dodge all the attacks, and as Ringer's Skin activated, his robe transformed into a heavy, ultra-strong metal.

"Hmph!"

Unable to bear the weight, Shirone spread his wings of light through his artificial brain.

As the wings of light whipped the air with a bang, his body shot forward dozens of meters in an instant.

The sky flashed with rainbow-colored magic, and the fairies, gathering and dispersing repeatedly, meticulously drove Shirone into one spot.

Not knowing how far he had flown or where he was, Shirone desperately defended against the fairies' attacks.

At that moment, there was a bang from where Plu was, and her body was seen falling to the ground.

"Senior!"

As Shirone tried to rush out, the sleeve of his right arm twisted rapidly, almost breaking his arm.

"Ugh!"

As the robe tightened to the point of tearing, Ringer's Skin activated, transforming it into ultra-strong metal.

Only after the rotation stopped did Shirone look ahead.

Feope, with fierce eyes, was using her power against him.
"Ugh!"

Feope poured all her strength into the spiral force.
Her magic had indeed become incredibly powerful, but even so, Ringer's Skin didn't budge.

'Senior Plu.'

Plu had already disappeared from the scene.
All he could do now was hope she had survived.

"Feope!"

Gritting his teeth, Shirone extended Armand's tentacles.
Two tentacles appeared and were immediately caught in the spiral force and exploded, but Kensei's absolute restoration ability quickly created new tentacles.

As the whip-like afterimages flew in, Feope, unable to withstand it, retreated.

At the same time, the fairies who had brought down Plu all charged at Shirone.

Plu's enemy.

Flames rose in Shirone's chest, but the cold rationality of a mage quickly extinguished them.

But that didn't mean he had forgotten his anger.

"Capture him! It's okay to kill him!"

As the fairies surrounded Shirone and cast their magic, Shirone's eyes flashed open.

'Scatter Movement!'

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

A massive flash of light spread in eight directions.

As one fairy failed to dodge and fell, the flash of teleportation sharply turned and rushed there.

The scatter spread countless times, and in an instant, the sky became a web of Photon Cannon flashes.

The power of the Photon Cannons, amplified by Galtomic's magic, was on a different level, and most of the fairies were busy dodging.

Feope stared blankly at the sight of numerous comrades falling.

The power was on a different level from when they had been tormented by the fairies while blocking the Elixir of Life in Zone 73.

Especially since the fairies present were all powerful spirits positioned in the middle ranks of the 72 ranks, unlike back then.

"Follow him! Don't stop!"

Even as their comrades were being blown apart, the fairies continued to fly in endlessly.

Shirone, with his wings of light fully spread, engaged in an aerial battle with the fairies using dazzling movements.

"Damn it..."

The fairies, belatedly noticing the red dots on their foreheads, gritted their teeth.

As the homing photon cannons equipped with seekers fired, the fairies surrounding Shirone scattered.

However, the homing photon cannons relentlessly pursued the fairies, and in the distant sky, the sound of explosions and dying screams echoed.

'Even with this many fairies, they can't stop me?'

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' report, Shirone's combat power was such that a unit of 65th-rank fairies could handle him when he blocked the Elixir of Life. But now, even dozens of 40th-rank fairies were at risk of being annihilated.

'I'm going to Araboth!'

Shirone flapped his wings of light to their maximum and increased his speed.

The weaker-willed fairies gradually fell behind, and finally, none could keep up with him.

'Pathetic creatures.'

Just as Shirone thought he had won the speed battle, a fairy's voice echoed in his mind.

Mirka, the second-ranked fairy, flew in with a blue flash and blocked his path.

Shirone deployed 16 homing photon cannons and fired them all at her.

As the flashes curved and flew towards her, she extended her hand.

Unregulated Form - Razor of Truth.

Thin, thread-like blades sparkled around Mirka at incredible speed, intercepting all the homing photon cannons.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shirone halted abruptly, raising his wings.

'What is this...?'

Mirka, seemingly unaffected by the impact, still had her hand extended and her wings fluttering.

'She didn't block them. It's some kind of ability.'

A fairy's durability is never strong.

Even a second-ranked fairy couldn't stand unscathed after being hit by sixteen photon cannons enhanced by magic amplification.

"This makes it clear."

Mirka, looking sternly at the confused Shirone, spoke solemnly.

"There is no variable by which you can defeat me."

Chapter 480:

"Absolutely cannot win?"

Shirone didn't dismiss Mirka's words lightly.

The reason she could remain unscathed despite being hit directly by the photon cannons was likely due to her use of the fairy's Unregulated Form. Therefore, Shirone thought her words were not mere bluff.

"What on earth is it?"

Shirone fired the homing photon cannons once more.

As expected, Mirka didn't dodge, and the photon cannons exploded with a powerful impact.

Seeing Mirka's slight smile, Shirone realized something new. She wasn't blocking the attacks; she was immune to them.

"Then can you withstand this too?"

Shirone fired an even more powerful laser, amplified by magic.

No matter how durable a material is, it can't withstand a laser that causes molecular vibrations forever. But once again, Mirka received the magic without the slightest tremor.

Only then did Shirone stop his attack.

"This is troublesome."

He couldn't understand the activation principle, but Mirka's Unregulated Form was a very simple yet powerful ability.

"Invincible... is that it?"

Mirka nodded calmly.

"That's right. You are weaker than me, so you can never defeat me."

Mirka's Unregulated Form, Razor of Truth, activates by receiving the first attack imbued with clear intent to kill.

Once activated, it begins a comparative superiority judgment of the strengths of the two entities. If Mirka wins,

she becomes invincible to any attack from the opponent. The comparative superiority judgment is based on the existence of the avatar, not measurable values. Razor of Truth eliminates all anomalies and variables in battle, making it impossible to reverse the invincible state. In practical terms, the winner is considered strong, but Mirka's Unregulated Form twists this concept to mean that the strong one wins by eliminating all variables in battle. To establish this powerful concept, a strict equivalent exchange is required. If Mirka's gaze is broken, the judgment is canceled, and even if the opponent is kept within her gaze, the duration is only about 30 minutes. The most extreme risk is that she must remain defenseless during the initial attack with clear intent to kill. If Mirka loses the comparative superiority judgment, she not only suffers the attack but also activates Razor of Truth in reverse, making the opponent invincible against her. In other words, facing an opponent stronger in pure avatar strength almost guarantees death or defeat. This extreme condition for implementing invincibility is a well-balanced fatal condition. But Mirka never doubted her ability. And she was currently ranked third among the 72 ranks of fairies.

"Shall we begin?"

Mirka attacked Shirone without hesitation. Unregulated Form - Law of Submission. Another Unregulated Form linked to Razor of Truth activated. As Mirka quickly struck Shirone's solar plexus, a tremendous impact spread through his body.

"How?"

Even as he struggled to breathe, Shirone felt doubt. Ringer's Skin, a type of armor, wasn't activating. Moreover, the physical force was too powerful to be from a fairy.

"This is also an ability."

Shirone's guess was accurate.

The Law of Submission, which activates when Mirka wins the comparative superiority judgment from Razor of Truth, nullifies all the opponent's attacks and repels the force generated by the counteraction.

In other words, it delivers a critical hit with double the impact, making Mirka's physical attacks, in her invincible state, unbearable for Shirone, who was essentially defenseless.

Mirka continued to physically attack Shirone.

As long as she was facing Shirone, her body was invincible, so her attacks were relentless.

As Shirone endured the impact of being struck by a heavy rock, one thought flashed through his mind.

He couldn't win.

Having encountered many Unregulated Forms through experience, various potential countermeasures came to mind.

One correct answer was to get out of her line of sight, but that wasn't the core issue.

She was a fairy ranked second among the 72 ranks.

Without a strength that surpassed the avatars of other fairies, Razor of Truth was an unbeatable ability.

As Mirka immobilized Shirone, numerous fairies followed and unleashed all kinds of magic.

If it wasn't Mirka's attack, most of the impact was blocked by Armand, but no defense could withstand continuous strikes indefinitely.

"The problem is the Unregulated Form."

An ability that completely blocks variables in battle.

For Shirone, who had defeated stronger opponents with powerful insight and adaptability, it was an almost natural enemy.

"This is the end."

Mirka dropped vertically and struck Shirone's abdomen with a physical attack.

"Ugh!"

He heard the sound of his abdominal muscles tearing and couldn't breathe.

The sky darkened from the edges, and two-thirds of his vision turned to darkness.

"Now! Pour everything on him!"

As Armand resonated with the caster's consciousness, its functionality weakened as Shirone's consciousness faded. Seeing the tentacles droop like wet grass, the fairies poured all their magic on him.

They intended to completely sever his consciousness, and his life would be extinguished before he even hit the ground. The fairies' total attack entered his narrowed vision.

Watching the dazzlingly colorful magic, Shirone squeezed out his last bit of strength.

Judicial Halo - Valhalla Action.

As the halo spun, it quickly computed a single spell.

Judicial Halo - Super Magic Amplification Array Ataraxia.

As the massive halo unfolded in front of him, the fairies targeting Shirone clutched their heads in shock and screamed.

The only one who could look at it was Mirka, already in an invincible state.

"Damn..."

Seeing the Ataraxia accumulate instantly, she shouted to the surrounding fairies.

"Everyone, get away!"

As the photon cannons passed through Ataraxia, an enormous flash filled the sky completely.

The magic pouring down was swept away, and the fairies trapped within the radius evaporated like flies in the flames.

"Ugh!"

When the flash disappeared, no fairies remained except for Mirka.

Mirka looked around for Shirone, who had vanished from sight, then clenched her teeth in resignation.

Ataraxia, the signature move of Archangel Ikael.
Even knowing she was invincible, she couldn't act due to the instinctive fear rooted in the beginning of her consciousness.

"He can't be alive. Falling from this height..."

She wanted to think that, but she couldn't be sure.

"Find him. Don't stop searching until you tear his body apart."

At Mirka's command, all surviving fairies rushed to the ground.

The fact that they were flying over the most treacherous valley in Shehakim, known as the Whale's Gorge, made it even more frustrating.

"I should have finished him off for sure."

The face of the third-ranked fairy was severely tarnished. But it was in the past, so Mirka quickly let go of her regrets and followed her subordinate fairies, flying swiftly into the gorge.

"Stay conscious. Don't lose consciousness."

As he fell into the gorge, Shirone desperately tried to stay conscious.

It was an incredible concentration created in a situation that would be near-fatal for an ordinary person.

As long as he remained conscious, Armand would heal him to some extent even if he fell.

But if he lost consciousness here, no one could guarantee what would happen next.

Thud! Thud!

He didn't feel pain.

Only a dull impact struck the back of his head.

Shirone, colliding with the cliff of the gorge, bounced off and hit the opposite wall again before falling.

With his eyes closed, blood flowed from his forehead.

He was only 500 meters from the ground.

If he fell headfirst, his neck would surely break.

At that moment, a fairy flew towards Shirone at a terrifying speed, skillfully avoiding the sharp rocks of the valley.

It was Feope, the spiral fairy.

"Ugh!"

Grabbing Shirone's robe, she pulled with all her might, but the inertia of the fall was too strong.

Using spiral magic to disperse the falling force, she could only slow the speed.

"Ugh!"

Feeling the pain of her shoulder dislocating, Feope gritted her teeth.

Thud!

As Shirone hit the ground, her body bounced off and rolled on the floor.

But without time to feel the pain, she flew to Shirone.

"Shirone! Shirone!"

Seeing no movement and losing consciousness, Feope, terrified, quickly pressed her ear to his chest.

Thump, thump.

His heart was beating weakly.

It would soon stop, but she felt a slight sense of relief.

"Oh no, this isn't the time for this."

If the other fairies started searching the Whale's Gorge, it was only a matter of time before they were discovered.

Grabbing his robe and looking around, Feope found a cave just big enough for one person and dragged Shirone inside.

"Phew, this should be okay for now."

Wiping her sweat, Feope stared blankly at Shirone's face, who seemed dead in his sleep.

The reason she could track him this far was that she hadn't seen Ataraxia.

Somehow... she knew what Shirone was going to do.

"Of course."

Feope smiled sadly.

"We're friends."

Did he know that she wanted to choose him over the Ministry of Internal Affairs?

Would he understand the heart that had to choose the opportunity to rise from the lowest rank of the 72 ranks of fairies to a mid-level position?

"Shirone, I..."

Feope's eyes welled up as she chose her words.

"Meeting you changed me."

She wasn't saying she loved him.

No matter how pure her words were, if she knew it was an act of throwing her heart, she wouldn't have said it.

She learned more emotions from the high-ranking fairies.

The more she thought about it, the more her words, like a spectrum passing through a prism, spread into a multicolored rainbow with various attributes, shimmering in her heart.

"Even so, I don't regret my choice."

Choosing the Ministry of Internal Affairs was the right decision.

"Igilin said that humans and fairies can't love each other. Because I am..."

Feope transformed her sorrow, which felt like it would explode her heart, into laughter and smiled brightly.

"Too small."

But her voice was choked, and hot tears endlessly welled up in her large eyes.

Armand's Vajra Armor was released and transformed into the form of a magic sword.

Shirone had completely lost consciousness.

His body was in terrible condition.

His broken bones were bruised, and his organs were failing, heading towards death.

Feope looked at him with pity and flew to his face.

She knelt under his chin and caressed his cheek.

The time they had spent together was short, and she couldn't say she knew much about him.

But having already thrown her heart, there was no more room for regret.

"I'm sorry, Shirone."

Feope closed her eyes and kissed Shirone's lips as her body began to burn with a radiant light.

She was pouring all her life force into a single act of giving life.

"I love you."

With a concept she understood more clearly than a year ago, Feope once again threw her heart to Shirone.

Chapter 481:

Shirone sat in the grass, gazing at the lake.

The lake was white like milk and as calm as if it were in the middle of a windless zone.

His eyes were fixed on the horizon above the water's surface.

"What are you looking at?"

'Ikael.'

The surface of the lake bulged in the center and transformed into the shape of Ikael.

The milky liquid that smoothly flowed over the surface disappeared, and Ikael's figure emerged as if real.

"What are you looking at?"

'Father. Mother.'

Ikael's form crumbled like a sandcastle, replaced by Vincent and his wife.

'Rian. Amy. Friends.'

The calm surface began to ripple as if hit by a storm.

Countless forms of people emerged on the water's surface, filling it completely with allies and enemies, loved ones and hated ones.

"What are you looking at?"

The milky liquid gathered into a giant shape of Mirka.

He had been completely defeated by her Unregulated Form, which fundamentally blocked variables.

But was she truly an unbeatable enemy?

Marsha's advice that nothing is absolute in Unregulated Forms flashed through his mind.

'Who is it?'

Shirone suddenly looked up at the sky.

Who could it be?

The voice that had been questioning him.

"To truly see is to observe something that exists there in its pure state."

'In its pure state.'

The voice asked again.

"What are you looking at?"

Defeat. Feope's betrayal. Plu's safety.

All those emotions surfaced on the water.

No, I am not looking at that. It is merely a delusion created because I wanted to see it or thought I had to see it.

"What am I looking at?"

All the forms on the water began to dissolve.

"I am not looking at anything."

The voice said.

"When you see nothing, you see everything."

The lake calmed down again.

Soon, the water level lowered, the white liquid disappeared, and the world disintegrated into tiny pieces, scattering like cherry blossoms out of sight.

The Ultima System, which had seeped into his brain like a ghost, finally became systematized and integrated into his neural network.

Simultaneously, Shirone's avatar briefly shone, signaling his mental transformation.

If the blind directionality of the cerebral synapses created focus and that focus manifested as a Spirit Zone, then Shirone's Spirit Zone, equipped with the Ultima System, was manifesting as something unique and independent with a different temperament than before.

'This is...'

Direct Perception.

A single gaze that looks straight at the entire world.

The previously empty landscape regained its original place and unfolded before Shirone's eyes.

The lake was still calm, but now Shirone could clearly see countless possibilities changing like a living organism.

"What are you looking at?"

Shirone answered.

"The ultimate."

As if in response, the voice continued.

"That is the Ultima's..."

Flash!

A powerful flash struck Shirone's brain, and he opened his eyes wide in shock.

'What happened?'

A faint memory like a dream.

But the image itself was so vivid.

The last thing Shirone remembered was hitting his head on the cliff and losing consciousness.

"Huh?"

As he regained his senses, Shirone felt a warm sensation on his lips.

A mysterious woman was on top of him, kissing him.

Blushing, Shirone pushed her away in surprise.

"What, what is this?"

The woman rolled to the side weakly, breathing painfully with her bare body exposed.

Shirone quickly lit a fire with Shining Magic.

"Feope?"

He couldn't believe it even as he said it because the small fairy had grown to the size of an adult woman.

But the small dress she wore was torn to shreds, and the fairy wings lying beside her confirmed she was Feope.

"Shirone..."

Feope opened her eyes with difficulty and smiled faintly.

Reading the emotions in her smile, Shirone looked around in confusion.

Why was she here? And what had happened to her?

"What happened, Feope?"

"I'm glad you're safe."

Shirone finally checked his own body.

All his wounds were completely healed.

Recovering from fatal injuries so quickly without the Vajra Armor was impossible.

There was no doubt she had saved him.

"Why? I..."

Feope shook her head.

What Shirone thought didn't matter to her.

Facing the end of her life, the most important thing was something so trivial it even surprised Feope.

"Shirone, how do I look?"

Shirone, not understanding her meaning, looked at her body.

The price of exploding all her life force at once was rapid growth and the loss of her fairy essence due to mental collapse.

"Am I pretty?"

Feope's question was so pure that Shirone couldn't say anything.

Realizing he had nothing to give back but gratitude sent chills down his spine.

But it was the truth.

One cannot create something out of nothing.

When Shirone didn't answer, Feope closed her eyes gently.

She felt both disappointed and relieved. There would be no lingering regrets at the end.

"Don't look, Shirone."

Feope made her final wish.

"Please... don't look."

Feope's body began to shrink rapidly. The backlash of burning all her life force was hitting her.

"Fe, Feope..."

Shirone watched in a daze as Feope transformed.

Her face, now the size of a fairy, was full of wrinkles, and her once firm body had lost all its muscles, leaving only bones.

Beside her lay wings that finally matched her size, but they had already fallen off and were decaying.

"Feope! Feope!"

Shirone held Feope in his hands and shouted.
Her lifeless body didn't move.
She couldn't die like this.
Realizing this in front of her corpse, Shirone brought Feope close to his face.
She was still breathing faintly.
'She's still alive.'
But how could he save her?
"There is nowhere left to run, foolish human."
Hearing Mirka's voice resonate from outside the cave, Shirone grabbed Armand and stood up.
Beyond the curtain of light at the cave's entrance, Mirka and her fairy troops completely blocked the exit.
Shirone advanced slowly, holding Feope without any sign of fear.
He realized why the fairy troops had stepped back only after coming outside.
An enormous army had completely surrounded the area.
There was no way to escape.
Mirka, having concluded this, looked at Feope in Shirone's hand with sad eyes.
"Foolish one. I explained so many times what the price of loving a human would be."
There had been fairies who loved humans in history.
But their ends were always tragic.
Fairies are pure, and humans are selfish.
No matter how passionately they burn, human greed knows no bounds, and in the end, they drain the fairies dry.
"She's still alive. How can I save Feope?"
That was why Shirone had willingly entered the encirclement.
"Human, accept the aura willingly. If you do, I will ensure Feope's life is saved."
"I asked how."
Seeing Shirone's unwavering gaze, Mirka answered coldly.

"There is only one being in heaven who can restore a fairy whose life force has been exhausted. Archangel Ikael."

Shirone instinctively knew it was true.

The incarnation of amplification.

Ikael could amplify Feope's faint essence and restore her to her original state.

"Alright."

"A wise choice. Hand over Feope to us and..."

"Vajra Armor."

Shirone grabbed Armand's handle and activated the Vajra Armor.

In an instant, the organic robe enveloped him, and the artificial brain equipped with Akamai's Eye floated above his head.

The fairies tensed up and assumed battle stances.

Although he had been defeated by Mirka, he was a formidable opponent who had shot down many fairies.

But Mirka, knowing there were no variables in her duel with Shirone, smirked mockingly.

"You have a good weapon. Thanks to it, you could achieve so much with your mediocre skills. But without that weapon, you are nothing but a weak human."

Having already overwhelmed him in avatar strength, it didn't matter what techniques he used or how many functions he had.

The absence of variables was the scariest aspect of Razor of Truth.

Without a word, Shirone placed Feope inside Armand's robe. He created a pocket near his heart and safely protected it with Ringer's minerals.

To reach Ikael as quickly as possible, he would have to fight fiercely.

Realizing Shirone had no intention of surrendering, Mirka extended her hand with an angry face.

"Kill him. Make him pay for the crime of defiling heaven."

The fairies waiting all around flew at Shirone at terrifying speed.

At the same time, Shirone's eyes focused forward.

Magic of unknown attributes rained down from all directions, and the fairies moved swiftly like a storm, but Shirone ignored it all.

When you see nothing, you see everything.

As Shirone's Direct Perception activated, the boundaries of his Spirit Zone began to blur.

Mirka, the highest-ranking entity, was the first to sense the change.

"What is that...?"

The presence of the Spirit Zone was fading. Eventually, it completely merged with the world, and the boundaries disappeared.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

As Shirone widened his eyes, dozens of photon cannons shot diagonally from completely unexpected places.

It was an impossible angle unless Shirone had fired them from mid-air.

The fairies charging from the sides were caught off guard and exposed, swept away by the cascade of flashes and slammed into the ground.

"What is this? How is he using magic...?"

Shirone created and fired photon cannons in all directions.

The rampaging flashes intertwined like a net, bombarding the fairies indiscriminately.

Even amidst the chaos, the fairies couldn't find the origin of the magic and looked around in confusion.

There was no central point where the magic was being cast. Shirone's mind, now merged with the world, had achieved a state of perfect omnipotence. The photon cannons, bundled together, rapidly changed direction like schools of fish in the ocean, sweeping up the enemies.

"Ugh!"

Mirka hastily moved her body out of the radius.

The complete annihilation of the first unit that tried to subdue Shirone was shocking, but what came to her mind first was an ancient record.

"This is the Gaia's..."

The Spirit Zone of those who wield the Ultima System, 'Elysion,' had resurrected, transcending the ages.

Chapter 482:

"He's just a human!"

Mirka refused to believe that Shirone's Spirit Zone was Elysion.

Anke La had feared the mythical humans, Gaia, who had driven heaven to the brink of destruction.

But they had ultimately lost the war and left the world, hadn't they?

The idea that their abilities, which could only be found in fragmented records, would suddenly reappear now didn't make sense.

"Do you think a mere human can wield Elysion? You're just a poor imitation."

