



The Infinite Mage

Information

Associated Names :

Infinite Mage
Infinite Magician
Infinite Wizard
무한의 마법사

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Synopsis :

This is the tale of a boy dreaming about infinity as a human!

Found abandoned in a stable, Shirone is the son of a hunter —and a peasant through and through.

Despite hardships, he's a genius that manages to learn to read by himself and becomes obsessed with it.

Brimming with genius talent, he goes to the city with his father, where he learns about magic—

beginning his journey as an explosive rising star!

Genre :

Action, Adventure, Drama, Fantasy, Romance, Shounen, Supernatural

Chapter 1: Meet the Magic (1)

“Wahh... Wahh...”

Vincent frowned as he awoke from his sleep. In the stillness of the mountain, where even the birds were asleep, the sound of a crying infant echoed.

“Wahh... Wahh...”

Even as he rubbed his sleepy eyes and shook off his disheveled hair, the sorrowful cries of the baby continued.

“Oh, Lord, what did I do to deserve this?”

Vincent glanced at his wife, still sound asleep in bed. He hoped she was dreaming sweet dreams because if she heard this, it would cause quite the ordeal.

Vincent and his wife, Olina, had been married for seven years and were childless. They had even spent a lot of money visiting doctors, but all they heard was that there was no known cause.

“There’s something called ‘compatibility’. It’s just one of those things. Neither you nor Olina seem to have any real issues, so just keep trying more often. Ha ha!”

At first, Vincent had laughed heartily. The doctor's advice had actually improved their intimacy.

But by their fifth year of marriage, he had no choice but to accept the truth.

They couldn’t have children.

Olina never once expressed disappointment. But every now and then, when he caught her looking wistfully at other people’s children, Vincent couldn’t help but feel frustrated with himself.

“Whose rotten kid is this, tormenting people like this?!”

As a hunter, Vincent lived deep in the mountains. He needed to check his traps regularly, and when tracking game for days, a base camp in the mountains was essential. At this hour, no one would come to a hunter's house. Suspecting the worst—perhaps bandits—Vincent grabbed a one-bladed axe and stepped outside.

“Who’s there! Who’s making all this noise in the middle of the night?!”

Vincent shouted so loudly the mountains echoed. There was no reply, only the sound of his voice bouncing back.

It could have been a merchant selling local goods, but no matter how hard he looked, there wasn’t a single torch in sight.

Growing more tense, Vincent gripped the axe handle tightly and carefully followed the sound of the crying baby.

The sound was coming from the stable.

It was likely bandits. He’d heard from villagers that bandits had been robbing lone mountain dwellers.

“Rotten scoundrels! I’ll cut you into pieces!”

In the worst-case scenario, there would be blood.

Resolving himself, Vincent flung open the stable door and, with the sharp senses of a hunter, scanned the inside.

Snort.

Hearing the peaceful snort of a horse calmed him somewhat. Animals never lied.

The stable, where two horses lay asleep, was small and cozy. There was nowhere to hide. Yet, strangely, there were no signs of anyone entering.

“Then where is the crying coming from?”

Vincent cautiously approached the pile of hay. There, a baby, barely a few months old, lay crying.

In awe of this mysterious sight, Vincent hid his axe behind his back. Then, feeling even that was disrespectful, he threw it into the corner and crawled toward the baby.

“Wahh... Wahh...”

When he gently unwrapped the swaddling cloth, he found a baby as beautiful as a full moon. An innocent child, oblivious to the world, who had just encountered the air of life.

Vincent's eyes trembled. Then, as if struck by lightning, his body shook. Overwhelmed with emotion, he ran out of the stable.

"Who's there?! Who's playing a prank on me? Abandoning a baby like this, you scoundrel! Come out now!"

His voice echoed through the mountains as if spoken by many.

"Come out! Are you really not coming out? How could you abandon a baby?! You're a real villain! Do you know that?"

He pressed on, but no one answered.

"So you really abandoned it! This is your last chance! If I ever see you again, I'll beat you senseless!"

Vincent shouted louder than he ever had in his life. He wanted to make sure that when he looked back on this day, he would have no regrets.

Vincent re-entered the stable. The baby, seemingly tired from crying, had fallen asleep. With trembling hands, Vincent cradled the child and gently placed his ear against its small chest.

The heart was beating.

"Honey, what's going on?"

Olina, panting, rushed into the stable. She was wide awake now, having been startled by the sound of Vincent's shouts.

Vincent, speechless, looked blankly at his wife, then showed her the baby asleep in his arms.

"Who is this child?"

"I think... this is our baby."

The early summer, lush with greenery.

Vincent hummed a tune as he briskly walked along the path by the cold, flowing stream. A large roe deer was slung over his shoulder, but his massive frame moved effortlessly.

As he neared home, his steps quickened. The thought of his precious family already made him smile.

"Shirone, Father's home!"

"Father!"

A 12-year-old boy burst out the door with a beaming smile. Unlike Vincent, who was as rugged as a rock, Shirone had grown into a boy who seemed as if he were specially cherished by the gods.

His hair shimmered like strands of gold, and his blue eyes and straight nose—though he hadn't fully grown—made him look like a doll. Every time Vincent saw his son, he couldn't help but feel proud, puffing out his chest.

Hugging Shirone, Vincent buried his face in the boy's neck, inhaling deeply. His son's scent washed away the fatigue of the long mountain trek.

"Ah, my son. My treasure. Have you been well?"

"Yes, I helped Mother with cooking and read lots of books."

Cooking and books.

The incongruity between the two words made Vincent feel a bit awkward. But he didn't show it and let out a hearty laugh.

"You really like books, huh?"

"Well, it's just... there's not much else to do."

Seeing his son trying to hide his feelings, as if he'd done something wrong, Vincent felt a pang of guilt.

He knew it, after all—this miraculous child, gifted by the heavens, was unusually intelligent.

Olina, Vincent's wife, could read a little, but she was the wife of a hunter, after all. Yet Shirone, with what little he had learned, had started recognizing letters and eventually taught himself to read books on his own.

That made Vincent's heart ache even more.

A hunter's child can't afford an education.

An herbalist's child becomes an herbalist, and a hunter's child becomes a hunter. That was the only way to keep food on the table.

No matter how insignificant a job, there are always tips and tricks that can't be passed on for free. What Vincent could pass down to his son was his hunting skills. That was all he had.

But he couldn't bring himself to say it. At 12 years old, Shirone was too young to learn how unfair the world could be.

"You did well. No matter what you do, learning is the key to success. When I head to the city next, I'll bring you another book."

"It's okay. You've already bought me so many. And to be honest, they weren't all that interesting."

Vincent laughed at his son's exaggeration. Practical books that might be useful were too expensive, so he had only been able to buy discarded books from the noble families at a second-hand shop. It was doubtful that any of them were at a level Shirone could truly enjoy.

Feeling a mix of pride and heartache for a son who worried about his parents' livelihood, Vincent's heart swelled and tore at the same time.

"All right! But how about this—how would you like to go chop some wood with me? Learning is important, but a man needs to be strong, too. Today, I'll teach you how to chop wood."

"Wow! So, do I get my own axe?"

"Ha! Of course! Today, we'll chop down all the trees in the forest together!"

Vincent eagerly handed Shirone an axe. Though it was a bit expensive compared to their living expenses, it was far more useful than books—after all, axes help you earn a living.

Honestly, Vincent hoped Shirone would follow in his footsteps as a woodsman. But Shirone was small for his age, making it hard to imagine him doing tough physical labor. So, Vincent thought it best to start building his son's strength early on.

‘He’s got the looks and the smarts of a noble. Could he be a noble’s child?’

Vincent quickly brushed the thought away. Every time he thought like that, he felt both unworthy of such a gift and guilty for even thinking it.

‘Shirone is my son. He’s not a child I found in the stable; he’s my own flesh and blood.’

With that resolve, Vincent took Shirone’s hand, and they set off from the house.

His logging site was about a kilometer away from the cabin. There were many hunters nearby, and if you worked outside your designated area, it could lead to fights—sometimes even to knife fights.

“Now, watch closely. I’ll show you how it’s done, and then you can give it a try.”

Vincent spat into his hands and began chopping the tree with a satisfying swing. After just a few chops, the tree cracked and fell with a loud snap.

The number of strikes it takes to fell a tree is a measure of a woodsman’s skill. Vincent wasn’t a lumberjack, but cutting it down in 10 strikes was impressive.

“If you keep hitting the same spot, the tree will lean and fall under its own weight. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes, I’ll give it a try.”

Vincent picked a tree that Shirone could manage. Standing before the tree, Shirone spat on his hands, just like his father had. After just one look, he mimicked Vincent’s stance and even the habit of rubbing his palms together. Vincent smiled, proud of his son’s quick learning.

But when Shirone tried swinging the axe, his stance seemed off somehow.

It wasn’t something you could accomplish with just brains. Strength and stamina were essential. The axe was heavy, and swinging it hard enough to cut into the tree required strong muscles.

The reason Vincent had taken Shirone out to chop wood in the first place was because his son's physique was smaller than other boys his age.

If he couldn't become a scholar, he would at least need to build up his strength. No woman would want to marry a man who couldn't provide.

"Hng! Hng!"

Shirone gritted his teeth and swung the axe, but each hit landed at a different spot on the tree.

Unable to watch anymore, Vincent gave him some advice.

"You don't need to use all your strength. Focus more on accuracy instead of power."

Shirone quickly took his father's advice to heart, but now he wasn't using enough strength, and the tree showed no signs of breaking.

Was my son always this weak?

Vincent felt a little deflated.

"Huff, this is hard."

"It's okay, Shirone. No, actually, I'm sorry. To be honest, I know this kind of work doesn't suit you. But the son of a hunter... has no choice..."

Vincent choked up. What parent wouldn't struggle with having to reveal the harsh realities of life to their child?

"You're really smart. Smarter than Baron, the herbalist's son, and even Stella, the fruit seller's daughter. There's no need to feel bad about being weak. My greed has..."

Tears welled up in Vincent's eyes from the sorrow. But Shirone, without paying attention to his father's emotion, tugged on his sleeve and asked,

"More importantly, Father, how can I chop the tree better?"

Vincent felt slightly embarrassed.

But only for a motherent—he was soon filled with joy at Shirone's interest in chopping wood.

"You really want to learn this?"

"Yes, please teach me. It's fun."

Hearing his son's words, Vincent's spirit lifted. He showed Shirone the groove in the tree where they had been chopping.

"Look at this groove here. Strength will come naturally when you grow older. But the truth is, you don't need a lot of strength for this. What's important is technique. Earlier, I told you to keep hitting the same spot, but if you adjust the angle just a bit, you'll get much more force behind each swing."

"Oh, I see."

Vincent squinted and examined the groove Shirone had made. It was impressive—he had hit almost the exact same spot repeatedly, something a beginner would rarely achieve. At this rate, it might be even harder for a strong person to bring the tree down.

Chapter 2: Meet the Magic (2)

“Let me try again.”

Shirone continued to stare at the notch in the tree even after Vincent stepped back.

At that motherent, he felt a light thrill.

Holding knowledge in your mind is one thing, but feeling it with your entire body is something else entirely.

Strike the same spot, but with a slight twist.

This simple piece of advice, passed down through countless woodsmen, was being absorbed by Shirone as a far deeper realization than Vincent had expected.

“Father.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think I can break this tree with one more swing?”

Vincent chuckled. “Haha! You’ve barely made it halfway through, how could it possibly break?”

“Well, if I’m lucky, maybe it’ll work.”

Luck alone won’t bring a tree down. Skilled woodsmen relentlessly exploit the weaknesses of the wood and bring trees down with only a few swings, but Shirone certainly wasn’t at that level.

“Alright! Let’s trust in my son’s luck then!”

Vincent playfully went along with his son’s enthusiasm. He was simply grateful that Shirone was taking an interest in woodcutting.

“If I do break it, will you grant me a wish?”

“A wish?”

A sudden unease swept over Vincent. Could Shirone be asking to learn how to read? Or maybe he wanted to be sent to school, like the children of wealth families?

“Can you take me with you the next time you go to town?” Vincent felt a wave of relief. Hiding it behind a hearty laugh, he replied, “Haha, sure, no problem! I’ll take you!”

Having received his father's approval, Shirone swung the axe over his shoulder and focused on the tree. The smile that had lingered on his lips slowly faded, and Vincent suddenly felt a chill. It was as if his son was searching for something unseen as he gazed intently at the tree.

Then, without warning, Shirone swung the axe.

He struck the notch dead center, but with an imperceptible twist in his movement.

Crack!

The sound of lightning striking echoed through the forest, and Vincent's eyes widened in disbelief. A web of cracks spread from the notch like an earthquake, and the tree, unable to bear its own weight, came crashing down with a loud crack.

“Yay! I did it!”

Vincent couldn’t believe his eyes. It was a legendary technique known among woodsmen as “Thunder Strike”. Though widely spoken of, neither Vincent nor any other woodsman he knew had ever seen or experienced it firsthand.

But that was because woodsmen focused on survival, whereas others—like knights—often encountered the phenomenon.

Knights, who wielded swords with their lives on the line, practiced their techniques in ways far more systematic and refined than any woodsman.

Among their skills was the Thunder Strike, but even then, it was a rare feat that not all knights could accomplish.

“Yay! I did it!”

Shirone jumped up and down, cheering in joy over his success, excited for the promise of going to town.

As Vincent watched his son, confusion clouded his thoughts.

Should he raise this boy to be a woodsman? Or perhaps he wasn't meant to be a woodsman at all?

Vincent held the reins of a two-headed cart as they crossed through the gates of Creas, the large city. Shirone sat in the cart, wide-eyed, eagerly taking in the sights of the bustling streets.

They had plenty of stops to make: delivering leather to the weapons shop, meat to the grocer, and innards to the apothecary or magic shop. Vincent knew it would take at least four hours to finish all the transactions and haggling involved.

Once they arrived at one of the shops, Shirone jumped off the cart as Vincent slung a bag of meat over his shoulder.

"Make sure you're back before sunset."

"Don't worry, I remember the way."

"And don't go wandering into any dark alleys. Stick to the main roads, and if anyone asks why you're alone, tell them you're waiting for me at the closest shop."

"I got it, Father. Nothing happened last time either."

Vincent's heart ached at the thought of leaving his son alone. But haggling was critical for the family's livelihood, and Shirone reassured him before heading off. Vincent assumed Shirone might go see a street performance or check out some toy stores, like most children.

But Shirone wasn't interested in those things.

Instead, he found himself standing in front of the largest library in the city. He gazed up at the towering, grand structure, his heart racing with excitement.

Would all the knowledge since the dawn of history be accumulated inside this building?

There was no way to confirm. The library, a high-class cultural space, was only accessible to nobles.

When two female students walked out of the library, holding books in their arms, Shirone hurriedly stepped aside.

Vincent was a kind father, but whenever he talked about nobles, he always issued warnings like a goblin.

Never argue with them. Their words are always right. If you make eye contact, bow your head.

Shirone didn't care how great the nobles were. He just wanted to read books.

'Why can't I go in?'

Shirone decided to follow the female students. There wasn't anywhere else he was particularly interested in, and he was curious about what made nobles different from commoners. After about 20 minutes of walking, the scenery changed dramatically.

Shirone forgot his original purpose, overwhelmed by the massive structures that rose around him. The most impressive among them was a school, its vast grounds visible even beyond the iron bars of its gates.

The name of the building was written on the archway at the entrance.

Alpheas Magic Academy.

If there was one word Shirone couldn't comprehend in his life, it was magic.

It appeared in countless stories, yet he had never seen a book explaining its principles. It was a kind of disregard—an arrogance that said those who weren't mages didn't need to know.

A guard spotted Shirone and shouted.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

Upon seeing Shirone's attire, clearly that of a commoner, the guard waved his hand dismissively, as if shooing away a fly.

"Get lost! This isn't a place for the likes of you."

"Oh, sorry!"

Terrified, Shirone ran away. The guard's intimidating appearance and glaring eyes made his legs shake.

However, once the guard was out of sight, Shirone stopped. Amazingly, he was still standing by the wall of the magic

academy.

Just how big is this school?

As he pondered this, an old man's voice came from beyond the wall.

"Now, let's begin our discussion on the topic: What is magic?"

"Aww, no! Show us magic! Just one more time, please!"

"Yeah! Show us some fire magic, Headmaster!"

Shirone looked up at a large tree standing beyond the wall. It seemed like the headmaster of the magic academy was conducting an outdoor class beneath its shade.

The children's voices were all younger than Shirone. Since nobles were educated from birth, it wasn't surprising that young children were attending magic academy.

"Haha! If I started a fire at school, I'd get in trouble. But if you can answer this question, I'll show you some interesting magic."

"Yay! What's the question? Ask us!"

Shirone pressed his ear against the wall.

"What is the most important talent needed to learn magic?"

A long silence followed.

No one seemed able to answer. Shirone thought it was a rather subjective question.

But the children attending the school were all prodigies, having been admitted early because of their magical talent. Rather than giving up, they began offering their answers one by one.

"Effort. Magic takes a lifetime to study, so hard work is the most important."

"I think it's knowledge. I've read over 100 magic books."

Other answers included concentration and memory, all sounding reasonable.

But the headmaster still hadn't responded. Perhaps he was smiling kindly at them.

"Money! There's so much you have to buy to learn magic."

The children burst into laughter.

The headmaster's chuckle joined theirs.

By now, even Shirone was curious. If effort, knowledge, and money weren't the answer, then what was the most important talent for learning magic?

Finally, after hearing all the children's responses, the headmaster spoke.

"The most important talent for learning magic is insight."

A second silence followed.

"What is insight?"

The headmaster let out a thoughtful hum before explaining in a kind voice.

"Insight is something more precise than knowledge and faster than effort."

"Wow! So, it's basically magic?"

"Haha! You could say that. No, you're right. Every magic in the world originates from insight. Let me give you an example. Do you know what 1 plus 1 is?"

"It's 2, of course."

The children answered in unison, as if wondering why he'd ask something so obvious.

"That's right. But can you explain why 1 plus 1 equals 2?"

"Huh? Well, it's just..."

The children who had confidently started to speak suddenly fell silent, unsure how to explain something so simple.

The headmaster's voice carried a smile.

"That strange feeling you're experiencing right now, that's insight. Long ago, people didn't know that 1 plus 1 equals 2. It took knowledge and effort to prove it. But you all understand it perfectly without going through that process, don't you?"

Shirone was becoming more and more absorbed in the conversation. The children beyond the wall were probably listening just as intently, mouths hanging open.

"Magic is a phenomenon that has always existed, like the fact that 1 plus 1 is 2, even before people knew it. Someone

discovered it through knowledge and effort, but you don't need to. Insight is the fastest way to understand a rule."

"Does that mean we don't need to study or put in any effort?"

"Is that what it sounds like? But to be honest... that's not entirely wrong."

Common sense is knowledge accepted by many. But sometimes, it's accepted simply because it's easy to believe. Shirone could sense the struggle in the headmaster's voice as he spoke of this harsh reality.

"So, we don't have to go to school?"

"Haha! Insight isn't something that's easily gained. The reason $1 + 1 = 2$ was proven by scholars after years of research. Of course, some people realize the truth without needing proof. We call those people geniuses."

"My mother says I'm a genius!"

"She might be right. Every human is born with talent, and if you hone that talent, anyone can become a genius."

Anyone can become a genius. Those words struck Shirone deeply.

But is that really true? Will there ever be a chance for him to cross this high wall?

"Alright. You there, behind the wall. I'd like to hear what you think."

Shirone quickly stepped back from the wall.

Should he run? Or answer? But did a commoner even have the right to respond?

"Don't be shy. Come over here. I'd like to see your face."

With his heart pounding, Shirone approached the wall. He didn't know much about the world yet, but one thing was clear. If he didn't take this chance to cross the wall now, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Shirone climbed over the wall. The headmaster of Alpheas Magic Academy, Alpheas himself, was smiling.

At first glance, he seemed like a kind old man with white hair, but in truth, he was a 4th-class mage recognized by

the kingdom, renowned even in other lands for his wisdom. Sitting on a flat rock, Alpheas waved his hand.

“Come, join us. Have you come to keep this old man company?”

Bolstered by the headmaster’s kindness, Shirone jumped over the wall. As he had expected, children around his age, or even younger, were sitting in a circle.

Chapter 3: Meet the Magic (3)

A child frowned as they looked at Shirone's appearance.

"Headmaster, that kid isn't a noble. I think he's a commoner."

"Commoners aren't allowed in here. Hey, you, get out!"

Alpheas, who hadn't expected Shirone to be a commoner, scratched his eyebrow awkwardly. But, being a mage who sought wisdom, he didn't discriminate by status and motioned for Shirone to come forward.

"It's alright. Come over here. So, what did this old man say that caught your interest?"

Shirone stood there, hesitating. He wanted to approach Alpheas, but the gaze of the other children held him back. Their looks seemed to say, "Don't you dare, commoner, invade our space."

"Show me a magic," Shirone asked.

"Ho ho, you've never seen magic before?"

"I've read about it in books, but I've never seen it in person."

One of the children pointed a finger at him and shouted,

"Liar! What commoner reads books?"

Alpheas stared into Shirone's eyes, as if trying to determine the truth. It didn't seem like a lie. But he knew kids at that age could easily deceive adults with innocent faces.

"Alright, what kind of magic would you like to see?"

"Anything is fine. Please show me something—anything at all."

Realizing his place, Shirone bowed politely. Alpheas let out a hearty laugh and waved his hand dismissively. A simple magic trick for entertaining kids wasn't a difficult task.

“This old man’s only joy is showing magic to my dear little ones. Very well! This time, I’ll show you magic that summons the wind.”

“Wow! It’s the wind!”

While the other kids clapped their hands in excitement, Shirone clenched his fists in tension, not knowing what to expect. Magic was completely foreign to him.

As Alpheas waved his hand, Shirone suddenly felt a sense of weightlessness and opened his eyes wide. The world seemed to drop beneath him, and his view expanded to encompass the entire magic academy.

“Ahhhhh!”

Without realizing it, Shirone screamed. Meanwhile, the other children, amused by Alpheas’ magic, were performing somersaults and enjoying the spell.

Soon after, Shirone began to fall rapidly. The sight of the ground rushing up at him made him squeeze his eyes shut and curl his body.

However, the expected crushing impact never came. When he slowly opened his eyes, he found himself floating gently, just above the ground.

The children pointed at Shirone and laughed, while Alpheas looked on with a broad smile.

“How was it? This is magic.”

The only sound Shirone could hear was the pounding of his heart in his chest. The magic he had just experienced far exceeded the vague fantasies he had dreamed of as a boy.

“What is magic?” Shirone asked.

“Hm, let’s see. Magic is...” Alpheas began, a playful glint in his eyes, but Shirone, growing impatient, interrupted.

“It’s okay if I don’t understand. Please just tell me what you really think.”

The children’s faces stiffened. Alpheas was a renowned mage, known throughout the kingdom. Even the noble children acted like meek lambs in his presence. So for Shirone to speak so boldly, the kids were utterly shocked.

Alpheas thought Shirone was being audacious, but seeing the desperation in his eyes, he didn't feel offended.

Shirone's beautiful appearance, uncharacteristic of a commoner, also helped ease any sense of discomfort.

"Ho ho! No need to be so nervous. It's not such a difficult concept. But if you wish, I can make it a bit more challenging. Magic is the act of breaking common sense. To put it another way, it's the mental process of exploring the truth behind phenomena."

Shirone blinked, lost in thought for a long moment.

"If you don't understand, it's alright to admit it."

"Even if it defies common sense, it's still the truth, isn't it?"

Alpheas pursed his lips, a habit he only displayed when truly surprised.

To grasp the essence behind such a short phrase meant Shirone had a deep level of understanding.

This was exactly the kind of insight Alpheas always emphasized.

"Where did you learn such things?" Alpheas asked.

"Uh, well, from books."

"There are books that contain such ideas?"

"It wasn't written explicitly. I just thought of it while reading. I realized that common sense isn't always correct. To reach the truth, you have to challenge common sense—that's what I thought."

Alpheas nodded, impressed.

'That's not just reasonable, it's the truth. Does he truly understand what he's saying? Anyone can parrot something they've heard from someone else, but if this is truly his own thought...'

Could this boy be only twelve years old?

Once a thought becomes accepted as common sense, it becomes incredibly difficult to break. For someone so young to already grasp the essence that magic strives for—this fundamental truth—was extraordinary.

‘How remarkable. He has true insight. Could he really be a commoner? What a pity...’

Sensing that he wouldn’t be able to stay here much longer, Shirone asked his second question.

“How can I learn magic? Do you need some kind of special power?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by special power, but it does require a great deal of mental strength.”

The answer was unexpectedly mundane. Shirone wondered if Alpheas might be hiding the truth.

“Is that really all there is to it? If I just think about wanting to summon the wind, will I be able to fly like I did just now?”

“That’s quite a difficult question. But if I exaggerate a bit, yes, it’s possible. Of course, just thinking about it won’t work. A mage’s mind must be completely in tune with the world. It’s like being in an extremely heightened state of awareness.”

The children, witnessing the headmaster in serious conversation for the first time, didn’t dare interrupt.

“How can someone experience that state of heightened awareness?”

Alpheas saw through Shirone’s intentions and smiled subtly. This wasn’t mere curiosity. The boy was genuinely seeking knowledge—he truly wanted to learn magic right here.

‘It’s unfortunate he’s a commoner. He’ll likely never have the chance to study magic. Perhaps it’s better to end this now than let him live with lifelong frustration.’

Alpheas relaxed his expression, shifting the mood.

“When a mage concentrates, their mind sharpens to the point where they can sense everything around them. Mages call this entering the Spirit Zone. I’ll give you a demonstration. Watch carefully what this student does.

Shua Min, can you enter the Spirit Zone?”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

The girl named Shua Min responded confidently. All the children here had been called prodigies before they entered

the academy, so it was only natural they'd want to show off their skills.

When Shua Min closed her eyes and began focusing, the other children fell silent, as if their demeanor further highlighted their sense of superiority.

"She's in the Spirit Zone," one child whispered.

"Then let's begin," Alpheas said.

He pulled out a few coins and jingled them. Then, grabbing a handful, he extended his closed fist.

"Now, how many coins are in my hand?"

"Six."

When he opened his hand, six silver coins lay in his palm.

Shirone's expression of surprise went unnoticed as Alpheas repeated the action.

"Let's try again."

"Three."

Once again, the answer was correct.

They continued several more times, and each result was the same. Alpheas, looking satisfied, put the coins away.

"Well done, Shua Min. You did an excellent job."

Shua Min let out a long breath. Despite only guessing the number of coins, beads of sweat had formed on her forehead.

"This is what it means to be in an extremely heightened state of awareness. When a mage enters the Spirit Zone, they perceive the outside world with superhuman senses. Truly skilled mages can even count the number of leaves on a distant tree. While what Shua Min demonstrated was impressive, it's just the beginning."

Shirone felt like he understood. After all, he had succeeded in mastering the Thunder Strike, a technique that required insight into areas beyond human perception.

He realized that Shua Min hadn't actually counted the coins. Instead, she had sensed everything happening within Alpheas' hand by focusing all her awareness on the situation.

‘A state of heightened awareness. The Spirit Zone.’

Shirone mulled over Alpheas’ words. And naturally, a question arose. Could I do it? No, maybe I could.

“Anyone can do it,” Alpheas said, seeing through Shirone’s thoughts.

The Spirit Zone was accessible to everyone. But it wasn’t something just anyone could master.

Natural talent.

Magic was a world that required such innate ability.

“Practice in a quiet place. First, feel yourself. Then, erase that feeling. Once you manage that, an entirely new world will open up to you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Shirone said.

“If you can’t feel yourself, then you won’t be able to erase yourself either.”

Alpheas was once again impressed. A 12-year-old wasn’t supposed to have this level of insight.

This left only two possibilities: either the boy was extraordinarily talented, or someone with a mischievous streak had sent him to cause trouble.

“Would you like to try it? Right here?”

With no reason to refuse, Shirone closed his eyes. He thought that if he relied on his experience with the Thunder Strike, he might be able to pull it off. But once he tried to concentrate, it was different from when he had searched for the weak point of the tree.

He couldn’t grasp anything. Even visualizing his own form proved futile since most of it was merely a compilation of information gathered through his sense of sight. He was shocked to realize how little he knew about himself.

‘What exactly am I?’

Shirone spiraled deeper into thought. Eventually, he reached the idea of contemplating the one who was doing the thinking.

‘The brain. Humans are their brains.’

No matter what he envisioned, he couldn't arrive at a clear definition of himself. A human is simply a product of the brain's activity. If thinking is the only way to define the self, then erasing thoughts would mean erasing oneself.

Shirone began erasing the brain's functions one by one. It was something that everyone could do, but not everyone could succeed.

His consciousness felt like it was being pulled into an abyss. For the first time, he saw the form of concentration itself. As the nervous system connected to his five senses began to melt away, he could no longer distinguish what was a smell or a touch.

And finally, Shirone disappeared from his own brain.

Shirone's eyes snapped open.

The scene before him was calm. The children were yawning, and some girls were plucking their hair to play with. Shirone hadn't realized that ten minutes had already passed.

"How was it? Did you hear anything?"

Alpheas hadn't expected much. He acknowledged the focus Shirone maintained for ten minutes, but entering the Spirit Zone wasn't something that could be achieved through sheer effort alone. If all it took was standing still with your eyes closed, anyone could become a mage.

"Yes, I heard something."

Alpheas raised an eyebrow at the unexpected response.

"Oh? And what did you hear?"

"Sound. I heard all the sounds."

"Ho ho, I see."

Alpheas nodded. Shirone likely hadn't entered the Spirit Zone. Even an ordinary person, after focusing for ten minutes, would start to hear all sorts of things. But the experience of the Spirit Zone was on a completely different level.

First, one experiences synesthesia—where sounds produce smells, light brings about taste, and images are felt through the skin.

'It seems it was too much to expect right away. What a shame. This boy does have talent.'

If he had been a noble, and trained from a young age, he could have achieved a level similar to the other children here.

But talent alone wasn't enough to sway Alpheas. The world was full of talented people, just like the children in this room, who still couldn't be guaranteed to become mages.

"You did well. If you keep practicing, you'll be able to hear even more sounds," Alpheas said, patting Shirone on the head before leading the other children away. Shirone sensed the disappointment in him. Still, it was considerate of Alpheas not to outright expel him from the school.

Shirone climbed over the wall and ran like mad. Only after collapsing to the ground did he realize how hard his heart was pounding against his ribs.

"I actually did it."

Chapter 4: Meet the Magic (4)

Shirone heard everything. Of course, he had other heightened senses too, but he couldn't confess this to Alpheas.

The motherent his vague intuition became tangible, his thoughts grounded in reality, warning him that this was dangerous.

Perhaps he had not truly entered the Spirit Zone. She still couldn't define exactly what it was.

It felt like her body was disintegrating into particles, spreading out. As her senses opened up, an overwhelming flood of information rushed in. The magnitude of this world, entirely different from anything she had perceived with her five senses, sent shivers down her spine. At the same time, a single truth pierced through her mind.

Infinite.

"Huuuh, huh..."

Shirone cried tears of overwhelming emotion. Then, clenching his eyes shut, he dashed forward. He didn't even realize he was running. His awakened mind was releasing a torrent of adrenaline, and he slipped into a motherentary blackout.

Suddenly, a blunt impact hit his face.

"Oof!"

Clutching his nose, Shirone fell onto his rear. When he came to, he was in an alleyway. It was the shady place that Vincent had specifically warned her never to enter.

"What the hell? Annoying!"

A young man who had been hit by his back lost his balance and grumbled. Ahead of him stood a group of thuggish-

looking men, glaring at Shirone.

As soon as the youth got up, he grabbed Shirone by the collar. His eyes were narrow and his lips twisted into a nasty sneer.

“What’s wrong with you? Are you crazy?”

“S-sorry!”

“Sorry? That’s it? Tell me the truth. The Wolf Gang sent you, right? Were you trying to take me out?”

“N-no! It’s not like that!”

The thugs saw the fear in Shirone’s eyes and smiled cruelly. Even sprawled on the ground, this kid was cute, and they could tell he didn’t have the guts to wield a knife, let alone hit someone.

In the underworld, kids like this were called ‘herbivores.’ And herbivores made excellent financial resources for carnivores. He was trembling in fear—now all that was left was to strip her clean.

‘Well, well, what do we have here?’

Despite the poor clothing, her face radiated nobility. A kid like this could be sold in the southern district for a good gold coin, a high-end product.

“What’s going on? Something fun happening?”

“Lady Amy!”

The thugs immediately turned and called out in unison. Standing just outside the alley was a beautiful girl about Shirone’s age. Her crimson-tinged bangs fell over one eye, and she wore a high-collared dress that matched her long neck.

“Hehe. What brings you here? Bored again?”

Despite his casual tone, the youth rubbed his hands together obsequiously. Anyone who knew her identity would understand.

Carmis Amy.

The youngest daughter of the Carmis family, the highest-ranked noble family. She had everything from birth, which

had left her bored with life. Lately, she wandered the slums looking for entertainment.

The Carmis family ranked just below royalty in the hierarchy, so it was natural that the alleyway thugs trembled before her. Besides, Amy's lavish spending earned her respect even among the lowlifes.

"This kid tried to kill me, Lady Amy. I was just giving him a little lesson."

Shirone frantically shook her head.

"N-no, it's not like that! I bumped into him by accident!"

"Yeah, right. You expect us to believe that?"

A hulking man jabbed him in the stomach, and Shirone couldn't even scream as he crumpled to the ground. His breath was knocked out, and his belly felt like it was being ripped apart. This was the first time in his life he had experienced violence.

"You think you're not gonna pay for this, huh? Where's your mother? Did he leave you to stuff your face with bread while she raised a kid with no conscience?"

Shirone was shocked. They had mothers too, so how could they say such things? They were truly awful people.

"Oh? Look at that, his eyes are changing. Are you upset now?"

As Shirone's expression turned serious, the thugs all rushed in and began to beat him. Even at that point, Shirone didn't understand why they weren't hitting his face.

"Stop it. You'll kill the kid," Amy ordered.

The thugs stepped back at Amy's command.

Shirone looked up at Amy, fear in his eyes. He envied her, as though there was an invisible glass wall between them—Amy was free from pain.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I-I didn't do anything."

"Who said you did? I'm asking if you're okay."

"I don't know if I am."

Shirone wanted to go home. Maybe this girl would let her go. After all, didn't girls dislike violence? He prayed silently, hoping for Amy's permission.

Amy glanced at the thugs and spoke.

"So, what now? Got anything more fun?"

Shirone looked at Amy with eyes full of betrayal and fear.

But Amy just gave a mischievous grin. One of the thugs scratched his head and said, "I figured we'd rob him a little, then sell him off as a male prostitute."

Shirone's face turned as pale as a bowl of watery soup. Amy felt a twinge of pity as she looked at the frightened boy.

Still, she had no intention of sinking to the level of the slum rats. She was planning to scare him a bit and then send him home.

"If he's gonna be a male prostitute, he needs to be in perfect condition. How about we strip him down?"

Amy suggested boldly. Nobles matured faster than commoners, and by twelve, they were already well-versed in theory.

And with that maturity came curiosity, the desire to see things with their own eyes.

'Besides... he's handsome, honestly.'

The rough, naked bodies of adults weren't to her liking, even if you paid her. But Shirone was close in age and pleasing to look at. While commoner women liked muscular, brawny men, nobles preferred someone like Shirone.

"Go ahead, strip. Who knows? Maybe if you're obedient, I'll let you go home."

Shirone stood there, numbly enduring the many eyes staring at her. She couldn't understand why this was happening to her.

"Hey, the lady said strip! Do you want to get beaten again?"

A thug barked, but Shirone didn't respond.

Amy felt a bit uneasy. Though a noble child of twelve was considered mature, a commoner was still just a kid. Maybe the terror had pushed him over the edge.

But Shirone wasn't going insane. In fact, he was more focused than ever. In the midst of his panic, he had unknowingly entered the Spirit Zone.

This second experience in the Spirit Zone was different from the first. A torrent of information was flooding in, and she could even hear the thugs blinking their eyes.

Shirone's mind followed a path through this hypersensory world, and at the end of it, a memory of Alpheas casting a spell lingered.

Shirone's insight gathered all the surface-level information from Alpheas' spellcasting—his emotions, sensations, thoughts, actions, posture, and stance.

As the outer structure took shape, he began to piece together its inner truth, and an idea clicked into place.

"Hey, hurry up and take off your pants! The lady said she wants to see!"

The Spirit Zone, which required deep concentration, was vulnerable to physical disruptions. When the thug grabbed Shirone's collar and shook her, he nearly snapped out of the Spirit Zone.

But as a chilling energy surfaced in Shirone's eyes, Amy raised her hand and shouted, "Wait a second!"

But it was too late.

Teetering on the boundary between reality and the Spirit Zone, Shirone's subconscious instincts kicked in, twisting the reality around her.

Boom!

A gust of highly dense wind surged upward, causing everything in the alley to be lifted into the air. The thugs, and even Amy, were sent flying.

It was as if a typhoon had swept through, leaving no wooden crates, stones, or even the smallest speck of dust behind.

"Ahhh! Someone help!"

Hearing the screams from above, Shirone abruptly snapped out of his trance. When he regained her senses, he found

herself standing in a deserted alley.

Moments later, the people who had been hurled higher than the rooftops began to plummet back down with screams of terror.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

The heavy, bone-jarring sounds of bodies hitting the ground reverberated. Gravity was far more brutal than one might expect, and the thugs who had landed awkwardly found their limbs broken.

“Ughhhhhh.”

“My, my arm... My leg...!”

Their legs were bent at unnatural angles, and the bones in their arms had pierced through their skin, protruding by an inch. It was like a scene of discarded marionettes, carelessly strewn about.

Shirone was speechless, unable to comprehend how a fleeting emotion could lead to such a horrific result.

Amidst the chaos, one person had landed gracefully, unharmed—Amy.

Nobles undergo rigorous physical training from a young age, and especially for someone of the first rank in nobility, there was no room for debate.

Holding down her fluttering skirt, Amy stared at Shirone with a mix of disbelief and curiosity.

“You... who exactly are you?”

The scene Shirone had created clearly illustrated why mages were such terrifying beings. Even someone as physically capable as Amy couldn’t resist the sudden whirlwind.

“Answer me! Where did you learn magic? How could a commoner possibly...?”

Amy trailed off, turning to glance behind her. People were starting to gather, having heard the screams. If word got out that she had been mingling with thugs, it would cause an uproar in her family.

“Tch!”

Amy placed a foot on the wall and pushed off, launching herself upward. With a few quick bounds, she vanished over the rooftops.

“Huh? Huh?”

Shirone, who had been tracking Amy’s movements, now stood helpless. If people saw this scene, he’d be blamed for everything. The city was cruel to those without power—no one would come to his aid.

Panicked, Shirone ran down the opposite alley. He raced toward the only person he trusted—his father.

The Carmis family.

For 200 years, they had maintained their position as the kingdom’s most powerful nobles.

Though their main house was located here in Creas, the family had produced many talented individuals who had made their mark not just in the kingdom, but across the continent.

Amy entered the house with a weary expression. Her father, Carmis Shakora, who had retired from the political world and returned to the family estate, was reading the newspaper.

“You’re back.”

“Where have you been? I heard you skipped your lessons again.”

Though Shakora was past sixty, he looked remarkably young, with not a single gray hair. Tall, fit, with an intellectual face, his eyes held the pride of being the kingdom’s top-ranking noble.

“I’ve already learned everything. It’s so boring.”

“So, you’ve been hanging out with ruffians again? Even if you’re a genius, slacking off too much will let others catch up. A rough gem needs polishing to become a jewel. If you let your guard down, one day someone will catch you off guard.”

“Ugh, there you go again with the lecturing.”

Shakora chuckled. Though Amy had inherited her mother's reckless nature, her talent clearly came from him. Once she realized her potential, the imbalance would naturally right itself.

That was the fate of a true genius.

Amy was about to head to her room but stopped in her tracks. Her father's words had unintentionally reminded her of what happened earlier in the day.

'Who exactly is that kid?'

From his clothes and terrified demeanor, he was clearly a commoner. The odds of a non-noble formally learning magic were about as likely as an illiterate person mastering the art of statecraft.

So, what was that magic he cast in the alley?

An accidental manifestation? An awakening of his talent? No matter how hard she thought about it, those were the only conclusions she could come to. Her father's words suddenly stung.

If you let your guard down, one day someone will catch you off guard.

Amy bit her lip. The world may be dull, but that didn't mean she was willing to fall behind.

"Father."

Shakora lowered his newspaper and adjusted his glasses. It was unusual for his daughter to start a conversation, especially during her rebellious phase.

"Yes? Do you have something to say?"

"Well... It's not like I really want to. But there's something I'm kind of interested in."

"Oh?"

Shakora's eyes lit up with curiosity. She had always been a child who, when taught one thing, could master a hundred. Whatever it was, he was sure she'd excel.

"Tell me, and I'll fully support you."

"No, I said I'm not really into it. I'm just... curious."

"Alright. Then I'll fully support your curiosity."

Amy clicked her tongue. She knew the truth. With the power and wealth of the first-ranked nobility, there was nothing in the world they couldn't obtain.

Sometimes, though, she wished her parents would take on a difficult challenge for her sake. But that was just a rebellious thought from a teenage girl.

"Magic."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"Introduce me to someone at a magic academy if you know anyone."

Chapter 5: Meet the Magic (5)

Shirone kept silent about the events that had occurred in the city. Upon reflection, he realized it wasn't a simple matter. Once he started talking, he would have to reveal what had happened at the magic academy as well.

Shirone understood that the incident from that day was an extraordinary experience. Whether it was a blessing or a misfortune, one thing was certain—once he crossed the line, there was no going back to how things were before.

One criterion for being a genius is recognizing that you are one. Shirone had known from a young age that he was different from others. While he didn't feel particularly superior, his desire to test the limits of his abilities was stronger than anyone else's.

But he didn't show it.

To Shirone, his parents were the most precious people in the world. Even though they were poor, they had never forced him down the wrong path. He didn't want to burden them with the weight of his troubles.

And so, the great awakening the twelve-year-old boy had experienced went into a dormant phase, waiting for the right opportunity.

Life continued as usual. He helped his mother with work and spent his afternoons chopping wood in the mountains.

However, most of his time in the mountains wasn't spent chopping wood but meditating. After about a month, he was able to enter the Spirit Zone much faster.

Of course, there were still challenges. No matter how familiar he became with the Spirit Zone, he couldn't replicate the magic he had cast in the alley.

Before long, Shirone realized why.

It had been magic performed unconsciously and involuntarily. Once he became aware of its success, he could no longer imitate it. It was like trying to play a piece of music that he had once played effortlessly but now froze under conscious thought.

To restore that feeling, he would have to retrace the steps he had skipped over in his insight. But having never formally studied magic, it was impossible for him to retrace those steps.

Rather than dwell on the unattainable, Shirone decided to focus relentlessly on the Spirit Zone.

Simply casting magic wasn't enough for him to be a true scholar of magic. He concluded that developing mental resilience, unshaken by any circumstance, was crucial.

After five hours of meditation, Shirone grabbed his axe and attempted the Thunder Strike. Unlike before, as soon as he started focusing on the technique, his success rate dropped. But chopping wood wasn't like magic—he could go over the process repeatedly.

Shirone corrected each mistake one by one as he swung the axe.

After hundreds of strikes, he finally succeeded in executing the Thunder Strike.

Crack!

The tree fell satisfyingly.

But he felt no particular excitement. It was simply the discovery and correction of one error.

“Tomorrow, and again tomorrow.”

And so, he continued to repeat the basics, preparing for the opportunity that would come someday.

As Shirone carried the wood back home, his eyes shone more intensely than ever before, focused on an opportunity more valuable than life itself.

A Priceless Opportunity (1)

Autumn leaves scattered endlessly on the wind.

Standing by the window, Shirone, now wearing a mink scarf, gazed out at the late fall scenery in the mountains.

Four years had passed, and Shirone had grown into a sixteen-year-old boy. Though traces of youth remained, he was now strikingly beautiful—his face so captivating that it could turn heads regardless of age or gender.

“I’m heading out, Mother.”

“Don’t overdo it, dear. We have enough firewood for now.”

“Winter’s almost here. It’s better to be prepared.”

After gathering his gear, Shirone stepped out of the cabin, the cold air taking his breath away. The mountains welcomed the seasons faster than the city, and snow had already begun to pile up at the peak.

“If I want to be back before sunset, I’ll have to walk briskly.”

Having trained his mind in the Spirit Zone for four years, Shirone no longer feared ordinary dangers like he once did.

His social awkwardness had also faded, and he now often mingled with the children of the mountain hunters.

But he didn’t have any friends with whom he truly opened up.

The mountain children were rough and straightforward, unlike Shirone. Even the girls were the same.

In that group, Shirone was the odd one out.

While the children admired Shirone’s intelligence and sophistication, at times, they openly displayed hostility toward him.

A year ago, a woman from a slash-and-burn farming village named Hauran had made a pass at Shirone. She was six years older than him and had called him aside under the pretense of talking, only to try to make physical advances. When Shirone firmly rejected her, she suddenly turned on him, saying that a weak boy like him wasn’t her type and threatening to ruin his household if he ever bothered her again.

Shirone chuckled to himself as he recalled the memory.

He remembered how, as a child, he had been so anxious for days, worrying that she might actually show up at his home. 'I wonder how everyone's doing.'

Shirone, having arrived at the logging area, found an appropriate tree and lightly struck it with an axe, carefully examining the groove it left. However, his eyes weren't really seeing anything. After years of experience, he realized that the vital point of a tree couldn't be found with just his eyes.

When one repeats the same actions or thoughts, sometimes the principle behind it becomes apparent—this is called a routine. A common example is understanding the complex concept of basic arithmetic instinctively.

For four years, Shirone experimented with different ways of swinging the axe, and through this process, he perfected the sensation of Thunder Strike.

Sensing something, Shirone picked up the axe again and struck the groove with moderate force. A thunderous sound erupted, and the tree fell. He had succeeded with just two strikes. Though it was a bit of luck, Shirone could consistently pull off Thunder Strike once every ten tries.

Sitting on the fallen tree, Shirone entered the Spirit Zone.

Currently, his Spirit Zone was a spherical area with a diameter of around 40 meters, a level that placed him in the upper classes even among the elite students of the magic academy.

He could feel the world beneath his feet, sensing the subtle movements of the foliage as if he were one with the earth. He heard the worms squirming in the soil and the sound of tree roots absorbing moisture.

Nature never rests; it's constantly changing. Savoring that dynamic world made five hours pass in the blink of an eye.

"Huh? It's already dark."

Having finished his meditation, Shirone chopped the fallen tree into logs and shouldered them on a carrying rack.

When Shirone arrived at the cabin, he noticed a luxurious carriage parked outside, something he wasn't accustomed to seeing. Looking into the stable, he saw two white horses licking their feed.

"I'm back."

He called out as he opened the door, but no one greeted him. Something felt off. His mother's face was tense, and in the living room, an old man he had never seen before was seated at the table, talking with his father.

"Oh? Father, you're back already?"

"You're home, Shirone?"

It was earlier than expected for his father, who had gone to town at dawn, to return. Moreover, under normal circumstances, his father would have rushed over to shower him with kisses, but now he sat solemnly.

"Introduce yourself, Shirone. This is the deputy butler of the Ogent family."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Temuran."

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Shirone."

Shirone bowed politely. Even though he lived in the mountains, he knew about the Ogent family—a noble house of the second rank based in Creas, renowned for producing many martial artists.

"I've come to meet you."

Temuran exuded the typical aura of nobility, though he himself wasn't a noble.

In the kingdom's hierarchy, while the division between nobles and commoners was simple, many strata existed beyond political distinctions.

Among these, it wouldn't be wrong to say that the status of commoners was largely determined by the nobility.

For example, blacksmiths who crafted weapons for nobles were highly respected. Merchants who set up shops in noble districts also wielded considerable influence.

But what about a mountain dweller? They had no ties to the nobility and didn't even live in the city, so they were

considered lowborn, treated with disdain.

On the other hand, as someone who served nobles closely, Temuran could be seen as the highest-ranking among commoners.

Shirone had no idea why such a man had come all the way to the mountain to see him.

“Let me take a look at you first.”

Temuran examined Shirone’s body, assessing his appearance, physique, and even his gaze, much like a farmer evaluating livestock.

“I’ve heard you can read.”

“Yes, I’ve been reading books since I was young.”

Temuran, offering no further explanation, fell into deep thought, which tested Shirone’s patience.

“I’d like to know what’s going on. Could you tell me?”

Temuran’s gaze grew sharp.

“I hear you have a good reputation. A mountain dweller’s son who can read and, on top of that, is known for his filial piety.”

Temuran had a knack for making compliments sound like mockery, as if to say, “How deep could your filial piety really be?”

Shirone hated people who belittled others’ families the most. He was about to retort when Temuran said something shocking.

“How would you like to work for the Ogent family?”

Shirone felt as if he’d been struck by lightning. Working for a second-rank noble family would be akin to rising from the lowest class to the highest.

“What kind of work would I be doing?”

“The main house is relocating the grand library. It’s not a task we can entrust to just anyone. There are over ten thousand volumes, and some of them must never be leaked. While laborers will handle the heavy lifting, the sorting will be done by just you and me. It’ll likely take around two years.”

The library!

Shirone's heart almost burst. He knew that the more enticing an offer seemed, the more likely it was hiding a trap, but right now, he felt as though he would drink any poison if necessary.

Temuran, as if reading his mind, explained the "poison" Shirone would have to swallow. It was the pride of a butler not to deceive the lowborn.

"The only people who know this are you and your family. If, for any reason, a book is leaked or rumors of a leak spread, you and your family are as good as dead."

Shirone now understood why his parents' expressions had been so dark. Even if no one talked, anything could happen over the two years. It was akin to entrusting their lives to someone else.

Yet, despite that, Shirone found he couldn't refuse the offer. Perhaps it was because...

"Since it's a matter of life and death, we will pay you handsomely—far more than your father could earn from hunting. Thanks to their son, your family will be living comfortably."

Vincent stood up abruptly, his face red.

"We didn't hear you out because of the money! I just... I just want my Shirone..."

Vincent was too choked up to speak. He felt ashamed for being such a useless father, unable to provide anything for his son. And now the opportunity he had brought was something that risked his son's life.

"I just... wish for him to fulfill his dreams."

Temuran scoffed in disbelief.

"What are you thinking? That you can curry favor and climb the ranks? Wake up from that dream. Let me be clear: I'm hiring him. You were the one who begged me to hire your son. It's only about money, nothing more."

"You said he can read!"

“Of course he can. But the point isn’t just reading; it’s the fact that it’s impossible to monitor him perfectly. That’s why I said I would cut off his head if there’s a leak. It’s the bare minimum safety measure.”

Vincent gritted his teeth. While in the city selling goods, he’d heard from a noble family’s butler that they were looking for a commoner who could read. Believing it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he had rushed to Temuran to plead for Shirone to be hired.

But he hadn’t expected things to turn out this way.

What frightened him most was the potential harm this could do to his son. Would Shirone think he had sold him out for money?

The very thought was terrifying.

“Get out. We don’t need your money. If I’d known it would be like this, I wouldn’t have asked in the first place. So leave my house now!”

“Father, I’ll do it.”

“Shirone!”

Temuran turned to Shirone, surprised. It was a life-risking job. For a 16-year-old boy, especially a commoner, the burden must have been overwhelming, yet Shirone showed no signs of fear.

“Are you sure? I’m not trying to scare you, but I must be clear. Even the smallest rumor could cost you your head.”

“Yes, I’ll do it. I won’t let anything leak, and even if rumors spread for any reason, I won’t hold it against you. Please let me do it.”

Hearing this, Temuran decided Shirone was trustworthy.

Everything seemed perfect: he was a lowborn who could be easily disposed of, he was filial, and he was sharp.

Feeling that his efforts had paid off, Temuran turned to leave.

“I’ll come to collect you in a week. You’re free to change your mind before then, but once you enter the mansion, you won’t be able to leave until the job is done.”

Without waiting for a farewell, Temuran left the house. But the family wasn't in the mood to offer any words of caution either.

Chapter 6: A Priceless Opportunity (2)

Vincent grabbed Shirone's shoulders and shouted.

"Shirone! Why did you agree to this? This is extremely dangerous! No, it's my fault! It's because your ignorant father didn't know any better! So let's refuse!"

"It's okay, Father. I just have to make sure nothing gets leaked, right?"

"It's not that simple. How can there be secrets in things done by people? The more I think about it, the more foolish this seems! I'll take responsibility and refuse!"

Shirone smiled gently and shook his head slowly. He realized he truly had the best parents.

"Father, thank you."

Vincent looked bewildered. It was the first time Shirone had ever addressed him so formally. But even more surprising was the fact that Shirone was crying.

"S-Shirone..."

Shirone opened his arms wide and, with a radiant smile that matched the joy in his heart, said:

"Father, you've given me the greatest gift in the world."

"Hugh!"

Vincent, forgetting his dignity, burst into tears. Had he ever seen his son cry before? Had he ever seen him so full of joy?

"Don't worry, Shirone! No matter what happens, I'll protect you! Just do your best, without any worries! I'll make sure you're safe!"

"Father, I'll do my best."

"That's my son! My treasure!"

Vincent hugged Shirone tightly and kissed his cheek.

Watching the touching embrace between father and son,

Shirone's mother, Orina, wiped away her own tears of happiness.

A week later.

The regular servants from the Ogent family came to take Shirone. They had said that sorting through the ten thousand books would take over two years, but for Shirone, who had lived simply, his luggage amounted to just a single backpack.

As part of the deal to take Shirone, Temuran had promised 20 gold coins per month. Considering that the family's monthly living expenses were only 4 gold coins, this was an enormous sum.

Would their home look a little more luxurious when he returned? Though Shirone knew his parents weren't the type, he tried to cheer himself up with the thought, shaking off any lingering sadness.

From the motherent he stepped into the carriage, the contract was in effect.

The regular servants swiftly processed the paperwork, and in the midst of it all, Vincent barely had enough time to say a proper goodbye before Shirone was whisked away into the carriage.

Shirone remained calm as he waited inside. Though he hadn't shown it to his parents, from now on, it would be more important to keep his emotions cool and focused. He closed his eyes and entered the Spirit Zone. Through his heightened senses, he could feel his parents, wiping their tears as they awaited his departure. He gently guided his thoughts, almost as if he was comforting their hearts.

Warm feelings of love spread through Vincent and Orina's minds. While it wasn't exactly magic, it was certainly a reflection of Shirone's sincere heart reaching out to them. When the carriage finally rattled to life, Shirone was jolted out of the Spirit Zone, though his eyes remained closed. Entering the Ogent family was both the opportunity of a lifetime and the gravest risk, a double-edged sword.

Could he survive two years among people with such immense power?

Unsure of what the future held, Shirone once again sank into the Spirit Zone.

The Ogent family was a renowned warrior clan, known for producing certified third-class swordsmen of general rank. Additionally, the head of the family, Ogent Bischof, was a fourth-class certified swordsman and the military commander of the city of Creas.

When Shirone arrived at the Ogent estate, he was overwhelmed by the vast scenery that stretched out beyond the main gate.

A massive road cut through the entire estate. Passing through the grand mansion and under an arch, the road extended beyond the back gate, reaching far into the distance, out of sight.

‘So this is the Great Road of the Ogent family I’ve heard so much about.’

The Great Road, dividing the estate in two without any obstacles, was a symbol of the Ogent family’s bold and powerful nature.

A steward in his early twenties sneered at Shirone as he looked around in awe.

“Heh, are you scared? No need to be shocked yet. The family members are even more monstrous.”

“Watch your words. Do you want to lose your head?”

An older steward scolded him. But since there was no real malice in the young steward’s words, the rebuke ended there, and they led Shirone through the main gate.

The Great Road wasn’t meant for servants. Shirone followed a garden path next to the road, circling around the mansion. The place where the servants resided was a four-story round building. Upon entering the office, they found the deputy butler, Temuran, going about his work.

“You’re here? I’ll explain the task, so follow me.”

“Yes, I’ll do my best.”

Temuran headed toward the library without even acknowledging the greeting.

As the rusty iron doors of the library creaked open, a vast space filled with books was revealed. Books filled the shelves on the second, third, and fourth floors as well.

Inhaling the scent of old paper, Shirone clenched his fists tightly. The situation was serious enough to risk everything.

“We will be moving the books here to the new library. Your job is to categorize them. I’ll give you a list of titles every week, and your task is to locate and gather those books.

The work hours are from 9 AM to 6 PM. After that, you have free time. You’re not allowed to leave the premises or enter the mansion without special instructions. The regular butler will inform you of the butler’s rules. Understood?”

“Yes. When do I start?”

“Tomorrow. For now, unpack and rest. Get familiar with the butler’s rules in the meantime.”

Starting the next day, Shirone reported to the library. Once he began, it became clear why he had to do the work alone. The list Temuran provided contained hundreds of titles, and the criteria for categorization were subjective.

For example, should a book titled *The History of Swordsmanship* be categorized as a history book or a swordsmanship book?

Temuran had set some basic guidelines, but with over ten thousand books to organize, Shirone often had to make his own judgments.

He decided to prioritize. History was broad, while swordsmanship was more specialized, so he categorized *The History of Swordsmanship* under swordsmanship. It took him two weeks just to establish these standards.

However, even this kind of work was beneficial to Shirone. Through the process of creating a classification system, he realized that all knowledge is interconnected. Music and

mathematics, chemistry and psychology, art and science—they weren't so different after all.

Once the classification system was set, the work gained momentum. As Shirone began to meet his daily quotas, he finally turned his attention to studying.

Knowledge was the greatest distinction between nobility and commoners. The knowledge he would acquire here would be immensely helpful in the future.

Shirone decided to use his time efficiently. With ten thousand books in front of him, even with two years, reading them all would be impossible.

'Where should I start? Should I just read randomly?'

Struck with an idea, Shirone slapped his knee. Since all knowledge was connected, focusing deeply on one subject would allow him to strengthen other areas of knowledge later on.

"So, what field should I focus on?"

After much thought, Shirone's lips curled into a smile.

"I should study history."

If human life is history, then knowledge has also developed along historical lines. Learning history was like building the spine of a living organism.

Shirone visualized the horizontal timeline of history in his mind. If he expanded that line, he could see religion, science, magic, mythology, literature, art, politics, war, and economics—all of humanity's knowledge—arranged in chronological order.

"If I learn history, I can reinforce other knowledge whenever I need to. In fact, combining it with other fields will be much faster. History is the backbone of knowledge."

The library contained about 850 books on history. Shirone made up his mind. He would read all 850 history books in the next two years, building the backbone of his knowledge! From that day onward, even after his work was done, Shirone didn't return to his quarters but stayed to read.

Under the guise of working overtime, he skipped roll call, but as a temporary worker, no one except Temuran paid him any attention.

Reading history books was admittedly difficult. Having grown up in the mountains for 16 years, Shirone had never heard of most of the continent's place names and figures, let alone visualized the intertwined events.

He briefly considered memorizing the material by heart but quickly dismissed the idea. Memorization records things in the mind, but understanding records them in the heart.

Even a single event, if truly understood, would help build the spine of knowledge.

Yet understanding history was a monumental task.

It wasn't just about learning events. He had to grasp why certain events had occurred and how those events would influence future ones.

His pace slowed dramatically, and a week passed without finishing even a single book. He often ended up sleeping in the library, collapsing in exhaustion.

At 4 AM.

The iron doors creaked open, and Temuran entered with a crystal lamp in hand. Shirone didn't notice, but Temuran had been checking on him at this hour every day.

He glanced at the book Shirone had dropped while reading. The material wasn't particularly difficult, yet two weeks had passed, and the book still hadn't changed.

Temuran sneered. If Shirone had been madly cramming practical knowledge, he would have considered banning him from entering after work hours.

But now it seemed like Shirone was utterly clueless. Despite knowing how to read, he was just a fool with lofty dreams.

"Of course. What does a commoner expect to accomplish?"

Feeling much lighter, Temuran turned to leave. Success in academics required both luck and intelligence. Shirone, with his grand dreams but no substance, had already failed in his eyes.

Three months had passed since Shirone began working in the library.

As he became more familiar with the classification work, he had more time to spare and learned various things through the butlers.

The most shocking revelation was that the nobles didn't care whether the books were leaked or not.

After all, the family secrets were passed down directly, and with the many responsibilities the nobles had, they couldn't care less if a few books went missing.

That didn't mean Shirone was any less at risk. The tolerance of the nobility was built on the strict loyalty of the commoners. The butlers could become ruthless to ensure no mistakes were made.

Shirone realized firsthand just how disconnected the mindsets of the two classes were. What was trivial to the nobility could mean life or death for a commoner.

Around noon, the library doors suddenly burst open, and an unfamiliar boy's voice shattered the silence.

"Damn it, that old man! What's the harm in taking a day off today?"

Shirone blinked at the unexpected guest.

It was Ogent Rian, the youngest son of the family head. As expected of someone from a martial lineage, his facial features were sharply defined, and though they were the same age, he stood a head taller than Shirone.

A loud voice echoed from outside the library.

"Rian! How dare you run off? You'll get an extra hundred laps around the garden if I catch you!"

"Ugh! Damn it!"

Rian, panicking, ran around the bookshelves before spotting Shirone. Without giving him a chance to react, Rian rushed over, shaking him by the shoulders.

"Hey! Don't tell anyone I was here, got it?"

Before Shirone could respond, Rian hid under the bookshelf. Just then, the door swung open, and the old man's voice boomed through the library.

"Riaaan! I know you're hiding in here!"

Despite his white hair, the old man's broad shoulders and towering height made him an imposing figure. With his long white beard hanging down to his chest, he walked over to Shirone, glaring menacingly.

"You! Have you seen a blue-haired brat around here, short and scrawny like a peanut?"

Shirone wondered if the old man had mistaken him for someone else. He did know a blue-haired boy, but if that boy was "scrawny like a peanut", how did the old man perceive him?

"Based on the description, he might be the young master. May I ask who you are?"

Shirone thought of using the authority of the family to buy some time. However, the battle-hardened veteran before him had commanded battlefields for decades and easily saw through his intentions.

"I'm his swordsmanship instructor! The one who's going to beat that peanut into shape! Now stop wasting my time and speak up if you don't want to get smacked first!"

Shirone smacked his lips. For a knowledge-seeker like him, a teacher was akin to heaven itself. Especially a master instructed by the family head—there was no room for a butler's wordplay.

"Ah, I see. The young master is hiding under that bookshelf over there."

"Hey! Are you insane? Do you want to get us both killed?"

Rian crawled out, his face twisted in a scowl. But then he froze as he came face-to-face with his swordsmanship instructor, who was now towering over him.

"Master, this is a misunderstanding!"

"You little brat!"

The instructor grabbed Rian by the collar and slammed him into the floor.

As Rian's body arced through the air, Shirone closed one eye. With a tremendous thud, Rian hit the ground, limbs trembling.

"Come with me, you brat. Forget your training—you need a complete mental overhaul."

Rian, now being dragged by the leg, craned his neck to glare at Shirone. His lips moved, though no sound escaped. Yet, despite the lack of voice, Shirone clearly heard what he was trying to say:

You're dead.

Chapter 7: A Priceless Opportunity (3)

Since that day, Shirone couldn't help but feel an itch on the back of his head. He never knew when Rian might show up for revenge.

But Rian never appeared. Rumor had it that he had been dragged off to the mountains by the sword master.

It took Shirone a month to finally relax. Emotions tend to fade over time, and something that once seemed like a big deal begins to feel insignificant. Even if Rian returned, he likely wouldn't be as furious as before.

Feeling lighter, Shirone resumed reading the founding history of his homeland, the Kingdom of Tormia.

In four months, he had finished 82 books. While it wasn't an overwhelming number, it was still impressive considering it had taken him 20 days to finish the first one.

Recently, Shirone's reading speed had increased exponentially, and it now took him an average of just 20 seconds to read a page.

For sections he didn't understand, he took a full minute, but for familiar parts, less than 10 seconds was enough.

This was a natural progression when focusing on a single field of study. After all, authors themselves acquire knowledge from other books, so there's rarely anything completely new in any work.

Shirone believed that once he crossed the 200-book mark, the remaining 650 would be much quicker to read, as he would have a better grasp of the general content.

What Shirone enjoyed most in history books was the stories of mages. If scholars researched theories, mages were the ones who brought those theories to life.

The profession of a mage was as varied as the kinds of scholarship. But scholars who couldn't access the Spirit Zone could never become mages, making mages highly elite individuals.

Extensive knowledge and heightened awareness—these were the two essential qualities a mage needed. Having already mastered the Spirit Zone, Shirone was even more determined to immerse himself in knowledge.

Suppressing his curiosity about other subjects, he focused solely on history, knowing that a well-rounded knowledge base would greatly enhance his efficiency in the future.

He often wondered what kind of mage he would become once his foundation in knowledge was complete.

Such thoughts even made sleep feel like a waste of time.

Just as Shirone was about to close the founding history book with a satisfied smile, the door burst open loudly.

"You little punk! I've survived hell, waiting for this day to come!"

It was Rian, back from what he described as hell. His face was so full of spite that he looked like a demon.

Shirone could only shake his head at Rian's persistence.

Judging by his demeanor, he still seemed as furious as the day he was taken away by the sword master.

The only difference was that Rian now looked gaunt, with hollow eyes and a thinner frame.

"You dared to snitch on where I was hiding?"

"Is that really why you're here?"

"Of course! Do you even know what I went through? I climbed cliffs over and over again. Every time I thought I was going to die from exhaustion, I pushed through, thinking of my revenge!"