As if to refute Mirka's words, Shirone widened his eyes and cast photon cannons.

With flashes erupting from close range, Mirka couldn't even think of using her Unregulated Form and had to dodge.

'This is definitely dangerous.'

If Immortal Function is infinite, Elysion is intangible.

A mind perfectly integrated with the outside world handles all information detected by the Ultima System as its own.

It was similar to combining Shirone's Spirit Zone with ancient magic, making Mirka feel like she was fighting a system rather than an individual.

To any being with individuality, the Ultima System's Direct Perception was an utterly unfamiliar phenomenon.

This entirely different combat system threw the fairies into confusion, and Shirone's magic, adapted to Elysion, began to devastate the surroundings with even greater destructive power.

'We must stop him here.'

Seeing seven fairies vanish in just ten seconds, Mirka finally steeled herself.

Whether Shirone was using Elysion or imitating it, the ability itself was real.

"Everyone, follow me!"

As Mirka led the charge, Shirone fired photon cannons from behind, bombarding them like a flurry of punches.

Simultaneously, Mirka activated her Unregulated Form, Razor of Truth.

A chilling white light flickered around her, and photons with mass struck her body.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

All the fairies who knew the power of the Unregulated Form paused their battle to watch the outcome.

Shirone also observed Mirka with sharp eyes.

"Hah, hahahaha."

Mirka, unscathed, extended her hand and laughed.

Being among the top-ranked fairies, her avatar's strength still gave her the upper hand.

But her smile was tense, almost rigid.

"I've won."

With her Unregulated Form activated, Shirone was now invincible to her.

She activated another Unregulated Form, Law of Submission, and charged at incredible speed.

"Tch!"

Shirone spread his wings of light and soared into the sky.

All the fairies shot up vertically, quickly leaving the Whale's Gorge and entering the open sky.

"Catch him! If we capture him, we win."

Shirone's vision was filled with countless fairy spells.

Visible, invisible, material, and phenomenological, the types varied according to the fairies' concepts of creation, but Shirone didn't dwell on any of them and just looked straight ahead.

Elysion integrated all information into a single dimension and transmitted it, while Armand's powerful functions heightened Shirone's reflexes to the extreme.

"How is this possible...?"

Shirone's movements, dodging what seemed like an inescapable barrage, astonished even the fairies born with innate flight abilities.

Shirone, who had escaped the magical barrage that couldn't be avoided without calculating millimeter-level errors, began his counterattack.

As Akamai's eye locked onto targets, photon cannons flew in from all directions, delivering concentrated strikes.

Every time the focus of Antithesis jumped between fairies, they fell without fail.

"What are you all doing?!"

As Mirka flew in, shouting in anger, Shirone stopped his attack and focused on her.

'Stay calm. Think.'

Shirone knew Mirka was invincible, but unlike before, he didn't despair.

All Unregulated Forms have activation conditions and costs.

'Just blocking the first attack can't make her invincible.'

The first thing that came to mind was a time limit.

She couldn't maintain invincibility indefinitely. But that alone wasn't enough.

The advantage was so powerful that it made Shirone's judgment easier.

'Spatial limitation.'

Having reached a conclusion, Shirone sharply changed direction to avoid the charging Mirka.

Confirming Mirka's reaction as she tried to keep him in her sight, he felt somewhat confident.

'I see. In her line of sight...'

Using the maximum functionality of his wings of light, Shirone performed dazzling movements to confuse Mirka.

"Hmph! It's a good idea, but..."

Many enemies had tried to break Razor of Truth before.
But that was a misconception focused only on the ability to eliminate variables.

With a bit of different thinking, one could understand why Mirka had such an ability.

Ranked third among countless fairies.

Mirka was inherently strong, and the Unregulated Form was merely a tool to maintain that strength at 100%.

"Do you think you can evade me?"

Mirka's body turned into light as she pursued Shirone.

Charging at a terrifying speed, she aimed to pierce Shirone's body, caught in the Law of Submission.

With a bang, Mirka passed through Shirone, her eyes filled with shock.

"What?"

Shirone had suddenly disappeared.

Not a teleportation, but literally vanished.

Hearing the sound of the wind being cut, Mirka quickly turned to the side. Shirone's tentacles were approaching rapidly.

Having lost sight of him, the Unregulated Form reset.

Gritting her teeth, Mirka hastily leaned back.

Ugh! The wind pressure alone pushed her body back several meters.

Shirone didn't stop at swinging his tentacles but followed up with photon cannons.

Even as she dodged, tracing complex trajectories in light form, Mirka's mind was filled with questions.

How had he gotten out of her sight?

"Razor of Truth!"

Regaining some composure, she activated her Unregulated Form again.

The photon cannons vanished futilely, and realizing she was invincible again, she glared at Shirone.

Valhalla Action.

Seeing the fallen angel's magic circle behind Shirone, everything became clear.

'Damn...!'

Reversing cause and effect.

If he had already reached a specific coordinate and then reversed time, she couldn't keep him in her sight.

'This way, I can avoid the Unregulated Form. But I must refrain from big attacks.'

However, Shirone also faced a delay as a cost for reversing causality.

For Mirka to activate her Unregulated Form, she had to be attacked once, and Shirone could be caught if he miscalculated the delay.

Both had to be cautious.

But this destroyed the overwhelming advantage of the Unregulated Form and balanced the power.

Shirone fought fiercely among the fairy troops.

It was a one-against-many battle, but the tide was gradually turning in Shirone's favor.

The magic emerging from Elysion's intangibility steadily eliminated the enemies without giving them time to adapt, and finally, a deadly laser net was deployed.

A red line net, possible only without a central point, spread in all directions, disrupting the fairies' movements.

As homing photon cannons slipped through the net and exploded the enemies, screams echoed in the sky.

"This wretched human!"

As Mirka activated Razor of Truth, Valhalla Action triggered, and Shirone disappeared.

'I must find him!'

Mirka looked around frantically.

If she could find him before his delay ended, she would win.

'Huh?'

Turning around, her eyes widened in shock. Shirone was right in front of her.

Spinning and swinging his tentacles, his movements were domineering, but not beyond Mirka's ability to dodge.

'Foolish human. Did he make a reckless move out of impatience?'

Mirka smirked and extended her hand.

If she blocked with her Unregulated Form, Shirone would be completely defenseless.

"Ugh!"

But just before activating her ability, Mirka felt a powerful restraint and shuddered.

Akamai's eye, embedded in the artificial brain, was targeting her from the side.

The advantage of Valhalla Action was the ability to reverse the causality of all linked events.

In other words, Shirone had simultaneously advanced two outcomes: placing the eye on her side and then attacking from behind.

The delay was longer, but it was Shirone's unique variable to break the balance of power.

'Is there no absolute outcome?'

As she reached this thought, a thud echoed in Mirka's head. Her head shattered, she flew into the distant sky, and as the inertia ended, she fell in a parabola.

"Lady Mirka!"

All the fairies in the sky couldn't believe what they were seeing.

A noble spirit ranked second among the 72 ranks of fairies had been defeated by a mere human.

Fury surged as their pride was trampled, and all the fairies charged.

"Ugh!"

Shirone grimaced, waiting for the delay to end.

The waiting time was much longer than usual because he had reversed two events.

When the delay finally ended, countless spells were already rushing toward him.

'I have no choice.'

It wasn't his preferred method, but this was war. Sometimes, brutality was necessary for victory.

Through Elysion's mental power, Shirone cast one of his specialties, Berserk.

But this Berserk was entirely different from what he had shown before.

It was a literal multi-explosion of Berserk.

Due to Elysion's lack of a central point, Berserk exploded in numerous locations.

Previously, Berserk had merely repelled things, but this time, it crushed everything with a storm of light.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

"Ahhhh!"

All the fairies trapped within Elysion's influence screamed in agony.

The small bodies caught between the curtains of light made cracking sounds as they broke.

From a distance, it looked like lightning was striking out of a clear sky.

As the 30-meter diameter spheres of light flashed, the fairies trembled as if electrocuted and fell in droves.

When the casting of Berserk, which could only be performed within Elysion, ended, the sky returned to its calm blue state.

The fairy troops were annihilated, and Shirone, floating alone in the air, took a deep breath as he looked up at the higher sky.

As his wings of light vanished, his body began to fall.

Accelerating towards the ground at a tremendous speed, Armand's robe extended, flying dozens of meters to anchor itself to the ground first.

Simultaneously, it absorbed the impact, allowing Shirone to land lightly as if he had jumped from a low height.

He was on the mountainside, and below the mountain range, he could see the paradise where the subjects lived.

"Haa."

Shirone sat down for a moment to calm his exhausted mind. Armand's nerves vividly conveyed the safety of Feope, who was nestled in his chest.

He briefly wondered how much stronger he had become. But what he felt most acutely at that moment was the devastation of his mind and the harsh reality brought on by the war.

"I have to keep going."

That was the nature of war. There were also personal goals he had to achieve.

"Just hold on a little longer, Feope."

As Armand restored some of his physical functions, Shirone stood up again.

As he gently bent his knees, the massive wings of light spread out once more from his back.

With a burst of dust, Shirone's body soared, quickly flying over the mountain range towards Arboth.

Chapter 483:

In the underground torture chamber of the Hall of Corruption in the Second Heaven, Rakia, angels who had lost their divinity were imprisoned and subjected to torment. If angels were viewed by physical standards, their durability far exceeded that of humans, and thus the torture devices were bizarre and on a scale unimaginable in the human world.

Kangnan was unconscious, her hands bound by chain cuffs hanging from the ceiling, relying entirely on them to support her weight.

Snakes slithered across the floor, and the enclosed air was so foul that it overpowered even the sulfur smell of the burning torches.

In the darkness, dozens of eyes gleamed as a Mara emerged.

It was Torco, a subordinate of the fallen angel Mauriel. He had the face of a gaunt old man, a bald head, a bulging belly like a tadpole, and legs much shorter than his long arms.

Known as the God of Screams in some worlds, he had a perfect understanding of the human body and was an excellent torturer, capable of inducing pain with his delicate touch.

Laughter echoed from the walls.

"Give us the screams, the wretched human screams."

"Can we avoid killing her? Even using just one forty-third of the hatred for Miro would kill her."

The fallen angels who demanded the exchange of Miro and Kangnan across Rakia gave their subordinates a chance to vent their frustrations.

Some Maras had no interest in human suffering, while others found it extremely fascinating, and all those gathered in the torture chamber were of the latter type.

Torco cupped his hands and slapped Kangnan's cheek.

A hollow sound, unlike any normal slap, reverberated, and the impact scrambled Kangnan's brain.

"Ugh!"

Feeling as if her skull was splitting, Kangnan grimaced and regained consciousness.

"Where is this...?"

She saw the hooked nose of an old man.

But her senses detected the malevolent energy seeping into the prison walls.

'I've been captured.'

She had expected this. What pained her was not dying immediately but losing consciousness in that situation.

She pulled at the cuffs on her wrists, causing the chains connected to the ceiling to rattle.

If it were just metal, she could break free.

She could break her wrists if necessary.

'The cuffs are draining my strength.'

As far as she knew, it was impossible to completely block Skima by normal means.

That left two possibilities.

An Unregulated Form or...

"An object?"

"An object called 'Self-Destruction.' The more strength you use, the stronger it becomes. You can't escape."

'Annoying...'

From the Mara's words, she inferred that the less strength she used, the weaker it became.

But if its minimum strength was greater than the human body, escaping was impossible for Kangnan.

"Kill me."

It was better to quickly abandon any futile strategies.

"You will die eventually. But you might survive."

When Kangnan looked at him, Torco smiled, curious about her reaction.

"If the humans bring Miro by noon tomorrow."

Humans become pathetic when given hope.

Thinking about how this brave warrior who had reclaimed Miro by leaping over the drawbridge would become filthy made him tremble with excitement.

"Ha!"

Torco's face hardened.

Kangnan, shaking with laughter, looked at him with disdain.

"Miro will never come."

She wouldn't come.

Gaold wouldn't trade the results of his 20 years of dedication for her life.

'Yes, she won't come.'

If he were that indecisive, he wouldn't have sent her into danger in the first place.

'Good for him. He'll meet the one he loves.'

Contrary to expectations, Kangnan smiled, causing Torco's face to contort.

"If Miro doesn't come, all that awaits you is death after endless screams. How will you scream? How will you beg for death?"

The voice of a Mara watching from the darkness echoed ominously.

"Hehehe, human screams are the sweetest music in the world."

Born a warrior and destined to die a warrior.

Even amidst the chilling threats, the warrior of Rammoai showed no sign of wavering.

Kangnan, you are a woman.

She first met Gaold 16 years ago, when she was thirteen. After the wolf tribe was annihilated, she fled south, her life a series of trials.

Those who extended a hand to a child with nothing always had ulterior motives, mostly because she was a girl. Though Kangnan had an exceptional physique even among the wolf tribe, she was too young to defeat the world's strong.

Eventually, she was kidnapped by a band of thieves and taken to a foreign slave market.

"Don't glare at me like that."

The man sitting across from Kangnan in the cargo hold spoke.

"Think of yourself as not human from the start. Like a dog, horse, pig, or cat. Depending on what kind of animal you become, your life might be decent. You're pretty and valuable."

"I am a wolf."

The man didn't understand her southern language.

But he knew he couldn't get a high price without removing the venom from her eyes.

Slave buyers had varied tastes, but catering to a small niche often devalued the product.

"This won't do. I'll have to break you in advance."

As the man drew the curtain in the cargo hold, darkness fell. When he turned back, his eyes were no longer normal.

Crack.

The sound of chewing soft bones came from his fist.

"Let's start by making you a dog."

"I am a wolf."

Kangnan spat back and crouched.

With all her strength, she lunged, headbutting the man's abdomen with her hands tied behind her back, and pushed him out of the carriage.

"Crazy!"

Jumping from a moving carriage with her hands tied was akin to suicide.

As the heavy wheel rolled towards her face, she thought it was too late to avoid it.

But the wheel suddenly split with a bang, and the carriage overturned.

Kangnan knelt and looked to the side.

Before she could assess the situation, the thieves rushed in and began beating her.

"Damn it! Kill her!"

With her hands tied behind her back, Kangnan was defenseless.

But she thought of her entire body as a shield and stood up, demonstrating the techniques of Rammoai with her free legs.

Dodging between the thieves with her small frame, she swung her leg at a large man blocking her path.

When her low kick struck his log-like shin, a dull thud echoed.

"Argh!"

The large man couldn't withstand the pain and collapsed, screaming.

It wasn't the strength of a thirteen-year-old.

"Don't underestimate me. I am of the wolf tribe..."

But that was all she could achieve, and she was soon knocked to the ground by the flurry of punches.

"Ah! Annoying!"

The man who had fallen from the carriage approached, bleeding from his head.

Drawing a dagger from his boot, he raised it towards Kangnan.

"I'll stab you a hundred times and kill you!"

At that moment, another explosion rang out, and the man's head burst.

"What?"

The thieves realized it wasn't a simple accident.

At the end of the forest path they had come from, a man was walking towards them.

It was Gaold, who had graduated from Alpheas Magic School and embarked on a journey of ascetic training at the age of

twenty-four.

Unlike his current appearance, he still had a youthful aura, his body emaciated to the bone, and his complexion deathly pale.

But what left the deepest impression on Kangnan were his eyes, which seemed to hold death itself.

"Who are you? A mage?"

"Have you ever seen a god?"

The thieves, who got hives just hearing the word "god," exchanged glances and burst into laughter.

"A crazy monk?"

Encountering someone who had lost their mind at the end of their ascetic journey wasn't uncommon for those who roamed the world trafficking humans.

"Have you really never seen one? Where is God?"

The leader of the thieves twirled his dagger and stepped forward.

"Hey, what do you want with God? Did you commit a crime?"

"I..."

Before Gaold could finish, the dagger flew towards his forehead.

"Need to kill him."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

As the air compressed, the heads of all the thieves standing around the fallen carriage exploded.

Gaold, who had lightly tilted his head to avoid the dagger, walked slowly.

Looking down at the stunned Kangnan, he spoke indifferently.

"Kid, have you ever seen a god?"

Even as an unprecedented fear enveloped her, Kangnan slowly shook her head.

"Where is he? Where is he? I need to kill him."

Gaold's appearance, searching the forest for something, was the epitome of bizarreness to Kangnan.

'He's crazy. This man is crazy.'

After looking around for a while, Gaold looked down at Kangnan again and untied the rope binding her hands.

'I need to run.'

That was the first thought that came to Kangnan's mind.

But before she could act, Gaold extended his hand.

"Can you stand? Judging by your appearance, you seem to be from the south. What tribe are you from?"

Forgetting her fear, Kangnan glared fiercely at Gaold.

None of the people who had extended a hand to her with kindness had ever been beneficial.

"I am a wolf."

Gaold's half-closed eyes looked at her fiery face.

"The wolf tribe. I heard they were annihilated. It must have been tough."

'He understands the southern language?'

It was surprising that this madman, who looked worse than a beggar, understood her.

"What's your name?"

Wondering who this man was, Kangnan finally spoke.

"Kangnan. I am Kangnan."

"Kangnan?"

Gaold searched his increasingly blurry memories for the meaning.

"The soul of a wolf."

He then smiled gently.

"It's a wonderful name, Kangnan."

Kangnan would never forget the emotion she felt at that moment.

"Let's go. You're badly hurt. You need treatment."

Kangnan followed Gaold to a cave in the forest.

Though still filled with wariness, she needed someone's help at that moment.

Gaold handed her some dry bread from his bag.

It was as hard as a rock but plentiful enough to last several days.

She was extremely hungry, but the bread was difficult to chew with a child's jaw unless softened with saliva.

Gaold chewed it easily.

What puzzled her was the groaning sound that escaped from deep within his throat every time he moved his jaw.

Thinking he was indeed mad, Kangnan declared,

"I'll leave tomorrow morning."

Gaold nodded without trying to stop her.

That night.

"Ugh. Ugh."

Gaold woke up to faint groans coming from where Kangnan was.

"What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"Nothing... it's nothing."

Sitting up, Gaold saw Kangnan's pale face drenched in cold sweat.

"Tell me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing... it's nothing...!"

When Kangnan gritted her teeth and stubbornly refused to speak, Gaold lay back down.

"Sleep. We're leaving at dawn."

As time passed and midnight approached, Kangnan crawled out of the cave and staggered into the forest.

Moments later, Gaold's eyes snapped open.

Chapter 484:

When Gaold emerged from the cave, Kangnan was nowhere to be seen, but footprints on the ground led toward the forest.

Kangnan, wandering through the thickest part of the forest with a severely scrunched expression, was clearly distressed.

Suppressing the groans escaping through her tightly closed lips, she anxiously stomped her feet while scanning her surroundings.

Finally, unable to hold out any longer, she dashed into the bushes, yanked down her pants, and squatted down just in time.

Having held it in for two entire days, her bladder felt as if it would burst.

The relief was mixed more with pain than pleasure, and only after the sharp sting of the pain subsided and the comfort of release washed over her did her expression regain some calm.

However, the fleeting sense of ease was quickly replaced by sharp vigilance as her eyes warily scanned her surroundings.

The world had taught her a harsh lesson since she left her homeland: never give anyone an opening from the start. Be more ruthless, like a beast—bite before doubt becomes certainty.

That was the way a descendant of the last remaining wolf tribe survived in this world.

"How long were you holding it in?"

Just as Kangnan was finishing up and preparing to stand, Gaold's voice came from somewhere in the forest.

A moment later, he emerged from the bushes, looking disheveled and worn.

Though the moonlight barely reached through the forest canopy, his eyes seemed to glow faintly on their own.

Kangnan's nose crinkled, and a chill of hostility crept up her spine.

Like other men, this one surely harbored some ulterior motive.

The only difference was that he was a master so skilled that she hadn't even sensed his presence.

"If you hold it in too long, it's bad for your health. Did some men mistreat you?"

A cold smile curled on Kangnan's lips.

In her experience, men who asked such questions never truly cared for her.

"I'm a wolf. Treat me like a person, and I'll kill you."

"Kangnan, you're a woman."

Gaold took a step forward.

His silent, gliding movement made it seem as though he wasn't even touching the ground, causing Kangnan to instinctively step back.

"And I'm a man."

Without thinking, she backed away until her back hit a tree trunk.

Before she realized it, Gaold was right in front of her.

"Anything can happen."

The moment his wild eyes grew cold and composed, Kangnan understood that staying like this would mean the end for her, and she launched an attack.

She swung a low kick, her most confident move, but when it landed on Gaold's leg, it produced a muffled thud.

'What?'

It felt like striking an airbag filled with compressed air—there was no impact at all.

"Ugh!"

Gaold placed a hand on her shoulder and pressed down.

Completely overpowered, she collapsed to the ground, and with a light shove from Gaold, she fell onto her back. He straddled her abdomen and pinned her shoulders with both hands.

"L-let me go! Or else..."

"Stop running from yourself."

Kangnan fell silent.

"Whether you're a woman or a man, don't waste time worrying about what's already decided. What matters is what you can do."

When Gaold leaned in closer, Kangnan flinched.

It was fear that had been etched into her unwillingly.

"Now, tell me. At this moment, what can you do?"

Nothing.

Her body was completely restrained, and Gaold's abilities far surpassed anyone she had ever met.

'I can't win by running away.'

Though she wasn't as strong as Gaold, Kangnan was smart, and his words quickly sank into her mind.

"Um, I... haven't pulled up my pants yet."

Just as Gaold glanced down to check, Kangnan clenched her teeth and headbutted him.

Crack!

A loud sound rang out as Gaold fell backward.

"Aaahhh!"

Kangnan stood up, a triumphant smirk on her face.

"Ha! How's that—"

But something was off about Gaold's condition.

Even though she had used all her strength, someone of his level shouldn't be reacting this way.

"Argh! Aaaargh!"

Gaold clutched his head, rolling on the ground in agony.

Far more sensitive to pain than normal, he felt as though his brain was being stirred with a metal rod.

As his agonized screams continued, Kangnan realized the situation was serious and rushed to him.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"Arghhh! Aaaargh!"

"Say something! What hurts?"

No matter how much she shouted, her voice couldn't reach Gaold.

He would spend the entire night trapped in his agony, and this marked the beginning of a long bond between the two. As they wandered the world together for training, Kangnan gradually learned more about Gaold.

Though he wasn't talkative, she pieced together what kind of life he had led from the occasional things he said.

He was training to meet someone—Adrias Miro.

When Kangnan heard that the world was being protected by a single woman, even she couldn't help but feel admiration.

"So, is Miro the strongest woman in the world?"

"There's no such thing as being the best in combat. But officially, yes. Miro represents humanity, and no one can defeat her."

Kangnan casually tossed out her question and watched Gaold's retreating back.

The strongest woman in the world.

Was this man in love with someone like that?

"What if I become the second strongest woman in the world?" she asked suddenly.

Gaold, who hadn't expected the bold remark from the young girl who barely reached his waist, turned to her with a curious gaze.

"If you truly desire it, you might reach that goal. But in my opinion, it's unlikely."

"Why? I'm not afraid of anything. I'll do whatever it takes to get stronger."

Gaold acknowledged her tenacity—her determination was something he respected.

She also possessed exceptional physical talent as a fighter. If she continued to grow, her body would undoubtedly become a formidable weapon.

But having wandered the world himself, Gaold knew better than to fill her head with false hopes.

"It's not a matter of talent or effort."

"Then what kind of person is Miro?"

"She's..."

Gaold gazed out toward the desert winds swirling beyond the horizon.

"Something beyond human. We just call her human because we have no better word to describe her."

Kangnan paused, taking in his words, then pouted and followed him with a determined step.

"Well, I'll beat her someday anyway."

Their journey led them to the Akkad Desert in the Middle East, within the kingdom of Paras.

There, Gaold said he would train to overcome pain through extreme endurance.

The desert was a land of death, and to survive, they needed more than strength—they needed resilience.

In the underground caves they called home, Gaold's nightly screams echoed through the air, and Kangnan tirelessly scavenged for food day and night to sustain him through his suffering.

Deep within the desert, a madman and a wolf survived by clinging to each other's warmth.

Even now, Kangnan struggles to define what their relationship was during those days.

Family? Friends? Comrades? Lovers? Perhaps enemies.

All the emotions ordinary people experience with many others, they experienced solely with each other.

It was the only way they could survive.

One day, Kangnan experienced the most horrific tragedy of her life.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted."

Carrying a bundle of desert insects, she trudged into the depths of the cave, weary from her efforts.

Just then, Gaold's piercing screams echoed through the cave.

She was used to hearing his cries every day, but this time, something was different.

There was an unmistakable ominous tone mixed into the sound—enough to make her certain that something was wrong.

"Hey, old man!"

As her bundle fell apart, the insects scattered rapidly in all directions.

By the time Kangnan reached the end of the cave, the screams had stopped.

Her eyes, trembling in fear, fell on Gaold lying motionless on the ground.

"Old man! What's wrong? Say something!"

"Ughhh..."

Gaold's eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and drool dripped uncontrollably from his mouth.

Knowing his condition, a rare form of self-perpetuating mutation, Kangnan immediately understood.

After continuously pushing the limits of his pain threshold, his brain had finally reached its breaking point.

He was now trapped in a living hell—a state of perpetual torment with no end in sight.

"Please, old man! Wake up!"

For the first time in her life, Kangnan felt true fear.

The world consisted only of the two of them. A world without Gaold was unimaginable.

Thus, the fourteen-year-old girl could do nothing but call out his name for days, screaming until her voice gave out, hoping he would come back.

Eventually, she collapsed into Gaold's arms, unconscious from exhaustion.

She remained in a deep sleep for three days before finally opening her eyes.

It felt as though she had been asleep for a thousand years.

But when she confirmed that Gaold showed no signs of waking, a grim determination replaced her fear.

Rustle.

Her keen hearing picked up the sound of an insect crawling across the ground.

After a brief moment of thought, she swiftly reached out, grabbed the insect's body, and shoved it into her mouth. Chewing the thumb-sized insect, she pressed her lips against Gaold's and carefully fed him the mashed remains. She then took out a water flask and gently brought it to his lips.

With a firm tone, as if making a solemn vow, she whispered: "Wait for me, old man. I'll save you. No matter what it takes, I'll bring you back."

Kangnan ventured into the city of Paras.

Healers, medicine, magic, information—whatever she needed to obtain, one thing was essential: money.

Would Gaold ever know?

Would he ever realize what kind of life Kangnan had to endure during that year while waiting for him to wake?

The hardships she faced, caring for an immobile adult who could do nothing for himself?

Yet Kangnan never once spoke of those days.

She endured it all, waiting for the day Gaold would open his eyes again.

And when, as if by a miracle, Gaold finally woke, every bit of resentment and anger she had harbored vanished without a trace.

"Whew."

The first thing Gaold saw when he regained consciousness was not the dark, oppressive cave where he had suffered in torment but the humble ceiling of a small inn.

A moment later, the door creaked open.

Returning with food and medicine, Kangnan dropped her bundle in shock upon seeing Gaold lying awake and blinking.

“Old man...”

Tossing the bundle aside, Kangnan threw herself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

“Old man! Old man!”

At that time, Kangnan was fifteen years old.

Only a year had passed, but to Gaold, the girl who had grown physically and mentally in that short time felt unfamiliar.

“You saved me.”

Kangnan shook her head, wiping away her tears.

He was back. She was no longer alone.

“Don’t ever do that again. Promise me. Never leave me behind.”

Gaold gazed into Kangnan’s eyes.

There was no need to ask; he already knew.

He knew of the hellish time Kangnan had endured, fighting alone to protect him.

Gently, Gaold wrapped his arms around her.

“Let’s go back to Tormia. I won’t leave you behind again.”

Having emerged from hell, Gaold’s endurance and resolve were on a whole new level.

Now, it was time to begin in earnest.

They would return to Tormia, where Gaold would become the head of the Magic Association.

It was the only way to reclaim Miro, and Kangnan would play a crucial role in his plans as his right hand.

Buried in Gaold’s embrace, Kangnan kept nodding.

Her tears wouldn’t stop as she recalled all the hardships she had endured, but she couldn’t let him see her cry.

“Old man, I’ve made up my mind about something,”

Kangnan said, lifting her head as if suddenly remembering something.

Gaold smiled and asked, “Oh? What is it?”

With a bright, innocent smile, Kangnan declared:

“I’m going to become the second strongest woman in the world.”

Chapter 485:

"What are you thinking about?"

In the underground of the Hall of Corruption in Rakia.

Kangnan, snapping out of her recollection, looked up.

Torco, a subordinate of the fallen angel Mauriel, was staring at her with a smile that seemed to reek of foulness.

"Are you preparing yourself for the upcoming torture? But blocking out thoughts won't help at all."

As Torco grabbed Kangnan by the collar, there was a ripping sound as her clothes tore.

"We are all slaves to time. If you stretch out your time, you have exactly 18 hours left. Only pain and annihilation await you."

Torco wanted to make her aware of reality, but in Kangnan's mind, time had already stopped.

"Gaold won't come."

This was the end. Whatever future awaited, it was already over.

"Hehehe, then all that awaits you is a desperate scream."

When Kangnan responded with a final smirk, Torco's face finally lost all expression.

"It's been a while since I've had such an interesting subject."

As Torco slowly stepped back and extended his hands, his weapon, a two-pronged whip, appeared in his hands.

"First, let's tenderize the meat."

As soon as he finished speaking, Torco's hands alternated in swinging the whip.

Each time the whip struck, Kangnan felt a burning pain on her skin.

'It hurts.'

The pain traveled through her nerves to her brain, transforming into a new kind of mental agony.

'It hurts.'

At the end of the pain, she felt an even more poignant emotion.

'It must have always hurt like this.'

Breathing felt like inhaling glass shards, and every step felt like walking on nails.

But Gaold had endured everything and made it this far.
So she could endure it too.

'I won't scream.'

Each time the fierce whip struck her cheek, memories of her time with Gaold flashed through Kangnan's mind like lightning.

"The sun is setting."

Sein, seeing the darkening sky outside the forest, approached Gaold.

His eyes, still gnawing at his thumb, were fierce enough to kill anyone who approached, but Sein could no longer yield.

"Decide, Gaold. What will you do?"

With a click of his teeth, Gaold stopped his self-harm.

No one here knew what Kangnan meant to him.

How could they?

Only now did Gaold realize that he had completely forgotten what she had given him.

Only Miro.

He had poured all his passion into turning back the stopped clock, never once thinking about who was following behind.

'Pathetic.'

Miro, looking displeased, sat on a rock with her legs crossed. Her left leg, draped over her knee, swung back and forth, reflecting her dissatisfaction.

Seeing her displeasure, Arius crawled over to her and supported her swinging foot with his head.

Whimpering, he brushed the dirt off her bare foot with his cheek and began sucking on her toes.

If Arius was human, Miro was a god, and if Miro was human, Arius was something less than human.

That relative status never changed, so Miro just let him be. Then, annoyed, she pulled her toes out of his mouth and kicked his face.

"Whimper! Whimper!"

Ignoring Arius as he rolled on the ground with a hurt expression, Miro stood up and strode over to Gaold.

"Hey! Make up your mind! Is it me or that girl? I can't stand this anymore!"

In Miro's mind, a grand map of heaven and humanity was drawn, but on a more human level, Gaold's indecisiveness hurt her pride.

Of course, even if Gaold chose her, she had no intention of accepting him.

But that made his inability to choose between two women even more absurd.

Gaold slowly turned his gaze to look up at Miro.

The woman he had wanted so desperately, the one he had staked his entire life on, was right in front of him, and he had no doubt that he loved her.

So why did his heart tremble?

The heart that should have been running blindly towards Miro shook like it was driving on an unpaved road whenever he thought of Kangnan.

"I can guess a little about the life you've lived."

Seeing Gaold's reaction, Miro was convinced.

"You must have trained through countless pains. For 20 years, you looked only at me and reached this point."

Gaold just listened.

Having the woman he desired more than life acknowledge his efforts was overwhelming, but he finally realized.

He could never have made it this far on his own.

"You know, don't you?"

Miro recalled the look in Kangnan's eyes at the last moment.

"While you were running, looking only at me, that girl was running, looking only at your back."

Gaold looked away from Miro and stared straight ahead.

It might have been the first time.

The moment Kangnan stood before him.

"I don't know what story you two have, but..."

"I'm going."

Gaold interrupted Miro and stood up.

Everyone's eyes focused on him, or rather, on his lips.

"I'm going to save the mutt."

No one disagreed with Gaold's decision.

It had been his fight from the beginning.

But a hint of sadness crossed Miro's face.

The price of saving Kangnan was Miro's death.

She had already accepted it, so there was nothing to fear, but now that Gaold had made his decision, she felt a strange jealousy for the first time in her life.

But such human emotions were absorbed into her grand spirit, leaving no trace, and she smiled again with a relieved expression.

"Fine, then let's go. If you save her after sending me..."

"No. I'm going alone."

Sein frowned and asked,

"Alone? What are you going to do?"

"I told you, I'm going to save the mutt."

"But without Miro..."

Sein stopped mid-sentence as if realizing something.

"You, no way?"

Gaold intended to end it.

Having achieved something more impossible than dying, he had the resolve to face it.

Whatever the outcome, Gaold had no future beyond this.

"The final war might happen. Miro must not die."

Sein, who knew this better than anyone, had only yielded to Gaold's overwhelming emotions.

"Hmph, do you feel any responsibility for the chaos you've caused humanity?"

"No."

Gaold turned his head, revealing a mocking smile.

"Why should I care about that? I'm just going to meet Kangnan. The rest is up to you."

From God to Miro, and now to Kangnan.

A man who only knew how to run forward, perhaps that was Gaold, Miro thought.

'Yes. That's why I...'

As she watched Gaold leave the forest, Miro spoke.

"Hey, after all this, you're not even going to say goodbye?"

Instead of looking back, Gaold pushed aside the branches blocking his path.

"Let's do that when I get back. I've already reserved it."

Realizing he wasn't talking about a farewell, Miro chuckled.

It was an awkward situation to take back her own words.

"We'll see about that. If you come back in one piece."

"Hehehe."

Gaold shrugged and disappeared into the forest.

'You've become strong, Gaold. Really strong.'

Still stubborn and annoyingly single-minded, but he had truly reached it.

He had become a man who could look her in the eye.

'Goodbye, Gaold.'

Turning to Sein, Miro's face no longer held a smile.

"From now on, we need to move quickly. Depending on whether we can return or not, the risks humanity faces will change."

Sein spoke.

"What will you do? You stopped the explosion, but there might be an archangel capable of breaking the spell."

It was a realization that came from seeing Uriel's Judicial Halo.

Ikael's Ataraxia also defied human understanding, but Ragnarok was an equally extraordinary ability.

It enveloped the entire body in the concept of destruction, making physical attacks.

The fundamental concept was unshakable, so once

Ragnarok was activated, there was no way to stop Uriel.

Miro rested her chin on her hand and said,
"The only one who can break the Stop spell is the Archangel of Light, Raiel. His Judicial Halo can implement the speed of light. If the Stop is broken, my head will fly off."

Armin spoke.

"If he can use the speed of light, he won't be trapped in the time field. But breaking the spell is another matter. It won't be easy."

Sein asked,

"How long do you estimate it will take to break the spell?"

Armin thought for a moment and then spoke.

"About five minutes."

Miro nodded.

"That's enough time. I'll handle it from here. You focus on your own missions."

"What are you going to do?"

"Arius."

When Miro called, Arius wagged his tail like he had one and approached.

"Stop doing stupid things. From now on, you are allowed to speak."

Arius knelt on one knee as if nothing had happened.

"Arius. At your command, my master."

"There must be a door installed in my head. Enter the primal consciousness again. It should be easier the second time."

"Yes, but... I can't break the archangel's magic circle with my ability."

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle the magic circle."

Miro explained her plan.

"Kariel's magic circle is blocking my brain circuits, preventing concentration. So you will become my nerves. Connect my nerves by bypassing the magic circle. As soon as I enter the Spirit Zone, I'll infinitely reduce the magic circle with Scale Magic. I can't stop the explosion, but I can handle it."

This was the true terror of Scale Magic.

By magnifying relative size, all the reasoning created by intelligence becomes meaningless.

Sein also thought it was an excellent judgment.

"Can you time it right? If the Stop spell breaks right now, you'll die."

"That's why we have to be quick. Once Arius enters consciousness, time will flow differently. Five minutes. It should be enough."

"Alright, I have no choice but to trust you. Be careful."

Worrying about the great Miro didn't make sense.

"Let's go, Arius."

Reading his master's thoughts, Arius cast Flicker Magic and moved Miro to a secluded place.

With Gaold and Miro gone, Sein began to strategize to end the war.

With the first goal of reclaiming Miro halfway achieved, he pondered the unease he had felt before coming to heaven.

"Even though the war has started, the angels aren't moving. How is this possible?"

Aside from the interference from Uriel and Kariel in the Second Heaven, only fallen angels and Maras were visible. Fighting a war without the regular angels was like fighting with both arms tied from heaven's perspective.

"Something is definitely happening that we don't know about. Where are they moving? Heaven? Or humanity?"

Regardless, the fact that the regular angels weren't moving was an opportunity for the rebels.

"If there are no special communications, Shirone will activate God's punishment by noon. We must take advantage of this opportunity."

Whatever the outcome, the war will end tomorrow.

Chapter

486:

"It is impossible."

Uriel tilted his head.

He had suggested to Raiel, the Archangel of Light, to release the Stop spell on Kariel, but surprisingly, Raiel refused.

"Why? With your ability, you should be able to reverse the stopped time."

Raiel's fundamental concept was light.

He could manipulate electromagnetic forces at will and was the fastest being in heaven.

"Let's call it the logic of power."

Raiel recounted the incident where he and three other archangels had clashed with Ikael.

"Ra has forbidden the activities of the angels, and Archangel Ikael follows Ra's will. For that reason, I cannot release Kariel."

If Ikael had made that judgment, Uriel had only one option.

"I will invoke the Council of White."

The highest executive body in heaven, the Council of White.

As the scenery disappeared and a white space filled the area, the archangels began to appear one by one.

Kariel, trapped by the Stop spell, naturally couldn't come, and this time, the Archangel of Annihilation, Paiel, was also absent.

The other archangels knew it was because the Archangel of Amplification, Ikael, had come, the highest authority in heaven.

"Uriel, why have you invoked the Council of White?"

Ikael's authoritative gaze, which had persuaded the archangels with the logic of power, was more commanding than ever.

"Kariel has been affected by human magic. Given the wartime situation, I would like to borrow Raiel's power."
Ikael thought for a moment and then spoke.

"Granted."

All the archangels' eyes turned to Ikael simultaneously.

"Is that alright? Kariel's rebellion has ultimately dispersed heaven's power. He must also bear responsibility for that."

"Victory in the war takes precedence."

The archangels fell silent.

Ra had forbidden the activities of the regular angels, and human resistance was much stronger than expected.

Of course, they still didn't think they would lose, but even having such thoughts was shameful.

"Why has Ra forbidden the activities of the angels?"

Even the archangels who handled fundamental concepts couldn't understand.

"Mirka is dead."

The Archangel of Union, Metiel, spoke.

Her hair, as thin as gold thread, hung down on both sides, and her beautiful face showed an expression of anger that seemed impossible.

"Shirone, the Nephilim, did it."

At the mention of a boy's name, the archangels' gazes sharpened again towards Ikael.

Mirka, the second-ranked fairy.

The news of her death had spread quickly throughout heaven, and Shirone had become the enemy of many fairies.

"Is he that strong, just a Nephilim?"

The Archangel of Disintegration, Satiel, spoke.

She looked like Metiel's twin, but her violent temperament made it easy to distinguish between them.

Sensing her energy, the archangels' halos all shone brightly.

If this weren't the Council of White, all surrounding matter would have been disintegrated into particles.

Reading the archangels' discontent, Ikael spoke.

"I already said I would handle Shirone."

Metatron spoke.

"That's the problem. Why are you so fixated on the Nephilim? Could it be that the boy is..."

As Metatron's words trailed off, silence fell over the Council of White.

Even the archangels, who feared nothing, didn't dare to speak.

Metatron's mouth disappeared.

It was as if his skin had covered it, leaving nothing below his nose.

There was only one possible explanation.

Anke Ra.

The archangels could only roll their eyes at the first manifestation of his will.

Metatron's question was one all the archangels shared, but now they couldn't afford to dwell on it.

"What is Ra's will...?"

The erasure of a fundamental concept would cause significant changes, even if the Akashic Records governed parts of it.

Ra had only erased Metatron's mouth, but the message was clear: any further defiance would result in complete erasure.

"Indeed, there is something. What is the relationship between Shirone and me?"

Ikael also felt Ra's will but knew that further interest would be dangerous.

He had already resolved to follow Ra's will before losing his memory, so adhering to it was the clearest solution.

"I will kill Shirone."

Ikael's declaration weighed heavily on the Council of White.

"As you can see, Ra's will is firm. The activities of the regular angels are forbidden. However, archangels are permitted to guard Arboth. This is my decision. We will now vote."

As expected, the result was unanimous.

In a deep cave, Miro, sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed, began to glow brightly.

As Archangel Raiel released the Stop spell on Kariel, the remaining 0.1 seconds until the explosion began to decrease again.

0.09 seconds. 0.08 seconds...

And now, in Miro's primal consciousness, her avatar and Arius were desperately trying to break the magic circle.

"It's connected!"

Even with his eyes blind, Arius accurately connected Miro's cerebral nerves.

It was possible because he dealt with microscopic spaces in Scale Magic.

As the line of light extended and successfully bypassed the circuit blocked by Kariel's magic circle, the magic circle suddenly vibrated as if it were about to explode.

Miro's avatar bit her lip in frustration.

"Is it already too late?"

She couldn't be sure, as she didn't know how much time had passed in reality.

Miro activated her Spirit Zone through the circuit Arius had bypassed.

As soon as she cast Scale Magic, the magic circle began to shrink rapidly.

Only when she felt the detonation of the magic circle on her skin did she realize she couldn't make it in time.

"No. If it explodes like this, the damage will be too great."

Although her head wouldn't explode due to the reduced scale, she estimated that about 15% of her brain would be damaged, preventing her from exerting her full power.

"Arius!"

"Yes!"

Arius, emitting light with his hands spread, turned his head and shouted.

At the same time, Miro ran over and shoved the now tiny magic circle into his mouth.

"Swallow it!"

Since everything here was part of Miro's mind, any explosion would directly affect her.

But Arius was a foreign entity in Miro's mind.

So, by placing a foreign object within a foreign object, the impact would be mitigated.

"Ugh!"

Swallowing the magic circle, Arius looked at the smiling Miro in shock.

"Hehe, better your heart than my head, right?"

'Ah.'

Arius shed tears.

'Beautiful. So lovely.'

Bang!

Arius's body jolted as an explosion occurred in his stomach. Simultaneously, in reality, Miro, still sitting cross-legged, was thrown to the side as if struck by something.

"Ouch, my head!"

The explosion, mitigated by the shock absorption, spared her brain, but smoke was rising from Arius's mouth as he emerged from the door.

"Are you okay?"

Arius, clutching his stomach and drooling, nodded with a pitiful expression.

"Yes, I'm fine."

There could be no personal resentment towards the sacred Miro.

Even as a mage, it was right for him to take the hit if one of them had to.

'Ah... Lady Miro.'

Realizing this, Arius bowed his head.

The gratitude for her concern for his safety made him momentarily forget the pain that turned his insides upside down.

"Lady Miro."

"Hmm?"

"I would do anything if I could love you. Please give me a chance..."

"Do you want to die?"

"S-sorry!"

Feeling the pressure of the absolute, Arius quickly bowed his head.

As the only human to reach Miro's primal consciousness, Arius knew.

He knew the trauma she had discovered in the Temple of Drimo.

'As expected, you are...'

While Arius was lost in thought, Miro stepped outside the cave.

The sun had set, and the moon had risen.

'I can use magic, but with the barrier of time and space broken, I can't stop the war alone.'

"What will you do now?"

Arius asked, unable to hide his guilt, and Miro turned back with a beautiful smile.

"What do you mean? I'm going to explore heaven."

Miro wouldn't miss such an opportunity.

The war that had started early in the morning had only subsided around midnight.

Small skirmishes were still occurring in various parts of heaven, but they weren't as intense as during the day.

Summarizing the first day's battle, it could be said that the rebels had achieved a one-sided victory.

From the First Heaven to the Sixth Heaven, the distance the rebels had advanced towards Araboth, breaking through the outer gates, was enough to reach the second concentric circle when dividing heaven into three concentric circles.

Currently, the rebel headquarters, led by Crude, had established an advance base in the middle of the Fifth Heaven, Matei, preparing for the next day.

The surroundings were quiet as if everyone were asleep, but except for those who had passed out from exhaustion,

everyone was lost in their thoughts.

Kanya and Lena, part of the headquarters, were no exception.

Sitting side by side, it was natural for them to see their parents' faces in the stars.

Lena leaned on Kanya's shoulder instead of crying.

Having family to rely on, expressing sadness was not appropriate for the other rebels.

Ching. Ching.

The sound of calm metal made Kanya's face contort.

Babel, having completed her patrol of the camp according to her programming, returned.

When not on a mission, she was programmed to take care of Kanya and Lena.