Shirone started to feel uneasy. If Rian had spent every day nurturing this grudge, then to him, Shirone must now appear worse than a mortal enemy.

"Aren't you going to answer? I asked why you ratted me out, you coward!"

"I didn't rat you out. I just told the truth."

"Haha! Told the truth? Well, how about I tell the head butler what you've been up to, then? See how your life turns out after that! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Seeing how absurd this situation was, Shirone gave up on trying to reason with him. He had already learned how vastly different the thinking of nobles was from that of commoners. Avoiding further escalation seemed like the best option.

"If I've wronged you, I'll accept my punishment. What do you want me to do?"

Rian looked a bit taken aback. He could see that Shirone was nothing more than a common butler who had just joined the household, but he acted so calmly.

"So, now even the butlers think they can look down on me? Fine. I'll make you experience the same suffering I went through. Come with me."

Shirone was practically dragged along, realizing that Rian was likely planning to beat him in some secluded spot. The memory of being assaulted by thugs four years ago flashed through his mind, making his chest tighten.

'At least it's better than dying. Let him beat me, or do whatever he wants. I'll endure it.'

Shirone thought of his family every time fear crept up, recalling his parents cheerfully sharing a meal together. He couldn't let this opportunity they had sacrificed so much for go to waste.

Rian took him to a small training yard. As befitted a martial family, the mansion had numerous large and small training grounds. This one was Rian's private area, far enough from the main house that no one would come running, no matter how loudly one screamed.

While Rian lit a torch, Shirone swallowed nervously. He wished the ordeal would just begin already, the waiting only making his stomach churn. Perhaps Rian was dragging it out

on purpose, being a swordsman well-versed in the tension before a fight.

“Here, take this.”

With the yard now illuminated, Rian tossed a wooden sword at Shirone. It landed in his palm with a firm slap, the handle thicker than that of any axe Shirone had ever held.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“What, you thought I’d just beat you one-sidedly? I’m not as cowardly as you. I’m going to be the greatest swordsman in the world one day. I’ve gotten stronger because of you, so I’m paying you back. Seems fair, right?”

Shirone was speechless. To pit someone like him, who had never trained in martial arts, against Rian, who had been honing his skills since birth, was no different than asking to be beaten up.

“And what exactly did I do that was so cowardly?”

“You’re the type of person I hate the most—the kind who tattles without even thinking when someone’s in trouble. The perfect punishment for someone like you is a good beating with a wooden sword. Come on, let’s go. I’ll give you three free hits to account for our skill difference before we start.”

Rian’s eyes shifted as he pointed his sword at Shirone. His personality might be strange, but the fire in his eyes was unmistakably that of the Ogent family.

Perhaps reacting to the tension, Shirone found himself gripping the wooden sword with both hands. The solid feel of it made it clear that this weapon could easily break through bones. In other words, once the three chances Rian offered were over, Shirone’s bones would likely be next to break. A flood of thoughts raced through his mind. *I won’t be able to work. I won’t be able to read. What if my parents have to look at their son, broken and crippled?*

‘What do I do? What can I even try?’

Shirone made up his mind. He had no choice but to swing. Giving up just because the odds were slim would be as

foolish as throwing away his future.

“Yaaaah!”

With a yell, Shirone raised his sword over his head and charged forward. The force was impressive, but Rian sneered. His stance was poor, and his center of gravity was all wrong. It was clear he’d never wielded a sword before.

As he blocked Shirone’s strike, Rian shouted, “One!”

The sharp sound of their swords clashing echoed through the training hall, but to Shirone, it was more like the footsteps of a lion closing in. Overwhelmed with fear, he swung again in desperation, attempting a sideways slash.

“Two!”

Hearing Rian’s booming voice infuriated Shirone. How could he take so much joy in toying with a complete novice? Biting his lip, Shirone poured everything he had into his final strike.

As the wooden sword sliced through the air, Rian’s lips curled into a smirk. A vertical slash, then horizontal, then vertical again. It was a pattern so simple it was almost laughable.

Rian positioned his sword in a blocking stance. Taking a step forward, he shouted, “Alright, this is the last one! Now, it’s my tur—”

Crack!

Suddenly, the middle of Rian’s wooden sword shattered. Rather than breaking, it seemed to have snapped cleanly. At the same time, Shirone’s wooden sword also splintered in the center.

Rian’s shocked expression was brushed by small fragments of wood. He quickly regained his composure and stepped back to examine his sword. The grain at the break was rough and jagged, as if the shock had been trapped inside and burst out.

‘This... this is Sword Smash, isn’t it?’

A weapon-destroying technique called Sword Smash.

Every sword style had at least one method for breaking weapons since all swordsmanship involves cutting. In the Ogent family, this technique was known as Sword Smash, a secret passed down only to a select few.

The reason it was considered a secret technique wasn't just because it required strength. In battles between people, absorbing and countering force was as important as applying it. To succeed in a Sword Smash, one needed to focus all their energy into a precise shock aimed solely at the sword, not the person wielding it.

For Rian, this was an astonishing motherent. Despite training with swords his entire life, he had never successfully executed a Sword Smash against another person.

But what angered him more was that, among all his family members, he was the only one who hadn't mastered Sword Smash yet.

"Who are you, really? Where did you learn swordsmanship?" Shirone dropped the remains of his wooden sword. To be honest, it had been a gamble.

After the first strike, he felt something. After the second, he calculated the timing. And on the third, he made his move—using the Thunder Strike he had practiced countless times over the past four years.

"I've never studied swordsmanship."

"Liar! You expect me to believe that? Then how did you break my sword? Are you mocking me? I'll kill you on the spot!"

"It's called the Thunder Strike."

"Thunder Strike?"

"My Father is a hunter. I spent my childhood cutting down trees in the mountains. Since I wasn't big, I had to develop a technique to split the wood efficiently. That's how I learned the Thunder Strike. Among woodcutters, that's what they call it."

Rian's mind was a mess. A mountain dweller? Cutting down trees? What the hell is he talking about? I've been training with swords for 16 years. There's no way splitting logs would teach you something like this. No one my age has mastered Sword Smash... except...

Rian thought of one person.

Ogent Rai.

Rai was Rian's older brother by two years, a prodigy praised as the greatest talent in the Ogent family's history.

Rian clenched his fists so hard they hurt. He could almost see Rai's specter mocking him.

Rai had successfully performed his first sword-break at the age of 12. It was a family celebration, and their father had thrown a lavish week-long party in his honor.

Rian still remembered the feelings he had that day. And now, to be surpassed by a woodcutter's son?

"I won't accept it!"

Rian's furious shout seemed to chase away his brother's specter. He had worked hard, pushing himself to the breaking point countless times.

So why could this guy do it when he couldn't?

"Young master, I know I've been disrespectful, but—"

"Shut up! Nothing's over yet! No one has lost! I am Ogent Rian!"

Rian turned, walking to the edge of the training ground where an ornate longsword rested, reserved for noblemen. He drew it with a metallic hiss, and the blade gleamed like molten steel, reflecting the torchlight.

The sight of the real sword sent chills down Shirone's spine. When Rian drew the blade, it seemed to sizzle with a fiery glow. After checking the edge, Rian sheathed it again and threw it toward Shirone.

Shirone caught it with both hands, staring at it, confused about why he was being handed a sword. Rian pointed at him.

“We can’t settle this without weapons. If you’ve mastered Sword Smash, you deserve a fair duel. One month from now, we’ll fight here again—with real swords.”

Shirone’s heart sank. He had tried everything he could to survive, but the situation kept getting worse. The thought of fighting with a real sword was terrifying. This time, there would be no three chances.

I could die.

For the first time, Shirone truly felt the fear of death. His parents’ sad faces flashed through his mind. He felt a deep sorrow for all the dreams he might never realize.

“Please, young master, reconsider! I’ve never trained in swordsmanship!”

“That’s why I’m giving you a month. You cRaim you learned Sword Smash while chopping wood? I don’t believe it, but if you’re really that talented, you’ll figure out something in a month.”

Rian didn’t feel like he was being unreasonable. If Rai could do it, then it was possible. Maybe this wasn’t so different after all.

“Don’t even think about running. I’ll never forgive someone like you.”

Rian’s final words landed like a nail driven into Shirone’s chest.

Chapter 8: A Priceless Opportunity (4)

The Next Morning.

Shirone headed to the library, looking exhausted. The events of the previous night had left him unable to sleep at all.

His unsettled mind made it hard to focus on sorting tasks, and realizing this wouldn't do, Shirone forced himself to regain some composure.

Fear wouldn't solve anything. He had to come up with some kind of plan over the next month.

First on the agenda was gathering information.

The head of the Bischof family had three sons and one daughter. The eldest son was a certified 6th-class swordsman, and the second son, Rai, was known as a sword prodigy, expected to follow closely in his brother's footsteps. Rian's older sister also had talent at the level of the Ogent family but gave up swordsmanship because she was a woman, and now worked as a pianist in the royal court.

By process of elimination, the only one who hadn't stood out was Rian. Even with a personal tutor assigned by the family head, the reports always came back saying he had no talent.

"Ah, what a pointless thing I did. I should've just let him hit me."

It was no surprise that Rian, who had spent his life being compared to his siblings, was infuriated by Shirone's Thunder Strike. Not all nobles were exceptional, it seemed.

"What do I do now? I'm really in trouble."

Once he grasped the situation, anxiety crept back in. Under the desk, the real sword that Rian had thrown at him was

still sitting there, untouched.

After staring at it for some time, Shirone finally made a decision and abruptly stood up, heading for the study. Whether he fought or not, it was better to be prepared. Having lived in the mountains, he was confident in his physical stamina. Maybe learning to defend himself could save his life.

He decided to put history books on hold for a while. Instead, he gathered every book he could find on swordsmanship. Among the books were technical guides like *Swordsmanship Manual*, philosophical works like *What Is a Sword?* and *Only Humans Fear Swords*, and even practical guides like *Winning with Bluff* and *Survival of the Fittest*.

Shirone opened a book with the straightforward title *Swordsmanship*. It covered the history of the sword and the general principles of sword fighting.

Even as a magic student, Shirone found the content fascinating. Just as mages had the Spirit Zone, swordsmen had something called Schema.

Schema is a virtual body or a mental blueprint of the human body. Every person has an internal image of their body, but Schema takes it to an extreme level of specificity.

Masters of Schema understand their bodies so thoroughly that they can control even the actions of individual cells.

Reading this, Shirone realized that Schema was essentially the counterpart to the Spirit Zone.

While mages dissolve themselves to blend with the world, swordsmen intensify their awareness of self to the extreme. Shirone decided to test it out.

He activated the mental processes involved in entering the Spirit Zone and imagined a virtual version of himself in his mind.

This part was easy.

But the virtual body remained shadowy, dark, and impossible to see into.

'If I could lift this shadow completely, it would become Schema. Amazing.'

Shirone returned to the book. It said that the method of mastering Schema varied widely between families, and different families focused on strengthening different aspects of it.

Some families pursued Schema through mental discipline, while others pushed their bodies to the limit. Some used Schema to strengthen muscle, others to increase speed, and others to enhance their nervous systems.

Shirone thought back to the red-haired girl he had encountered in the alleyway four years ago. At the time, he had been too busy escaping to notice, but in hindsight, her movements weren't human.

'That girl must have mastered Schema. She was about my age too. What incredible talent.'

But there was no time for admiration. Shirone closed the book and fell into thought. It was unlikely that Rian had mastered Schema either. And yet, Shirone had his doubts about trying to do so himself.

Just as the Spirit Zone wasn't exactly magic, Schema wasn't exactly swordsmanship. Just as mages needed knowledge, swordsmen required physical strength. Without a strong body to support it, even if one could activate Schema, its benefits would be limited.

"I already have the Spirit Zone. Instead of trying to master conflicting concepts, I should focus on finding a solution through swordsmanship."

He needed to find something that could keep him alive within the next month.

Shirone grabbed an introductory swordsmanship manual and opened it to the first page. Although studying swordsmanship had been an unexpected turn of events, his focus was sharper than ever, given that his life was at stake.

"Ahhh! Ahhh!"

Dust rose in the grand training hall as Rian's legs kicked up clouds of dirt. His heart felt like it was going to explode. He couldn't breathe, and his stomach was rebelling.

"Blech! Blech!"

What he had eaten for lunch came back up through his throat. Rian didn't care. All that mattered to him were his legs.

"One hundred laps! Done!"

Sword instructor Kite shouted in satisfaction. He couldn't remember the last time Rian had looked so focused and determined.

"You've set a new record! What's gotten into you? You're actually doing the training without compRaints?"

"Damn it! How is this even called training?"

"What was that?"

Kite shot him a bewildered look. He had just been about to praise him, but here Rian was, already compRaining again. But today's compRaints had a different tone.

"I'm still standing! Master, don't you have something tougher?"

"Oh?"

Kite was quite surprised. It had been a long time since he'd seen Rian so fired up. Probably not since two years ago when he had been crushed by Rai's prodigious talent.

"Something must've happened to you, huh?"

Rian, hands resting on his knees, drenched in sweat, lifted his head.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

Kite didn't believe him. He could see that in those intensely focused eyes, there was someone haunting Rian's vision.

"Is it Rai again?"

Who else could push Rian this hard except for the second son of the family? Had Rai done something new again? But what? Hadn't he already mastered Schema?

In the end, it didn't matter. Rai wasn't Kite's concern; his student was Rian. And right now, Rian was practically

begging to be pushed further.

“Alright then! Let’s see how far you can go today! But I won’t be responsible if you die for real!”

“Bring it on!”

Rian swung a metal rod, twice as heavy as a regular sword, repeatedly. Since he couldn’t grasp Schema through insight, he planned to push his body to its absolute limit, hoping to force it out.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Kite watched, proud at first, but his expression soon stiffened. Finally, he realized what was happening and rushed forward.

“You madman! Stop! Your muscles will tear apart!”

“They haven’t torn yet!”

Kite stopped in his tracks, watching his student. Tears streamed down Rian’s face as he gritted his teeth and swung the rod.

“Damn it! Why won’t my muscles tear? Why won’t my arms break? I can keep going! This isn’t the end! I’m not finished yet!”

Kite’s eyes welled up with tears. He was just as frustrated as his student. Why wasn’t it working? Even after pushing his body to its absolute limits, why couldn’t he unlock Schema? Kite wiped away his tears with his thick arms. He couldn’t give in to doubt. If the master wavered, what hope did the student have?

Kite intercepted Rian’s metal rod with his palm. This time, Rian had no choice but to stop swinging.

“Rian, that’s enough for today. You’ve done more than enough.”

At the warmth in Kite’s voice, Rian’s madness faded. His arms had long since gone numb. He didn’t even notice when the rod fell from his hands. Bowing his head, he muttered quietly.

“Yes, thank you.”

Kite placed an ice towel on Rian's shoulder. Considering that his bones were unharmed, there was no denying that he was born with strong, resilient bones.

Rian sat on the hill overlooking the training grounds, staring blankly into the distance. After finishing the treatment, Kite sat down beside him.

"What are you thinking about?"

"That my arms hurt like hell."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Kite's lips.

"Rian, I've never written in any report to the family head that you have talent."

"Tch, who said you did?"

"But I believe you do. Talent isn't just about achieving something quickly. It's about pushing forward, even when it seems impossible. That's also a form of talent."

"There's no need to comfort me. Let's be honest—it's because I lack talent that I have to work myself to death."

"Is that so? Geniuses know they're geniuses. They also clearly understand what they can achieve. Have you ever thought that way?"

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

"Exactly. That's why you're not a genius."

Rian looked at Kite, dumbfounded. His master seemed to be adding salt to the wound, pouring gasoline on a burning house. His arms were in agony, and now Kite's words were making his insides burn too.

"Enough already. I get it."

Rian pouted, and Kite smiled gently.

"But Rian, do you know what geniuses fear the most? It's effort. Putting in effort means you don't naturally have what you're striving for. You say you work hard because you lack talent? Not at all. Only those who are capable of effort can make the effort."

Kite placed his hand on Rian's shoulder and gently squeezed.

“Geniuses fear you. You have the power to obtain what they can’t. Those who can put in effort are the true enemies of geniuses.”

Enemies of geniuses.

Rian liked the sound of that. Even if it was just comforting words for a pitiful student, it didn’t matter. Yes, it was simply something he didn’t have. If he didn’t have it from the start, he’d just have to get it through sheer determination.

Rian clenched his fists, resolving to pour everything into the remaining month.

Shirone, on the other hand, clearly understood what he was capable of.

Rather than clinging to the idea of mastering Schema, she sought other solutions, showcasing a nature that was the polar opposite of Rian’s.

Still, talent pursues the shortest path to its destination in the most efficient way. Shirone didn’t bother with unnecessary techniques; he focused solely on the fundamentals of swordsmanship.

A month flew by.

After mastering eight directions of slashing and eight directions of blocking, Shirone concluded her training.

At the end, she posed a question that encapsulated everything she had learned.

“What is swordsmanship?”

It is the culmination of movements driven by the intent to kill. And because it determines life and death, it is also an intricate form of psychology.

Shirone imagined Rian as his opponent and pointed her sword at him. The enemy would likely come at him from every conceivable angle.

But it was all an illusion. The only real threat would be the sword aiming to strike her.

Shirone faced his imaginary opponent with his own mental responses. His sword extended like a phantom, covering all

eight directions. In another exchange, it branched into dozens of possible attacks.

“It’s not about counting numbers. It’s about sensing the whole.”

If you focus on the trees, you can’t see the forest. The key is to perceive the entirety of what could happen—that’s true insight.

But it wasn’t easy. The more the various patterns branched out like fractals, the more she found herself fixated on certain attacks.

“It’s okay if I can’t do it. I’ll just observe.”

Gradually, Shirone gained motherentum, and at a certain point, she completely let go of her thoughts. All possible outcomes were drawn into an infinite void.

“Huh? What the...?”

Shirone stared at the world in awe. It was endless. The entire world was filled with his and Rian’s swords.

Overwhelmed by the sheer scale, Shirone dropped his sword and staggered.

“Haha, hahaha.”

He let out a hollow laugh. Like magic, swordsmanship was also infinite. He had just experienced a world of endless possibilities, all stemming from a single sword.

‘So this is the path swordsmen have chosen.’

He, too, was walking a path of infinity with magic. A strange sense of camaraderie lifted her spirits.

‘Mother, Father, I’m sorry. I might not be able to come home.’

There were no regrets. Rian probably felt the same.

Standing at the crossroads between life and death, they had been lucky enough to glimpse a fascinating part of the world.

The sound of a bell tolled from outside the library, signaling the approach of midnight.

Rian, who sought what he could not have, and Shirone, who had finished everything he could do—these two mirrored

boys were now just one hour away from their clash.

Chapter 9: A Priceless Opportunity (5)

The Grand Training Arena.

Shirone arrived right on time. Rian was already there, waiting.

The battle had already begun in spirit. The two stood apart, eyeing each other from a distance.

“Let’s get started.”

Rian had chosen the same longsword as Shirone.

Ogent swordsmanship, known for its flashy and dynamic style, was more suited to a broadsword than a longsword.

But that was only relevant when it was possible with Schema; it was more a choice of customized weaponry rather than consideration for Shirone.

Shirone took the stance of beginner swordsmanship, a basic position in swordsmanship. It was a simple posture, but even Rian could see that Shirone had much better balance than before.

‘Is it really... possible?’

Rian saw a glimpse of Rai in Shirone once again. He suddenly had this thought: maybe that kid had never truly learned swordsmanship.

‘But how can he stay so calm? Isn’t he afraid of death?’

Even Rian, who had trained with swords for sixteen years, feared death. That was why he pushed his body to its limits to boost his confidence.

In contrast, Shirone lacked the kind of courage Rian had. He was a herbivore who loved peace and hated fighting.

However, intelligence always seeks the highest efficiency.

Analyzing the fear of the real sword as the greatest danger

in this duel, Shirone worked hard to find a solution and finally found the answer.

If he couldn't overcome the fear, he could understand it.

In sword philosophy, this is referred to as "leap of faith".

Anyone can jump off a cliff if they don't think about the fact that they will die.

For example, certain groups in the world do not feel fear.

Whether they are rulers, businessmen, or criminals, they all share a common trait: they do not imagine the consequences beforehand.

Serial killers only pursue motherentary pleasure and do not think about the death they will face when caught. Some dictators leisurely enjoy banquets even when rebels are breaking through their gates. For them, the future does not exist even for 0.1 seconds; it is an illusion.

Shirone imagined standing at the edge of a cliff. Then, he extended his right foot into the air and followed with his left. Shirone did not fall. If one does not imagine the future, the outside of the cliff is just a state before falling.

'Until I fall, I haven't fallen. Until I die, I'm not dead.'

The reason intelligence can sometimes be more frightening than courage is that it understands the nature of danger in this way.

Furthermore, Shirone's frozen mind ultimately led to a significant increase in the stability of his Spirit Zone.

"I'm going!"

As Shirone entered the Spirit Zone, Rian closed in on him.

A flash seemed to streak in front of Shirone's eyes. It was a flashy swordsmanship, certainly at a different level than a lumberjack's axe-swinging.

But Shirone also had his own Spirit Zone.

With his synesthetic perception, he clearly felt the trajectory of the sword and narrowed his eyes to evade the attack.

Rian's expression shifted to one of surprise. For a beginner, seeing the movement of a real sword was absolutely impossible.

However, the techniques of swordsmanship are also infinite. There were certainly unpredictable elements in Rian's attacks. As the blade passed by Shirone's chest, the Spirit Zone wavered motherentarily.

Shirone's heart dropped. At this rate, he would be completely at his opponent's mercy.

But Rian's subsequent attack was unexpectedly aggressive. Thanks to that, Shirone was able to dodge and escape death.

'Why is he attacking like that?'

He could have simply made a swift slash to the side without exerting much effort. Yet Rian came at him with grand movements, seemingly unaware of Shirone's wobbling stance.

'Is his understanding of swordsmanship not as strong as I thought?'

Shirone's thoughts were accurate. Rian lacked insight; while he was skilled in sword techniques, his understanding of the essence of swordsmanship was lacking.

Shirone adjusted his perception of Rian's strength. Setting the opponent too strong was foolish, as it gave up any chance of counterattacks. To win, risks had to be taken.

As Shirone initiated his counterattack, the tension of death heightened, causing Rian's stamina to rapidly depleted.

After several exchanges, Rian was finally shocked.

"Damn it! This can't be happening! This can't be real!"

The techniques being used by his opponent were only basic slashes. Yet it was difficult to block. He was only targeting the unguardable parts.

Suddenly, Rai's face flashed in his mind. Two years ago, during a duel, his brother had subdued Rian with just one hand. Rian could still vividly remember Rai's smirking face, lips curling into a sneer.

"What a joke! I'm going to be the world's greatest swordsman!"

The more Rian charged in recklessly, the more puzzled Shirone became. What kind of boy is this? Doesn't he want to win? Why is he being so stubborn? Does he even think? 'Huh? Huh?'

Shirone gradually realized that he was being pushed back. At some point, he couldn't read Rian's movements anymore. Rian's sword, wielded with conviction, approached Shirone with an unpredictable complexity.

"I won't lose! I will definitely overcome this!"

Rian seized the advantage of victory and pressured Shirone. Shirone's stamina rapidly dwindled. He had been distributing his stamina efficiently up to this point, but an absolute difference remained. The sword felt heavier.

"This is the end!"

As Rian lunged forward with his longsword poised to strike Shirone's chin, Shirone swung down with all the strength he could muster.

With a clanging sound, their swords shot into the air and embedded themselves in the far side of the martial arts arena.

Silence enveloped the space.

The two of them exhaled heavily and glared at each other.

Rian slowly lowered his gaze. He saw Shirone's sword aimed at his solar plexus.

Just before the swords clashed, Shirone spun his wrist like a whirlwind, lifting Rian's sword from below to above. With the added force of inertia and impact, Rian, whose stamina was depleted, ultimately lost his grip on his sword.

This was not a technique he had attempted with confidence. It was merely the difference in understanding of swordsmanship. He had taken a risk based on the belief that only an attack that could kill him was real.

Shirone did not let his guard down. He wanted to collapse right there, but he couldn't let the hard-won life slip away uselessly.

"Ugh, I really thought I was going to die."

Rian watched Shirone, who was grumbling. The strongest opponent who had pushed him to overcome the fear of death had vanished, leaving only a little boy sitting there. Who could he be? It was clear he was a genius. Yet he was not Rai. Unlike his brother, who had laughed and dismissed him while batting his sword aside with one hand, this boy had fought him with everything he had.

"What's your name?"

Shirone raised his head. Sitting down, Rian appeared even larger.

"I am Arian Shirone."

"I'm Ogent Rian."

It was funny for a noble and a commoner to introduce themselves, but what was even more absurd was this: did he really think he wouldn't know the name of his family's youngest son?

Rian walked over, indifferent to Shirone's sulky expression. Shirone's head tilted up even more. Rian, with a hand as large as a pot lid, spoke in a deep voice.

"Let's be friends. What do you think?"

The First Step Toward a Dream (1)

It had been a year since Shirone entered the Ogent family. Now 17 years old, Shirone had read more than 7,000 books from the grand library. Temuran was amazed at his incredible reading speed, but Shirone had already anticipated this. It was only natural that the more the books were categorized, the faster the process would go.

In Shirone's mind, everything in life seemed to follow the principle of acceleration rather than constant speed. Even if the start is slow, as long as one doesn't give up and keeps moving forward, one can reach the goal faster than expected.

Of the 850 history books he had set as his target, only about 200 remained. His average reading speed was over three books a day, and in just a few months, the backbone of knowledge he dreamed of would be complete.

Aside from that, he had also experienced swordsmanship and understood the nature of fear. This allowed him to significantly strengthen the durability of his Spirit Zone. All in all, the past year had been both productive and fulfilling for him.

But no achievement could compare to the joy of making his first true friend.

“Wow, there are so many books. I wonder if my family’s read all of these,” Rian mumbled, glancing at the books while sitting on the floor.

As Shirone got to know him better, he found Rian to be affectionate and full of charm, fitting for the youngest in a noble family.

While organizing books on a ladder, Shirone replied, “Of course. The lord and the young master often visit the library.”

“Tch, smart people are lucky. They can do so much.”

When Rian threw the book he had been reading aside, Shirone climbed down from the ladder, picked it up, and scolded him.

“Don’t throw books around. If even one gets damaged, I’m as good as dead.”

“I don’t like that either. How can books be more important than a person’s life? Even if you burn down this library, I’ll protect you, so don’t worry.”

“If you just stay still, there’s no chance of that happening, so please be careful,” Shirone said.

Shirone had never been the type to say anything cheesy. He was firm and strict, but not cold. Rian liked that about him.

“I like being with you, but being cooped up in this library is killing me,” Rian complained.

“Then why are you hanging around here? What about your training?” Shirone asked.

“I’m just doing basic training. I told them I wanted to study in the library for a while,” Rian replied.

Shirone trembled slightly.

“Then hurry up and study. What are you doing?”

“I’m bored! Bored! Bored!” Rian flailed his arms and legs, whining.

Shirone ignored him and headed toward his desk. He wasn’t particularly worried about Rian’s laziness. If Shirone was like water, Rian was like fire—once he ignited, he would blaze uncontrollably.

Chapter 10: The First Step Toward a Dream (2)

Shirone, holding a history book, scolded Rian again.

“Get up and bring your book. You need to study.”

“Ugh, training’s been so intense lately.”

After sending Rian to the study, Shirone sat down and opened the history book. Recently, fieldwork had been completed faster than paperwork, giving him plenty of free time.

Once he focused on the book, the pages flew by. A glance to the upper left, lower left, upper right, and lower right—four eye movements, and two pages were done. Moreover, his rhythm rarely broke until he finished the entire book.

This indicated that the scope of knowledge in his mind now exceeded the scope of the books. After reading 650 history books, the remaining 200 or so could be absorbed as easily as drinking water.

“Hey, Shirone. I found an interesting book.”

Rian approached, waving a book. But when he saw Shirone flipping through the pages at an incredible speed, he didn’t dare interrupt. For instance, it had once taken Rian more than 10 hours to turn just one page. He was sure he had been reading, but when he opened his eyes, it was morning. Rian sat down next to Shirone and opened the book he had brought. The title read: *Swordsman VS Mage*.

“Introduction: You’ve probably asked yourself this question at least once—if a swordsman and a mage fought, who would win?”

As Rian read aloud, Shirone’s hand paused in mid-page turn. For an aspiring mage like him, the topic was irresistibly intriguing.

"I traveled the world in search of the answer. Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still see it: the Artusna mountain range at 6,000 meters above sea level. There, carnivorous trees prey on mountain birds..."

Rian closed the book abruptly.

"Wow, this is so boring."

"What? I think it's interesting!"

Startled by Shirone's outburst, Rian's shoulders jumped. He had pretended not to care, but like a sly fox, his ears had been perked up all along.

"How is that interesting? There aren't any pictures, and it doesn't even talk about swordsmanship."

"You didn't even read a single page—how can you say that?" Shirone retorted.

"The author should have more consideration for the readers. Start off exciting and end with something emotional."

"This isn't a novel. Give me the book. So, who wins?"

"Who cares who wins? Do you really think a swordsman and a mage would actually fight? If it's favorable, they'd attack, and if it's not, they'd run."

Shirone flipped to the middle section of *Swordsman VS Mage* and skimmed the pages.

"There could be situations where they have no choice but to fight. If that happens, who would win?"

"Hmm. If I had to guess..."

"The swordsman, of course," came a sharp voice from behind the bookshelf. A man with a cold expression appeared. He wasn't as bulky as Rian, but he was much taller, with long, slender limbs.

It was Rai, the second son of the Ogent family.

Even though they were brothers, Rai's appearance and aura were quite different from Rian's. His hair was jet-black.

The Ogent family had two dominant bloodlines that had been passed down, one marked by blue hair and the other by black. The patriarch, Bischof, along with his eldest and second sons, had inherited black hair, while the blue hair

had been passed to the second daughter and youngest son, Rian. Their grandfather, a nationally certified third-class swordsman, also had blue hair.

Despite these differences, the family was closely bonded. However, it was sometimes amusing how they would divide into factions based on their bloodline. The superiority of one lineage over the other shifted with each generation.

Currently, the black-haired line, represented by Bischof and Rai, was in the lead.

"Oh! Hello," Shirone hurriedly bowed his head. No one in the family knew about his friendship with Rian. If they had overheard their earlier conversation, there would be serious consequences.

"The swordsman wins? How can you be so sure? Just because you're a swordsman?" Rian, aware of the risk, tried to keep Rai's attention on their conversation with a sarcastic tone.

"Is there really a need for a grand term like 'certainty'? It's obvious just by looking at the positions that mages and swordsmen hold across the continents."

Fortunately, Rai didn't seem to care about Rian and Shirone's friendship, but Shirone wasn't at ease. Every time Rai came to the library, Shirone found him difficult to read.

"No matter their rank, this is a straight fight. You're not going to say something like, 'Step aside because I'm ranked higher than you' on the battlefield, are you?" Rian said smugly, thinking he had scored a point.

But Rai didn't even flinch. Instead, he casually glanced at Shirone.

"What do you think, kid?"

"Well... assuming both are at the highest level, magic is extremely powerful, so a mage could deal a fatal blow to a swordsman. But swordsmen are physically superior, so if they can close the distance before the mage casts a spell..."

"No, you're wrong. A mage cannot defeat a swordsman."

Shirone felt a surge of frustration. Although still an apprentice, becoming a mage was his dream. Hearing that his dream was inherently inferior to something else was upsetting.

Rian, also angered by Rai dismissing his friend's ambitions, snapped back.

"What makes you think you can say that? Do you think you represent all swordsmen?"

Rai smirked, a gesture Rian hated.

"A swordsman's pride isn't something just anyone can have. But a mage's knowledge? You can buy that with money."

Rai's words had a sharp edge. In reality, swordsmen had ways to neutralize magic, most notably through artifacts known as "anti-magic".

Anti-magic artifacts emit a special wave that disrupts a mage's Spirit Zone. When the Spirit Zone is disturbed, the power of magic drastically decreases.

These anti-magic artifacts, often shaped as crystals, were embedded in armor, shields, or swords. They required the heart of a dragon, which radiated magical waves, making the highest-quality artifacts so expensive that even most nobles couldn't afford them.

Moreover, attaching multiple artifacts didn't provide cumulative protection. The waves from each artifact could interfere with one another, reducing overall effectiveness. The key was in minimizing this interference as much as possible.

The greatest artifact that exists is the "Armor Set of the Five Gods" created by the archmage Yakra. The set consists of a helmet, armor, gauntlets, boots, and a shield, each embedded with artifacts that provide the maximum efficiency of 20%.

Research indicates that when the full Armor Set of the Five Gods is worn, the suppression power it grants reaches a staggering 65%. Weakening a mage's magic by 65% is almost equivalent to binding their hands and feet.

Another thorny issue is the “Essence of the Spirits”. This essence, which occurs in extremely small quantities in nature, comes in four types: fire, water, wind, and earth. When equipped, it not only activates magic but also perfectly blocks that specific elemental attribute.

To date, 17 essences have been discovered worldwide: 2 of fire, 3 of water, 5 of wind, and 7 of earth. The value of a single essence exceeds the budget of a small kingdom.

Shirone imagined. If a master swordsman with the Armor Set of the Five Gods equipped with the four essences swung their sword, what mage could possibly stand against them? Of course, this was only theoretical. The Armor Set of the Five Gods had been scattered around the world, and its origins were unclear. As for the Essence of the Spirits, acquiring even one was beyond the reach of anyone but a nation.

Even stacking multiple anti-magic items was problematic. Even Yakra, the master of wave equations, spent 10 years fine-tuning the Armor Set of the Five Gods.

Trying to stack anti-magic haphazardly would likely just lead to throwing money down the drain. Without mastering wave equations, resonance frequencies, and the interactions of magic, efficiency wouldn't improve.

The joke that half of a noble's wealth could disappear trying to increase anti-magic by 1% wasn't an exaggeration.

This is where the swordsman's dilemma begins. Instead of investing vast sums to increase anti-magic, it was often much cheaper to simply hire a mage skilled in anti-magic spells.

Rai's words implied this very notion: that mages were nothing more than subordinates to swordsmen. And he continued to assert that a mage's knowledge could always be bought with money.

It wasn't a swordsman but a mage who developed anti-magic into artifacts. Even now, countless mages are researching the effects of dragon magic on Spirit Zones,

hoping to achieve breakthroughs and gain immense wealth and fame.

Rai was pointing out the irony of mages, who live off magic, researching ways to weaken it. In his view, no mage who was willing to sell themselves for money could ever defeat a swordsman.

“So, what do you think? You seem to like books. Magic can simply be blocked with anti-magic. But the physical prowess of a swordsman is different. Our abilities can only be earned through suffering.”

Shirone understood Rai’s point, but that didn’t mean he agreed with him.

“That’s exactly what makes a mage.”

“What?”

Rai was surprised at Shirone’s unexpected agreement. A boy who liked magic should’ve been angered by his comments.

“A mage is someone who obsessively explores the harmony of all things. So it’s not strange for them to research ways to suppress magic. What matters to them isn’t whether they win or lose a fight, but whether they know or don’t know something. In the end, artifacts are also the result of that boundless pursuit of knowledge. To say a swordsman can defeat a mage because of this is, I believe, a flawed premise.”

Rai was not as simple as Rian. He was the type to use any logic necessary to win an argument. However, he couldn’t find words to refute Shirone’s reasoning and stood there silently, his jaw clenched.

Rian, struggling to contain his laughter, was thrilled to see his older brother, always so confident and talkative, rendered speechless by Shirone’s argument.

‘Ha! Serves him right. My friend’s logic is unbeatable, huh?’

As time passed, Rai’s face became more distorted. His brows furrowed, and veins popped at his temples, but no counter-argument came to mind.

“Ideals are different from reality. No matter the intentions, the fact remains: mages cannot win in a fight.”

Rai turned coldly and left the library. Rian could no longer hold back his laughter.

“Hahaha! Shirone, you’re amazing! I’ve never seen my brother make that kind of face before!”

As Rian hugged Shirone like a doll and shook him with joy, Shirone’s eyes remained fixed on the door where Rai had exited.

Swordsman versus mage.

The book Rian had brought opened many questions in Shirone’s mind. Perhaps Rai was right, and reality might be different.

But Shirone held faith.

The spirit of a mage, who fearlessly puts even their own weaknesses under scrutiny, was the very reason intelligence exists in this world.

The grand library felt chillingly empty. The bookshelves, once brimming with knowledge, now felt hollow, and the glowing lights that had illuminated the room like daylight were extinguished.

A single beam of golden sunlight poured through a fourth-floor window, hitting the floor. Shirone sat in the sunlight and turned the pages of a book.

Page by page, until finally... the last page was finished, and the cover closed.

Shirone gently touched the back of the deep orange cover. Flipping a book was easy, but journeying through hundreds of pages and reaching the end was not something just anyone could do.

850 volumes of history.

Shirone had read every history book in the grand library.

‘It’s done. This is the spine of my knowledge.’

He felt warmth. It was as if light was filling him from within.

Shirone had finally come to understand the world. Despite being the child of a hunter, he could now hold discussions with nobles on any matter of the world.

This was the result of focus and dedication. Talent might only point to the most efficient path, but anyone who read 850 history books could understand their place in the world. The library relocation project had also been completed after 18 months of extensive work. Now, Shirone could return home anytime without worrying about his family's safety. It all felt like a dream. So many memories passed through his mind like fleeting motherents of a dream.

Chapter 11: The First Step Toward a Dream (3)

“Hey, Shirone. Are you still here? Didn’t you say you were done with your work?”

Rian, who had just walked in, cleared his throat at the rising dust. Shirone greeted his friend with a gentle smile.

“What’s with that expression? Did something good happen?”

Rian was puzzled by his friend’s unusual demeanor. But what Shirone said next was even more shocking.

“Rian, show me around your house.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

Rian blinked in surprise. Shirone, who was usually principled and never made silly mistakes, suddenly wanted to see his house.

But then he noticed a book next to Shirone and realized.

“You... you did it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing left to read, at least not in this library.”

Nothing left to read.

Rian didn’t particularly like books, but he could feel how amazing that statement was.

At that moment, Shirone looked like an embodiment of intelligence. Even the sunlight pouring through the window seemed to bless him.

“Wahaha! You really did it? You’re incredible, man!”

Rian was genuinely happy for him, of course, in his own boisterous way. After hugging Shirone and spinning him around, he snapped his fingers as if he had a great idea.

“Alright! If you want to come over to my place, you’re always welcome! This is perfect timing. To celebrate

finishing your studies, I've got an amazing gift prepared for you!"

"What gift? I don't need anything."

"Just follow me. You're gonna love it! Hahaha!"

Shirone felt uneasy. It was strange that he had just learned about finishing the books, yet Rian was already preparing a gift. Moreover, he doubted that the gift would be something he liked, considering the overly exuberant grin on Rian's face.

As he got closer to the mansion, the sheer size was overwhelming. He understood why ancient people chose gigantic structures to express the divine.

"Rian, let's go in quietly. What if the family finds us?"

"What are you worried about? The contract is over anyway. Besides, the family is all out. Ah, here we are. Hurry, hurry!"

The place Rian led him to was a woman's room that smelled delightful. Pink curtains hung at the balcony window, and various musical instruments, including a piano, were arranged inside.

"Wait! Isn't this your sister's room? Get out of here! What are we going to do if we go in?"

"Hehe. Just wait a motherent. It should be around here somewhere."

Rian rummaged through the drawers as if he were in his own room. While searching the bottom shelf, he picked something up and shouted with joy, tossing it to Shirone.

"Found it! Here, Shirone, it's your gift!"

Something fragrant and soft covered Shirone's face. When he held it up with both hands to see, it was a ridiculously small piece of fabric.

Shirone's face turned red in confusion. By shape and size, it was undoubtedly his sister's underwear.

"Hey! Are you crazy? Why are you throwing this at me?"

"Hahaha! Look at how red your face is. You're 17 now, after all. Just be bold about it. That's the meaning behind this gift from me."

“Shut up! What’s so bold about looking at underwear? Put it back quickly!”

“Oh? You’re excited. Shirone is finally excited!”

Rian doubled over with laughter. In truth, he wanted to tease him 90% of the time, but there was also a 10% concern.

Having been holed up in the library for a year and a half, Shirone’s skin was pale, and he still looked quite young. Shirone was too starved for learning. It wouldn’t be bad to use shock therapy just once to draw out the man inside him. But it didn’t work on Shirone. He returned the underwear with a sigh and began to scold Rian.

“When are you going to grow up? Playing pranks like this. It’s not just anyone, it’s your sister. Hurry up and put it back. What will you do if we get caught?”

“The court musician only comes once or twice a year. There’s no way we’ll get caught. But are you really not going to take it? You’ll regret it later.”

“Following you is my biggest regret in life! Hurry up and tidy up.”

Rian crumpled the underwear and shoved it back in, closing the drawer.

“Hey, then we’ll get caught!”

“The maid will clean it up when she has time. But you’re not getting excited enough; it’s kind of boring.”

“If you do that one more time, I’ll cut ties with you.”

“Hahaha! Alright. It was just a joke. Anyway, let’s go to my room.”

Rian’s room was at the end of the corridor. He said that since most of the rooms were empty, he could choose whichever one he wanted to use.

True to his enthusiastic nature, his room was piled with wooden swords, and the bookshelves were filled with books about swordsmanship.

However, there weren’t many specialized texts; most were novels about warriors from mythology.

As the two sat in the room chatting about random things, they eventually grew bored and started a card game. They each started with the same amount of chips, but the game ended in just 30 minutes. It was a complete defeat for Rian.

As Shirone gathered up the chips, he asked.

“One more round?”

“No way! Damn it. Gambling is all about luck anyway, and I must have none.”

“You seem to have a habit of moving your cards outward whenever you get an Ace. Also, your betting timing changes depending on whether you have a pair or not. Just knowing those two things could help you win easily.”

Rian was stunned, as if he'd just been conned.

“How do you even notice things like that?”

“Observation is easier than you think. It's invisible because you're too set on finding it. Let go of the idea that you must find something, and just feel the whole picture. Then you'll be able to see it.”

“Hmm, so you're saying not to obsess over what you want to gain? Maybe this could help with finding the ‘Schema’ too?”

“Probably. It also helped me understand Spirit Zone.”

Rian repeated Shirone's words to himself over and over. It felt like he was close to grasping something, but the core eluded him.

Perhaps from thinking too hard—something uncharacteristic for him—Rian felt drowsy, his body growing heavy. He stretched lazily and lay down, saying, “There's nothing else to do. Let's nap for a bit. I ran a hundred laps this morning, so I'm dead tired.”

“Then get some rest. I'll just read.”

“Yeah, sure”

Rian fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Shirone chuckled softly at his carefree friend and pulled out a novel. Having spent so much time reading difficult history

books, he became engrossed in the adventure tale, losing track of time.

An hour passed, and Rian still hadn't woken up. Shirone closed his book and began tidying up the room. It would get noisy once the sun set and the household became busy, so it seemed like a good time to leave.

As he walked down the hallway, he heard the sound of piano playing.

Shirone froze in shock. Having grown up in the mountains, a musical score filled with a composer's inspiration struck him differently, shaking his soul in a way that even magic couldn't.

The sound came from Rian's sister's room. Almost unconsciously, Shirone approached and saw her for the first time.

She had a pure, serene face, like dew at dawn, and her blue hair flowed down like waves as she played the piano.

It was Ogent Reina, the second daughter of the Ogent family.

The melody she played was nothing short of divine.

Although not the youngest, Reina had been recognized for her talent at 19 and brought to the royal court, so Shirone's awe was well-deserved.

The harmonies piled up, racing and changing, and Shirone's mind followed Reina's fingers as if he were a marionette, completely entranced.

It wasn't until the performance ended that Shirone realized where he was. Maybe he had been too lost in the motherent, because when he came to his senses, Reina had already turned toward him, waving.

"Hello! How was my piano sonata?"

Although he had read about such music in books, this was his first time hearing it. Shirone couldn't bring himself to critique Reina's performance.

"Come closer if you'd like. I don't recognize you. Are you a new servant?"

“Yes. I was working on organizing the library. It's all done now, though.”

“Oh, I heard about you. You must be pretty smart! Not just anyone can handle the cataloging job.”

Perhaps because she was an artist, her words and manner were completely unpretentious, even kind.

For the first time, Shirone felt envious of Rian for having a sister like her. Then, he suddenly remembered the embarrassing prank from earlier, and his face flushed as Reina's image overlapped with that memory.

“Ugh!”

“Are you okay? Your face looks red.”

“N-no, I'm fine.”

Awkwardly stepping into the room, Shirone tried to convince himself he hadn't seen anything inappropriate, shifting the conversation.

“Is that sheet music?”

“Yes, it is. It's a piano sonata by Schreimann, the third movement titled *In the Darkness*. Have you ever played the piano?”

“No, never.”

“Really? Come sit here. I'll teach you. It's not a difficult piece.”

Shirone was struck by Reina's gentle demeanor. He had heard Rian describe her as a temperamental witch, so her kindness left him a little bewildered.

Following her instructions, Shirone carefully placed his fingers on the keys and played his first chord, slowly moving on to the second one.

“Wow! You're quick at picking things up. For your first time, you've got impressive sight-reading skills.”

Sight-reading refers to playing an unfamiliar piece at first glance, something that requires sharp mental agility. Those who are good at it are often quick thinkers.

Shirone felt pleased with her praise, but he quickly forgot about Reina and became fully absorbed in the piano, driven

by an unstoppable curiosity.

“Could you... play it again for me?”

“Huh? Sure.”

Reina, sensing something unique about him, smiled. Artists don’t care much for talent, contrary to what critics claim.

What they truly admire is passion.

“Alright, listen carefully.”

Reina played *In the Darkness* once more. Even to an outsider like Shirone, it sounded more delicate than the first time. It was the power of Schema—the deep understanding of one’s body, making Reina’s nerves far more sensitive than most people.

When the performance ended, Reina looked over with satisfaction. However, Shirone was deep in thought, showing no reaction as if he hadn’t heard a thing.

“Can I try it?”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

“Please excuse my playing. It might be hard to listen to.”

“Haha, don’t worry. Everyone starts out like that.”

Shirone’s hands rested gently on the keys. Just as Reina was thinking his posture was decent, he began pressing the keys, creating an unrecognizable melody.

Reina smiled awkwardly at first, but as the music progressed, she began to realize something.

‘What is this kid doing? What’s he trying to achieve?’

Every note was wrong—completely off. Yet, strangely...

It was perfect.

There was no logical explanation, but it was true. While Shirone had no technical skill in playing the sheet music...

He was mirroring everything about Reina herself.

This wasn’t a performance for an audience. In his mind, Shirone was entirely focused on the piano.

‘Just a little more. A little closer.’

Shirone desperately tried to immerse himself in the music.

Keeping pace caused him to play too quickly for his sight-reading ability to keep up.

He compressed his focus with each passing second, his mind slipping into a state of Spirit Zone.

Reina gulped, hearing harmonious notes peeking through the dissonance.

And then, in the climactic section, for precisely 1.7 seconds, his playing matched the sheet music perfectly.

Reina felt a chill run through her, holding her breath.

Shirone maintained that state, entering the final cadence.

His hands hit the first note, then, like lightning, he struck the fifth. Finally, he pressed down the last note with all the passion of his life.

Kuuuuuuung.

The chords from four minutes ago resolved into seven notes, echoing into infinite reverberation.

Chapter 12: The First Step Toward a Dream (4)

Reina stared blankly at Shirone, who was breathing heavily. It wasn't something you could call a proper performance, so there was no point in evaluating his sense of music, but his insight into grasping the essence was beyond imagination. 'Who is this kid? Why is someone like him working as a servant...?'

"Ugh, shut up already! You old witch!"

Both Shirone and Reina turned their heads toward the hallway.

"If you're here, wash up and go to bed, or at least play a lullaby or something! Stop throwing tantrums after getting worked up!"

With messy hair, half-closed bleary eyes, and still half-asleep, Rian scratched his washboard abs and entered the room. Then, noticing Shirone sitting next to his sister, he tilted his head.

"Huh? Shirone, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I was just..."

It would be a disaster if Reina found out he was friends with Rian.

But Rian, not thinking that far, mumbled something and then suddenly grabbed his stomach, bursting into laughter.

"Pfft! Are you here for *that*?"

The unbearable embarrassment made Shirone's face turn red. If Reina found out about the crime Rian committed, how would she see him? How humiliated would she be?

"No! I just came in for a motherent!"

"Oh, come on! Congratulations, Shirone. You've finally become a man."

Rian was blunt. Of course, underwear among family members was as trivial as a rag. But for Shirone, who was on the receiving end, the pressure was overwhelming.

“What? You two know each other?”

“Shirone? Yeah, he’s my friend.”

“Rian! What are you talking about?”

“Hahaha! It’s fine. That witch has a terrible temper, but she doesn’t care about this kind of thing.”

Is that really true?

Reina was artistic and open-minded, sure, but this was the kind of situation that could cause serious trouble between nobles and commoners.

“Your name’s Shirone, huh? Don’t worry. If you’re Rian’s friend, you’re my friend too. Even though my brother’s a pathetic idiot, he’s not the type to mess with people.”

Shirone still wasn’t fully convinced. Though being on the receiving end wasn’t pleasant, Reina appreciated his cautiousness. True trust, after all, blossoms in the midst of doubt.

“But you’re really something. How did you manage to play that earlier?”

“Wait, Shirone played it? I thought it was just one of my sister’s hysterical fits.”

Shirone frowned. He couldn’t understand why Rian would use words like “witch” and “hysterical” for such a kind and lovely sister.

“Rian, why did you lie to me? She’s kind and gentle.”

“Shirone, you must never be fooled! She’s a witch! One day, she might just eat you alive!”

Rian grabbed Shirone’s shoulders and shook him. His expression was far too serious for it to be just a joke.

“Haha, sorry. My brother is so immature. But I’m relieved he has a friend like you. He’s pathetic and useless, so please look after him.”

Rian walked over to the table and poured himself some water. After all, no matter what you said to siblings, it went

in one ear and out the other.

"Oh, no, it's not like I..."

Reina stared intently at Shirone as he scratched his head shyly. Despite being 17, which was considered grown-up, he was still so innocent.

"Haha, you're really cute."

"If he's that cute, why don't you take him in, sister? I wouldn't mind if Shirone became family. Haha!"

Shirone's face flushed like a ripe tomato at Rian's mischievous joke. Still, he didn't feel bad, perhaps because he was unconsciously starting to like her.

"Oh my, it seems you're quite close to give up even your sister."

"What are you talking about? Shirone may be like a brother, but as for a witch like you, I wouldn't mind giving you away to anyone. In fact, Shirone is too good for you."

"Ah, is that so?"

Reina suddenly leapt into the air. Her jump was so high that she easily soared above Shirone's head, leaving him dizzy with amazement.

She landed right in front of Rian and pulled hard on his ear.

"Owww! Ow, ow, ow! It hurts! It hurts!"

"Got you, you culprit!"

"Culprit? What are you talking about?"

"The one who played with my underwear. It was you, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't! Why are you accusing the wrong person?"

"The only lively men on the second floor are you and Shirone, and from what I've observed, Shirone would never do something like that. So it has to be you. Now admit it. Why were you so interested in your sister's underwear that you claim to hate so much?"

Reina had once been as skilled with a sword as Rai. The strength concentrated in her fingers was formidable.

Rian, feeling like he was being tempered in the fires of hell, looked at Shirone. Now that it had come to this, self-sacrifice

was the only way out. If someone had to suffer, at least one of them should survive.

"Fine, I did it! I was going to wear them since I was out of underwear! Can't you even spare a pair of panties for your brother? Aaaagh!"

As Reina mercilessly tugged on his ear, the large Rian couldn't move and stood on his tiptoes.

"Do you really expect me to believe that? If you don't confess the truth, I'll rip your ear off."

"Kill me! Kill me! I have nothing else to say!"

Shirone felt uneasy. No matter who led the situation, they both committed the act, so he couldn't let Rian suffer alone.

"Um, actually, it was me."

"Shirone, no! You don't know how terrifying this witch is! Run away, quickly!"

"Rian was just playing a prank, and it turned out that way. He didn't mean any harm. But I'm really sorry."

"Hmm, I see."

Reina squinted, looking back and forth between Shirone and Rian. Then, with a smirk, she smacked Rian on the head.

"Ouch!"

"You should know you're only getting away with this because of Shirone. If you ever do it again, I'll make sure you go deaf for real."

Rian grumbled as he rubbed the top of his head. What on earth possessed this witch to return home?

"Why did you come back anyway? You already took your vacation, didn't you?"

"Huh? You haven't heard about Rai yet?"

"When do we ever care about that?"

"This time, Rai is taking the official knight exam. I came to pick him up. I left the capital with Grandpa, but he stopped on the way to meet some friends."

"Official exam?"

Rian's eyes shook with shock. He acknowledged the difference in their abilities. His brother was a genius, after

all.

But had the gap grown this wide?

The official certification was the dream of everyone living in the Kingdom of Tormia and served as a measure of noble rank.

The exam was held once a year, and over a thousand applicants participated.

But fewer than thirty people actually obtained the official certification.

There was also the non-certified qualification, granted by institutions designated by the royal palace, such as the Alpheas Magic Academy in Creas.

Graduating from a magic academy earned one a non-certified rank of 10th-class mage, and from there, one could raise their rank by performing achievements through guilds or associations.

The difference between the certified and non-certified was whether or not one received official recognition from the royal palace. Although non-certified individuals could be just as skilled, most people gravitated toward certified knights for the prestige and wealth that came with it, making the overall quality of certified individuals much higher.

In fact, more than half of the candidates who passed the official exam each year already held non-certified qualifications.

“Hmph, good for him. Geniuses really are different. Even the family backs him up wholeheartedly.”

Reina looked at Rian sympathetically. No matter his talent, he was still her adorable younger brother. She hoped this wouldn’t hurt him too much.

“I need to go prepare dinner. We got some seafood from the palace, and I need to handle it myself. Shirone, it was nice to meet you. Let’s say hello next time we meet.”

“Yes, goodbye.”

Shirone bowed, feeling a tinge of sadness. He would be leaving the estate tomorrow and likely wouldn’t see Reina

again. But the excitement he felt when playing the piano with her would remain with him forever.

“Rian, about your sister...”

“Huh? What about her?”

“Uh... does she have a boyfriend or anything?”

Shirone regretted asking the motherent the words left his mouth. Feelings were like caged beasts—once released, they could lead to uncontrollable consequences.

Rian blinked for a motherent before bursting into laughter.

“Shirone, you can’t be serious?”

“No, no! Just forget I said anything! I was just...”

“Pfft! Haha! Sis! Sis!”

Rian darted out of the room, and Shirone, his face flushed red, chased after him. Rian leaned over the banister, too impatient to take the stairs, and yelled.

“Sis! Shirone wants to know if you have a boyf—!”

“Stop it already!”

Shirone barely managed to cover Rian’s mouth and dragged him back into the room.

“Huh? What’s going on? A boyfriend?”

The maids working in the kitchen looked up at the second floor. Smiling, Reina, who was preparing the seafood, replied.

“They’re just fooling around. Okay, now all that’s left is to steam it. I’ve already removed the toxins, so follow the recipe.”

“Yes, Miss.”

As the real cooking began, the maids focused on their work again.

However, one young man overseeing the estate’s operations frowned at what he had overheard.

It was Lewis, the head butler.

With his natural talent for calculation and his meticulous nature, he had become the youngest head butler in the history of the family. He wore rimless glasses that accentuated his cold expression.

“Shirone, was it?”

The maids might not recognize the name, but it was etched clearly in Lewis’s mind. Shirone was the contract worker Temuran had brought in for the grand library relocation project.

“Why is he involved with the youngest master...?”

To Lewis, who had sworn to dedicate his life to the prosperity of the Ogent family, this was an issue that couldn’t be ignored. Something was clearly happening that he didn’t know about.

His eyes gleamed as he called over a regular butler and gave instructions.

“Tell the assistant butler to come to my room immediately.”

The loud sounds of effort echoed from the grand training yard early in the morning.

Rian was pushing himself harder than usual in his training. The news of Rai taking the official exam had only stoked his competitive fire. He would catch up, no matter what. With that determination, he continued his sword strikes countless times.

Kite, observing his student’s powerful swordplay, was certain.

“He’s definitely improved.”

In terms of stamina, energy, and skill, Rian had made great strides. With this level of ability, he could easily take down a gang of bandits near the city.

However, if it were a formal duel between skilled swordsmen, he still had a long way to go. The problem was his fighting style. Rian’s greatest strength—his recklessness—was now becoming his biggest flaw.

Rian’s swordsmanship was aggressive and powerful. But sometimes, one needed to remain calm and focus on the essence of the battle, yet he only knew how to charge forward.

“Everyone has their own way. His lack of composure is nothing compared to his overwhelming force. This is the path he must follow. Still, it’s a pity.”

“Hyah! Hyah! Hyah!”

He swung a club twice as heavy as a longsword using only brute strength. Considering the air resistance, he’d have no trouble handling a greatsword. Kite was already excited about how much more effective Rian would be once he mastered his technique.

“Enough! Take a 10-minute break!”

Rian, panting heavily, walked over to Kite.

Kite saw the passion burning in his student’s eyes. It was the same as that one day a year ago.

Back then, his fire had died out quickly, but this time was different. Rai was heading to the royal capital. Rian’s flames would not fade again.

“Master Rian! Master Rian!”

A regular butler came running from the mansion, out of breath. Arriving in front of the panting Rian, he spoke without even catching his breath.

“There’s trouble! The lady says you must come to the mansion immediately!”

“My sister? What’s the big deal? If it’s about my brother, I don’t care. She can handle it herself.”

“No, it’s not that. The contract worker named Shirone is in mortal danger right now.”

Chapter 13: The First Step Toward a Dream (5)

Rian spit out the water he was drinking. The news that Shirone was in danger came out of nowhere, leaving him utterly confused. He had planned to see off his friend who was leaving in a few hours, which made this situation even more unexpected.

"Shirone? What happened?"

"Well... uh..."

"Hurry up and tell me! What's going on?"

"It seems that Butler Louis reported it to the lord. I don't know all the details, but I overheard that you and Shirone have been acting like friends..."

"Damn it!"

Rian immediately grabbed the clothes that had been drying on a rock. Kite, watching this unfold, asked calmly.

"What's going on? And who is Shirone?"

"He's a friend of mine. I didn't tell you because he's a commoner, but it looks like Louis snitched. That coward! Master, I think we'll have to end today's training here. I need to get back to the mansion."

"No. You cannot go."

Rian, already heading for the exit of the training ground, stopped in his tracks and looked at Kite in shock.

"What do you mean? My friend is in danger!"

"You said he was a commoner, didn't you?"

"What does that have to do with anything? Master, are you that kind of person? Didn't you say yourself that anyone who can connect through the sword can be a friend?"

Kite clicked his tongue. His reckless student had finally caused some trouble. Although Kite didn't know all the

details, his many years of experience gave him a pretty good idea of the situation.

“And what exactly do you plan to do when you return? Are you going to cry and beg? Or maybe entertain them in hopes of changing your father’s mind?”

“Master!”

“Rian, anyone can be your friend, but that is only between you and that boy. Your friend has directly challenged the hierarchy of the Ogent family. Crying or throwing a tantrum won’t fix this.”

“So you’re telling me to just sit back and do nothing? I was the one who first extended my hand to Shirone. I won’t be a coward!”

Kite looked into his student’s eyes. What a pure and passionate gaze, full of honesty and determination. He unfastened the sword from his waist and handed it to Rian. As the real sword came into view, Rian’s heart raced. Though he wasn’t sure exactly what his master intended, the gesture was clear.

If you want to save your friend, you must be prepared to draw this sword.

“Take this sword with you. If you can enter the mansion with it, I’ll let you go. But if you’re not prepared for that, then don’t take a step further. This is a matter beyond your control now.”

“Master.”

A warm smile crept onto Rian’s face as he gazed at Kite. He bowed deeply and reached out with both hands, to which Kite silently handed over the sword.

“Thank you. I won’t forget this kindness.”

“Remember, abandoning a friend is like abandoning a part of yourself.”

“Yes!”

With the sword now at his waist, Rian sprinted toward the mansion. Kite watched him go with satisfaction. It was over.

The time for farewells had come a bit sooner than expected, but at least it would be a departure befitting a man. May fortune smile upon his student's future.

An icy atmosphere hung over the mansion. All work had come to a halt, and the butlers and maids stood silently in place, not daring to make a sound.

Behind the sofa where the direct family members were seated, Head Butler Louis adjusted his glasses. Next to him, Assistant Butler Temuran glared at Shirone with a stern gaze.

Shirone knelt on the floor in front of the family, absorbing the many hostile and scornful stares directed at him. It felt as if he had stepped into the middle of a colosseum.

"Head Butler, give your report," commanded the lord of the house.

"Yes, my lord. According to the report, Shirone, who was hired by Temuran, has been staying here for 18 months and is now accused of disrespecting the authority of the Ogent family. Numerous butlers have witnessed the youngest master and Shirone behaving familiarly, and I personally overheard Shirone speaking informally to the young master. The detailed circumstances are documented in statements from the butlers, which will be submitted as evidence."

Bischof, the lord of the house, silently extended his hand. Louis handed over the documents, which Bischof flipped through with a sharp, brisk motion.

While her father read through the documents, Reina quietly approached Shirone and whispered to him.

"Shirone, don't worry too much. I'll try to convince my father. Everything will be fine."

Shirone slowly raised his head, his expression eerily calm. It sent shivers down Reina's spine. Despite the situation, his face showed no sign of fear or anxiety.

'He's not pretending to be calm. He's truly not afraid.'

Shirone wasn't afraid. His mind was detached, as if floating over the edge of a cliff. The future was nothing but an illusion, and nothing had been decided yet.

Bischof finally spoke, his voice as cold and commanding as his pale appearance.

"Arian Shirone, is the information in these documents true?"

"Father, Shirone and Rian are—"

"Reina, I didn't ask you. You will have your turn to speak. Stay silent for now."

Reina knew this wasn't going to be easy. Her father, Bischof, was a man who based his power on logic and strict principles. He wasn't someone who could be persuaded through emotions.

"May I ask one question?" Shirone asked.

Shirone spoke in a calm voice. The unusual composure surprised the watching servants, but it didn't faze Bischof.

"Speak," he said.

"If the youngest master and I are indeed friends, what will happen to him?" Shirone asked, his voice steady, despite being in a life-threatening situation. His concern for his friend first brought a look of affection to Reina's face.

"It will have no effect on him. This inquiry is about you, a commoner. No matter what Rian may have done, as it pertains to the family, we will protect him," Bischof replied coldly.

His words carried a sting, making it clear that a noble son would never be treated the same as a mere commoner. Yet Shirone was satisfied with that answer. Having shed his last worry, he smiled brightly and confessed, "Then I'm relieved. Yes, Rian and I are indeed friends. We've built a great friendship over the past year and will continue to do so."

No one outwardly reacted, but Shirone's words caused a significant ripple, especially among the servants who had spent time with him. The shock was immense: a noble's son

had been friends with a hunter's child for a whole year—something that seemed only possible in stories.

"The family's honor has hit rock bottom. Shirone, as the head of the Ogent family, I sentence you to death," Bischof declared.

"Father! Wait, please listen! You said you'd give me a chance to speak!" Reina pleaded.

"He's confessed. There's no point in delaying further. Butler," Bischof called.

"Yes, my lord," the head butler replied.

"Carry out Shirone's execution. And make sure no word of this leaks beyond these walls."

"Understood."

Reina panicked. In that moment, she found herself almost resenting Shirone for being so calm.

But what could she do? Never had her father reversed a decision he'd made as head of the family.

"Who said you could execute him?!"

Rian burst into the room, slamming the door open so forcefully that it felt like the entire house heated up.

Everyone knew Rian's fiery temper, and that was the very source of his power—the fire within.

"Who thinks they can execute my friend without my permission?!" Rian shouted.

"I did," Bischof replied curtly.

"Why? He didn't commit any terrible crime! All he did was become my friend!"

"Not all deaths result from crimes. Nobility carries complexities. Those complexities allow you, as the son of a noble, to enjoy privileges. But maintaining those privileges sometimes comes with hard decisions," Bischof explained.

"If keeping those privileges means killing my friend, then I reject them!" Rian retorted.

"You're being childish, Rian. Friends are people who share an equal bond. Do you think that boy truly sees you as his friend? How can you be sure he doesn't have ulterior

motives? For all you know, he could be using you for money. You wouldn't be able to tell. So how can you trust him?"

Bischof pressed.

"Shirone would never do something so low!" Rian snapped.

"And how do you know that? Show me proof that Shirone isn't that kind of person," Bischof demanded.

Reina bit her lip. They had been ensnared by Bischof's argument. There was no way to prove Shirone's sincerity. Whether Shirone had approached Rian with pure intentions or with hidden motives, his actions would appear the same. Rian, too, felt a chill from his father's logic. It was cold—too cold. Asking for proof of friendship felt like his heart was freezing over.

Gripping the sword at his waist, Rian felt the warmth of his master's teachings flow through him.

"Hahaha!" Rian laughed heartily, having finally understood his master's intent. The sword wasn't given to him to sulk or beg.

"I almost fell for it, Father. Proof? I believe in Shirone. Even if he doesn't see me as a friend, as long as I believe in him, he's my friend. That's the undeniable proof!" Rian exclaimed, his voice filled with conviction.

Now, Bischof began to feel the heat from Rian's words. It was true, after all.