This showed Shirone's consideration, but to Kanya, it felt even more horrifying.

The machine that had pierced her father's body was now fighting alongside her.

"Shirone algorithm applied. Protecting Kanya and Lena.

Mission in progress."

"Shut up."

The moment she heard Babel's mechanical voice, Kanya's patience snapped.

"I said shut up!"

"Logs are set to be disclosed."

"Logs? Do you have the log of killing my father?"

"Search complete. Data number 0342-24-6-46."

"Shut uuuup!"

Detecting abnormal vibrations in Kanya's voice, Babel switched to emergency mode and muted her sound.

"What do you know? Do you have a family? Can you feel pain?"

Babel remained silent.

Among the many data choices available, this was the best judgment.

"Answer me. Tell me the most painful way you can feel!"

"I understand pain. However, I do not have the neural mechanisms to feel it."

Kanya gave a murderous smile.

"Really? Just wait. When the war is over, I'll destroy you in the most humiliating, disgraceful way possible, in front of everyone!"

Babel responded after a moment.

"When the war is over, I will pay the price."

As Kanya ground her teeth and turned away, the commander's voice was heard.

"Don't get excited. Save that anger and unleash it tomorrow."

"Commander."

Kanya and Lena stood up and saluted simultaneously.

"Seems like you can't sleep. Well, it's understandable."

Tomorrow, all the rebels would attempt to enter Araboth, the heart of heaven.

No one expected to survive.

The moon they saw now might be the last, so sleep wasn't a priority.

"Commander, at this hour..."

Crude smiled bitterly.

"I can't sleep either. But it's best to get some rest. We're going to win, not to die."

Kanya nodded calmly.

She understood the meaning behind Crude's words, knowing that survival wasn't guaranteed.

Ching!

Babel's eyes suddenly lit up.

A red laser quickly scanned the front and immediately identified a suspicious figure, reporting it.

"A living entity detected 600 meters ahead. Heat sensor activated. Body temperature 40.1 degrees. Classified as ally. Name: Ravid Plu."

Chapter 487:

"Plu?"

Crude's eyes widened.

Plu was part of Shirone's team, which operated on a completely different path from the rebels.

How had she ended up here?

As Crude ran towards her, Kanya and Lena followed, with Babel hovering protectively over them.

"Plu!"

When Crude arrived, she was already collapsed on the ground.

"Damn..."

Plu was wearing the attire of a citizen, clearly stolen.

But even that was tattered, revealing numerous wounds.

'She went through hell.'

It looked like she had fallen from a great height, with bruises covering her shoulders, thighs, and calves.

"Crude..."

Hearing her faint voice, Crude quickly shouted,

"I'm here. How did you get hurt like this?"

"Shehakim..."

"Shehakim?"

Crude's face turned incredulous.

Had she run that incredible distance in this condition?

"I have urgent news... very urgent..."

Plu couldn't finish her sentence and fainted again.

Realizing the severity of her condition, Crude turned to Kanya and Lena.

"We need to move her. To the Nor medical room!"

Babel immediately carried out the order.

With the rebels united, skilled Norin mages were on standby at the headquarters.

They filled a large tank with water and submerged Plu, casting the water healing spell Orhiri, which began to heal her wounds.

After three hours, Plu was moved to the recovery room, her breathing steadier than before.

Crude, who had rested for about an hour, opened the door to the recovery room and looked at her.

'Plu...'

From the first time he saw her, she had occupied a place in Crude's heart.

Was there a reason?

Maybe, but did it matter?

Her stubborn appearance matched her sharp personality.

Everyone on Shirone's team had a mysterious aura, but to Crude, Plu was the most enigmatic.

A human perfectly specialized in a social system created by humans, something not found in heaven. In Shirone's world, such people were called professionals.

But at this moment, the sharp edge he usually felt from her was absent.

Perhaps that's why a sleeping woman is beautiful.

Crude's hand slowly reached for her forehead.

He justified it by wanting to check her temperature, but his wish was thwarted when Plu's brow furrowed.

"Ugh!"

Quickly withdrawing his hand, Crude spoke as Plu slowly opened her eyes.

"How are you feeling? Are you alright?"

"Where am I?"

As soon as she regained consciousness, Plu connected her awareness to her memory.

Then she quickly scanned her surroundings.

A room with the characteristics of Mecca. And Crude looking down at her.

'I've arrived. I don't remember anything after entering Matei.'

It was a distance she couldn't have covered with sheer willpower alone.

Without the help of the algorithm, she would have been caught and killed by the giants.

But that relief was nothing compared to the overwhelming sense of failure.

She had failed her mission.

Her task was to safely transport Shirone to Araboth.

Failing to fulfill her role as a supporter shattered the pride of a top graduate of the Royal Magic School.

Seeing Plu trembling with clenched fists and a tight-lipped expression, Crude couldn't say anything.

Perhaps he had hoped for a word of thanks for saving her life, but Plu's mind was consumed with guilt over her failure and how to make up for it.

Having made up her mind, Plu stood up abruptly.

Though her wounds had healed, the pain hadn't completely subsided, but she gritted her teeth and endured it.

"What's the situation? How far have we pushed?"

As the conversation shifted to the war, Crude set aside his emotions and spoke.

"We've pushed more than halfway. The distance to Araboth is about 40 kilometers. But the battles from now on will be different."

The lack of angelic activity and the rebels' unexpectedly strong firepower had contributed to today's success, but it wasn't just a matter of brute force.

"To be honest, the enemy's defense perimeter was too wide. But as we approach the center of the concentric circles, the defense range will narrow, and the enemy density will increase."

"Probably. Can we break through?"

"In my opinion... it's impossible. Even if the advance distance is the same, the enemy density will be at least three times higher. We won't be able to break through like we did yesterday."

Crude spoke frankly.

This was also why he couldn't give Kanya and Lena hope for survival.

"Hmm, I see."

"We can't afford to drag this out. Once heaven's interception system Aegis is restored, bombardments will rain down from all sides. A quick, decisive battle is the strategy I'm considering."

Realizing the weight of Crude's words, Plu turned her head.

"Do you have a plan?"

"We'll concentrate the rebels in Jebul. We'll use Titans to break through heaven's walls and gather there. Then we'll advance to Araboth."

Jebul was a city of powerful angels, but currently, there was no angelic activity.

It was a somewhat risky strategy, but it was the only way the rebels had any chance of success.

"But didn't you say you had something to tell me?"

He had heard her say that just before she lost consciousness.

But Plu remained silent, deep in thought.

'Sein...'

Just before departing for heaven from Purgatory, Plu had received two special orders from Sein.

One was to transport the Terminator to Araboth.

This mission was to be prioritized above all else.

Sein had also given her another task.

"If Shirone arrives safely at Araboth, or if any variables occur and you fail to transport him or leave the team, you must find the rebel commander."

"Crude?"

"Inform him about God's punishment. If the second situation occurs, the outcome of the war will likely depend on Shirone. It's best to use this information, but by then, it won't matter if you reveal it."

It was a calculated yet human decision by Sein.

Once God's punishment was activated, there was no way to stop it.

Heaven would be destroyed, and a massive explosion would occur.

If the rebels were concentrated near Araboth, they too would be doomed.

Despite this, the reason for keeping it hidden was a deeply selfish desire to ensure the project's success.

Plu wasn't afraid.

No matter the criticism, a mage carries out their mission.

Knowing her personality, Sein had entrusted her with the role of the villain.

"Before spreading the plan, I have something to say."

Without hesitation, Plu revealed everything.

Shirone's magic would destroy heaven, and the spell would be cast no later than noon tomorrow.

Whether it succeeded or not, it was information the rebels needed to risk their lives for.

Crude's face turned pale upon hearing the truth.

The land of victory, Araboth, had suddenly become a land of death.

Advance and die, retreat and die.

They had been used.

Hundreds of thousands of rebels, all because of a few people from the land of earth, were now marked for death.

"From the beginning... we were deceived."

Regardless of his true feelings, Plu didn't blink.

"As the chairman said, it's not a bad proposal for the rebels.

Didn't we risk our lives to win the war? If so..."

"Do you call that a proposal?"

Crude, abandoning his usual composure, shouted.

"Do you think sacrificing your life for a cause is the same as being killed like a dog by someone else's hand? Then what have we been fighting for?"

Plu remained silent.

There was no way to refute it. That had been the plan from the start.

"So what do you want me to do now? Tell all the soldiers? Tell them that death awaits them at Araboth? Even now, they can't sleep because of fear! How am I supposed to tell them that?"

"That is..."

Plu gritted her teeth.

Desperately trying to steady her mind, she looked Crude in the eye.

"That's not my concern."

Crude's eyes filled with murderous intent.

Even under his deadly glare, Plu remained defiantly composed.

"Damn it! Damn it all!"

Crude knocked over everything in the recovery room and walked to the door.

The sound of the door slamming shut echoed his emotions. Only after Crude left did Plu grimace in pain from her injuries.

'How far has Shirone gone?'

Or had he even survived the fairies' bombardment?

If he was alive, she had to go to Araboth to complete her final mission as a supporter.

She took out her phoenix from her cubrick.

Her stamina was severely depleted, but as long as she could move, she couldn't stop.

'Just wait a little longer, Shirone...'

As Plu left the rebel headquarters, Crude stood before the voice transmission device in the command center.

He had to speak.

They were fighting to win, but at least they should be able to choose their own deaths.

"Attention all headquarters personnel."

Crude's voice was transmitted to each room.

The sound echoed through the night, reaching Plu's ears faintly.

"I have an important announcement. At dawn, the war will resume, and we will ultimately win. But..."

Crude paused.

He couldn't bring himself to say it.

Once the order was given, the information would spread rapidly through wireless communication, and tens of thousands of rebels would spend the night fighting the fear of death.

Even as a commander, did he have the right to plunge so many people into despair?

As the silence lengthened, the awakened soldiers looked at the speakers with anxious eyes.

It was clearly not good news, and their eyes gradually filled with unease.

"...Let's fight."

Crude's voice, sounding choked, continued.

"Let's fight to the end."

Gritting his teeth and squeezing out the words, Crude stared into the darkness.

He couldn't give up here.

If he told the rebels the truth, despair would spread among them.

That would immediately weaken their strength, and those fighting with the resolve to die would only face miserable defeat.

'I will take responsibility for everything.'

Even if he became the worst commander in history, even if he was called a demon, he had to lead everyone into the fray.

With hot tears streaming down his face, Crude shouted,

"We will win! We will win and reclaim our freedom! Today is the most glorious day in human history! Let's give up our lives and fight!"

"Yeahhhh!"

The resolve of the highest commander of the rebels was more effective than a brief sleep, and the soldiers in countless barracks cheered.

The massive sound, as if the entire radius was shouting, reached Plu's ears as she left the headquarters.

'We will fight. We will fight to the end.'

Despite the pain from her bruised body, she didn't slow down.

In the distance, she could see the faint light of dawn breaking over the horizon.

The last night in heaven was coming to an end.

Chapter 488:

"Dawn is breaking."

Amidst the chaotic battle, Shirone sensed the sky brightening.

As Armand's pupils contracted to take in as much light as possible, the terrified expressions of the Kergo warriors became vividly clear.

"Kill! Don't retreat!"

Even the face of the Kergo chieftain shouting those words was pale with fear.

They had honed their Skima through centuries of heretic hunting, but Shirone's use of Elysion was truly an unknown realm.

As the boundaries of the Spirit Zone disappeared, dozens of photon cannons swept through the space, left and right.

The enemies' blades couldn't cut through Armand, and the tentacles continuously absorbed the corpses, giving Shirone more energy.

And finally, when the multi-explosion of Berserk occurred, grotesque screams filled the air.

Dozens of light sources flared up, crushing the entire Kergo hunting party.

Shirone, left alone, was filled with sorrow.

He had come with dozens of reasons to wage war, but with each life extinguished, those reasons also vanished, leaving him unsure of what he was fighting for.

"I'm scared."

As a mage and a member of Gaold's team, he hadn't come to heaven without this level of resolve.

What truly frightened him was his own numbness, feeling no emotion despite his resolve.

"Rian."

Shirone's previously calm face suddenly contorted as tears streamed down.

"I'm so scared, Rian."

"There he is! Chase him! Don't let him escape!"

The heretic hunters pursued him again.

As long as Shirone carried the scent of blood, they would follow him to the ends of the earth.

As a Kergo warrior swiftly approached and swung his crescent blade vertically, Akamai's eye activated Antithesis. Before the movement even stopped, Armand's tentacle burst the enemy's face.

The ensuing battle was another one-sided slaughter.

Kuzan's metabolic ability prevented Shirone from feeling fatigue.

Ringer's armor prevented wounds, and Kensei's absolute restoration prevented injuries.

Amidst all these enhancements, the Ultima System embedded magic into every space perceived by Direct Perception.

Akamai subdued the enemies, Galtomic's magic amplification maximized power, and approaching enemies were sliced by the tentacle blades.

'Damn it! He's a monster! Not human!'

The pursuers, who had thought of Shirone as merely a symbol of light from Zone 73, trembled in fear at his god-like prowess.

'Elysion!'

As Shirone's eyes, piercing the world with Direct Perception, flashed, countless photon cannons emerged from the ground, all shooting skyward.

It was like a massive burst of light beams rising in clusters.

Adapting to attacks from below was extremely difficult for humans with eyes on their heads, and the enemies lost their lives without even approaching Shirone.

After another battle ended, a wave of poignant sorrow washed over him.

"Feope."

Shirone placed his hand on his chest to check Feope's condition.

Her life force hadn't ceased, but it was significantly weaker. That faint life force spurred Shirone's spirit.

"I have to get to Araboth."

Shirone's robe, darkened by the blood of many, quickly absorbed the blood and converted it into energy.

With that power, Shirone pressed forward.

As he neared his destination, the number of pursuers dwindled significantly.

It might have been due to the sacred aura emanating from Araboth, but he also thought something significant might have happened in other regions besides Shehakim.

Finally, when the walls of Araboth came into view, Shirone cast a teleportation spell and stopped at a specific point.

'This is the first point.'

Sein had designated three points where God's punishment could be cast, and Shirone had learned the descent trajectory accordingly.

Casting the spell here would destroy heaven.

But Shirone ignored the point and walked on.

Unless special tactical instructions were given, God's punishment was to be cast at the point closest to Araboth. But not past noon.

If Plu were here, the judgment might have been better, but the result would be the same.

'I will meet Ikael. Just wait a little longer, Feope.'

Shirone immediately leaped over the walls of Araboth.

He was the first to reach Araboth among Gaold's team and the rebels.

At the second point, Shirone paused for a moment.

Even though he was close enough to see the spire where Anke Ra resided, no one stopped him.

The place where Shirone finally encountered someone was beyond the third point, just 2 kilometers from Araboth.

With the spire behind her, the Archangel of Amplification, Ikael, was waiting for Shirone.

"You've finally come, Shirone."

How many near-death experiences had he survived?

Her dry, lifeless eyes conveyed no emotion.

Despite facing Ikael's clear hostility, Shirone's steps didn't falter.

"I have a request."

"I refuse. You and I are enemies. If you come any closer, I will have to kill you. No..."

Ikael's body tilted slightly.

She had a clear reason to block out her emotions.

"I will kill you regardless."

With a bang, the air exploded, and Ikael's figure vanished. She reappeared right behind where Shirone had been standing.

As Ikael's fist, amplified in speed, cut through the air and stopped, her brow furrowed.

Shirone was now standing 10 meters away from Ikael.

Above his head, Ikasa's Judicial Halo, Valhalla Action, was spinning.

Although demoted to a fallen angel and most of her power restrained, the ability of the Judicial Halo was the same as the unique power possessed by other angels.

Seeing Valhalla Action, Ikael naturally thought of the Ataraxia linkage she had taught.

'To wield two angelic judicial powers...'

It was impossible for anyone in heaven, and thus Shirone had to die.

Having made her decision, Ikael lunged again.

Even with Armand's enhanced nervous system, her movements were so fast that only afterimages were visible.

With another bang, the air exploded as Ikael thrust her fist.

"....."

But once again, Shirone had vanished.

Ikasa's Valhalla Action consumed all the time required for the cause in exchange for preceding the result.

Giving Shirone time was clearly her judgment.

But she didn't consider it a mistake because she believed this time, he couldn't possibly evade.

'How did he see it?'

Ikael slowly turned her head to see Shirone, who had moved behind her.

Armand's tentacles fluttered, ready for battle.

But what surprised her was what she couldn't see.

Shirone's mental focal point had disappeared.

And it was clearly the ability of Gaia, vividly remembered in her mind.

"Elysion?"

Unconsciously muttering, Ikael grimaced in pain.

"Ugh!"

Even though she had organized her thoughts, another sensation was trying to connect with the forgotten past.

'I must not remember.'

That was Anke Ra's will.

Quickly regaining her composure, she spoke with a cold gaze.

"You've become much stronger. In just a few days."

Perceiving with the Ultima System and evading with Valhalla Action.

It was certainly possible, but Ikael thought it was foolish.

"Do you think you can face me with just that?"

He could only evade once.

If she attacked continuously, Valhalla Action's nature would prevent him from evading.

In fact, there was no need for that.

Knowing Shirone's level, she could move so fast that even Direct Perception couldn't detect it.

When Shirone took out Feope, Ikael's gaze turned to the emaciated fairy.

"She's still alive. You can revive her."

Feope was a familiar name to Ikael.

She was the fairy who had brought Shirone to heaven for the first time.

But now it was wartime, and Feope was a heretic who had helped Shirone.

"Don't be mistaken, Shirone. You can't make any deals with me. Can you survive this time..."

"I know you can kill me."

Clang!

A magic circle of Valhalla Action appeared above Shirone's head.

"Archangel Ikael is the strongest being in heaven."

"...What are you trying to say?"

Shirone looked up at the magic circle above his head and spoke.

"Valhalla Action reverses cause and effect. It means any action can immediately reach its result..."

Ikael's voice grew harsh.

"Are you mocking the archangel?"

All the angelic judicial powers were in Ikael's mind.

She was the source of all judicial powers.

"That's why I'm explaining. Once the result is reached, it can't be reversed."

Shirone turned his gaze back to Ikael.

"This Valhalla Action has various spells. I'll amplify a laser with Ataraxia and shoot it into the sky. Then, at an altitude of 6,000 kilometers, I'll cast a new spell using God's particles to compress mass. That will create a light spear with a mass of 10 tons by this planet's standards."

Ikael's face began to contort.

"And that spear will crash precisely into Araboth."

"Shirone..."

It was possible.

Ikael, who existed before Uriel's destruction and Kariel's creation, knew that.

The biggest problem was Valhalla Action.

Shirone's explanation was lengthy, but with Valhalla Action, it would all happen in an instant.

"I'm sorry for using the magic you taught me in this way. I can't tell you the point. You could predict and kill me before I cast the spell. But in the end, you won't be able to stop me. So..."

Shirone held out Feope with a desperate look.

"Save this fairy. She ended up like this to save me. Let me do what I can."

Ikael shook her head as if shaking off her internal conflict. Feope wasn't the issue.

If Shirone activated God's punishment, there wouldn't be many who could survive in heaven.

No, even an archangel might be annihilated if hit directly, given the expected power.

"If you cast that spell, do you think you will survive? The cost of Valhalla Action will leave you unable to move for a very long time. Doing such a thing will also cost you your life."

"Don't you understand yet?"

As Shirone approached, Ikael stepped back to maintain distance.

In terms of power, she was unmatched by any being in heaven, but currently, all the choices were Shirone's.

"I have a mission to destroy heaven. But if you save Feope, I'll abandon that mission. So..."

At a closer distance, Shirone's steps came to a halt.

"Whatever decision you make, it doesn't matter if I die."

Ikael's nose wrinkled.

All the circumstances and situations were perfectly clear in her mind, yet she couldn't make any decision.

"....."

Boom. Boom.

In the long silence, the sounds of war echoed from the skies of the First to the Sixth Heaven.

Chapter 489:

Six hours before Shirone entered Araboth.

Ethella arrived at the deep forest of the First Heaven, Shamain, under a special mission from Sain.

“Late. If they don’t come...”

Gaold had requested an item from Frankwine, the leader of Yamang, in exchange for granting Yamang free access to the Second Rebel Command, where Racis was the commander. The item Gaold sought through Yamang was an ancient artifact called the Disk.

With the collapse of the spatial maze, the coordinates had also changed. The existing Meta Gate had become useless, leading Gaold to plan extracting new coordinates from the Akashic Records.

When parts change, the whole remains perfect. Therefore, new and precise coordinates should now be recorded in the Akashic Records. The Disk, known as the artifact of Goffin, could extract these coordinates and input them into a new Meta Gate.

After Goffin’s erasure, no ruins of Goffin remained in Heaven. However, some relics used there still spread throughout Purgatory.

“If we fail to secure the Disk, we’ll be stuck in Heaven until humanity intervenes.”

Ethella, experienced in many hunts within Purgatory, knew how challenging this mission would be. Despite this, Gaold entrusted it to Yamang, the most elite organization in the Purgatory community. If they couldn’t succeed, no one could.

“So, they sent a beauty to greet me. Gaold knows how to handle business,” a voice echoed from deep within the forest.

As Ethella turned her head, the shrubs parted like a door, and Frankwine and Mitgun approached side by side.

Wasting no time, Ethella got straight to the point.

“Did you secure the item?”

Mitgun pulled a palm-sized square tablet from his inner pocket and handed it forward. Though she had no way to confirm its authenticity, the tablet was etched with Henna-like markings and emitted a faint red glow.

“At this point, they wouldn’t have a reason to fake the deal. I must get this to Zebul quickly.”

By now, Armin, Shina, and Kuan were likely heading toward Zebul’s Inglis. Delivering the Disk to them was the task assigned to Ethella by Sain.

“Thank you. Thanks to you, the mission will—”

As Ethella stepped toward Mitgun, she abruptly stopped, her heart sinking as a sense of lethal intent pierced her chest.

A gust of wind howled, and Frankwine’s fist narrowly grazed her temple. Staggered, she retreated without finding her balance.

“What is this...?”

The moment Ethella met Frankwine’s gaze, she realized.

“Who are you?”

“Kekeke, who knows?”

Frankwine’s demeanor had shifted. Though she had sensed his malevolence from their first meeting, this was far more pronounced—a clean, sharp malice, so extreme it felt almost pure.

“How could a human...?”

Noticing a small dot moving in one of Frankwine’s pupils, Ethella adopted a combat stance.

A fly.

The fly circled in his pupil as though trapped in a glass orb.

“You’re not human.”

“Keke, consider yourself honored. I’ve chosen you as the signal flare of my resurrection.”

With a deafening roar, the ground beneath Frankwine exploded as he charged at Ethella.

“A Schema?”

No, it was a different kind of physical ability. While Yamang’s members came from a world apart from Shirone’s, their power operated under different principles. Mitgun distorted the fields of time, space, and mind to unleash unique abilities, while Frankwine was classified as a warrior focused solely on enhancing physical power.

Though straightforward, his strikes targeted only vital points, leaving Ethella with no opportunity to counterattack and forcing her to focus solely on defense.

As she retreated down the forest slope, Frankwine closed the distance with alarming speed. Ethella raised her guard, crossing her arms, only for Frankwine to seize her wrists, pull them apart, and lean in with a sinister grin, revealing his grotesque smile and the fly clinging to one pupil.

“Keke, what shall I do with our lovely guest?”

With a frown, Ethella kicked Frankwine in the groin. A crushing sound accompanied his twitching eyebrow. The two froze in place for a long moment until Frankwine’s head slowly tilted downward, revealing a wet stain spreading between his legs.

“It’s over.”

No matter how strong he was, a blow to the ultimate weak point should have rendered him unconscious or dead.

However, her assumption was shattered when Frankwine’s head gradually lifted again.

“Keke, rougher than I expected. I don’t mind that.”

Still stunned, Ethella barely noticed Frankwine had let go of her wrists. As he twisted his body, his movement looked like a vortex. Too late, Ethella attempted to block, but Frankwine’s punch pierced her guard and slammed into her abdomen.

“Urgh!”

Ethella’s body rocketed backward, snapping thick trees

before crashing out of sight.

“Are you all right?” Mitgun asked, tilting his head. Though expressing concern for Frankwine, the man he revered for his strength, was audacious, he couldn’t suppress human sympathy for such a blow.

“Who cares? Let it burst or not.”

Frankwine shook his drenched groin, then turned.

“I’ll head to Zebul. Finish this and join me. We’ve much to do to seize Heaven.”

Mitgun watched Frankwine leave, murmuring under his breath,

“Satan...”

Eventually, Frankwine arrived at the Second Command, only to find a middle-aged man with a monocle and a cane waiting. Introducing himself as Satan, the man offered a deal.

“Are you content with ruling Purgatory? Sell your soul to me, and I will give you all of Heaven.”

For Frankwine, who had sold anything for profit in his previous world, a soul was a useless currency. Without hesitation, he accepted. Satan handed him a vial containing a fly, which was fused with Frankwine through a Fuzix Machine at the command center.

Though it should have melted into him completely, the fly remained visible in his pupil. Mitgun realized it wasn’t a flaw—it was the core concept behind taking over Heaven.

Following orders, Mitgun approached Ethella’s collapsed form. Drawing a dagger, he aimed for her neck.

“Don’t resent me. Everyone dies someday.”

Just as the blade descended, Ethella’s hands shot up, gripping Mitgun’s wrist.

The Fifth Heaven, Matei.

Amid the immense city of titanic giants that could make one’s legs tremble just by looking, the rebels advanced fiercely.

Crewed aboard Titan No. 1, Crude destroyed the walls with ten flash cannons, supported by numerous Kuroi units.

Penetrating Araboth through a siege was impossible. The key lay in creating an alternate route to regroup the rebels, but the giant forces, realizing this, grew even more violent in their assault against the rebels.

The giants currently engaged in battle with the rebels were formidable warriors, 15 meters tall, who had reached the fourth stage of Ilhwa's Elixir. Even Kuroi, classified as heavy equipment, were no more than mere toys before the giants' size. Their iron swords shredded reinforced plates as though they were paper.

"This is too hard to break through. We can't go any deeper." Having reached a decision, Crude spun the Titan sharply and began advancing toward the wall.

"We'll carve a path here! All forces, follow me!"

The troops, having received the transmission, surged forward like a massive torrent toward the wall.

"Damn it! Damn it!"

Crude gritted his teeth. The rebels fought with everything they had at his command for one reason—to win. To win and return home. But Crude couldn't promise them a future. As they neared Araboth, what awaited them was the end—countless lives and the infinite possibilities they carried with them coming to an irrevocable close.

"Fluuuuuuu!"

Unable to suppress his swelling rage, Crude cried her name. A mage? A cold-hearted rationalist? The anger at himself for once being captivated by her flooded in too late.

She was a witch.

A witch with neither blood nor tears.

Did Crude know? In the world where Fluu once lived, mages had long ago been called witches.

"I won't forgive you! When this war is over...!"

Death didn't scare him. But whatever death awaited him, hers would accompany it.

The massive mechanical army poured through the shattered walls into Zebul, creating a spectacular sight.

The Sixth Heaven, Zebul.

Despite its title, City of Angels, no angels were to be seen wandering Zebul. At the far end of the gateway leading to Araboth, the archangels Metiel and Satiel hovered in the air, gazing over the battlefield.

Though the walls were collapsing and the rebels were flooding in, Zebul currently lacked the forces to repel them.

The absence of angels.

This had been the greatest factor prolonging a war that should have been easily quelled.

The two archangels, both beautiful with flowing golden hair, did not look at each other. Their domains were Strong Force and Weak Force, fundamental concepts so vast they underpinned all matter in the universe.

Thus, they were both two and one.

Unlike the relationship between Cariel and Uriel, representing creation and destruction, Metiel and Satiel's nature kept them perpetually at odds.

"Arrogant humans..."

Satiel's face twisted in disgust.

Though Metiel's temperament wasn't particularly kind, Satiel was far more brutal and merciless.

"I can't understand it. Why were the angels forbidden from acting? If we lose this war, we might end up subordinated to humans."

"It seems to have something to do with Ikael. They banned the angels yet suddenly reinstated her. And Ikael is deeply tied to Shirone."

"Hmph, Shirone? What's there to fear from a mere Nephilim?"

Metiel's gaze cooled. Satiel was practically her twin, having been with her since their creation. She knew exactly when Satiel's cold nature had turned cruel.

"Is it jealousy?"

For the first time, Satiel turned to look at Metiel, her eyes trembling with murderous intent.

“What?”

“Don’t waver. It’s already over. Goffin didn’t choose you—he chose Ikael...”

BOOOOOOOOM!

Satiel’s Judicial Halo erupted with a thunderous roar.

“Say that again, and I’ll obliterate you on the spot.”

Her wide-open eyes radiated fury, void of the sanctity an archangel should possess.

Chapter 490:

Metiel remained silent.

From the beginning, Satiel was not always this cruel and cold-hearted.

In fact, in the early days of his creation, she was the most gentle and pure among the eight archangels.

McClain Goffin.

Although he had already left this world, his presence still had deep roots and influence in it.

Even in the mind of the archangel Satiel.

"They are approaching quickly."

Metiel turned her words as she looked at the battlefield.

It wasn't that she feared Satiel's madness, but it was better to be cautious with his words as Ra's will might be at play.

As Metiel turned her words, Satiel also deactivated her judicial halo and looked back at the battlefield.

The rebels were pouring in like a tide, and although the heavenly army was following, control was still lacking.

Even in one heaven, there were different skies.

Taking advantage of the Aegis interception system being paralyzed, the rebels broke through the walls and used unfamiliar strategies, which worked in their favor due to the lack of angelic command.

"Shouldn't we step in? If they reach Aravot at this rate..."

"I've already sent all the Mara. Now we must restrain our actions..."

Grrrrrr!

Before Metiel could finish her words, a tremendous roar shook the world from the east of Zebul.

A massive black sphere, about 200 meters in diameter, expanded, pushing away all objects and sucking in everything around it.

If the landscape of Zebul was a painting, it was an alien scene as if pressed by a brush, and the speed at which tons of rocks rotated around the sphere seemed slow in the face of its massive scale.

"That's Metatron's gravity field. What's going on?"

It was hard to believe that an archangel would directly intervene in battle, especially Metatron, who had lost his mouth for defying Ra's will.

Metiel and Satiel simultaneously unfolded their halos to look inside the gravity field.

Nothing could be seen due to the gravity that absorbed even light, but as Metatron's power gradually faded, a scene was revealed.

"That is..."

The eyes of the two archangels shook with shock.

"The angel's power... doesn't work."

Metatron muttered with the mouth of his mind.

If Ra hadn't destroyed his mouth, he would have been staring blankly at the person standing before him.

"Kekeke, is this the power of an archangel?"

Frankwine, caught in the gravity field, flexed his muscular body, naked.

His skin was red and blotchy, and the wounds inflicted by Etella were hideously scarred, but his expression was still smiling.

"Nothing special."

As Frankwine kicked off the ground, Metatron floated hundreds of gravity spheres, trapping him in an inescapable maze of attraction.

But surprisingly, Frankwine ignored all the gravity and approached Metatron directly, landing a punch.

Metatron, rolling heavily on the ground, looked at the floor with an expression of disbelief.

"....."

Without a mouth, he couldn't even groan.

"The fundamental concept is not being applied. That means..."

Reaching a conclusion, Metatron turned his head with eyes wide in disbelief.

Frankwine, with four triangles above his head, was arrogantly walking towards him, swinging his shoulders.

"Four-sided Mara. It's Satan!"

If the angel's halo symbolizes eternity, Mara's triangle symbolizes absoluteness.

And all these concepts are integrated to form the Akashic Records.

But Satan has four horns.

This was a concept unattainable by law, and thus Satan was unaffected by any law.

"The reason for prohibiting the angels' activities wasn't because of the Nephilim. Ra was..."

Ra had evacuated the angels fearing Satan's descent.

It was the right choice in the end.

Satan, being an entity outside the law, was the only concept that couldn't be erased by the Akashic Records.

Therefore, the most threatening variable in heaven was not the rebels or the Nephilim, but Satan.

"He must be eliminated now. If the angels fall, no one will be able to stop him."

The Akashic Records are perfect, so the number of laws is always one.

But using a special reason, it is possible to downgrade this immutable status to a general concept.

That is, assuming there is "something" outside the concept of the whole that refers to the whole.

No one knows what "something" is, but the moment it is assumed to exist, the concept is born.

From that point, the Akashic Records are downgraded to the number of laws being two, referring to each other, and eventually entering the zero-sum game that mages call the seesaw of law.

The entity born from the subjunctive, without substance, is Satan.

Perfect imperfection is the only concept that can erase the Akashic Records by law.

"Angels are said to have high self-esteem, but why not just give up? Before you end up in a more hideous state."

Metatron stood up, trembling all over.

Although his characteristic majestic shout could no longer be heard, his momentum was conveyed through the trembling air.

"This ends now!"

As the judicial halo activated, the area around Frankwine bent towards a point as if transparent water was being sucked into a funnel.

Frankwine's face twisted as the ability to compress gravity and pierce through space-time took effect.

"Krrrrr!"

Then his body twisted around the point and quickly tightened towards the hole.

"Kekeke, this is... child's play."

Suddenly, Frankwine's body disappeared from space as if evaporating.

".....!"

Metatron's eyes were filled with shock.

As Frankwine's fist cleanly penetrated his thick chest, the halo above his head weakened like a candle wick burning out.

"It seems it can't be done..."

The reason angels are powerful is that they handle the deep principles of this world that no creature can approach.

But Satan, who ignores all these concepts, was the natural enemy of all angels, including the archangels.

The halo, which had been shining like a last struggle, exploded like glass, and Metatron's heavy body fell over.

"Foolish creature."

Frankwine looked down indifferently at the archangel, who was disintegrating into light, and unclenched his fist.

"So, what will happen now?"

When Satan proposed the deal, the information that most intrigued Frankwine was this.

The seesaw of law.

Every time he annihilated an angel, Frankwine's law grew stronger.

And now, one of the eight fundamental concepts had disappeared.

In other words, one-eighth of the principles governing the world had been removed.

As Metatron's corpse, turning into light dust, completely disintegrated into the air, Frankwine's eyes flashed open.

As the fly in his pupil spun madly, his body began to convulse.

"Ooooh! Ooooooh!"

A tremendous power surged in.

His entire body swelled like a balloon, his height rising to two meters, and his skin turned blood-red.

His eyes were wickedly slanted upwards, his teeth jutted out, and his thick neck flowed down like a mountain to his shoulders.

"Hahaha! Hahahahaha!"

Frankwine's voice, laughing wildly at the sky, was hoarse as if squeezed out by muscles.

Looking up at the building of Zebul, cut by the gravity field, he kicked off the ground and flew up.

Entering the 23rd floor of the 43-story cross-section, the subordinates of Yameng were lined up in a row, waiting.

"Welcome, boss!"

Frankwine smiled with a hideous face that had lost its original form.

Every step he took made the pale walls, symbolizing angels, flicker with ominous red shadows.

"Now, shall we start playing in earnest?"

Satan's angel hunt had begun.

Zebul 13th floor.

Armin, Shiina, and Kuan formed a team and were heading to Ingris, where the Akashic Records were located.

Although it was not difficult to infiltrate Zebul due to the lack of angelic activity, the problem was that there was no special plan even if they arrived.

"I hope Etella brings the disk safely. I felt it during the deal, but those Yameng guys are very suspicious."

Shiina shared the same thoughts as Armin.

Especially the leaders of Yameng, Frankwine and Meatgun, exuded a unique temperament different from the other members.

"Etella-sensei will be fine. I know her skills better than anyone."

Having lived together as teachers of the same age at Alpheus Magic School, the reason he couldn't close the distance with her was partly due to his reverence for her. Beyond the title of bishop of the Karsis Monastery, she had a genuine heart for the world.

"Yes. Mr. Zulu is also a strong person."

Currently, Zulu is on a solo mission to find the Metagate. It is presumed to be in the military factory underground in Zebul, but the outcome is uncertain due to the wartime situation.

Despite the precarious situation, Armin steeled his resolve. As the angel's power released the stop, Armin's timeline was also refilled.

The only concern was Miro.

Is she safe?

Or did she fail to match the time and die when Kariel's magic circle exploded?

"Well, she's not a magician I should worry about. Just focus on protecting Shiina."

Armin stopped and looked back at Shiina.

"If an uncontrollable situation arises, come behind me unconditionally. I can block it once."

"Got it."

Armin's stop would certainly help, but for Shiina, receiving help was only a part of the strategy.

"But make this clear. If you cast stop just to save me, I will never respect you again."

"Okay. I promise."

Armin answered without even thinking.

If he had been afraid of earning her resentment, he wouldn't have left the Ivory Tower and flown to heaven in the first place.

Whether she knew this or not, Shiina snorted and quickened her pace.

Kuan, watching the two converse from behind, didn't feel very good.

What had he expected?

Did he think that sharing life and death together would bring about something new between them?

Because Shiina had come to him directly with the proposal, did he think she might have some expectations as well?

'Foolish guy.'

Shiina had Armin.

The war was reaching its climax, and no matter who won, this place would be his grave.

"Only death will save me."

"Huh?"

Shiina turned around at Kuan's low muttering.

Even though he was not one to show his emotions, he hadn't even offered tactical opinions since entering Zebul.

It was as if he couldn't bear the thought of not cutting someone down, his eyes filled with a murderous intent.

'In this way, he's like a child...'

When she became a certified 5th rank, he was the first to send a congratulatory letter, and when she sent urgent funds to propose going to heaven, he came running.

It doesn't make sense to say she didn't know Kuan's true feelings.

Although he still didn't show his emotions, she could feel the disappointment hidden in his cold demeanor.

Shiina smiled and made a mischievous joke.

"Kuan, it's the same for you. No matter what happens, the mission comes first, right?"

It was a statement that subtly revealed she understood his feelings, and it took great courage for her to say it.

But Kuan, without any change in expression, passed by her and replied firmly.

"Don't worry. I don't have the ability to protect anyone."

The mage from the Ivory Tower who had mastered time magic was protecting her.

Shiina appreciated his concern, but she hated being pitied in any situation.

'Did I make a mistake?'

A joke she would never have made under normal circumstances. Perhaps she had the courage because this might be the last time.

Pouting her lips, Shiina watched Kuan walk away.

His fatigue was evident as he limped more severely than usual, making his back look even more forlorn.

Chapter 491:

"Hmm."

Meatgun tightened his grip on the dagger, but Etella's strength was so formidable it felt almost mechanical. Even in the tense situation where the blade was trembling in front of her neck, Meatgun was puzzled.

'What's going on? She was definitely dead.'

Life gradually returned to Etella's wide-open eyes.

Yin-Yang Wave Fist Revitalization Technique.

A technique that momentarily stops breathing and increases abdominal pressure to explosively boost strength.

However, Frankwine's attack was so powerful that it caused a momentary cardiac arrest.

'If I had been a little later, it would have been dangerous.'

Fully regaining consciousness, Etella slowly pushed Meatgun's wrist away.

Sensing the futility, Meatgun abandoned the stab and leaped back just as Etella's kick shot up.

Meatgun, who almost suffered the same critical hit as Frankwine, shuddered and touched his groin.

Unless he had sold his soul to the devil, he would never want to be hit there.

Etella quickly got up and took a fighting stance.

Still aching from the blows, she straightened her back and snapped,

"Are you crazy? Selling your soul to the devil."

Etella hadn't seen Satan with her own eyes, but her monk's intuition told her.

No human could harbor such evil within them otherwise.

"Following the boss in business, I realized something."

Meatgun tilted his head to one side.

"If it can be sold, nothing is precious."

As Etella sprang forward, Meatgun raised his fists and prepared to fight.

As the essence of the Yin-Yang Wave Fist stormed in, Meatgun continuously ducked and dodged the attacks.

Mirror Cycle - Event Reflection.

The moment Etella's fist struck his side, the same impact exploded in her side.

"Ugh!"

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Meatgun struck Etella's face, sending her spinning back several meters.

"You can't touch my body."

Meatgun, with an air of invincibility, rubbed his fist and slowly approached Etella.

His ability, Mirror Cycle, reflected events by perceiving his body as a mirror.

This ability manifested through the distortion of time, space, and mind in his world.

He perceived a mirror that reflected events with his mind, distorted space to implement that mirror, and finally distorted time to project the mind into reality until the mirror was implemented in a specific space.

"It's an embarrassing technique since it's been broken before."

To prevent event reflection, one must break the mirror in Meatgun's perception.

Gaold had done it at the headquarters, but Etella's fists were far from capable of such a feat.

"More than enough to handle one woman."

This time, Meatgun initiated the attack.

Realizing the ability to reflect events, the psychological pressure was immense, regardless of its effectiveness.

However, through long training, Etella overcame her fear and counterattacked Meatgun's assault.

In terms of martial arts, Etella was superior, but Meatgun had no reason to avoid her.

"Huuuup!"

As all events entering Meatgun were reflected, waves began to spread through Etella's body.

It felt as if she was standing in front of a mirror, hitting herself instead of Meatgun.

This conveyed that if she delivered the final wave here, it would be herself, not Meatgun, who would break.

"I told you, it won't work."

Meatgun's voice grew faint, and his entire body trembled as his consciousness began to fade.

'I won't give up! I must...!'

She had to stop Frankwine.

After losing to Arcane, her resolve for good had only strengthened.

And now, facing her lifelong enemy, that resolve filled her entire being, erasing any doubt about her commitment to good.

Her head felt like it was splitting open, but it was a sensation of transcendental liberation rather than pain.

'What is this?'

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Each of Etella's punches penetrated the Mirror Cycle, delivering a dull impact to Meatgun's body.

Yin-Yang Wave Fist Ultimate Technique - Divine Transcendence Strike.

'Damn it!'

A technique that directly transmits the power of the avatar to the opponent's avatar.

As the shockwave shook Meatgun's mind beyond his body, cracks began to form in the Mirror Cycle.

Realizing the danger, Meatgun retreated, but his legs had already given out, causing him to stagger.

Simultaneously, Etella rapidly approached and struck his abdomen with both hands.

The Mirror Cycle's effect was still active, but there was no hesitation in her movements to shatter the mirror.

Thunder Strike.

Boom!

The numerous waves swirling inside were swept away by a single wave, causing a massive shockwave to explode.

Meatgun, hit in the abdomen, slowly lowered his fists and stood still for a long time.

As he staggered back, a mouthful of blood gushed from his mouth.

"Huuuup!"

Etella bent over, clenched her fists, and gathered the waves spreading through her body.

Thanks to the shock to Meatgun's mind, the mirror's clarity had diminished, but she would have delivered the same attack regardless.

Without such resolve, she couldn't have delivered the avatar's strike to her opponent.

Paradoxically, that conviction shattered her enemy, and Etella approached Meatgun, who lay sprawled on the ground.

"Don't move. If I treat you now, you might survive."

Meatgun didn't respond.

He had never begged for his life from anyone before.

"...You're a strange woman."

Meatgun struggled to lift his hand and took a disk from his inner pocket, throwing it at Etella's feet.

"Go to the boss."

Meatgun's eyes slowly closed.

"He'll probably like it."

Etella put the disk in her pocket and bowed her head in mourning for Meatgun's death.

"Whew!"

When she opened her eyes again, Etella's gaze was much clearer than before the fight with Meatgun.

'I can feel it, where he is.'

After awakening her avatar technique, everything became clear.

Frankwine's avatar was not human.

Absolute evil.

A massive aura of evil was blowing in from afar, from Zebul. Rumble!

The walls of heaven were collapsing from all sides.

The noise was so deafening that even shouting right next to someone couldn't be heard, and the rising dust made it impossible to see an inch ahead.

Despite losing their sight and hearing, the rebels showed no signs of stopping their advance.

"Sister! We're only 10 kilometers from Aravot!"

Hearing Lena's transmission, hope began to light up in Kanya's eyes for the first time.

While most of the rebels had escaped through the collapsed walls into Zebul, the 1st Command remained in Matei, continuing their advance.

Currently, Matei was the only strategic point that could block the path to Zebul, and someone had to stay behind to hold off the enemy's pursuit.

'We can win! We can really win!'

If they could just reach Aravot, if they could just reach Anke Ra, the war would be over.

Ra wouldn't move.

Being an absolute existence like the sun, Ra wouldn't engage in battle or flee.

Kanya surveyed the surroundings through the multivision. Everyone was fighting fiercely without regard for their lives, but the ones achieving the most outstanding results were not humans but machines.

Ancient weapon Babel for archangels.

The power output from its powerful engine surpassed the strength of giants, and its blade-like fingertips easily tore through tough muscles.

'Amazing. Who on earth created that...'

Kanya hurriedly stopped her thoughts.

As a member of the Mecha tribe, she marveled at Babel's design, but admiring an enemy was unthinkable.

-Enemy sighted! A large force!

Hearing the transmission, Kanya snapped back to attention and checked the vision.

A massive force of giants was charging, filling her field of view.

"We'll take care of it! Cover us!"

As 120 members of the Norse unit stopped fighting and prepared collective magic, the Guroi unit swiftly moved to protect them.

Ancient magic Estacion, possible only when over 100 mages connected their minds.

The atmosphere within a 100-meter radius was torn apart, starting to shred the flesh of the giant unit.