"So, are you saying you'll defy the head of your family? This isn't about father and son. If you defy the head's order, you may be expelled from the family," Bischof warned, drawing his final line.

The threat stunned not only the servants but even the immediate family members. Yet Rian didn't flinch. He responded as if he were addressing a superior officer rather than his father, his voice calm but firm.

"If protecting my friend means being expelled, I'll gladly accept it with a smile."

Bischof slammed his boot into the floor. It was unacceptable. A mere 17-year-old son, daring to talk about

defiance and exile? It was nothing short of insolence. Rian was exploiting the bond of family to throw a tantrum.

“Draw your sword. If you’re willing to accept expulsion, then you’re willing to sever ties with your family. Put your life on the line if you truly care for your friend,” Bischof commanded.

Rian drew his sword, further enraging his father.

“Are you truly going to raise a blade against your father?”

“This sword is not to strike down my father. It’s to uphold my convictions,” Rian declared.

“And since when have you cherished friendships? You never mingled with other nobles because you thought they outshone you. Now, you cling to a commoner to find solace. It’s pitiful,” Bischof sneered.

“No. You’re wrong this time, Father. Shirone shines brighter than I do, and I want to help him shine even more,” Rian countered.

Bischof felt drained. What was it about that boy? What had he said to ensnare Rian so completely?

“Is it you?” Bischof turned to Shirone. “Did you tell him that nobles and commoners could be friends?”

Despite the family’s conflict, Shirone remained composed.

“Yes, I told him that,” Shirone answered.

Rian stepped in front of Shirone. “Shirone, stay out of this. I’ll handle it. No matter what happens, I’ll protect you—”

“Rian,” Shirone interrupted, his voice colder than Rian had ever heard. Startled, Rian turned to face him.

“You take responsibility for what is yours to bear,” Shirone said, his tone as icy as Bischof.

His demeanor, voice, and words all carried a sharpness that could rival Bischof himself. Everyone in the room felt a chill, even Rian.

“Y-Yeah, of course.”

“But...” Shirone continued, “There’s no need to take responsibility for what isn’t yours. We’ve done everything

together up until now, and we've made it this far. We'll get through this together, too."

Suddenly, Shirone's face softened, returning to its usual warmth.

"Even if I die, I don't regret becoming your friend," he said. Shirone's final words ignited a fire within Rian's heart, bringing tears to his eyes. At this point, he saw nothing but his resolve.

"That's exactly it! Even if I'm exiled, we'll always be friends!" Rian shouted.

The servants began murmuring. What had started as a cynical interrogation had turned into something far more complicated. Even they now felt unsure which side to support.

Chapter 14: The First Step Toward a Dream (6)

‘Impressive, Shirone.’

Reina, who had been resting her chin on her hand, smiled as she watched Shirone. With a single strict word, he had intimidated the adults in the room. Moreover, he had managed to ignite Rian’s fiery temper even further.

In a way, Shirone’s personality might resemble his father’s the most. However, the reason Shirone stood out was because his actions weren’t part of a calculated strategy but were driven by genuine sincerity.

“Pwahahaha! This is fantastic! Who would’ve thought I’d get so excited in my later years? Youth is truly the best!”

At the sound of thunderous laughter that shook the mansion, the maids screamed. In contrast, the direct family members, already familiar with the voice, sighed and turned around.

A bald old man with a blueish hue in his hair stood on the second-floor balcony.

Shirone stared blankly at him. He was a giant who looked like the ultimate evolution of Rian, with his bulging arm muscles twitching as if ready to burst.

It was Ogent Clump, Rian’s grandfather.

“Grandfather!”

Reina stood up, wearing an expression as if a thousand reinforcements had just arrived. She had been struggling to persuade the black-haired head of the family with just herself and Rian, but things were different now that Grandfather was here.

“You’re here, Father. Reina said it would take you a few more days.”

“Hah! A friend of mine ran off with a young bride, so I came back earlier than planned. This place is as lively as ever. Ah, youth really is a wonderful thing.”

“This isn't a wonderful situation. The family's honor has been tarnished.”

“Well, from what I've seen, everyone here seems to have a lot to say. Why not hear everyone's thoughts before deciding if the honor has been tarnished or not?”

Inwardly, Reina shouted, ‘Grandfather, you're the best!’ Though Clump had already passed on the position of head of the family to his son, his title as a 3rd-class swordsman was more than enough to earn the respect of all the family members.

“In that case, let me speak first. I only met Shirone for the first time yesterday, but he struck me as a smart and talented child. Additionally, Shirone has fulfilled all his duties as a contract worker, and he was set to leave the family today. Given these circumstances, I don't think Shirone harbored any ill intentions towards Rian, nor do I believe he has disgraced the family's honor.”

Reina expressed her opinion clearly and concisely before sitting down. However, this didn't mean the tide had completely turned. At best, the situation was now balanced between the two sides.

Although blue-haired Clump favored fairness over the black-haired lineage, he had a just and impartial character. He also gave the opposition, specifically Rai, a chance to speak.

“So, what does our second grandson think?”

Rai responded coldly, “I don't like that kid.”

The servants started murmuring. It was a shocking statement, coming from the family's most promising member.

“But I don't care enough to do anything about it.”

Bischof asked, puzzled, “What do you mean? You don't like him, but you don't care?”

“Exactly what I said. I don’t like him, but I don’t feel like pretending to care just because I don’t like him. I don’t want to bother. I’d rather finish this discussion quickly and head to the royal palace.”

Reina clicked her tongue. As self-centered as her younger brother was, this time his attitude seemed to favor Rian. Clump chuckled like a mischievous boy. It amused him to see how unique each of his family members was. This, he thought, was the strength of the Ogent family, a mixture of two distinct bloodlines.

“Now, let’s hear from the assistant butler, who has likely observed this boy Shirone the longest.”

Temuran stepped forward. Lewis gave him a sidelong glance, hinting that he should choose his side carefully. After all, while family members could say whatever they pleased, the most important person to the servants was their employer, Bischof.

“Shirone has carried out every task I’ve assigned to him perfectly for the past year and a half.”

Lewis frowned in annoyance. All Temuran had to do was bend the truth a little. No wonder he was still stuck as an assistant butler.

“Did you know they were friends?”

“I knew he spent a lot of time with the young master, but I didn’t know they were friends. However, from my limited perspective, if Shirone had been a reckless child without any discernment, he wouldn’t have been able to organize ten thousand books.”

Shirone’s eyes widened in surprise. He never imagined Temuran thought so highly of him.

Lewis, with anger in his voice, asked, “So, are you taking Shirone’s side?”

Temuran, like a seasoned butler, gave a humble smile and bowed his head.

“No, I was also shocked to learn that Shirone, a contract worker, was involved with the youngest master. I am merely

reporting the facts as an assistant butler.”

At this point, it was clear that the verdict was essentially decided. Bischof was the only one still pushing for punishment. No matter how much power he held as the family head, when everyone spoke in unison, he had no choice but to relent.

Rian, feeling the tension ease, let out a deep breath.

Shirone also felt more relaxed and smiled warmly at Rian.

But it wasn't over yet.

“I can't accept this.”

It was Clump's final judgment.

“Father.”

“Grandfather!”

Bischof and Rian called out to Clump simultaneously, but the emotions in their voices were completely opposite.

“I understand that you two acknowledge each other as friends, but this is as far as it goes. If your relationship continues, rumors will inevitably spread, and you may become prey to other nobles. So, I believe it would be best for Rian and Shirone to part ways here, with good memories.”

Reina felt disappointed with her grandfather but had no rebuttal. The family's reputation was indeed important.

They had already made a significant effort just by ensuring Shirone's safety.

Rian's fiery gaze was met with Clump's bright smile. While he surely understood his beloved grandson's feelings, he had a duty to protect the family's honor. The fact that no one objected to his decision confirmed its legitimacy.

“Shirone, what do you think? I appreciate you teaching my naive grandson about friendship, but do you think you could let Rian go now? It's difficult for nobles and commoners to remain friends.”

Shirone, who had been staring at the marble floor, spoke up.

“I cannot do that.”

This unexpected, bold response left not only Bischof but also Reina, Rai, and even Clump wide-eyed in surprise. But no one was more startled than Rian.

“Sh-Shirone...”

“If a commoner like me becomes an obstacle to Rian’s path, I will accept never seeing him again. If you doubt my sincerity, you could even take my life. But even so, I cannot think we aren’t friends. Because Rian and I are friends.”

Tears welled up in Rian’s eyes. They were tears of shame. Deep down, he had been relieved that Shirone was still alive. It was his own trust that had faltered.

Finally, having made up his mind, Rian raised his sword and shouted.

“I make this declaration here and now!”

His family members looked on with anxiety. Unlike Shirone, Rian’s emotional outbursts often led to unpredictable situations.

Their worries were justified. Before anyone could react, Rian turned his sword, driving it into the marble floor with lightning speed.

The blade penetrated the floor, and Shirone stared blankly at his reflection in the sword’s gleam.

At that motherent, Rian knelt on one knee and bowed his head to Shirone.

“As of this motherent, I, Ogent Rian of the Ogent family, pledge to be Shirone’s sword.”

“You fool!” Bischof stood up, pointing a finger in disbelief. Rian’s action was so outrageous that even Reina, who had been supporting him, was stunned.

“Did you just... make a knight’s oath?”

A knight’s oath.

While nobles pledge loyalty to the royalty in exchange for land and titles, in ancient times, even kings were once mere nobles. This meant that royal power could always be overthrown, and a knight’s loyalty was tied to the benefits and honor bestowed upon them by royalty.

But a knight's oath was different. It was a personal decision to dedicate oneself as a sword, pledging a lifetime of service to one master.

A noble who betrays a king is a mere traitor. But a knight who breaks their oath isn't even treated as human, and their family is forever disgraced in history.

A knight's oath is made only once in a lifetime, and Rian had just made that heavy decision for Shirone.

Bischof seethed with rage. Once the oath is made, it cannot be revoked. Even without emphasizing its significance, withdrawing the oath would immediately mark Rian as a fool.

"Rian, what are you doing?" Shirone asked, shocked. But Rian couldn't lift his head in shame. For a mothererent, he had wavered. In contrast to Shirone, who was willing to risk his life to protect their friendship, Rian's words had been shallow.

"What do you think? There's no turning back now. We're in this together."

Compared to Shirone's resolve, making a knight's oath seemed insignificant. Rian proudly lifted his sword and looked at his family. Their faces showed disbelief, but despite the trouble he'd caused, he felt a sense of satisfaction.

Clump stroked his large chin, deep in thought. He hadn't expected Rian to be this foolish, yet he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride—perhaps because Rian reminded him of his younger self.

"Well, to be truly foolish, you have to be at least that bold," he mused, burying his complicated emotions. Then, in a serious tone, he asked, "Rian, if you're pledging to be his sword, does that mean the boy is worthy of it?"

"He's more than worthy."

"Then answer me. Is this boy's worth measured by his greatness or by your inadequacy?"

Rian thought carefully. Is Shirone exceptional, or is it that Rian himself is lacking? No matter what answer he gave, it wouldn't fully satisfy Clump. Why had his grandfather asked such a question?

"A sword doesn't judge. It simply protects."

Clump was pleased. As Rian said, a sword doesn't think. It only needs to cut in the direction its master desires.

"You certainly talk well for someone so poor at swordsmanship. I feel sorry for your friend, having such a sword."

"Grandfather!" Rian shouted with wide eyes, but the tension had eased. There was no turning back, but everyone was too drained to argue further.

Clump concluded the matter with his usual decisiveness.

"Enough. It's settled. Help your master up. Shirone, Rian may be an unrefined sword, but he won't wound you. Take care of him for us."

Shirone nodded silently. Modesty in this situation would only harm the Ogent family's pride.

"He's a friend far beyond what I deserve. Thank you for allowing this."

"It wasn't my decision. He acted on his own. I heard your contract is over. You're planning to return home, right?"

"Yes. My parents are waiting for me."

"You must miss them. But now that the two of you have made a lifelong bond, leaving without a farewell would be a shame. Head servant!"

"Yes, sir."

"Send for Shirone's carriage now. His parents should be brought here."

"Understood."

The head servant left the estate. This matter was now completely out of his hands. Once again, he was reminded how impossible it was to predict the ways of nobles.

Chapter 15: The First Step Toward a Dream (7)

Shirone and Rian were chatting in Rian's room. It was now noon, after being summoned and forced to kneel earlier in the morning. So much had happened in just half a day that it felt overwhelming.

"Hehehe, did you see my family's faces earlier? It was so satisfying."

"But Rian, are you really okay? I mean, that knight's oath... I'm worried you might have made such a big decision because of me."

Rian's playful expression suddenly turned serious. Even someone as carefree as Rian understood the weight of a knight's oath.

"Shirone, I didn't make the oath just because we're friends. You're different from my brother. You have this pull, a strength that draws people in. I entrusted my life to someone like that."

Shirone could sense Rian's sincerity, but he still found the sentiment a bit embarrassing.

"Haha! That's a lot of pressure. But if you're going to protect me, you'll need to improve by at least a few times more."

"Ugh! Don't poke at my weak spots. I already know that. But seriously, I was amazed by your courage earlier. You stood up and spoke your mind in front of everyone, and you even took control of the situation. Weren't you scared?"

"Haha, there's a special trick to that."

Shirone explained the concept of imagining leap of faith, thinking it might help Rian in his swordsmanship.

But after listening for a while, Rian's first reaction was unexpected.

“Leap of faith? Why would you do something like that? Are you an idiot?”

“An... an idiot?”

Being called an idiot by Rian was a shock. It was probably more jarring than being called ugly by an orc.

“No, listen carefully. I'm not telling you to actually jump off a cliff, but to imagine it. Until you fall, you're not dead, right? So instead of worrying about the future, focus on the present, and then solutions will appear.”

“But eventually, if you jump, you die. Think about it. If you jump, you die.”

“Ugh, that's not the point! The idea is that if you're afraid to take the leap, you'll never accomplish anything, you fool!”

“Oh, that's what you meant? Well, in that case, I could jump anytime.”

“Huh?”

“For example, if jumping off a cliff could save you, I'd do it without hesitation. That's what it means to be a friend and a knight.”

Shirone blinked. Rian's interpretation was completely different from what he had been trying to convey, but it still made sense in its own way. In fact, it was very much in line with how Rian thought.

“He really is the complete opposite of me. It's amazing we even met,” Shirone thought.

As he was lost in thought, someone entered the room, and Shirone's face flushed. Reina poked her head in, waving her hand.

“Hi! The mood over at the black-haired camp is a bit too intense, so I've come to take refuge in the friendly base.”

“Get out. We're having a man-to-man talk,” Rian grumbled, trying to shoo her away.

Shirone quickly waved his hands.

“Why are you acting like that, Rian? She helped us a lot this time.”

“Yeah, but you don't know. This witch is definitely—”

Rian, about to hurl another insult out of habit, stopped when he saw Shirone and thought for a motherent. Shirone and Reina. Reina and Shirone. Their names kept bouncing back and forth in his mind.

With her usual cheerful demeanor, Reina trotted over and sat between the two boys like a cat.

“By the way, Rian, you were pretty cool earlier. Knight’s oath, all for the win. I really can’t compete with you.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Hehe, did you figure it out?”

“Gah, you’re so annoying! Why are you really here? Just to tease me?”

“Hey! How could you think that? I’ve been doing some solid reconnaissance. The atmosphere is pretty serious over at the other camp.”

“What could be more serious at this point?”

“Actually, Father was talking about sending you with Rai this time.”

Rian hadn’t heard about this. Even the genius Rai wasn’t sure if he would be recognized by the royal family, so why would Rian go to the palace?

“What are you talking about? Are they giving us a tour?”

“No, they’re thinking of enrolling you at the Kaizen Swordsmanship School. You know, the biggest sword school in the Kingdom of Tormia. Over the past 200 years, they’ve produced 10 certified 1st-class swordsmen.”

“What? And they didn’t even consult me before deciding this? I finally get to hang out with Shirone, and now they want to send me off to school? What about Mr. Kite?”

“The teacher’s contract ended yesterday. He already left for his hometown this morning. He said he already said his goodbyes, but I guess you didn’t hear?”

Rian looked surprised and glanced at the sword his master had given him. It was thanks to this sword that his knight’s oath had carried any weight at all.

‘Master.’

He was strict, but more than anyone else, he cared deeply for Rian. The reason he had willingly terminated the contract was likely because he hoped his student would grow even more.

"But this is all so sudden. What about Shirone?"

"Well, that's the thing. They're talking about sending you and Shirone to the swordsmanship school together. Yesterday, you mentioned that Shirone is better with a sword than you, right?"

"That's true, but Shirone isn't going to the swordsmanship school. He has something else he wants to do. Hmm, actually, I was thinking about this. While we're at it, why don't you ask Grandpa for a favor?"

"Huh? Something else he wants to do?"

Reina looked back, but Shirone couldn't say a word. Honestly, he couldn't quite grasp what the conversation was about. Sending him to a swordsmanship school? A commoner like him? Not only was the method questionable, but the reason for doing this was also unclear.

But for those who understood the noble mindset, it made perfect sense. No one in the Ogent family thought it was wrong to teach Shirone something.

Since the youngest son had decided to be Shirone's sword, Shirone's growth had to be supported to uphold the family's honor.

When Shirone didn't respond, Rian spoke on his behalf.

"Shirone's going to become a mage. He's not interested in swordsmanship."

Reina was shocked.

"What? A mage? Then, you lost to an aspiring mage in a sword fight? That's just pathetic."

"Shut up! I know! But Shirone's a genius! If he trained in swordsmanship, he'd surpass Rai by far."

"Really? That impressive, huh?"

"N-no, not at all..."

As Reina looked at him in admiration, Shirone lowered his head, embarrassed, not knowing where to look.

Rian wasn't happy with Shirone's timid behavior. With that lack of confidence, what woman would ever be attracted to him? Rian thought that using his "underwear plan" one more time might be the only way to break through.

"Alright, I'll suggest it, but it's likely Father will agree only if you also enter the swordsmanship school. He's always one to exploit weaknesses."

"Tch! Whatever. I'll think about it."

Rian knew all too well what his father was like. But if it was for Shirone's sake, entering the swordsmanship school was something he could easily do.

When he thought about it, it was necessary for him as well. He had lost a sword fight to an aspiring mage. At this rate, he wouldn't be Shirone's sword but rather a burden to him.

Just then, someone knocked on the door, interrupting the conversation. A house servant entered, looking nervous.

"Master Shirone's family has just arrived. They are scheduled to be escorted to the mansion, but the master has ordered that if you would like to greet them, I should guide you."

"Oh! Your parents, Shirone? What do you want to do?"

There was no need to ask. Shirone's eyes were already fixed on the mansion's front gate, which wasn't visible from here. His body was practically itching to run out.

"Haha. Go greet them, Shirone. We'll wait in the parlor.

Please guide Shirone."

"Understood, my lady."

Shirone followed the servant out of the mansion.

Shirone was slightly annoyed at how the servant, who had been addressing him informally until yesterday, had suddenly changed his tone. Now, the man seemed overly cautious, as if afraid Shirone might trip over a rock at any motherent.

“Um, you don’t need to act any differently. It’s not like I’ve suddenly become a noble.”

“Not at all! How could I dare behave so casually with someone who will become the youngest master’s lord? Please don’t say such things. It would be the death of me!” Shirone, who had once risked his life over a single book, understood the servant’s feelings better than anyone. But that only made him dislike this kind of treatment even more. “Even if you make a mistake, I won’t tell anyone, so please relax.”

The servant nodded repeatedly, overwhelmed with emotion. For the servants, Shirone was like a hero from a legend—a commoner who became the master of a noble.

In any case, Shirone couldn’t focus on that right now. His mind was elsewhere. At the end of the grand driveway that symbolized the Ogent estate, a carriage had just arrived. He saw two people stepping out. At that moment, Shirone’s vision blurred.

His parents, whom he hadn’t seen in a year and a half, were right there. Memories of long nights spent in the library and the hardships he’d endured flashed before him like a montage, and tears welled up in his eyes.

His legs began to move on their own, following the surge of emotion. Shirone ran toward the mansion's iron gates, oblivious to the servant calling after him.

“Mother! Father!”

Alpheas Magic Academy (1)

Shirone led his parents toward the reception room. Because they had all been crying so much at the front gate, the three of them walked down the hallway with swollen eyes.

It would take some time for their emotions to settle.

Whether it was out of courtesy from the hosts or the fact that the meeting was running long, Shirone and his parents were able to catch up for quite a while in the reception room.

"Let me see, my son. Your face looks so worn out. You must have had a hard time. You really went through a lot."

Tears welled up in Vincent's eyes again. Although Shirone looked healthier than before, from a parent's perspective, it seemed like he hadn't been eating or sleeping well.

"I didn't have a hard time at all. I read books and had so much fun. How have you been, Father?"

"Of course! I've been eating well and living comfortably. Look at your mother, she's gained some weight. She's become so beautiful we almost had another sibling for you. Haha!"

"Honey, what are you saying in front of our son?"

Shirone smiled sadly. His parents, whom he hadn't seen in a year and a half, had lost a lot of weight.

He could only imagine how they worried about him every day, likely unable to eat properly. That thought made Shirone's heart swell with emotion once more.

Vincent grew curious. At first, he had been so anxious, thinking something terrible had happened to his son, but seeing Shirone calm and collected, it didn't seem like anything bad had occurred.

"So, why did you call for us? If everything is done, you could have come straight home. Did they refuse to let you leave?"

"No, it's not like that. A good opportunity came up."

"A good opportunity?"

Shirone began to explain what had happened. Since he had already organized his thoughts, the words came out easily. However, for those listening, it was an utterly unbelievable tale.

Vincent's expression gradually turned to one of shock. To be honest, at some point, he couldn't even hear Shirone's voice anymore. He couldn't comprehend what his son was saying. He became friends with the youngest son of the Ogent family? And then that friend made a knight's oath to him? On top of that, the family accepted it and allowed them to remain friends?

Every time another wall of common sense was shattered, it was like thunder booming in Vincent's mind. When Shirone finally finished his story, Vincent scratched his head in silence.

He knew his son was intelligent and thoughtful. But even so, this didn't make any sense. Could his son's mind have gone astray? Had he suffered so much here that he had fallen into delusions?

"Shirone, be honest with me. I'll do anything for you. What exactly happened? Who made you like this?"

"It's the truth, Father. Why would I lie about something like this?"

"Yes, you're not a child who lies. So tell me, who's been bullying you? Who made your life miserable?"

Vincent was genuinely furious. He had heard countless stories of commoners getting tangled up with noble families and coming out of it half-crippled.

Shirone himself admitted it sounded unbelievable. But he couldn't think of a better way to convince them than by simply telling the truth.

As he was stuck, unsure of how to proceed, the door to the reception room opened, and the direct family members of the Ogent household entered.

Chapter 16: Alpheas Magic Academy (2)

“Nice to meet you. I am Ogent Bischof, head of the family.” Bischof greeted everyone on behalf of the group. Although Clump and Rai were absent, Rian and Reina accompanied him instead.

Rian, full of joy, bowed his head to Vincent.

“Greetings, uncle! I am Rian, Shirone’s sword. I will be the greatest swordsman in the world one day. Hahaha!”

“And I’m Rian’s sister, Reina. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Vincent and Olina blinked in confusion. After a motherent, when their minds finally connected the dots, they realized the situation and bowed.

“Oh, hello! I’m Shirone’s father. I can’t believe someone so distinguished would come here...”

“Oh my, didn’t Shirone tell you?”

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”

Vincent pondered what she might be referring to. The only thing that came to mind was his son’s seemingly impossible stories.

“So, you’re saying it was all true?”

“Ah, I suppose you might be surprised. We should have come earlier. But yes, everything Shirone said is true. My younger brother Rian and Shirone have become bound by a knight’s oath. That’s why we’ve invited you here.”

Once Vincent fully grasped the situation, his heart pounded. His initial joy was quickly replaced by fear. What had his innocent son gotten himself into?

“Let’s eat first. We can discuss everything in detail afterward.”

Bischof, true to his character, quickly addressed the matter and turned away.

The head of the family didn't seem particularly friendly. However, the fact that someone of his noble rank was even showing courtesy to commoners was a clear sign of how much weight he placed on his youngest son's decision. Even after the nobles left, Vincent stayed seated for a while. It wasn't until Shirone, with a smile, gently tugged at his sleeve that he snapped out of it and followed them to the parlor.

"Is this really happening? Our Shirone? In the Ogent family?"

Everything was a question. Everything seemed unbelievable. Olina, trembling like a scared girl, clung to her husband's arm. But even Vincent's legs were shaky. Suddenly, he gathered his wits. If Shirone's words were true, he could no longer afford to show weakness. He had to stand firm for his son.

What seemed like a simple meal invitation now felt like a battlefield to Vincent.

The rectangular table was filled with a variety of exquisite dishes. Even as a seasoned hunter, Vincent saw foods he had never encountered before. Reina had arranged for ingredients to be sourced directly from the royal palace. Everyone sat according to their rank, as tradition dictated. Viscount Bischof sat at the head of the table, with Clump to his left and Reina to his right.

Seated at the far end, Vincent finally realized the gravity of the situation when he saw the array of luxurious dishes before him. As head butler Louis and assistant butler Temuran served with utmost formality, Vincent unconsciously puffed up with pride.

However, he couldn't simply enjoy the motherent. He wanted to get through the meal quietly, out of respect for his son, but the sheer number of utensils—more than seven types—was dizzying.

As commoners, they were used to handling an entire wild boar with just one fork if needed. But the cutlery before them came in all shapes and sizes, some of which he had never seen before.

Even though the meal had started, Vincent's family had yet to take a single bite. The biggest issue was that the maids were just standing there, offering no assistance.

In the delicate psychological battle between nobles and commoners, they dared not make a wrong move. Especially as commoners who had suddenly risen in status, they could sense the sneering condescension in the air.

Bischof set down his utensils and spoke.

"Please, eat. There's no need to follow the noble customs."

"But still..."

"Courtesy lies not in the action itself but in the intent behind it. Simply seeing you try is enough to show us your respect. Please feel at ease."

Vincent was moved by the Viscount's words. Whether it was genuine kindness or noble pride, the fact that he was being so considerate was a great act of goodwill.

The maids' faces paled. The Ogent family's intention to fully accept Shirone was genuine. They truly planned to take him in.

In a hurry, the maids explained how to use the cutlery. Once they understood, the family found that eating wasn't that difficult. Vincent's family finally began to enjoy their meal comfortably.

Having regained his composure, Vincent now worried about his son. What exactly did the Ogent family plan for Shirone? Although he had heard about the knight's oath, nothing really changed. Shirone was still the son of a hunter, and aside from being exceptionally bright, his future was anything but certain.

Did they have ulterior motives? Vincent didn't want to doubt those who had shown kindness, but when it came to his son, he couldn't help but be cautious.

"I appreciate your regard for my son, but I'm also concerned. Ogent is a highly esteemed family, one of the most prestigious even in Creas. I can't quite believe that the young master would make a knight's oath to Shirone."

"Haha! There's no need to worry about that. Shirone and I —"

Bischof cut Rian off.

"To be honest, it is somewhat displeasing."

All utensils came to a halt. Yet Bischof continued to cut his meat without missing a beat.

"However, a knight's oath is a serious commitment, especially in a martial family. It represents pride and conviction. If I were to harbor resentment simply due to the difference in status, that would be an insult to Rian's honor. So, I will continue to address you with respect. Please, don't feel burdened."

Bischof's words resonated deeply with Shirone. Most nobles were arrogant and self-centered. But because of that, the values they held in high regard were elevated beyond imagination.

Shirone had always viewed nobles as oppressors, but after observing their way of life and having these conversations, he realized that they operated within their own set of rules and values.

"Haha! It's rare to hear such wisdom from our head. You must be feeling lonely, sending off your last son like this. Why not keep him here for another year?" the elder interrupted with a teasing smile.

Bischof didn't take the bait.

"Rai has mastered Schema and added the Ogent swordsmanship to his arsenal. His chances of earning his certification are high. On the other hand, Rian has yet to even grasp Schema. We have no choice but to place our hopes in this upcoming swordsmanship school."

"I see. So, you're subtly supporting the black-haired boy. Don't underestimate the passion of blue-haired youth. You

may find yourself embarrassed if you dismiss them.”

Rian, chewing on his lamb, gave his grandfather a thumbs-up. Bischof merely snorted. He was all too familiar with his father’s playful nature.

“Whether it’s blue hair or black hair, whoever succeeds is still my child. And that is the essence of...”

The entire direct family set down their utensils and spoke in unison:

“Ogent.”

After dinner, Clump gathered the family in the living room to discuss matters concerning Shirone.

Reina shared the news that Shirone had an interest in magic, and everyone agreed it made sense. Considering his physique and personality, swordsmanship had its limitations.

In the end, bringing Vincent along had been a good decision. Despite the relatively pleasant atmosphere during dinner, Clump maintained a solemn expression and made a formal announcement.

“As you all know, our family intends to support Shirone moving forward. It seems he’s interested in becoming a mage. In that case, what do you think about sending him to the Alpheas Magic Academy here in Creas? I’ve known the headmaster, Alpheas, for a long time, and the school is among the top five prestigious institutions in the Tormia Kingdom. It’s a state-recognized institution, so upon graduation, he would obtain a semi-official certification. In other words, he could officially become a mage.”

“A-a mage...”

Vincent swallowed nervously. Mages were seen as the pinnacle of intellect and masters of phenomena. It was a unique profession, unaffected by social status. Once certified, a mage could find significant opportunities anywhere.

There were rare cases of individuals who had discovered magic on their own, and some commoners had the fortune of becoming apprentices to mages, learning magic in that way. These individuals could eventually become mercenaries or join associations to earn their mage certification.

But such cases were extremely rare, and for most commoners, becoming a mage was a distant dream, even in their wildest imagination.

Yet here they were, discussing the possibility of Shirone becoming a mage, and being admitted to a prestigious school where certification would be guaranteed upon graduation. As a father, this was an offer Vincent could not refuse.

Olina was overwhelmed with emotion and burst into tears. Shirone hugged her tightly. It was a touching scene, though Clump remained uncharacteristically somber.

While attending a magic academy was indeed the fastest path to becoming a mage, the problem lay in Shirone's social status. Magic academies primarily admitted nobles, and special admissions were exceedingly rare.

Even with the influence of the Ogent family, which held a second-rank noble title, gaining admission would not be easy. The school had students from first-rank noble families, as well as many from second-rank ones.

"As you probably know, Shirone's current status does not meet the qualifications for admission to the magic academy. Even if the family covers the tuition and material costs, there will be talk about his mode of entry," Clump explained.

Vincent was jolted back to reality. The prospect had been so sweet that it had made him lose touch with reality.

"Ah, of course. Yes... I understand," Vincent said, his voice heavy with disappointment. The realization that his son, who had been acknowledged by a noble family, couldn't

attend the school simply because of the lowly status he had inherited from his father weighed heavily on him.

"There is one possible solution. In fact, it's the only solution," Clump said.

Vincent looked up sharply. Shirone, who had not heard of this before, also leaned in, listening closely.

"We would like to adopt Shirone into the Ogent family."

A heavy silence filled the room.

Clump's proposal was, in essence, asking Vincent to give up his son. Of course, it wasn't a bad offer—his son, who was a hunter's child, would suddenly become a member of the Ogent family.

Under normal circumstances, this would be an unimaginable privilege. But Vincent hesitated, unable to speak because of the deep, emotional ties of blood.

Shirone could become a noble. But from that moment on, he would no longer be Vincent's son. His own child would become someone else's.

Vincent looked at Shirone. Annoyingly, his son's face was calm, as though he expected this, or perhaps because he thought it was all too fantastical to be true.

"We discussed it as a family and decided this was the best solution. I have a cousin who doesn't have children yet. If we register Shirone under his name, he will become a noble and gain entry into the school. Of course, we have no intention of taking your son away from you. This would only be a matter of paperwork—your family ties wouldn't change," Clump added.

Just paperwork, he said. Could it really be that simple? In reality, everything in this world boiled down to paperwork. Vincent wasn't confident. Would he truly be able to watch Shirone, registered as someone else's son, without feeling resentment?

'Shirone, please say something. What should I, your father, decide? What is it that you truly want?'

Vincent turned to Shirone in despair.

Shirone's brow furrowed, irritated by his father's inability to respond. Vincent suddenly understood—it was because Shirone was frustrated with his indecision.

Seeing that everyone else remained silent due to the sensitive nature of the matter, Reina stepped in and asked, "Shirone, what do you think? It's just a matter of paperwork. You can become a noble and pursue your dreams. We'll still consider your current parents as your real parents. Nothing will change."

Shirone's brow furrowed even more deeply, and his eyes narrowed as if he couldn't comprehend the situation.

Chapter 17: Alpheas Magic Academy (3)

“Of course not. I am my father’s son. I will never become anyone else’s adopted child.”

“Shi...Shirone.”

Vincent’s voice trembled with emotion. There was no hesitation in his son’s tone. In fact, he spoke as if even being made to say such a thing was unpleasant.

Shirone’s firm attitude left the family members flustered. It was a difficult situation, of course, but the fact that he could answer so clearly meant there was no inner conflict in his heart.

Clump shot a sharp look at Shirone, colder than before.

“Are you really sure about this? This is a golden opportunity to become a noble. Not everyone gets such a chance.”

“If I have to change my father, I’d rather live as a commoner.”

“Commoners can’t enter the magic academy.”

“Then I won’t enter the magic academy.”

“If you don’t enter the magic academy, you can’t become a mage.”

“Then I won’t become a mage.”

“Shirone!”

Clump stood up abruptly, his eyes burning with frustration at Shirone’s stubbornness. Why was a child, usually so quick-witted, being so obstinate over such a simple matter?

“Is it because of guilt? The world isn’t that easy. For success, there are things you have to sacrifice. Or is your dream something so insignificant?”

Clump’s imposing figure was enough to intimidate anyone just by looking up at him. But Shirone, as always, responded

calmly.

“Perhaps it is.”

“What?”

“No matter how great my dream is, it’s something I inherited from my parents. My parents are the roots that provided me with the nutrients to bear fruit and to dream. The opportunity I have with the Ogent family now, the chance to become a servant earlier, the ability to read before that—it was all possible because my parents were the roots that supported me. This one opportunity given to me now is nothing compared to the infinite opportunities my parents have passed down to me. So to reject those roots and take nourishment from another is the same as telling me to wither and die.”

The room fell silent. But in everyone’s heart, a storm was brewing. Reina wiped her tears, and Rian smiled with pride for his friend.

Clump’s eyes, staring down at Shirone, wavered.

‘How can this child be like this...?’

It was Clump who had been mistaken. Perhaps he had been wrong from the start. Even without anyone’s help, wouldn’t this child still become a mage?

He is vast. No, infinite. Even the honor of the Ogent family is nothing but a fleeting opportunity for him.

No one could hold onto this child. Not until he decided to hold them first.

Only after convincing everyone did Shirone smile.

“I’m grateful for the offer, but I cannot accept it. My parents are the two people sitting here right now.”

Vincent clenched his fists. He felt ashamed. He wanted to crawl under the sofa right then. How could he have felt slighted over something as insignificant as a piece of paper? His son had so much faith in him. How could he, as a parent who had done nothing, feel hurt over such a trivial matter?

“Please... accept Shirone as the Ogent family’s adopted son.”

“Father...”

Vincent tightly closed his eyes.

“Please accept Shirone as your adopted son! I beg of you!”

No one thought Vincent was a bad parent. They would have done the same for their family.

“I understand your feelings, but there’s no choice. After what your son just said, how could we ignore his heart?”

“Shirone... Shirone isn’t actually our child.”

“Honey!”

Everyone’s eyes widened at Vincent’s confession. But the most shocked of all was Shirone.

It wasn’t just because of the secret about his birth. Anyone here might have suspected as much, given that Shirone's appearance was completely different from his parents.

But this statement went beyond paperwork; it was about the father-son relationship. Vincent was genuinely ready to give up being a father for his son’s dream.

“My wife and I cannot have children. Shirone came to us by chance. As you’ve seen, he’s clearly a noble’s child. He’s far too exceptional to be our son. If he becomes a noble’s adopted son, he’ll just be finding his rightful place, so it’s not rejecting his roots.”

It was a reasonable argument, and the people around the room considered it.

But Shirone, with a hurt expression, interrupted their thoughts.

“Father!”

“Shirone?”

“How can you say that without even discussing it with me? You’ve never mentioned anything like that before!”

“I... I’m sorry, Shirone. The reason I didn’t tell you is...”

“Do you know why I never asked? Because there’s only one father for everyone. And only one mother too. How many parents do you plan to give me? At this rate, I’ll have six!”

Vincent was struck. If you counted the two parents he might be adopted by, his current two, and the two who abandoned

him, it made six. Realizing this, Vincent was overwhelmed by the absurdity of what he was doing to his son.

"I... I just didn't want you to give up your dream because of me..."

"Who's giving up on their dream? There will be plenty of chances in life! Do you know how it feels to be abandoned by your parents twice?"

Tears welled up in Shirone's eyes.

It was only then that Vincent realized. His son, so intelligent and deep-thinking, was still only seventeen years old.

"Shirone, I'm sorry! What have I done? I will never give you away. I will make sure you achieve your dream!"

"Father!"

As Vincent hugged him tightly, Shirone finally wiped away his tears and buried his face in his father's embrace. How frightened he must have been. How much it must have hurt, this child who never showed his feelings.

The Ogent family watched the reunion between father and son warmly. The most moved of all was the head of the family, Bischof, who had raised four children alone after his wife passed away.

Bischof quietly spoke to Clump.

"We'll need you to use your influence."

"You're asking a decrepit old man for quite the favor. What influence do I have? Even those brainy scholars are worn out by Alpheas's stubbornness."

Clump groaned, shaking his head. But his expression wasn't entirely pessimistic, as if he still had hope.

"As head of the family, I'll give the order. Try to break through the special admission process. From what I've heard, there's an old debt involved."

"Hmph! That old man owes me more than one thing, but the problem is he's not the type to bend principles."

"Is it impossible?"

"Heh. Who knows? People like him respond well to stubborn persistence, don't they?"

Bischof smiled quietly, recalling how Clump's stubbornness had made him the head of the family in the first place.

Shirone stayed at the Ogent family residence until the day Rian left. Whether he would pass the special admissions was uncertain, but even if he did, he would only begin attending next year, leaving him six months to spend with his parents. An elegant four-horse carriage was waiting at the Ogent mansion's grand entrance, ready to transport the family to the royal capital. Rai had already boarded, and Clump was set to join them later, after meeting with Alpheas, the headmaster of the magic academy.

Rian, reluctant to part with Shirone, was in tears. The duration of studies at both magic and swordsmanship schools wasn't fixed—one could attend for years without passing the graduation exams, meaning their next reunion was uncertain.

"Shirone, you must become a mage! I'll write to you!" Rian said, sobbing.

"I know. It's not like we won't see each other again. You can come back occasionally, so stop crying," Shirone replied.

"I'm sure you'll graduate! I guarantee it!" Reina chimed in, hitting her brother on the head for acting childish.

"Focus on your own graduation first! You're the one I'm worried about!"

"Ow! I'm going to try my hardest too! I'll become the greatest knight and serve as Shirone's sword!"

Shirone didn't doubt him. Rian might not have the innate genius that Rai had, but he possessed many qualities that Rai lacked.

Reina gently patted Shirone's head.

"Don't worry, Shirone. Enjoy your time with your family for now. Grandpa will make sure you get into the academy. He never says things he doesn't mean."

"Yes. And... thank you for everything."

Shirone spoke earnestly. No matter how close he'd become with Rian, without Reina's help, things wouldn't have worked out so smoothly.

Reina realized that she, too, didn't want to part with Shirone. Despite being four years younger, he didn't feel like a child—likely due to his mature and noble character.

"Shirone, when you graduate from the magic academy..."

Reina started, then stopped, laughing instead. He was only 17, with a bright future ahead. Once at the academy, he would meet even more brilliant minds, far beyond what he'd experienced thus far.

"Never mind. Let's both work hard. You're going to become a mage for sure."

"Yes. Please take care of Rian."

"Don't worry about him. He's made his knight's oath, so he'll work hard even without nagging."

Reina glanced back at Shirone one last time before boarding the carriage. As the four horses began to move, Rian stuck his head out of the window.

"Shirone, you're the best! Break everyone at the magic academy!" Rian yelled.

"You too! Make sure you graduate!" Shirone shouted back. And so, his 18-month journey as a servant ended.

As soon as he realized it was over, a feeling of sadness akin to leaving home overwhelmed him.

The grand mansion of the Ogent family, which had once intimidated him, now felt like a symbol wishing him good fortune.

"Master Shirone, shall we go? I'll take you home."

A carriage awaited Shirone to take him back to his own home. Seeing it finally made him feel like he was truly returning.

Shirone bowed deeply toward the Ogent family estate.

"Thank you so much."

At the Alpheas Magic Academy.

Around noon, during a break in classes, two elderly men sat across from each other in the headmaster's office, sipping tea.

One was a large man with blue hair, the other a gentle-looking man with a slight stoop, gazing out the window with a warm smile.

They were Milch Alpheas, the headmaster, and Clump of the Ogent family—friends for over 50 years.

Their conversation had stalled for the past 30 minutes.

Clump was waiting for Alpheas to respond. No matter how long it took, it was Alpheas's turn to speak, so Clump remained silent.

"No matter how close we are, I can't grant you this favor."

After a 30-minute pause, Alpheas finally spoke, though his answer was disappointing. Clump, however, smiled.

It had seemed like Alpheas had been carefully contemplating a difficult decision, but Clump knew his old friend better than that—he had probably been stalling without giving it much thought. That was typical of the mischievous Alpheas he knew.

"Even I can't? Do you have any idea how much trouble I went through for you when we were younger?"

Alpheas chuckled. "Hearing you boast about past favors—seems like you're in a real bind. But I didn't create the special admissions process just to give noble families a backdoor. I get countless requests each year, but even the special admissions have conditions."

"Heh, that's amusing. A backdoor for nobles, huh? But this time, it's different."

Alpheas felt a tinge of unease. Clump's eyes sparkled mischievously, meaning he'd brought another tricky case.

"I'm not asking you to take in some spoiled brat. Quite the opposite, actually. There's a kid, a friend of my youngest grandson, who's incredibly talented. Reminds me of you when you were younger."

At this, Alpheas's gaze softened, lost in memories of over 50 years ago. Time had passed so quickly.

"Your youngest grandson—Rian, right? He's reckless and stubborn, just like you were."

Clump laughed heartily.

"No talent for magic, so I sent him to a swordsmanship academy. Anyway, he's not who I want to talk about. It's Rian's friend."

"If he's so talented, why not let him take the formal entrance exam? I can only assume there's a problem."

"Oh, there's a big problem. He's not a noble."

Alpheas's eyes widened, not because of the request for a commoner, but because a memory from five years ago flashed across his mind.

"Could it be... a boy with blonde hair and blue eyes?"

Chapter 18: Alpheas Magic Academy (4)

This time, it was Clump who was surprised. As always, his friend knew how to toy with people.

“They say foresight comes with mastery of magic.”

“It’s not that. We had a brief encounter. Though, it was quite memorable.”

Alpheas began recounting his meeting with Shirone when the boy was about 12 years old, and Clump shared how Shirone had come to live with the Ogent family afterward.

“Arian Shirone...”

Alpheas fell silent again, but this time, it was because he was deep in thought.

“How about accepting him? It might just be fate,” Clump suggested.

“Fate is nothing more than a word game. A person’s future is shaped by their own hands. If you try to attribute everything to fate, is there anything that *wouldn’t* be fate?”

Clump sighed. It seemed like this wasn’t going to work either.

Still, he felt sympathy for his friend. He could understand why Alpheas was hesitating, even after recognizing such remarkable talent.

“You still... haven’t forgiven yourself, have you?” Clump asked.

Alpheas remained silent.

“You opened the special admissions process, defying the noble’s power struggles, for that very reason, didn’t you? You’ve done enough. You’ve nurtured countless talents. It’s time to forgive yourself.”

“Haha... Forgiving myself would be arrogance. I’m just a man who threw away a precious gift from the heavens. I’m not doing this for forgiveness. I just hope no one else ever makes the same mistake.”

Clump sighed. Alpheas, a certified 4th-class mage and headmaster of a prestigious academy, was meant for far greater things. He had been a genius. If not for that day...

“Ha! It’s true, even as your friend, you were insufferable back then. The shining star of the Milch family. A once-in-a-century genius, now just an old headmaster. Life sure is fleeting, isn’t it?”

Perhaps with age comes the ability to embrace even painful memories, for Alpheas found Clump’s cutting words oddly comforting.

“Haha! Meanwhile, you’ve been blessed by the heavens. That talentless fool has become a certified 3rd-class swordsman. The future of the Kingdom of Tormia sure looks bleak.”

The two laughed heartily. In the battle between talent and effort, it seemed Clump had emerged victorious, and Alpheas admired and respected his friend for it.

“As I grow older, I realize that genius is nothing but an illusion. It just means being a little better at something than others. I wonder, could that boy really bring me comfort?”

“You know the answer to that better than anyone,” Clump replied.

Alpheas chuckled as he walked toward the window. Was this how it would come to pass? The talent he once had to let go due to social barriers was now returning to him after a five-year detour.

He had always believed there was no such thing as fate. That humans alone shape their futures.

But suddenly, a chill ran down Alpheas’s spine. Could it really be... fate?

“I’ll admit Shirone,” he declared.

Learning Magic (1)

Spring had arrived. Flowers bloomed abundantly in the garden of Vincent's cabin.

In the six months since Shirone's admission to the magic academy had been confirmed, he spent joyful times with his parents.

Since he would be living in a dormitory once he entered the school, Shirone wanted to do as many things as possible with his family.

He went with his father to gather wood, and when they returned home, they enjoyed delicious dinners prepared by his mother, chatting together.

Vincent didn't tell anyone about Shirone's success. Although he was tempted to boast to friends who had subtly looked down on him for having a fragile son, he didn't want to cause any trouble for Shirone by attracting unnecessary attention.

Shirone was grateful for his father's consideration. Even when the Ogent family offered to provide them with a house in the city, Vincent stubbornly refused, not wanting to burden his son in any way.

The happy days passed swiftly, and finally, the day of Shirone's entrance to the magic academy arrived.

As the assistant butler Temuran waited outside with the carriage, Shirone bid farewell to his parents.

"Father, I'm off. I'll write to you often."

"Alright, my son! Do your best! Now, give me a kiss!"

When Vincent puckered his lips, Shirone's smile stiffened.

No matter how youthful his appearance, it was still a bit embarrassing to kiss his father at the age of eighteen.

"Father, come on... I'm too old for that now."

"Haha! If you don't, I'll kiss you instead!"

"Ugh."

As his father approached with his plump lips, Shirone recoiled. But instead of his lips, Vincent planted a warm kiss on Shirone's forehead and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Shirone, I'm proud of you."

Held in his father's arms, Shirone felt the last traces of anxiety melt away.

"I'll be back."

With that simple farewell, Shirone left the house and approached the stable, where Temuran was waiting.

"Please get in. I've been ordered to escort you to the school."

"Yes, thank you."

They traveled in silence. After all, their roles had been reversed in just two years, and it felt awkward.

But Shirone hadn't forgotten. Despite the opposition of the head butler Lewis, Temuran had stood by his side.

When they arrived at the magic academy's gate, Temuran respectfully helped Shirone out of the carriage. Since it was a prestigious place for nobles, they had to be mindful of appearances.

"The tuition and book fees will be handled through me.

Please don't worry about the financial aspects, and focus on your studies, young master."

Shirone bowed respectfully to Temuran in return.

"Assistant butler, thank you so much."

"I'm just doing my job."

"But I haven't had the chance to thank you properly. Thanks to your support, I was able to get into the magic academy. I'll never forget your kindness."

Temuran thought for a moment before responding.

"No matter how much a commoner excels, they remain a commoner. They can never rival the nobility."

When Shirone looked up, Temuran's sharp eyes gleamed as he continued.

"But such opportunities aren't given to just anyone. Many nobles will probably view you unfavorably. Even so, endure it. If you can persevere to the end, there will be a way."

It was advice fitting for Temuran, an orphan who had risen to the rank of assistant butler. Truth often lies in simplicity: if you endure to the end, there will always be a path forward.

“Thank you. I’ll definitely become a mage.”

For the first time in the two years they had known each other, Shirone saw Temuran smile.

“If you’re ready, follow me. You’ve been registered as a guest of the Ogent family and admitted through a special selection. I’ll introduce you.”

At the front gate of the magic academy stood the same guards as six years ago. Whether or not they were the same ones who had thrown Shirone out like a pest, it was clear that the philosophy of the gate remained unchanged.

“What brings you here?”

“This is Sir Shirone, a newly admitted student. Here are his admission certificate and identification papers from the Ogent family.”

The guard checked the admission certificate but didn’t dare even glance at the identification papers.

After all, anyone who could cross this threshold clearly outranked them.

“Ah, I see. It’s an honor to have you. I’m Marco, in charge of the main gate security. Please let me know if you need anything in the future.”

As the guard bent at the waist, his colleague beside him placed his right arm across his chest and offered a formal salute.

Shirone, taken aback by the stark contrast from six years ago, quickly regained his composure and smiled.

“I’ll take my leave now. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

With the papers in hand, Shirone took his first steps as a student of the magic academy.

As he crossed the threshold, his heart swelled with emotion. The Alpheas Magic Academy, a cradle for geniuses. What would he learn here, and whom would he meet?

Shirone’s journey as a mage had only just begun.

The magic academy sprawled across an entire mountain, covering an area of 75.425 square kilometers. There were 22 buildings and over 40 basic training grounds.

The total student body was 420, with 32 teachers. It was truly the kingdom's top school.

Entering the building where the reception was located, Shirone saw neatly dressed students moving about in small groups.

The walls displayed maps, the academy's history, and various curriculums. As Shirone waited to submit his documents, he passed the time by thoroughly examining them.

Alpheas Magic Academy used a class system known as "Ten Class". Classes Ten through Eight were basic levels, Seven through Four were advanced, and Classes Three through One were the graduating classes.

The graduating class was the only one graded on a curve, with a maximum of 30 students and only 10 graduates each year.

Shirone was shocked by the strictness of the graduation process at Alpheas. Considering there was only one graduation test per year, it meant that 20 students were expelled annually.

"You must be Shirone."

The school headmaster, Alpheas, had come personally to greet him.

Shirone was startled to see that Alpheas hadn't changed at all in the past six years. But then again, in a magic academy where the impossible was possible, it wasn't that surprising.

"Hello, I'm Shirone."

"I believe we've met before, haven't we? Do you remember me?"

How could he forget? It was the first time in his life that he had dared to dream of becoming a mage.

"Yes. Thank you for your help back then."

“Indeed. Anyway, we can talk more later. For now, let’s go. You need to take the entrance test.”

Shirone was flustered at the idea of a test right after enrolling. What kind of test would he be given without having learned anything yet?

“Don’t worry. It’s just an evaluation to place you in the right class. Can you use the Spirit Zone?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Ho! Is that so?”

He knew that he was a talented and smart boy. However, even so, mastering the Spirit Zone alone was a difficult task. In fact, it was Alpheas himself who taught Shirone the Spirit Zone, but he never imagined that a 12-year-old child could succeed after just one attempt.

That thought still holds true today. The reason he enrolled Shirone last among the new students was due to that.

There are countless families that train their children in magic from birth, so among the new students, there were many who weren’t even 10 years old. No one was older than 14, at the very least.

Therefore, he adjusted the timing so that 18-year-old Shirone wouldn’t lose face.

‘I should teach him from the basics. Perhaps it’s my own lack of insight, but it’s a pity. It would have been nice if we had started just a little earlier.’

Alpheas guided Shirone to the testing area. Since they had just arrived, other children would be in the middle of their tests, so he walked at a leisurely pace.

As they entered the building, intending to give her a tour, Shirone’s mouth dropped open in amazement. A completely different world unfolded before her eyes.

Many students were using magic. Even though it was a basic class building, the children’s astounding tricks were dizzying.

A girl was floating four stories up, chatting with a friend through the window, while another child had three books

spread out in the air and was reading them simultaneously. Alpheas glanced at Shirone's reaction and smiled mischievously. From now on, the world were different.

When they entered Class Seven, the age of the students increased significantly. Although they didn't use the bizarre magic typical of younger children, their gazes were filled with intellect, and they were so engrossed in conversation that they didn't notice anyone passing by.

"Is the convection energy enough to pull the temperature of the air below freezing? Wouldn't it be more efficient to condense the refrigerant instead?"

"But there's the drawback that it can't promote a reversible reaction. What about this: instead of reversing the direction of energy, if we rotated the time axis...?"

Shirone felt a pang of fear upon hearing the students' conversation. She couldn't understand what topic they were discussing at all.

At that moment, a loud noise echoed from the end of the corridor. A girl burst through the door, covering her ears. The students briefly looked back in surprise but quickly returned to their usual activities. From their reactions, it seemed like such occurrences happened frequently here. The girl covering her ears spotted Alpheas and greeted him warmly.

"Oh, Headmaster! Hello!"

"Ha ha, yes. It seems there's been a problem."

"It was a sound amplification experiment, but there seems to have been an error in the output circuit. I think I'll need to redesign it."

"It's important to balance the input and output. The key is maintaining consistent electrical power."

"Yes, I'll try again."

The girl adjusted her glasses and went back into the lab. Other kids were gathered around a strange magic circle, engaged in discussion.

Shirone realized just how small of a well he had been trapped in until now. Everyone looked like a genius. On the situation board, the grades of 270 students from the advanced class were listed. Among them, 42 students were recorded in Class Four, the highest tier, with the top student being named Carmis Amy.

“Wow. As expected, the Carmis family is in first place.”

Based on her experience working in the Ogent family, Shirone had memorized some of the well-known noble families. If it was Carmis, they were a top-tier noble family based in the city of Creas.

However, Shirone didn't let fear take hold right from the start. This was, quite literally, an infinite competition. He wanted to compete. He wanted to challenge herself to see how far he could climb.

“Hey, Amy! Let's go together!”

Shirone turned her head. She had clearly said Amy. This was an opportunity to see the top student of Class Four with her own eyes. A beautiful girl with red hair was hugging a book and waiting for her friend.

“Huh?”

Shirone's heart suddenly began to race. Trauma. The emotions came before the memories. It wasn't until some time passed that she recalled who she was.

She was the girl who had bullied him in the alley six years ago.

Chapter 19: Learning Magic (2)

‘Huh, how could this be! Why is that girl here?’

As Amy walked alongside her friend, Shirone turned her head. It would be disastrous if she remembered him, as he knew Shirone was not of noble birth.

‘Please just pass by. Just keep going.’

The two girls walked past without showing any particular reaction.

Shirone let out a sigh of relief, but that was a hasty judgment stemming from her unfamiliarity with women.

“Did you see that boy who just passed by? Is he a new student? He seems a bit too old for a first-year. Could he be a transfer student? Totally my type.”

Even while listening to her talkative friend, Amy didn’t respond. Like Shirone, she felt something strange.

But it wasn’t trauma. The girl who had been a troublemaker in the alleys couldn’t easily recall Shirone.

“Hmm, that’s strange. I definitely recognize him from somewhere. Where have I seen him?”

“What? Are you interested in him? You’ve never even looked at a guy until now.”

“No, I really have seen that boy somewhere.”

“Stop lying! You’re not being honest. You have a crush on him, don’t you?”

“I really don’t!”

Under the relentless questioning, Amy quickened her pace. As her friend walked faster, Amy started to run. The boys around them looked on with pleased expressions at the sight of Amy.

Only Shirone knew that the girl revered as a goddess at Alpheas Magic academy had once been a troublemaker ruling the alleys.

Magic Academy. Testing Area Three.

The enormous auditorium had a floor as smooth as a mirror. Unintelligible characters were densely written all over, and there wasn't a single ordinary chair in sight.

The only place with any furniture was in the north of the auditorium, where five teachers sat in a row at a long table. Six children were taking their tests while waiting for their turns, most of whom were under 10 years old.

"The test isn't over yet, huh? Well, that's good. Pay close attention to how those kids do."

Shirone moved toward the testing area. The kids, focused on their tasks while waiting for their turns, looked at Shirone with curiosity.

Traditionally, the third testing area for the Spirit Zone only conducts entrance exams, except in special cases. However, Shirone was too old to be a new student.

Alpheas had told Shirone that once he entered the zone, the characters engraved on the floor would convey special information. Depending on what the teachers saw there, they would check aspects like the size, intensity, flexibility, and disposition of the Spirit Zone.

"Okay, Kemi. Can you use magic?"

"I can levitate objects."

The examiners didn't check each answer individually. It was ultimately a loss for anyone who boasted in a school meant for learning.

"I see. Then shall we go straight into the Spirit Zone?"

Kemi, receiving the attention of the examiners, entered the Spirit Zone. The teacher sitting to the right rested his chin on his palm and observed intently. He was a clean-cut man with slicked-back hair and pronounced double eyelids.

"What's the farthest number you can see?"

“Six.”

“Oh! A six.”

The man marveled and recorded the number on his paper. This meant that the diameter of the Spirit Zone was six meters. If a new student had a size like this, they would at least be in Class Nine.

It was now the turn of the older teacher sitting beside him. With a curly hairdo and fine wrinkles on his forehead, he habitually widened his eyes, resembling an owl.

“What is the color you feel most clearly?”

“Um... I feel like I’m in a red world.”

“It’s red. So, it’s a divergent type. I can understand why the Spirit Zone is wide for their age.”

The teachers nodded at the old man’s words. The third and fourth teachers also posed questions related to their areas of expertise.

The question of whether a giant tower stood on the right or left side was mainly about determining whether the brain primarily used the right hemisphere or the left. The question regarding how many balls were shaking around was aimed at measuring the density of the spirit.

“What temperature do you feel right now? Is it warm or cold?”

The last teacher to ask was a young woman. Her eyebrows were sharply thin, and her gaze was long, giving her a cold impression, but her appearance was still quite attractive.

“Um... I feel a bit hot. I’m even sweating.”

If they felt hot, it meant that the shape of the Spirit Zone was variable. However, the more variable it was, the lower the durability, making it hard to determine whether it was good or bad.

In this way, the remaining students took turns being tested. The teachers appeared satisfied, suggesting a rather high level of ability.

When a child called out the number 12, even the headmaster, Alpheas, could not help but be impressed.

After all the students had completed their tests, it was Shirone's turn. Alpheas gently nudged the tense Shirone's back and brought him to the teachers.

"Now, don't feel pressured; just show us what you can do."

"Yes, I'll give it a try."

Shirone did not feel burdened. He had resolved to study the basics as soon as he entered this place.

When a tall boy entered, the examiners scrutinized Shirone closely. He was a special admission student that the principal had informed them about in advance.

His resume noted that he was a guest of the Ogent family, a unique status, and a special remark mentioned high potential for development.

Sometimes, there are children like this. Kids who, as they grow older, accidentally unlock their abilities.

However, this was a magic academy known as the cradle of geniuses. No matter how much of a genius they claimed to be outside, once they entered here, countless children would become underachievers. Perhaps because of this, the teachers had no particular expectations.

A man with slicked-back hair sitting to the right asked a question in a dull voice. He was Thadd, a fire mage. His interests lay solely in women.

"Arian Shirone. 18 years old. Can you use magic?"

"No. I haven't learned magic yet."

"I see. Well, you could probably do a few things even without learning."

Thadd's tone was laced with sarcasm. Of course, there was some truth to his words. The Spirit Zone serves as a conduit for extracting knowledge from the mind into reality.

Therefore, noble children who study various forms of knowledge from a young age often have the ability to perform simple magic on their own.

However, for Shirone, who had not had the opportunity to learn, it was impossible. Aware of this shortcoming, he focused solely on knowledge, but nevertheless, it was true

that the knowledge he could apply to magic was still shallow.

“Alright. Let’s see what you can do. Stand in that circle and show us your Spirit Zone. Oh, you can do a Spirit Zone, right?”

If he couldn’t even enter the Spirit Zone but had enrolled through special admission, the headmaster’s moral integrity would be in question.

Fortunately, Shirone nodded and headed toward the circle, so there was no unnecessary doubt.

Shirone closed his eyes and concentrated. As his self faded, countless sensations extended outward.

‘Wow....’

Once in the zone, Shirone was overwhelmed by a multitude of information. It felt as if he had fallen into a different dimension rather than an examination hall.

In the phase space, most of the information was blocked.

The only thing he could feel was the interaction of the magical symbols engraved on the floor.

“What’s the furthest number you can see?”

Countless numbers were revolving. Shirone focused on the most distant number. Since he was perceiving it through synesthesia, the ability to see wasn’t important.

However, Shirone could not answer.

“Shirone, what’s the furthest number you can see?”

Even when Thadd pressed him, Shirone’s lips remained sealed. The teachers thought he was just shy. After having seen the abilities of the younger children, it was natural to feel intimidated.

Alpheas spoke in a gentle voice.

“Shirone, you can speak honestly. It’s not about ranking but rather about finding a suitable method of education for you.”

With a voice lacking confidence, Shirone spoke.

“Um... I can see the numbers, but they’re too long for me to read.”

“You can’t read them? Are you saying you can’t see them?”

“No, I can see them, but they’re too long. They’re getting longer even now.”

Thadd felt annoyed. The magical phrase used to calculate the size of the zone only transmits integers. He thought Shirone was stalling out of embarrassment at his lack of ability.

“Then just give me an approximation of the number in front of you.”

“Um, 3.14.”

The teachers’ eyes widened. The number Shirone was seeing was pi. Since it’s an irrational number that cannot be divided by an integer, it extends infinitely.

The woman sitting to the left adjusted her glasses and shot a glare. She was Siena, a frost mage. True to her magical disposition, she had a cold personality and was a rival of Thadd.

“Shirone, I’m sorry, but 3.14 is not one of the numbers we specified. Are you really sure?”

Shirone frowned in confusion.

“Um. Is that so? But that’s what I see.”

‘It’s true....’

Siena lied. Of course, pi was not recorded among the magical symbols engraved on the floor. There was only one situation in which pi might appear.

When the diameter of the zone exceeds the measurable range.

This meant that the diameter of the zone Shirone had extended was at least over 30 meters.

The measuring precision of the third examination hall, which evaluates new students, was set quite low. This was to prevent young children who had not yet matured from experiencing severe mental shocks due to overly intense stimuli like extreme heat or the cold of the Arctic.

As part of this, the measurement range for the diameter of the spirit zone was limited to 30 meters.

However, even if someone enrolled late, very few exceeded this limit. A zone with a diameter of over 30 meters would at least indicate a Class Five level.

An old man sitting next to Thadd posed a question.

“What is the most vivid color you feel?”

“Um, blue. Everything is tinted blue.”

The old man’s lips puckered. A murmuring sound began to spread among the teachers.

If it was a blue hue, it indicated a convergent type. This type has advantages in durability rather than size in the spirit zone.

Even so, if the diameter of the spirit zone exceeded 30 meters, it was by no means a sign of slow growth for his age.

Alpheas continued to be surprised. He finally understood the reason behind Clump’s boastfulness.

However, being a natural mage, he became more critical.

If Shirone had moderate talent, he would have been willing to praise him, but Shirone was already surpassing that level. Furthermore, he was only halfway to the realm of magic and thus represented a dangerous potential.

If he were to overly praise him, it might ruin his life.

Shirone answered the subsequent questions. The development of his brain was in the bilateral hemispherical shape.

While this was also characteristic, what was truly noteworthy emerged from the next question.

“How many balls are floating around?”

Because he was experiencing synesthesia, there was no need to count them individually. Just as one could feel something touching their skin, he could perceive the number of balls all at once.

Shirone remained silent for a moment before speaking.

“867.”

“867....”

The teacher who had asked the question muttered unconsciously.

Siena, who had been watching with a cold demeanor until now, also pulled her chair closer and sat properly for the first time.

The density of the zone measured how evenly the mental energy was distributed.

Sensing 867 balls meant that Shirone's mental energy was filling the zone with a density of 86.7 percent.

A uniform density indicated a stable mind, which, in turn, meant a higher probability of success in magic.

Chapter 20: Learning Magic (3)

“Shirone, how cold is it right now?”

Siena asked the question, assuming that Shirone was on the colder side.

As expected, Shirone provided the answer she wanted.

“It’s quite cold. No, it’s cold enough to be uncomfortable.”

In the third testing area, one could only feel a chill rather than anything more. Siena nodded as if she understood and began writing her overall assessment.

The gist was this: It was convergent, defensive, and had excellent durability. However, despite this, the size of the zone was abnormally large.

Siena wondered if such a case could exist. Having been a teacher for over four years, it was rare to see a temperament that was the complete opposite of a student’s mental inclination.

But this was the inevitable result of Shirone’s focus and concentration. Just as he might have solely consumed history books to overcome his shallow knowledge, repeating only Spirit Zone training in an environment where he couldn’t learn magic had endowed her with this remarkable foundation.

“Thank you for your hard work. You may leave the Spirit Zone now. We need to hold a meeting to decide on classes, so could you please wait outside for a moment?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

After leaving the Spirit Zone, Shirone bowed and headed toward a group of children gathered outside.

As the testing room door closed, the teachers began voicing their opinions one after another.

“Quite an unusual student, indeed.”

Thadd retorted, seemingly displeased.

“Rather than unusual, wouldn’t you say it’s well-balanced?”

Siena responded.

“It’s so well-balanced that it becomes unusual. An 18-year-old boy who doesn’t know magic has a zone with a diameter exceeding 30 meters. And he has a convergent tendency.”

“As the zone grows larger, the density decreases. Yet this student’s density remains at 86.7 percent.”

“While we teach students technically how to increase density, this child achieved this number solely through their abilities. An 86.7 percent density is comparable to that of a high monk training in the mountains.”

The teachers were full of praise, which only further upset Thadd. Magic was a realm of talent; thus, most mages had strong pride. Because of this, they sometimes felt jealousy toward their students.

“Still, it’s just a student level. We need to observe them further.”

“What do you mean by that? It’s a school where students come to learn.”

At Siena’s cold voice, Thadd’s face reddened. If she hadn’t been pretty, he wouldn’t have endured such an insult.

As the atmosphere hinted at turning into a clash of emotions, the other professors fell silent. Thadd, specializing in fire magic, and Siena, in ice magic, were known rivals even within the school.

Alpheas asked, “So where would you like to place him?”

Shirone, that is.”

Siena was the first to offer her opinion.

“Wouldn’t Class Five be appropriate? He have high potential and his tendencies are unique, so I think he should be managed closely.”

Thadd countered.

“But they don’t know magic, right? If we put them in Class Five, he might get too full of himself and cause trouble.”

“Some students may act like you, Teacher Thadd, but not all of them will.”

Thadd shot her a glare and stood up.

“Teacher Siena! There’s a limit to my patience! To be honest, you want to manage him yourself, don’t you? Since you’re the Class Five homeroom teacher!”

“What does that matter? There’s no issue with a teacher wanting to guide their student, is there?”

“Your greed is excessive. He don’t know magic, and his zone transformation is at a level that’s impossible. No matter how you look at it, Class Seven is appropriate.”

Alpheas asked for the opinions of other teachers. Some suggested gradually nurturing the student starting from Class Ten, while others advised to hold off on placement for the time being.

A teacher resembling an owl proposed a compromise.

“I think Class Seven would be suitable. Given their age, sending them to a beginner class might diminish their motivation, but Class Seven includes basic lessons from the Spirit Zone, so it might not be bad. If Shirone truly demonstrates talent, early advancement would also be possible.”

Alpheas agreed with his statement. To perfect Shirone’s half-baked talent, it was essential to solidify the basics even more.

“Then I’ll proceed with that understanding for the assignment.”

The entrance exam had concluded.

Thanks to being assigned to Class Seven, Shirone was able to settle into the advanced dormitory where his peers stayed.

Surprisingly, it was a private room. Since it was a school for nobles, it seemed they ensured maximum comfort.

Shirone’s room was 707 in the boys’ dormitory.

Although it was a modest room for a noble, it was the size of the living room of the hut where Shirone had lived. A bookshelf was placed against the wall, and naturally, it was empty.

The staff member guiding Shirone provided some simple instructions. Classes ended at 5 PM, and after that, it was free time.

Except on weekends, going out was prohibited, but since the campus was vast, most amenities were available on-site. Students could create research groups in areas of interest, and if a sufficient number gathered, they could receive funding.

The library was open 24 hours in four locations across the north, south, east, and west, and as long as deadlines were met, there were few restrictions on borrowing books.

Shirone was satisfied with everything. It was the optimal environment for studying.

The staff member finally informed him of the prohibitions. Using magic after work hours, except in laboratories, was strictly forbidden. Particularly, researching external magic could lead to disciplinary action.

Among the typical forms of external magic were necromancers' soul arts, which included anti-magic.

Shirone asked why anti-magic was forbidden, but the staff member only replied that they didn't know and left.

Lying on his bed, Shirone fell into thought. Since he hadn't learned anything yet, there was no need to join a research group for the time being.

'I should go to the library. After studying history for two years, it's time to acquire broader knowledge now.'

Shirone felt confident. After all, wasn't the spine of knowledge built from suppressing curiosity? From now on, all that remained was to encompass all the knowledge of the world.

Shirone woke up to the sound of piano music. It was an ethereal resonance, a type of sound magic that amplified the sound. The performance was pleasant to hear, but it didn't match Reina's skill.

Shirone already missed her. I wonder how Reina is doing? Is Lian waiting for the first class with the same nervousness I have?

Unlike the strictly segregated dormitories, the cafeteria was the only place where boys and girls could sit together.

Shirone sat alone at a corner table, eating his meal.

Once, his timid nature had led him to be teased by the children in the nomadic village, but the students here didn't care how anyone else ate.

However, issues between the sexes were an exception; when a pretty or handsome student entered, everyone would cast their gaze in that direction.

Especially since Shirone was a new face and her appearance was outstanding, he attracted the main interest of the female students.

Fleeing from the whispers of the girls, Shirone finished his meal and returned to her room to gather her textbooks according to her schedule.

As he slung her bag over his shoulder, the weight of the books made his shoulder ache. Being in Class Seven, which was still considered an advanced class, meant there was an overwhelming amount to learn.

The classes were difficult. Compared to the aristocrats, who were thorough with their preparations and revisions, Shirone's knowledge was very limited.

However, thanks to the vast knowledge he had acquired through his knowledge backbone, he was able to keep up to some extent.

In the morning, they learned theory, and in the afternoon, they had practical sessions. The advanced class held integrated lessons focusing on Spirit Zones.

The sight of 280 students gathering in the training area, separating into seniors and juniors, was spectacular from Shirone's perspective.

"Senpai, thanks to your guidance last time, I did well on the exam. Thank you!"

"Senpai, over here! I saved a seat for you!"

Not knowing anyone, Shirone observed how the students interacted. It was common to see older students bowing to younger ones.

Whether in public or private, positions in society were determined by rank, so here too, there were strict hierarchies based on skill among seniors and juniors.

It was like a miniature version of the magic society.

Of course, yesterday's junior could become today's senior, but no senior would mistreat a junior just out of fear of such things.

Rather, if they could catch up, they boldly flaunted their status.

Just getting admitted to a magic academy was proof of their talent.

In a gathering of such prodigies competing against each other, the difficulty of promotion was beyond imagination, and closing the gap once it had formed was as challenging as plucking stars from the sky.

The teacher for the Spirit Zone was Ethella, a certified 6th-class mage. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, with brown hair tied back and wearing large glasses, giving her a gentle impression that seemed uncharacteristic of a mage.

"Before we start the class, we have some new students joining us. Shirone, please stand up and introduce yourself." All eyes turned to Shirone, including Amy's.

"Oh my! Isn't that the boy we saw yesterday? I think his name is Shirone," Amy's friend Seriellelele exclaimed.

However, Amy didn't respond. She recognized the face but couldn't recall where she had seen it.

“Oh! Senpai, do you know him?” a junior from Class Five interjected.

“She’s a new student who just joined and was placed in Class Seven right away. According to the teachers, he has incredible talent,” he said.

“Really? That’s even better. I wonder which noble family he’s from. Do you know his last name?”

“Damn it!”

Amy suddenly shouted. Seriellelele looked at her in surprise; it was the first time she had ever heard such harsh words from Amy.

“Amy, what’s wrong?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s nothing.”

Incredible talent. A young noble from a prestigious family.

These two keywords sparked a memory in her mind.

It was the boy she had met in a back alley six years ago.

‘He had talent. But he must be a commoner. No, an untouchable among commoners. So how is he here?’

Shirone introduced herself in a calm voice.

“Hello, I am Arian Shirone. I’ll be attending classes in Class Seven. I look forward to working with you all.”

The students welcomed Shirone with applause. The seniors were happy to have a junior join, and the girls were pleased that a handsome boy had arrived.

However, there were also some disdainful glances. It was a reasonable hostility towards someone who could potentially become a rival.

After the introductions of the new students concluded, Ethella began the class.

“Now, everyone. What is a Spirit Zone?”

“It’s the mind of a mage.”

“Correct. A Spirit Zone is the manifestation of the mind. The original form is a sphere. That’s what concentration is.

However, basic forms are less effective in real situations.”

Ethella stepped into a magical device called the “Image Zone”. The smooth floor was the same as when she took the

entrance test, with numerous magical circles forming concentric circles.

As the smooth floor disappeared and a dark space appeared, Ethella looked as if she were floating. In that state, she created a Spirit Zone with a diameter of about 10 meters, and surprisingly, its form became distinct.

‘So this is the Image Zone.’

The Image Zone was a device that could only be created with numerous magical engineering principles and an enormous amount of money behind it.

However, if the Spirit Zone could be seen visually, the achievement of the class would greatly increase. There was a reason Alpheas Magic academy was one of the five prestigious schools of the kingdom.

Chapter 21: Learning Magic (4)

Ethella, moving comfortably despite being inside her Spirit Zone, continued her explanation.

“Now, this is the basic form of the Spirit Zone. It evenly dominates the entire space. However, in practical situations, you rarely have the opportunity to use the whole space, except in special circumstances. Let me give you an example.”

With a snap of her fingers, a target appeared 20 meters away.

“A 10-meter-diameter sphere can’t exert any magical effect on that target. You’d have to either move directly or expand the size of the Spirit Zone. However, by changing its shape, there's another way.”

Ethella elongated her Spirit Zone toward the target. The volume remained the same, but by altering the shape, she captured the target.

“When you change the shape of your mind, the shape of the Spirit Zone changes as well. And then, like this...”

She extended her hand and said, “Fire.”

A burst of flame shot out, igniting the target 20 meters away. The eyes of the new students widened. Ethella, with her gentle appearance, suddenly seemed awe-inspiring.

“But there’s a critical flaw in this method.”

The students, slightly embarrassed, realized that the demonstration was actually an example of what not to do.

“The shape of the Spirit Zone can be transformed in many ways, but in real combat, where every second counts, calculating the shape every time would be inefficient. That’s

why mages simplify things by patterning a few shapes. These are known as the Four Patterns of the Spirit Zone.” Hearing this concept for the first time, Shirone’s heart raced with excitement.

“The first of the Four Patterns is the defensive type.”

Ethella’s Spirit Zone contracted and transformed into a cuboid with 20 triangular faces. Though its shape was bulky, it resembled a sphere from a distance.

“The foundation of the defensive type is the cuboid. You create a mental framework. The more frames you have, the stronger the durability, allowing you to protect a greater number of allies. Next is the offensive type.”

Ethella changed the shape of her Spirit Zone again. The surface of the sphere shrank, and dozens of long spikes extended outward in all directions.

“The offensive type is called the star shape. It reduces the surface area of the center while extending multiple zones outward. It covers all directions, so you don’t have to worry about the target’s location, making it useful for fighting multiple enemies. Now for the targeting type.”

Her Spirit Zone transformed again, extending out in the shape of a cross in all four directions.

“The targeting type is based on the cross shape. Of the four basic forms, it has the longest range. Although it has less firepower than the offensive type, it allows you to easily capture a target. The Spirit Zone rotates around the mage, locking onto targets.”

When Ethella snapped her fingers, the targets began to move around her. She followed them with sharp eyes.

“45 degrees to the side. Fire.”

Each time the rotating cross locked onto a target, flames shot out. The magic was cast in all directions simultaneously, with pinpoint accuracy as if she had eyes in the back of her head.

“The key to mastering the targeting type is the rotation speed of the Spirit Zone. In extreme cases, there’s the linear

type with the longest range, but unless you're a sniper, it's rarely used. Since the mage is located at the far end of the line, it's incredibly difficult to change direction."

After demonstrating the three forms, Ethella paused to wipe her glasses.

"Finally, there's the deviation type, which involves moving the center of the zone. In other words, it's like moving your brain."

Shirone couldn't grasp what she meant. The center of the zone is the mage's head, so how could that be moved?

Ethella returned her Spirit Zone to its original form.

A moment later, the Spirit Zone began moving while maintaining its spherical shape.

After 10 seconds, the Spirit Zone completely detached from Stella's body.

Shirone was shocked. If the zone represented the mage's mind, then what on earth was at the center of this detached zone?

"This is the deviation type. Among the Four Patterns, it is a special form. If the unified Spirit Zone is like 'oneness with mind', then the deviation type is like 'oneness with the world'. The farther the zone moves from the mage, the smaller it becomes. It's so difficult to master that there are specialized mages just for this technique. However, it's the fastest moving type and activates instantly."

Ethella then demonstrated a continuous transformation of the Four Patterns. It hardened into a cuboid, then spiked outward into a star, stretched into a cross, returned to a sphere, and finally detached from her body, swirling quickly around her.

"Wow..."

The students of Class Seven finally realized that transforming between the Four Patterns wasn't something achieved with just a year or two of practice. The teacher before them, who seemed like a harmless softie, was actually a certified 6th-class mage.

“You will now train in these Four Patterns. You’ll practice performing the four forms repeatedly. Let’s start by dividing into groups according to your class.”

The students received lessons according to their skill level. Shirone also participated in Ethella's class alongside her fellow Class Seven students.

“First, let’s focus on the defensive form. While mages tend to specialize in certain areas based on their tendencies, it’s important to consistently refine your defensive skills. It helps you maintain concentration in chaotic battlefields and, most importantly, gives you resistance against anti-magic.” Shirone recalled the warnings she had heard the previous day. Although the staff hadn’t provided clear answers, she still had lingering questions.

“Teacher, I have a question. Oh! May I ask a question?”

“Haha, feel free to ask anything. I assume your question isn’t whether you're allowed to ask questions?”

“Yes. Why is anti-magic considered forbidden magic? After all, many mages are studying it legally.”

“Hmm, let’s see. There are two types of anti-magic: the one used by mages and the one involving artifacts. Do you know about these?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Anti-magic isn’t exactly magic. It’s more like a Spirit Zone with special properties, so its effectiveness varies depending on the mage’s mind. This is what makes it different from artifacts.”

“So, approaching it carelessly could be dangerous?”

“Exactly. If it’s used improperly, accidents can happen.

Mages who specialize in anti-magic spend their entire lives practicing it. They often have a cold and detached personality. The school doesn’t want to encourage students to follow that path just yet.”

Shirone nodded in understanding. Since anti-magic involved destroying each other’s minds, it was clearly not something to be researched within the school.

“Alright! Let’s get back to practicing the Four Patterns.”

The students of Class Seven began their practice. Shirone worked on the defensive form, following the process of building a mental framework and connecting it.

After a while, he felt her Spirit Zone solidifying and opened his eyes in surprise. He couldn’t confirm it visually, as it wasn’t an Image Zone, but he felt like he had accomplished something.

Though his natural tendency towards concentration helped him, the result was still impressive. It was the reward for his six years of dedicated training in the Spirit Zone.

“Whoa! Look at that!”

Her classmates pointed towards the Image Zone and shouted. Students from Class Four were taking turns practicing, and now Amy was putting on a spectacular display.

Amy specialized in the targeting form. Her cross-shaped Zone rotated 90 degrees to the right, then twisted 270 degrees to the left, constantly shifting its angles while shooting flames.

Although the length of her zone was about 20 meters, which was average for the targeting form, the speed of her axis rotation was beyond imagination.

Despite targets rising from all directions, the number of flames shooting out in the four directions was rapid-fire.

Amy swiftly obliterated 120 targets before retracting her zone. With her beautiful appearance and remarkable skills, the younger students looked at her with admiration in their eyes.

“Is that senior Carmis Amy?”

“She’s ranked number one, has an amazing face, and even better skills. If I could date someone like her, my school life would be perfect.”

“Don’t even think about it. They say over 100 guys have already confessed to her, and she hasn’t shown interest in any of them.”

“Of course not! The Carmis family is famous even in the kingdom.”

Shirone, overhearing her Class Seven classmates, realized something. Why was a girl from such a prestigious family hanging out with thugs six years ago?

As he pondered, he shuddered. Amy, who was descending from the Image Zone, was staring directly at him. Naturally, the other students turned their gaze toward Shirone as well.

“What’s going on? Do they know each other?”

“I don’t think so. Isn’t he the boy who just enrolled yesterday?”

“Could it be love? Amy, who won’t even look at guys, staring at him?”

Hearing their whispers, Amy hastily looked away, cursing herself for making such a mistake. But honestly, she was losing her mind with curiosity.

To Amy, Shirone was the only person who knew about her reckless past. Though she hadn’t completely matured, once Amy started learning magic, she had wiped her slate clean. ‘I can’t let this happen. Graduation is coming soon, and if any rumors spread now, everything I’ve worked for will be ruined. What do I do?’

Amy returned to her seat, but none of the other students wanted to use the Image Zone. She was, after all, the undeniable top student in the advanced class, and anyone else would just embarrass themselves in front of the juniors. Seeing this as her chance, Shirone approached Ethella.

“Teacher, would it be alright if I used the Image Zone?”

“Huh? You want to use the Image Zone?”

Ethella tilted her head in confusion. What reason could a student who had just learned about the Four Patterns have for using the Image Zone?

“Wait a moment... The rule is for advanced students to use it first.”

Ethella paused, but no one else stepped forward to use it. Figuring it wouldn’t hurt to let Shirone experience it, she

agreed.

"Alright, it's probably good to let you try. But don't summon any targets. It could be dangerous."

"Yes. I just want to get a visual feel for the defensive form."

"Hmm?"

Ethella looked puzzled but allowed it, and Shirone made his way to the zone.

As Shirone stepped into the Image Zone, the seniors whistled and clapped, though it was clear they were mocking him more than encouraging him. Ignoring them, Shirone walked to the center.

Amy, who had been sipping water, turned at the commotion, and upon seeing Shirone, she spit out the water she was drinking.

"Pffft!"

"Amy, are you alright? What's going on?"

"What is he doing? What does she think he's going to do in there as a Class Seven student?"

The class session had turned into a break, but Shirone remained focused.

As he entered the Spirit Zone, it expanded rapidly into a large sphere. Seeing it with her own eyes took her breath away. Overwhelmed by the image, Shirone unintentionally stopped the expansion.

The students, who had been chattering, fell silent. The zone had grown to a diameter of 20 meters. Given that the average diameter for Class Seven students was 13 meters, it was safe to say a new large-scale talent had appeared.

"Wow! That's huge!"

"Hmph. Does making it bigger mean anything? It's probably just an air bubble."

Shirone was flustered. Before entering the Image Zone, he had succeeded in creating a solid frame, but now it was bending like a wet noodle.

"Why isn't this working?"

Had his focus been shaken by seeing the Spirit Zone with his own eyes? It was a possibility.

But Shirone didn't believe he was that weak-minded. There must have been a fundamental issue.

"Aha! That's it!"

If he tried to perform the Four Patterns in this state, his Spirit Zone would collapse. As a novice, he needed much more mental energy than an expert to perform the transformations.

It was like trying to build a structure with insufficient materials. With a 20-meter diameter, he couldn't construct a frame as strong as steel.

'I need to push it to the limit.'

Chapter 22: Learning Magic (5)

Shirone focused even more. Ignoring what was visible through the Image Zone, he delved into the Spirit Zone, and the already large sphere expanded to double its size.

The senior students' jaws dropped. The recorded measurement showed a diameter of 41 meters.

Considering that Class Four's average diameter was 27 meters, this was a figure close to the graduation class level.

"What the... How is that guy's Zone so big?"

Ethella was just as surprised.

Of course, the Spirit Zone can grow in size with training.

However, this growth isn't achieved through physical endurance like that of knights, but through mental and spiritual growth, including insight.

The body is straightforward—consistent training, while difficult, always yields results. However, the mind is a nebulous battle against an elusive illusion with no clear answers.

There are countless mages in the world who spend their entire lives training but fail to reach any meaningful achievements, eventually succumbing to despair.

This is why magic is often considered a talent-based field.

"I've never seen such an extraordinary zone from the start.

He must have spent his life contemplating the world and exploring his inner self. But could this really be possible at only 18?"

Unlike earlier, Shirone now felt certain. As his Spirit Zone expanded, he could feel the framework starting to take shape.

Unaware that many students were staring at him with astonishment, he was entirely focused on connecting the skeleton of his Spirit Zone.

“Don’t get attached. Tighten it all at once.”

Gritting his teeth, Shirone opened his eyes wide. As he transitioned into the defensive form of the Four Patterns, the massive sphere compressed around him, as if it was about to crush him.

The force was so intense that the onlookers could almost hear a faint cracking sound, like *creeeeak!* from the pressure.

“Woooooah...”

A soft groan escaped from somewhere.

Shirone observed the Four Patterns he had manifested in awe. He felt as if he were trapped inside a solid diamond. It was a perfectly interlocking shape, just like the cube that Ethella had demonstrated. The zone’s diameter was now 13 meters. From 41 meters to 13 meters—a 30% efficiency rate, but success nonetheless.

“He really did it! A freshman completed the Four Patterns on his first day!”

The naïve students of Class Seven were overly excited, while some of the seniors frowned at their reaction.

Still, many expressed approval. Most of those were female students, of course.

Amy, however, didn’t belong to either group. She was seriously starting to get irritated by Shirone.

Why had she forgotten? The reason she’d vowed to study magic in the first place was because of the humiliation she suffered at Shirone’s hands.

‘Who is that guy, really?’

This wasn’t a school one could enter just by having talent. He must have had someone helping him. But who?

“Teacher, the volume shrinks way more than I expected.”

“Hmm? Well, that’s natural. But the durability should have increased significantly. It should be able to withstand a

decent amount of physical impact.”

Shirone agreed. The solidity of the frame was vividly clear, almost like a second skin. At this level, he wouldn't risk being forced out of the Spirit Zone, even under physical attack.

Ethella scratched her eyebrow.

‘They said he surprised the teachers during the entrance exam. It seems the rumors were true.’

Of course, one can't expect perfection from the start.

Shirone's insight was indeed remarkable, but his success in the defensive form was partly due to his convergent nature and the abnormal size of his zone.

Realizing the reactions of those around him, Shirone, shy as ever, quietly returned to his corner.

Perhaps it was because of all the attention, but Shirone didn't notice that Amy was glaring at him intensely.

The Cold Boy and the Fiery Girl (1)

Shirone was overwhelmed by the variety of subjects he had to study. While students could choose a major in their final year, until then, they were required to complete all subjects, making the workload immense.

First period was an introductory chemistry class. As he entered the auditorium for Class Seven, students were already taking their seats. A familiar face stood at the lectern.

It was none other than Olipher Siena, a specialist on ice magic. She was the second daughter of the Olipher family, a renowned member of the Olipher Magic Academy. At just 26 years old, she had reached the certification for 6th-class mage through her expertise in ice magic alone. Beautiful face. Cold personality.

Her frosty demeanor during the freshman test had left a strong impression on Shirone. Despite her cold nature, she was surprisingly popular among the male students. Her beautiful appearance, the prestige of being a teacher, and

her mature, aloof attitude—all contributed to an irresistible charm.

Her long purple hair was neatly tied up, and she adjusted her horn-rimmed glasses as she spoke.

“Hello. Starting today, I’ll be teaching chemistry for Class Seven. My name is Olipher Siena.”

The room erupted in enthusiastic applause. Some even whistled or boldly asked if she had a boyfriend.

Siena ignored their voices and simply opened her book.

Then she subtly glanced around the room.

Shirone felt a chill. It seemed like she was looking right at him.

Though he thought it was his imagination, Shirone’s instinct was spot on. The reason she took the time to teach an extra subject, even though she was already in charge of Class Five, was solely because of Shirone.

‘Talent will rot if it stays stagnant. It’s better to promote it as quickly as possible.’

If you raise someone with talent, they’ll find a way to keep up. She planned to advance Shirone, to undermine her rival, Thadd, and uphold her values as a teacher.

Regardless of her motives, the students were delighted to have one of the most popular teachers instructing them.

“Teacher, is it true you’re dating Mr. Thadd? It’s not, right?”

“Tell us about your first love! It’s the first class, after all.”

“Please, teacher! Tell us!”

As the students pressed on, Siena frowned. A 30-centimeter ice crystal appeared beside her.

Srrrrk! Srrrrk!

The ice began to spin and grind, scattering snowflakes everywhere. The cold particles rapidly lowered the room’s temperature.

At first, the students laughed it off, saying, “It’s a bit chilly.”

But their expressions soon hardened as the temperature continued to drop, to the point where they could barely move their mouths from the cold.

“T-teacher! It’s... it’s so cold...”

“We will begin the lesson now.”

Siena stepped down from the podium and approached the students. As the ice’s rotation slowed, the temperature began to rise, but it was still below freezing.

“What is the principle behind the ice magic I just cast?”

Siena extended her palm, making the ice crystal float above it.

“What is cold?”

With that question, she clenched her fist, shattering the ice crystal into countless pieces.

“Coldness is the state of lacking energy. There’s no such thing as ‘cold energy’. Therefore, while temperature can rise infinitely, it cannot drop infinitely. The absence of energy is called absolute zero.”

Shirone frantically scribbled notes.

“When you extract energy from the atmosphere, you can form an ice crystal. It’s ordinary ice, of course. But what if you break it down to particles and disperse it with wind? Just like earlier, you can lower the temperature to a level where even simple ice can be fatal to humans.”

At the mention of death, the students’ faces turned pale.

“How do we absorb energy, then? Or rather, how does a mage cast magic?”

Siena raised two fingers and began to explain.

“Omniscience and omnipotence. A mage casts magic through omniscience and omnipotence. The Spirit Zone aligns a mage’s mind with the world, granting them godlike authority within that zone. This is omnipotence. But omnipotence alone isn’t enough to cast magic. You can’t just say ‘get hotter’ and expect the temperature to rise within your Spirit Zone. That’s where knowledge comes in. That’s omniscience.”

Shirone nodded in agreement. He realized that the reason he hadn’t been able to cast magic was because he had only

been training his omnipotence, neglecting the essential knowledge—or omniscience—required.

“You will learn various fields of study from me and other teachers. The Spirit Zone is only half of magic. Without knowledge, you cannot become a great mage. Now, let’s begin the basic chemistry lesson.”

Siena finally turned to the board and started writing. It was the beginning of a proper class, and the students were more focused than ever.

“So that’s how it is. A teacher isn’t popular just for being pretty,” Shirone thought.

His trust in Siena as a teacher sparked a newfound determination, and he focused deeply on the lesson.

Though there were parts he didn’t fully understand, he wasn’t concerned.

His spine of knowledge had been established, and from today onward, he was determined to devour other disciplines as well.

5:00 PM.

After the class ended, students filed out of the auditorium en masse. Shirone, feeling mentally drained, headed toward the dormitory.

Groups of students from study clubs were carrying lunch boxes, walking together in small clusters. Shirone, who wasn’t part of any club, planned to grab a quick bite and then head to the library.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, his body felt lighter. He realized he was being rapidly pulled somewhere, his feet leaving the ground. The force pulling him by the collar was so strong that it nearly took his breath away.

After about three minutes of this superhuman speed, he arrived in a forested area within the school grounds.

As the pace slowed, Shirone was lifted into the air before being dropped hard onto the ground.

The shock traveled through his tailbone. Coughing, he barely had time to catch his breath before looking up at the person who had brought him there.

The mysterious figure, wearing a black mask, anxiously glanced around before removing the mask.

“Oh... oh?”

Shirone’s eyes widened. The masked figure was none other than Carmis Amy. Even from a distance, her beauty was evident, but up close, her features were even more striking. Amy seemed to have realized something from Shirone’s expression and raised her hand, summoning fire magic.

“As I thought. You remember me, don’t you?”

“Uh, what?”

“I almost let you be. But I’ll just burn your lips and make you mute.”

Shirone didn’t try to dodge the approaching flame and simply watched. Even maniacs have some purpose behind their violence. Burning someone’s face at school just didn’t seem reasonable.

As expected, the flame stopped just in front of him. The fire had already disappeared. Amy, who had intended to frighten Shirone, frowned.

“You... you’re not the same coward from before, are you?”

The trembling boy who had been caught by street thugs and shivering with fear was nowhere to be found.

“So, you remember me too, senior?”

Amy grabbed Shirone by the collar and yanked him up.

“Who are you calling senior, you brat?! How did you even get in here? You’re just a commoner from the countryside! How did you get into this school?”

Shirone didn’t understand why she was so agitated. If she had a problem with a commoner attending a noble’s school, she wouldn’t have dragged him to such a secluded spot.

“There are reasons, but why did you bring me here?”

“Huh? Why?”

It had been an impulsive decision. At first, Amy had planned to ignore him, but she just couldn't. Even a minor secret was enough to make her restless, and Shirone was holding a bombshell that could ruin her school life.

"Be honest! How did you get into this school?"

Sensing that the next punch wouldn't stop, Shirone hurriedly explained. He told her how he entered the school as a guest under the sponsorship of the Ogent family. Amy finally let go of his collar.

"Huh. A guest of the Ogent family?"

Chapter 23: The Cold Boy and the Fiery Girl (2)

Amy's head spun. It was a lie, no doubt. A commoner could never be a guest in a noble household. The conclusion was made from ignorance of Rian's knight's oath.

"You. You didn't tell anyone that you know me, right?"

"I didn't tell anyone. It's not exactly a pleasant memory."

Then Shirone was a ticking time bomb. Carrying that around while trying to live a normal school life was truly awful.

Amy thought of a plan. She lifted her head arrogantly and spoke.

"You, you're in Class Seven, right? I'm in Class Four."

"I know that, senior."

"Then from today on, you'll be my subordinate."

"Huh? Subordinate?"

"I hold your weakness, don't I? If I say a word, you'll be kicked out of school. So, from now on, you have to do everything I tell you."

Shirone looked dumbfounded.

"Why should I? You're my senior, so I'd follow your orders anyway."

"So naive. Do you think I'll give you easy tasks? Prepare to cry your eyes out because I'll make you work hard."

If she couldn't follow Shirone around, she'd make him follow her. Keeping him in her sights and attacking his pride, she could figure out his true intentions.

"What are you going to make me do?"

"After class, buy me bread and coffee, and bring it to me. Got it? And if you spill even a drop of coffee, you'll go back and get it again."

Even Shirone, with his gentle nature, was getting furious. Bread? Did she think he enrolled in this school just to be her bread delivery boy?

“Haha! Meet me at the front of Library One from tomorrow. Don’t worry; if you listen well, I’ll let you off quickly.”

Amy laughed, poking Shirone’s forehead.

Shirone was bewildered. Was this really the Amy known as the goddess of Alpheas Magic academy?

“Oh, right. And one more thing...”

Just as she turned to leave, Amy looked back at Shirone. She raised her hand, and the air around them started to spin. At the same time, Shirone’s body floated into the air.

“Gasp!”

It was a tornado spell, manipulating air pressure to create wind. A spell Shirone had once helplessly fallen victim to, but for Amy, now in Class Four, it was child’s play.

Shirone flailed helplessly in the air. The ground seemed so clear, perhaps due to the crisis—he could even make out the leaves rolling on the ground.

And Amy’s smirking face.

‘If I fall, I’ll die.’

As that thought crossed his mind, Amy leaped up and grabbed the back of his neck. His collar tightened around his throat, and he gasped for air. By the time he regained his senses, he was already lying on the ground.

“Cough! Cough!”

Having demonstrated both magic and physical prowess, Amy dusted off her hands, satisfied. Though she had stopped training in Schema since she was 12, she still moved with inhuman precision.

“Consider your debt paid. See you tomorrow. Hahaha!”

As Amy walked away, laughing, Shirone’s anger flared. He had never met such an infuriating girl in his life.

But rank was power, and skill was everything. Swallowing his resentment, Shirone hung his head and left the woods.

Just thinking about seeing her again tomorrow already made his future seem bleak.

The bell signaling the end of the final period rang at 5 PM. The basic physics class had ended. As Shirone packed his bag and left the lecture hall, he let out a deep sigh. He had been running Amy's bread errands for ten days now. He bought bread and coffee from the school shop. Compared to the stipend he received from the Ogent family, the cost was negligible, but it wasn't about the money; it was about the feeling. And that was exactly what Amy was targeting.

"Why is she doing this to me? She's the one who started it." Walking carefully to avoid spilling the coffee required intense concentration. Yeah, think of it as training. He adjusted his steps to keep the coffee steady.

"No way! How long will this go on?"

Shirone felt pathetic.

"Oh look, there goes the lovesick boy."

"He's going to confess to her again today, isn't he? He's practically sick with it."

Passing girls whispered and giggled as they pointed at Shirone. This was the biggest problem.

After delivering the bread and coffee to Amy, she would receive them elegantly and then disappear into the library. Rumors were spreading among the students that Shirone had a crush on Amy. The more the rumors spread, the colder Amy treated him.

Shirone's fantasies about girls were completely shattered by Amy's relentless pursuit of revenge for something that had happened six years ago.

"Hey, here comes your prince."

"Prince? More like servant."

Amy stood with Seriellelele in front of the library, waiting for Shirone. The area was crowded with students who had come to witness the spectacle.

As Shirone climbed the steps, the watching girls burst into applause and giggles. Shirone's face turned beet red.

Seriellelele gave a sympathetic smile.

"Isn't it a bit much? Why don't you just accept him already, after all this?"

Amy's eyes widened.

"What? Why would I accept him?"

"Don't pretend. You don't even make eye contact with guys, but you always accept the bread and coffee Shirone brings. People are starting to wonder if the goddess of Alpheas has finally found her match."

It was ridiculous. The whole point was to provoke Shirone, but things were spiraling out of control.

She had originally intended to stop after a week. But for some reason, Shirone never showed any displeasure and kept bringing her the bread diligently.

'Ugh! If this keeps up, the rumors will get worse. I should stop now.'

When Shirone handed Amy the bread and coffee, a cheer erupted from the crowd. His devotion to not spilling a drop of coffee for the girl he supposedly loved was impressive—though it was all a complete misunderstanding, deepening the rift between them.

"Senior, here's your coffee."

"Ugh! So annoying!"

Amy raised her hand. The best way to clear up this ridiculous misunderstanding was to humiliate him.

She intended to knock the coffee out of his hand. That way, Shirone would be just like all the other boys she had rejected, and the strange rumors would die down.

"Who told you to bring this?"

As Amy swung her hand, the students gasped. But the expected disaster didn't happen.

Amy glared at the coffee, her hand trembling.

'Can't he at least show some annoyance? Is he an idiot? A fool? Does he have no pride?'

Unexpectedly, guilt washed over her. That was Shirone's strength.

If you have to do something, it's best to approach it with a positive attitude. That mindset made Amy feel guilty.

"Here, senior, your coffee."

Amy, who had worked her way into Class Four through sheer effort, knew that what she was doing to Shirone was a colossal waste of time.

Realizing this made her feel guilty. It wasn't like she avoided men out of fear of gossip; she just found them tiresome.

Nobles with inflated egos and no real skill simply didn't appeal to her.

'They can think whatever they want. As long as it doesn't involve me.'

Amy took the bread and coffee. Applause erupted from the crowd, as if they were watching a performance.

"Don't bring this nonsense again! Got it?"

"Huh? Oh, okay."

Was her anger finally gone? Shirone sighed with relief, thinking he wouldn't have to see her anymore.

But Amy's words only fueled more misunderstandings among the students.

"She accepted it! Amy accepted Shirone's feelings!"

"She even said she didn't need the coffee anymore. Does that mean he can just come as he is?"

Amy, not wanting to argue, disappeared into the library.

Seriellelele hurried after her, barely able to contain her excitement.

"Hey! What are you going to do? If this is real, it's great, but did you really mean that?"

"Oh, I don't care! Let them think whatever they want. Don't they have anything better to do? I'll graduate soon, anyway. Let them have their childish fun without me!"

As Shirone descended the library steps, he felt like he was floating. Ten days of suffering had finally ended. He hadn't

expected it to end so soon. Now, he could go straight to the library without wasting time.

“Yay! I can read an extra book tomorrow!”

The boys who mistakenly believed Shirone had won Amy’s heart watched enviously as he ran off.

11 PM.

Amy closed her book and sighed. She had never thought studying was fun, but she enjoyed being in the library. It was far better than hanging out with people who cared more about others’ relationships than their own lives.

Even as midnight approached, the library was still bustling with students. These people had no interest in who was dating whom. They were racehorses, running madly towards their dreams. Watching them, Amy realized that even wasting time on idle thoughts felt like a luxury.

Still, she was the top student in Class Four, and she never once thought she would be overtaken.

Sitting next to her, Seriellelele turned her head.

“Oh? Why did you close your book? Are you heading back already?”

“Yeah. I’m feeling a bit unsettled today. I’ll just rest and wake up an hour early tomorrow.”

“Really? Alright, then. Let’s go together.”

“No need. You don’t have to stop just because of me. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay, then. Sleep well. Don’t forget to wake up early tomorrow.”

Amy smiled and packed her bag. Fortress Seriellelele, the only friend Amy had made in six years of school. She was just as chatty as any other girl their age but knew how to focus when it mattered. Seriellelele was ranked 6th in Class Four, comfortably within the graduation ranks.

Amy appreciated Seriellelele for enjoying mature competition rather than shallow friendships.

After giving her friend some encouragement, Amy left the reading room. Aside from the night duty staff, the hallways

were empty and quiet. For the students, the school was about pursuing dreams, but for the staff, it was just a job to make money.

Amy stretched as she walked down the stairs, easing the day's fatigue. That's when she noticed someone standing in the shadows of the landing.

Pale skin, dark circles under his eyes, and black hair hanging over his face. As the moonlight revealed the figure, Amy's expression immediately soured.

It was Jake Ardius.

He belonged to the second-highest noble rank, and his family head served as the financial administrator of the royal court. Due to this role, the Ardius family's power was nearly on par with the top-ranked nobles.

Jake had a conceited and prickly personality. However, the real reason Amy disliked him was that he was a student with neither talent nor effort.

Though they attended the same Class Four, Jake was far from the level required to graduate. Moreover, there were rumors that he was the head of the "Black Mages", an underground research group.

In Amy's view, the Black Mages only focused on finding ways to torment students more talented than them.

The group wasn't officially recognized by the school, so they didn't receive funding. In other words, it was a dark circle for students plagued by inferiority complexes who wanted to bully the successful.

While they didn't openly harass or extort money, since most students were children of high-ranking nobles who could get them expelled immediately, rumors about students falling victim to the Black Mages still persisted. Clearly, they were up to something.

"Amy, you're done early today. I was planning to wait until midnight," Jake said.

"Why were you waiting for me? Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Don't be like that. I've heard about you. Word is, you've taken a liking to that junior, Shirone?"

Amy sighed, rubbing her forehead. Was he out of his mind? To come all the way to the library to talk about such nonsense?

Jake smirked and offered her a cup of coffee. Amy could tell just from the aroma. It was civet coffee, a favorite among nobles.

"I kept it warm for you. Someone like you deserves the best. How could you defile your lips with cheap coffee?"

Amy looked at the coffee and then at Jake with an incredulous expression.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm courting you, as you can see. You know how powerful my family is. I'll inherit my father's position managing the royal finances. Don't you think I'm the right match for you?"

"Sorry, but I don't make small talk in the library. You've got the wrong place, the wrong time, and most importantly, the wrong person. I don't like you. So let's both be careful not to run into each other again."

Amy stepped aside to go down the stairs, but Jake blocked her path, leaning against the wall.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Maybe I've been too gentle. I have my family's reputation to uphold. You're the same, aren't you? You work so hard to avoid tarnishing the Carmis family name. We share the same burden."

Amy scoffed. No matter how powerful the Ardius family was, they couldn't tarnish the name of Carmis. And Jake's arrogant attitude only made her dislike him more.

"You're nothing but a money-counting miser."

"What did you just say?"

"My family believes in living freely, doing what we want. Unlike you, who thinks counting coins like your father is something to brag about, we're different."

Jake's face flushed with anger. Even the top noble families couldn't speak to him like that.

"My father is the financial administrator for the royal court. In this world, money controls everything. You think you're better than me? I could crush your family with money alone. Want to test that theory?"

Amy felt a chill. Jake was the kind of person who would torment others endlessly for his own gain. She suddenly understood why she had felt unsettled all day.

"Thanks. Now I know why I accepted the coffee."

"What?"

"You're nothing like Shirone. In short, you're a coward."

"Ha! You're calling me a coward compared to that loser?"

"Want me to prove you wrong right now?"

"If you're so eager to do something, just do it already. Stop wasting time with idle threats. Do you think glaring at me will scare me?"

Amy slapped the mug out of Jake's hand. The expensive coffee splattered against the wall, and the mug shattered on the stairs.

Chapter 24: The Cold Boy and the Fiery Girl (3)

Jake felt his blood boiling. The hours he had spent waiting to meet Amy were now all for nothing, and his efforts had been insulted.

“You worthless girl...!” he began, but then clamped his mouth shut and recoiled. Amy had already entered her Spirit Zone. It was likely a targeting form of Four Patterns.

“A worthless girl? Do I seem that insignificant to you with all your fancy words? If you’re that mad, come at me. I’ll burn you to ashes right here and now.”

Jake gritted his teeth. He had thought she was just a studious model student, but he had been mistaken. She had once been a mischievous troublemaker who roamed the back alleys.

“Using magic at this hour is against the rules,” he said.

“You’re the one who used magic first, didn’t you? When you were warming up that civet coffee or whatever it was,” she retorted.

“Are you crazy? How could you compare that to a Four Patterns...?”

Amy burst into laughter. This was all he amounted to—a small-minded coward who got scared the moment someone revealed their full power. Most of the men she had encountered were just like him.

“Do you know why I accepted Shirone’s coffee? Because he seems like the kind of person who takes responsibility for his actions. Unlike you, who hides behind your family’s status and talks about rules, he does what he can. If you don’t disappear right now, I’ll burn you to nothing—there won’t even be a trace left.”

Jake was convinced. She wasn't lying. This was the Crimson Eye of the Carmis family, the one he had only heard about in rumors. Her large eyes were glowing red.

"If you kill me..." he stammered.

"I don't care. I take responsibility for my actions too," she replied.

Jake clenched his teeth so hard it felt like they might break. He had never experienced such humiliation before.

But even Jake, the notorious troublemaker, couldn't help but step back under the pressure of her Crimson Eye. She had locked him in her Four Patterns, and as the top student in Class Four, she could almost certainly incinerate him.

"You'll regret this, you arrogant girl!" he snarled as he stormed out of the library. It wasn't until Jake disappeared from sight that the glow faded from Amy's eyes. She staggered slightly, rubbing her eyes, and muttered to herself.

"So annoying. What a jerk."

She had planned to relax after a long time, but instead, she wasted it dealing with a terrible person. The fact that she couldn't get that time back frustrated her to no end.

Why were the men who approached her always like this? She wondered if there was something wrong with her personality.

Amy let out a small laugh.

"Well, I guess there are a lot of problems."

Suddenly, she felt sorry for Shirone.

Having escaped from Amy's controlling grip, Shirone was enjoying each day of freedom. The saying "You don't appreciate something until it's gone" rang true. Realizing how precious the hour Amy had taken from him was, he found studying even more enjoyable.

Although he had to endure people's stares because of the scandal involving the most prestigious girl in the school, in the library, no one cared. It was this kind of scholarly

atmosphere that made Alpheas Magic Academy such a prestigious institution.

After finishing his classes, Shirone hummed a tune on his way to the library. But near the teacher's dormitory, he spotted a familiar face.

It was Fortress Seriellele, Amy's friend. She was pacing nervously, as if she urgently needed to use the bathroom. Shirone decided to change her path.

Although they only exchanged greetings during integrated classes, Shirone had a positive impression of Seriellele.

Unlike Amy, who always growled at him, Seriellele had offered words of encouragement, though Shirone still wasn't sure what exactly she was cheering him on for.

Seriellele's eyes widened as she spotted Shirone walking over. She suddenly looked as if she had seen a ghost and rushed toward him in a panic.

"Hello, senior..." he began.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Serielle grabbed Shirone by the collar and shook her.

"Why are you here? If I had known, I wouldn't have sent Amy!"

Shirone tilted his head in confusion. He knew that after class, Amy would go straight to the library.

"What's going on? You have to explain it for me to understand."

"Read this! Are you sure nothing happened to you?"

Seriellele handed him a crumpled piece of paper. Shirone took it without a word and unfolded it. It was a brief warning note from someone claiming to be from the Black Mages.

30 minutes earlier.

Amy and Serielle were on their way to the library when a man blocked their path.

He was a student from Class Five, over 23 years old, and had been held back for years. Amy knew his name from when they were in the same class a year ago, but she had never spoken to him due to his gloomy personality.

“Hello, senior. You’re still doing well, I see,” he greeted slyly, addressing her with excessive politeness. Amy scoffed and kept walking.

“I’m busy. Move aside, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Come on, don’t be like that. We were classmates once. Just give me a minute of your time.”

“Was I your only classmate? Hundreds of students have passed through Class Five. Go find someone else,” she retorted, her tone sharp despite maintaining polite formalities. She couldn’t stand this man. He wasn’t entirely without talent—otherwise, he wouldn’t be in Class Five—but he wasted it, content to flirt with younger female students instead of striving for more. She had no interest in talking to someone like him.

“Haha! You’re still as rude as ever, Amy,” he sneered.

Amy’s eyes flashed with anger.

“What did you just say?” she demanded. She had treated him with respect, considering his age, but now he was trying to provoke her. The man, still confident, handed her a note.

“The boss wants to see you. You’d better do as you’re told if you don’t want to make the prince suffer.”

“The prince? What are you talking about?” Amy asked, frowning as she snatched the note and read it.

We have Shirone. If you don’t want him to be ruined as a man, come to Training Ground 14 by 6:00. If you tell a teacher, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.

—Black Mage.

She crumpled the note and threw it to the ground.

“So what? Shirone has nothing to do with me. And even if he did, do you think I’d follow your orders?”

“That’s for you to decide. I’m just the messenger,” the man replied with a sly grin before walking away casually.

Amy’s anger flared as she kicked the note on the ground.

Serielle, who picked it up and read it, trembled in fear.

“Black Mage... These guys are the worst. There are rumors that they’re the reason Tyra dropped out last month.”

“Tyra?” Amy’s classmate Tyra wasn’t at graduation level, but she had been a solid, above-average student. If they had targeted her, it must have been through numbers or underhanded tactics.

“We have to go. Shirone got caught because of me,” Amy said, determined.

“We should tell a teacher. Shirone’s important, but you could be in danger too,” Serielle urged.

“A teacher? Hmm...” Amy hesitated. She didn’t care about her own past, but Shirone had a secret about his origins that couldn’t be revealed. If the situation escalated, it could spread throughout the school and ruin his life. Knowing the privilege-conscious mindset of the nobles, she couldn’t let that happen.

“I’ll go first. If I’m not back by 7:00, report it to the teachers,” Amy decided.

“What? We need to report this now!” Serielle protested.

“Sorry, but I have my reasons. I’ll explain everything when I get back, okay?” Amy’s unusual plea left Serielle shocked. She had never seen her like this.

“Then I’ll go with you. Who knows how many people will be there?”

“You need to stay and be ready in case something happens. Don’t worry, Jake is probably their leader. He doesn’t have the skill to hurt me,” Amy reassured her.

Serielle knew better than anyone how talented Amy was. Though held back by the barriers of graduation, Amy was leagues ahead of most of their Class Four peers. She had always been at the top.

“Fine. Exactly one hour. If you’re not back by 7:00, I’ll go straight to the teachers.”

“Got it. I’ll count on you.”

After hearing Serielle’s account, Shirone was stunned. The existence of a thug circle like Black Mage was shocking enough, but Amy risking herself for his sake?

“So, Amy went because of me? How can we just wait around?” Shirone asked, panicking.

“I don’t know either! Amy told me to wait no matter what. Why are you even here?”

Shirone thought he understood. The one-hour delay was because Amy was confident she could handle it. She was also trying to protect his secret. Leaving Serielle as a messenger was a smart move.

“I’m going! You follow what Amy said,” Shirone insisted. Shirone dashed toward Training Ground 14. Although there were still 30 minutes before the meeting time, the location was far away. The training grounds were deep in the mountains, designed for real combat.

Suddenly, the scenery blurred, and buildings zipped past her. Shirone turned to see Serielle grabbing her side.

“How are you going to get there running? I’ll come too,” Serielle said.

It was short-distance teleportation, a fundamental spell for mages. Though normally banned on campus due to the risk of accidents, this wasn’t the time to worry about that.

With a series of loud pops, the two teleported through the air, catching the attention of students below as they leapt 10 meters at a time toward the mountains.

When they reached the mountain’s base, they switched to running. Teleportation was too dangerous in the woods, where a misstep could be fatal.

They arrived at Training Ground 14 just before 6:00, but Amy was nowhere to be found. There wasn’t even a trace of the Black Mage.

“Amy! Amy! What’s going on? Where is she?” Serielle yelled.

“They might have moved her. They could have suspected we’d report it to a teacher since the location was revealed. We might’ve been tricked,” Shirone said.

“Then what about Amy?” Serielle asked, her voice trembling.

Realizing the Black Mage's cunning, Shirone was certain they were up to something serious.

"Go back down and tell the teachers. You'll be much faster without me," Shirone urged.

"But Amy said to wait until 7:00! She said there was a reason! What if she's disappointed later?"

"That reason is because of me! Just go! I'll be fine!" Shirone shouted.

Serielle hesitated, confused by how important Shirone seemed to Amy.

"Is this for real? What exactly is your relationship? Are you two secretly dating or something?"

"Is this the time for that? She could be in danger!" Shirone snapped.

"Fine! Just don't wander off!" Serielle said as she turned to head back down the mountain. As long as Amy didn't get hurt, she had no reason not to report this.

Shirone ventured deeper into the forest to search for Amy. Unlike most nobles, he had spent half his life in the wilderness, so the dense forest felt like home.

He expanded his Spirit Zone to its maximum, searching for any trace of Amy. After about 10 minutes of trekking through the woods, he sensed the first set of footprints through his synesthesia.

"There!"

But there were no further traces. The bushes around him were flattened, as if someone had flown up into the sky. If Amy had taken to the air, there was no way for Shirone to follow. Frustrated, he circled the area when suddenly, he heard the sound of an explosion from the sky in the distance. Shirone's head snapped toward the source of the noise.

Chapter 25: The Cold Boy and the Fiery Girl (4)

Black smoke rose from Amy's face, though on closer inspection, it hovered about a finger's width away from her skin. It was a spell called Air Shield, which compressed the air to form a localized barrier.

"Changing the meeting spot and launching a sneak attack right away—you're still as cowardly as ever."

Amy straightened her posture from where she had landed and turned to face the man who had handed her the note earlier, now smirking slyly.

"Heh, I've been holding a lot of grudges against you for a while now. If you'd just let it happen, I could've had the honor of stealing your first kiss."

"Stop talking like the filth you look like. Where's Shirone?"

Five figures descended from the sky, landing around Amy. Among them was Jake, the leader of the Black Mages.

Looking around, Jake spoke as though surprised.

"You really came alone. Is that weakling really that important to you?"

"What nonsense are you talking about? I'm more than enough to take you all down by myself. Where's Shirone?"

"Haha! That spineless guy is probably in the library, completely unaware of what's about to happen to his 'girlfriend'."

It was only then that Amy realized she'd been deceived.

But, in a way, it was fortunate. Without a hostage, there was no way these guys could lay a finger on her.

"If you called me here, you must've been ready to die."

"Confident, aren't you? But it won't be that easy. If you saw the list of people who underestimated the Black Mages and

ended up dead, you'd hold your tongue."

"Your learning curve is worse than I thought. You sure talk a lot."

Amy activated her Spirit Zone. She adjusted its form into a Four Patterns targeting mode. Seeing this, Jake quickly deployed his own Four Patterns Zone, recalling their last encounter.

But once again, the cost of missing the first strike was high. Amy ignored Jake and focused on the others behind him. She unleashed consecutive Fire Strikes, forcing the men to dodge in panic. The Strike spells combined magic with physical force, making it hard to defend against even with an Air Shield.

Amy swiftly rotated her Spirit Zone to target them. However, human movement was unpredictable, and it was impossible to achieve perfect accuracy like in practice. The repeated rotations and reversals of her zone made her head throb. Jake summoned a gust of wind and shot into the air. While Amy specialized in fire, Jake's domain was wind. In one-on-one combat, it often came down to a decisive move.

Confident, he cast his most powerful spell, Wind Cutter, sending sharp gusts slicing through the air.

Amy didn't sense the Wind Cutter approaching. The cross-shaped targeting mode significantly increased her range, but it was weaker defensively compared to the spherical form, leaving her vulnerable to aerial attacks.

She detected the Wind Cutter only when it penetrated her Spirit Zone, and she turned quickly—but it was already less than a meter away.

Just as the Black Mages were about to celebrate, Amy's body twisted at an unimaginable speed. The Wind Cutter narrowly grazed her, slicing through her red hair. Jake was stunned.

"What... how did she do that?"

"It's called Schema, idiot."

Amy raised her cross-shaped targeting spell into an anti-air angle. Jake quickly summoned another gust of wind to evade, but her targeting speed was unmatched.

“Fire Strike.”

A massive fireball shot towards him. Realizing he couldn’t dodge, Jake encased himself in Air Suit, a high-level air spell.

Jake took the hit from the Fire Strike and plummeted to the ground with a deafening crash.

“Ugh! You annoying woman!”

He stood up, glaring at Amy. His Air Suit was still burning, the flames devouring its oxygen, making him look like a demon. As he dispelled the suit, the flames dispersed like falling petals. Yet, the physical force from the strike had already done its damage, twisting his insides painfully.

“I’ll kill you.”

“Hahaha! You thought you could beat me with those pathetic skill set? You’re not even fit to graduate—you’re bound to fail at this rate. That’s what happens when you let your mind wander.”

Amy, the genius of the Carmis family, had an overwhelming advantage in both skill and reputation.

But Jake smirked wickedly.

“Are you sure about that? Your confidence ends here.”

His boast wasn’t empty. The members of the Black Mages simultaneously extended their hands, and Amy’s face turned pale. A strange sensation, something she had never experienced, surged through her. It was as if something was entering her mind, disrupting her thoughts.

Amy glared at Jake in fury.

“This... is Anti-Magic?”

“Hahaha! Surprised? This is the Black Mages’ trump card. It’s the same spell that’s sent countless talents back home in defeat.”

“You dirty bastard.”

It truly was a despicable move—Anti-Magic, forbidden by school rules. Once someone crossed that forbidden line, it was akin to ripping out their Achilles' heel.

The resonant waves of the five Mages tore through Amy's Spirit Zone, shredding it to pieces. It felt like someone was violently shaking her brain, and she could barely hold on. Any longer, and she'd go insane.

Jake smiled victoriously as he cast Air Chain. The chains of wind wrapped around Amy's limbs, lifting her into the air. Bound and suspended, Amy struggled with all her might. Even after using Schema, she couldn't break free from the overwhelming force.

"Hah, finally caught the wild little cat."

Jake pulled out a knife.

"Now, what should I do with you? By the way, I haven't forgotten what happened a few days ago. Honestly, I'm in the mood to do something drastic."

"I'm warning you, if you so much as put a scratch on me, you won't get away with it either."

"Puhaha! The great Amy resorts to family threats when she's cornered? I told you, we're no different. Once you leave your family, you're nothing but a helpless girl."

"I've told you before, don't you dare lump me in with trash like you. I'll personally make sure you're taken care of."

Jake's eyes filled with malice. He was irritated by her attitude, refusing to bow her pride even in this situation. His hand, holding the knife, trembled as though he could stab her at any moment.

"You're not in a position to talk big. Should I give your face a makeover? If you become ugly, at least you won't have annoying guys chasing after you."

Even Amy felt a tinge of fear in Jake's eyes, filled with unstable inferiority. He truly intended to do something terrible.

Jake grasped the knife's blade with his other hand. Though not skilled in fire magic, heating metal was an easy task.

The blade began to glow red-hot from within.

“How about this? The arrogant girl Amy lost her eyesight while experimenting with magic on her own. She dropped out of the magic academy and lived the rest of her life as a failure. Doesn’t that sound like a great scenario?”

He brandished the blade, now glowing like molten metal, in front of her. As he thrust it towards her, Amy turned her head. The ends of her hair sizzled and burned.

“Hoho! So even Amy gets scared. I’ll give you one last chance. Beg me for mercy just once. It’d be better if you cried. Promise me you’ll leave the academy, and I might just spare your eyes.”

Amy finally understood why Tyra had dropped out. They had used illegal magic, exploiting loopholes in the school rules, to humiliate her beyond recovery.

Just because they felt inferior. Just because they were in a bad mood, they committed these horrible acts. The rising fury of the Carmis family’s crimson hair blazed red.

“Do your worst. But don’t you dare think you’ll walk away unscathed.”

Jake chuckled. He’d heard it all before. Even the other noble families they’d chased off had been stubborn at first. But when the blade was about to pierce their flesh, everyone eventually begged for their lives.

The more prideful they were, the harder it was for them to recover once broken. Watching students leave the academy, defeated, soothed Jake’s deep-seated inferiority complex.

“Well then, shall we begin?”

The knife inched closer to Amy’s left eye. She intended to endure it, but as the heat grew more intense, her eyelids squeezed shut.

“Stop right there, you bastards!”

A shout suddenly echoed through the room, causing the members of Black Mage to flinch. Amy’s eyes widened as she saw Shirone, fists clenched, seething with anger. Jake also turned around with a surprised expression.

“Well, well! Looks like the prince on the white horse has arrived. Too bad you came a little late, or your girlfriend could’ve been even prettier.”

“What do you think you’re doing to my senior?”

“Who knows? Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

“You idiot! Why did you come here alone?”

Amy shouted, but Shirone was too shocked by what he was seeing to hear her.

Older students surrounded the girl, tied up, and were threatening her. Jake was laughing maniacally while waving a knife around.

‘This is all because of me...’

For the first time in his life, Shirone felt a deep, overwhelming rage. He grabbed a wooden log lying on the ground and yelled.

“Let her go! Or else you’ll regret it!”

“Puhaha! Did you hear that? What’s he gonna do with a piece of wood?”

Ignoring their mockery, Shirone charged at them. After all, he had once beaten Rian in a sword duel. If he could just buy enough time using all his senses, the teachers would arrive soon.

“Here I come!”

“Guys, let him in. Open the door for him.”

Though Shirone charged at them, not one of them moved. Instead, they stood with mocking smiles, waiting for him to come closer.

Just as he felt something was wrong, Shirone’s mind reeled as if he’d been struck by a hammer.

“Ugh!”

“You fool! Disable your Spirit Zone! It’s Anti-Magic!”

Anti-Magic? Shirone realized the reason why someone as skilled as Amy had been caught by these thugs.

The resonance waves created by five people at once shook his consciousness violently.

Shirone looked up. The colors of the world seemed to swirl and blur, as though everything was melting. But he couldn't give up now. Clinging to his fading consciousness, he slowly took another step forward.

"Senior, I'll save you now."

"I told you not to come! If you stay here, you'll never be able to use magic again! You'll end up a fool!"

"It's all because of me... I have to do this..."

"Release your Spirit Zone! Quickly!"

Amy knew Shirone couldn't hear her, but all she could do was shout. With every step he took toward saving her, her heart broke.

Shirone gritted his teeth and maintained his Spirit Zone.

'No! I must hold on. I need more frames.'

Driven by his will, his Spirit Zone began transforming into a defensive four-sided structure. Now, it was the Black Mage members who were taken aback. It became harder for them to maintain their Anti-Magic, as if a massive weight was pressing down on them.

"What the—what's happening?"

Shirone expanded his Spirit Zone to its maximum size.

Though it wobbled precariously like a dewdrop on a leaf, he held its form with all his might.

'Stronger. Don't let it collapse. Don't let it break.'

Finally, the frame connected, and the Spirit Zone regained stability. Now, the Black Mage members started to suffer.

The balance of the Anti-Magic shifted, causing them pain.

"Agh! What's going on? My head hurts!"

At that moment, Shirone's eyes shot open. His defensive four-sided Spirit Zone solidified into a massive cube, closing in on the Black Mage members. The agony of the Anti-Magic vanished, replaced by a crushing sense of pressure.

"Arrrrgh!"

The five who had cast Anti-Magic screamed and collapsed.

As if crushed by an unseen force, they couldn't move a finger, all of them bleeding from their noses.

This was why Anti-Magic was forbidden at the academy. Without a mind sharpened to near perfection, Anti-Magic would backfire and destroy its caster.

Amy was stunned, watching the Black Mages squirm in agony. Shirone had single-handedly crushed the Anti-Magic of five people. And this was a first-year student from Class Seven, who hadn't even been enrolled for a month.

Shirone felt as though he had a small lizard pinned beneath his feet. The creature squirmed, but that was all. As time passed, even that small resistance faded. Just before their minds broke, the Black Mages released their Anti-Magic.

Amy incinerated the air chains binding her with fire magic and landed gracefully on the ground. Through her Spirit Zone, she could feel the shape of Shirone's own Spirit Zone. It was cold, hard, and impossibly heavy.

'My god. How is this even possible...?'

Shirone still had a fierce look in his eyes. As he took a step forward, Jake unconsciously stepped back. His instincts told him not to collide with Shirone's Spirit Zone.

But there was no escaping a 15-meter-wide Spirit Zone by merely stepping back. As the two zones overlapped, Jake asked in horror,

"Who... who are you?"

It was unbelievable. But the heightened sense of awareness from the Spirit Zone didn't lie. A defensive four-sided structure, an enormous cube composed of 88 faces, surrounded Shirone.

Chapter 26: Things Money Can't Buy (1)

Black Magicia.

A study group created by six troubled students, led by Jake. Except for Jake, the rest of the group consisted of students who repeatedly failed to advance, a group with neither dreams nor a future.

They were once regarded as brilliant talents. If they only had the courage to try again, they might have achieved victory someday.

But they chose to give up on competing. In a way, they were the only dropouts in a harsh world of competition.

"This can't be happening. Something's wrong."

Jake shook his head. Losing to a freshman who had just entered, not to mention against Amy, was impossible for the Black Magicia.

"Yeah. We didn't lose. We were just unlucky."

The students Jake had expelled so far were far more talented than Shirone. In the end, it was just bad luck. Haven't there been days like that in life?

"It's not over yet. I'm a Class Four. I'm fundamentally different from those who rely on anti-magic cheap shots."

Shirone sensed Jake's hostile intent and grew tense. He could feel Jake's Spirit Zone shifting into a star-shaped form, and it felt like hundreds of archers were aiming at him.

'What do I do? I haven't learned magic yet.'

Anti-magic was a battle of Spirit Zones, so it was manageable, but magic combat was a different story.

There was no way Shirone, who hadn't even learned the basics of defense magic like Air Shield, could stand a chance against Jake.

Jake conjured wind between his palms, compressing it as if squeezing it into shape. The air began to spin, forming a disc. It was a Wind Cutter, sharp enough to slice through logs.

“I’ll take your arm first. Then your legs.”

Just as Jake was about to cast the Wind Cutter, someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. The moment Jake sensed the approach through his extrasensory perception, they were already touching him. It wasn’t human speed.

Jake saw Amy’s face, her red eyes wide with fury. Her punch struck his chin, and the scene before him shook.

“Argh!”

For a mage, physical attacks were a weakness, and Amy’s attack, reinforced with the power of Schema, was devastating. His Spirit Zone couldn’t hold up against it. Amy climbed onto Jake’s abdomen and landed blow after blow. Each strike was as if a stone was being slammed down.

“What were you planning to do to me? Say it again, you bastard! Say it again!”

Jake’s head was jerked violently from side to side, as if his face was about to be torn off. Realizing things were about to get out of hand, Shirone ran towards Amy.

“Senior, please stop! He’ll die!”

“Let go, you bastard! You thought I was a joke?!”

“I’m telling you, he’ll die!”

Jake, barely conscious, overheard their conversation. He didn’t feel any pain, only a dull thud with each impact.

“Die? Am I going to die?”

The fear of death jolted Jake awake. He shielded his face with his arms and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Sp-Spare me! Just let me live! Please!”

Tears welled up in Amy’s eyes. She had nearly been disfigured. The thought of having endured humiliation from this trash made her blood boil.

"I'll never forgive you! You scum!"

"Senior, please, stop!"

Shirone put all his strength into pulling Amy off. The balance of Schema was such that it felt like he was pulling a stake out of the ground. Finally, with one last effort, Amy toppled backward, falling on top of Shirone.

"That's enough now, senior. Please stop."

Shirone gasped for breath. As his mind cleared, he felt a soft, delicate sensation against his arm. Realizing his arm was pressed against Amy's chest, he quickly pulled his hand away.

"S-Sorry!"

Amy didn't respond. She only gasped for air, her body trembling intermittently. Shirone could feel her emotions through her body, and it made him feel a sense of pity. Gently, he wrapped his arm around her waist and spoke softly.

"Senior, because of me..."

"Ah! That felt good!"

"Ugh!"

Amy suddenly sprang up, hitting Shirone's lower stomach with her rear as she did so.

Shirone clutched his abdomen and rolled over. If the hit had landed just a little lower, it could have been a disaster.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Although he avoided a vital spot, the impact caused sweat to form on his forehead. But he couldn't show any signs of pain.

"No, it's nothing."

"Hehe! Of course. I'm so light, after all."

There was no way she, being as curious as she had been since childhood, didn't know the state Shirone was in. It was her way of showing affection, though she wasn't good at expressing her emotions. She was also overlooking the fact that Shirone had, unintentionally, made an inappropriate contact.

“But what do we do now?”

Shirone changed the subject and turned his gaze to the Black Magicia. In the heat of the battle, he hadn't noticed, but now that the dust had settled, their condition looked serious.

All of them were knocked out with nosebleeds, and Jake, half out of his mind, was crawling on the ground.

Seeing their state, Amy decided to let it go at this point. She would have loved to expel them, but if things escalated, Shirone's true identity might be revealed.

“Let's get going. Those guys will stay quiet from now on since they've got something to hide too.”

“But senior Seriellelele will be coming this way, right?”

“What? Don't tell me... did you inform the teachers?”

“Of course! How could I come alone when you were in danger?”

Amy sighed and rubbed her forehead. She had hoped to at least savor the reward of her victory after the humiliation, but hearing that a report had already been made took the wind out of her sails.