"Whew!"

Even watching through the vision, the ferocious power of the magic was palpable.

"Sister! It's not working!"

Lena shouted in a terrified voice.

Despite being hit by Estacion, none of the giants fell.

Their basic durability was on a different level from the giants they had fought so far.

They were officers who had reached the 5th stage of the Art of One.

"Crush the enemies! They're just insects!"

The giants swung their weapons, destroying the rebel lines.

With each flash of the blade, Guroi was cut down, and people were sent flying by the mere wind of the sword.

-Map weapon activated. Codename Babel.

Babel, which had descended to the ground, transformed into map weapon mode.

Its upper body opened wide, its limbs anchored to the ground, and it aimed its cannon, embedded with a giant glass sphere, at the giants.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

As the electron cannons fired in bursts, holes were punched through the bodies of the giants filling the field of view.

Kanya, along with all the rebels, watched the scene in a daze.

The only emotion they felt was a small but intensely realistic sense of hope that they might actually win.

"The struggle of insects is so pathetic I can't bear to watch."

On the wall of Matei, one giant watched the standoff between giants and humans.

Giant Corps Commander Girshin.

In his hand, which fluttered a black cloak, was a long, broad double-edged sword.

Having reached the 7th stage of the Art of One, he was undoubtedly the second most powerful giant, though he could never surpass Ymir, who was at the 10th stage.

"Ymir, I will end this war on your behalf."

Girshin kicked off the wall and leaped to the ground.

As he landed and swung his sword, rebels within a 10-meter radius were cut in half before they even knew what hit them.

"Enemy! Surround him!"

The rebels who spotted Girshin turned around in unison.

They still didn't realize what kind of monster stood before them, and by the time they did, their brains and bodies were already separated.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Girshin didn't stop and charged into the heart of the rebel forces.

Like a wind playing with feathers, humans were swept away with his every move, and blood sprayed into the air with each swing of his sword.

"Lena! It's dangerous!"

Kanya, seeing this through the multivision, quickly twisted Guroi's direction.

Just by seeing Girshin's single strike, she could tell he was on a different level from any enemy they had fought before. As Girshin, who had cut through the rebels in a straight line, raised his double-edged sword towards Lena, Kanya blocked

his path and aimed her cannon.

"Foolish."

Before she could pull the trigger, the cannon was sliced, and the body was split in two.

The cockpit hit the ground with a tremendous impact, but Kanya desperately held onto her consciousness.

Through every screen of the multivision, she saw Girshin swinging his sword.

"Ugh!"

As she pressed the emergency escape button, Guroi was dismembered like a toy.

Lena, thrown out of her seat and rolling on the ground, looked around without a moment to check her own safety.

"Lena!"

Girshin, having cut through Guroi, was charging towards Lena.

"Nooooo!"

Just as Kanya's heart was about to stop along with Lena's life, a gray flash flew in and blocked Girshin's path.

Clang!

Even amidst the chaotic noise, the clash of metal against metal pierced Kanya's ears clearly.

"Oh?"

Girshin raised an eyebrow at the appearance of a machine that blocked the strength of a giant at the 7th stage of the Art of One.

"I remember. It was fun back then."

"Babel will protect Kanya and Lena."

Kanya hurriedly crawled to Lena and hugged her sister, who had fainted from shock.

"Why?"

There was no reason for Babel to deactivate its map weapon mode and come to save her and her sister in the middle of a battle.

It was an entirely human decision.

Even in Shirone's algorithm, protecting Kanya and Lena was the third priority.

But that was why Babel moved.

Kanya could never know, but from the moment Girshin appeared, the first and second priorities in her mind were erased.

And that meant the probability of victory, calculated through Babel's transcendent computation, converged to zero percent.

Chapter 492:

Thud! Thud!

The giant guards who had reached the 6th stage of the Art of One began to mobilize from the castle of Matei.

Standing nearly 80 meters tall, their heads touched the sky, and from their perspective, humans and machines looked like mere insects.

As their massive feet stomped the ground, numerous rebels and Gurois were simultaneously crushed flat.

The only ones who could see the giants' faces were the pilots of the Titan, a Mecha 3rd stage system.

Crude swallowed hard as he watched the 20 giants stride over the rebels like grains of sand.

Even when he was a citizen, he had never seen such giants up close.

When he saw them, he finally realized the truth.

This was a war they could never win from the start.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Crude forced himself to deny the fear rising within him and advanced the Titan.

The enormous giants used the power of Schema to nimbly leap towards the Titan like small humans.

Boom!

As the giant's fist struck the Titan's body, all the joints in the waist twisted, causing it to stagger.

"Ugh!"

He momentarily regained the balance of the machine, but as he stepped back, his allies were crushed.

Crude didn't even register their deaths.

In the midst of the battle between giant creatures and machines, both rebels and giants were dying alike.

"Damn it!"

Using the recoil of the machine, Crude launched a powerful attack at the giant.

The Titan's output was beyond imagination, but the Schema of the giants at the 6th stage of the Art of One was layered to produce an impossible power for living beings.

Boom!

The thermal flash cannon fired at close range grazed the giant's shoulder.

The giant let out an earth-shattering roar as the flesh on its shoulder disappeared, but the wound quickly healed.

The process of the thick nerves and muscles rising and intertwining like vines was reminiscent of the birth of nature.

As the enraged giants pounded the Titan, the rebels on the ground felt as if thunder was crashing from a clear sky.

As the Titan's mechanical parts exploded, tons of debris fell, striking both Gurois and giants.

Boom!

Finally, the engine exploded, paralyzing the controls, and the Titan began to slowly topple over.

"Huff! Huff! Huff!"

Crude felt himself plummeting tens of meters and timed his move.

Just before crashing into the ground, he pressed the emergency escape button.

As the cockpit opened, a Guroi popped out and fell vertically.

Crude briefly lost consciousness but then came to.

The Mecha 2nd stage system Guroi was also inoperable due to the impact of the fall.

He sat in the cockpit, looking up at the sky.

It was only the sky seen through the vision, but the sun rising towards noon was blindingly bright.

Under that sun, endless giants were destroying another Titan.

"This place... is hell."

A giant's foot was descending from tens of meters above. It wasn't specifically targeting Crude, but it was clear what would happen if he stayed lying there.

Pressing the emergency escape button again, Crude ejected from the Guroi and landed on the ground using the power of the Mecha 1st stage system Piper.

Having come this far, there was no turning back.

The rebels had no choice but to advance, and advance they would.

"To the end."

To Aravot, where Anke Ra awaited.

As he finished his resolve and lifted his head, Crude's eyes filled with fear.

"What... is that...?"

A tremendously ominous aura was swirling from Aravot beyond the giant's castle.

It was as if the entire Aravot was burning in black flames, and a strange wind that seemed to call for death could be heard.

Whooooosh!

Crude's face twisted in despair.

Only death.

The aura was so powerful that it melted his iron will like molten metal, making him certain that entering Aravot meant certain death.

What on earth was there?

The fleeting question vanished in the face of the fear of annihilation.

'We must retreat. Everyone must flee. It's the only way we can survive.'

Crude decided to acknowledge their defeat in the war as he reached for his personal communication device.

"All troops..."

Once spoken, it could never be taken back.

Even if the words could be retracted, the will that admitted defeat would never rise again.

'There's no way we can win!'

As Crude took a deep breath and was about to issue the order to the entire rebel force, he saw a woman.

Plu was breaking through the giants' offensive, running straight towards the terrifying flames of Aravot.

So, she had come this far?

"It was a war we could never win from the start."

But why was she heading towards the center of annihilation, where only death awaited?

"Damn it! I won't be swayed by the likes of you!"

With a fierce glare, Crude set Piper's functions to maximum and kicked off the ground.

11th floor underground in Zebul.

In the underground of Zebul, the pinnacle of the intelligence of countless angels was located.

The heavenly munitions factory, Zion.

Everything produced in heaven came from here, including Kariel's Great Law Book and Uriel's Paradise Staff.

Countless machines, whose functions were unimaginable, clanked and splashed molten metal as they operated beneath the endlessly extending steel bridge.

"The path is complicated."

Zulu surveyed the maze-like paths of the steel bridge from a distance, looking for a way down.

A small black bird with a broad beak sat on his shoulder.

It was Erga, a 10-tier monster Zulu had first successfully summoned at the age of three.

Though it had no special abilities other than mimicking human speech, Zulu always kept Erga by her side when walking alone in dark paths like this.

"Suck. Suck. Suck. Suck."

Erga jumped off Zulu's shoulder, passed under the steel bridge, and mimicked the sound of sucking on a pacifier.

"Yes, it's there."

Zulu chose the third path from the six branching bridges. The stairs leading down were hidden behind the railing.

-Why do you want to go alone?

When Zulu said she would find the Metagate alone, Sain couldn't understand her decision.

Etella had to meet Frankwine, so they had to separate, but Inglis and Zion were both in Zebul.

It would have been better to join Armin's group and move together to increase the chances of success, but Zulu insisted on going alone.

-It's better for me this way.

Sain, pondering Zulu's words, no longer objected, and thus she found the Metagate production factory at the southern end of Zion.

Numerous Metagates were moving around on belt-like trailers.

It was a place no human could easily enter if not for the special wartime situation.

Even thinking about the high value of Metagates in the land of the earth, the sight was enough to make one covet, but Zulu's gaze remained as calm as ever.

"After causing all this trouble, are you now planning to run away?"

Hearing a woman's voice from across the trailer, Zulu stopped reaching for the Metagate and turned her head.

It was a woman with four arms, her skin dark and her slit eyes like a snake's, with pupils that absorbed light, making her look like a shadow from a distance.

Zulu checked the number of red-glowing triangles above the woman's head.

Three-sided Mara Kali.

She was a direct subordinate of the Archangel of Annihilation, Fael.

'Strong.'

Zulu's eyes turned cold.

She had personally experienced the prowess of the three-sided Mara since coming to heaven, but the Mara before her

exuded an aura that was on a different level from other Maras, regardless of strength.

"Those who come must also go. It's just to follow the natural order. Do not interfere."

It wasn't a slightly comical continental language, nor was it a voice that put people at ease.

"Interfere?"

Kali spread her four arms wide, revealing a sword, shield, whip, and skull in each hand.

"No creature can defy the god of death."

As Kali's sword slashed, a black line cut through space, rushing towards Zulu.

Zulu evaded with teleportation, dispelled Erga, and summoned a 3-tier monster, Cougar.

Roar!

The giant beast approached as if to devour Kali, swinging its sharp claws.

Clang!

As Kali's shield blocked the claws, black smoke rose and enveloped Cougar's body.

"Roar!"

Cougar's fur evaporated, black spots appeared on its skin, and pus swelled as if it were decaying.

Kali's four weapons all embodied the concept of death, and among them, the shield caused the fastest death by inducing disease, making it impossible for any creature to survive.

"All living things shall bow before me."

As Kali swung her sword, Cougar's massive body was sliced in half.

Cougar was a top-tier summoned monster and the most physically powerful among the monsters Zulu could summon.

Suck. Suck. Suck. Suck. Suck.

As Kali subdued Cougar in one blow, the sound of Zulu sucking on the pacifier quickened.

"Now, choose. What kind of death suits you?"

With an evil smile, Kali spread her upper body wide, and her black legs dissolved into smoke, lifting her body.

"...This is dangerous."

Zulu truly thought so.

"Huff. Huff."

Numerous angels were clutching their stomachs and sobbing along the corridors of Zebul.

At the end of that humiliating scene stood Frankwine, who had made a pact with Satan, wearing a smug expression. Behind him, the grotesquely transformed subordinates of Yameng were looking around with vicious eyes, searching for another angel.

"Kekeke! More, more angels..."

Although Satan was free from the abilities of angels, he knew from the dawn of history how powerful they were. Even if he could break the concept of angels, if they united and attacked with their physical abilities alone, the outcome would be uncertain.

Therefore, Satan sought the easiest and most convenient way to kill angels.

The result was the subordinates of Yameng, combined with Garas.

"Ugh! I'd rather not exist like this..."

Feeling the seed of Garas growing inside her, the angel tightly closed her eyes and reversed her halo.

With a pop, the angel's body turned into light and vanished. Shame.

For angels who prided themselves on their noble spirit, this was a more terrifying emotion than annihilation.

Following the first angel's self-destruction, all the angels lying in the corridor reversed their halos and erased their own existence.

"Kekeke, Laisis was a fool."

Using the nature of Garas to gain great power?

"No, just becoming Garas is enough."

As all the angels before him committed suicide, Satan's presence grew even stronger through the seesaw of law.

"Uoooooooo!"

His body grew larger, and horns sprouted and twisted from his temples.

As his thick chest muscles twitched like armor and he clenched his fists, flames of hellfire erupted.

"Not yet. I need a bit more."

Satan, with fangs extending down to his chin, looked at his fist and then shot flames down the corridor, shouting.

"Go! Find every single angel! Ravage them! From now on, heaven is our world!"

"Kiaaaaaa!"

Dozens of subordinates, transformed into the form of Garas, ran towards the blazing flames at the end of the corridor.

The angels' banquet hall.

"Sob. Sob."

While the angels who had been attacked by Garas erased their own existence, one angel had hidden in the empty banquet hall.

But even she could not defy the law, and her belly was gradually swelling.

Adio, the angel of fulfillment.

She was so happy to exist in this world that she couldn't bring herself to leave, even knowing the outcome.

"I don't want to disappear. I have so much to do."

"Great angel."

Among the three Maras, from one-sided to three-sided, who were guarding Adio, the leader, Mara of Regret, Rubel, spoke.

"Please endure a little longer."

It was the only comfort they could offer.

Even if the seed of Garas was conceived, the angel's durability would prevent complete annihilation.

But what meaning would that have?

Beyond the physical damage, the mental shock of an angel, who dealt with concepts, giving birth to a monster's child would be immense.

"No, no! Aaaaaah!"

As Adio screamed with wide eyes, her belly exploded with a pop.

Her halo shook wildly, and according to the law of her kin, the three Maras disappeared from reality.

"Sob, sob..."

Adio collapsed to the floor, shedding miserable tears.

What she realized now was that she should have chosen annihilation like the other angels from the beginning.

Gurgle. Gurgle.

The creature that emerged from Adio's body ignored its mother and slipped out of the banquet hall.

It was the birth of a Nephilim, something no one wanted.

Chapter 493:

Under the noon sun shining on Aravot, Shirone and Ikael stared at each other in silence for a long time.

The Valhalla Action was still spinning above Shirone's head, and Ikael's eyes watching it were intensely cold.

"Destroy heaven?"

According to the magical theory Shirone explained, it was not an impossible task.

Then, this time, she must kill him.

Ikael's delicate fingers tightened, curling like a predator's claws.

Yet, she couldn't strike because Shirone's direct perception read her intent as soon as she revealed her killing intent.

"No, that's not it."

Shirone said that if she revived Feope, he wouldn't destroy heaven.

It wasn't a difficult task for Ikael, and the Shirone she knew wasn't one to go back on his word.

Accepting the proposal was a wiser choice than betting on an uncertain assumption.

"No, that's not it either."

Ikael frowned.

Shirone's Ataraxia was a power she had directly imparted to him through possession.

While synchronizing with Shirone's mind, she felt admiration, pride, and a deep, poignant emotion.

"I don't remember."

Most things were clear in her mind, but the problem was the emotion of poignancy.

"What do I want to do with that boy?"

Her mind began to waver again.

Ikael couldn't define her feelings towards Shirone in clear terms.

Love?

Simply calling it love felt too shallow.

Unable to delve deep into her emotions, Ikael finally made a decision.

"He must die."

She couldn't trust Shirone.

No, she couldn't trust herself.

Trying to analyze someone with imperfect memories was never a good idea.

"I just need to do what I can."

Having made her decision, Ikael spoke.

"Alright. I will revive Feope. But you must keep your promise."

"As long as I can save Feope, I don't care."

Shirone looked at the small fairy in his hand with pity.

He still wasn't sure if this was the right decision.

But Feope had wasted an almost eternal lifespan to save him and had shriveled into a pitiful state.

"I must save Feope."

For now, that was all that mattered.

"Place the fairy in front of me. Amplifying life force is a highly sensitive task."

This was the main reason Ikael didn't choose to negotiate.

Once Ataraxia began, she would have to focus all her mind on Feope.

If Shirone, with his direct perception, found an opening, he could deliver a fatal blow.

It wasn't a strategy to employ in front of an untrustworthy opponent.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything until Feope is revived."

"Please..."

As Ikael responded in a dry tone, Shirone cautiously approached without lowering his guard.

"Kill. Kill. Kill."

Watching Shirone close the distance, Ikael repeated the same thought over and over.

If he got just a bit closer, even if he sensed her intent, he wouldn't be able to react before his heart was ripped out.

"Now!"

Shirone walked calmly.

"Now!"

Even as he approached and slowly bent down to place Feope on the ground, she couldn't move.

"Now! Now! Now!"

Ikael finally realized.

"Now..."

The thoughts swirling madly in her mind were just that—thoughts.

"You can't kill me."

Placing Feope down and stepping back slowly, Shirone looked at Ikael with sad eyes.

It wasn't that he didn't guess her intent.

Maybe he did... That's why he didn't lower his guard, but he also thought it didn't matter.

If Ikael killed him, the reason he risked his life to come to heaven would disappear.

But in the end, Ikael couldn't kill Shirone, and Shirone was satisfied with that.

Just to meet her, many people had already sacrificed themselves, and he had killed many lives.

"Yes, this ends it."

Contrary to Shirone's thoughts, Ikael was even more confused.

"How do you know that? Why can't I kill you?"

The words he had held back rose to his throat, but Shirone swallowed them.

If Ikael had already lost her memory, saying anything would only hurt her.

If there was one, a single hope...

"I don't know."

"But you..."

"I really don't know. That's why I came to meet you. But you can't tell me anything."

Shirone gritted his teeth, suppressing the rising sadness.

"Why don't you try to remember me? You can do it."

Ikael remained silent.

It wasn't that she hadn't considered what Shirone thought.

If Anke Ra had only cut off her memory instead of resetting it, maybe Ikael could regain it.

But that would mean directly defying Anke Ra's will, and it wouldn't end with just a backlash.

Seeing Ikael's silent figure, Shirone felt another small wound and stepped back, looking down at Feope.

Saying nothing was the right choice.

"It's enough. Save Feope. Then I'll do whatever you want."

Ikael's gaze turned to Feope.

If she couldn't kill him and wouldn't kill him, making a contract with Shirone was the best choice.

"...Alright."

Kneeling slowly in front of Feope, Ikael placed her hands on her knees and closed her eyes.

Chiiiiiiing!

As her halo expanded, Ataraxia, Ikael's symbol, spun brilliantly with five-colored light.

Shirone watched in awe with half-closed eyes.

He could also use Ataraxia, but no one could match the beauty of the original.

"Amplify the life force..."

Reviving Feope.

Reviving a fairy on the brink of death after exhausting its entire lifespan was as difficult as giving new life, but it wasn't impossible for Ikael, who handled amplification as a fundamental concept.

"It will still take time."

Ikael emptied her mind and reached out to Feope.

"Shirone will keep his promise."

As she made up her mind, a strange calmness came over her.

Her mind was still calculating all the variables, but trusting Shirone filled her with a serene and happy feeling, making her smile slightly without realizing it.

But her expression soon turned cold, and she focused on activating her power with emotionless eyes.

Rumble!

At that moment, the ground began to shake from the west of Aravot.

Shirone, tense, quickly turned to look, his eyes shaking with shock.

An indescribably dark and gloomy aura was approaching from afar.

Feeling the aura through his direct perception, Shirone shuddered with fear.

Black dots, like pixels, swirled like a vortex, spreading fear and casting a murky darkness around the one who spread it.
"Faiel?"

The Archangel of Annihilation, Faiel.

Even Ikael hadn't expected this, and her eyes wavered with anxiety.

If Ikael, the Archangel of Amplification, was the first to be born among the eight great concepts, Faiel, the Archangel of Annihilation, was the last.

Thus, it was extremely rare in the history of heaven for two archangels to clash over a single event.

And the law of outcomes always favored annihilation.

"Faiel! Don't come any closer!"

Faiel's purpose was singular, and his intent in coming here was clear.

Victory or defeat in the war didn't matter.

Faiel was coming to end everything.

"Archangel Ikael..."

Even from a distance, his voice echoed through the black vortex around Aravot.

Shirone desperately steadied his mind to suppress the rising fear.

Faiel's appearance was unimpressive.

At 1.7 meters tall, he could be called a dwarf among angels, and though he wore a white robe, his face hidden by the hood was pure darkness.

"From now on, I deny you."

Whooooosh!

Faiel's face finally emerged from the hood.

Or could it be called a face?

Only the wickedly slit eyes and thorn-like protruding lips were etched in light within the darkness.

Whooooosh!

As the surrounding darkness distorted and the face within the hood was projected, his halo turned black and began to spin like spilled ink.

"Huuu!"

Just being exposed to the aura felt like his life force was draining away, and Shirone's teeth chattered.

Armand's tendrils withered like dried leaves, and a chill like ice water flowing through his bones pierced his entire body.

"Annihilate, Ikael."

As Faiel lunged, Ikael leaped away.

Amplification and annihilation.

There was no need to clash to know which was superior.

As Ikael watched from 100 meters away, Faiel glanced at her briefly before turning to Shirone.

"Foolish Nephilim. Trying to destroy heaven with mere human desires."

As Faiel raised his hand, Feope's body slowly floated up.

Reaching a terrible realization, Shirone spun the Valhalla Action's halo faster and shouted.

"No! Let go of Feope!"

"All life is annihilated. It is only following the natural order. The same goes for you."

"Don't touch Feope. I'll kill Ra, whom you cherish so much!"

Faiel tilted his head slightly, as if looking at Shirone's halo. He had already confirmed through his vision what result was equipped in the Valhalla Action.

But he had no attachment to the destruction of heaven. As the Archangel of Annihilation, he simply couldn't watch the Archangel of Amplification be ruined any longer.

"The only result for me is annihilation."

"Nooooo!"

As Shirone screamed, Faiel clenched his fist.

Black smoke seeped into Feope's body, turning it into black ash that scattered like the remnants of a fire.

"Fe-Feope..."

Shirone stared blankly at the ashes.

Feope had been annihilated.

Without any chance of resurrection or even the dignity of a proper death, Feope had vanished from the world.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

Shirone clenched his fists, biting his teeth.

He didn't think about holding back his tears or appearing weak in front of the enemy.

What began to sprout deep in his heart was intense anger.

And that anger quickly expanded, filling Shirone's mind.

"I won't forgive you."

Judicial Halo - Valhalla Action.

As Valhalla Action activated, Ataraxia unfolded in an instant, and Shirone's body disappeared from his spot.