Shirone felt deeply moved. Amy was disappointed because she had been trying to protect his secret.

“Thank you, Senior.”

“Huh?”

“You came here alone because of me. But don't worry. Secrets don't matter to me anymore. I'm just glad you're safe.”

“No, it's not really about that...”

Amy scratched her cheek and averted her eyes. Growing up in the free-spirited atmosphere of the Carmis family, she had sometimes felt neglected. Craving human connection, she wandered the backstreets. Shirone's kind words warmed her heart, but they were also hard for her to fully accept.

“Hmph! Who said it was because of you? I can handle scum like them by myself. I've been waiting for this chance, and now they're paying for it.”

Amy's cheeks were flushed red. Shirone felt satisfied. He thought he understood her better now.

"Haha, how childish. You call yourselves geniuses? Nonsense. You're just clueless kids."

Jake, using a tree for support, stood up. His face was a mess, but his eyes were filled with venom.

Amy placed her hands on her hips and spoke.

"You're really pathetic. If you can barely stand, you should just stay down. Are you some kind of masochist? Do you enjoy getting hit by me that much?"

"Hahaha!"

In Jake's mind, the thought of losing didn't even exist. In the end, money rules the world. He might have lost the fight, but he still had enormous financial backing.

"Do you think this is over? No, this is just the beginning. Let's be honest. You won't actually kill me, right? If you're so confident, go ahead and try. As long as I'm at this school, you'll never graduate. I'll destroy you no matter what it takes!"

Shirone felt a chill, but Amy, who had grown up dominating the backstreets, knew people like Jake all too well.

"Kill you? Why would I bother? My life's too bright and promising to waste on someone like you. But remember this: I might not kill you, but I can still beat you to a pulp."

Amy clenched her fist and took a step toward Jake, making him flinch. No matter how tough one's resolve, the body remembers fear.

"... Do you think I'm scared?"

"Who said anything about fear? Since you're standing, it's time for another beating. I'm still not done yet."

As Amy rotated her shoulders dramatically, Jake felt a surge of anger but his face twisted in fear.

Screeeeeeeech!

A sharp sound pierced the air from above. Shirone looked up, but the other two knew what it was without needing to check.

It was the distinct noise of a high-level teleportation spell. As starlight flickered in the sky, a flash of light rapidly twisted downward, descending to where Shirone and the others stood.

Seriellelele landed, accompanied by two teachers.

Amy checked the teachers' faces as if scratching a lottery ticket. Then she let out a small sigh.

It was Siena, who specialized in ice magic, and Thadd, who specialized in fire magic.

'Of all the teachers, it had to be them.'

Along with Ethella, they were the youngest faculty at the school, and there was no way they would treat this incident lightly.

"Amy! Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

Seriellelele rushed over to Amy with a worried face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. You know I'm not the type to go down easily."

Seriellelele, being the detail-oriented person she was, didn't miss even small changes. Amy's bangs, which usually hung down over her right eye, had been singed.

She had always thought Amy's hairstyle was a bit too old-fashioned given how pretty she was, but now that her friend's hairstyle, which she had maintained for six years, was damaged, Seriellelele's heart sank.

"What happened to your hair? What exactly went on?"

"Oh, come on! It's nothing. Anyway, is it really past seven already?"

"What do you mean? Do you know how long we've been searching for you? If it wasn't for the teachers, we wouldn't have made it in time."

The sun had already set, and darkness had fallen.

As night deepened, Thadd cast a fire spell. A burst of flame shot up with a pop, burning like a small sun, lighting up the surroundings.

'So this is the Fire Sun spell.'

Shirone marveled as he looked at the glowing orb in the sky. Even though it brightened the area like daylight, there was no heat. It was a phenomenon that could only happen by converting heat energy into light energy. According to what Shirone had read in books, the Fire Sun was a high-level spell typically seen on battlefields.

Thadd approached Amy with a distressed look on his face. "What's going on, Amy? How could someone as talented as you do something so foolish?"

Thadd, who was weak when it came to women, paid no attention to Shirone. Given that Amy was not only the top student but also from a first-rank noble family and stunningly beautiful, it was no wonder Thadd couldn't help but care.

Siena, feeling disgusted by Thadd's attitude, turned to Shirone.

"Shirone, can you explain what happened?"

"Uh, well, um..."

"I'll explain."

The teachers turned to look at Jake, surprised that the culprit behind the incident was offering to explain. They wondered if he had lost his mind after being beaten so badly.

But this was part of Jake's plan.

Punishments? He could endure those. After all, the school, which relied on the funding from the Ardius family, could never expel him.

But what about Shirone? Jake had clearly overheard their earlier conversation about keeping a secret. And Amy's attempt to cover up the incident confirmed it: there was something they were hiding.

"I called Amy here. She's so skilled that I had no choice but to use anti-magic. But it was a fair duel. We've had a history of bad blood, and it escalated into a pride contest. As you can see, we're the ones who were seriously beaten."

Siena spoke with a displeased expression.

“Are we supposed to believe that? You broke the school rules.”

“I’m not saying it was right, but think about it. If Amy was the victim, why didn’t she report it? They wanted to keep it quiet because they have something to hide.”

Amy shouted.

“What nonsense! What are we hiding? You kidnapped Shirone and threatened him!”

“Haha! And did we actually kidnap anyone? No. Besides, Shirone read the note we sent and still didn’t tell the teachers. What do you think that means?”

“You... you bastard...”

Amy couldn’t argue. From an outsider’s perspective, it made no sense that Shirone hadn’t informed the teachers about the note. But revealing the truth would expose Shirone’s secret.

Chapter 27: Things Money Can't Buy (2)

Jake became filled with arrogance. Look at this—this is how adults fight. In the end, the world is won by the ruthless, dirty, and shameless.

'Heh heh. Goodbye, Amy. Even if I fall into hell, I'll drag you down with me.'

"Don't get cocky, Jake."

Siena spoke coldly, her eyes sharp.

"I spoke to Seriellele before I came here. You won't be attending this school any longer."

"Don't be so hasty. You're a teacher, not part of the administration, right?"

"What?"

"You must know how much the Ardius family contributes, right? More than ten first-class nobles combined. Do you really think they can expel me?"

Most aristocratic schools operate on donations to maintain expensive equipment. If the equipment becomes outdated, the students' achievements decline. Lower grades threaten the school's prestigious title, which in turn discourages talented students from enrolling. This cycle would repeat. No one understood this better than Thadd, a graduate of Alpheas Magic Academy. If the funding from Jake's family disappeared, the school would face financial trouble.

"Teacher Siena, I think it's premature to talk about expulsion. These matters should be handled by the disciplinary committee, right?"

"No. Jake will be expelled. If he isn't, I'll resign as a teacher. I couldn't face the students who've left if I didn't."

Thadd quickly erased the thought of Siena resigning from his mind. Though her cold personality wasn't to his taste, he couldn't deny her magical talent. Losing her was far more serious than Jake's expulsion.

Jake, however, laughed arrogantly, his shoulders shaking. "Ha ha ha! Quit? Fine, let's see who gets to stay. You or me?"

A chill rose from Siena's shoulders, befitting a mage of ice. Her fury was as cold as ice.

"Where do you think your teacher's salary comes from? How do you think the books in the library are bought? The training grounds? The expensive magic devices? The world runs on money! There's nothing money can't buy!"

At that moment, Siena raised her hand. Jake, confused, glanced at his feet. He felt a cold wind, and before he realized it, frost was swirling around him.

"Ugh!"

Realizing it was an Ice Tornado, which cooled the air around it, Jake curled up and shielded his face.

Crack, crack, crack!

The whirlwind of cold air ascended, trapping Jake. As the air froze, hundreds of sharp icicles protruded.

"Aaaah!"

The jagged ice shards grazed his face, shoulders, sides, and legs. Jake felt utterly trapped, unable to move even a finger.

"Wow! Amazing."

Shirone was genuinely impressed. Even though mages were said to be omnipotent, controlling freezing effects at the molecular level was no small feat. The rumors that the palace coveted Siena's genius were no exaggeration.

"A student lecturing a teacher? There are plenty of things money can't buy."

Jake scowled, like a wolf baring its teeth. To him, there was nothing in the world that couldn't be bought. He had grown up watching how even the noblest people turned into beasts at the sight of gold.

“Things money can’t buy? Like what?”

“Talent.”

Jake flinched. Siena had struck him at his weakest point with icy precision.

“Character. Integrity. Conviction. Intelligence. Friendship. Effort. Want me to keep going?”

Jake wanted to scream. Why was this woman tormenting him so much? He felt as though he would pay any amount of money just to shut her up.

Siena snapped her fingers, and the Ice Tornado shattered. Fragments of ice struck Jake’s face.

“Aaaah...”

Jake was too terrified to open his eyes. He felt as though his face had been torn apart.

“Now do you understand, Jake? Money can’t buy everything. That’s why you have nothing.”

Siena grabbed Jake by the collar, pulling him close.

“Hrk!”

“Don’t be mistaken. The school doesn’t exist just to teach students in exchange for money. The school is the one place that teaches things you can’t buy with money. You threw away that precious opportunity with your own two feet. Once you leave here, no one will teach you these things.”

Jake’s heart sank. He had never considered the possibility of truly being expelled from school. That meant he’d never be able to challenge anything again, condemning him to a life of failure.

‘It’s over. I’m... finished...’

As his face turned pale, Jake began to look less like the arrogant young man he had been and more like a frightened child. On the verge of tears, Jake knelt at Siena’s feet and wept.

“I’m sorry, teacher. I was wrong. Please, don’t expel me. Just give me one more chance. I swear I’ll study hard from now on.”

The others stood solemnly. They understood the fear of being cast out into the world as a student with nowhere to go.

Siena knelt and helped Jake stand.

“When the disciplinary committee convenes, sincerely apologize. It will take that level of determination to set things right. I’ll stand by you as your teacher, but you’ll need to do the rest.”

“Thank you! Thank you!”

Shirone realized, perhaps for the first time, just how many things in life couldn’t be bought with money. No matter if they were nobles or commoners, all the students here had to chase their dreams on their own strength.

After all, the dreams they pursued were far beyond anything money could buy.

The members of Black Magicia were confined to the punishment room and received treatment.

A disciplinary committee was scheduled for the next day, and Shirone and his group had a separate meeting with the teachers to discuss the incident.

While Thadd was writing a statement, Shirone explained in detail how he had subdued the Black Magicia. As expected, the teachers were astonished.

“What? You crushed the Anti-Magic with a Spirit Zone?”

“Yes. I heard from Teacher Ethella that Anti-Magic is a mental battle, and casting it recklessly is dangerous. So, I think I instinctively tried to hold out with a defensive stance.”

Everyone, except Amy, was too shocked to speak.

Of course, unless one specializes in Anti-Magic, it’s hard to wield it with full efficiency. But even considering that, it was five simultaneous attacks.

If Shirone’s Spirit Zone hadn’t been stronger than the combined power of all the Black Magicia, the outcome would have been impossible.

Siena leaned in to inspect Shirone's eyes. After checking that there were no abnormalities, she sighed in relief.

"Never do that again. Anti-Magic is far more dangerous than you think. You got lucky this time, but if you're not careful, you might lose the ability to use magic altogether."

Even Shirone, who was usually brave, felt his heart drop upon hearing this from Siena herself. At that moment, he was only focused on protecting Amy.

Amy, feeling guilty for putting Shirone in danger, averted her eyes.

Siena rested her chin on her hand, lost in thought. Despite the risks, suppressing Anti-Magic was an incredible feat. She had known from the start that Shirone was resilient, but this was beyond her expectations.

Thadd, on the other hand, was displeased. Shirone had succeeded where even Amy had failed, and it gnawed at him.

Thadd voiced his dissatisfaction.

"Shirone, why didn't you report this right away? You should've informed a teacher if something like this happened. I can't understand why you went to rescue an upperclassman all by yourself."

Shirone and Amy both sensed that the moment of reckoning had arrived.

This time, even Siena didn't stop Thadd. Given that a student had dropped out due to the Black Magicia's actions, it was essential to address any lingering suspicions.

Shirone gave Amy a reassuring smile and a nod as if to signal that it was okay. Amy sighed and resigned herself to the situation.

"Alright. I'll tell you the truth."

The person most curious about Shirone's secret was Seriellele. When did these two become close? And why was Amy so protective of Shirone?

"The truth is, Shirone is..."

As everyone leaned in, waiting for Amy's words, she suddenly scratched her head with a bright smile.

"He's my boyfriend."

"What?!"

The room shook as everyone reacted to the unexpected revelation.

Thadd, in disbelief, pressed her further.

"Since when? You've never shown any interest in romance. And Shirone's just a freshman who recently enrolled!"

"We met when we were younger, and our paths crossed again here. Ha ha, it's not that uncommon, is it?"

Amy exaggerated her tone on purpose. This would suffice.

She was about to graduate, and with their different class schedules, she and Shirone wouldn't cross paths often.

While it might cause a stir in the school for a while, it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Knowing she was taken would probably reduce the number of boys pestering her.

In her mind, it was an excellent improvisation.

Meanwhile, Shirone, standing beside her, felt his heart racing. Amy was a respected senior and the object of admiration for many students. Even though he knew it was just a lie to defuse the situation, the pressure was immense.

"Right, Shirone?" Amy flashed a sweet smile, though it was clear she was forcing it. Shirone could almost hear her inner voice threatening him to play along or else.

"Ah! Yes, that's right," Shirone stammered.

"Kyah! How could this be? I'm so shocked—and touched!"

Seriellele exclaimed, slapping her cheeks in excitement.

"Hoho, I knew it all along! No wonder Amy acted so strange around Shirone. So, when did you start dating? Who confessed first?"

With even Seriellele, Amy's friend, buying into the story, the teachers couldn't deny it either. If they were a couple, it made sense that Shirone would rush headlong into danger to rescue Amy from the Black Magicia.

Thadd, pulling at his hair, continued writing his report.

“In the case of Shirone and Amy, the victims of this incident... they are, uh, in a wholesome romantic relationship...”

The rumor spread like wildfire.

By now, every student at Alpheas Magic Academy knew that Shirone and Amy were a couple. Though the uproar was partly due to the public notice about the Black Magicia's crimes, it was mainly thanks to Seriellele's wild embellishments.

According to her, Shirone had infiltrated enemy territory alone to protect his lover. The Black Magicia had countered with Anti-Magic, but Shirone overcame it with the power of love and rescued Amy.

The leader of the Black Magicia, Jake, was supposedly so overwhelmed by Shirone's fierce gaze that he broke down in tears and begged for forgiveness. And, under the moonlight, the two shared a passionate kiss in the mountains.

“Serielle! Do you want to die? What kind of rumors are you spreading?!” Amy yelled.

“Gahahaha! Why? It's close enough to the truth!”

“It's nothing like the truth! When did I ever kiss Shirone?”

“Oh, stop being so coy. If you're dating, you've probably kissed at least once, right? You have to add a little flavor to make the story more interesting.”

“Are you a playwright now? Why are you embellishing someone else's story”

“Well, it worked out, didn't it? Now all those boys who used to bother you have stopped showing up.”

Chapter 28: Things Money Can't Buy (3)

Amy was satisfied with that part as well. Not only were there rumors that they were dating, but now there were even rumors that they had kissed. The shock among the male students must have been huge.

"What are you going to do today? When are you meeting Shirone? Hmm? Hmm?"

"I don't know. We've decided to focus on studying for the time being."

Amy's tone conveyed a sense of disappointment.

'Even if it's just a fake relationship, how can he be so calm when such rumors are spreading?'

Her pride was hurt by Shirone's indifferent attitude. It wasn't that she thought she was a princess, but every time she looked in the mirror, she knew her looks were more than good enough. And yet, Shirone seemed completely uninterested, focusing solely on his studies. Even if it was a fake relationship, they were still an official couple. She could understand her own indifference, but shouldn't a guy be a little more mindful?

"Ugh, I'm not going to care either. I've got tons of things to do. How can he be so distracted?"

"You're disappointed, aren't you? I mean, Shirone is being too much. If I had such a beautiful girlfriend, I'd never leave her side! Oh, maybe that's what melted your iron-clad heart?"

"Serielle..."

Seeing Amy's face turn red, Serielle quickly waved her hands, sweating nervously.

"Haha, okay, I'll stop!"

Amy exhaled sharply, letting out her frustration. In a way, Shirone was handling the situation properly. If he got too distracted, then their efforts to fend off other boys with this fake relationship would be for nothing.

“Oh! Amy, isn’t that Jake over there?”

Jake was walking down the hill, his face covered in bandages and a large backpack slung over his shoulder. As per the disciplinary committee’s decision, the Black Magicias received a two-year probation. While they were required to apologize to the students who had dropped out, it was still considered an unusually lenient decision.

“Hey, long time no see, Amy.”

Despite being expelled from school, Jake’s face was surprisingly bright.

“Haven’t left yet? You’re so clingy.”

“Haha! I did so many bad things that I have a lot of goodbyes to make.”

“Are you trying to turn over a new leaf? Come on, people don’t change that easily.”

“You’re right. But still, there’s someone who believes in me now. So, I can’t go back to my old ways.”

It was well known among the students that Siena had fought hard to reduce Jake’s punishment at the committee meeting. Without her efforts, the Black Magicias would have been expelled for sure.

“So, what are you going to do now? If you’re out for two years, you’ll fall behind in class.”

“I’ve got to apologize to the ones who dropped out. They probably won’t forgive me, but I’m ready for that. Once I’ve made amends, I’ll figure out what to do next.”

Amy thought it wouldn’t be easy. The kids Jake had hurt were mostly high-ranking nobles from the first class, and they bore deep, unhealable emotional wounds.

There was even a chance he could be beaten to death.

Jake surely understood that better than anyone. But instead of fear, he seemed almost relieved.

“Well, I should get going. By the time I come back, you’ll probably have graduated. I don’t know when I’ll get the chance, but when I do, I’ll do my best. Take care. And have a great love life.”

As Jake turned and waved, Amy responded with a bitter smile. It was absurd that even Jake, who had been part of the whole incident, believed she and Shirone were dating. Still, watching him leave in such a sorry state, she couldn’t help but feel a little sorry as a fellow student. After thinking for a moment, Amy called out to him.

“Hey, Jake.”

Jake turned around.

“Two years will pass quickly. Don’t give up.”

“Haha! If things get tough, I’ll call you. I’ll borrow some money or something.”

Even at the last moment, he was showing off his money. But in a way, it was just like Jake. Honestly, if he had broken down and cried, she might have hit him.

“Two years, huh... Well, yeah, it’ll be nothing.”

As she watched Jake walk away, Amy thought to herself. He wouldn’t be able to attend school for at least two years. But in the grand scheme of things, what did that matter? In the world of magic, if you lacked skill, you’d spend your whole life stuck in one place.

“Seriellele, I’ve made up my mind.”

“Huh? Are you going to see Shirone?”

“I’m going to apply for the graduating class.”

“What? Already? Isn’t that too soon?”

Once you enter Class Four, you automatically qualify to apply for the graduating class. However, if you fail the advancement exam, you can’t reapply for the rest of the year, so the competition starts early in the semester.

Even if you pass the exam, graduation is still far off. The graduating class is made up of only the best and brightest from the academy.

Graduates of the magic academy often recall the graduating class as a battlefield more brutal than anything in the outside world. The bonds of friendship formed during school were set aside as 30 elite students fought for survival. Some criticized this endless competition, but given the unique nature of their profession, it was considered necessary.

Alpheas Magic Academy is a government-certified institution, and graduates receive an unofficial license, meaning they're recognized as official mages and can immediately contribute to society.

Considering that they might have to face life-or-death situations on the battlefield, teachers agreed that the graduating class had to be held to the highest standards.

"Why don't you wait a little? The graduating class still has openings, and you could analyze the competition before applying."

"No, I don't want to hesitate. Right now, I just want to focus on moving forward."

Knowing Amy's determination, Seriellele didn't try to stop her anymore. In fact, she felt excited to see how far Amy's talent could take her in the graduating class.

"Alright, I'll cheer you on. You can do it."

"Thanks. I'll go ahead and scout things out."

"Hehe, honestly, I'm a bit nervous, so I'll start by gathering some information. Anyway, let's both do our best."

"Yeah. I'll help you too."

Amy looked up at the clear blue sky with a sense of relief. Her dream felt as far away as the sun. But like the sun, it shone brightly, lighting the path for all who looked up at it. 'I will definitely become the greatest mage.'

A Thorn in the Eye (1)

The time for the advanced class's integrated lesson had come.

Even as the senior and junior students mingled, no one approached Shirone.

Sometimes, standing out too much could also be a problem. He had amazed the teachers during the entrance test, succeeded in the Four Patterns during his first lesson, crushed the Black Magicia, and even became the official boyfriend of the much-admired Amy.

In such a short time, Shirone had left quite a mark. Yet, despite all this, he remained in Class Seven, the lowest in the advanced course, which naturally made his classmates feel complicated.

"Hey, look! There's Amy's boyfriend, Shirone!"

Serielle waved from a distance. Shirone pushed through the crowd toward them, where Amy stood with her arms crossed, looking a bit sulky.

"Hello, senior."

"Oh my, you're still calling me 'senior'? We're not strangers, and we're the same age. Just drop the formality and speak casually."

Despite Serielle's matchmaker-like intervention, Amy's mood remained sour. Ever since some time ago, she had begun feeling as if Shirone was not just indifferent but actively avoiding her.

It wasn't arrogance, but as Carmis Amy, she had never had a guy refuse her before. On the other hand, she had often wondered how she would deal with it if Shirone approached her sincerely.

But how was Shirone behaving? As if drawing a clear line, treating her less than a friend, only engaging in formal conversations and barely giving her a glance.

"Haha! Still, I can't do that. You're my senior, after all."

Amy clenched her fists, almost ready to punch him, but held back. Losing her temper here would only make her seem less appealing.

"Just call me casually when it's just us. I mean, we are dating. It feels weird to keep calling me 'senior'."

In her trembling voice, Serielle could feel the power of love. The prideful Amy, swallowing her frustration just to win

Shirone's favor—it was something unimaginable before.

"No, it's fine. Well then, I'll head to class."

As Shirone returned to his seat, Amy was so upset and embarrassed that she almost burst into tears.

"Fine! Do whatever you want! If you hate it that much, then don't bother!"

Serielle chased after the retreating Amy. Even she had noticed that Shirone's attitude had been strange recently.

"Amy, did you and Shirone fight?"

"I don't know! I don't care anymore! He thinks he's so great!"

Suppressing his guilt, Shirone returned to Class Seven. Amy was a good person, but there were too many obstacles to being friends with someone as high-ranked as her.

As soon as Shirone sat down, his classmates began whispering.

"Oh, look at him, acting all high and mighty. Does he think he's so special?"

"Flirting during class, huh? He's got no skill, just got into school with his face."

Their jealousy was far stronger than Shirone had anticipated.

The average age in Class Seven was fifteen, younger than Shirone. Especially at that age, a year's difference could make a big impact, leading to immature behavior among the group.

They couldn't stand the idea that a newcomer had caught the attention of the top-ranked Amy. Fueled by mob mentality, even the girls began to gossip about him.

"My eyes must be playing tricks. He's such a player! He hasn't even mastered a single spell because he's too busy flirting."

Shirone decided to distance himself from Amy. If he wasn't careful, it could harm her reputation too.

It would be a lie to say the constant criticism didn't bother him. Lately, the gossip had grown worse, and it was starting

to get on his nerves.

But each time, he remembered Temuran's advice and held his temper. The only solution was to move up to a higher class as quickly as possible.

"From today on, we'll be reducing theory lessons and focusing more on practice. Spend an hour working on your Four Patterns technique, and after that, practice changing patterns," instructed Ethella.

The students gathered to practice their Patterns, but Shirone couldn't blend in with them.

At first, he had made the mistake of using his Spirit Zone unconsciously, which led to an embarrassing incident. The other students, affected by Shirone's Spirit Zone through synesthesia, had recoiled from him as if they had encountered something dirty.

So Shirone moved to a quieter spot. With the largest Spirit Zone in Class Seven, this was the only way he could practice comfortably.

After an hour of training in defensive form, Shirone began practicing the remaining three patterns. His offensive form was decent, although not as good as his defense, and the targeting form was still a struggle.

The most challenging of all was the deviation form. It was difficult enough that he couldn't even imitate it properly.

'This is so tricky. How do you even get it to deviate?'

He tried shifting his Spirit Zone to the right, but all that happened was its form became distorted. It wasn't an exaggeration when they said that even in the upper classes, only a handful of students could execute the deviation form.

'It's all about the center. Moving the center is the key.'

He corrected his previous mistakes and tried again. Holding the shape of his Spirit Zone steady, he slowly shifted its center.

A faint whirring sound filled his head, making him feel dizzy. Is this what it feels like for one's mind to leave their body?

His consciousness grew faint, his senses distant. Just as he was about to succeed, the Spirit Zone burst like a bubble.
“Phew!”

All he could think was how difficult it was. Having one’s mind leave the body wasn’t something natural, and he would have to approach it very technically.

“Maybe I should focus on moving the center first? No, the first method is right. If the form isn’t perfect, the center won’t move.”

As Shirone struggled, Ethella approached him.

“How’s it going, Shirone?”

“The deviation form is tough. Shifting the center is not easy.”

“That’s understandable. For someone like you with a Convergent Spirit Zone, the deviation form is practically your nemesis. The Four Patterns technique is natural, but the deviation form is anything but. How about the other patterns?”

Ethella didn’t expect Shirone to master the deviation form. What she was more interested in was his natural insight into the forces of nature, not his artificial calculation abilities.

“The others... don’t seem to be a problem.”

Shirone answered honestly. He felt that his proficiency in changing the Four Patterns was improving to a satisfying degree.

Chapter 29: A Thorn in the Eye (2)

Ethella gently touched her lips, lost in thought.

"Would you like to demonstrate it in the Image Zone?"

"Huh? Right now?"

"Why? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, it's not that..."

Ethella blinked in surprise. The once eager student, who had been enthusiastic about using the Image Zone from the first class, had become more withdrawn lately.

'What's going on? He doesn't look well. Are the other students pressuring him? He's more sensitive than I thought.'

She patted Shirone on the shoulder and spoke.

"If you're not feeling well, you can wait until later. You're the only one in Class Seven who can perform a pattern shift in the Four Patterns, so I just wanted to see it."

"No, I'll give it a try. Please evaluate me."

Shirone changed his mind. Even if his classmates were critical, he couldn't let that stop him from receiving guidance from Teacher Ethella.

As Shirone entered the Image Zone, insults were hurled at him.

"Look at that, he's trying again! So desperate for attention."

"Just trying to impress his girlfriend. What else is he good at? He's hopeless at magic."

Meanwhile, the upper-class students stopped their practice to watch. It had been a month since Shirone had succeeded in the defensive form of the Four Patterns Technique, and they were curious to see how much he'd grown.

"Teacher, I'm starting now."

“Alright, let’s take it one step at a time.”

Shirone demonstrated his strength, the defensive form. A massive cube formed with sturdy precision.

The upper-class students murmured in admiration.

“In terms of defense, he’s already at an upper-class level. That’s practically armor.”

In contrast, Shirone’s classmates glared at him as if he were a public enemy. Despite their resentment, they couldn’t deny the impressive skill on display.

Next, Shirone transitioned into the offensive form. The size of his zone shrank, but sharp spikes protruded menacingly. Then came the targeting form. Though the cross form was sizable, its rotational force was weak for real combat. Even so, his progress was undeniable.

Ethella smiled with satisfaction. Soon, Shirone would be ready for early advancement to Class Six.

Shirone didn’t stop there; he attempted the deviation form. He knew that failure was a valuable step toward receiving advice from Ethella.

Predictably, he faced difficulties. The shape of his Spirit Zone would collapse, or even if the center shifted, the zone would burst just before detachment.

Ethella watched with surprise. She hadn’t expected him to come this far, given that his attributes were naturally at odds with the deviation form.

Meanwhile, Class Seven’s students, who hadn’t even attempted the deviation form, sighed in relief.

“Hah, what’s he even doing? That’s not Four Patterns Technique, it’s child’s play.”

“They call him a genius, but he’s not all that. If he can’t do at least one thing right, what kind of mage does he think he’ll be?”

Shirone felt hurt. No one in Class Seven could even perform the deviation form. He couldn’t understand why they held others to standards they themselves couldn’t meet.

His frustration caused his Spirit Zone to wobble. The more it shook, the more his classmates whispered harsh comments to drag him down.

Amy, watching the demonstration, frowned. She had been pleased with his performance in the Four Patterns Technique, but now his zone was trembling.

“What’s wrong with him? What’s he doing?”

“The deviation form is difficult. Maybe he’s too distracted by the students’ reactions.”

“No way. He’s not someone who’d get rattled like that. Is there something going on with him lately?”

“Oh, defending him, are we? Well, he’s your ‘boyfriend’, so of course you’d be concerned.”

Amy, her face flushed, silenced Serielle and sank into thought. Something was definitely wrong. The steadfast resilience that had helped Shirone defeat the anti-magic spells was now gone, replaced by a Spirit Zone wavering like a drunkard.

‘Is there really something happening that I don’t know about?’

Shirone struggled to suppress his emotions. But once anger starts growing, it feeds on itself, making it hard to control.

‘Why do they hate me? What did I do wrong? I just want to learn and get better. Is it so wrong to want to become a mage?’

His Spirit Zone began to shake violently, as though it might burst at any moment.

“Hey, you’re overthinking this.”

Shirone snapped out of his thoughts. The voice had come from the Class Five side.

“If you want something, just do it. You’re here to learn magic, aren’t you?”

For the first time, Shirone calmly assessed his situation.

With a clear mind, he realized just how foolish his thoughts had been.

‘What was I doing?’

Clearing his mind of distractions, Shirone attempted the deviation form again. It didn't matter if he failed or succeeded—the important thing was that he would grow through the process.

The 40-meter-wide zone began to slowly shift from its center. As the center moved, the zone's diameter shrank exponentially.

Would it deviate first, or dissolve first?

Every student in the advanced class watched intently.

When the zone had shrunk to a 2-meter diameter, its surface completely deviated from Shirone's body.

The shock among Class Seven's students was indescribable. He had succeeded in a technique that even upper-class students struggled with, leaving them dumbfounded.

The Spirit Zone began orbiting Shirone rapidly, feeding him a massive influx of new information. The sheer volume of data made his head feel like it might explode. With a sudden blink, the Spirit Zone popped and vanished.

"Hah, hah."

Even though he hadn't physically exerted himself, he was out of breath.

"I did it. I actually succeeded in the deviation form."

The advanced class buzzed with excitement.

This accomplishment far surpassed his earlier success with the defensive formation. In both Class Seven and even Class Six, no one had managed to pull off a successful detachment formation.

Serielle shook Amy's arm enthusiastically.

"Amy, Shirone did it! He really did it!"

Amy smiled as well. Whatever their personal feelings, she couldn't deny his talent as a peer chasing the same dream. 'His growth rate is unbelievable. No... It's almost too fast. To succeed in the deviation form within a month... He might...' Be as talented as I am. Or even more.

Amy felt a tinge of frustration. Shirone had likely trained his mind rigorously every day, while she had wasted her

precious time loitering in back alleys and causing trouble.

‘Why... Why did I waste my time so meaninglessly?’

Shirone, after succeeding in the deviation form, looked around Class Five, trying to spot the person who had given him advice. But without knowing the seniors well, he couldn’t identify the voice.

‘I wanted to say thank you...’

Ethella, watching Shirone receive applause, pondered. His growth was inspiring the entire class. An idea came to her that could further boost the class's morale.

“Hmmm, you’ve progressed faster than I expected.”

Shirone had recently been struggling with a private concern: he didn’t know how to cast a single spell.

The knowledge needed for magic wasn’t something that lower-class students could easily grasp. For this reason, serious magic practice didn’t officially start until Class Five. However, the reality was different. Nobles, having received education from birth, were already capable of casting at least one spell, even if they were in lower classes.

Meanwhile, Shirone had only studied for a total of a year and six months under the Ogent family.

Shirone’s dilemma lay in this fact. If he concentrated on one field of study, he might be able to cast a simple spell. But if he followed the same approach as the others, he would never surpass those who had been educated since childhood.

Thus, his strategy was to study not just one subject but all the fields that branched out from it.

This approach meant he needed to borrow more books, and lately, he had practically been living in the library.

His classmates mocked him for it. They thought it was foolish to study so broadly when he couldn’t even keep up with the current lessons.

But Shirone didn’t change his mind. He believed that if he built a solid foundation of knowledge, he could organize any

subject in chronological order. In other words, the likelihood of forgetting information would be significantly reduced.

“The results might not be immediate. But if I can keep this up for at least two years, the core knowledge from all fields will connect.”

This would become the spine of knowledge—a comprehensive encyclopedia stored in his mind, allowing him to access any information.

Feeling motivated again, Shirone dove back into his books.

By the time he snapped out of his focus, it was well past midnight. The only other person left in the reading room was a girl from Class Six.

As Shirone packed his bag and nodded politely, the girl returned his gesture with a shy smile.

It was 2 AM by the time he left the library.

Even if he went to bed now, he’d only get about four hours of sleep. But the thought of being behind the noble students made him feel like sleeping was a waste of time.

At moments like these, Shirone would think of a book he once read, *The Great Scholars’ Conversations*.

One of the interviews with a biologist named Torkkollin left a strong impression on him. He claimed that humans needed at least six hours of sleep, but near the end of the interview, he made a joke.

“Of course, when I was a student, I only slept four hours.”

The author of the book asked him,

“So, does that mean your research findings are wrong? After all, you became a great scholar on only four hours of sleep.”

Torkkollin’s response was,

“Haha! Teenagers aren’t human. They’re superhuman. They can sleep or not sleep, and it won’t make a difference.”

For Shirone, who was constantly pressed for time, this was a great source of encouragement.

“Yeah! Let’s keep pushing. If I do my best, the results will follow.”

The building where the senior students trained still had its lights on. The windows flashed as they performed their magic experiments late into the night. What kind of new magic was being created inside? Shirone's gaze was already fixed on the senior students.

Just before lunch break ended, Ethella came to see Siena. The two were the same age, 26, and had been working together for four years, but they still used formal speech with each other.

"Teacher Siena, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, but I have a Class Seven lesson coming up, so I can't chat for long."

Since their discussions about magic often went on for over an hour, Siena gave a heads-up.

"Oh, I see. I wanted to talk to you about Shirone."

Siena's interest was piqued when she heard Shirone's name. She had heard that while Shirone's performance in theory classes was lacking, he had been excelling during Ethella's practice sessions.

"How's he doing lately? I noticed his practice scores have been pretty high."

"That's right. Last time, he even succeeded in the advanced Four Patterns deviation form."

"Oh, really?"

Siena smiled with satisfaction. As Shirone's theory teacher, it was always nice to hear compliments from another instructor.

"So, I have a proposal for you, Teacher Siena."

"A proposal?"

It was rare for Ethella to make a suggestion about a student to another teacher. Siena blinked in surprise, sensing this might be something big.

The blackboard in Class Seven's lecture hall was filled with chemical formulas. The students' eyes and hands were busy

as they took notes. The lesson felt faster than usual today. As expected, Siena ended class about ten minutes early and stepped down from the podium.

"That's it for today. But I have an announcement."

The students were feeling generous. As long as the class ended early, they didn't mind hearing a bit of extra information.

"A student has been selected for early advancement. Arian Shirone, please stand."

Shirone was startled by the sudden announcement. His classmates, on the other hand, wore sour expressions. Early advancement wasn't extremely rare, but the fact that Shirone was the one advancing was the issue.

"Shirone will be promoted to Class Five. Starting tomorrow, please attend your new class according to their schedule. I hope the rest of you will continue to strive and earn this opportunity as well. That's all."

Chapter 30: A Thorn in the Eye (3)

The classroom stirred. Class Five? It wasn't just an early promotion but a leap of two levels, an extraordinary decision both for the students and the school itself.

"Teacher! I object! How can Shirone jump two classes? He can't even use a single spell!"

This was the first time Siena had heard this. Even Ethella hadn't mentioned it. Perhaps she didn't know either, since there was rarely any need to use magic in the lower-grade classes.

"Is that true, Shirone?"

The classmates turned to Shirone, their eyes pleading as if they were saying:

Please, just say you can't. Just admit you can't.

"Yes. I still can't cast any spells."

"Hm."

Still, this wasn't a problem for the early promotion. Magic was only taught in earnest from the upper grades, and the lower grades focused more on strengthening the Spirit Zone. Shirone had mastered all the basics of the Four Patterns techniques, and his Spirit Zone's size and durability rivaled those of students in the upper grades. Therefore, Class Five was indeed the most suitable for his level.

Yet, the fact that he couldn't use magic at all was unusual. Most students, even if not taught, would have secretly tried casting spells out of sheer curiosity. After all, these were children who had joined a magic school out of a burning desire to learn magic.

"This does raise questions," Siena said. "But up to Class Six, there are no evaluation criteria based on magic usage."

Shirone's promotion is entirely legitimate."

"I won't accept this!"

Mark, the unofficial leader of Class Seven, stood up abruptly. A large student with a square jaw that matched his hulking frame.

"Why are you favoring him? You need to show us convincing evidence! You always tell us that omniscience is just as important as omnipotence. Applying special conditions only for Shirone doesn't make sense!"

"Exactly! Honestly, even if I were competing with Shirone academically right now, I'd bet on myself. He can't even keep up with theory lessons!"

"If Shirone gets promoted, I'll petition the student council for a hearing!"

The students' backlash was far stronger than anticipated. Despite their youth, they had climbed up from Class Ten through intense competition. They had hoped Shirone's success might motivate them, but instead, they were consumed by hostility, treating him as an enemy.

'I must be missing something,' Siena thought, realizing from their determined expressions that the situation was more serious than it appeared. If their resistance was this strong, it could even negatively affect the class atmosphere.

"This isn't a finalized decision. A formal announcement will be made after we discuss this in the faculty meeting.

Today's class is dismissed."

Back in the faculty office, Siena rested her chin in her hand, lost in thought.

In a specialized school like this, competition was inevitable. The students understood that and had voluntarily enrolled, knowing the challenge ahead.

'What was that strange look in their eyes?'

It wasn't just simple jealousy. Early promotions had happened before, but never had the opposition been this intense.

"Excuse me, Ms. Siena."

Maria, one of the students, came to see her.

At 19 years old, Maria was the oldest in Class Seven, and she hadn't advanced in the past four years. She wasn't entirely without talent, but her shy and timid nature had kept the school staff concerned.

"Yes, Maria? What's the matter?"

"I have something to tell you..."

After hesitating for a while, Maria revealed everything. She told Siena about how Shirone was being treated in the class, and why the students had reacted so angrily earlier.

The more Maria spoke, the more Siena's brow furrowed. This wasn't just a case of hurt feelings; it was outright bullying of the worst kind.

Whenever the students encountered Shirone, they would dramatically pretend to gag in his presence, or they would gather near him and talk amongst themselves as if he wasn't there. It happened all the time.

By the end of her story, Maria was on the verge of tears.

"Right now, I'm the oldest, so I don't care as much anymore. But it happened to me too, once. Back then, I couldn't focus on anything, not even my studies. I think Shirone is amazing for staying so composed despite everything."

Siena now understood the full scope of the situation. One student was being ostracized by the entire class. Without fair competition, the school would lose its purpose.

"Thank you for telling me. I'll handle it from here."

Shirone returned to his dorm around midnight. After the talk of early promotion, the bullying had intensified, so he decided it was better to head back early and read.

Knock, knock.

Someone knocked on the door. It was past 1 AM.

'Who could it be at this hour?'

Students weren't allowed to go out, and the staff had already left for the day. Was it the other students coming to harass him?

Nervously, he hesitated to approach, but a familiar voice came from the other side.

“Shirone, are you awake?”

“Teacher Siena?”

Shirone rushed to open the door, finding Siena standing there.

“May I come in?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

Had she been on duty tonight? Her hair was still damp, as if she had just washed it. It wasn't common for teachers to visit the dorms so late, especially since some of the older students were in their early twenties. But Siena had chosen this time to speak with Shirone in private.

Unlike most boys' dorms, Shirone's room was impeccably tidy, giving Siena a good sense of his personality. She scanned the books spread across the desk, noting that while some were textbooks, others were from fields she didn't need to study yet.

‘As I thought. He's certainly thinking ahead.’

Though it seemed like random books had been opened, anyone with broad knowledge would notice that the subjects were deeply interconnected.

Siena had a growing suspicion about why Shirone couldn't use magic yet—it wasn't that he couldn't, but that he hadn't.

‘He was weak with clairvoyance from the beginning. He's been desperately searching for a way to overcome his shortcomings. This boy doesn't just want to learn magic. He wants to become a true mage.’

Siena admired Shirone's approach. Connecting different fields of knowledge was difficult, but the reward was immense. Once linked, that knowledge would never be forgotten.

“Would you like some tea, Teacher Siena?”

“No, that's alright. I came because I wanted to ask you something.”

Siena sat on the bed, and Shirone pulled over his desk chair. This was the first time he had seen Siena so close. Dressed casually with her hair down, Siena looked much younger than she did at school, making Shirone feel a bit embarrassed. He shyly lowered his head.

Siena observed her quietly.

'He's shy. Is this his usual self?'

In class, Shirone always seemed so intense, as if he were trying to drill a hole through his teacher's face with his concentration. This side of him was unfamiliar.

"Is school life difficult for you?"

"No, I'm enjoying it. I love studying."

"Why didn't you say anything about the other students bullying you?"

Shirone had already expected this. After all, it would have been strange if no one had noticed. The students had been so blatant about it lately.

"It's alright. You don't need to worry about me."

Siena, having heard the full extent of the students' misbehavior from Maria, didn't believe him.

"You can be honest. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I really am fine. It's a shame that I haven't made friends, but if they dislike me, there's not much I can do."

"Bullying is wrong."

"You can't control other people's emotions. It was hard at first, but I've gotten used to it. If Class Seven doesn't like me, that's okay. It's not like the whole world hates me."

Siena could understand now. For some, the group they belong to defines their whole world. But for someone like Shirone, who looked ahead, such a group was just a temporary stop on his journey.

"I want to meet more people. I believe there's someone out there who will take me seriously."

Shirone's stance on her promotion was clear. He also believed that once he moved to Class Five or higher, he

would find classmates who could accept him without feeling inferior.

"I see. Your resolve is clear, Shirone. I'll take this into account for the faculty meeting."

Teleportation (1)

"This concludes my report on Shirone's early promotion."

In a meeting attended by Headmaster Alpheas and the upper-class teachers, Siena submitted the documents regarding the Class Seven bullying incident and sat down. The teachers frowned as they read the contents. The details revealed the persistent bullying Shirone faced, all because he couldn't use magic.

"Does this even make sense? Bullying a student over something so trivial?"

"This kind of thing can happen in the lower classes. Many of the students are young, or they've stayed behind because they lack talent. The class itself lacks proper discernment."

"In that case, it would be better to promote Shirone quickly. At this rate, he could graduate in four years at most. With nearby schools challenging Alpheas Magic Academy, the more early graduates we have, the better."

The age at which students graduated was one indicator of a school's excellence. While graduates failing to succeed in society could harm the school's reputation, rumors had spread that other schools were pushing for early graduations.

It was a typical strategy for elevating a school's prestige: secure the elite title first, attract top-tier talent, and then improve the quality of instruction. With rival schools intensifying their efforts, Alpheas Magic Academy needed to not only promote students early but also produce students of exceptional quality. In this regard, the teachers placed high expectations on Shirone.

"I'm somewhat against this."

Thadd raised his hand, casting a dissenting vote. Siena's expression darkened. With Shirone's promotion seemingly a

foregone conclusion, his opposition felt irritating. However, Headmaster Alpheas was intrigued by this first dissenting opinion.

“Against it? Why is that?”

“I acknowledge Shirone’s talent. But the core issue here is that he cannot use magic. The other students’ backlash stems from this very fact. Shouldn’t we address that point clearly?”

Siena interjected, “As I’ve already mentioned, Shirone has been dedicating himself to broadening his knowledge. He hasn’t had the opportunity to focus on a single field of study. Personally, I believe this approach is optimal for his growth.”

“I’m not questioning the method. The issue is that you, Siena, are showing too much favoritism towards Shirone.”

“What?”

“Let’s not forget that the students in Class Seven have also been working hard since joining the school. Whether Shirone had time to study or not should still be a part of his evaluation. Otherwise, we might as well promote the other students early as well, even if their Spirit Zones are weaker than him, because they excel in theory.”

“Stop spouting nonsense! My decision was not made emotionally. I reached this conclusion strictly according to school regulations. In the lower classes, the primary evaluation criterion is clearly the Spirit Zone.”

“The problem lies with the students’ resentment. This situation could lower their morale. Teachers aren’t here just to focus on a single genius, right?”

“And leaving a talented student behind because of other students’ misplaced jealousy is also not what a teacher should do!”

Both Siena and Thadd stood up, slamming their hands on the table. It was a familiar scene whenever a meeting like this took place.

Chapter 31: Teleportation (2)

As the heated debate continued, the older teachers frowned, but they remained silent because the two arguing held higher ranks than they did.

Siena and Thadd, both in their mid-20s and certified 6th-class mages, were among Alpheas Magic Academy's pride, along with Ethella.

The argument showed no signs of dying down. Even though Ethella tried to mediate, it was as if fire and ice had clashed, with neither side willing to yield.

Headmaster Alpheas, however, simply smiled. Without passion for education, no one would argue this fiercely. They simply focused their passion on different things.

Thadd wanted the development of his almamater, while Siena focused on the growth of her students. As teachers, they ought to side with Siena, but it was also hard to dismiss Thadd's perspective, being a graduate of the academy himself.

"I've heard both of your opinions clearly. I understand your points, so let's end this and take your seats," Alpheas said. The moment he spoke, Siena and Thadd stopped their argument as if by magic. The only thing they had in common was their respect for Alpheas.

"I believe both sides have valid points. Siena's reasoning is sound, but as teachers, we must also avoid letting prejudice take root in the hearts of the students, don't you think?"

"That's exactly my point, Headmaster," Thadd said with a smile, while Siena remained expressionless. But Alpheas wasn't ready to end things just yet. After pondering for a

while, a broad smile spread across his face as he made a suggestion.

“That being said... how about we try this?”

A notice was posted on the bulletin board of the upper-class building.

Dozens of students gathered in front of the board, shocked by what they read.

For the first time in the history of Alpheas Magic Academy, a decision had been made to conduct promotion evaluations for all students in Class Seven.

The main points of the notice were as follows:

All students in Class Seven would be given a chance for early promotion. Only one student would be promoted, and the one who passed the test would advance to Class Five. To respect the students’ concerns, the evaluation would be graded based on magic, not the Spirit Zone, which was an unprecedented decision.

The test was to perform Teleportation.

“Tele—Teleportation? I don’t know how to do that. Do you?”

“No, of course not. That’s an official Class Five-level spell.”

“I’ve tried it once, but it was so terrifying I couldn’t bring myself to attempt it again.”

“You idiot! It’s easy if you just follow the standard method. The tricky part is applying it.”

The murmuring among the students died down when Shirone walked up. Under the intense gazes of many, he reached the bulletin board and read the notice. The teachers had concluded that this would be a genuine competition between the students.

‘Teleportation.’

Shirone made sure to commit it to memory.

The incident, now dubbed the “Class Seven Bullying Case”, also piqued the interest of the upper-class students, especially since it involved Shirone.

“Can you believe that? Did you know about this, Amy?”

Amy, who had only just read the notice after finishing her day, was dumbfounded. Serielle, who had picked up details from various rumors, filled her in on the specifics, and Amy's fists clenched with anger.

'Shirone was bullied? And it was because of me?'

Apparently, the other students in the same class wouldn't even make eye contact with Shirone. Worse, some students openly cursed when Amy spoke to Shirone during their integrated class sessions.

"What do you think? Well, I guess there are younger kids in Class Seven. Something similar happened to me, but I got promoted quickly, so it didn't become a big deal."

"Being young doesn't give you a free pass. If that were the case, aren't we young, too?"

"Well, we're in Class Four now. Magic is closely tied to mental strength, so age doesn't really matter."

Amy didn't want to debate the details. Her mind was too chaotic to focus on anything. All she felt was rage—rage that Shirone had been mistreated.

"You idiot! Why didn't you say anything?"

If Shirone had just told her, they might have found a better solution together. No, they definitely would have. No matter what people thought of her, she was the top student in Class Four. Just imagining that Shirone had been ridiculed for associating with her made her feel like it was her own personal insult.

"I've got to go see Shirone."

"Go if you want, but what are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going to punch him. Then, I'll gather up all the Class Seven students. As his girlfriend, I think I'm allowed to do that, right?"

"What? Are you crazy? Absolutely not!"

"What do you mean, 'no'? Do you expect me to just stand by? This happened because of me!"

"Ugh, you really don't understand boys, do you? Do you know why Shirone didn't tell you? It's because it hurt his

pride. And now you want to make things worse?"

Amy couldn't understand. How could Shirone have avoided eye contact with her all this time just because he was afraid of a few Class Seven students?

If anyone's pride had been wounded by this incident, it was Amy's.

"Guys are all about wanting to be acknowledged. Their pride is everything to them. He's probably embarrassed that he got bullied, so he didn't want to tell you."

Serielle's argument made sense, but only if the relationship was truly romantic. How was Amy supposed to interpret it when Shirone didn't tell her, even though they were only pretending to date?

'He probably thinks he's stepped in something bad because of me. That's why he's been avoiding me.'

Serielle saw the school's response as a positive step.

"At least it's good, right? If he passes the promotion exam, he'll make it into Class Five. The Teleportation test is a great choice. The Class Seven students will have to learn it from scratch too."

Amy had a different opinion. There was a big difference between not learning a specific spell and not learning magic at all.

And Teleportation of all things?

The most important thing when learning Teleportation is overcoming fear. The speed is far beyond flight magic, and one misstep could result in a fatal collision with an obstacle.

"Now that I think about it, this is an extremely dangerous test. What are the teachers even thinking?"

"They'll adjust the difficulty level accordingly. It's also a good way to test the students' determination. It looks like more than half of Class Seven is planning to take the exam."

"What? That many? Even though they've never learned it?"

"The reward is a promotion to Class Five. Plus, since everyone's starting from scratch, I'd probably take the challenge too."

Amy couldn't shake her unease. The students who signed up for the exam would probably get help from older students or dedicated teachers for concentrated practice. But Shirone wouldn't be in that position. There was no way he'd have a dedicated teacher, and he didn't have any friends to turn to for advice.

'Is he really going to fail this?'

Though Amy acknowledged Shirone's talent, the exam didn't seem like one that guaranteed a quick pass.

"Why don't you help Shirone out, Amy? This could be a chance for you to make up and reconcile."

"Hmph! After all that, he didn't even consult me, and you think he'll accept my help? I'm just going to pretend I don't know anything."

"Ugh, you two are really something else. If you like each other, what does it matter?"

"Mind your own business. That's just how we do things. Besides, I'm not exactly free either. The graduation promotion test is right around the corner."

"Oh, right! Sorry, I forgot."

For a student, nothing was more important than promotion. Even Amy couldn't afford to worry about anything else with the daunting graduation test ahead.

"He'll figure it out. If he can't even handle this, then it's better I stop calling him my boyfriend."

As Amy walked away from the bulletin board, she added silently to herself,

'Even if he's just a fake boyfriend.'

It was close to midnight.

A figure wearing a mask infiltrated the garden of the boys' dormitory. Moving like a cat, their steps were so silent that even the grass didn't rustle. Noticing that the lights on the seventh floor were still on, they scratched their head in frustration.

'This is definitely not because I care. I'm just helping because I feel responsible!'

Amy ground her teeth. She had tried to ignore it, but thoughts of Shirone kept bothering her, making it impossible to focus on her studies.

"Just wait. I'm going to make him beg for forgiveness."

Amy scaled the wall to the seventh floor. If word got out that she had snuck into the boys' dormitory at night, she wouldn't be able to show her face again. But her mischievous side from her younger days hadn't completely disappeared.

'Heh, since it's come to this, I'll scare him so badly his heart will drop.'

As soon as Amy opened the window, she rolled forward, calculating her next move. She would overpower Shirone and throw him onto the bed, then twist his arm until he screamed in pain.

"Huh?"

But Amy couldn't move a step. Shirone was looking at her with wide eyes. And next to him, seated in a chair, was their teacher, Siena.

"T-Teacher?"

"Amy, is that you?"

Siena adjusted her glasses and took another look. With her bright red hair and deep double eyelids, it was unmistakably Amy.

She knew they were dating, but thought they were just focused on their studies lately, each aiming for their own goals. Now, though, things looked much more suspicious.

"Have you two been meeting like this all along? Pretending not to know each other during the day, only to secretly meet at night?"

"No, Teacher! You've got it all wrong! It's a huge misunderstanding!"

Siena quickly put a finger to her lips.

"Shh! The neighbors will hear."

Amy covered her mouth and glanced nervously at the nearby rooms. This was the boys' dormitory after all. If rumors started that a girl's voice was heard coming from Shirone's room, she'd be the prime suspect. Though, considering the circumstances, she wouldn't really have much of an excuse.

"Wait a minute! Even if I am here, what are *you* doing here, Teacher? And at this hour?"

Now that she thought about it, Siena seemed the most out of place in this situation. There were plenty of ways to call Shirone out. Why would a teacher come here, dressed in civilian clothes, in the dead of night?

"Go on, explain yourself. Why *are* you here at this time?"

Siena's face flushed slightly at Amy's probing, but she quickly regained her composure and responded coldly.

"I came to give him some advice about the promotion test. Given the situation, it seemed better to avoid being seen."

Amy had no comeback to that. After all, she was here for the exact same reason.

"Um, Senior?"

Shirone, who had prepared tea, extended a cup toward Amy.

"Would you like some tea...?"

"Hmph."

Amy took the teacup and inhaled the aroma. Shirone was being quite proper, showing hospitality like a courteous junior should.

"...Like hell! This is all your fault in the first place!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Shirone's quick apology only fueled Amy's anger more. He was such a pushover that even younger students felt they could disregard him.

"Just sit down. I'd like to finish what we were discussing."

Siena gestured for them to take a seat. Amy plopped down next to Shirone, turning her body away from him. She had come because she was concerned, but that didn't mean her anger toward him had subsided.

“As you both know, the evaluation for the upcoming test is Teleportation. It was a decision made personally by the headmaster.”

“The headmaster?”

Amy finally started to piece things together. She had thought the test seemed out of place for Class Seven, but if the headmaster’s playful nature was involved, it made more sense.

“Yes. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure of his intentions either. Teleportation is a dangerous magic for lower classes to attempt.”

Amy asked, “The test will probably be held at the ‘Bridge of No Return’, right?”

“I’m not certain, but honestly, that’s the most likely place.”

Chapter 32: Teleportation

(3)

The Bridge of No Return was a bridge connecting two mountain peaks at an altitude of 1,000 meters, the highest among the training grounds. The bridge was 700 meters long, and a rapid river flowed beneath the valley.

“Why is it called the Bridge of No Return?”

In response to Shirone’s question, Amy explained.

“Because it literally is a bridge that cannot be crossed. It’s a training ground for Teleportation practice. The difficulty ranges from level 1 to 10, and even for me, who is in Class Four, I’d have to risk my life starting from level 8.”

Siena added to the conversation.

“The promotion exam will be set at level 1. There won’t be any obstacles. For Class Seven kids, even crossing 700 meters is impossible.”

Amy asked, “Oh? Then how will they evaluate it? Isn’t the person who arrives first the one who gets promoted?”

“The student who jumps the farthest will be chosen. It won’t be too dangerous. We’ll be operating safety measures, and the advanced class teachers will be observing. The problem lies with the students themselves. If their competitive spirit gets out of hand, collisions among them are quite common.”

Amy also thought that was the key issue. Since it was a test tied to early promotion, there would be no collusion. Even so, the person who would receive the most scrutiny would be Shirone.

“How about this? From the start, Shirone should take the lead. Of course, it will consume a lot of mental energy, but someone like Shirone should be able to manage just fine.”

"I think the same way. That's why I'll be focusing solely on Shirone starting today."

"Wha—? You, Teacher?"

Amy's eyes widened in disbelief. It was not only unfair for a teacher to focus on a specific student, but it could also easily lead to misunderstandings.

"Why would you go that far, Teacher?"

"Because I have a responsibility in this matter. I intended to enroll Shirone in Class Five from the beginning. However, it fell through due to opposition from other teachers. If they had followed my advice, Shirone wouldn't have had to suffer."

"But if rumors spread, it could lead to bigger problems. Other students will go to any lengths to study Teleportation, but if it gets out that you personally focused on Shirone, it could ruin the test he worked hard to pass. Instead, let me handle Shirone for now. Since the difficulty is at level 1, I can teach her without any problem."

Siena shook her head.

"I know you've applied for the graduation class promotion, so wouldn't it be better to concentrate on that? You won't have the luxury of looking after Shirone."

"Really? Is that so, Senior?"

Shirone asked again, seemingly unable to believe it. Being the first to register when no one else had applied yet meant she intended to break through in a straightforward manner.

'Oh, I see. That's truly impressive.'

Amy felt grateful that Shirone came to find her even amidst the chaos of preparing for the promotion exam. However, the situation was unfolding differently from the warm atmosphere she had expected. The two women, fired up with pride, refused to yield an inch.

"No matter how busy you are, you can at least spare time for Teleportation. So, why don't you give up, Teacher? It's such interference that could negatively impact Shirone."

"I can't ignore this as a teacher knowing it's an important time for my student. The graduation exam can only be applied for once a year. It would be better for you to leave it to me and focus on your own graduation work."

Both women had smiles on their faces, but their eyes clearly showed that they were not smiling. Eventually, realizing that they could not find a compromise, they turned to Shirone one last time.

"Shirone, you choose. Who will it be, me or Teacher? Of course, it would be better if your girlfriend taught you."

"Yes, Shirone. It would be better for you to decide. The teacher will teach you much better than a student facing the graduation exam."

Their voices were kind, but for the one receiving it, it felt like a threat. Nevertheless, Shirone, unwavering, expressed her original thoughts.

"I'll do it by myself. Thank you for the offer, but I don't need help."

The women's expressions turned blank.

"Learning from a teacher is unfair. And I don't want to rely on a senior before the exam. I'll do my best to pass this exam on my own."

"You idiot! The others will take private lessons to prepare for the exam! Plus, everyone's keeping an eye on you! This is not something you can handle alone!"

"If that's the case, then I can accept it."

"Huh?"

"I think it's really impressive that you decided to apply for the graduation class. If I can't overcome something like this, I won't be able to face any obstacles in the future."

"Huh? That's... true, but..."

"I feel the same. I'll work hard and definitely pass. I won't be ashamed as a boyfriend."

Realizing how determined Shirone was, Amy could no longer oppose him. Above all, she felt grateful that Shirone acknowledged her decision.

"Hmph. Of course, it should be like that."

Although no one was chosen by Shirone, the atmosphere indicated that Amy had won the judgment.

Siena adjusted her glasses and stood up.

"If that's how the student feels, then the teacher must accept it. But if you ever have questions, feel free to ask. That goes for other students as well."

"Yes. Thank you for your consideration."

Before leaving, Siena turned to Amy and said.

"I'll let it go this time, but in the future, refrain from entering the boys' dormitory. If you get caught next time, you could face disciplinary action."

Amy bowed her head graciously. In her mind, she could only see today as a stroke of luck.

Once Siena left, an awkward silence settled in.

This was Shirone's first experience being in a room with a girl of the same age, and he couldn't utter a single word.

Thus, Amy was also swept up in the strange atmosphere. She had come here with the intention of hitting him, but faced with the situation, she began to feel intimidated by Shirone.

"Well, then... I'll be going too."

"Ah, yes! Thank you for your concern."

Amy sighed in relief as she prepared to leave. Then suddenly, she turned to Shirone and shouted.

"You idiot! Why didn't you tell me? If that happened, we should have discussed it earlier!"

"I'm sorry. But I didn't want to say it."

"Because of your pride? You fool, what's that even worth?"

"More than that... I just didn't want to break up with you, Senior."

Amy's cheeks flushed hot.

"Just being honest would only make things more awkward. But I want to continue having a good relationship with you. You are my goal, after all."

Shirone recalled his first day entering the magic school. Since he saw the name of Carmis Amy, who was at the top of Class Four, his goal had always been Amy.

"I will definitely catch up to you. So, please work hard as well."

While Amy felt good, she also felt a burden because she, too, was experiencing similar feelings.

"Then don't call me Senior from now on."

"Huh?"

"We're the same age, and I acknowledge you, so don't call me Senior anymore."

"But that's..."

"I'm saying I feel uncomfortable! What's that? Pretending to follow me while chasing me from behind is cowardly! I want you to come alongside me and compete with confidence!"

In the magic school, the classes were also related to social status. By asking Shirone not to treat her like a senior, she was saying she viewed Shirone as an equal.

"Instead, hurry up and catch up. If you stay down there, just talking a big game, I'll kick you out. Got it?"

With a red face, Amy walked toward the window. Unable to leave through the door, she had to scale the wall once more.

"Amy."

When Shirone called, Amy flinched and turned around. What would happen if she just did it when asked?

However, Shirone's eyes were burning fiercely. Facing that gaze, all her misplaced emotions vanished in an instant.

"I'll definitely catch up to you. I'll be waiting in the graduation class."

Amy's eyes curved like seagulls. Although hidden by her mask, she was certainly smiling.

"Hmph. By that time, I'll have already graduated, right? If you can catch up, then by all means, try."

Amy jumped down from the window. When he looked down, she was already gone.

Shirone sighed. Although he pretended to be strong, he felt lost about where to start.

“Teleportation, huh...”

There is one month left until the promotion exam. He had to master Teleportation somehow within that time. First, he went to the library and gathered every book related to Teleportation magic. Contrary to my expectations that there would be no stock, it wasn't difficult to find the books.

According to rumors, about 20 students would be participating in the promotion exam. It seemed that they were all studying through special methods instead of relying solely on the books.

“What if I actually fail this?”

Shirone calmed her anxious heart and diligently began to learn the basic concepts of Teleportation.

The Photonization Theory, regarded as one of the greatest discoveries in the history of magic, was the magic that transformed a mage's body into light.

So, the important question was, what are the properties of light? It was too complex for a human mind to comprehend. Light possessed both particle and wave properties, had no relative velocity, and contained no mass.

However, Kergos gained great insights from this complex nature. By utilizing the absoluteness of light, which has no relative velocity, one could leap through space quickly.

If the Photonization Theory is adopted as a universal principle, anyone can successfully teleport. This is what makes it a great discovery, but the problem lies in how much it can be controlled.

Teleportation moves to the destination too quickly, and trying to calculate and move with one's head could easily lead to death.

“Well, it's impossible to calculate speeds that reach 10 to the 20th power.”

Shirone continued reading the book. It was said that mages broadly classify light speed into four categories:

superluminal, luminal, subluminal, and near-luminal.

Superluminal refers to speeds faster than light, theoretically allowing for Time Slip magic that reverses time. However, it was still an unknown realm that no mage had reached.

Therefore, the most exceptional light mages among humans were those who could manipulate light speed. They could learn the magic called Stop, which is referred to as the realm of gods, but those who reached this level were few throughout history.

In the end, most professional mages who handle light are divided in skill within the subluminal realm.

According to mages' definitions, subluminal means "far exceeding the maximum speed of matter but much slower than light".

Additionally, subluminal is also the basic omnipotence of Spatial Movement. While light speed would mean instantaneous movement, handling subluminal speed still allowed one to reach a destination within a few seconds. Shirone read the book in awe, but it still felt far from reality. What he needed to focus on was the last speed of light, near-luminal speed.

The definition given by mages for near-luminal speed is "exceeding the maximum speed of living beings but much slower than subluminal speed".

Thus, even if Teleportation possesses the properties of light, it can still be perceived by the human eye.

It is not a speed that can distort space, so if one misjudges the surrounding environment, irreversible accidents could occur.

"The moment I miss even a single piece of cover, it's over. Even if I reduce mass with the Photonization Theory, the speed would still result in a fatal impact."

I realized why Siena emphasized the fact that there were no obstacles on the Bridge of No Return. However, she

mentioned that there were no specific measures regarding collisions among students.

“Can I really do this? Just with the basic formulas?”

Chapter 33: Teleportation (4)

The time to travel from Point A to Point B was less than a second. Calculating variables in that short amount of time was extremely difficult. More importantly, because Teleportation required multiple short-distance jumps, the more attempts, the greater the confusion.

“Oh, I see!”

Shirone slapped his palm. While it was impossible to calculate with the mind, one could sense it intuitively. Just as one can count the leaves on a tree using the Spirit Zone, the speed of light could also be perceived through insight.

This was exactly what Alpheas wanted. A type of magic that anyone could learn, but the level of mastery drastically varied depending on talent.

Shirone gained confidence. Although he lagged behind in omniscience, he had been honing his omnipotence every day since he was 12.

There were 30 days left until the exam.

Shirone put all his efforts into mastering Kergos' Photonization Theory. After class, he would stay up all night in his dorm, devouring books. After 20 days, he had exhausted everything he could study from reading alone. From that day, he sought out the training grounds reserved for Class Seven. His classmates were all conducting private training sessions, so the place was deserted.

Shirone combined the omniscience of Photonization Theory with the omnipotence of the Spirit Zone. Since it was his first attempt, it was difficult to get a feel for it.

Shirone stood between omniscience and omnipotence. The moment he erased himself from that state, omniscience and omnipotence would converge, activating the magic.