"Foolish Faiel! Are you trying to endanger Ra?"

Faiel, who had been watching Shirone's movement, turned his head at Ikael's shout.

His face in the darkness still wore a smile, but his voice was cold and solemn.

"The foolish one is you, Ikael. Do you still not understand what awaits at the end of this war?"

"What do you mean...!"

Flash!

Before Ikael could finish speaking, a massive red light shot up into the sky from afar.

Estimated power: 2.19 million kilobusters.

The divine punishment, the most powerful destructive spell in Shirone's arsenal, had begun to activate.

Chapter 494:

Through the Valhalla Action, the laser shot into the sky instantly reversed cause and effect, concentrating the magic of Amgu 6,000 kilometers above the sky.

Amgu borrowed the omnipotence of divine particles, absorbing mass at a terrifying speed, and finally, a spear of light with a mass of 10 tons was born.

The planet's gravity pulled the 10-ton mass strongly, and the light, containing immense kinetic energy, began to plunge straight towards the spire of Aravot.

Time left until the destruction of heaven: 18 minutes and 42 seconds.

'No! At this rate...'

Ikael stared blankly at the sky.

The Valhalla Action had instantly transported Shirone to the entrance of Aravot, and the thickness of the laser shot from there was enough to pierce the sky.

If Shirone's magic was true, heaven would be destroyed.

'How can I stop this?'

While she worried about the safety of heaven, the Archangel of Annihilation, Faiel, cared about nothing.

He was flying rapidly towards Shirone, aiming to eliminate the impurity before him.

Ikael knew Faiel intended to kill Shirone.

But even though Faiel's fundamental concept was annihilation, his reckless actions were puzzling.

'What is at the end of this war?'

Faiel's message hinted at the true intention of Anke Ra, who had banned angelic activities and reinstated Ikael as the archangel.

"Shirone..."

Faiel had already closed more than half the distance to Shirone.

Having intended to kill him from the start, if left unchecked, Shirone would vanish into nothingness.

"Ugh!"

As she thought this, Ikael's halo began to vibrate at a terrifying speed.

She had resolved to stay focused, but in the face of Faiel, the embodiment of absolute death, she finally realized.

There might be something greater than heaven in her lost memories.

Superpower Amplification Array Ataraxia.

Ikael clenched her fists and expanded her halo.

Kiiiiing!

The sight of light pouring into the massive magic circle, hundreds of meters in diameter, was heavenly.

She mobilized all her mental strength to reveal the fundamental concept and poured that immense amplification power into one thought.

'I must regain my memory!'

The fragments of memory erased by Anke Ra.

What remained at the end of the broken thoughts were small signals that couldn't even be called language, but Ataraxia amplified them over 200 million times, filling her mind with perfectly clear images.

"Huh?"

As the only remaining image swept through her body, it began to restore the torn memories.

The thoughts of the archangel advanced as fast as light, and finally, like a new bridge connecting a broken path, all thoughts unified into a single history.

"Ah..."

Clear tears flowed down Ikael's cheeks like light.

Aaaaaaaaah!

The most noble angel's sorrowful cry shook Aravot.

'How could I forget?'

The miserable realization pierced her heart like a dagger, and her mind spilled out like blood.

Shirone.

And Goffin.

Compared to her lifetime as the first and leader of all angels, the time she spent with those two was fleeting. But for Ikael, it was undoubtedly the brightest and most beautiful moment in her time.

With that memory alone, she could exist.

Losing that memory meant she had no reason to exist.

The result she chose for Shirone had ultimately ruined everything.

'Ra...'

Where is Ra leading the entirety of this world?

"Shironeeeeeee!"

Ikael snapped back to reality and spread her wings of light. Though she had exhausted most of her mental strength to regain her memory, she squeezed out the last bit of strength and flew towards Shirone.

Through her vision, she saw Faiel had already reached Shirone, gathering the energy of annihilation in his hand.

"Are you rushing towards your own death? Well, that is the limit of a mere human, a Nephilim."

Shirone gritted his teeth and glared at Faiel.

The time required to reverse causality with Valhalla Action was a full 10 minutes.

If he had only cast Divine Punishment, the risk wouldn't have been this great, but the time needed to move to the exact coordinates to hit Aravot's spire was much longer than expected.

'No, this is enough.'

He hadn't saved Feope, who had sacrificed an almost eternal lifespan for him, and Ikael, whom he had hoped would be his lifelong mental sanctuary, had almost killed him.

Having completed his mission, he thought nothing else mattered now.

'Amy, I'm sorry. Everyone...'

Thinking of the faces of his precious people left in his hometown, Shirone awaited his impending death.

"Disappear, insignificant being!"

Faiel's face, hidden under his hood, twisted grotesquely as the darkness composed of particles flared like flames.

As the power of annihilation surged to engulf Shirone, Ikael caught up with Faiel just in time.

"Nooooo!"

Boom!

As Ikael activated her power, the concepts of annihilation and amplification clashed, shaking the area.

'Ikael?'

Shirone looked up at Ikael's face, which was two heads taller than his.

Though she wasn't sweating, her complexion was pale, and her eyes were weary.

Even so, Ikael forced a smile for Shirone, but it soon turned into an expression of sorrow, apology, and deep yearning, conveying her poignant emotions.

"I'm sorry."

Ikael's eyes conveyed everything words couldn't express.

"I'm sorry, Shirone..."

Seeing Ikael's tears, Shirone's eyes also filled with tears.

The same substance, perhaps, creating a comforting illusion that made him want to stay in it forever, began to rehydrate Shirone's war-dried emotions.

"Shirone, you..."

Boom!

Before she could finish, Ikael's body was flung to the side. In Shirone's view, where Ikael had disappeared, Faiel stood with a furious expression.

"Ikael. Fallen, filthy archangel. How far will you desecrate the existence of angels?"

Shirone struggled to move, but there was no way to violate the principle of equivalent exchange.

"It doesn't matter."

Faiel turned back to Shirone.

"Both ugliness and nobility disappear all the same."

As Faiel attacked Shirone again, Ikael, who had fallen to the ground, sprang up and blocked the way once more.

"Ugh!"

Having exhausted her strength to remember Shirone, it was the only thing she could do.

But Faiel no longer cared.

He poured the power of annihilation onto Ikael, intending to overwhelm her with sheer force and concept.

The dark smoke, composed of particles, enveloped Ikael like swarming insects, and her halo gradually lost its light.

"Huuu!"

She tried desperately to endure, but the shock of her angelic presence being erased was evident on Ikael's face.

'Ugh, ugh! Ugh!'

Shirone wept as he watched Ikael.

Unable to move a finger, unable to cry out, he could only watch as the one he loved died, feeling the most miserable emotion a human could experience.

"It's okay, Shirone... It's okay."

Ikael's smile was beautiful.

The most beautiful smile in the universe.

Armin, Shiina, and Kuan waited for Etella to arrive in front of the portal to Inglis.

Zulu, who had gone to retrieve the Metagate, could be met outside, but they needed the disk to extract coordinates from the Akashic Records.

"She's unusually late. I hope nothing's happened."

Etella knew time was of the essence, so even if Yameng had broken their promise or failed to keep their contract, she should have arrived at Zebul by now.

"Let's wait a bit longer. She's a good person but not so naive as to lose her sense of judgment. She'll be here soon."

Shiina still believed in Etella, but she also had a bad feeling. A bishop of the Karsis Monastery.

Heaven was full of powerful beings, making it impossible to move around comfortably with ordinary skills, but at least she should be able to avoid fights and complete her mission.

Even when Gaold first formed the team, he prioritized Etella over herself, proving her capabilities.

'What happened?'

As Shiina's thoughts grew more anxious, a low, rough growl echoed from the corridor of Inglis.

"Growl!"

All three heads turned simultaneously.

The shadowy figure emerging from the corner was clearly not a normal enemy.

"What is that?"

It was a creature they had never seen before.

But anyone in the world would have felt the same.

Garas, with no clear species characteristics, manifested its appearance through the biological traits of its mother, with its only constant traits being its protein bow and immense reproductive drive.

The black forms varied, but as they were originally Yameng's subordinates, they had some uniformity.

Standing 2 meters tall, with black skin covered in mucus, long knees bent backward, and a spine ending in a spiked tail.

"Kekeke! Reproduction!"

With human traits incorporated, they had no problem speaking.

The difference from the King of Reproduction born in Laisis's headquarters was that they were all strong beings with a telomere level of 5 or higher.

Seeing Garas's eyes, Shiina shuddered.

It was a different kind of fear from killing intent, a terrifying fear she instinctively felt as a woman.

Ice Cloud.

A freezing mist rose around Shiina.

The rapidly cooled air froze into ice crystals, scattering like glass powder on the floor.

The fact that the combative Shiina cast a defensive spell before even engaging in a single exchange shows how shocked she was.

However, the fear was soon controlled by the mage's cold rationality, and her eyes, glaring at the wicked lust demons, burned with fighting spirit.

'How arrogant.'

The person most disgusted by Garas's nature was Kuan.

Already burning with a desire to kill, he gripped the hilt of his sword more tightly than usual.

"I'll handle this..."

As Kuan moved to stand in front of Shiina, Armin stepped in first.

"Stand back. There's no need to waste your energy here."

With Armin's Stop, any enemy could be defended against.

However, from Shiina's perspective, Armin's overprotection against an enemy that was neither an angel nor a Mara was just annoying.

Moreover, the way Garas looked down on her was infuriating.

"Don't worry. This is nothing..."

"Kiaaaa!"

Dozens of Garas let out a screech.

The deafening sound, mixed with hundreds of emotions, was a unique characteristic that no other creature could imitate.

Exposed to the overwhelming desire that emotionally dominated humans, the three tensed up.

Garas's movements, fueled by the powerful life force of telomere level 5 and extreme desire, were explosive.

Ice Dagger.

Ice daggers formed from the freezing cloud around Shiina and scattered in all directions.

The spells cast by a certified 5th-level mage were relentless, and the approaching Garas were repelled.

Ting! Ting ting!

As the Garas hunched their bodies, their carapaces hardened, shattering the ice daggers.

Though they were pushed back by the impact, they didn't suffer fatal injuries.

Even Kuan's sword strikes were deflected by the chitinous resilience.

'Damn it!'

Though not as strong as Ringer's armor, the fact that a mere creature could block his attacks was humiliating for a swordsman.

Absolute Zero.

As Shiina's most powerful spell, Absolute Zero, was cast, the Garas began to freeze one by one.

Kuan's sword became effective, shattering the frozen Garas into pieces.

In the midst of the cleared view, a man stood.

Chapter 495:

"What's that?"

Kuan was the first to show aggression as he approached. The man had a peculiar appearance, as if he didn't quite meet the standard of a human.

"What was I born to achieve?"

His features were misshapen, and the skin below his neck was covered in Garas's chitin. His fingers were sharp, like he was wearing steel gloves, and thick, sharp hairs stood out like a hedgehog's.

He was the Nephilim, born from the angel of fulfillment, Adio, and Garas, known as Nameless.

From the moment of his birth, he had followed the question in his heart like a calling, and names were of no importance to him.

As Nameless looked at the sword Kuan was holding, he spread his hands wide, and with a burst of light, two swords appeared in his hands.

Kuan raised an eyebrow in displeasure as Nameless lifted the swords and asked,

"What is this thing called?"

It was strange that he had manifested swords without knowing what they were, but Kuan answered honestly.

"A sword."

"A sword. How do you use it?"

"If you're asking how to use it..."

Kuan launched himself, drawing out his external force.

"This is how you use it."

Kuan's body spun like a top in front of Nameless, swinging his sword.

At that moment, Nameless realized that the sword would soon cut his neck and take his life.

Bang!

Nameless's twin swords blocked the attack, and Kuan's sword struck them hard.

It wasn't a technique or tactic, just a defense to stay alive.

The only reason Nameless could block the sword of an instructor from the Kaizen Swordsmanship School was due to the physical traits inherited from the angel and Garas.

As the blades scraped against each other, sparks flew, and Nameless was pushed back, slamming into the wall.

Barely regaining his balance, he kept his guard up and muttered something with his head bowed.

Kuan found the response surprisingly weak and felt something was off.

"Does he not know swordsmanship? Then what was that intense sense of unease I felt at first?"

Nameless finally lifted his head.

"I understand."

"Understand what?"

Kuan gripped his sword and walked forward.

"What a sword is."

Nameless disappeared from Kuan's sight.

Kuan, whose entire focus was on movement, couldn't lose sight of him just because he was fast.

Kuan's pupils fixed on a deep spot to the left as he searched for the vanished enemy.

Clang! The swords clashed again, but this time the situation was completely reversed.

"Can't react?"

Is human thought truly infinitely free?

This had been the question in Kuan's mind since he first picked up a sword.

And the conclusion he had reached through years of swinging his sword was clear: "No."

Human thought seemed free, but from the perspective of a truly free being, it was highly mechanical and bound by patterns.

To overcome this limitation, Kuan had trained in movement all his life and reached his current level.

But now, Nameless's movement transcended even Kuan's thoughts.

"Did he know swordsmanship?"

The thought crossed Kuan's mind, but he quickly corrected himself.

He wasn't already knowledgeable; he was growing through the clash of swords.

"No, this is evolution."

The explosive growth in swordsmanship, or realization, was beyond explanation.

Nameless's twin swords began to swing in trajectories beyond Kuan's understanding, and within just five minutes, he inflicted a fatal wound on Kuan.

"Ugh!"

Kuan, slashed across the chest, spun to keep his distance and retreated to the end of the corridor.

The humiliation as a swordsman hurt more than the wound on his chest.

If Nameless had picked up a sword for the first time today, he had caught up to everything Kuan had achieved in 30 years in just five minutes.

"Is that possible?"

Nameless was a Nephilim, a hybrid of the angel of fulfillment and Garas.

Through this unprecedented hybridization in the history of heaven, Nameless had developed new traits.

The angel's noble spirit combined with Garas's transcendent reproductive desire, converting it entirely into a desire for achievement.

While Garas pursued only reproduction, Nameless's mind was now focused solely on understanding techniques and transcending them to deeper levels.

Nameless was breaking through barriers that a human would need years of relentless training to overcome at an

incredible speed.

I want to do better. I want to do better. I want to do better.

Nameless absorbed Kuan's 30 years of swordsmanship like a hole that sucked in everything and sublimated it to a higher level.

In the face of attacks imbued with that level of swordsmanship, Kuan could only desperately defend.

"This can't be happening! This can't be happening!"

Gritting his teeth and enduring desperately, Kuan found Nameless's swordsmanship increasingly surpassing the limits of his imagination.

"We need to help!"

As Armin and Shiina prepared to cast spells on Nameless, Kuan, using a moment of clarity he had squeezed out, shouted,

"No! Run!"

Only those who had fought Nameless directly could understand his terror.

But Armin and Shiina had already begun to act.

Armin cast a flicker spell to distract Nameless, and Shiina fired seven ice spears simultaneously.

Thanks to this, Kuan escaped from the brink of death, but he knew the cost would be much greater.

Nameless, having dodged the ice spears and widened the distance, immediately showed interest in the mages' techniques.

"What is that?"

The intense desire for improvement, far beyond human imagination, struck Nameless's mind.

I want to do it! I want to do it! I want to do it! I want to do it!

That immense desire pushed all of Nameless's functions beyond their limits, and his spirit zone opened.

Armin, sensing Nameless's spirit zone with his synesthesia, was horrified.

It wasn't just finding the focal point of his mind.

"He unlocked the Immortal Function."

Nameless, having cast the flicker spell, moved behind Armin and swung his sword.

Faced with Nameless's ability to use both the spirit zone and schema simultaneously, Armin felt his hair stand on end as he bent backward.

As the first strike missed, Nameless immediately cast a spell, firing ice spears at Shiina.

Only then did Armin realize why Kuan had been unable to do anything but be pushed back.

"Damn it! How can such a creature exist?"

It's unfair.

No genius could instantly copy the ice magic of a certified 5th-level mage.

But that was just emotional frustration; Armin knew the truth.

There are no such things as unfairness in this world.

If he was born that way, no matter how bizarre, that was just reality.

"Now that he's mastered the flicker spell, we can't run."

Facing a creature he had never encountered before, Armin's cold rational mind couldn't find a basis for judgment.

The only possibility was to use all their strength to eliminate Nameless immediately.

But if Nameless's growth speed exceeded his expectations, they would be the ones to be devoured.

Even so, choosing the former was the right thing to do, but if Shiina's safety was at high risk, the judgment changed.

"I must save Shiina. No matter the cost, I must get her home safely."

That was the only gift he could give his beloved sister by risking his life.

Armin hugged Shiina, who was unable to do anything against Nameless's chaotic movements, and rolled on the ground.

"Isn't there anything more fun?"

As Nameless, with eyes full of madness, charged, Armin realized what he had to do.

"I'm sorry, Kuan."

As Nameless's swords slashed in an X, Armin surrounded himself and Shiina with a barrier of stop magic.

"Hup!"

Nameless stopped his swords just before being caught in the stop.

An action impossible with normal inertia, achievable only through Nameless's unknown realization.

"What is this?"

Nameless's spirit zone immediately analyzed the anomaly of the stop magic and transmitted it to his brain.

If he had advanced a bit more, he would have been trapped in the stopped time.

Armin, holding Shiina, watched Nameless beyond the barrier with a tense expression.

With the inside of the barrier emptied, the two were free from the timeline, ready to escape with Shiina at the slightest opening.

"If he masters the stop as well..."

The thought alone was terrifying.

Perhaps it would have been better to die here.

But for Armin, who only cared about Shiina, it was never an option.

"Hmm, I see."

Nameless savored the stop's barrier for a moment, then widened his eyes and cast a spell.

As Armin and Shiina watched tensely, Nameless tilted his head slightly.

"Huh? It doesn't work?"

Armin's heart, which had been racing madly, found a moment of calm in a sigh of relief.

"Don't think this is over. Ra will never accept your existence... Ugh!"

With a pop, another angel exploded in Satan's grasp.

Frankwine, embodying Satan's concept, hunted down the hiding angels one by one, and as their numbers dwindled, the seesaw of law tipped rapidly.

"How dull. Ordinary angels don't even make a dent."

A law beyond the law.

No matter how well-armed the angels were with concepts, they had no effect on Satan.

Thud! Thud!

Two impacts pierced the ceiling of Zebul and struck the corridor where Frankwine stood.

"Oh? This time, it's substantial?"

Frankwine's lips curled at the arrival of the big shots.

The archangels of combination and decomposition, Metiel and Satiel, each wielding the fundamental concepts of strong and weak forces, arrived.

"A pathetic rat hiding on the opposite side of the law, running wild without knowing fear," Metiel said coldly as she walked forward.

Realizing through their vision that Metatron had been annihilated, the two archangels immediately flew to Zebul. To balance the seesaw of law, it would have been best for them to stay hidden, but with all the ordinary angels in hiding by Ra's command, they had no choice but to act quickly to resolve the situation.

"Do you truly think so, archangel? The one who fears is not me, but Ra of the law," Satan taunted.

"Don't pretend to be noble, you hybrid with an unclear concept. It's extremely unpleasant," Metiel retorted, raising her hand slowly. Satiel, standing beside her, also spread her halo.

Metatron's gravity field was a pure manifestation of a fundamental concept. While powerful, it likely worked to Satan's advantage, who was invincible to the law. But Metiel and Satiel were different.

When the two archangels combined their powers, they could manipulate all particles in the world, allowing for extensive

secondary applications.

"Kekeke, it's fun to see the pretty ones' tricks," Satan provoked as Metiel and Satiel simultaneously flew at him. As the forces of strong and weak combined, matter melted like paint, transforming Zebul's landscape into something entirely otherworldly.

Bizarre substances with extraordinary properties manifested, and unimaginable phenomena began to occur around Satan.

In the surreal landscape resembling an abstract painting by a madman, the two archangels launched a tremendous attack on Satan.

Radiation tormented Satan's cells, and the superheated air scorched his entire body.

"Rrrrgh!"

Particles that distorted time bound Satan's hands and feet, and metals that warped space crushed his body like clay.

"Let's end this," Metiel said, and Satiel nodded, charging forward.

Though often rivals, in battle, there were no better partners in all of heaven than these two archangels.

Chapter 496:

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Laughter erupted from the twisted, collapsed form of Satan, whose eyes, nose, mouth, hands, and feet were all jumbled together.

A powerful shockwave rippled through the air, and in an instant, Satan's body returned to its original state.

"Damn it..."

Satan's massive hands grabbed the throats of the angels. With a force that seemed like it could snap their necks at any moment, the faces of the two beautiful angels twisted in pain.

'Has it come to this?'

An angel's physical durability is not something that any creature can easily destroy.

Moreover, the secondary application of the law they used had indeed been effective.

However, Satan's law, having annihilated countless ordinary angels and even the archangel Metatron, had grown much stronger than Metiel and Satiel had anticipated.

If the Akashic Records represent the entirety of the universe, Satan's law is its counterpart.

In other words, if the seesaw of law is balanced to some extent, even physical impacts cannot be fully conveyed.

"Two archangels."

Satan alternated his gaze between the two suffering archangels and smiled wickedly.

"Is this enough to end it?"

As Metiel and Satiel's halos shook violently, about to explode, someone rushed in from behind Satan and struck him.

The sudden loss of strength in Satan's body allowed Metiel and Satiel to break free.

But Satan paid no attention to the already defeated angels.
"Who the hell...?"

The impact wasn't that strong, but it was enough to momentarily neutralize Satan's law.

Turning around, Satan finally understood the reason.

Etella, the bishop of the Karsis Monastery, who possessed the perfect law of good, was glaring at Satan with burning eyes.

'Just a little further...'

Plu caught a glimpse of Aravot's walls.

But like a mirage, they quickly vanished, replaced by giants.
"Sob! Sob!"

Tears of frustration streamed down her face.

She had come to heaven with pride as a professional mage, but it was an overwhelmingly difficult place for her.

The giant guards of Matei were so massive that her magic barely affected them.

What could she possibly do in such a place?

Yet she kept running, because stopping here would mean never being able to do anything again.

Even her lifelong pride as a mage would crumble.

'I can still fight!'

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

The giants noticed Plu running beneath them and repeatedly stomped their feet.

Plu, rolling on the ground, felt like a helpless insect, biting her lip in despair.

A majestic voice boomed from above.

"Humans are so annoying. They're weak and small."

Annoyed by Plu's persistent evasion, a giant brought down his greatsword with all his might.

Boom!

To Plu, it felt like the world was splitting apart.

Massive debris flew in all directions, and the shockwave pushed her body dozens of meters away.

As she lay on the ground, momentarily losing focus, a rock the size of a human head struck her shoulder.

"Aaaah!"