Shirone cast the spell in a state of trance. He felt his body disintegrate, and light burst forth. As soon as he nodded his head to move forward, the world, melting away, overwhelmed him.

“Aaahhh!”

Having teleported 5 meters, Shirone tumbled to the ground upon arrival. It felt as though every bone in his body had shattered.

“Ugh...”

Even as he gritted his teeth, trying to endure the pain, the word “failure” was etched in his mind. Without perfectly reducing his mass through photonization, the impact force of advancing at near-light speed struck him fully.

It was too dangerous to attempt alone.

However, with no private tutor or senior to ask for advice, Shirone had no choice but to learn through trial and error.

‘I won't give up. I will succeed.’

From that day on, Shirone went through countless trials, correcting his mistakes. It seemed like a reckless approach, but in the end, only the memories learned through the body would remain.

After several days, a mysterious figure appeared at the training grounds to observe Shirone. It was probably a spy sent by someone, but he didn't care. There was no other suitable place for him to train anyway.

How many times had he rolled on the ground and smashed his lips into the dirt? His entire body was bruised, and every morning, his bones ached.

And so, the final day approached.

With 10 minutes left until midnight, Shirone staggered back to his spot.

“I will... never... give up...”

His throat was dry from inhaling dust. Standing in the center of the training grounds with half-lidded eyes, he muttered to himself.

Most of the errors had been corrected. What remained was perseverance to endure the pain and the will to overcome fear.

But Shirone couldn't move. He was too afraid to cast Teleportation again. His stamina was completely depleted, and now even his bones ached with every touch.

"Do it... I have to..."

Shirone mumbled in a daze. Maybe this was a good thing. Without needing to make any effort, he might forget himself entirely.

"Teleport..."

At the extreme limit where his upper body was leaning forward, Shirone's body shot 10 meters ahead. Though it was nothing compared to the speed of light, to the human eye, it was as if a flash of light had passed by.

Upon arriving at the destination, Shirone hurriedly caught his upper body, which was about to fall forward.

"....."

He stood there for a long time. There was no sensation. This time, the excruciating pain did not follow.

"Hehe, I did it."

The sound of the bell ringing at midnight echoed.

As he heard that solemn sound, Shirone collapsed onto the ground, still standing. The smell of earth filled his nose.

In 30 days, he had advanced only 10 meters through Teleportation. But it was the first 10 meters he had ever leaped.

"How far can I go from here?"

To cross the 700 meters on the Bridge of No Return, he would need to cast Teleportation at least 70 times.

Moreover, if it were a race, he'd also have to manage his stamina.

Casting Teleportation once was far more inefficient than casting an attack spell once.

If he had to cast Teleportation to move 10 meters, it would be better just to run quickly.

In the end, the key was continuity.

If he couldn't cast continuously, Teleportation was a spell better left unused.

If he arrived at his destination perfectly photonized, inertia would vanish. That's what kept the mage's body from being destroyed, but to continue the chain, he needed the same level of focus as the first attempt.

'I don't have time for this. I can't just lie here. I need to practice a little more. At least strengthen the continuity part...'

His determination was intact, but he couldn't move a single finger. His consciousness was being sucked into the abyss, and Shirone's eyelids slowly closed.

And so, the next morning dawned.

Mark opened the window and let the fresh morning breeze hit his face. He stretched lazily and went to the bathroom to wash his face. A smile never left his face as he changed his clothes.

Today would be a historic day in his life.

"Accelerated promotion in Class Seven. Hehe. I can't wait to see how the Class Six kids will treat me after this!"

Despite being only 15 years old, Mark had an impressively large build. In the world of magic, physical stature didn't matter much, but children tended to be intimidated by size.

On top of that, he was naturally gifted in magic, so no one dared mess with him in Class Seven. This gave him the confidence to push Shirone into a corner and seize this opportunity, further boosting his pride.

"Master, how are you feeling?"

A thin man opened the door and greeted him. He was a wizard who had been privately tutoring Mark on

Teleportation for the past month. Although he was hired in a rush due to the urgency of the situation, he was still a certified 9th-class mage with a reputation for cleverness.

“I’m fine. How’s Shirone?”

“Same as always. While Teleportation isn’t that hard to learn, there’s a limit to what someone can do on their own. Even if he takes the promotion test, he won’t be a match for you, Master.”

“Hmm, but I shouldn’t let my guard down. His Spirit Zone is bigger than mine, after all.”

Mark was pleased with the words that had just left his mouth. People often said that laziness was the weakness of geniuses. But he was different. He combined natural talent with effort, so there was no way he would lose to Shirone.

“By the way, how many kids are participating in the mission?”

“As of yesterday, four.”

“That’s fewer than I expected. It’s not every day you get a chance for private tutoring from a certified mage.”

“They’re likely overestimating themselves or holding on to a foolish sense of pride.”

Mark scoffed at the thought of the students who had refused to join the mission. Talentless fools had let their arrogance blind them, kicking away the golden opportunity of early promotion.

“Let them be. In the end, I, Slider Mark, will be the one to get the promotion.”

The Slider family, while ranked third in the aristocratic hierarchy—not the highest—held considerable influence in the magical world, with most of its members working for the Magic Association.

The children of the first-ranked aristocracy might sneer at him, but they never stayed long in places like Class Seven since they wouldn’t even enter the academy unless they were absolutely certain of their magical prowess.

In any competition, there are always the top performers and the lower ones. Mark planned to rally the mid-level students to form a team. By promising to help them secure jobs in the Association after graduation, he had lured a few into his fold. They had realized that striking a deal was a more realistic option than hoping to pass the test, which had room for only one successful candidate.

“Four people will be enough. We just need to crush them early on.”

“How is your Teleportation coming along?”

Mark gave a thumbs-up as he walked out the door.

“Perfect. I can cross 700 meters with my eyes closed.”

“Good luck, Master.”

The certified 9th-class mage treated Mark with deference until the very end. Even though Mark was technically his junior, the mage had been hired by Mark’s father, a technical advisor for the Magic Association, so he was also the son of his employer.

Mark headed for the advanced class building. Since the promotion test was scheduled for today, there were no regular classes, but students not participating in the test were still staying behind to study. Mark stopped by to have a meeting with his team before the test.

As expected, the students’ faces weren’t exactly cheerful. They were weighed down by the frustration of not even qualifying for the exam.

Mark surveyed them, basking in a sense of superiority. The ones left in the classroom today would likely end up shining his shoes out in the real world. The thought made him grin.

“Hey, Maria! Are you giving up on the test too?”

Mark raised his hand to greet Maria from a distance, and her face turned pale. Ever since she reported Shirone’s bullying incident to Siena, she had become a target of bullying herself.

Mark looked at the nervous Maria with disgust.

“Tch. What a bat-like girl. She was all in when it came to bullying Shirone, but now she’s trying to distance herself? She’s absolutely useless. What’s the point of her even being here?”

Maria, visibly anxious, spoke first.

“Mark, aren’t you at the practice grounds? Are you here to study too?”

“Haha! As if! I’m not like you. I’ve got time to kill, so I thought I’d come say hi to my friends.”

Being addressed informally by Mark, who was four years younger, made Maria feel wretched. But she couldn’t complain, given her lack of skill.

“And what are you doing here? Studying one more day isn’t going to change anything for you. No wonder your grades are so low. You should come watch at the practice grounds. Observing skilled people is also a form of learning.”

“Yeah... you’re right...”

Maria forced an awkward smile as she listened to his lecture. All she wanted was for the conversation to end so she could leave.

“W-Well then, good luck. I hope you pass.”

“Heh! Do you really mean that?”

Mark’s sneer made Maria’s heart drop.

“I’ve let things slide because we’re in the same class, but once I’m your senior, be prepared. I won’t forget how you snitched to the teacher.”

Maria wanted to offer a desperate excuse, but her mind went blank, and she couldn’t think of anything to say. In the end, she lowered her head and hurriedly walked away.

Mark snickered and entered the classroom where his team was waiting. Inside the empty classroom were four fellow students. Three boys and one girl had trained for a month to sabotage Shirone. Their training had focused especially on strategies for within a 100-meter range.

Shirone, of course, would know he was being targeted, so he would likely try to pull ahead early. The key was to eliminate

him before that happened.

Although deliberate collisions could lead to penalties, Mark didn't care much. Any damage incurred would be worth it if he could get compensation later.

"So, is the plan set?"

"Yeah. As soon as the race starts, two of us will go after Shirone. The other two will cover you. If Shirone tries to break away, we'll use our last resort."

They had only two real chances to knock Shirone out, but that was enough for a contest within 100 meters.

Shirone's leap distance was about 10 meters. The team just had to bring him down within the first 10 attempts.

"I won't forget your help. Once I'm promoted early, I'll take care of you all."

"Right. We're counting on you."

Mark was satisfied. Everything was going according to plan. He was certain he'd be the proud student to earn the early promotion.

"Alright! Should we get going?"

Chapter 34: Teleportation (5)

Teleportation Training Grounds

Students arrived one by one at the practice grounds situated on a 1,000-meter-high peak. Since there were no classes today, not only the students from Class Seven but also those from higher classes gathered to witness the results.

By the end of the day, one student from Class Seven would be promoted to Class Five. Given that it normally took an average of two years to advance one class, in the worst case, a student who was at least four years younger could become a peer.

“Wow! So this is the ‘Bridge of No Return’. This is my first time here.”

The students participating in the promotion test were awestruck by the vastness of the training grounds. On the opposite peak, 700 meters away, teachers and students had also gathered.

“But why do they call it the ‘Bridge of No Return’? I don’t see any bridge.”

“You idiot, it’s right there.”

A long metal pole connected the two peaks. The longer the pole, the more its tension weakens. Just the fact that a 700-meter-long pole was stretching across meant it was made of some sort of alchemical material.

Some students walked to the edge of the cliff and peered down. Contrary to what the teachers said, there were no safety devices in sight—not even anything resembling one.

“What is this? If we fall, we could die.”

Thadd, who had teleported over, spoke up.

“You don’t need to worry about that. The safety system is fully in place.”

The students still weren’t reassured. They had heard that in other schools, students had died during Teleportation practice.

“How exactly does it work?”

“If you fall 100 meters, the Air Net spell will automatically activate. The safety devices are invisible so that students don’t get too relaxed.”

“What if it malfunctions?”

“Haha! I can’t say it won’t happen, but it hasn’t yet.”

“So there’s no guarantee of safety, huh?”

“Well, you could put it that way.”

The students’ faces turned pale, but Thadd smiled with satisfaction. Even if the safety system failed, no accidents would happen. That’s why all higher-class lessons were suspended, and the teachers had gathered here.

But even if an accident did occur, it couldn’t be helped. Magic schools, being supported by the kingdom for special purposes, operated under a rule that injuries or deaths during lessons wouldn’t lead to liability. Students were aware of this when they applied to advanced classes.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been here. Amy, let’s head over there.”

Serielle grabbed Amy’s hand and led her up the hill.

Although Amy showed clear reluctance, she eventually followed along.

“I don’t want to watch. It’s obvious how Class Seven will perform.”

“Oh, come on! Your boyfriend is moving up to Class Five, and you’re saying that? You should be cheering him on to earn some points!”

“Tch! Whether I cheer or not, those who pass will pass, and those who fail will fail.”

Despite her nonchalant attitude, Amy was secretly worried. In just one month, how much had he improved in

Teleportation? Could he even teleport at all?

The best way to get a feel for Teleportation was through hands-on practice, but since the process was incredibly painful, most people first learned tips from skilled mentors before trying it themselves.

Amy, however, had learned through sheer determination, smashing into the challenge head-on. Thanks to her early grasp of schema, she hadn't suffered too much.

'But Shirone isn't like me. Still, he wouldn't give up so easily. I just hope he's in good shape.'

Although Shirone was the standout, Class Seven had several notable talents. Depending on the circumstances, it wouldn't be too surprising if Shirone failed.

"Wait, but Shirone isn't here yet, is he?"

Serielle, scanning the other peak with binoculars, passed them to Amy. Sure enough, Shirone was nowhere among the 20 students standing on the cliff.

"What? What's going on?"

"Did he fail already?"

There was no way to know for sure. While they trusted in Shirone's abilities, Teleportation wasn't an easy magic to learn by self-study.

'You idiot... what on earth are you doing?'

Shirone woke up to the scorching sunlight. His vision was low, and the sky seemed unusually high. A jay hopping nearby snapped him fully awake.

"Ahh! What the heck!"

Frantically looking around, he realized he was still in the middle of the training grounds. He had collapsed last night and slept there until now.

With only three hours of sleep each night and having pushed his body to the limit in the final week, it was no wonder he had passed out.

'The promotion test!'

Cold sweat trickled down Shirone's back. Without a moment to dwell on his exhaustion, he sprang up and ran. To ascend the 1,000-meter peak, there was no time to worry about his condition.

'Please! Please!'

The Bridge of No Return (1)

"We will begin now, Headmaster."

"Hmm, go ahead."

As Siena cast an illumination spell into the sky, tension filled the practice ground. Ethella, having confirmed the light from the opposite peak, turned to the students and spoke.

"When the teacher gives the signal, run toward the cliff. The person who teleports the furthest will pass the advancement test."

The students gulped nervously. The difficulty level of the Bridge of No Return was set to Level 1, with no obstacles, but the fear of soaring through the air was beyond imagination.

Regardless of rank, they needed to string together at least 70 teleports to land safely. If they lost their rhythm in the middle, the terror of falling would cause them to lose even their Spirit Zone.

'I won't make it across anyway. I'll end up falling, and if the safety device doesn't work, what will happen?'

Even though they were told it was safe, human nature made it hard for the students to believe. Most of them were tense and stiff, except for Mark and his strategy team, who remained somewhat calm.

'Hmph. I've practiced every day. As long as I'm not interrupted, 70 teleports should be enough.'

The only variable was Shirone's absence. Mark's personal magic instructor had reported that Shirone's progress was slow, but Mark hadn't believed it until seeing it with his own eyes. Now, with everything happening, he realized he had been nervous over someone insignificant.

'He hasn't even mastered Teleportation. Well, he was always useless outside of the Spirit Zone anyway.'

The person most anxious due to Shirone's absence was Amy. Her previously confident demeanor had disappeared, and she was pacing nervously by the edge of the cliff.

"What's going on? Why isn't he here yet?!"

"Amy, look over there!"

Serielle pointed to the opposite peak. Through her binoculars, Amy saw Shirone running toward the summit, covered in dust and barely able to catch his breath, his face pale.

"What on earth was that fool doing until now?!"

Serielle sighed in relief. "Well, at least he made it in time. But will he be okay after exhausting himself like that?"

"I don't know! Who cares?! Just making it here without being disqualified is lucky enough!"

Since Shirone had made it to the test site, it seemed he had at least learned Teleportation. His cracked lips and bruised arms told a story of the struggle he had gone through. Amy, regaining her composure, surveyed her surroundings.

"The wind is pretty strong today. It'll be a tough test."

Although Teleportation wasn't as affected by wind as flight magic, it wasn't entirely free from wind speed and pressure. This test would require unwavering focus.

The students waiting for the test stiffened at Shirone's arrival. They had let their guard down, thinking he had given up, only to be caught off-guard at the last moment.

"Damn! He did that on purpose to mess with us."

"Acting all innocent, but he's really sly. Does he want to advance so badly that he'd pull a stunt like this?"

While Shirone's arrival certainly rattled their nerves, he was clearly exhausted, meaning he was at a disadvantage.

Ethella, noticing Shirone's heavy breathing, hesitated. He had arrived before the test began, so there was no issue with his eligibility, but the test was supposed to assess skill under equal conditions.

‘Will it still be fair to continue like this?’

She shot a yellow illumination spell into the sky. Blue meant “ready,” red signified “test start,” and yellow meant a “question.”

The teachers, upon seeing Ethella’s flare, began to debate. Some argued that the test should start immediately, while others suggested giving Shirone 10 minutes to rest.

“What do you think, Headmaster?”

Alpheas was firm.

“Let’s proceed. Managing one’s condition is part of a student’s capability before a test. It’s not our place to interfere.”

“Understood. Then...”

Siena signaled to continue by casting a red illumination spell. Shirone squeezed into the line of students. The only ones kind enough to make space for him were Mark’s strategy team.

The students were all tense. No matter how much special training they had undergone, running off a 1,000-meter cliff was another matter. It was an unknown world that was equal for everyone. No one could predict how they would feel or what they would see when the sky unfolded beneath their feet until they experienced it.

“Now, we will begin Class Seven’s early advancement test. Get ready.”

The students crouched in preparation. As the sound of their heartbeats became the only thing audible, Ethella cast her illumination spell.

With a *bang*, a red orb shot into the sky. On the opposite side, the teachers flipped through their files, ready to record, and the students, without waiting for anyone, kicked off the ground and sprinted.

‘I need to take the lead!’

‘If I charge ahead, I might just have a chance!’

Most of the students were thinking the same thing. Shirone, whose legs were weak, inevitably fell behind.

But there was still a chance to make up for it. Each student's determination dictated the point at which they would cast their first teleport near the cliff. The best start would be to launch off the cliff and cast teleport mid-air. But how many could actually manage that? The starting point was the most nerve-wracking, and the Bridge of No Return was at an altitude of one kilometer.

Wind speed, direction, air pressure—everything was different from practice. If you leaped into the air and your magic failed, it was over. It was human nature to want to start from the ground, where there was at least a chance to recover.

As expected, when they were five meters from the cliff, students, unable to bear the fear, began casting Teleportation. The rest soon followed. The only ones who hadn't yet were Mark's team.

'No! Just a little more!'

Mark suppressed his rising fear and continued to run. Shirone was surely aiming for the perfect start, so Mark needed a comparable start point.

'Can I do it? What if I fall?'

No matter how hard he steeled his mind, the anxiety wouldn't go away. Eventually, even Mark's strategy team, who had been holding out, couldn't bear it and cast their teleport spells. Mark, too, finally followed suit.

Although over half the students had already teleported off the cliff, Shirone continued running. His strategy team, keeping pace with him, was feeling the pressure.

If they didn't teleport soon, they'd fall off the cliff. With only two steps left before the edge, the team finally cast their magic. Yet, Shirone kept running, unshaken by the fear that gripped everyone else.

It was still the first phase of the test. If Shirone could nail the start, he could make up for the ground he had lost on the cliff.

Chapter 35: The Bridge of No Return (2)

Unlike the intense psychological battle taking place, to the spectators watching from afar, it merely appeared as if everyone was jumping off the cliff together. It was a competition happening within mere seconds.

‘Until you fall, you haven’t really fallen.’

Even as Shirone reached the edge of the cliff, his body didn’t glow with magic. The spectators watching began to feel their hearts race. Kicking off from the cliff’s edge, Shirone leaped as far as he could. The overwhelming sensation of floating took hold, the strong wind buffeting his body, and birds flew in flocks far below.

Shirone focused entirely on Teleportation. At the critical point of his jump, his body finally flashed and disappeared in a burst of light.

With Shirone’s leap, the first round of the test concluded. Naturally, the rankings shifted as they moved into the second round. Those who started first now fell behind the group.

Shirone had closed the gap that opened during the running portion. Most importantly, he managed to narrowly pull ahead of Mark.

Seeing Shirone suddenly appear ahead of him, Mark was startled. How late could Shirone have started to overtake him in just the first round? Of course, the lead group was still within 10 meters of each other, so the rankings could shift again at any moment, but it was frustrating to see his plan fall apart.

“You bastard! Don’t you dare stay ahead of me!”

With only a fraction of a second between them, Shirone and Mark both simultaneously cast their teleportation magic.

Ten minutes before the promotion test began.

A girl with a gloomy expression was heading toward the training grounds.

Erlang Maria.

At 19 years old, she was the third daughter of the noble Erlang family, ranked third in the noble hierarchy. She had discovered her magical talent early on and entered the Alpheas Magic Academy.

Though she was now stuck in Class Seven, mocked even by Mark, who was four years younger, it hadn't always been that way.

Maria had entered the school at the age of 10, and for nine long years, she fought fiercely. But at some point, the competition started to feel meaningless.

She no longer understood why she needed to claw her way up to higher classes. Even if she advanced, it would just be the start of another grueling competition. Her life felt like a marathon without a finish line.

"Sigh, what am I even doing right now?"

Was it because she had missed her chance to rise earlier?

The moment she realized she was the oldest in Class Seven, everything began to feel pointless.

The probability of a Class Ten student advancing to Class Seven was around 40 percent. Surpassing that threshold should have been a source of pride.

When Maria had advanced to Class Seven at age 15, she had been overjoyed, as if she were flying. But that happiness was short-lived, and soon, she felt the narrowing chances for promotion closing in on her, filling her with dread.

Ironically, her best performance had been during her first year in Class Seven.

After that, her grades slowly declined, and now, she was being ridiculed by even the youngest students.

She was afraid of the competition. She felt suffocated by the idea that she had to fight for her life, become a bit more relentless, a bit more perfect. Every time she thought that way, it felt like she couldn't breathe.

Was she still here because of inertia, or was there still a bit of passion left? Or perhaps she was stubborn because she didn't want to waste all the time she had invested?

Maria had entered magic school because she loved magic, but now she found herself sighing as she watched her sense of identity erode.

The promotion test felt like something irrelevant to her. Yet, she didn't want to remain behind, stuck in the classroom, self-studying with the younger students—it would hurt her pride too much.

Lost in these thoughts, she wandered aimlessly. At some point, she had decided to head to the training grounds.

Perhaps, at the peak, there were dazzling talents fiercely competing against each other. Watching them would only deepen her self-doubt, but she could feel the last spark of passion inside her fading away.

She walked, as if grasping at straws, hoping that maybe something, even the smallest incident, might spark a change within her.

"Huh?"

At the mountain peak, Instructor Ethella's magic signal flared. It was blue, indicating that preparations for the test were underway.

The cheers of students echoed around her. Losing confidence, Maria stopped walking. Their cheers weren't meant for her.

'My place isn't there. Only the outstanding ones from Class Seven would be there.'

At that moment, a devilish thought crept into Maria's mind, guiding her steps.

At first, she just didn't want to ignore the fact that a possibility existed.

When she came to her senses, she had already reached the control room for the Bridge of No Return.

Maybe it wasn't all over yet. Clinging to that hope, she opened the door to the control room. Inside, an employee sat yawning in a chair. Normally, an instructor would accompany them during a promotion test, but since the mechanisms of the Bridge of No Return were deactivated today, and the instructors were focused on ensuring the students' safety, the room was left unsupervised.

The relaxed employee stretched his legs and whistled. But moments later, his eyes drooped and his head slumped forward.

Behind him stood Maria, casting a sleep-inducing spell.

This type of spell had little effect on other mages but was quite effective on non-magical people.

Maria looked around the control room. The safety mechanism for the Air Net was activated, and beside it was a rotary switch for adjusting the difficulty of the Bridge of No Return.

She placed her hand on the safety button, her body trembling. Was this really the right thing to do? No, setting right and wrong aside, could she even go through with it? All she had to do was press the button. Normally, she wouldn't have even imagined doing something so reckless, but when people are entranced by something, they often focus only on the sweet rewards.

Maria pressed the button. When she actually did it, she let out a hollow laugh at how easy it was. No catastrophe, no disastrous result. She had simply pressed a button.

The red lights of the Air Net installed along the cliff began to fade.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Explosions erupted from the group of students as 20 of them flashed in and out, racing through the sky at an altitude of 1,000 meters. By the time they reached the third turn, the gap between the lead and the rear hadn't widened much. The whole group moved like a massive human wave. However, the difference in skill became evident. Most of those who started early couldn't handle the void beneath their feet and began to lose focus.

'Pant, pant! Are we really falling here?'

Looking down, all they could see was a sheer drop of thousands of meters. Even if there was a safety net, the thought of falling 100 meters regardless was terrifying. As the Spirit Zone weakened, their jumping distance decreased, causing the gap between them and the leading group to grow rapidly. The Spirit Zone required an extremely sensitive mental state. Any lapse in concentration made it impossible to maintain. Ultimately, the students in the trailing group, who failed to teleport accurately, began plummeting.

"Ahhh!"

"Help! Somebody, help me!"

Hahaha!

The seniors watching from the other side burst into laughter. Having already experienced the Bridge of No Return, they found the panicked reactions of their juniors amusing. The teachers smiled as they carefully recorded the eliminated students' evaluations.

But the festive atmosphere shifted in an instant.

Without warning, the teachers raised their heads, shocked. Although the students should have already been caught by the Air Net, the warning siren remained silent.

"What's going on? What's happened? Control room!"

"I'll go check!"

Thadd activated his Teleportation magic, a bright flash streaking through the sky toward the control room.

"I'll rescue the students!"

Siena dove off the cliff, using high-speed Teleportation. Ethella, watching from the other side, quickly realized something was wrong and jumped down as well.

“Headmaster, what should we do? Should we stop the exam?”

Alpheas exhaled thoughtfully. With two certified 6th-class mages on the scene, the students would be safe. But whether to continue the test was another matter to consider.

From the school’s perspective, canceling the test would be easier. However, doing so would unfairly penalize the students in the lead who had given their all to stay ahead. As long as safety was ensured, it was better to respect the participants’ determination.

“Let’s wait and see. We can easily protect 20 students. Stopping now would undermine their passion, don’t you think?”

Siena and Ethella soared back up from the cliff, followed by the students caught in the Air Net magic.

“What’s going on? It looks like there’s been a problem.”

Serielle peered into the sky with binoculars, trying to understand the situation. Other students also began murmuring in confusion.

But Amy remained unfazed by the change in atmosphere. In a place where two certified 6th-class teachers were on guard, no one was going to die from a fall. Moreover, the leading students remained composed. If she were in their shoes, would she care about safety when Class Five was at stake?

Meanwhile, in the middle ranks, noticeable unrest arose. Realizing that something had gone wrong after watching the teachers jump off the cliff to save the students, the middle group began to panic.

‘No safety net?’

Up until now, they had managed to overcome their fear, knowing that it wasn’t a real-life scenario. But now, it felt

like they were truly suspended over a bottomless abyss.

“No! This can’t be happening!”

“Teacher! Help us! We’ll give up the exam!”

“Are we going to die like this?”

One by one, the middle group began to fall. The teachers frantically flashed lights, pulling the students back up in a spectacular display.

Even in such chaos, the lead group pressed on without stopping. They, too, understood that the safety systems had failed, but instead of fear, they felt excitement.

‘This is an opportunity! The more who drop out, the better.’

Before entering the magic school, these children had been hailed as prodigies. Their competitiveness far surpassed that of their peers. So far, the lead group had advanced 270 meters—an impressive distance for Class Seven students.

Shirone was still holding the lead. Although Mark and his team alternated overtaking him, he reclaimed first place every time. In 27 consecutive teleports, his jump distance per turn remained exactly 10 meters, without a single error.

‘Focus only on each moment. Forget about linking spells together.’

The mechanical routine Shirone had perfected for this test was paying off. Under certain conditions, humans could become even more precise than machines, and this was the power of unconscious repetition. A person driven by obsession could break through barriers like a machine, moving forward with relentless determination.

‘Damn it! He’s relentless! What’s the rest of the team doing?’

Mark was irritated. With Shirone maintaining the lead, there was no room for his team to intervene. He cast a fierce glance at the girl next to him, silently pressuring her to initiate their final plan.

The method? A kamikaze maneuver.

But with the safety system disabled, the girl hesitated. Was this really the right thing to do?

'I have no choice. Whether I die here or live a failed life, it's the same.'

She pushed her concentration to its limit. By giving up on finishing the race, she could temporarily seize the lead with rapid Teleportation.

She rapidly chained her Teleportation spells to block Shirone's path. At the same time, another member of the strategy team cut off Shirone's route on the left.

With both his front and side blocked, the girl slowed down, forcing Shirone to reduce his jump distance as well.

Chapter 36: The Bridge of No Return (3)

'I'm sorry. We have to make a living too.'

The male student tightly shut his eyes and cast a

Teleportation towards Shirone.

If a collision occurred, a serious injury was inevitable.

"Ugh!"

A groan of fear escaped him, but the impact he was bracing for never came.

When he opened his eyes, Shirone was still beside him.

'He changed direction.'

Avoiding the collision was better than a mutual downfall, but the loss of distance meant that victory was now out of reach.

The girl and boy fell, satisfied, while Mark took Shirone's leading position.

'Damn...!'

With the evasion breaking his repetitive rhythm, Shirone gritted his teeth and focused hard to regain his teleportation tempo.

"Didn't those two seem to move a bit strangely?"

Some of the advanced students commented.

"I thought the same. Maybe they got tangled up from pushing too hard. Surely, they weren't really trying to crash into each other?"

"No, they did it on purpose."

The Class Five students turned to look behind them.

The owner of the thin, metallic-sounding voice was Mercodine Iruki from Class Five. He was the one who had previously offered Shirone advice in the Image Zone. His body was skinny, his eyes uneven, and his teeth jagged.

“How can you be sure? In cases like this, you might have a hunch, but unless you’re the one involved, you can’t know for certain.”

Iruki spread his hand and then clenched it into a fist as he explained.

“One blocks the path, and the other strikes from the side.

It’s a brilliant strategy, using Teleportation’s immediacy and spatial leap to simultaneously seal off two options. If Shirone hadn’t dodged, the race would have ended here. Of course, I would have calculated the movement equations and escaped with perfect timing, but that’s just me.”

The other students turned their heads back towards the test site.

‘What a show-off.’

Meanwhile, the gap between Shirone and Mark began to widen, and Shirone started to feel a growing sense of urgency.

The remaining distance was 350 meters.

At the halfway point, all the other participants had been eliminated, leaving only Shirone and Mark in the race.

‘I’ve won! I’ve definitely won!’

As Mark became certain of his victory, he felt a thrill.

No one was blocking his way, and despite casting nearly 40 Teleportations, he didn’t feel fatigued at all.

‘Today, I’m on a different level. I’m the one who’ll pass!’

Images of quickly advancing to Class Five, the envy on his peers’ faces, and the humiliation of Class Six seniors flashed through his mind.

“Hahaha! I’m number one!”

As Mark pushed his Teleportation tempo even faster, the distance between him and Shirone grew even more.

‘In that case...’

Shirone suddenly accelerated, and the sound of his Teleportation bursts echoed like a drumbeat.

The excitement among the students reached its peak.

“Shirone is catching up! This is where the real battle starts!”

“Mark! Faster! Faster, faster, faster!”

At that moment, Mark noticed something strange.

The iron bars of the Bridge of No Return began to twist geometrically, rapidly approaching.

If his foot caught on one of them, at best, he would suffer a fracture; at worst, he would lose balance and plummet.

Warning. Warning. Bridge of No Return mechanism activation initiated. Level 10. Level 10.

The advanced students gasped in shock.

“Level 10?!”

It was the highest difficulty level of the Bridge of No Return. Even the upper-level students of the advanced class had never seen the iron bars twist in such a terrifying way.

“What in the world is happening? How could the mechanism suddenly activate like this?!”

The teachers were thrown into confusion.

Not only had the safety mechanisms been disabled, but now the most dangerous trap had been triggered.

“Where’s Mr. Thadd? Didn’t he go to the control room?”

“Headmaster, what should we do? Should we cancel the promotion test?”

Alpheas clicked his tongue as he watched the twisted iron bars closing in on Shirone and Mark.

While he wanted to respect the students’ determination to face the graduation exam, the Level 10 trap on the Bridge of No Return was another story entirely.

‘At this level, there’s no way to distinguish their abilities.

These kids won’t make it through.’

With a bitter tone, Alpheas spoke.

“Cancel the test and deactivate the mechanism.”

Just as he finished speaking, a flash of light shot up into the sky above the test area.

It was Siena, who had gone to the control room to find Thadd.

Meanwhile, unaware of the situation at the testing site, Thadd approached the entrance of the control room, breathing heavily through his nose.

“Damn it! Just wait until I catch whoever did this!”

No staff member in their right mind would deactivate the mechanisms, so it had to be the school’s troublemakers.

“Who the hell...!”

He shouted as he roughly turned the doorknob, only to hear the click of a lock from the inside.

“You little...!”

Activating his Spirit Zone, he sensed someone sitting against the door on the other side.

Thadd, with fire energy rising in his hands, spoke up.

“Open up. I’m about to cast Fire Strike. If you don’t open the door, I’ll blast you away.”

“Go ahead, I don’t mind. Actually, please do it, sir.”

It was Maria’s voice, unexpectedly.

Though Thadd wasn’t her assigned teacher, he knew her well enough from before he started working at the school.

“Maria? What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Don’t forgive me.”

“Open the door. Let’s talk face-to-face first.”

“I’m going to be expelled, right? Or maybe I’ll end up in prison?”

“No, Maria. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ll listen. Just open the door first.”

“I don’t care anymore. I don’t want to live. I wish I could just die right here.”

Thadd extinguished the fire in his hand.

“Sigh. Fine, if you don’t want to come out, don’t.”

Judging by Maria’s usual behavior, she wasn’t in her right mind, and breaking down the door wouldn’t help.

Thadd leaned against the iron door and stared at the sky above Alpheas Magic Academy, a sight he once found suffocating in his childhood.

Maria, feeling a bit calmer simply because Thadd wasn't yelling at her, spoke up.

"Teacher."

"What?"

"You hate me, don't you?"

"I don't hate women."

Thadd's fondness for women aside, his current statement held a weight of its own, part of his peculiar belief system.

"Why is the world so unfair?"

"Haha! You don't like unfairness? It's rare for someone as beautiful as you to be born."

"You're called a genius mage, but you don't know what it's like to lack talent. No matter how hard you try, despair always comes first. Do you have any idea how helpless that feels?"

"...I do."

Maria turned her head toward the iron door.

"You do, sir?"

"I graduated at twenty-two, so I've been a teacher for four years now. I guess when you entered the school, I was in my final year. You know I went to school here, right?"

"Yes."

"Then think about it. Have you ever heard of a student named Thadd while you were here?"

Now that she thought about it, no memory came to mind. Compared to Shirone, who became the talk of the school as soon as he enrolled, Thadd was an unusual case.

"No, I've never heard of you."

"Exactly. I was a mid-to-lower-level student, with no talent, no special background, and always getting into fights outside the school."

"You, sir?"

"Yeah. I repeated two years every time I tried to advance a class. I even spent three years in the final year. Haha! I guess my situation was slightly better than yours."

Thadd imagined Maria's sullen expression as he continued.

“But in the end, it’s all the same, isn’t it? If you can’t be the best, you’ll break eventually. That’s what happened to me. Even when I made it to the final year, I kept failing.”

“But then how...?”

“How did I become a successful teacher? It’s all luck, pure luck. Sure, I worked hard, but not as much as others. Competing with people became exhausting. But then, one day, someone said something to me that changed everything.”

Thadd recalled that time as he spoke.

“They told me, ‘You’re not losing because you can’t win; it’s because you don’t want to win.’”

Maria quietly repeated those words.

“Maria, you don’t have to beat anyone. If you love magic, that’s enough. There are people in this world who don’t want to compete, just like me.”

Nine years later, the ten-year-old girl who had entered the school with a love for magic was now utterly worn out.

“Since meeting that person, my life changed. Thinking about it now, it’s kind of strange to be a teacher and say things like that.”

“That person was your teacher?”

“Yeah, my master, Headmaster Alpheas.”

Maria’s head snapped around.

“Huh? The headmaster?”

“After that day, I became his official disciple and received personal lessons. It was a huge privilege. Thanks to him, my life turned around. Learning from a renowned mage on the continent, even a nobody like me got to live as if I were a genius. Pretty enviable, right? Life is all about luck, luck! Hahaha!”

Maria’s mood darkened again.

“So, what I’m trying to say is, the world is unfair. Some are born with talent, others fight their way up. But sometimes, even people like me, with no talent and no desire to

compete, get a miracle. That's why everyone holds on to hope, isn't it?"

Thadd stood up and turned around.

"A miracle can come to anyone. It'd be a shame to give up now after all the time you've spent. Why not try just a little longer, a little harder?"

Maria buried her face in her knees.

"Do I really have to stake my life on waiting for a miracle that may never come? What if it doesn't? What then?"

"What are you talking about, Maria?"

Thadd placed his hand on the iron door and smiled.

"Look, a miracle has already come to you."

Tears filled Maria's eyes.

"Let's try again, together. I may not have had an easy ride like others, but don't give up on yourself just yet. Maybe you've just been unlucky so far. Maybe the approach was wrong. Not all school lessons work for everyone. So why don't you give me another chance? I'll make sure you become a mage."

Maria covered her face with her hands.

"Really? You think I can do it too?"

"You can. If magic is everything to you, then you should never give up on it."

There was a click as the lock turned, and Maria, her eyes swollen from crying, came out and urgently shouted.

"Teacher! Quickly, the mechanism... The mechanism...!"

"Huh? Mechanism?"

Even a Teleportation covering 700 meters wouldn't take that long. The test must have been nearing its end by now, and since there was no news, Thadd assumed the teachers had successfully concluded the promotion exam.

But at that moment, a sharp sound rang out, followed by a flash of light.

"Teacher Thadd! What are you doing?!"

Siena's face, a mixture of anger and urgency, came rushing toward them as she ran.

She reached out as if to grab Thadd by the collar, then froze when she saw Maria, looking confused.

“Maria? Why are you here?”

Thadd asked, “What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

Siena shouted again.

“Deactivate the mechanism now! The difficulty of the Bridge of No Return has been set to Level 10!”

“What?!”

She hadn’t just deactivated the safety mechanism?

Remembering Maria’s earlier words, Thadd realized it was true and hurried toward the control room.

Just then, another flash of light bent into their view.

It was Ethella, who had teleported to their location and was running toward them in a panic.

“Teacher! This is bad! Really bad!”

Siena felt a surge of fear as she realized the gravity of the situation.

“What is it? Could there have been an accident...?”

Ethella, her voice still shaken, screamed.

“Shirone... Shirone!”

Chapter 37: The Bridge of No Return (4)

The teachers were in a panic.

It was the first time in an advanced class that the difficulty of the Bridge of No Return had been raised to level 10.

“Teacher! Over there!”

One of the teachers pointed, raising their hand.

At the center of the complex bars and beams, Shirone and Mark were charging forward.

“Damn it! So reckless!”

The participants in the test had decided to continue, despite the situation.

While their determination to advance was commendable, from the teachers’ perspective, it seemed nothing short of suicidal.

‘This is an incredible trap. How do we get out of it?’

Even in this life-and-death situation, Shirone was solely focused on finding a way to pass the Bridge of No Return.

The structure created by the bending bars followed a “wave progression”, resembling waves crashing continuously.

‘Standing still will only get us caught in wave after wave of traps.’

Ultimately, the key was to break through the waves in the shortest time possible and reach the other side.

The first wave involved a structure that lashed out like a whip as the bars bent. Mark, who dodged it easily, gained some confidence.

‘If it’s only this level...’

No matter how difficult the challenge, only the first-place winner would advance.

‘The higher the risk, the greater the challenge. This could actually be a good thing.’

Mark’s competitive spirit shone even in this dangerous situation.

‘No, this is bad!’

On the other hand, Shirone wasn’t just calculating the immediate dangers; hhe was also anticipating the future disasters that could follow.

From observing the starting point of the waves, he realized that the level 10 obstacles couldn’t just be dodged one by one.

Unless he analyzed and moved through all five waves or more, he’d be cornered into a dead end.

“What the...?”

As expected, after dodging the first trap, Mark looked bewildered.

After the vertical wave, a double horizontal wave surged forward, followed by a triple horizontal wave undulating like water.

At the speed the bars were moving, even a slight mistiming could result in broken bones.

‘No way. He can’t dodge that.’

From a higher position where he had been observing, Shirone quickly descended toward Mark, who was on the verge of being crushed.

“Ugh!”

Right before Mark could be caught in the trap, the watching students shut their eyes, bracing for a gruesome outcome.

But there was no scream. When they opened their eyes again, they saw Shirone had wrapped his arms around Mark’s waist and used Teleportation to escape the trap.

“Shirone!”

While saving Mark was a brave act, some thought it was also a reckless decision.

After all, wasn’t this still part of the test?

“What the hell? Being nice has its limits.”

“What are you saying? Mark was about to die! Of course he had to do something.”

“Of course? Could you have done the same?”

“Why are you dragging me into this?”

While the students argued, Iruki stood with a knowing smile.

‘That’s not it, you fools...’

The trap extended as far as the eye could see, and looking at it made Shirone feel suffocated.

When the net-like mesh approached, for the first time since the test began, his mind turned blank.

‘How am I supposed to dodge that?’

As the massive 20-square-meter trap approached, he felt like a fly awaiting a swatter.

“Ahhh! Please, someone save me!”

Mark began thrashing wildly.

Once his courage broke, it was impossible for him to regain composure during the test.

Death seemed imminent.

The number of traps rushing toward them felt endless, and their forms grew increasingly bizarre.

“Stay still!”

Shirone was racking her brain to find a breakthrough, but in front of the massive barrier with no room to escape,

Teleportation was useless.

‘No, that’s not right. If it was a trap with no way out, they wouldn’t have made it in the first place.’

At that moment, a flash of insight struck her mind.

‘That’s it!’

Just as Mark screamed, “We’re all going to die!” Shirone activated Teleportation, causing Iruki to jump up and shout.

“That’s it!”

Shirone chose to teleport backward, quickly creating distance faster than the approaching net. He had been so focused on crossing the bridge that he had forgotten the space behind him was open.

'If I step back and gain enough distance, I can easily leap over the entire net.'

Seizing the right timing, Shirone ascended diagonally, barely grazing the outer frame of the net with the tips of his feet as he passed.

'I got through, but...'

Level 10 was not going to let her off easily.

As Shirone increased her altitude, the iron bars also rose, and the next trap was rushing in.

Serielle shouted in frustration.

"Why is she doing something so reckless? If Mark is eliminated, he'll automatically pass!"

Amy responded, "He wouldn't make that choice. It's not in her nature."

"I know he's kind, but there's no need to go that far. I can't prove it, but Mark hired people to sabotage him."

"Shirone doesn't care about being first."

She wasn't competing for some number given by others.

"He just wants to pass the promotion exam and reach a higher level. He knows that if he can't be satisfied with himself, advancing is meaningless."

Although Amy fully understood Shirone's mindset, that only made her feel more pity for her.

"But this time, luck isn't on his side. It's too dangerous. This exam should be stopped now."

The Level 10 difficulty of the Bridge of No Return was something no one from Class Four could handle.

Though Shirone was still hanging on, in Amy's experience, the traps they had passed so far only amounted to about Level 6 difficulty.

"AAAAHHHHH!"

Mark's screams were so loud they could shatter eardrums, and his eyes turned white before he foamed at the mouth and passed out.

Meanwhile, Shirone's mind was becoming even sharper.

At some point, she had passed through the traps, completely forgetting her own existence, and the teachers, as well as the frantic students, had all fallen silent. Even Alpheas was lost in admiration, unable to take his eyes off Shirone's brilliant movements.

'Adversity draws out potential, but everyone has their limits. How can he still be holding on?'

Could he really still endure?

The Bridge of No Return was now speeding at 200 kilometers per hour.

For an ordinary student, the speed alone would be enough to knock them unconscious.

Yet Shirone was weaving through the dark iron structures like lightning.

'Was there never a limit for him in the first place?'

Even when you reach a peak, no one can continue to ascend forever. Everyone, at some point, becomes satisfied.

Magic was the same.

Is it really just a matter of skill or talent that prevents all mages from reaching the top?

No matter how high they climb, a sense of satisfaction eventually sets in—a psychological barrier that humans cannot overcome.

'Shirone, are you dreaming of infinity within a human body?'

It was as if no such limit existed for her.

Because he had no feeling of satisfaction, he could mentally handle the endlessly increasing difficulty.

Shirone was undoubtedly in a state of complete focus, and it was likely she wouldn't remember this moment afterward.

But Ethella, the youngest bishop of the Karsis Monastery, knew she would never forget Shirone's dazzling performance today.

'He's finding escapes in real-time, each one closer to one in a million.'

How is that even possible?

‘Such mental strength could only be sustained by the greatest monks in a state of deep meditation.’

The structures had now passed beyond complicated, to the point of being almost grotesque in their convoluted design. It was a trap of chaos, with no discernible pattern.

‘I have to break it down further.’

The waves had shortened to the point where they could only be dodged with movements within a meter, so Shirone’s jumping range also decreased.

He couldn’t dodge one and then calculate the next; he had to analyze everything from the start and leap in all at once. Left, right, left, left, right, left...

Shirone imprinted the incoming ring-like traps into her mind and identified the pattern.

As he activated Teleportation, a streak of light zigzagged through the structures, but another trap, identical in shape, surged in vertically.

There was no time to calculate the pattern.

‘It needs to be even finer!’

Time fragmented further, and the streak of Teleportation curved downward in an arc.

As the students and even the teachers gaped in awe, Iruki raised his squinty eyes and shouted.

“Rainbow Drop! So he’s finally reached that point!”

The light, bending like a wave, threaded through the center of the circle like an eel swimming in water.

Rainbow Drop was an advanced teleportation technique, typically only mastered by senior students on the verge of graduation.

This was why the advanced class students could not comprehend what they had just witnessed—how the light had curved and slipped through the trap.

“Is that really possible? How can Teleportation bend like that? Light only moves in straight lines!”

Iruki tapped his head and said, “It’s simple. If you differentiate a circle, you get an infinite number of straight

lines. He divided the intervals of Teleportation into one-thousandth segments.”

“One-thousandth? Is that even humanly possible?”

“Even if you can’t calculate it, you can sense it. He’s not omniscient, but he’s omnipotent. In short, he’s a genius with the opposite nature of me.”

The students turned their heads, ignoring Iruki’s self-praise. ‘Genius? In Class Five?’

Meanwhile, the speed of the Bridge of No Return had reached its peak.

The iron bars had blurred into streaks, making it nearly impossible to discern the structure unless you had already adapted to it.

As Shirone dashed through the afterimages, his movements had surpassed technique and reached the level of art.

Everyone was entranced by the sight of light breaking into fragments and tracing curved trajectories.

“Could he really...?”

The distance to the end of the Bridge of No Return was now a mere 30 meters.

The students had stopped thinking about anything else and were now silently rooting for Shirone to succeed.

For the first time in the school’s history, an advanced student was on the verge of mastering the Bridge of No Return.

“Headmaster! Over there!”

Someone pointed to the end of the bridge, and all the teachers who looked turned pale.

The moment they feared had come.

From the destination point, the iron bars began to twist like burning hair, forming a massive three-dimensional structure.

“It’s the Dragon’s Maze! We have to stop it now!”

The Dragon’s Maze was a trap that only appeared once at Level 10, named for its resemblance to a dragon’s face when complete.

Although the exterior looked similar, the internal structure changed each time, and the length of the iron bars used to form the trap exceeded 600 meters.

If the twisting process wasn't fully analyzed in time to find an escape pattern, anyone caught in it would be swallowed and utterly destroyed.

Even in Shirone's focused state, he could tell the twisting iron bars were not normal.

He had burned the pattern of the structure into his mind, not even blinking, when he suddenly felt a jolt at his side.

"Aaaah! What's happening! Help!"

Mark had regained consciousness and, seeing the enormous trap hurtling toward him, screamed in terror.

Since he hadn't passed through the earlier traps step by step, the sight of the rapidly approaching maze was overwhelming.

'It's coming!'

Even in this situation, the Dragon's Maze was charging toward them at an unprecedented speed, its jaws wide open.

Chapter 38: The Bridge of No Return (5)

The time remaining until arrival was barely one second, and this time, even Shirone's heart skipped a beat.

'I can't give up!'

As an electric jolt struck his brain, Shirone refocused his Spirit Zone, which had been shaken by Mark's screams. That was within one-tenth of a second.

Shirone thought, *Am I calm?*

But while you can imagine dividing one second into ten parts, actually experiencing 0.1 seconds ten times is impossible.

Therefore, there was only one method—keep splitting the time further.

One-hundredth of a second.

He reconstructed the formation of the Dragon's Maze in his mind.

The overall shape was a seven-pointed star with six branches.

One-thousandth of a second.

After retracing the maze's structure, he found an exit.

To escape, he would need to cast Teleportation at least nine times consecutively.

'No! It's impossible to take Mark with me!'

If there was no space for the two of them to escape, he had no choice but to find another route.

At that moment, the Dragon's Maze engulfed Shirone.

The male students turned away, while the female students screamed, imagining a gruesome outcome.

Serielle's scream was the loudest.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The deafening sound of destruction in the confined space sounded like the screams of Shirone and Mark themselves. And finally, the sound disappeared.

One ten-thousandth of a second.

Within that infinitesimal moment, which could barely be comprehended even through insight, Shirone analyzed all the patterns once again and found the exit.

The flash of his Teleportation burst out of the Dragon's Maze, and Shirone, gleaming with brilliant light, crossed the finish line and landed.

"Huff, huff."

Shirone set Mark down, took a few more steps, and then collapsed to his knees, unable to hold herself back.

No one made a sound. The students, wide-eyed with fear as if they had seen a ghost, stared at Shirone.

Ethella teleported to Siena, who had gone to seek out Thadd, and soon after, the mechanism's control turned off, accompanied by the echoing voice of the system.

Deactivating the mechanism of the Bridge of No Return.

Level Zero. Level Zero.

The speed of the moving bars slowed, and the twisted structures that had grown like vines began to revert to the flat, original form of the Bridge of No Return.

"What, what is this...?"

The students all felt the same thing.

"Is this really possible?"

"No way. It was Level 10. And he even passed through the Dragon's Maze."

As murmurs spread among the students, Shirone, who had been sitting on the ground, finally gathered his senses and looked around.

'What? Why are they all staring at me?'

He had gaps in his memory, but crossing the Bridge of No Return was a fact.

As reality began to settle in her mind, Shirone's face twisted into an expression of exhaustion.

“Phew, I thought I was really going to die.”

It was such an unremarkable comment for someone who had just made history, yet Serielle knew this was exactly the Shirone who had jumped from the cliff’s edge.

“Amy! Shirone did it! Your boyfriend did it!”

Serielle probably could have left out the “boyfriend” part, but seeing her tears of joy, Amy let it slide this time.

The students crowded around Shirone, offering their congratulations.

“Congrats! That was seriously amazing!”

“So, are you getting promoted to Class Five now? Haha, the Class Six students are going to be feeling pretty bitter about this!”

As Shirone received their congratulations, the teachers and Maria, who had gone to the control room, arrived via Teleportation.

Siena immediately checked on Shirone.

Though he was surrounded by students and clearly overwhelmed, it seemed he wasn’t seriously injured.

‘He passed the Dragon’s Maze? How on earth did he do it? Even graduating students train for that level countless times.’

As Siena shot Thadd a glare for making her miss such a historic moment, he shrugged in defense.

“As you know, or maybe you don’t, I did my best.”

Siena sighed and approached Alpheas.

There was no way, but if both Shirone and Mark had crossed together, it would be best to announce the result to avoid any disputes.

“Headmaster, we should announce the results...”

Startled, Alpheas quickly regained his composure and, with a kind smile, addressed the students.

“The successful candidate for early promotion is Arian Shirone. I hereby promote Shirone to Class Five. However, I am proud of all the students who participated in this exam. The courage you displayed today will be the driving force

that propels Alpheas Magic Academy forward. I hope you all continue to strive for great success.”

Applause spread from the seniors to the underclassmen.

No one had any complaints about Shirone’s early promotion anymore, and even Mark, who had directly competed against him, had no choice but to accept it.

‘So geniuses really do exist.’

The memory of Shirone teleporting through the Dragon’s Maze at incredible speed was still vividly etched in his mind. It wasn’t a matter of mere talent.

In impossible situations, some people despair and retreat, while there are others who think only of overcoming them.

‘There’s no room for excuses now.’

Mark, his legs shaking, walked over to Shirone.

Most of the students had suspected some kind of deal was involved in this test, but Mark, already prepared for the outcome, admitted defeat in front of everyone.

“Senior, I lost. It was a great match, and I learned a lot! I look forward to working with you from now on!”

Since Alpheas had given his approval, he would now have to call Shirone his senior.

“Yeah, you worked hard today. I’ll keep doing my best too.”

Amy, watching with satisfaction, turned to Serielle and said, “Let’s head down now.”

“Huh? Why are we leaving already? On a day like this, shouldn’t you be with your boyfriend?”

“There’s no time for that. Since Shirone succeeded, now it’s my turn. I need to prepare for my own promotion exam.”

“Are you really okay with leaving like this?”

Amy, too, found it hard to leave, but felt she needed to do something to calm her excitement.

“Hey, Amy.”

When Shirone called her, Amy flinched and turned around. As the two faced each other, the students around them murmured in disbelief.

“Did he just call her by name?”

"Of course. They're dating, aren't they?"

"But still, it's senior Amy..."

Amy, who had never once lost her first-place standing, was seen by her juniors as more than just a senior. Many thought she could already perform well enough to join the graduating class, so this situation was surprising.

Ignoring the reactions around her, Shirone smiled and held up two fingers toward Amy.

"Only two steps left."

"Haha..."

Amy's lips quivered slightly as she smiled. If she passed the graduation exam, the gap between her and Shirone would be only two steps.

"Let's go, Serielle."

"Huh? Oh, okay."

As Amy turned and walked away, Serielle quickly followed her down the mountain.

Other advanced class students, except for Class Seven, also began to disperse one by one. It was only then that Thadd approached Alpheas.

"Headmaster, I have something to report regarding Maria."

Thadd explained everything that had happened in the control room.

"I see... How could such a mistake have happened..."

Alpheas murmured with a sorrowful expression, and Maria approached, bowing deeply.

"I'm sorry. I made an unforgivable mistake. I will accept any punishment you deem necessary."

"Hmm, for now..."

At that moment, Mark interrupted.

"I have a confession to make. Everything that happened today was because of me."

The teachers turned their attention to Mark, who stood there with a crooked smile.

"What do you mean, it was because of you?"

“Well, this morning, I really got on Maria’s nerves. Honestly, if someone had said to me what I said to her, I’d have lost it too. So, I’ll take the punishment. I’m the one who provoked her.”

Siena interjected. “Even so, Maria’s actions were still wrong. And why are you bringing this up now? It’s something we might have never found out about.”

“I’m not a good guy, but I’m not such a coward that I’d cause trouble without being prepared to take responsibility for it. And the students all know what happened anyway. Keeping quiet about it would just be embarrassing. Besides, I was the one who came up with the plan to keep senior Shirone in check.”

Mark, who had always lived by the belief that winning was all that mattered, realized something after his encounter with Shirone.

‘Overwhelm with skill.’

Shirone’s single-minded focus on overcoming the obstacles in front of him and claiming victory, without any unnecessary thoughts, had shaken the very core of Mark’s beliefs.

“In any case, that’s how it is. I’ll take whatever punishment you give me, but please go easy on the others. Especially Maria...”

Mark glanced at Maria and added, “She must have been under a lot of stress. The kids have been ganging up on her every day. Who wouldn’t snap after all that?”

Alpheas, too, had been thinking deeply about Maria. While her grades weren’t exceptional, she had quietly trained harder than anyone else at the school.

Seeing her now, on the verge of being expelled for an irreversible mistake, reminded Alpheas of his younger self.

‘Master...’

Thadd, knowing Alpheas’s past, looked at him with sympathy. Alpheas had once been the shining light of the Milch family, famous for his magic of light. Though it was

now seen as outdated, back then, his brilliant ideas had even earned him the prestigious Gold Circle Award from the king.

However, that brilliance had also led young Alpheas into chaos. A single wrong decision had caused him to spend ten years lost in darkness. If not for that mistake, Alpheas might have become a legendary mage whose name was carved into history.

“I will refer both of you to the disciplinary committee. Maria is guilty of illegally operating the mechanism and disrupting the test, as well as causing unnecessary danger. However, since Mark was the one who provoked the situation, his punishment will be taken into account.”

As Maria and Mark bowed their heads, students from Class Seven began raising their hands one by one.

“Teacher, I bullied Maria too. Doesn’t that mean I share the responsibility?”

“I was part of the group that attacked senior Shirone.”

The fact that all of Class Seven raised their hands meant that this incident with Maria had stemmed from issues within the entire class.

While this was something that would have come to light eventually, their willingness to confess showed a sense of responsibility worthy of magicians.

“In that case, I will punish all of you. Return and await the verdict.”

“What will happen to Maria?”

“It will be reflected in the disciplinary committee’s decision. The entire class will be punished, but Maria will not bear the full burden of the blame.”

Although it wasn’t a definitive answer, coming from the headmaster, it carried significant weight.

Siena asked, “Isn’t that a dangerous statement? We don’t know what the final decision will be yet.”

“We are teachers. Our job is to guide students, not to judge them. Those kids are our students, whom we must teach

and nurture.”

Unable to hold back, Maria burst into tears. “Thank you. I’m so sorry.”

Thadd smiled as he watched.

‘You’re lucky, Maria.’

This situation was likely a miraculous opportunity in Maria’s life, something that might never come again.

Just like when Thadd had first met Alpheas.

‘The world may be ruled by luck... but if you give up, you won’t even get a chance at that luck.’

If Maria hadn’t truly loved magic, would she have been able to endure all those years in Class Seven?

Despite the world’s unfairness, Thadd believed that life was still worth living for this very reason—because if you endure and persist through your dreams, the opportunity will eventually come to everyone.

Chapter 39: Another Genius (1)

Shirone advanced to Class Five.

It was a stroke of luck that Siena, who knew the unique study method called the “Spine of Knowledge”, became her dedicated teacher.

Shirone’s class jumped up two levels at once, and although he struggled to keep up with the pace, he stuck to his original method until the end.

The advanced class had weekly tests and a final exam at the end of each month to determine the rankings for the month. In his first test, Shirone ranked last, 40th out of 40 students.

There were a total of 11 subjects, and his average score was a mere 32 points.

However, it was noteworthy that his scores across all subjects ranged evenly between 30 and 33 points.

In the second theory test, his average score rose to 34.

‘An average increase of 2 points might seem insignificant, but...’

His scores had increased across all subjects.

The third test showed a similar pattern, with his scores ranging between 36 and 39 points for each subject, reflecting an even steeper upward trend.

‘His entire performance is improving simultaneously.’

Looking at the steadily rising graph of Shirone’s scores, one could sense his determination.

‘It’s a relief. If he stayed at the bottom for too long, it could have led to a loss of confidence.’

His progress chart showed no signs of such anxiety, and he was steadily walking his own path.

‘The theory test is important since it’s one of the key factors in evaluating a mage’s overall ability.’

Teachers generally viewed a score of 60 or above as the minimum threshold for being able to use magic.

‘If his scores increase by 10 points each month, in three months, he’ll be able to handle basic magic. If that happens...’

In less than half a year, Shirone would be able to fully master the basics of magic.

Of course, humans aren’t machines, so aptitude varies based on personal traits, and the gap widens as one aims for higher scores.

However, looking at his progress chart now, there was a strange sense of optimism that maybe he could achieve it. How high could his scores go without neglecting any subject?

The answer to that would determine the extent of Shirone’s potential.

‘He’s also doing well socially.’

No student looked down on Shirone just because of his low grades.

By the time they reached Class Five, students’ primary concern wasn’t immediate rankings but preparing for the graduation class.

Countries around the world spared no expense in maintaining the highest level of magical systems. In such an environment, it was important for students to specialize in a major that distinguished them from other wizards.

As a result, students without a clear specialty yet admired Shirone, who was a specialist in photon magic.

‘I think photon magic suits me well.’

Above all, the field of photon magic relied more heavily on omnipotence than mere “knowledge”.

While the field of knowledge was also highly advanced, when it came to utilizing the properties of light, there were limits to what human intellect could achieve.

In fact, if Shirone hadn't been able to perceive the segmental nature of time through his insight, he wouldn't have been able to cross a bridge that would have otherwise been impossible.

For this reason, his classmates couldn't ignore Shirone, and it was common for juniors to greet him during integrated classes.

Ironically, the junior who was closest to Shirone was none other than Mark, who had returned after being disciplined.

"Senior, please sit here. I've saved a seat for you."

"Thanks."

Mark, the de facto leader of Class Seven, took pride in being able to be close to Shirone.

"Oh! You're here! Is there a seat for me as well?"

"Ah! Good day, Senior!"

Mark shot up and greeted Serielle.

Serielle was in the upper ranks of Class Four, making her a senior on a whole different level.

Seemingly unbothered, Serielle waved her hand and sat next to Shirone, immediately clinging to her.

"Our Shirone, you seem a little down lately. Well, it makes sense since your lover left, doesn't it?"

"Haha, it's not like that."

A week ago, Amy passed her promotion test and finally advanced to the graduation class.

According to Serielle, she passed it easily, but it was clear from her relentless training that she didn't take it lightly.

"You must be feeling lonelier than me, Senior. You and Amy were always together."

"True, but it's fine. I'm planning to join the graduation class soon myself."

"What? The graduation class?"

Serielle was more than qualified.

Class Four had many strong contenders, but she stood out for her talent in healing magic.

Moreover, since the graduation class focused entirely on specialized fields, her expertise in healing magic would give her many advantages.

"It's not like I'm just following a friend... but I was inspired by you, just like Amy. Originally, my dream was to live a laid-back life as a nurse, but I realized it would be a shame to end it like that."

Mark, listening to this renowned student's dream of becoming a nurse, made a face.

"If someone like you says that, what does that mean for me?"

"Haha, don't worry. It's not like I had a special talent that got me here. Anyone can reach Class Four if they work hard enough. Shirone's just an exceptional case."

Shirone quickly waved her hands.

"No, I'm actually lucky. That promotion test I took last time wasn't part of the regular curriculum."

"Don't be so modest. I guarantee you'll be in the graduation class soon too. Amy's been saying she won't let you become a classmate, but... well, just keep doing your best."

'I won't let you be a classmate, huh.'

It was just like Amy, and imagining her gritting her teeth in training made Shirone feel warm.

"By the way, has Amy decided on her major yet?"

"What? You don't know yet? I've thought this for a while, but you two really are such a boring couple."

"Well, that's how we are."

Shirone smiled awkwardly as Serielle propped her chin up, thinking.

"Hmm, Amy's specialty is fire magic, and she's particularly good with targeting form. From what I heard, she's aiming to become a sniper."

Most fire mages aim to be combat mages, but a sniper was quite a unique field.

"If she becomes a sniper, isn't that like becoming a soldier?" Serielle, understanding Shirone's feelings, smiled bitterly.

“It can’t be helped. Even I find the idea of Amy being a soldier a bit strange, but it’s normal to choose a job that fits your talent. And Amy is from the first-rank Carmis family. She’s probably expected to do something for the family’s honor.”

Shirone was concerned.

“But it’s dangerous. She might have to go to war and hurt people if necessary.”

“That’s true, but once a war breaks out, your major doesn’t matter. Anyone who’s a mage will be deployed to the battlefield, no exceptions. The magic school will become a training ground to produce reserve mages under the kingdom’s orders. At that point, there’s no such thing as graduation. You receive basic military training and get sent out.”

It was a bitter truth that was hard to swallow.

“That’s why this school exists for a special purpose. Even if a student dies during training, half the responsibility falls on them.”

“To put it bluntly, we’re just tools of the kingdom. The more talented people like Amy, the stronger the deterrent against war.”

“That’s true, but...”

Although Tormia was a powerful nation, constant peace wasn’t guaranteed, and being a soldier wasn’t a safe profession.

They might face war due to diplomatic tensions, and if a kingdom in their alliance asked for support, Amy would have no choice but to fight on the front lines.

Mark, who was more battle-driven, wasn’t too concerned about that and focused on another aspect.

“If Amy becomes an officer, she’ll be super popular in the army. Honestly, with her cute looks, she doesn’t really match the soldier image.”

“Hahaha! That’s because you don’t know Amy’s personality well. I actually think she’ll fit in perfectly. And Shirone, don’t

worry too much. Mages don't fight in close combat on the battlefield, and snipers focus more on espionage. If you think about it, doesn't it sound cool? Beautiful spy Amy."

"Haha, yeah, that does sound pretty cool."

Shirone decided to stop worrying for now.

While he was still concerned, Amy had never missed being the top student. Surely, she knew what she was doing.

Worrying too much about her decision would only undermine Amy's pride.

As the theory lesson ended and the practical training session for the Spirit Zone began, the students stood up from their seats.

The practice sessions were designed for students of the same class to train together, so Shirone parted ways with Mark and Serielle and headed to join the students of Class Five.

Class Five had the most students of Shirone's age in the advanced division, and he was right at the average age cutoff.

Though they burned with rivalry during tests, the class was otherwise filled with laughter and banter, with competition forgotten.

Thanks to that, Shirone felt less self-conscious in Class Five compared to other classes when practicing Spirit Zone.

His peers were easy to talk to when needed, and whenever things got a little dull, he could easily find someone to chat with.

"Shirone, you're on fire today as usual. Want to practice together?"

Nade, a classmate from Class Five, spoke to her.

With light green hair and a mischievous face, his personality was just as cheerful, and he had a knack for making sure no one in the group felt left out.

His performance in magic mirrored his personality—there weren't any subjects he excelled or failed in particularly.

The only unusual thing about him was his ability to use electrical magic, which was quite rare among the different branches of magic.

‘Electricity, huh... It’s similar to light but also a different field.’

Magic was categorized differently depending on whether it relied more on omnipotence or omniscience.

For example, light magic relied more on omnipotence, while ice magic leaned towards omniscience.

In the case of electrical magic, it required a balanced 50-50 split between omnipotence and omniscience, making it a more complex field.

‘Maybe his personality reflects this balance,’ Shirone thought at first, but after joining Class Five and hearing more, he realized there was more to it.

Nade’s dream wasn’t to be a mage, but a magical engineer.

Having dealt with electricity since childhood, his understanding of both omnipotence and omniscience naturally grew, which made it easier for him to use electrical magic when he entered magic school.