Hearing the sound of her bones shattering, Plu knew it was over.

She screamed and fell to the ground, unable to roll due to her shattered right shoulder.

Seeing the giant's hand descending from the sky, Plu trembled as if electrocuted.

Like a child thinking of hundreds of ways to torment an ant, she couldn't even imagine how the giant would kill her.

"Plu!"

Before she could turn towards the voice, someone rushed in, grabbed her, and leaped away.

"Aaaah!"

Clutching her injured shoulder, Plu screamed and widened her eyes at the face of her rescuer.

"How are you here?"

Crude, who should have been leading the rebels in the middle of the battlefield, was here alone.

And he was equipped with only the first-stage mecha weapon, Piper, instead of Titan or Guroi.

"Why are you here? What about the rebels?"

"The war is over. We lost."

"That's ridiculous!"

Even if they lost, shouldn't a commander fight to the end?

But Plu fell silent.

She had no right to criticize Crude, having informed him that divine punishment would strike Aravot.

'He must resent me.'

She knew Crude hadn't told the rebels the truth until the end.

She had said it wasn't her concern, but she couldn't imagine what he must have felt.

That's why Crude had come.

'Maybe it's for the best. If my death eases his anger...'

"But."

Crude, estimating the height of Aravot's walls, continued.

"Given the situation, wouldn't it be satisfying to at least see heaven's destruction?"

Plu was speechless at his unexpected words as Crude carried her towards the wall.

Using Piper's functions to zigzag, Crude dodged the giants' stomping feet as they began their insect hunt.

Each time a giant's foot fell, the ground shook like a rubber mat, and the noise was deafening.

'I can do this.'

Even in the overwhelming fear, Crude clung to his rationality.

He was the skilled pilot who had precisely operated the massive Titan and Guroi with millimeter accuracy.

Though he couldn't match the giants' strength, his understanding of the equipment was comparable to that of an immortal.

"Humans are worse than insects!"

But as the giants' stomping tempo increased, the scale's limits became apparent.

Even running a hundred steps was within a giant's single stride.

Reaching this far with Plu was already a miracle.

"There! Aravot!"

Plu pointed, and Crude saw it too.

But climbing the wall head-on would only result in being crushed by a giant's hand.

"Do you know why I came for you?"

In the dire situation, Crude's question seemed out of place, but Plu felt a strange sense of understanding.

She couldn't comprehend why he had come to save her, the one he should resent the most.

"To kill me..."

Plu's honest answer made Crude pause, then he smiled as if making a decision.

"Make sure you survive."

"What are you saying..."

She hadn't heard his answer yet.

But before she could ask again, Crude removed Piper's voice recognition device and issued a command.

"Limit release."

Clank! Clank!

Piper read the user's movements at nerve speed to enhance strength.

But no matter how much the function was increased, the human body had its limits.

With the limit released, Piper was no longer a strength-enhancing device.

It was a trap, a killing machine that would destroy the user's body.

'I have to do this at maximum output.'

Crude knew this was his last chance.

As he twisted his waist, pulling Plu to his side, Piper detected the movement and rotated at maximum output.

Crack!

His waist rotated half a turn, and his spine made a crushing sound.

"Ugh!"

Crude didn't care.

He focused all his strength on twisting his waist again to launch Plu over the wall.

"Aaaah!"

The small engine roared as Crude's waist snapped back at incredible speed.

As the disks crushed, the shock nearly knocked him out, but Plu's body soared like a cannonball.

"Catch her!"

The giants reached for Plu, flying past Crude.

Though she flew at tremendous speed, the giant hands stretched towards her, overwhelming the space.

As the palm blocked her view, Plu saw the five fingers closing in.

Dawkins Algorithm.

Plu slipped through the fingers and hastily cast a fly spell, landing on Aravot's wall.

In the midst of fear, with no time to feel relief, Plu looked back at Crude.

"No, no..."

She thought he might be smiling when a giant, arriving late, grabbed him.

The giant, bending over, straightened up and roared in anger at missing Plu.

"Raaaargh!"

If she jumped into Aravot, the giant couldn't reach her.

The only remaining option was to throw Crude at her.

The giant swung his arm, and Crude's body flew in a straight line towards Plu.

Bang!

Crude's body missed Plu by a hair and slammed into the wall's edge, bouncing off.

"No..."

Plu stared at Crude in shock.

Seeing his twisted limbs, she had a selfish thought.

'I haven't heard his answer yet.'

Crude's body, following the thrown momentum, fell over the wall into Aravot.

"Nooooo!"

Unable to hold back her sobs, Plu jumped off the wall after Crude.

Clang! Clang!

Cracks began to form in the iron, known for its supreme strength.

The sword of Girshin, the giant corps commander who had reached the 7th stage of the Art of One, finally started to

destroy Babel's body.

Kanya trembled, holding the unconscious Lena.

The battle between Girshin and Babel was too fast for her ordinary Mecha tribe eyes to follow, but the sparks and explosions made it clear.

The other giants had already wiped out the rebels and left to push the second wave, leaving only Kanya and Lena as survivors in the desolate battlefield.

"No, this can't be..."

The reason they survived while everyone else died.

Though she didn't want to think about it, Kanya had to know.

Babel, calculating the war's odds at zero percent, moved solely to protect Kanya and Lena.

And now, even the third possibility in Shirone's algorithm was converging to zero percent.

"Kekeke, impressive for a tin can. But that's the limit of machines. No one can surpass a giant's strength."

To Girshin, Babel was a worthy opponent, but the excitement ended there.

He had always won, so no being held more value than a mere rival.

There was only one being who could dominate him.

Not even Anke Ra, but the strongest of all creatures in this world, the giant Ymir.

"Taahaaa!"

Girshin's battle cry was completely drowned out by the ensuing roar, and a flash of light severed Babel's right arm.

For Babel, whose program was specialized in combat, losing a part of its body was a critical blow.

That's why the Gaian designers prioritized durability when creating Babel.

However, Girshin's strength surpassed that durability, and Babel's computation unit finally calculated a win rate of less than 0.1%.

Dodging Girshin's next strike, Babel leaped to shield Kanya and Lena.

Thud! Thud thud thud!

As her shoulders opened, the iron armor emerged and embedded itself in the ground, protecting Kanya and Lena. Almost simultaneously, Girshin charged and struck Babel's body with his sword.

Boom!

The tremendous impact exploded from Babel's back, causing Kanya's shoulders to shake from the nearby shock. Yet Babel's expression remained unchanged.

With a face as cold as a machine, she continued to endure Girshin's attacks, looking indifferently at Kanya and Lena.

Chapter 497:

"R...run..."

Kanya muttered unconsciously.

"Run away."

Babel did not respond.

Due to the priority of the Shirone algorithm, it was an order she could not follow.

But to Kanya, the algorithm no longer mattered.

In Babel's form, protecting her and Lena, she saw the face of the most precious person she had lost a year ago.

"Mom..."

Babel was not her mother.

Being a machine, she could not feel pain, and having no life, she had no fear of death.

It was entirely different from her mother, who had willingly accepted death for her children without showing her pain.

"Run away! I don't want your help!"

But why were tears flowing?

Even now, the memory of her father's death was vividly etched in her mind, so why did her heart ache so much?

"Babel protects Kanya and Lena."

The vibrations from her breaking body mixed noise into her voice device.

"You're our enemy! You killed our dad! You killed him! You're not my mom!"

"Babel will pay the price when the war is over."

"No! No, you're not!"

Kanya hugged Babel and cried.

The thought that someone was still protecting her was so unfair and frustrating, and she regretted not realizing it sooner.

As Girshin's attacks grew stronger, Babel's body shook more violently.

The red panel in Babel's eyes flickered, and machine fragments, like human flesh, sprayed from her back.

She was dying.

Kanya could feel Babel's condition.

"What will I do if you leave like this? I'll kill you! I'll kill you in the most painful way!"

Machines don't die.

They just get dismantled.

Babel decided to convey that information but erased the sentence just before output.

"I do not feel pain. But..."

Kanya, covered in tears and snot, looked up.

For the first time, a clear voice, free of noise, came from Babel's cold face.

"Perhaps this is what pain feels like."

"Ugh, ugh."

The overwhelming sadness crushed Kanya's heart.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you until the end."

As Babel's red panel burned brightly, Kanya shook her head like a child and screamed.

"No! Don't do it! That's an order! Follow my command!

Don't do it!"

Babel, receiving an impossible order, searched for a response but found no choice that would stop her tears.

Perhaps it was a delusion, but Kanya thought she saw a slightly troubled smile on Babel's face.

Self-destruct mode activated. Map weapon Babel.

Having endured destruction with less than a 0.1% chance of success, Babel pushed her output to the maximum.

"Uoooooooo!"

As Girshin aimed his final strike at Babel's shattered back, a flash shot from the glass sphere of the map weapon.

"Damn it...!"

The glass sphere shattered, and the electron cannon scattered wildly.

The flash scorched the entire rear radius, leaving nothing behind.

Target elimination failed.

Receiving the final signal on the central device, Babel tried every method to reactivate but could do nothing in her shattered state.

'Kanya...'

As the short name was input into the computation unit, all devices powered down, and eternal darkness fell.

"No! Get up! You can't be dead! Get up again!"

Kanya hugged Babel's remaining torso and wept. She missed the machine she had hated the most in the world.

Babel's electron cannon scorched a 2-kilometer radius.

Even Girshin, the greatest, couldn't guarantee survival against such speed, power, and range.

But it was only a hypothesis, and his expression was grim as he stood on a plateau 3 kilometers from the battlefield.

When Babel's cannon glowed, a hundred glass panels around him flashed, transporting him through space.

Signal.

Every giant knew the ability of Ikael's three-sided Mara, Ashur.

'Ashur. Ymir's rival.'

Girshin glared at Ashur with disdain.

Though their rivalry for the top warrior in heaven was in the past, Ashur remained a thorn in his side, as Ymir was the greatest in his eyes.

"I won't thank you. I could have dodged that ambush easily."

Even as the second-ranked giant, he had no pride to uphold against the archangel's three-sided Mara, but Ashur didn't care.

If such pride mattered, he wouldn't have evacuated Girshin in the first place.

"Don't underestimate Babel's computation. It wasn't guaranteed. You know that."

"Hmph, whatever. I'd rather die than run. It's not a giant's way."

"No. Further combat is meaningless. All we can do is minimize losses for the next war."

Girshin frowned.

"What nonsense? Victory is within reach."

"Don't you see what lies at the end of this war?"

"We only fight. The outcome doesn't matter."

"Then let me tell you. Why hasn't Ymir moved yet?"

Girshin fell silent.

Ymir's animalistic intuition had reached a transcendent level beyond even the realm of animals.

"This isn't... the end?"

Ashur nodded.

"Satan is descending in Zebul, annihilating angels. Humans have cast powerful magic directly at Aravot. Either way, heaven will fall."

Girshin's expression grew serious.

"But Ymir hasn't moved. Therefore..."

"Yes."

Realizing no further explanation was needed, Ashur concluded.

"Ra's will is about to manifest."

Second Heaven, Rakia.

Kangnan stood with her wrists bound in the Hall of Corruption, .

's ability was limited to absorbing power, but it was fixed in space using the angelic power of Hena.

After a night of torture, Kangnan was in a pitiful state, barely able to stand.

The biggest problem was the lifeless look in her eyes.

Gaold wouldn't come.

It was acceptance rather than resentment.

She had seen how fiercely Gaold had lived to save Miro, so she could understand.

"It's past noon. It seems he has abandoned you."

Uriel, floating with her arms crossed outside the wall, looked beyond the broken bridge.

Kangnan didn't respond.

She knew it, but admitting it was another matter.

Uriel slowly turned to look at Kariel standing beside Kangnan.

'Weaker than before.'

An angel's greatness comes from the mind, so mental shock directly affects their presence.

Though Raiel had lifted the stop magic, the humiliation from humans had further weakened Kariel.

Dark shadows lay under her eyes, and her once handsome face was gaunt, with no trace of archangel authority.

Whooooosh!

A strong wind blew from Aravot.

The sand mixed in the wind hitting her back felt like burning pain to Kangnan.

'Life is... pain.'

That's what Gaold had said.

"Kariel, let's begin the execution."

The fallen angel Mauriel approached for permission, but Kariel remained silent.

Since being defeated by human magic, her weakened mind had deepened her hatred for humans.

The question was, what was the source of that hatred?

'I...'

When did she start hating humans?

The doubt Kariel had never considered met precisely with the question Uriel had always pondered.

'Indeed, Kariel. Isn't it strange? Angels are great, but humans are confusing. Are we really...'

Are we truly superior to humans?

Without an answer to that question, there is no future for heaven.

That's why Uriel had watched Kariel's long struggle to the end, and finally, it bore fruit.

"He's coming."

All the fallen angels and Maras in Rakia turned to the plain before the wall.

Mikael Gaold, who had made them realize human desire, was slowly walking forward.

"Why...?"

Kangnan looked at Gaold in shock. Even seeing it with her own eyes, she couldn't believe it.

When Uriel landed, Gaold stopped walking.

"Where is Miro?"

"....."

Gaold looked up at Kangnan without answering.

Hanging by her handcuffs, her clothes were torn, and she was covered in wounds.

Gaold stared at her expressionlessly for a long time, then suddenly smiled.

"Kekeke. You really got it, mutt."

"You...!"

Kangnan shouted, squeezing out her strength.

"Idiot! Why did you come here?"

It was her honest feeling.

After all the time spent to save Miro, why come here and give it all up?

"Your rough mouth means you're still holding on."

"Go back! Go to Miro! Have you forgotten what it took to get here?"

"Yes, I forgot."

"...What?"

Kangnan was speechless at his easy admission.

"I forgot what you sacrificed to save me. I've lived forgetting it."

Kangnan's eyes filled with tears, and she fought to hold back her sobs.

He knew?

She had never mentioned it, never wanted him to know. So she could be satisfied with this.

"Fine. Then go back. I'm fine... Please... find happiness."

Gaold started walking again.

As he neared Uriel, all the fallen angels flew in to surround him.

Forced to stop, Gaold looked up at Kangnan and smirked.

"Don't be too angry. I'll leave soon enough. But first, I must keep my promise."

Kangnan's lips trembled.

'No. Don't say it.'

"I promised never to leave you again."

Her heart began to race.

Gaold's rare gentle smile conveyed extreme unease.

He hadn't abandoned Miro or come to save her.

He was ready to let go of all the hatred he had built up over 20 years of suffering.

Mauriel approached, sneering.

"You were supposed to bring Miro. Do you think you can leave alive after breaking the deal?"

"Haa, this guy and that guy..."

Gaold lowered his head and let out a quiet sigh.

When he looked up again, the kind face was gone, replaced by the mad mage once more.

"This is driving me crazy."

As the nightmare from ten years ago resurfaced in his mind, the color drained from Kangnan's face.

"Don't..."

Gaold's eyelids trembled as he looked up at the sky, his pupils slowly rolling back.

"Don't do it..."

Unable to hold back her tears, Kangnan sobbed and pleaded.

"Please don't... sir."

At the same time, Gaold's hair stood on end.

'Goodbye, cruel world.'

Poof!

All the fallen angels surrounding Gaold vanished, leaving only a few drops of liquid behind, as if they had evaporated.

Pain.

A hundred million times.

Chapter 498: Despair (1)

Life is pain.

That's what Gaold said.

"Sir."

It was when Gaold had returned to Tormia and was struggling to raise the ranks of the association.

Sixteen-year-old Kangnan, who was walking in the association's garden, picked a red flower growing by the railing and showed it to Gaold.

"Isn't this pretty?"

It was a beautiful flower that couldn't be found in the desert, where not a single blade of grass grew, or even in her southern homeland.

Gaold looked at the flower with indifferent eyes.

His magical skills had reached the top tier for his age, but politics required another kind of talent.

Growing weary of the internal power struggles within the association, he had become indifferent to everything.

Kangnan, understanding Gaold, didn't wait for an answer and held the flower petals up to his face.

"The best thing about Tormia is the many beautiful flowers. What's this flower called?"

"Pain."

Kangnan looked up at Gaold.

"Pain? Is that the flower's name?"

"I don't know its name. But whatever it's called, it's pain."

Gaold stepped closer and looked down at Kangnan.

He had become irritable lately, but today his expression was colder and more frightening than ever.

"But this flower is beautiful."

Gaold snatched the flower from Kangnan's hand.

"Kangnan, all living beings can only feel the world through pain. Pleasure is just another way of accepting pain."

"Sir, you seem very tired lately. Maybe you should rest a bit."

Kangnan expressed her concern indirectly.

She knew better than anyone how much pain Gaold had to endure to live in this world.

But she didn't want to see him like this, as he had never shown his suffering before.

Gaold cast a spell, sharply cutting the end of the flower stem.

"Flowers are beautiful because they pass on their lineage, but they never know their mate or see their offspring.

Kangnan, life is pain. Our senses and the nerves under our skin are just functions created to accept life's pain."

"Life is... pain."

It wasn't a comforting thought, but Kangnan thought Gaold might be right.

To varying degrees, the world each being perceives is filled with pain.

Pain Amplification 100 Million Times - Air Press.

Poof!

All the fallen angels surrounding Gaold vanished, leaving only a few drops of liquid behind, as if they had evaporated. It felt as if the sky had collided with the earth.

Among those within Gaold's radius, the only one still standing was the archangel Uriel.

Uriel's halo expanded to a diameter of 100 meters, spinning terrifyingly.

Though he didn't appear shaken, the rapid acceleration of his mind showed Gaold's immense power.

'Is this truly human power?'

If one were to name a human who had transcended humanity, Uriel would only think of Miro, but Gaold's extreme endurance had already surpassed human limits.

"Raaaargh!"

But this wasn't something Gaold had always possessed. The aftermath of 20 years of hatred exploding at once was immense.

All he felt was pain.

With his eyes rolled back and his body trembling, Gaold screamed, losing his sanity, and eventually, his lower jaw dislocated, leaving him to scream through his throat alone.

"Raaaargh! Raaaargh!"

Gaold ran madly.

Almost instinctively, he dashed towards Kangnan.

Wham!

As the second Air Press unfolded, the fallen angels and Maras vanished simultaneously.

"Raaaargh! Raaaargh!"

Life is pain.

The 100 million times amplified pain Gaold felt conveyed all the world's information as agony.

The shock was too great for a human made of flesh and blood to bear, and blood tears flowed from Gaold's eyes as he looked up at the sky.

It was as if his soul, trapped in his body, was desperate to escape the miserable prison of his flesh.

Thus, Gaold struggled within the confines of the pain bestowed upon living beings.

Kingdom of Tormia.

Isabel, a certified 3rd-rank archmage and former librarian of the Magic Association, was hospitalized in the association's exclusive hospital, 1 kilometer from the capital Baschka's Magic Association.

A recognized scholar and mage, she had been caught in the association's political schemes and tortured for 48 hours for supporting Gaold.

The torturer, Sakiri, had not used the extrajudicial "Scales of Truth" as promised.

But his hands were so cruel that they felt beyond emotion, almost malicious, and Isabel endured every second of

agony.

As a result, Isabel held out for 48 hours, buying time for Gaold's team to reach heaven.

She had been unconscious for over a month, relying on life support, and woke up only yesterday morning.

Though the healing mages and surgeons asked her many questions, she hadn't spoken a word until today.

She just blinked indifferently, staring at the white ceiling. Knock, knock.

Even when someone knocked on the door, her gaze didn't shift.

But when she heard the man's voice entering the room, her pupils trembled, and she slowly turned her head.

"Are you alright? I heard you woke up early yesterday morning."

Sakiri, the 5th-level mage who had tortured Isabel for 48 hours, entered with a calm expression.

As the memories resurfaced, Isabel's heart rate skyrocketed. But soon, her trembling pupils steadied, and her expression began to stabilize.

He was a man she never wanted to see again.

But Isabel didn't stop Sakiri from approaching.

What she had sought, at the cost of her body, was an answer to her long-standing question about Gaold.

"What happened?"

Sakiri pulled a chair next to Isabel's bed and slowly sat down, asking again.

"What do you mean?"

"Did Gaold... go to heaven?"

"He did. But he hasn't returned yet. He may never come back."

Sakiri sighed deeply, looking at the contemplative Isabel, and continued.

"The association sent Team Cage B, but they also lost contact. The situation is complicated."

Sakiri's words didn't reach Isabel.

What she truly wanted to know wasn't that.

"...Did he transcend?"

Sakiri didn't answer.

"Gaold..."

Clenching her right hand, she trembled with shame and despair.

In the agony of torture, Isabel had cursed her existence as a living being thousands of times.

She had been broken.

It felt like endlessly falling towards something less than human.

If she could stop the pain, she would do anything vile, shameful, dirty, or monstrous.

That was the fate of living beings.

The karma of humans, bound to pain.

'But how... Gaold, how did you...'

Isabel raised her clenched fist to cover her eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Gaold..."

Isabel cried out.

"Did he truly transcend! Did he transcend pain, the human condition, the fate of living beings!"

If life is pain, then birth is a curse.

But if it were Gaold, perhaps he could overcome that curse and become something truly free from pain.

If so, Isabel could endure.

She could overcome her ingrained hatred for humanity and live again.

Sakiri, drawing on his experience as a torturer of many, answered honestly.

"Who knows. You can forget pain. But transcending it is impossible for living beings."

Turning to the window, he looked far beyond the sky and spoke.

"But if anyone could, it would be Gaold."

Poof!

With the third Air Press, the number of fallen angels and Maras was halved.

Now the enemies realized they would be annihilated upon approach.

"Raaaargh!"

Gaold, now a mere embodiment of pain, had forgotten even Kangnan's existence and rampaged wildly.

With his lower jaw dislocated and his arms flailing, blood tears streaming, Gaold looked like a demon.

"Sir...! Sir...!"

Like the girl who had sent Gaold to hell ten years ago, Kangnan was terrified.

Life is not pain.

Gaold's true face wasn't like that.

"Then why do we exist?"

As Gaold walked to the flower bed, posing another question, Kangnan set aside thoughts of pain and refocused.

"It's strange. Humans experience pain from birth to death. Does that mean life is a cursed bastard of the universe?"

While Kangnan pondered, Gaold dug up the soil and replanted the flower.

"Can it survive without roots?"

"Maybe it will take root again. Though it will be a painful process."

Gaold looked back at Kangnan, who had approached the flower bed.

"But Kangnan, that's what life is. Because it was born, it blooms even in pain."

Gaold smiled warmly at the struggling flower, then turned to Kangnan.

"That's why life is the most beautiful flower in the world. Like this flower, our lives are beautiful."

For the first time, Kangnan saw it.

Gaold's face, smiling so kindly and beautifully, was his true self before he became a madman.

"Raaaargh! Raaaargh!"