“Alright, let’s practice together. So, for the Four Patterns Technique—”

“By the way, what’s Amy like in person? Is she really girly?”

As soon as Shirone agreed, Nade immediately set aside practice and jumped into conversation.

‘I had a feeling this would happen.’

Nade had a talent for drawing people in, and even the smallest topic could make students flock to him.

Proving this, two students from Class Five approached while arguing.

“Ugh! That’s not it! Why can’t you understand what I’m saying?”

“That’s what I’m saying! What’s important isn’t that! I’ve thought this for a while, but you’ve got a weird personality.”

Seeing the two approach, pointing fingers at each other, Shirone stared blankly.

Judging by their raised voices, they seemed to be in a heated discussion about magic.

“Oh! Perfect! Shironade, listen to this.”

Students in Class Five called Shirone and Nade “Shironade” when they were together, and as soon as they arrived, they eagerly started explaining their sides.

Chapter 40: Another Genius (2)

“Which one do you guys prefer, Teacher Ethella or Teacher Siena? Oh wait, Shirone, you probably don’t care since you’ve got Senior Amy. What about you, Nade?”

“Hmm. If I had to choose, I’d say Teacher Ethella. Although, Teacher Siena isn’t bad either.”

“Oh! A comrade! Ethella is the best, for sure. She has such a youthful face and an amazing figure. Especially her... well, you know.”

Ethella was certainly attractive. Despite the large glasses that made her look a bit aloof and her long hair tied up lazily, she was a beauty. Her voluptuous figure, seemingly grown on a child’s face, made her the number one favorite among the students.

The boys who were enthusiastically chatting suddenly went quiet and drifted away. Shirone, puzzled by their behavior, stopped his Spirit Zone training and looked around.

A strange-looking boy was approaching—Mercodine Iruki, the eccentric of Class Five. His blunt nature caused his classmates to avoid him, but not Nade, the friend of all.

“Yo, Iruki. Don’t tell me you came to practice.”

“Nope. Just patrolling the grounds. What were you guys talking about that seemed so interesting?”

“Just the usual. Comparing the teachers, you know.”

Nade suddenly remembered Shirone and turned to him.

“Oh right, Shirone! This is probably your first time talking to him. This guy’s Iruki. The outcast of Class Five.”

Even though it had been nearly a month since they were promoted to Class Five, this was Shirone’s first encounter

with Iruki. Not because he avoided him, but because he skipped more classes than he attended.

“Oh! Arian Shirone, the genius everyone’s watching. I’m honored. I should probably write this down in my journal.”

Shirone immediately understood why people distanced themselves from him. His gaze, analyzing him like a specimen, and his twisted tone were enough to make anyone uncomfortable.

“Hello, I’m Shirone. Nice to meet you.”

“Heh, what’s a genius asking favors for? I’ve been watching you since Class Seven—whether it was when you mastered the deviation form or when you crossed the Bridge of No Return.”

“Huh? You’ve been watching me?”

In that moment, Shirone realized something. That thin, metallic voice... it was him. The one who had offered advice when the Spirit Zone trembled under the criticism of other students.

“Wait, was it you who gave me advice back then?”

“I just said something because it was frustrating to see you getting pushed around by kids.”

Iruki waved dismissively, but Shirone was genuinely grateful. Without his advice, it would’ve been much harder to overcome her slump.

“Thank you. It really helped.”

Iruki stared at him.

“You’re really boring, aren’t you?”

“Huh? I’m boring?”

It was the first time he had ever heard that, and it bothered him. Sensing the awkward atmosphere, Nade quickly intervened.

“Hey, hey! Iruki, that’s no way to talk to someone who’s thanking you.”

Iruki shrugged and turned away.

“Was it? I meant it as a compliment. Anyway, do your best. But don’t think it’ll be easy. Class Five is full of tough cases.

Heh.”

As Iruki walked away, Nade called after him.

“Hey, where are you going? Come practice with us.”

“Too much effort. I’m going to take a nap.”

Shirone was left speechless. Skipping practice to sleep?

Class Five was supposed to be one of the top advanced classes. How had someone like him even made it here?

“He’s... kind of strange, isn’t he?”

“Sorry about that, Shirone. He’s not that bad once you get to know him.”

“But still...”

“Haha! I know what you’re thinking. But if we dig too deep, it’s just going to exhaust us. That guy’s a genius too, though a different kind from you.”

“A genius? Iruki is a genius?”

“Ah, I guess you wouldn’t know since you just enrolled.”

Nade explained who Iruki really was. Despite his mediocre grades, no one in their class could deny his abilities.

Iruki was the classic case of a person with extreme, unbalanced talent. While he failed miserably in subjects that required emotional understanding, like literature and the arts, he excelled in anything that required logic.

Initially, the teachers were eager to nurture his talent, but his unpredictable and rebellious nature led most of them to give up on him. Still, when it came to subjects requiring mathematical thinking, he was said to even surpass the graduates.

Iruki’s specialty was computational physics—a field that only people with extraordinary brain functions could master, where they calculated phenomena occurring in extreme environments like temperatures above a billion degrees. In academia, people with this kind of ability were often said to have “Savant Syndrome”. It usually manifested in individuals with autism, but sometimes it occurred in neurotypical people as well.

The dominant theory was that it resulted from damage to a specific part of the brain during fetal development, which later healed in a way that opened up unique cognitive pathways.

While insight also utilized different cognitive circuits, Iruki's Savant Syndrome was more about mechanical calculation. For example, Iruki could calculate the exact date 40,000 years from today in under a minute. He could also recite the digits of pi for his entire life if he didn't sleep.

Shirone was stunned after hearing Nade's explanation. If that were true, it was indeed an incredible talent.

"Then why is someone like that still in Class Five? And how can he get zeroes? I mean, even by guessing, he should get a few answers right."

"Haha! That's the thing. A month ago, something happened during an exam..."

Nade recounted a story from one of Iruki's written tests. As expected, he aced the natural sciences section, but there was a problem with the literature exam.

The question was about a poem by the famous poet Gilberto, *Life is a Fallen Leaf*. It asked why the leaf was described as zigzagging as it fell in the final line of the poem. Most students answered that it symbolized the fear of death.

But Iruki's answer was this:

Due to the varying air resistance caused by different speeds of the fluid (in this case, gas) flowing over the surface of the leaf, the resultant force vector from the pressure causes it to move in the direction of the greater force.

Below is an equation using the standard model of a leaf.

What followed were incomprehensible and bizarre formulas.

The teachers who knew Iruki's personality just let it pass, but Adelia, the literature teacher, couldn't tolerate it.

As a mother of three, she stormed into the classroom, her plump body jiggling as she moved, and slammed the test paper down in front of Iruki, demanding an explanation.

"Iruki! What is this?"

"A test paper."

"Not that! Look at your answer! This is a literature exam, not a math test!"

"Isn't distinguishing between math and literature itself proof of the falseness of literature?"

Adelia's round face turned red like a roasted pig.

"What do you know to act so high and mighty? You're still a student. It's too early for you to behave like an expert!

There are deep and profound thoughts in this world that you can't grasp mathematically."

"Teacher, those don't exist. If some part of the world were illogical, how could we live without fear? I could turn into an orc at any moment."

"So, you're saying everything is logical? Even Gilberto's poetry?"

"Of course. That's why I wrote my answer."

Adelia huffed and puffed for a while, then pointed her finger at him and shouted.

"Then answer me this. A thousand innocent people are about to die. But you have the power to kill one innocent person and save everyone. What would you do?"

"I'd let the thousand die. The thousand lives are proof, and the one life is a hypothesis. It's a formula that can't be equated."

Adelia suppressed the rising anger in her gut with sheer willpower. If he was going to be like this, she had a plan.

"Is God real, yes or no? Answer me!"

"He could possibly not exist."

Adelia grew even more furious.

"Between your mom and dad, which one do you like more? You can only pick one!"

"Momdad."

"Get out."

Adelia's finger, pointing toward the door, was trembling.

“Get out, you brat! You don’t deserve to be in my class! Get out!”

Because of Adelia’s recommendation, a faculty meeting was held. In the end, the teachers concluded that Iruki’s answer was mocking the teaching authority, so all his scores in humanities subjects were reduced to zero.

“Wow! That’s insane.”

Hearing Iruki’s story, Shirone couldn’t believe he was the same 18-year-old student as her. Not only was his attitude toward teachers combative, but his ability to push through his own thoughts despite being a student showed incredible resolve.

“Haha! Exactly, that’s just how he is. He’s got such a personality. Really hard to befriend.”

“Now that I’ve heard the story, I understand why he called me boring. But why did he say that was a compliment?”

“Who knows? Maybe he saw something unusual in you. That’s why I introduced you two. I thought maybe you two would get along.”

Shirone found herself growing curious about Iruki. He wished he had talked to him more. As she looked around for him, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Oh? Nade, look over there.”

Iruki, with a drowsy expression, was heading toward the Image Zone. As he approached, the other students moved aside on their own. It didn’t seem like they were avoiding him out of dislike, but rather making way for him.

“Damn! What’s that guy up to now? Let’s go check it out.”

Shirone followed Nade, running toward the Image Zone.

Other students began gathering one by one as well.

“What’s he doing now? Is he going to lie down naked like last time?”

Shirone’s eyes widened at the comment. Taking off his clothes in front of girls?

Contrary to their fears, Iruki set up the Spirit Zone normally. A 15-meter diameter sphere, which was small by Class Five

standards.

But the problem wasn't the size. He was effortlessly manipulating one of the most difficult pattern types, the deviation form.

"Wow! It's been a while since Iruki's done something."

"Shouldn't we stop him? Didn't Ethella ban him from using the Image Zone?"

"Leave it. He won't listen even if we stop him."

The small sphere moved rapidly across a wide area. Iruki made eye contact with Shirone. When he snapped his fingers, a target appeared and began spinning rapidly. The students let out sighs and wiped their foreheads. Raising targets was prohibited unless permission was granted. But their concern quickly turned to awe as they watched his performance.

"Wow..."

Iruki's zone tracked the target with eerie precision. His movements were so fluid that it felt like he wasn't even present in his body. The sheer speed of the sphere cutting through the air created a whistling noise that echoed like the wind.

"Hey! Iruki! What are you doing!"

Ethella, who had been instructing Class Four, ran over in a panic, looking shocked. But Iruki, seemingly determined, didn't stop. The Spirit Zone swallowed the target, and small lights began bubbling at the center like foam.

"Atomic Bomb."

"That maniac!"

Just as the students turned to run, an explosion powerful enough to push them back erupted. The thunderous roar left Shirone feeling dizzy. All the students were knocked onto their butts.

Shirone looked ahead with a pale face. Iruki stood with his hands behind his back, staring at her.

"See you next time, Shirone."

Chapter 41: Another Genius (3)

You could understand what “see you next time” meant when Ethella grabbed Iruki by the ear and dragged him away.

“Iruki! I told you one more time, and you’d be disciplined!”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch! I controlled it so the device wouldn’t break. You know what happens if I really blow things up.”

“You’re not reflecting on anything! You’re grounded for a week! Don’t come to class!”

“Ahhh! That’s way too harsh!”

Iruki whined but never admitted he was wrong. Instead, he smiled at Shirone and Nade as he was dragged off.

“Sigh, he did it again. Sorry, Shirone. I’d better go.”

Nade left first, but Shirone was so captivated by his thoughts that he didn’t even realize it. The other students were abuzz with conversation.

“That guy is still amazing, right? It feels like the reaction time for his explosions has gotten faster. The blast force seems about the same, though.”

“Well, he has Savant Syndrome, so he must be calculating the reaction formula perfectly.”

Shirone chimed in.

“The reaction formula... does that refer to the formula that causes the explosion?”

“Yeah. I don’t know much about explosive magic either, but apparently, the strength of the explosion depends on how you calculate the reaction formula. It’s similar to the basic concept of flame magic, like Ignite.”

“Got it. With explosions that powerful, he probably doesn’t even need to learn flame magic.”

“Not really. The use cases are different. Flame magic activates instantly, while Iruki’s explosive power takes some time to build up. Reducing that reaction time is the key challenge for explosive mages.”

If Shirone’s specialty was instantaneous movement, then explosive magic suited Iruki’s superhuman calculation abilities perfectly.

One significant advantage of explosive magic was that it could cause a larger blast than the Spirit Zone. Magic only triggered the explosion; the explosion itself was the result. This made it an ideal magic for someone like Iruki, who used a dissipating Spirit Zone that shrank the farther it extended. ‘Mercodeine Iruki...’

His first impression was as intense as an explosion.

The first monthly evaluation at Class Five was held.

Shirone scored an average of 41 points. He was still in the lower rankings, but he had raised his scores by 10 points in all subjects over the past month.

After class, the students stretched and packed up their desks. Some headed to the school store to fill their hungry stomachs, but most formed groups and headed to their respective research societies.

Shirone, without a research society, was planning to stop by the library. While his average score in the 40s wasn’t satisfying, he felt good about how quickly he was adding new layers of knowledge.

“Hey, Shirone.”

A female student approached him. From the corner of the classroom, her friends watched with eager anticipation.

“Yeah? Do you have something to talk about?”

“We talked it over, and... would you like to join our research society? We’re studying Teleportation magic, and we think you’d really help boost our progress. It’s also closely related to Photonization Theory.”

Though Shirone had received invitations from various groups since joining Class Five, this was the first time he'd been approached by a research society where her specialty was genuinely needed.

'Hmm. Should I give it a try?'

The school assessed students on three main criteria: Practical exams, theoretical exams, and project evaluations. Project evaluations were assignments given during vacations, where students could submit papers on a free topic. However, most students opted to substitute their evaluations with a research society presentation, allowing them to finish the task during the school term.

Shirone had previously looked into joining a research society to save time, but he ultimately decided against it. He wasn't confident he could keep up with their level, even if they were inviting him based on his reputation.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I'm currently focused on a topic I've been studying, and I haven't made much progress yet. I think I need to focus on that for now."

"Oh, I see. Well, that's okay."

"Sorry for turning you down when you were kind enough to offer."

"No need to apologize! If you ever change your mind, just let me know."

The female student smiled kindly and returned to her friends. By the time students reached Class Five, emotional reactions were rare. Of course, there were still oddballs like Iruki.

After the group left, Shirone heard cheerful laughter from the hallway.

'Lucky them. It sounds like fun.'

A pang of loneliness struck Shirone. Though he had friends like Rian and Amy, Rian was in a different field, and Amy was busy with her final year of school.

Life was a lonely battlefield, but attending Class Five without comrades felt especially isolating.

“Hey, Shirone, are you heading out? Let’s walk together.”

Nade came up from behind and wrapped his arms around his neck. As usual, he was the last one to leave the classroom and never missed a chance to catch up.

The two walked to the dormitory, chatting about various topics, most of which were subjects Shirone enjoyed.

“The library is great, but research societies have some good books circulating, too. So why did you turn them down earlier? That’s a pretty decent research society.”

“I just feel like I won’t have enough time.”

“True, you should probably focus on boosting your theory scores first. I envy your motivation. I don’t even have that.” Shirone laughed.

“But you’ve got tons of friends. You could easily join any research society, right?”

“What are you talking about? Of course, I already have a research society. I’m even the president.”

“Huh? Really? I had no idea!”

Shirone had assumed Nade would hate being tied to any group, so he never bothered to ask. But he was actually the president?

“What kind of research society is it?”

“Haha! To be honest, it’s a bit embarrassing. It’s down to just two members, including me.”

“Wait, doesn’t that fall below the minimum requirement? You must have lost your funding.”

The school required research societies to have at least three members. One person is singular, two is plural, but three makes a group.

“Yeah, the seniors graduated last semester, and they passed the presidency to me. I’m pretty stressed about it.”

“Oh, I see.”

There weren’t many research societies led by final-year students. And if they’d already graduated, they must have been some of the best students at the school.

“Would it be okay if I checked it out sometime?”

“Really? I didn’t think you’d be interested in research societies.”

“I’ve always been interested, but I didn’t want to join and be a burden, so I’ve been careful about it.”

“Hahaha! Come on, research societies are just groups of kids studying and having fun together. You don’t need to feel any pressure.”

“Is that so?”

“To be honest, you can be a bit hard to approach sometimes. You know how most kids our age joke around, mess with each other, sometimes even—well, you know, fool around? There are jerks in Class Five, too, but most of them are decent people. You should try relaxing a bit more around them. Not saying you have to let them mess with you, though. Haha!”

It was something worth reflecting on. After all, with Rian and Amy, they were the ones who reached out to her first.

As Shirone started to think deeply about it again, Nade suddenly declared something with determination.

“Alright, I’ve made up my mind. This is a special exception—I’ll introduce you to my research society. But no laughing at us later if you find it lame, okay?”

“Really? That’d be great. Thanks!”

“There you go again! There’s no need to thank me. We’re friends, aren’t we? Come on, let’s go!”

Shirone followed Nade to a secluded area located in the northwest corner of the central park at the magic school. There, they came upon a complex structure formed by a colony of about 100 massive tetrahedrons. The material was iron, and the surface was engraved with magical symbols. Not only was the scale impressive, but the shape also defied common sense.

“Where are we?”, Shirone asked.

“This is the storage for magical equipment. Our research club is inside this storage. Haha!”

There were no designated laboratories for research clubs. Once a club was established and gathered enough members, the school would allocate an empty room for them. But a storage room? It was hard to understand why the school would assign a lab in such a remote area when it had so much space.

“This place has been our hideout, passed down by the senior members for generations. Our club actually has a pretty long history. They worked really hard to secure this spot.”

“But still, this is a bit...,” Shirone replied, glancing around. “Haha! Don’t worry. We have everything we need here. With the things in this storage, we can make almost anything. Oh, but you have to keep this a secret. I’m only telling you because I trust you.”

“Wow, really?”

Shirone had never imagined that Nade, who seemed like an ordinary student, would be using the school’s materials illegally. In a daze, he followed Nade into the building. The structure was as complicated inside as it was outside, with multiple entrances. Almost all of the nearly 100 connected buildings formed a labyrinthine network.

“Isn’t it cool? But you don’t need to pay much attention to the layout. We change the structure whenever we feel like it.”

“You change the building structure? Is that even possible?” Shirone asked, puzzled.

“This place is officially called the ‘Istas Magical Storage’. The building itself is a magical device. It’s faster to move the building to the entrance than to search for the item inside and pull it out. It’s designed with both storage and transport efficiency in mind. So on days with school practicals, the structure often changes. No matter what, no one can find us in here.”

As Nade said this, he laughed mischievously. A hideout that no one could find—just hearing about it made Shirone’s

heart start racing.

“Actually, the method for finding the way is simple, but since you’re not a member yet, I can’t tell you.”

Nade navigated the complicated paths without a moment’s hesitation. After passing through twenty buildings, they arrived at a place painted blue. Each building contained about ten small and large storage units, and Nade’s club occupied the largest one.

“Ta-da! We’re here. This is it.”

Shirone approached with a nervous expression. What kind of research required hiding in such a place?

When they reached the iron door, a crooked sign greeted her.

Supernatural and Psychic Science Research Club

“P-Psychic science?”

Of all the fields she had imagined, psychic science had never crossed her mind.

“What do you think? Our club is amazing, right? As the name suggests, we study supernatural phenomena—ghosts, spirits, the afterlife, aliens, hell, gods, stuff like that.”

Shirone’s initial surprise started to fade. Now that he thought about it, the topic did spark his curiosity.

“Gods, huh,” he mused.

Many people throughout history have invoked the name of a god, but no god has ever directly revealed itself to the world.

“Yeah, this could be interesting. It may not be entirely magical, but it seems worth researching.”

“Haha! Right? I knew you’d get it! Come in, I’ll give you a tour.”

Nade grabbed Shirone’s hand and pulled him inside.

Contrary to his expectations of a neat, philosophical space, what greeted him was a cloud of thick dust.

Shirone winced at the bombardment of dust. Just opening the door shouldn’t have caused this much to rise into the air.

The storage room was about 15 pyeong (around 50 square meters). One desk had a broken leg, and the table was cluttered with old bread crumbs and crumpled papers. It seemed their only modification to the space was the sign outside.

“It’s a bit messy, huh? You’ll get used to it. Come on in, come on in.”

Shirone couldn’t understand why she had to adjust to the mess rather than clean it, but that thought vanished when she saw what was ahead.

Hanging at the front of the room was a blackboard, like the sign, tilted at an odd angle, and covered in dizzying formulas. The boy furiously writing on it with chalk was none other than Iruki, who had been absent from class after receiving disciplinary action.

“Huh?” Shirone gasped in surprise as Iruki, finishing up his writing, turned to face him.

Chapter 42: Another Genius (4)

“Uh? What? Huh?”

Shirone was too shocked to respond, and Nade gave a sheepish smile as he explained.

“Haha! Sorry. The truth is, our research club has a bit of a bad reputation, so it’s problematic if we reveal our members.”

That explained why the eccentric Iruki was friends with Nade. However, the real issue was the nature of the research club. It was hard to understand how someone as rational and logical as Iruki could be involved with something so unscientific.

“Wait, Iruki is interested in this kind of stuff?”

“Actually, it’s the opposite. He approaches it from a critical perspective. Iruki believes there’s nothing in the world that can’t be explained logically. So, what could be a better target for him than this?”

Iruki, seemingly unaware of Shirone’s presence, kept mumbling to himself as he moved around. Then, after briefly glancing in Nade’s direction, he noticed Shirone and hurried over with a surprised look.

“Huh? Shirone!”

Before he could respond, Iruki stormed over and shook his shoulders excitedly.

“You’re just in time! I’ve come up with something incredible! So, what if we split the smallest particle? You think you can’t split something that small, right? Well, that’s the point! If you split it, it stops being matter. So, what is it? I’ve been calculating for three days, and guess what? There’s an

enormous amount of energy inside! What do you think? If it's possible, what do you think will happen? Quick, tell me!" Iruki spoke so fast that Shirone couldn't follow most of what he said. But seeing the fiery look in his eyes, he felt compelled to respond.

"Uh, I guess energy would be released?"

"Exactly! A massive explosion! We're talking about an explosion big enough to wipe out an entire city! Can you imagine it? You can, right? I know you can!"

Shirone was stunned. Wiping out a whole city? Whether it was possible or not, the idea was horrifying.

"But if that happens, people would die. The people in the city would all die."

"What do you mean? I'm talking about an explosion! The city would be gone!"

"Exactly! If there's an explosion, what happens to the people living there?"

"Huh? The people living there?"

Iruki tilted his head as if he didn't understand the question. Shirone finally realized and asked again.

"Wait, have you never thought about that?"

"Of course not. The important thing is how much explosive power we can produce. Do I really need to think about stuff like that?"

Shirone was horrified. He might have understood if he had said he didn't care about people dying. But Iruki genuinely hadn't even considered it.

"How can you not think about that? A mage should always consider the consequences of their magic!"

"You're speaking nonsense, Shirone. That's the job of anthropologists. A genius' duty is to push the limits of what they can do."

"If being a genius means you inevitably hurt people, then I'd rather be a fool."

"A small number of geniuses support the majority of fools. History has proven that, and that's the reality we live in."

Shirone, I can't stand listening to idealistic nonsense."

"No, your logic reeks of defeatism. Ideals can absolutely be achieved!"

"Ideals are called ideals because they can't be reached."

As Shirone and Iruki bickered like enemies, Nade awkwardly smiled and intervened.

"Okay, okay! Let's stop this. Debate is fine, but fighting isn't. Why don't we sit down and calmly discuss this topic?"

"No. There's nothing more to say. Nade, I'm leaving!"

Shirone spun on his heel and stormed out of the research club. Nade hurried after her, shouting.

"Shirone! Wait! How are you going to find your way out on your own?"

"Leave me alone. The structure hasn't changed, has it? I remember the way I came in. If I can't even do that, I'd really be an idiot."

By the time Nade stepped outside, Shirone was already gone. Returning to the room, Nade frowned and spoke.

"Why did you have to provoke him like that? You could've explained things in a way that made sense."

"I don't know. Maybe because we're rivals. One of us has to fall."

Hearing Iruki use the word "rival" was rare. His arrogance played a part, but more than that, he had never cared much about competition.

Neither women, wealth, nor fame interested him. His sole obsession was with equations.

"Shirone, your rival? Are you serious?"

Iruki sat down on the sofa. A cloud of dust puffed into the air as his body sank into the cushions.

"You saw it too, didn't you? The Teleportation test. The impossible gap he crossed."

"Yeah, I saw it. That's how he ended up in the same grade as us, right?"

"For someone learning Teleportation for the first time to escape the Dragon's Maze, how fast do you think his mind

had to be?"

Iruki tapped his head as he spoke.

"My calculations show that the unit of time Shirone was able to split in that instant was at least one ten-thousandth of a second."

"One ten-thousandth of a second..."

The thought of the gap represented by that number made Nade's head spin.

Iruki chuckled, letting out a metallic-sounding laugh.

"It's the wonder of insight. It's faster than effort and more precise than knowledge. No amount of conscious calculation can match the speed of insight. But Nade..."

A manic gleam filled Iruki's eyes.

"What if it were me?"

"..."

Nade couldn't help but shudder as he imagined the inevitable clash between Shirone's insight and Iruki's calculation abilities. Which one would be faster? The thought sent chills down his spine.

Infinite (1)

Shirone, having been summoned by Siena, went to the teacher's office. After finishing her book, Siena led Shirone to the teachers' lounge. Offering Shirone some tea, she spoke.

"Here, since you treated me last time, it's my turn to treat you."

"Haha! Thank you."

Shirone had grown considerably more confident since moving up to Class Five. Recently, it was said that he had even started making jokes with his classmates.

"So, why did you call for me?"

"I looked at your report card. You're continuing to make progress. I'm especially pleased to see that your highest score is in chemistry, the subject I teach."

"Hehe, but it's only a one-point difference."

Siena hadn't expected Shirone to maintain her upward trend for so long. With an average score in the mid-45s and a variation of no more than 2 points between subjects, it meant that Shirone could continue improving steadily.

"At this rate, you'll settle into the upper-middle ranks by next month. The school will start paying attention to your study methods."

"Well, I didn't intend to get noticed."

"Of course. So, the reason I called you today is to make a suggestion."

"A suggestion?"

"You know there's a practical exam every two months, right? This month, it's a targeting test. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes, I saw Amy take it when she was in Class Four. It's a test where you hit targets within a time limit. Amy was particularly fast since her specialty is targeting. It was really impressive."

Siena smiled, seeing Shirone's eyes sparkle.

"Yes, Amy seems to be doing well in the graduate class. You must miss her."

Because the upper and graduate classes had different curriculums, it was hard for Shirone and Amy to meet. While they could date on weekends, they weren't actually dating, and even then, finding time was difficult.

"As long as I know she's doing well, that's enough. As her friend, I should cheer her on."

Few couples were as wholesome as Shirone and Amy. If they continued this way, the school might even encourage such relationships.

"Good. Now, to get to the point. The reason I called you today is about the practical exam. Besides Teleportation, do you have any other spells you've learned?"

"No. You can see from my grades that I haven't reached the standard yet... Ah! That's right!"

Shirone suddenly realized. To take the practical exam, he needed to be able to use an active spell. It didn't have to be an attack spell, but the only magic Shirone had learned, Teleportation, was a passive spell with a sustained effect. On the other hand, active magic spells were temporary and varied, including Fire, Wind Cutter, Healing, Ice Sword, Lightning Bolt, Atomic Bomb, and many others. He needed at least one spell that could hit a target. Shirone felt the pressure mounting.

"What should I do? I've been so focused on studying that I didn't even think about it."

"Don't worry. You've already mastered the Rainbow Drop, so you should be able to handle a simple active spell."

"But my theoretical grade is only 45 points on average. You said it would be hard to activate a spell unless my score was at least 60."

"That's true. But there's one subject where you scored nearly 100 points."

Of all the theory exams he had taken, Shirone had never scored over 50 points. But he soon realized what Siena was referring to. There was indeed one subject where he had done well.

"Ah! The Photonization Theory!"

"Exactly. We overlooked it in the practical evaluations because it's a theory, but you've studied the Photonization Theory enough to apply it to active magic."

"That's right! Thank you, teacher!"

"As your advisor, it's my job to help. No need to thank me. If you ever have any problems, feel free to come talk to me."

"Okay. So, what active magic can I develop from the Photonization Theory?"

Siena smiled knowingly, as if she had expected the question.

"Have you ever heard of Photon Output?"

"I've read about it in books. It's where you release photons, right?"

It was a phenomenon called Photon Output. However, because it lacked physical force, releasing it didn't accomplish much. It could be used to illuminate a path if one were lost in the mountains, but casting a light spell would be much easier. While the Photonization Theory was hailed as a great discovery, its utility varied greatly between active and passive uses.

Still, the leading scholars of the Ivory Tower, who guided the advancement of magic, believed that Photon Output was the future of magic. Nothing traveled faster than light.

Moreover, the property of direct transmission could potentially revolutionize the field of information magic.

Using these cutting-edge perspectives, Siena sought to persuade Shirone.

"Photon Output has a bright future. By the time you graduate, some breakthroughs might have been made. It wouldn't hurt to start learning it early."

"Yes, I'll give it a try."

Without hesitation, Shirone agreed.

After all, he needed an active spell for the practical exam, and Photon Output was the only one he could learn quickly.

After finishing the conversation, Shirone headed to the training ground. With the exam fast approaching, he didn't have much time to practice.

Shirone held out his hand and focused his mind. Magic occurred in the Spirit Zone, so physical movements weren't necessary, but performing an action to reinforce his consciousness could help increase his focus. This technique was called a "Magical Action" by mages.

Despite activating the photonization state, no emission occurred. Since Teleportation was a defensive magic, it was easier for Shirone, but Photon Output was specialized for offensive magic.

'This requires a much higher level of focus than Teleportation.'

After dozens of failed attempts, Shirone slumped to the ground. While passive magic depended on maintaining mental strength, active magic required an instantaneous mental concentration.

It wasn't that the Spirit Zone diminished, but rather that it felt as if an immense pressure was being applied to extract the magic. However, the Spirit Zone's durability was so strong that it was difficult to get a handle on it.

'This is why personal affinity is so important.'

Ethella had once mentioned that there was a technique to strengthen the Spirit Zone, but at the time, Shirone had just enrolled and hadn't yet received detailed instruction.

'The Spirit Zone is an extremely sensitive mental state. A limit to focus, but how do you strengthen it further?'

With more questions than answers, Shirone trudged back to his dorm.

Chapter 43: Infinite (2)

Shirone headed to the integrated training grounds early in the morning. From today onward, the lessons would be focused on preparing for the upcoming tests, creating a more tense atmosphere than usual.

The test subjects varied by class. In Class Five, where Shirone belonged, the test was called the “Speed Gun”, a targeting exam.

“Ugh! We’re going to be stuck doing Speed Gun drills non-stop. It’s my weakest subject. The kids specialized in targeting are so lucky. They have such an advantage”

“Not necessarily. Targeting form are only good when facing a small, elite group. But in the practical exam, the targets come at you in swarms. It might be better to switch to an offensive type and just blast everything that comes your way.”

“You’ll get tired out too quickly that way. It’s either offense or targeting. No one’s going to use deviate form of magic. How could anyone keep up with all those targets?”

“Speaking of, what do you think Iruki will do? Maybe he’ll use deviation form again?”

“Haha! No way, unless he’s a fool. I’m curious about Shirone though. He’s great in real combat. But since he’s specialized in defense, I’m interested to see what she’ll choose.”

In their conversations, Iruki and Shirone’s names came up frequently. While there were students with higher grades, there was an overwhelming expectation that these two would do something impressive in critical moments.

But Shirone felt like crying. Far from being strong in real combat, he hadn’t even succeeded in Photon Output yet. If he couldn’t activate any active magic, his practical exam would be an automatic zero.

‘Ugh! What am I going to do? I’m seriously worried.’

As Shirone was lost in thought, the sound of a dog barking echoed from the outskirts of the training grounds. The girls were the first to take notice, and the boys rushed over.

“What is that? How did it get in here?”

“It must be a wild dog from the mountains. But why is it barking like that?”

As more kids gathered, the dog grew more defensive, baring its teeth and growling.

People usually expect dogs to wag their tails when they see humans. But once a dog shows aggression, it’s hard not to feel uneasy, no matter how much it looks like a typical dog.

“Hey! Get out of here! What a bad luck!”

The students from Class Seven started throwing stones at the dog. Even though some upper-class students were watching, no one intervened. They thought the dog was no different from a wild animal, given how it disliked humans. But Shirone saw things differently. After listening to the dog barking for a while, he seemed to realize something and ran over.

“Wait! Don’t throw stones!”

Not long ago, he had been a classmate of the students in Class Seven, but now he was officially their senior, so they stopped, looking a bit nervous. The leader of Class Seven, Mark, calmed the crowd.

“Hey, hey! Knock it off! Senior Shirone said to stop!”

Shirone approached to take a closer look, and Mark, startled, followed him in.

“Senior, that’s dangerous! It’s a wild dog!”

“Even if it grew up in the wild, a dog won’t bite a person. It’s more likely to run away.”

“But it’s barking like that!”

“I think... it’s because of something else...”

Shirone fearlessly moved closer. The dog growled with a menacing low tone but didn’t attack.

Shirone stared directly into the dog's eyes and guided it toward the forest. Just as he expected, a puppy lay in the grass, whining, its leg injured.

"Oh, it hurt its leg. Poor thing."

"Huh? You're right! Guys, there's a puppy over here!"

"Don't call everyone yet. Even dogs can become unpredictable when their pups are in danger."

"Oh, right. Hey! Don't come over here!"

"Instead, can you find someone who can cast healing magic? It'd be great if Senior Serielle were here, but anyone from Class Five or below would do."

"Maria can do it. We don't need to look far."

Maria had been attending the academy since she was young and knew a variety of spells. Plus, ever since she'd met Thadd, she'd become more relaxed and easily fit in with her classmates, so when Mark called her, she quickly came over.

"Oh my, poor thing! How did this happen?"

"It must've gotten caught up in a territory fight and been bitten. Can you heal it?"

"Yes, Senior. This is easy."

As Maria cast her healing magic, the puppy's wound began to close. Regaining its health, the puppy soon started bouncing around the grass as if nothing had happened. The mother dog finally stopped barking and took her puppy back into the mountains.

Saving a life was always a heartwarming experience. Even the students who had thrown stones felt touched, watching the forest in silence for a long time.

"That was amazing, Senior! How did you know there was a puppy?"

"Hmm? Haha! I used to spend a lot of time in the mountains."

Shirone recalled a memory from when he went hunting with his father around the age of eleven.

That day, they were lucky enough to spot a red bear, a highly prized catch, caught in a snare. Since a red bear could easily snap a rope with its strength, Vincent quickly readied his bow.

Shirone watched anxiously, knowing that if they caught the bear, they wouldn't have to worry about food for a while.

But the arrow never flew. Curious, he turned to see that Vincent had lowered his bow and was preparing to leave.

"Ah, sometimes being too lucky can be a bad thing. Let's head back, Shirone."

"Huh? Why aren't we catching it? Mom would be so happy."

Vincent squatted down and pointed to something beside the trapped bear.

"Look over there, Shirone."

Shirone looked closely. Next to the mother bear was a baby bear, whining and trembling.

"No matter how great a hunter you are, you don't kill when there are cubs around. Animals love their children just like humans do."

"But we'll go home empty-handed. That's such a valuable catch."

Vincent gently stroked Shirone's head with warm eyes.

"Just like that bear has her cub, I have you. As a parent, how could I pretend not to see that? Fighting for survival is the same for both humans and animals. But you mustn't do it in front of their children. That's an unspoken rule for all living beings."

That day, Shirone felt his father's deep love. Perhaps

Vincent wasn't saving the bear; he was protecting his own child. Shirone was comforted by the certainty that his father would always protect him.

The students were impressed by the story Shirone shared.

Although they didn't know it was about Shirone's father, the emotional impact of the tale resonated deeply with them.

"I see. Shirone is really amazing."

"Yeah, Shirone is so kind."

The classmates began to see Shirone in a different light. They had thought he was rigid and only knowledgeable about magic, but discovering that he had such a warm heart was an unexpected charm.

“That’s a foolish theory. That’s not why hunters spare the beasts.”

The comment that poured cold water on the warm atmosphere made the kids glare. Iruki was standing with his arms crossed, looking at Shirone.

“The reason they don’t kill a beast with cubs is so that those cubs don’t grow up to be aggressive towards humans. In biology, we call this imprinting. Once they recognize humans as their enemies, their offspring will inherit that nature. It makes hunting difficult. But if they were to eliminate the cubs, the species would die out. It’s a wisdom of hunters who can only hunt in their territory.”

Shirone felt a surge of emotion. Of course, Iruki didn’t know what he was saying, but his statement was an insult to the memory of her father.

“How can you say that? Sure, there might be hunters like that. But most hunters release the beasts out of pity.”

“Feelings and emotions are just ways to package things. I’m speaking about reality. I’m not going to deceive people with foolish idealism like you.”

“What?! Have you finished talking?”

Shirone stood up abruptly and glared at Iruki. It was the second round of the argument that had occurred in the Supernatural and Psychic Science Research Society.

The students were taken aback. Shirone wasn’t the type to fight with anyone, and Iruki didn’t socialize with anyone either. The tension skyrocketed when these two clashed.

“What’s going on? Did something happen between those two? It seems like they’ve been fighting for a long time.”

“They’re probably keeping each other in check. After all, both of them are candidates for the next promotion.”

Shirone narrowed his eyes and glared. Meanwhile, Iruki seemed uninterested in fighting and looked around, distracted.

“Hey! Why are you two acting like that again? You were quiet for a while. The teacher is coming, so let’s head back for now.”

Thanks to Nade’s attempt to mediate, it didn’t escalate into a major fight, but Shirone couldn’t help but feel unpleasant. He didn’t understand Iruki’s way of thinking. It bothered him in every aspect, from researching equations that could blow up a city to his attitude toward the lives of beasts.

‘Ugh, I shouldn’t engage with him anymore.’

Class began, and Ethella climbed up the mountain. The students stared in awe at her different appearance.

Was it because it was the practical evaluation period? She was wearing training clothes that were short-sleeved and revealed her thighs, making it easy to move.

What shocked them the most was that she wasn’t wearing glasses.

The boys were speechless at the sight of the beautiful woman standing before them. Could a single pair of glasses change a person’s impression this much?

“You all know that there’s special training starting today, right? Due to the circumstances of the practice ground, the Speed Gun test for Class Five will be conducted first. From tomorrow onwards, the time slots will be divided by class, so please keep that in mind. Now, we will proceed after observing a demonstration by the teaching assistant. Samuel, this way.”

A tall, handsome young man with blonde hair walked forward. He looked to be in his early twenties and, unusually for a man, had his hair long, reaching his waist.

“This teaching assistant here is Samuel, who is preparing to graduate from the graduating class. His major is incantation magic, and he’s come today to give a special magic

demonstration. Since it's related to the Spirit Zone enhancement training, please pay attention."

Wow!

The female students greeted Samuel enthusiastically. After only seeing the boys in the integrated classes, they couldn't hide their excitement at the appearance of such a handsome guy.

"Nice to meet you. It feels like just yesterday I was attending classes in the advanced class, but time has flown by so quickly. Though my skills are not impressive, I hope to contribute to your education with my efforts."

Shirone watched Samuel with interest.

This was an opportunity to see what kind of skills the rival competing with Amy in the graduating class had. He was especially curious about the unfamiliar major of incantation magic.

Once Samuel entered the Image Zone, he unfolded the Spirit Zone. Just that alone made the students gasp in amazement. A sphere with a diameter of 42 meters, similar in size to Shirone's, surrounded him.

"Incantation magic enhances magical power through the power of language. Now, let me demonstrate a tornado without using an incantation. Tornado."

As Samuel raised his hands, a powerful whirlwind swept through. While there were students in the advanced class who could also summon a tornado, he executed it as if handling basic magic.

"Remember the power from earlier. This time, I will enhance the tornado with incantation magic. As the name suggests, it utilizes the power of language. By savoring the intention contained in the language, the mage's mental strength increases."

Samuel cleared his throat and recited an eight-line poem.

"O land of ecstasy, I beseech your strength to caress my hand. The heavens look down, and the history of the ages is

contained in the moment. When the power of the void dwells in my hands..."

Before the first line was even finished, the children's expressions turned dull. They felt boredom creeping in as he recited a strange poem that was vague in meaning. They could hear someone yawning from somewhere, but Samuel finished the poem without seeming bothered and raised his hands again to cast magic.

"Tornado."

Whoosh!

With a tremendous roar, a massive whirlwind soared into the sky, leaving the kids frozen as they were hit by the powerful winds that felt like they could take their breath away. The wind was so strong that Samuel's figure shimmered like a mirage.

Samuel smiled and said, "This is the power of incantation. Language contains the will of the mage. By savoring that will, the magic is enhanced. Speak, and reflect. This is the basic system of incantation magic. Now, let's begin in earnest."

Chapter 44: Infinite (3)

The students looked bewildered. They could already feel the power of the incantation magic from the demonstration they had just witnessed. But now, Samuel was saying that the real part was only about to begin.

Samuel began reciting the same poem again. As the speed of his words increased, the students became more intrigued. "O land of ecstasy, I beseech your strength to caress my hand. The heavens look down, and the history of the ages is contained in the moment."

But this was only the beginning.

His lips started to blur, and soon his speech sped up to a point where it was impossible to understand the syllables. The sanctuary of the sky exists in the heart, and the will of the mage is embedded in the world. I will sing songs of praise and adoration. Only pale lightning can kindle the fire, and the hot wind will call forth a storm.

Samuel clenched his lungs and furrowed his brow. The charming young man calmly reciting verses was gone, replaced by a fierce incantation mage.

The speed of his incantations reached an extreme.

Oh spirit embedded in the mind, call out our name. The mage does not fear the power of the lion. Like the sea swallowing the sun, the earth swallowing the sea, and the wind swallowing the earth, eternal winds reside in our hands, forming infinite wisdom.

As the sounds rushed forward, the tones began to crack, releasing high-pitched frequencies. The students covered their ears in unison, feeling as though they were hearing the cries of dozens of dolphins.

By now, the incantations had transcended language and become pure sound waves. Samuel's lips remained open,

unmoving, while only his tongue vibrated at an incredible speed.

Shirone was stunned. He was speaking more than 20 times faster than a normal pace. What initially took over two minutes to recite, Samuel finished in just six seconds. He then cast Tornado again. With a loud bang, a whirlwind cloaked in dust shot up into the air.

When the dust cleared, Samuel stood there, smiling calmly. The piercing sound had vanished, but the students' ears were still ringing.

"This is what we call supersonic incantation, a fundamental technique for incantation mages. It's indispensable in real combat. Of course, speed alone isn't enough. While it may have sounded like noise to you, I was fully reflecting on the meaning of every verse. The power of the tornado should be proof enough of that."

The students were speechless in astonishment. They hadn't expected the power of incantations to be so immense. The final tornado was nearly ten times stronger than the initial one.

'So, this is the level of a graduate student?'

Shirone broke into a cold sweat. Of course, Samuel had been called as an assistant by Teacher Ethella, meaning he was likely one of the top students even among graduates. Still, he was just a student. And knowing that Amy was competing with people like him made Shirone even more determined to enter the graduate class.

Other students seemed equally inspired, their faces flushed with excitement. This was clearly why Ethella had brought a senior student to demonstrate.

"Good work, Samuel. I'm sure the students learned a lot from what you showed them. Thank you for taking on such a difficult request."

Samuel bowed his head seriously, with no trace of any romantic notions between men and women.

"Not at all. Just call on me anytime."

Shirone was reminded of the caliber of the people he was learning from. Even Samuel, when he graduated, would only be an unofficial 10th-class mage. But their current teacher was a 6th-class official mage recognized by the state.

‘Just how strong is our teacher?’

It seemed the other students had realized this as well, as they maintained a respectful posture even after Samuel left.

“Now, everyone, did you enjoy the demonstration of incantation magic?”

“Yes!”

The students responded more loudly than usual, and Ethella nodded in satisfaction.

“The reason I showed you incantation magic in advance is that it’s closely related to the enhancement of the Spirit Zone, which you’ll be learning today. So now, can anyone answer this question: what’s the best way to strengthen your thoughts?”

The students answered in unison.

“By speaking!”

“That’s right. It’s through words, because thoughts are expressed through language. Can anyone rephrase that?”

The students from Class Four, who had been taking lessons from Ethella for a while, responded.

“It means you can see your thoughts.”

“Exactly! Now, everyone, try to think of something—anything. You should be able to visualize that thought.”

The students nodded, understanding what she meant.

“Why is it important to be able to see your thoughts?”

“Because it allows you to reflect on them. Incantation mages absorb the language they speak to enhance their thoughts.”

Ethella raised her index finger to emphasize her next point.

“The basic structure of incantations is simple: speak, then reflect. Speak, then reflect. By repeating this process, you amplify the meaning and strengthen your magic.”

“Teacher, does that mean we’ll be learning incantation magic too?”

A question came from Class Seven, and Ethella smiled.

“Do you want to learn incantation magic?”

“Yes, that guy earlier was so cool!”

“I see. It’s important to find something that suits you. But unfortunately, incantation magic is a specialized field of study, so it won’t be covered in the advanced class.”

“But then how do we strengthen the Spirit Zone? Isn’t it done with incantations?”

“That’s a very good question. Now we’re getting to the point. Incantations are used to enhance specific types of magic. There are countless spells in the world, each with its own language. But the Spirit Zone is a pure mental exercise, so you don’t need to learn incantations or supersonic techniques. So, what’s the method for enhancing the Spirit Zone?”

Ethella moved up to the Image Zone and continued her explanation.

“It’s through a unique concentration technique called sequential counting. Now, how many of you have ever tried counting from 1 to 100, either mentally or out loud? Raise your hands.”

More than half the students raised their hands.

“Good. Now, how many of you have counted from 1 to 1,000?”

The students craned their necks, looking around. The entire Class Four raised their hands, but there were few from the lower classes.

“Sequential counting is literally the technique of listing numbers. Unlike words, numbers are fixed symbols, making them well-suited to the Spirit Zone.”

“Does counting improve concentration?”

“Exactly. But it’s not enough just to count. Like incantations, you must reflect on each number. Think of it as *think, then reflect, rather than speak, then reflect*. If you don’t focus on each number, you won’t succeed with sequential counting.”

Now it was clear why Ethella had introduced incantation magic first. Though advanced techniques were different, the basic concept of enhancement was almost the same for sequential counting and incantations.

“The faster you count, the more the zone is strengthened. With sequential counting, you can enhance all aspects, like activation probability, power, and precision. But remember, sequential counting isn’t a magic bullet. The Spirit Zone can only be truly elevated through serious mental discipline. So don’t rely too heavily on technical enhancements. Now, I’ll demonstrate sequential counting.”

With that, Ethella cast a Spirit Zone about 10 meters in diameter for the training.

“I will now begin sequential counting. I’ll strengthen the Spirit Zone you see before you using only sequential counting. Since we’re not using incantations, I’ll call out only every 10th power. Let’s start. 1.”

As soon as Ethella spoke the first number, the Spirit Zone seemed to swell as if filling with air.

“100.”

“100? Did she just say 100?”

For sequential counting to be effective, you must carefully reflect on each number. Yet she had reached 100 in just two seconds—an astonishing speed.

“400.”

The students’ eyes widened. The pace was accelerating, and the time it took to jump between intervals was growing shorter.

“1,100. 1,700. 2,400.”

Shirone’s jaw dropped. Could a human even count that fast? In less than 20 seconds, Ethella had already counted to 2,400.

The Spirit Zone had now expanded into a 40-meter sphere, created solely through sequential counting.

At the point when the number reached 10,000, Ethella stopped the sequence. As the Spirit Zone rapidly shrank, it

returned to its original size. The ability to count to 10,000 in one go was clear proof of why she was the youngest bishop in the Karsis Monastery.

‘That’s incredible. How much mental training does it take to reach that level?’

The students who witnessed Ethella’s demonstration of sequential counting were shocked. Even her beauty seemed to pale in comparison to her immense talent.

“Did you all see that? The faster you can perform the sequence, the greater the enhancement. Since it’s just a technique, it won’t be as effective if your Spirit Zone isn’t well-trained, but I believe all of you can use it effectively.” Shirone was thrilled by her words. By using the sequential method, he realized he could execute active magic through mental condensation, even beyond the durability of the Spirit Zone.

“The sequence typically starts from 1 and goes up to 100. The speed at which you reach 100 is called the ‘zero-to-hundred’. Until you’re used to it, don’t focus on extending the sequence too much. Instead, work on shortening your zero-to-hundred time.”

After class, Shirone found a quiet spot to practice. When he tried the sequence himself, he found it simple yet challenging.

He timed himself counting from 1 to 100, which took 7 seconds. For a first attempt, it was a decent time.

The best part was that even though he counted rapidly, he never lost focus and reached the target smoothly.

While the students in Class Five had a high skill level, this showed that Shirone’s mental endurance was still superior. In fact, most students performing the sequence for the first time lost focus as they gained speed.

‘Counting isn’t the issue. Should I increase the numbers? No, Etella said to focus on shortening the zero-to-hundred first.’

Knowing Ethella's teaching style, Shirone believed the sequence's difficulty was set precisely for their level.

'That means there must be even higher levels. What could they be? There has to be a special method.'

Deep in thought, Shirone snapped his fingers.

'I don't need to calculate each number individually. I should group them and process them all at once.'

Though Shirone didn't know it, this was the basic concept of information magic—modularization. By grouping numbers and processing them together, he was essentially optimizing the process.

Shirone immediately began experimenting. To integrate the numbers, he needed insight rather than calculation. As he increased the number of digits processed simultaneously, he felt a clear improvement in the performance of the Spirit Zone.

After quickly breaking through his zero-to-hundred speed, Shirone shifted his formation to an offensive mode. The moment his sequence reached 1,000, he performed a magical action and cast a spell.

With a flash of light, the students turned to look at Shirone. A photon mass shot out from his palm.

It was technically a ball of light, but due to its near-lightspeed velocity, it appeared to the onlookers as if a beam of light was streaking through the air.

"Whoa! What was that?"

"That's Photon Output. Is he using that for the targeting test?"

"But why learn that? Photon Output isn't really useful in actual combat."

"Doesn't matter. Any magic works in the Image Zone, even healing magic can remove a target. Honestly, it could give him an edge in the test. Also, isn't that thing is seriously fast!?"

Even though Photon Output lacks physical force, it's one of the fastest forms of active magic, making it perfect for

hitting fast-moving targets like the ones used in their tests.

Chapter 45: Infinite (4)

Ethella followed the murmuring voices and headed toward where Shirone was. Light was continuously flashing from Shirone's hands.

"Shirone, it looks like you're preparing well."

"Yes. I actually just succeeded now."

"Haha, really? It seems the sequence technique is working out for you."

"I think so, too."

Shirone, realizing there were still some errors to correct, returned to focusing on his Photon Output. Ethella carefully observed, rubbing her lips. She had initially thought active magic would be quite difficult for Shirone, as his nature leaned heavily toward defense.

'Yet, the fact that he succeeded means...'

It indicated he had incorporated modularization. She had planned to give him advice during a private lesson, but since he figured it out on his own, that opportunity was no longer needed. Instead, she offered a suggestion.

"Shirone, you've never tried hitting a target, have you? Want to give it a shot in the Image Zone?"

"Yes, I'll try."

The other students stopped their practice and turned to look at Shirone. His potential score became a key point of interest among his competitors.

Shirone waited for the targets to rise. Even though it was just practice, this was his first time doing speed training, so it felt as tense as a real test.

Ethella activated a magic barrier device, just in case something went wrong. In a previous incident with Iruki, casting a spell without the protective shield had caused damage to both the equipment and students.

When the signal dropped, targets appeared from all directions. Shirone deployed his sequence technique and transformed his Pattern into an offensive form. Countless spikes shot out in every direction. Many targets were captured in one swift motion.

Without hesitation, Shirone cast Photon Output. The moment the light flashed, the targets disintegrated into ash. "Wow..."

The children gasped in awe. While Photon Output lacked physical force, its brilliance was overwhelming.

'Not bad.'

He continued firing Photon Output in rapid succession. As soon as the magic was cast, the targets disappeared. The lack of time lag due to distance was a significant advantage.

'With this, I can do it!'

Gaining confidence, Shirone fired photons in all directions. As things began to fall into place, he started aiming for a high score.

So far, he had destroyed 172 targets, with 20 seconds left on the clock. It seemed like reaching 200 points was well within reach.

'He really has mastered modularization.'

Ethella was sure of it after watching the demonstration. Shirone had applied the insights gained from crossing a seemingly impassable bridge to his sequence technique, which was a positive development.

Currently, Shirone's sequence technique involved grouping ten numbers into a single unit and progressing all at once. At this speed, he could complete his zero-to-hundred in just two seconds.

After one minute, the device stopped, and Shirone descended from the Image Zone, panting. All eyes were on the scoreboard. The final total was 342 points, meaning he had eliminated 342 targets in one minute.

"How did he not miss a single shot? Should I try using Photon Output for the test too?"

“Does that look easy to you? Shirone can use Photon Output because he’s mastered Teleportation.”

The students exchanged their thoughts. Nade and Iruki sat together nearby, discussing what they had observed.

“As expected of Shirone. He’s specialized in defense, but his offensive skills are amazing too. He might climb into the top ranks after this test.”

“I’m not so sure. A score of 342 isn’t that impressive, is it?”

“Still, it’s a decent score for a first attempt. He couldn’t even use Photon Output yesterday.”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s his first time or not. What’s really important is his ability to grasp the core of things, don’t you think? That’s what’s impressive.”

“What’s this? Are you actually praising Shirone?”

“I give credit where it’s due. Either way, this will be a good experiment. We’ll get to see who comes out on top in this test.”

“What are you planning?”

Iruki didn’t respond. Instead, he stood up and walked toward the Image Zone.

“Ethella-sensei, may I give it a try?”

“Iruki, you want to?”

Ethella asked anxiously. Given his past, she was worried about what trouble he might cause during the demonstration.

“I’ll just practice a bit and come back down. The magic barrier is active anyway.”

Since it was the test preparation period, it wouldn’t be fair to restrict specific students. Reluctantly, Etella agreed.

“Alright, go ahead. But don’t cause any accidents.”

Iruki nodded and entered the Image Zone. His presence immediately drew the attention of the other students. After preparing, Iruki transformed his formation into a deviation form. The students whispered among themselves, shocked that he was using deviation form even in a targeting test.

Shirone was just as surprised. Deviation form was the fastest in terms of movement among all formations, but to capture multiple targets appearing in rapid succession, at least an offensive form was required to score. In deviation form, he had to abandon spatial awareness and track targets solely with his eyes. It was a perfect one-on-one approach—like chasing a dot with another dot.

‘What is he planning?’

When the targets rose, Iruki’s Spirit Zone started to move. It had shrunk to about the size of a human face, but the speed had significantly increased.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was precise. Like a rubber band with elasticity, the Spirit Zone sharply changed angles, eliminating targets. The students’ awe was only natural, and even Ethella couldn’t hide her surprise.

‘To eliminate targets using the deviation form... that’s quite a unique method.’

The score had already surpassed 100. Shirone realized how extraordinary Iruki’s skills were. He was eliminating targets just by watching them with his eyes. Considering the speed of the movement, it was a remarkable feat of dynamic vision.

‘No, it’s beyond that.’

It was the astonishing calculating power of Savant Syndrome. He was predicting the direction of the targets’ movements and positioning the Spirit Zone in advance.

‘You shouldn’t be so surprised by this, Shirone.’

The corners of Iruki’s mouth curled up, and the Spirit Zone moved at an entirely different speed than before.

“Huh? What?”

The students were in shock. Their eyes couldn’t keep up with the Spirit Zone’s movements. Every time the blurry figure bounced around the space, targets exploded from all directions.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Thanks to minimizing the power of the Atomic Bombs, there was virtually no delay in the detonation reaction. While Shirone's Photon Output quickly dominated the range, Iruki was moving his Spirit Zone for direct impact.

The score surpassed 200 points. He was moving even faster than Shirone, who was utilizing modularization. Shirone could accept that based on the visible results. However, he was still uncertain about how Iruki had enhanced his zone.

"Could it be the method I used?"

"No, it's different from yours."

Before he knew it, Nade had approached his side.

"Iruki sees you as a rival. It wouldn't make sense to win without using Savant Syndrome. It's all about incredible calculation speed. The number Iruki is probably counting now isn't in the thousands."

"Not in the thousands? Then what is it?"

"Millions."

Shirone's eyes widened. Could someone really count a million in one minute? This was different from sensing a ten-thousandth of a second. Modularizing numbers was in the realm of insight, so it was possible. But performing a million routines was beyond the reach of imagination.

Iruki finished using the full minute and descended. His final score was 548 points, significantly surpassing Shirone's.

The students began murmuring. It was the first time Iruki had ever taken a lesson this seriously.

"Wow, 548 points with the deviation form? That's not human."

"With Servant Syndrome, he calculated the motion equations of all the targets. Isn't that kind of unfair?"

Even Ethella started to view Iruki differently. Capturing targets using the deviation form could be explained by mathematical calculations, but the speed at which the Spirit Zone moved was beyond that.

'No way... That kid...'

Iruki came down from the Image Zone and walked straight to Shirone, twitching one eye.

“So, how did you like it? Not bad, right?”

Shirone had no choice but to acknowledge him.

“That was an incredible demonstration. Savant Syndrome... I never thought you’d calculate the targets’ paths mathematically.”

“Hmph, is that all? How disappointing.”

“What?”

Shirone retorted, feeling irritated. Even when she praised him, he looked dissatisfied, which hurt his feelings. Iruki, however, continued without concern.

“You group numbers into modules to speed up the sequence technique. It’s definitely a method only you could use.”

Shirone was surprised to realize that Iruki already knew. At the same time, he felt uneasy. He still had no idea what method Iruki had used.

“Should I teach you the method I used?”

Shirone’s pride was wounded.

“Can you just tell me so easily? You seem to be really wary of me.”

“I don’t care. Knowing it doesn’t mean you can do it.”

Iruki’s words were as irksome as ever.

“It’s really nothing special. I just used logarithms to reduce the units.”

“Logarithms...? Ah, I see.”

So that’s how he did it. And just as Iruki had said, knowing didn’t mean it was something easy to replicate.

“With logarithms, even astronomical numbers can be expressed simply. This time, I just did it for practice. After all, the real test will be the practical exam.”

Logarithms can simplify the expression of any large number—whether it’s a billion or even a hundred billion.

But logarithms were originally symbols used to simplify complex calculations. When applied to something as simple

as a sequence formula, even mathematicians would find it impossible to perform mental calculations.

But Iruki could. Using his Savant Syndrome, he converted all natural numbers into fractions and calculated them.

‘Applying logarithms to sequence techniques? Is that even something a human can do?’

For the first time, Shirone thought he might have underestimated the situation. He had encountered plenty of geniuses in his life, like Carmis Amy and members of the Ogent family, but Iruki’s extreme level of talent was unlike anything he had seen before.

“So, what do you think? Can you still beat me?”

“I’m not studying to beat someone. As long as I do my best, it doesn’t matter who wins.”

“That’s the textbook answer. Whatever. I expected as much from you. But next time, watch your words. It’s really unpleasant to hear an idealist with no real skill talk.”

Shirone clenched his teeth in frustration. What exactly was he so dissatisfied with? All he wanted to say was that life is precious. If even that was seen as idealism, he had no choice but to prove herself.

“Fine, I’ll take you on! In the next test, I’ll definitely beat you.”

“Haha! If you can, go right ahead.”

Shirone was about to snap back, but when their classmates, who had just witnessed Iruki’s skills, crowded around him, he held her tongue.

“Iruki, you were amazing! How did you do it? Can you teach me?”

“With skills like that, why were you hiding them? Why don’t you join our research group? I bet we could finish our project in a month with you on board.”

The compliments poured in from all directions. Shirone thought it was only natural. The demonstration Iruki had put on in the Image Zone was indeed impressive.

“Shirone, your insight during the Bridge of No Return was certainly remarkable. But...”

With a meaningful smile, Iruki turned his back.

“My calculations are faster than your insight.”

Shirone swallowed hard. He had faced many rivals since entering the magic school, but none had ever been this formidable.

Nade patted Shirone on the back to console him.

“Cheer up. It might sound irresponsible, but from where I’m sitting, this is pretty exciting. I’m friends with both of you, so it doesn’t matter who wins.”

“I don’t mind the competition, but I don’t like this. It’s like Iruki just hates me for no reason.”

“Haha! What can you do? That’s just the way he is. But it’s impressive that you made him go all out. You two are probably the only ones who could break the Class Five record.”

“Huh? There’s a record? What’s the score?”

“Let’s see... If I remember correctly, it was 987 points.”

Shirone’s eyes widened.

“987 points?”

Forget his own score; even Iruki, using logarithms, had barely surpassed 500. He couldn’t even imagine how fast one would have to target to score 987 points in a minute.

“That’s insane! Who was it? They must have already graduated, right?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? You’re dating her and you don’t know? It’s Senior Amy.”

Chapter 46: Infinite (5)

“Eh, Amy...?”

Shirone blankly recalled her face. As someone specializing in targeting, her speed was certainly remarkable. But 987 points was an unbreakable record.

“Senior Amy has incredible concentration in real combat. I guess in that way, she’s similar to you. No wonder she never lost the top spot until she in graduate class.”

How many monsters are out there in the world? Or perhaps it was because this was a magic academy, a place that seemed to be full of talented individuals.

“You don’t need to break the highest record, so just take it easy. Before Amy’s 987 points, the highest record was in the 700s. The teachers say that score probably won’t be broken for the next ten years.”

The gap was immense. Shirone didn’t get discouraged but set his first goal at 700 points. There were three weeks left until the exam. He had to find a way to improve his score by then.

‘I won’t lose. Not ever!’

Shirone clenched his fists tightly.

Shirone devoted all his spare time to working on sequences. Without counting faster than Iruki’s calculation speed, the competition would be over before it even started.

Currently, the number of digits he could modularize was 20. That meant he was counting in increments of 20 at a time. But that wasn’t enough to catch up to the logarithmic compression Iruki had used.

‘Damn it. What should I do?’

Shirone practiced Photon Output until dawn in the training ground. While his speed had improved significantly, he

could only count up to 10,000 digits per minute.

‘Iruki reached 1 million on the first day. I need to count faster, even faster.’

He also needed to understand the test format. If unlimited targets poured out from the start, scoring 1,000 points would be easy. But there was a pattern.

In the first step, 10 targets appeared, and after they were all cleared, 11 more appeared in the second step. This kept going for 1 minute, with the number of targets increasing with each step.

If you didn’t clear the steps quickly from the start, it wouldn’t matter how hard you pushed later. Big scores were only possible by advancing early.

‘It’s all about who clears the steps faster. By the end, the score difference could be hundreds of points.’

His practice sessions ended at dawn. Shirone returned to his dorm, slept like a log, and started each day back at the training ground, honing his sequence.

During exam periods, integrated classes were suspended, and each class took turns with their exams, so the training grounds were quieter.

Students shared tips or practiced sequences while waiting for their turn in the Image Zone. But Shirone thought even waiting in line was a waste of time, so he kept focusing on his sequence until the very end.

Finally, it was his turn. Shirone entered the Image Zone and unleashed all the progress he had made. Every time the targets touched his erratic, pulsating Spirit Zone, photon flashes exploded.

As he adapted to active magic, he became able to use Photon Output without the need for magical actions. This allowed him to hit targets without even looking.

His final score was 567 points. It was higher than Iruki’s demonstration score, and Shirone regained his confidence. Meanwhile, the other students’ confidence dwindled.

“He raised his score by over 200 points in just one week. This is insane. Even with immense talent, this feels like cheating.”

“He’s adapted to the offensive Spirit Zone. Magical actions may boost power, but they also create limitations, making combo moves difficult. From what I saw, it looked like he was hitting more than four times per second.”

As the number of students using the Image Zone dwindled and the space emptied, Iruki appeared. He had been sitting quietly, doing nothing all this time.

“Now it’s my turn, right?”

Smiling at Shirone, Iruki activated the device. His detached Spirit Zone had shrunk even further, now the size of a fist.

The fast-moving Spirit Zone eliminated targets with precision. Shirone’s photon flashes were impressive, but Iruki’s speed and intensity were equally breathtaking.

After one minute, Iruki didn’t even check his score. He walked away with his hands behind his back. His final score: 568 points. One point ahead of Shirone.

While it could be dismissed as coincidence, Shirone sensed that this, too, was part of Iruki’s calculated Savant Syndrome ability.

His hunch was right. Shirone’s skills improved dramatically with each practice session, but Iruki consistently outscored him by just one point every time.

Frustrated and driven, Shirone poured even more effort into his sequence practice. The number of digits he could modularize exceeded 100. His Spirit Zone had become nearly unrecognizable in its performance, though he realized the faster he shortened his “zero to full-speed” time, the less time he could maintain the zone. Still, with his endurance, he could likely hold on for a minute.

Shirone’s score rose with each passing day. He surpassed the average score of Class Five, which was around 500 points, and finally entered the 600s.

But Iruki remained the victor, always ahead by just one point. The dramatic nature of this narrow margin excited the other students more than Shirone's rapid progress.

The final training session before the exam arrived.

Since the score from this final check usually influenced the exam results, the students were more focused than ever.

Shirone gritted his teeth and cleared targets with all his might. Light beams shot out in every direction as if his body had turned into a luminous substance.

When the dazzling light show ended, the students erupted into cheers.

A final score of 700 points. It was close to the top score in Class Five, excluding Amy's record.

"I can't believe it. I never thought I'd witness a 700-point score in person."

"If you don't clear the tenth step within 10 seconds, you can't reach 700 points. How many targets are being destroyed per second?"

Seeing the score, Shirone clenched his fist. It was 70 points higher than his score in the previous class, and he had finally hit his goal of breaking into the 700-point range.

As Shirone descended from the Image Zone, Iruki brushed past him.

"Congratulations. 700 points is truly impressive. Your growth is terrifying."

"I never want to lose to you."

"Heh, I see. But don't let your guard down. The real test hasn't even begun."

Shirone snorted and stepped out of the Image Zone, only to turn around and see Iruki already starting his speed run.

The students marveled.

"Wow! It's amazing how he can shrink his zone that small."

Iruki had shrunk his Spirit Zone to the size of a marble. It moved so fast that even the afterimages were hard to see.

Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop!

It was as if the targets were bursting on their own. Explosions echoed from the center of the Image Zone, where Iruki stood.

When Iruki finished his demonstration, Shirone's face turned pale. His final score: 701 points. He had once again edged out Shirone by just 1 point, despite Shirone's best effort to raise his score by more than 70 points.

The students were buzzing with excitement over Iruki's showmanship. Though they had their own exams to worry about, they couldn't help but be caught up in the intense rivalry between the two.

"701 points? Another 1-point difference?"

For the first time, Shirone began to feel anxious. His palms were sweaty, and his mouth was dry. If Iruki had scored the highest possible score with his full strength, it wouldn't have been this nerve-wracking.

But once again, it was just a 1-point difference. It meant Iruki could still score even higher if he gave his all.

The exams were next week, but Class Five's schedule was the earliest, leaving only three days. Could Shirone close the gap in time? Full of uncertainty, he left the training ground feeling exhausted.

It was the students' favorite holiday. On a day like today, it was common to see young couples walking around, but with exams just around the corner, the central park was quiet. Serielle, however, hummed as she crossed the park, as if it were the perfect day for a walk. Since she had already submitted her graduation application, the advanced class exams were no longer her concern.

"Amy! Over here, over here!"

Amy was reading a book by the fountain. She was still as beautiful as ever, but as Serielle got closer, she could see dark circles under her eyes, and her already slender body looked even thinner.

“Wow! You’ve gotten so thin since I last saw you. I guess the senior year must be tough.”

Amy gave a small smile as she handed over some documents.

“Welcome to hell. Here, the graduation year data you asked for.”

It was data showing the grades and specialties of the senior-year students. Anyone in the graduating class could access it, so it wasn’t against the rules.

“Thanks. Let’s sit down. Want something to drink?”

“Let’s get coffee. I feel like I’ve been living on coffee lately.”

The two went into a café and brought out two cups of coffee, sitting on a bench. Without much conversation, they spent time watching the birds flying by, letting time pass.

Amy wasn’t much of a talker, unlike most other girls. For her, this quiet time was the greatest form of peace, something she couldn’t enjoy in the senior class.

Serielle, the usual chatterbox, also kept quiet because she could sense the aura of a battle-hardened warrior around Amy. Despite her frail appearance, Amy was radiating the intensity typical of the senior class.

There’s a saying that the class shapes the person. Though Amy’s days in the senior class were surely grueling, it was clear she had already pulled far ahead of the advanced class.

‘That must play a part, too. I need to advance quickly myself,’ Serielle thought.

After Amy finished slurping down the last of her iced coffee, she finally spoke.

“How’s Shirone doing these days?”

“I was wondering when you’d ask. You really haven’t seen her at all? Haven’t even heard the rumors?”

“No idea. I don’t have time to meet up, and the senior class has completely different lessons from the advanced class. I heard Samuel started helping as a teaching assistant, though.”

"I see. Well, there's something interesting happening in Class Five lately."

Amy turned her head, looking curious, as Serielle launched into her story with excitement. She explained how Shirone and Iruki had become rivals in preparation for the upcoming speed gun test, and how intense things had gotten.

"Using logarithms to reduce the units? That's clever. But that sounds just like Iruki, doesn't it?"

"Huh? You know Iruki?"

"Of course, I do. We were in the same class. Though I moved up quickly, so we didn't stay together for long. Isn't he the one with Savant Syndrome?"

"What? You actually know him? Have you talked to him? He doesn't seem to be very social."

"Yeah. When I first joined Class Five, he came up and talked to me."

Serielle's eyes widened, and she shouted.

"What? He hit on you? Oh my gosh! Then this is a rivalry between two people who love the same person! This is huge news!"

"Don't be ridiculous. He's a bit strange. What he says makes sense, but it's hard to connect with him. I think he was trying to do the same thing with me that he's doing to Shirone. He was confrontational from the start, so I didn't engage. I think he lost interest in me because I'm a girl."

"Hmm, so he's a so-called genius hunter? I guess Shirone was just unlucky to get caught in his sights."

"I wouldn't say unlucky. It's a challenge he'll have to face sooner or later. But it must be hard. The Speed Gun test is all about targeting, and if Iruki is using logarithms, he's bound to score high."

Serielle shot her a sharp look.

"How can you say that? Your boyfriend's in trouble here! Even if you can't help directly, at least cheer him on. What if Shirone loses to Iruki?"

“It’s normal to lose in a competition, so why are you so worked up?”

Unlike before, Amy didn’t seem to feel much emotion about the situation. She was probably dealing with so many intense battles in the senior class that she couldn’t get worked up over this.

Serielle felt a bit disappointed by that.

“But you’ve never lost! I want to see the two undefeated legends together! So please, just tell Shirone to hang in there. I’ll pass the message for you.”

“No thanks. You’ll probably just exaggerate everything when you pass it on. Besides, this isn’t the graduation exam; it’s just a practice evaluation. Shirone’s aiming to join the senior class, so this will be a good experience for him.”

“Then at least tell him the secret to getting a high score on the Speed Gun test! You’re the record holder, after all. 987 points.”

“Hm. But whatever advice I can give, Shirone’s probably already figured it out. It’s not that I’m uninterested—it’s just that Shirone is truly exceptional. He’s already scored over 700 points, right? I only did well because I specialize in targeting.”

Chapter 47: Infinite (6)

At the mention of there being no advice, Serielle's face fell. She had been following their heartfelt(?) love from the beginning and had immersed herself in the situation as if Shirone were the male protagonist in a novel.

"Either way, he has to win, right? Shirone has to win."

"Hmm."

Amy rested her chin on her hand, twirling her straw.

Mercodine Iruki. Their first encounter had been unpleasant, but there was no denying he was a talent.

"If it's purely about targeting, it won't be easy. Savant Syndrome is an incredibly powerful ability. And if he's using logarithms, it'll be extremely tricky to face him. Plus, isn't Iruki taking this seriously? If, back then, Iruki had seriously challenged me..."

"Ch-challenged you?"

Amy, deep in thought, pursed her lips and said, "I might have lost."

Serielle was shocked. Amy, who had never lost first place in the advanced class and had set an unbreakable record in Class Five, was saying she might have been defeated.

It could be that, having reached the senior class—a dimension beyond the advanced class—Amy was being generous in reflecting on the past. But even so, it was an astonishing statement.

"What do we do, then? Our Shirone..."

Serielle's face turned gloomy.

The Speed Gun test was now just a day away.

Shirone sat on the floor of his dormitory, deep in meditation. He was counting numbers, but it wasn't a sequence. If up

until now he had been mastering techniques, today he was seeking an answer to what a numerical sequence truly was. A journey of numbers with a starting point but no destination.

For 10 hours, he didn't move an inch. As time passed, Shirone grasped the essence of the sequence—a realization so shocking it was as if he had witnessed lightning strike right before his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, dawn was breaking outside the window. Despite not eating or sleeping for 24 hours, he felt no fatigue. A reverent light, too profound to call merely an emotion, shone in his eyes.

Shirone gazed up at the ceiling, overcome with sorrow. What he had experienced was a great revelation, but it was also an unbearably cold reality.

'Is this truly... the truth?'

No one answered him, but it felt as though he had received a response nonetheless.

There were still 30 minutes left before the test, but the training grounds were already packed with participants and spectators. Staff members bustled about. They had reinforced the safety measures, and scoreboards were set up all around the Image Zone.

Not a single student from Class Six or Seven missed the event. It was a glimpse into the hierarchical nature of the academy, where underclassmen sought to gain favor with their seniors.

On the other hand, only those from Class Four who were specifically interested in Shirone and Iruki's duel made the effort to come. Among them, the most notable figure was, of course, Serielle, one of the top-ranked students in Class Four.

"Oh! Senior! Hello, ma'am!"

Mark ran up to her with the eager look of someone who had just caught a big fish. Serielle smiled and waved at him

before scanning her surroundings.

“Ah, all the juniors are here, huh? Well, it was the same when I was in their shoes.”

“What do you mean by that? I’m only here to celebrate Senior Shirone’s victory!”

“Oh! That’s the spirit! Alright, let’s fire up our passion for cheering!”

Serielle and Mark took the best seats with the best view of the Image Zone. Wherever she walked, the crowd parted for her, so getting a front-row seat was as good as reserved.

Most of the murmuring was about the match between Shirone and Iruki. Shirone, naturally strong in the Spirit Zone, versus Iruki, who excelled at strengthening his zone through sequences. It was a battle to determine who truly was the top talent of Class Five.

The test was designed for both of them to take at the same time. The school’s intention in adopting this competitive format was to push students to their maximum potential. For the same reason, the highest scorers in practice were placed at the back of the order. Naturally, Shirone and Iruki were assigned to the final group, the 20th.

When Ethella activated the magic barrier, the scoreboard lit up. The test began in order, giving participants about 10 minutes to relax beforehand, starting from Group 1.

While individual scores were important in this practical assessment, the speed gun test was structured like a competition, making it a subject students could enjoy watching.

The participants, of course, couldn’t ignore this aspect either. So even if they broke their personal record, they’d walk off the Image Zone with a sour face if they lost to a fellow group member.

It took about an hour to complete the tests up to Group 10. The highest score so far was 533 points, with Nade finishing slightly above the class average with a score of 491.

As time passed, the students' eyes gleamed with anticipation. They knew what today's main match was. Finally, when Group 19's test ended, Ethella called Shirone and Iruki. The rowdy cheers suddenly quieted down. Without looking at each other, Shirone and Iruki ascended the stairs side by side. Their backs radiated a sense of determination.

"Wow! Senior Shirone seems really fired up. But I heard from others that Senior Iruki is completely outclassing him."

"Hmph. Shirone is strong in actual combat! He showed that in the Teleportation test, didn't he?"

Serielle shot Mark a glare, making him chuckle awkwardly as he scratched his head. He had been one of those who underestimated Shirone and ended up regretting it.

Ethella explained the rules to Shirone and Iruki.

"The time limit is one minute, and the test starts when the red light on the scoreboard goes on. Thanks to the magic barrier, you won't interfere with each other's zones, so treat this as an individual event. Especially since all the juniors are watching you, don't do anything embarrassing."

Both Shirone and Iruki simply nodded, as if saving even their mental energy for the challenge ahead. When Ethella spread her arms, the two separated and moved into their respective zones.

The juniors kept their eyes peeled, determined not to miss even a second of the showdown. The tension was so thick, you could hear people gulping. With both of them capable of scoring in the 700s, it was clear that the match would be fast-paced from the very start.

Shirone gazed calmly ahead. His heart was racing, but he didn't feel nervous. It was a sign of human focus reaching its peak. When the pre-lights on the scoreboard flickered, he counted down in his mind.

'3, 2, 1.'

Start!

As soon as the red light flashed, Shirone's eyes widened, and he kicked off the sequence. In an instant, he broke the zero-to-max speed, with the numbers climbing at an incredible rate.

Popopopopopopopopopop!

Ten Photon Outputs per second.

The flashes swept across the zone in a 360-degree arc. All the targets from the first step were destroyed at once.

Meanwhile, Iruki's detached Spirit Zone moved like a sweeping brush, clearing his targets with precision.

"Wow! Both of them are insanely fast! All the targets were destroyed as soon as the test started!"

Mark couldn't contain his excitement and shouted. The same thing happened with the second step, and the third. The moment the targets appeared, they were all obliterated. By the sixth step, the two were still tied, and Serielle clenched her fist tightly.

"Good. If it keeps going like this, it could go either way."

Shirone and Iruki completed the tenth step simultaneously. However, the next step involved 20 targets appearing at once. It was a number neither of them could handle in a single breath, meaning the real competition was just beginning.

The current score stood at 239 to 237, with Shirone barely in the lead. At this pace, both were well on track to surpass the 700-point mark.

'Alright! I'm holding my own against Iruki at full power. Let's keep pushing forward.'

A single targeting mistake could create a gap in steps, and that would drastically shift the outcome. However, neither the flashing Shirone nor the detaching Iruki missed a target. 377 points to 377.

At the 30-second mark, Iruki caught up. Feeling the pressure, Shirone accelerated his sequence, strengthening his Spirit Zone and speeding up the connection between his flashes.

When Shirone pulled ahead by 4 points, Iruki began to feel anxious. Unlike his relaxed attitude during practice, he was now pouring all his energy into targeting.

‘Even so, I’m falling behind? My calculation speed?’

Just three days ago, Iruki’s victory had been a foregone conclusion. Raising the level of one’s sequence in such a short time should have been impossible.

‘I can do it! My strategy is working!’

Shirone removed the modular limitation to match Iruki’s speed. Up until now, he had grouped numbers in units of 100, but now he was handling whatever came his way—232, 187, 99, 276. It was a strategy that sacrificed stability for speed, but his defensive mental endurance allowed him to maintain his focus.

469 points to 432.

For the first time, Shirone opened up a significant lead, and the students erupted in excitement. Even Ethella couldn’t take her eyes off the match, caught up in the tension of the unpredictable outcome.

Iruki finally saw through Shirone’s strategy.

‘He’s removed the modular limit? He doesn’t care about the test score at all. He’s gambling everything on winning.’

A smile crept onto Iruki’s lips. He had been waiting for this moment. Someone who could bring out his full potential. He had finally met his greatest rival, and he was ready to accept the challenge.

‘Shirone, my gamble is on a whole different level.’

Iruki increased the difficulty of his sequence. The change was immediate, and the students’ eyes widened in confusion. Another rhythm began to seep through the chain of explosions.

“Huh? What’s that?”

542 points to 558 points.

Not only had Iruki caught up with Shirone’s score, but he had overtaken him. This was only possible if he had somehow doubled his speed in an instant.

“Senior Serielle! What’s happening? Did Senior Shirone make a mistake?”

“No. Shirone’s score is still rising. It’s just that Iruki’s targeting has suddenly gotten much faster.”

“Is that even possible? His score just jumped by 100 points!”

Serielle stared at Iruki’s performance intently, and then she finally realized what was happening. She bit her lip.

“...He created another Spirit Zone.”

The students turned to look at Iruki. Sure enough, two afterimages were flying around in different directions. Double Spirit Zones were a unique trait of Savant Syndrome, a talent that allowed for mental division. It wasn’t a technique that could be learned, which was why it was considered a trait rather than a skill.

But what truly shocked Serielle was that despite creating an additional Spirit Zone, Iruki’s speed had increased even more.

He was executing two different sequences simultaneously. But could a human brain handle two separate calculations at once?

Iruki was proving it was possible. And not just with any sequence, but with logarithmic calculations that couldn’t be done mentally.

‘Just like Amy said, he’s an incredible talent. No, this goes beyond talent. He’s a mutant, outside the bounds of human ability.’

The power of Savant Syndrome was laid bare on the scoreboard.

692 points to 845 points.

The difference was over 100 points, and Iruki was several steps ahead. Once the gap in steps began to open, the only thing that would happen was an even greater disparity.

‘Faster. Even faster.’

Shirone was desperate. The numbers he was grouping through modularization now exceeded 300 on average. But

the calculations were becoming increasingly complex and irregular due to the lack of precise arrays.

732 points to 911 points.

Shirone had surpassed his personal best score. But Iruki was beyond personal records; he was on track to surpass Amy's record too. If the test ended now, he could very well achieve it.

Shirone had only one option left.

There exists a realm you cannot reach by simply running faster, a place you must leap to in order to arrive.

But is it possible? Can it really be done?

Once again, no one answered him. But Shirone felt as though he already knew the answer.

'Transcend the numbers!'

Chapter 48: Infinite (7)

Shirone's mind expanded endlessly, like the explosion of a supernova. A perfect release. Beyond modularity, it was as if all the numbers in existence compressed into a single point and rushed into him.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!

The targeting speed suddenly skyrocketed. Two beams of light shot out simultaneously from Shirone's Spirit Zone.

"Shirone is doing a double, too!"

"No, a double isn't possible unless it's Savant Syndrome. This isn't on that level."

Serielle couldn't believe what she was seeing. The number of beams grew from ten to twenty, then from twenty to one hundred.

Shirone felt an overwhelming sense of liberation. It was like permeating every corner of the world. The stronger the sensation grew, the fainter his thoughts became. He couldn't think of anything, and only his senses touched everything.

The Spirit Zone kept expanding. As its diameter exceeded 80 meters, the beams of light merged, filling the entire Spirit Zone with light. It was just one massive photon, even Shirone himself was enveloped in light.

The targets exploded as soon as they appeared, and the step speed accelerated rapidly.

'Ah... Ahhh...'

Shirone felt tears welling up as he realized his presence was gradually fading. He had transcended numbers. Everything. It was the end. All that was left was to dissolve into the world.

'No! It's not over yet!'

Iruki gritted his teeth. He saw Shirone's score rising at an alarming rate, but it didn't matter. If Shirone increased his speed, Iruki just had to go faster.

'There's no limit to the calculations of a Savant! Whether it's one trillion or a thousand trillion, I'll calculate them all! I'll see the end of every number that exists in this world!'

Iruki's Spirit Zone moved at a speed beyond human perception. He was going to win. He could win! One second left! 0.9 seconds! 0.85 seconds! Damn it! Why is time moving so slowly?!

Beep!

The seemingly eternal one minute finally ended. The targets vanished into illusions, and both Shirone and Iruki collapsed at the same time.

Unlike the gasping Iruki, Shirone didn't move. He had already lost consciousness.

Iruki lifted his head to check his score.

1,247 points.

An unprecedented record in the history of the magic academy. He had beaten the previous record held by Amy by a staggering 260 points.

'Did I win? Then why can't I hear anything? What's Shirone doing?'

When Iruki turned his head, Shirone was kneeling, his face buried in his chest, completely still. He seemed to be breathing, but there was an empty, hollow feeling about him.

Iruki shifted his gaze to Shirone's scoreboard.

1,253 points.

"Senior! Senior Shirone has...!"

"Shirone won!"

Serielle interrupted Mark's words and rushed forward. She was overwhelmed. Shirone had defeated even the terrifyingly skilled Iruki. She felt like kissing him in place of Amy, though only if she gave permission, of course.

The other students followed suit, heading toward the Image Zone. Everyone congratulated Shirone, shaking him in celebration.

“Ugh!”

Shirone, regaining consciousness, gasped for air, his eyes wide. His mind, which had been buried in the realm of meaninglessness, reassembled itself, and names of objects and emotions began to resurface.

While the crowd around Shirone was buzzing, no one approached Iruki. Only Nade placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You lost in the end. But it was an amazing match.”

“That’s not much comfort. Winning is the point of a competition.”

Nade chuckled and glanced over at Shirone. His talent was truly extraordinary. To others, it might have just been a simple targeting test, but Nade knew Iruki’s abilities well enough to realize that Shirone had achieved something monumental.

‘Congratulations, Shirone.’

Surrounded by students, Shirone had a sorrowful expression, despite his victorious achievement.

Ethella looked at him with a serious expression, deep in thought.

The difference between Shirone’s and Iruki’s scores was only six points. But in terms of mental speed, six points was an enormous gap.

‘Shirone. Could it be...?’

At the final moment of the Speed Gun test, Shirone’s Spirit Zone had been completely filled with light. It was a situation that should have been impossible with a Photon Output.

However, there was one exception.

‘Has he transcended numbers?’

Numbers are infinite. Even if Iruki spent ten thousand years calculating sequences, he would never reach the end of the journey of numbers.

‘Shirone, when did you realize this?’

The sequence technique expands the mind by unfolding numbers. But what happens if someone transcends numbers?

The mind expands infinitely.

Mages refer to this phenomenon as the Immortal Function, but as a monk, Ethella knew another name for it.

‘Nirvana.’

It was a concept that the magic academy neither needed to teach nor should teach. Infinity lies in opposition to finitude. Once one enters that realm, the individual’s existence vanishes.

Tears welled up in Ethella’s eyes.

‘Shirone. You mustn’t. No matter how radiant it seems, no matter how brilliant it appears, once you enter infinity...’

You will disappear.

Monks, after long years of asceticism, realize the impermanence of the world and enter the realm of Nirvana, having let go of everything.

But Shirone was different. He was an 18-year-old boy, meant to learn about the world and fulfill his dreams. Infinity was far too dangerous for him.

‘It looks like you only fainted, so it wasn’t perfect. But if you truly entered it...’

Ethella wiped her tears and approached Shirone. His sad expression said it all.

“Shirone, you...”

“I’m sorry, Teacher.”

“When did it begin?”

“It’s been a very long... journey.”

Their conversation was like a Zen dialogue between monks. Only Shirone likely knew the true meaning behind his words. Ethella had no advice to offer. Shirone had realized it and stopped himself, so the choice had to be his.

“Don’t worry, teacher. I really didn’t expect it to happen.”

All Ethella could do was look at him with kind eyes and say nothing.

“Y-yes, Shirone. The teacher loves you.”

The students gasped in shock, their eyes wide open.

“What did you just say?”

For a teacher to confess love to a student was not only absurd, but the timing was also strange.

Shirone bowed deeply, filled with a sense of reverence. The deeper meaning behind Ethella’s words struck his heart.

“Te-Teacher! Did you just say you love him? With how many members there are in the teacher’s elite guard, if you betray them like this...!”

Ethella tilted her head in confusion.

“Elite guard? What’s that? And I love all of you.”

“W-what? Is that what it is? Hahaha! I love you too, Teacher~!”

“I love you too, Teacher!”

The male students began to competitively confess their love. Ethella didn’t seem bothered and affectionately patted their heads.

“Alright, I’ll end the exam now. Everyone gather around.”

The students lined up in front of the Image Zone. Since they had done their best in the exam, their faces were relieved, regardless of the results.

“Thank you for your hard work. It’s nice that we can finish early on exam days, right? Let’s relax and enjoy training again starting from the next class. Everyone, you did well.”

As Ethella bowed in the way of a monk, the students half in jest, half in respect, followed suit.

“Thank you for your hard work, Teacher!”

Ethella went down the mountain first to report the exam results to the school. Meanwhile, the students couldn’t easily leave, savoring the aftermath of the intense competition.

“Shirone! This is amazing! Amy will surely be happy. No, she might be angry for breaking her record! But who cares! Her boyfriend won! Hahaha!”

Shirone was enduring Serielle's chatter with a tired expression. If only he could make her stop talking, he felt he could do anything.

Perhaps his prayers were heard, as Serielle miraculously stopped talking and looked around.

Iruki was approaching.

The students watched with excited eyes, curious about how the arrogant genius would handle the situation this time, but the words Iruki spoke were surprisingly bland.

"I lost. I was completely defeated."

Shirone shook his head.

"No. I don't think so."

"At times like this, you don't need to be humble. Especially when you hear a genius like me declaring defeat."

"I really don't feel like I won. This exam was a targeting assessment. But in the end, I hit all the spaces with my magic."

"Heh. You're really being boring. Anyway, that was still targeting. You just increased the power of the Photon Output and eliminated everything at once. Since you won, don't worry about it."

"If we're talking like that, it's the same for you. If you had maximized the explosion, you could have achieved a similar effect."

Iruki doubled over with laughter.

"There's definitely a way to do that. But it takes a considerable amount of time to create an explosion of that scale. Of course, I was quite desperate earlier, so I might have shortened the reaction time, but I still wouldn't have gotten good results."

Shirone understood. However, he couldn't bring himself to respond to Iruki's demeanor, which was so different from usual. Why had he been so aggressive before when he could persuade him so kindly now?

"Were you trying to provoke me on purpose?"

Iruki blinked as if he found that an interesting idea and suddenly brought up a different topic.

"I study explosions. To borrow your words, an explosion powerful enough to kill everyone living in a city."

Shirone's brow furrowed slightly.

"But Shirone, you're misunderstanding. An explosion isn't a violent phenomenon. Violence contains the intention to harm someone. But explosions don't have that intention. They're simply energy that's much stronger than human standards."

"Just because there's no intention doesn't mean people won't get hurt. After all, it's humans who handle that energy."

"That's exactly it. That's why I define an explosion as uncontrollable energy. But, Shirone. Energy is life force. So, what happens if humans can perfectly control explosions?"

Iruki spread his arms wide to express the enormity.

"A new era will dawn. An explosion powerful enough to blow up a city contains enough energy to sustain a hundred thousand people. If we can control it, there would be no need to go to war to take from others, and everyone could live a prosperous life."

A good emotion flickered across Shirone's face.

"I wish you had said it like that from the start. There wouldn't have been a need for a fight."

Iruki smiled bitterly.

"I told you. Ideals are just ideals. One mage can't change the world. Even if I could control explosions, someone would still use it to kill thousands. But Shirone, I will do it regardless. Someone has to."

"You can't do that. I understand what you mean, but that's a choice that will make you unhappy too."

"Haha! Right! That's why I'm saying this to you!"

Iruki plopped down and looked up at the sky.

"Should I just quit here? Maybe I'll just hang around Class Five until this gets boring, or maybe I'll dive into a dungeon."

Perhaps someone like me shouldn't have been born at all."
Shirone looked down at Iruki with complicated feelings.
What exactly was this kid? An idealist? A realist? Or maybe
an indefinable eccentric?

"So now you have to be responsible for me."

"Huh? Responsible?"

"You can stop my rampage. If someday, my pursuit leads to
a tragedy..."

Iruki spoke in a sincere voice.

"Stop me. If you determine that I have no reason to exist in
this world, then take my life with your own hands."

Iruki's way of thinking was cold. But because of that, he was
seeing the light and darkness of what he was pursuing with
clarity.

If there was something that absolutely had to be done,
Shirone thought that Iruki was the right person for the job.

"Understood. I'll stop you. No, I will make sure that you
never make a terrible mistake."

Nade seemed to be overcome with emotion, trembling as he
hugged the necks of both of them and began to head down
the mountain.

"Woohoo! I really like you guys! Let's work hard from now
on!"

Shirone and Iruki, caught by Nade, looked at each other and
smiled. It was the day the trio of Class Five was formed.

Chapter 49: Strange Research Society (1)

Shirone drifted through a dark space.

In some places, he saw countless stars, while in others, there was nothing but endless darkness.

In the darkness, he felt as if he were standing still, a fear creeping in that he would never escape.

One by one, stars began to appear, converging toward a single point, as if space itself was contracting.

He trembled at the sight of stars of unimaginable size. He couldn't even imagine what would happen at the final point of collision.

But the collision never occurred. Instead, the stars began to collapse and disintegrate into dust, which was sucked into the center.

Time was flowing backward.

By the time Shirone realized this, his own body had already disintegrated and vanished.

Yet, Shirone did not disappear.

He couldn't grasp what this final sense of existence as a human was, but even then, he was still conscious, drawn toward the beginning of the universe.

He saw threads of light squirming like worms, vibrating.

There, light, time, gravity, and the forces of the universe were unified.

When he finally reached the end—or rather, returned to the beginning—the entire universe was filled with light.

As the last vestiges of Shirone's existence began to fade, an overwhelming sense of unity surged through him.

It was a union as vast as a great explosion.

“Uaaaah!”

Shirone screamed as he bolted upright from his bed. His clothes, drenched in sweat, clung to him like they'd been soaked by rain.

The room was silent, and the window was awash in pale moonlight. He could smell the familiar scent of books. His desk was cluttered with books related to photon theory.

"Phew, another nightmare..."

He poured water from the kettle and drank deeply. Then he opened the window to let the cool early summer breeze dry his cold sweat. Only after that did he manage to collect himself and sit in his chair.

'Why does this keep happening at night? What's going on with me?'

Ever since the use of Immortal Function during the Speed Gun test, he had been having similar dreams every night. They weren't exactly nightmares, but the emotions he felt during them were just as terrifying.

"Uuuugh."

Shirone hugged his trembling body, rubbing his arms. He felt as though something fundamental about himself had shifted. The real problem was that these sensations weren't confined to his dreams—they were creeping into his waking life as well.

It was as if one of his senses had become highly attuned. But he had no idea what this sense was perceiving.

It wasn't that his sense of smell had improved, nor that his touch had become more sensitive. His sight and hearing were the same as before.

But he was certain that some new sensory organ had developed.

"Don't tell me... I'm being haunted by a ghost?"

The sound of the morning piano echoed through the air.

Shirone, seeing that the dawn had broken, went into the bathroom to wash up. With the advanced class evaluation over, normal classes were set to resume today. As the warm water touched his skin, the strange sensations gradually

faded. If he had to endure that feeling all day, he'd surely develop a nervous breakdown. Shirone was relieved and packed his bag, thankful for the reprieve.

Once the exams were over, the school quickly returned to its usual lively atmosphere. Students who had fiercely competed against each other were now back to being friends, laughing and chatting as if nothing had happened. The recent hot topic was Shirone's Speed Gun test. Unlike the theory exams, practical evaluations had a sports-like aspect, and students naturally got excited when someone delivered an impressive performance.

Typically, each class would have its standout student, but the impact of the Speed Gun test on the first day was so strong that it overshadowed everything else.

For the first time in the school's history, two students had scored over 1200 points.

The difference between Shirone and Iruki's scores was only six points, and on top of that, it had been an extraordinary comeback, defying all expectations. Since such an iconic event happened on the first day, even outstanding performances from the other students couldn't compare. Shirone had become an overnight sensation. Though he'd been somewhat well-known since the beginning of the year as Amy's boyfriend and a promising talent, he was now undeniably one of Alpheas Magic Academy's top students. As Shirone walked toward the classroom, students greeted him warmly. Among them were even upperclassmen from Class Four. Given how difficult it was to advance under the school's early promotion system, the upperclassmen usually maintained strict boundaries. But since Shirone had made history, they couldn't simply regard him as an underclassman anymore. In hindsight, Amy had been incredibly foresighted to acknowledge him as her equal early on.

By the time Shirone reached the advanced class building, he was already feeling exhausted from all the greetings.

“Oh, it’s Senior Shirone! Hello, Senior!”

“Senior Shirone, I’m a big fan! Can I follow you around from now on?”

The female students from Class Six approached him with friendly smiles. They had once been the group most upset by Shirone’s early promotion. Since he had jumped from Class Seven to Class Five, they were stuck in the middle, and it was only natural for them to feel irritated. But now, even the seniors from Class Four saw him as a future rival in the graduating class, so the Class Six girls had no choice but to change their attitude.

“Senior, do you have any plans after class today? We’re holding a magic demonstration later with some friends. Would you like to join us?”

“We’re planning a weekend trip. You should come! I’ll be your partner.”

“Sorry, I’m not feeling very well these days.”

Having nightmares every night and dealing with unsettling sensations while awake made Shirone want to avoid going anywhere. The girls didn’t press further, knowing that Amy was a barrier they couldn’t cross, and left with a promise to ask again another time.

“Shirone, Shirone, Shirone! Shirone, Shirone!”

As soon as he opened the classroom door, one of his classmates grabbed him. Without even a moment to put down his bag, Shirone found himself kidnapped, confused by the stares from the others.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“The semester’s almost over, so join our research group! We’re forming one with the Class Five students. The final evaluation is a free project anyway. It’ll save time and be fun. Come on, join us.”

“Hmm.”

Shirone couldn't answer immediately. He had received many offers before, but if he were to join a research group, he felt he should join the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group, where Nade and Iruki were members.

"Shirone, just think about it. You said the reason you're not joining a research group is because you want to study on your own, right? There are others like you here too. But you still have to do the practical evaluation, don't you? That's why we're forming a temporary group. It's not a big deal, so we'll finish it quickly and disband. Then, you'll have more time to study by yourself."

"Ah, I see."

It was definitely a sound strategy. The practical evaluation was a free topic, so it wasn't as decisive as the theory exam or practical test. However, joining an existing research group only to leave after the evaluation would seem insincere. Forming a temporary group with other students without a group to complete the evaluation made sense.

"Hey! What are you guys scheming? Shirone can't join! He's mine!"

Nade shouted as he pulled Shirone behind him, surprising the students around them. One friend who knew Nade's situation well was quick to retort.

"What are you talking about? You just want him to join that weird research group of yours, don't you? Shirone, whatever you do, don't join his group. You don't even have to join ours, just find another group. I've never heard of Nade actually completing a practical evaluation."

The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group had a long history, but its official activities were rare. In fact, most students didn't even know the group existed, or that Nade was part of it.

"Wait, Nade, you're part of a research group?"

Nade quickly rolled his eyes and deployed his usual charm to escape the situation.

“Of course! Do you really think someone as popular as me wouldn’t be in a group? Anyway, Shirone can’t join yours. I’m taking him with me.”

Nade grabbed Shirone’s wrist and started heading toward the door. One of the students who had invited Shirone shouted after him.

“Hey, Shirone! Think carefully! Don’t ever join that group! Nade, stop trying to drag him into your mess and just let him find a normal group!”

“Hahahaha! Say what you want, but Shirone already has only me on his mind! We’ve already crossed a forbidden line together!”

Shirone’s face turned pale.

“Wait, Nade. What are you talking about...?”

Before Shirone could protest, Nade shut the door. The students left in the classroom stared after them in bewilderment.

“What... what did he just say?”

The student who had shouted earlier scratched his head in frustration.

“This is bad. It looks like Nade really is trying to rope Shirone into his group. He shouldn’t get involved with that.”

“It might be too late already. But where are they even going? Class is about to start.”

As soon as they were out in the hallway, Shirone shook off Nade’s hand. Even though he knew it was a joke, he couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling it left behind.

“Hey! Why did you say something like that?”

“Hahaha! Well, it’s not exactly a lie, is it? You’re the only person who’s seen the real side of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group.”

“The real side? I didn’t see anything.”

Nade looked around at the people passing by in the hallway, then pulled Shirone down to sit.

“Just sit for a second.”

“Alright, alright. Stop being so pushy.”

Shirone sat down and leaned against the wall. After glancing around one more time, Nade lowered his voice.

“You’re the only person who’s actually entered the research group. So you absolutely can’t talk about it to anyone.”

“Who would I even talk to? No one’s ever asked me.”

“Still! We barely have any members, and the administration is already talking about disbanding us. We need to keep a low profile, so don’t even mention the word ‘paranormal,’ okay?”

“Alright, I wasn’t planning to anyway.”

To Shirone, the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group seemed like a failed club. But to those who understood its true value, it was a hidden gem, biding its time for the right moment. The school’s administration, however, was determined to shut it down.

“By the way, are you really planning on joining a research group?”

Nade knew about the strategy of forming a temporary group for the end-of-term evaluations. It was efficient, but he didn’t think it was the best choice for someone like Shirone.

“I’ve been thinking about it. Why? Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“Of course there is. The practical evaluation might not be as important, but joining just any random group would be a waste for you. Plus, you’re aiming for the top score in the school, right? Even one point can make a difference. It’s better to either work alone or join a proper research group.”

In Class Four, which aimed for graduation, even a single point in the practical evaluation could be a significant factor, given that there were students who scored perfect marks in specific subjects.

“Hmm. But doing the practical evaluation alone would take too much time.”

Shirone thought for a moment before speaking again.

“Nade, what if I joined the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group?”

Nade’s face lit up. If Shirone joined, it would form a trio with him and Iruki. Though they spent time together often, Iruki frequently skipped classes, so their group dynamic was sometimes uneven.

However, Nade hesitated. The Alpheas Magic Academy had been around for 45 years, and while most students graduated and moved into society, there was an unseen world within the school—filled with unusual individuals engaging in strange, secretive activities. The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group was one such group.

“Hmm. Are you sure? Honestly, our research group is pretty underground. Paranormal and supernatural science is a bit... niche. While I’d love for you to join, I wouldn’t exactly recommend it to a friend.”

From what Shirone had seen earlier in the classroom, it was clear that Nade’s group had some sort of hidden side. But Shirone wasn’t interested in joining just for grades. He had always been fascinated by the supernatural since childhood.

“It’s not just for that reason. The truth is... something weird has been happening to me lately. I was planning to ask you and Iruki about it. I thought maybe paranormal science could offer an explanation.”

Chapter 50: Strange Research Society (2)

Nade immediately showed interest, but their conversation was cut short when the class bell rang.

“The teacher’s coming. Let’s head in for now.”

Shirone set aside thoughts of the club and focused on the lesson. The day’s classes ended with the 5 PM session.

Afterward, Shirone packed his things and left the classroom with Nade.

“Let’s talk it over with Iruki first,” Nade suggested.

He led Shirone to the club’s meeting place. When they arrived at the magic warehouse, Istas, Shirone stared blankly at the building. The last time he saw Istas, it resembled a cluster of colonies, but now it looked like several towering structures reaching into the sky.

“Every time I see this place, it’s still amazing.”

“With 89 buildings in total, the patterns are endless. I just hope Iruki’s awake.”

The inside of Istas had also changed, as much as its outer appearance. But Nade navigated the complex hallways with ease, heading toward the research room.

“I’ve been wondering—how do you even find your way around? The layout changes constantly, so markers wouldn’t help.”

“Haha, I don’t use such low-level methods. I’ve memorized everything. A senior from the club restored the blueprints of Istas ages ago.”

Shirone’s face showed surprise. It wasn’t just about drawing up the plans for a building; it was understanding the mechanism of a complex structure with intricate patterns.

Nade pointed at the ceiling of the corridor. “Look there—see the three dots? That means this is room number three. If it’s room three, you just need to check the color of the iron door in the third warehouse. It’s blue, right? So this place is called ‘Blue Room Three.’”

Shirone’s gaze followed Nade’s pointing finger.

“Once you confirm that, the next step is to count how many warehouses are connected to this spot. There are four paths, so four warehouses. Here’s where it gets important: you substitute the room number as X, the color as a number for Y, and the number of warehouses as Z. Then you plug those into an equation.”

“What equation?”

“The seniors analyzed the patterns of Istas and came up with an equation. If you plug the numbers in, you’ll get a result down to two decimal places, which tells you the direction. As long as you know this equation, you won’t ever get lost in Istas. It’s like a mathematical master key.”

Shirone couldn’t help but wonder why anyone would go to such lengths for a club activity. The vast, intricate pattern of Istas, and seniors who’d mapped it out with such obsessive dedication—it hinted that there was something about this club others didn’t know.

“But wouldn’t it take too long if you have to calculate everything each time the warehouse shifts?”

“At first, yeah. But you get used to it. It becomes a routine. After about three months, you’ll just feel it instinctively.”

Shirone nodded in understanding. “That’s incredible—a blueprint for escaping a maze, reduced to an equation.”

“There was probably a savant among the founding members, someone like Iruki. When Iruki first saw the equation, he said it was breathtakingly beautiful. Anyway, you must keep this a secret. If the master key leaks out, it’ll be a disaster.”

Shirone felt grateful that Nade had shared something so significant, but he also realized Nade subtly hoped he’d join

the club. The club seemed to be a gathering place for seniors' unproductive, obsessive behaviors, with their legacies stored in the labyrinth of Istas. That was the heart of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Group.

After about ten minutes of walking, they arrived at the research lab. As before, the sign hung crookedly by the entrance. When Nade opened the door, a cloud of dust rose, though this time they were ready, covering their mouths to avoid a coughing fit.

"Iruki, we're here," Nade called, not even looking as he spoke. Iruki, who had been writing equations on the chalkboard, turned around and smiled when he saw Shirone. "Oh, Shirone. I didn't think you'd ever return to this gloomy place."

Nade laughed, remembering the last time Shirone had been there.

"Haha! That's true. But now, he wants to join."

"Oh?"

Iruki raised an eyebrow, surprised. Even he hadn't thought Shirone, the model student, would ever consider joining this place.

"Well, it's not just that. I have something I've been worrying about, and I was hoping you guys could give me some advice."

"A genius like you, with worries? It must be something incredible," Iruki said, his usual sarcastic tone evident. Shirone, now familiar with Iruki's personality, didn't mind the teasing.

"Since the Speed Gun test, something feels off. I've been having nightmares, and when I wake up, I feel... strange, like someone's there. I don't know if it's something paranormal or spiritual, but I figured you guys would know about this stuff."

Nade and Iruki's eyes lit up, intrigued by Shirone's words. As explorers and critics of the unknown, his experience piqued

their curiosity.

"Well, you've come to the right place! Come, take a seat."

Nade dusted off a couch, sending a huge plume of dust into the air. Shirone frantically waved his hands to disperse it, finally realizing the excessive dust was from Iruki's chalk.

"I'll just sit, thanks. Please, stop doing things like this in this room—or at least clean it once in a while."

"Come now, don't let a little dust get to you, our very first client! Please, tell us more."

Nade and Iruki pulled up chairs and sat down, crossing their legs arrogantly like experts waiting for a consultation.

Shirone sighed, but he needed answers. With a determined heart, he began to speak.

"Well, lately I've been having this recurring dream where..."

Shirone explained the dream he had been having every night, as well as the strange sensations that came to him at odd times.

"I have no idea what's going on. Could it be that some kind of ghost has possessed me? Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

An unexpected silence fell.

Shirone swallowed hard. He expected them to at least make a joke, but both of their expressions were unusually serious.

"What? Why are you two acting like this? You're messing with me again, aren't you?"

Nade awkwardly scratched his eyebrow.

"Uh, well... it's actually kind of serious."

"What do you mean? Explain it to me properly."

"It's that feeling you mentioned. The chills, the sensation that something's there even though you can't see it. In paranormal studies, they call that 'supernatural perception.'"

"Supernatural perception? Paranormal studies?"

The unfamiliar terms made Shirone even more anxious.

Nade touched his temple, deep in thought, then offered an example.

“About 200 years ago, a scholar experimented on a death row inmate. It’s called soul transmission. The hypothesis was that if the soul is made of matter, it could be broken down by electricity. The method was like this: they locked the inmate inside a sealed, conductive metal box and ran a current through it. But the experiment was stopped halfway because it was deemed too inhumane. The inmate survived, but he was unconscious for a month. The real problem started afterward. When he finally woke up, the inmate knew everything that had happened outside during the time he was unconscious.”

“That’s impossible. How could that even happen?”

“Exactly. That’s why it was so shocking. The scholar proposed a theory of soul ionization. When they broke down the soul with electricity, it created an electromagnetic force that pulled information from the world around the inmate. Of course, the academic community dismissed it as the work of a madman. There were even rumors that the inmate bribed the guards to give him information.”

“Wow. I didn’t know experiments like that existed.”

“Mainstream scholars don’t acknowledge it, but it’s still a hot topic in the field of supernatural science. Plus, official religious organizations, like the Spiritual Council, recognize trance states. So the idea of soul ionization isn’t completely out of the question. Anyway, the sensation that inmate felt is what this field refers to as ‘supernatural perception.’”

Shirone felt a chill down his spine. The idea of “supernatural perception” seemed connected to his nightmares, and he began to wonder if it could really be happening to him.

“Well then, I guess it’s time for me to share my conclusion.”

Shirone snapped out of his thoughts and looked up, curious to hear what Iruki had to say. He was always the logical one, and in situations like this, he and Nade made quite the pair.

“But first, I need to ask you something. You said this supernatural perception started after the Speed Gun test, right? I noticed that your Photon Output was different that

day. You don't have to reveal any secrets if you don't want to, but knowing more might help us figure this out."

Shirone agreed that Iruki had a point. To analyze the results, they needed to understand the cause. Besides, it wasn't like he was trying to keep anything hidden from his friends—he had just been too caught up in everything to mention it before.

Shirone explained in detail how he had reached the realm of infinity, the insights he had gained through his journey with sequences, and how, under the pressure of competition, he had unintentionally awakened to a transcendent level of mathematical understanding.

Iruki nodded as he listened. He had heard about such concepts from his father. It seemed that Shirone had opened the door to something forbidden.

"That's the Immortal Function."

"The Immortal Function?"

"I remember hearing about it when I was younger. It's the absolute equation that can unlock all the secrets of the world. But I think it's very dangerous. Everything, in the end, is the same as nothing—at least, in a certain sense."

Hearing this, Shirone suddenly realized just how dangerous his attempt had been. Even Ethella had warned him against it.

"I wasn't really planning on going that far... I never want to experience that again."

Iruki shook his finger, as if to say, *What are you talking about?*

"Actually, it's the opposite. Like I said, the Immortal Function is already being studied in academic fields as a mental state. The mind is different from knowledge. Just because someone understands it logically doesn't mean they can do what you did. Still, after hearing your story, I feel a little more at ease. I mean, if you can beat me, then you must have mastered the Immortal Function. Heh heh."

Iruki's casual attitude toward the Immortal Function—something even Ethella had feared—was bizarre, yet it reassured Shirone in a strange way.

"Hmm. So that's what the Immortal Function was. Alright. I think things are starting to make sense now."

"Really? You figured something out?"

Instead of answering, Iruki turned his head to look at the wall, as if drawing equations in his mind.

"I'm not an expert on the supernatural, so I can't say much about your supernatural perception. But as for that nightmare you've been having, I have a pretty good idea of what it is. And I think I know why you're having it, too."

Shirone instinctively clenched his fists.

"Tell me. I'm ready to hear anything, even if it sounds absurd."

"Dreams usually distort or exaggerate memories. But in your case, I think your dream is a direct reflection of your memory. It's a phenomenon known as psychological regression, similar to how people under hypnosis can recall their past with extreme clarity. So, if we assume your nightmare is of that type..."

"If we assume...?"

"What you saw might be... the universe."

"The universe?"

Shirone knew what the universe was—a vast realm beyond this world. But his knowledge was limited to that. In fact, who really knew what the universe was like? Since ancient times, people had known of its existence, but no one had actually seen it.

The only beings to ever experience the universe were the dragons. 680 years ago, Saint Dragon Gramishu had decided to leave the planet and traveled to space in the presence of representatives from various species. However, after just thirteen hours, Gramishu crashed back to the surface, his body in a horrendous state.

The representatives had followed his dying words and taken his remains back to their homelands. The evidence they collected would later play a significant role in advancing theories about the universe.

“And you’re saying that what I saw in my dreams... was the universe?”

Chapter 51: Strange Research Society (3)

“My major is computational physics. Based on the scale, speed, and shape of the space you described, there’s no way such phenomena could occur anywhere but in the universe. The numbers are just too large to be simulated on the continent.”

“But how could I have such a dream? If it’s a psychological regression, it would have to be my memory. But I’ve never been to space.”

“Maybe not physically, but memories can still exist. And this is where Nade’s expertise comes into play.”

As soon as Iruki mentioned it, a thought flashed in Shirone’s mind.

“Supernatural perception...”

Nade nodded.

“Exactly. In the soul transmission experiment, the death row inmate knew everything about world events that occurred during the month he was unconscious. How could that be? Did his soul fly around like a pigeon, listening in on conversations? It’s possible, but I think that’s too human-centered a way of thinking. Eyes and ears are specific biological organs with clear origins. A soul wouldn’t have those. The soul might be some kind of unique substance, and when it was broken down electrically, something strange happened. It either merged with other information or transcended time and space, traveling faster than we can comprehend.”

Iruki agreed with Nade’s explanation.

“Electrons can’t be observed and measured at the same time. It’s like when you pluck a guitar string; you can’t

pinpoint its exact position while it's vibrating. It only exists within a range of probabilities. This is called quantization. If a soul were ionized, even space wouldn't matter—it exists in a world where the relationship between time and distance collapses.”

Shirone nodded slowly. Though nothing had been completely solved, having some logical explanations and evidence made him feel much less afraid.

“Hmm, I think I'm starting to get it. Thanks a lot. You guys really do live up to the reputation of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club.”

“Haha! You shouldn't be so easily impressed. Anyway, don't worry too much. You're not cursed or anything. It seems like it might be connected to the Immortal Function, so let's investigate that further.”

Shirone nodded, his resolve strengthening.

“Alright! I'm joining the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club too.”

There was no reason for Nade to refuse. Besides, with Shirone joining, the club would finally have three members. It would be officially recognized as a research group, and they could get back the funding that had been cut off a year ago.

“Of course, you're welcome anytime. Iruki, you agree, right?”

“Hmm. For the future of the club, Shirone would definitely be a good addition. But will the administration approve? The club's reputation is notorious, and there are many teachers who oppose us.”

“Leave that to me. I'll just slip the paperwork in quietly, and it'll be done before anyone notices. Let's go right now!”

Nade, eager to act, rushed out of the lab, and Shirone followed behind Iruki with a smile. Before closing the door, he glanced around the lab. It was more of a storage room, covered in dust, but now that he thought of it as his research club, it had a certain charm.

“Still, we’ll need to clean up.”

Shirone closed the door and turned off the lights from outside. The dark, silent room felt completely still. The dust on the couch where Shirone had been sitting swirled gently in the air.

Overflow (1)

The atmosphere in the teacher’s office was unusually busy. Normally, after class, the teachers would relax, sipping tea or chatting while waiting for the next lesson. However, today, all the teachers were working together to sort through a large pile of documents.

Sorting and documenting dozens of membership applications before passing them on to the relevant department was a much more time-consuming task than expected.

Siena, who had just finished her class, silently approached the stack of papers piled high on the large desk.

“Oh my, all these are membership applications? Quite a lot this week,” she remarked.

“Haha, it’s the end of the term. It’s always like this around this time,” a teacher replied.

Once the term ends and vacation starts, students are required to submit papers on independent topics by the start of the next term. However, such evaluations can be replaced by presentations from research clubs, so it had become a trend for even students not in a club to temporarily join one at the end of the term.

Thadd, who was helping with the task, commented, “Kids these days, always looking for shortcuts. It wasn’t like this before. Research clubs and evaluations used to be about passion. Nowadays, all they care about is efficiency.”

“Haha! Things are different now. Competition has gotten fiercer in the last ten years, and students are under a lot of stress. Temporarily joining a research club is a way to buy time for their personal studies.”

"Maybe so, but I can't help but think they've lost sight of the joy of school life. There's something to be said for the romance of youth, you know?"

The teacher, seemingly in agreement, let out a bitter laugh. Just as he was gathering the documents to pass them on to the relevant department, Siena noticed a paper that had fallen under the desk.

"Looks like one was missed."

"Oh? When did that come in? Must have been left during class."

"Haha, someone was in quite a hurry."

Curious to see which student was trying to cut corners, Siena glanced over the document. When she saw the name, she adjusted her glasses, doubting her eyes.

"This... Is this really Shirone's application?"

The teacher leaned over to check.

"That's right. Arian Shirone. I didn't think he was interested in joining a club. But then again, with so many students pulling stunts like this, I guess it was inevitable."

Thadd snatched the application and frowned as he read it.

"I don't think that's the case here. The club he's applying for is quite well-known."

"Let me see."

Siena took the application back from Sade and looked at the club Shirone was joining. It was indeed a famous one.

'The Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Club.'

The name struck like a bolt from the blue.

She remembered having numerous conflicts with graduates from that club every year since she had become a teacher.

The mere thought made her head ache.

'Wait, come to think of it...'

Most of the troublemakers from the Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Club had graduated last year, hadn't they? She vaguely recalled hearing that the club lost its funding due to a lack of members.

The teacher smiled and said, "Now that you mention it, I heard that Iruki is also part of that club. Maybe they hit it off?"

Thadd let out a dry laugh. "I heard he did great during the targeting exam. But I'm surprised they get along. They don't seem like the type to mesh well."

Siena, with a pained expression, said, "Yes, and that's exactly the problem."

If Iruki, who was as talented as Shirone, had convinced him, even the stubborn Shirone might have changed his mind. But Iruki?

He was the biggest troublemaker in the school. Even though both were geniuses, the paths Shirone and Iruki followed were completely different.

They might help each other grow, but there was just as much chance they'd clash and drag each other down. That could lead to disaster for the school.

'Maybe this is a chance to break their bad connection.'

Siena opened the file and checked who the club president was.

As expected, it was Nade.

The club was where the two students Shirone had become closest with recently were both members.

Now, she was beginning to understand why Shirone, who had previously stayed far from clubs, decided to join.

'And Nade's supervising teacher is...'

She mentally went over the list of teachers, searching for the supervisor. The moment she found the name, she sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead.

"Of all people..."

At the training hall on the outskirts of the magic school, Etella was meditating in the lotus position.

The Karsis Monastic Order she belonged to was the largest in the kingdom, with over a thousand monk apprentices. Every year, hundreds of children were brought in by their

parents, but only a select few were recognized for their talent and became monks.

Among those few, Ethella stood out.

She had surpassed many high-ranking nobles, and even members of the royal family, to become the youngest bishop.

The position of bishop was not something one could attain through skill alone. Ethella had caught the attention of the elders for her natural disposition as a seeker.

I will be the light and salt of the world.

With this vow, she had turned her back on wealth and fame, choosing instead to become a teacher at Alpheas Magic Academy.

‘Thank you for letting me complete another day of teaching safely,’ she silently prayed.

This was what set Ethella apart from other teachers. Her background was not in academia or the magic associations, but the monastery.

While magicians critically analyzed the world, monks sought to embrace it whole, with infinite gratitude for the nature that sustained them and a mission to share that feeling with others.

Ethella slowly opened her eyes, a strange gleam in them as they pierced the empty space before her.

Through her Spirit Zone, she sensed a woman approaching. Ordinarily, a standard Spirit Zone wouldn’t reveal details like a person’s gender. But Ethella, a master of the technique, had heightened sensory abilities far beyond those of ordinary magicians.

If a typical Spirit Zone could be compared to air, Ethella’s was like liquid, denser and more sensitive to stimuli.

Rising from her seat, she waited for her guest. After a long while, Siena opened the door, and Ethella greeted her with a smile.

“Welcome, Teacher Siena.”

Siena wasn't surprised to see Etehlla already waiting. She was well aware of the remarkable clarity of her Spirit Zone.

"Were you meditating? I hope I'm not intruding."

"No, I was just finishing up. Please, come in."

"Thank you. Excuse me."

It wasn't often that Siena visited the training hall. Sensing a long conversation ahead, Ethella began to brew some tea.

While mats were laid out, sitting on the floor was unfamiliar to Siena. Still, she knelt politely and accepted the tea

Ethella offered with care.

Remembering that it was custom in the monastery to remain silent until after drinking the first cup, Siena refrained from speaking as she finished her slightly bitter tea.

Though it was summer, the golden hues of sunset were already spreading across the sky. Wanting to start the conversation before it got too late, Siena emptied her cup a little faster.

Sensing her eagerness, Ethella kindly broke the silence.

"If you've come all the way here, this must be something serious."

"Yes, I need your advice on something."

"What is it?"

"You're Nade's supervising teacher, aren't you?"

"Yes. He's a lively and good-hearted student. His grades are above average, and he has plenty of talent. He also gets along well with his peers."

"Are you aware that he's the president of the Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Club?"

"Of course. Has he done something wrong?"

Siena straightened her posture, her expression resolute.

"I'm planning to disband that club. I thought it would be proper to inform the supervising teacher first."

Ethella smiled softly and sipped her tea. After a long moment of contemplation, she finally spoke.

“If that’s your decision, I’m sure it’s for the students’ best interests. But I’d like to hear your reasoning this time.”

“The Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Club has had many incidents in the past. Even before I started here, it had a terrible reputation. The school overlooked it because it also had some achievements. But that’s no longer the case. I went through their records and found that they haven’t held a formal presentation in three years. On the contrary, they’ve only caused trouble—enough to warrant disciplinary action.”

“But as you said, isn’t that all in the past? The current members are Nade, Iruki, and Shirone—three of the most talented students, even compared to Class Four. Shouldn’t we give them more time? Besides, the Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Club has a long history at Alpheas Magic Academy. I believe even the president of the Magic Association, Gaold, is an alumnus.”

Chapter 52: Overflow (2)

“It’s different from when Gaold attended. Students these days are obsessed with doing well in assessments, even if they have to find shortcuts. If talented kids only chase after dreams, they’ll fall behind.”

“Haha, that’s so like you, Teacher Siena. Well, those three are indeed the school’s promising students. If they fall behind, it would be a huge loss for the school as well.”

Siena didn’t deny it. She wanted to help talented students blossom even more. That was her philosophy of education. Ethella, on the other hand, had the exact opposite approach. She never showed favoritism or forced anyone to follow a particular path. She believed competition wasn’t everything. Yet, when it came to results, the students she mentored were never behind Siena’s.

‘Am I being selfish?’ Siena wondered. ‘I don’t want to ruin the joys of their school days. But if it leads to the waste of their talents, what would their future hold?’

Siena sighed, clearly troubled.

“Hah... I don’t know. I really don’t. Why do these talented kids always seem to drift toward a different path? And why did Shirone join that place?”

Ethella quietly stared down at her teacup, deep in thought. She was the only one who knew that Shirone had experienced Nirvana.

It was Shirone’s experience, his own breakthrough, and she didn’t want to reveal it unnecessarily. But staying silent, even to his assigned teacher Siena, didn’t seem right either.

“Have you noticed anything strange about Shirone lately?” Ethella asked.

“Shirone? Hmm... there’s more than just one or two things. It’s all because he’s been hanging out with those kids. He

probably joined the study group because Nade and Iruki convinced him.”

“There might be another reason.”

“What? What do you mean...?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but something happened during the Speed Gun test.”

Ethella explained how Shirone had entered a state of Nirvana while targeting. Siena’s face turned pale.

“Is that true? But that’s the Immortal Function!”

The Immortal Function was a supreme state, though it didn’t necessarily mean the highest level of mastery. In some cases, even a beggar on the street could attain a deeper realization than a seasoned magician. For someone like Shirone, still just a student, it was a dangerously advanced concept to handle.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier? This is a huge issue!”

Ethella didn’t believe in labeling problems as big or small. Everything depended on perspective, and Shirone wanted to make his own decisions.

“Shirone already knows. In fact, it would be odd if he didn’t. Nirvana is an enlightenment even I have never reached.

When it comes to that, I felt it wasn’t my place to interfere.”

“I understand how you feel, Teacher Ethella. You can’t force someone into something you don’t know yourself. But what if he overflows? There might be no way back from that.”

Overflow was a phenomenon often found in prodigies who awakened to their talents too early, before their minds were fully developed.

A calm mind was like a still pool of water. When it overflowed, the person would lose control, becoming mad. This explained why many geniuses ended up eccentric or unstable.

People often said that the earlier someone experienced overflow, the greater their talent, but to Siena, such comments were just reckless glorification by people who idolized geniuses.

Siena herself had experienced overflow when she was only nine years old. The world, in her eyes, wasn't a rainbow-colored land of curiosity but a cold, mechanical space filled with rigid rules.

It was unbearable. She locked herself away in darkness. Despite the continuous efforts of the Olipher school, there was no sign of improvement.

She remembered the year she spent in that world of darkness. And she also remembered the miracle—when a ray of light pierced through that darkness.

A golden-haired boy had reached through the door, offering her his light. If he hadn't done so, Siena would never have made it to where she was now.

Siena. It's time to leave now.

Recalling that time, Siena gave a bitter smile. The memory told her one thing: she mustn't let Shirone walk the same path.

Shirone had grown rapidly in a short period of time. The stimulus from interacting with so many talented people, coupled with intense competition, had led to consecutive breakthroughs. And now, with the Immortal Function in the mix, the chance of overflow was extremely high.

"Teacher Ethella, I've suffered from overflow in my childhood. Haven't you as well?"

"Yes, of course."

Siena realized it was a foolish question. The average age for magicians to reach the recognized 6th level was 28, yet here they were, only 26 and already holding this rank for six years.

Considering that the average time to advance from 6th to 5th rank was ten years, they were already among the top-tier magicians at their level.

With such genius, the absence of overflow would've been the surprising thing.

"I experienced it for the first time when I was seven, which is why I ended up at Karsis Monastery. But thanks to the

wonderful people I met, I made it through safely.”

Siena felt a pang of jealousy upon hearing that Ethella had experienced it two years earlier than she had, but she quickly shook it off.

The younger you were, the more likely you were to be destroyed by overflow. For a child, the terrifying sense of disorientation would have been too much to bear.

“That must have been hard.”

“It was terrifying. If I hadn’t gone to the monastery, I probably wouldn’t have lived a normal life.”

To awaken so early, at seven, must have been unimaginable. Only a place like Karsis Monastery, where the greatest ascetics gathered, could have saved Ethella’s mind.

“Then why are you leaving Shirone to his own devices? You know better than anyone the fear of overflow.”

“Shirone is different from us. He’s not seven or eight. He’s eighteen. The danger of overflow comes from not having a strong enough mind to contain it, but I believe Shirone has the strength to handle it. Overflow is, in a way, the process of embracing one’s genius. If Shirone overcomes this hurdle, he’ll grow even more.”

There was logic to Ethella’s words. Siena herself had gained control of her magic after experiencing overflow.

But that had only been possible because of the miraculous help she had received. And the cost had been the loss of a precious person’s light.

“I understand your concerns, Teacher Siena. But not everyone who experiences overflow is ruined. I wasn’t, after all.”

Ethella was a unique case. Perhaps her meditative practice, her single-minded pursuit of enlightenment, had made overflow less of a threat. Siena, with those thoughts in mind, said:

“I know Shirone isn’t small-minded. But this is the Immortal Function we’re talking about. The worst could happen. If

that happens, will you be able to take responsibility?"

"I don't teach to take responsibility. I believe Shirone will overcome it."

"But..."

"But."

Ethella set down her teacup, speaking firmly.

"If the worst happens, I'm prepared to spend the rest of my life atoning for it."

Siena fell silent. Ethella's resolve surpassed that of a teacher—it reached the self-sacrificing spirit of a monk.

Had Siena, perhaps, lacked that kind of resolve herself?

Bringing her hands together in a gesture of respect, Siena bowed her head in farewell.

The iron door of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society creaked open. As dust rose from the floor, Shirone waved his arms, coughing as he tried to clear the air. Behind him, Nade entered with a weary expression, tossing his bag aside and collapsing onto the sofa.

Iruki was playing chess by himself, moving the black and white pieces in rapid succession, barely pausing to think.

One game ended in a flash, and without hesitation, he lined up the pieces and began another.

"You're here. How was your day?" Nade asked in a sleepy voice, his feet propped on the back of the sofa.

"Same as always. Nothing interesting," Shirone replied with a sigh as he looked at his friends. Iruki was skipping classes daily to play chess, and Nade, whenever he showed up to the society, would do nothing but nap.

"Iruki, you skipped your afternoon classes again, didn't you? What are you going to do if you end up failing?"

"I'll be fine. I just need to make up for it with my grades," Iruki said nonchalantly.

As annoying as his answer was, Shirone couldn't argue—it was true. Iruki was maintaining his place in Class Five purely through his science and engineering scores. His humanities

grades, on the other hand, were zero. Still, he had enough leeway to raise his overall average by about 20 points without much effort, so there was no immediate cause for concern.

‘Isn’t this a bit too much? I’ve never seen anyone in Class Five be this lazy,’ Shirone thought to himself.

Iruki skipped classes every day, yet his science scores saved him from failure. Nade, for all his laziness, still managed to stay in the upper-middle ranks. Watching them made Shirone, who was working hard to study, feel like a fool.

“I think I made a mistake joining this club.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You know we don’t take take-backs here,” Iruki teased.

“No, I mean it. I feel like I’m going to lose my mind if I stay here any longer.”

“What are you talking about? What have we done?”

“This is supposed to be a research society, but all we do is mess around. And despite that, your grades are better than mine. Being around you two just makes me feel more anxious.”

“Are you serious? After crushing me in the last test, you have the nerve to say that?” Iruki shot back.

“Yeah, you’re way too modest. It sounds like you’re just bragging at this point,” Nade added. It didn’t make sense to compare Shirone, who hadn’t even been enrolled for a full year, with them, who had been training since childhood.

“I’m serious. I’m going to cut back on club activities from now on. It’s not like you guys are planning to do any of the performance evaluations, right? I’d rather spend that time studying.”

At that, Iruki and Nade realized Shirone wasn’t joking. Being the model student that he was, he probably couldn’t handle the thought of wasting time not studying.

“Then why not study here instead?” Iruki suggested.

“Huh? Here?”

“Yeah. We feel kinda bad for you, to be honest. We want to hang out with you, but it feels like we’re just distracting you. So why not study here? It’s not a bad idea, and who knows? Maybe we’ll get inspired, too.”

“Hmm...” Shirone pondered for a moment, then nodded. While it seemed unlikely that he’d get much studying done in this bizarre research club, if it motivated his friends, it might be worth a shot. Sweeping the junk off the table onto the floor, he placed his bag down.

“Alright, I’ll study here. But you guys can’t disturb me.”

“Heh. Don’t worry. We’re busy people too, you know,” Nade said, immediately sprawling out on the sofa again.

“So, what should we do now? I’m bored out of my mind,” he added.

Shirone felt a vein pulse in his temple but held back his anger. This was nothing compared to the challenges he would likely face in the future. He opened his textbook, trying to focus. Meanwhile, Iruki, now on his 34th round of chess, was quickly moving his pawns and bishops, casually speaking to Nade.

“If you’re bored, go read a picture book or something. I brought this month’s issue.”

“Oooh! Really?”

Nade sprang up as if shot from a cannon and dove into the pile of junk under the table, burrowing into it like a mole.

‘A picture book? Is it an art collection?’ Shirone wondered. Though Nade’s antics were distracting, Shirone was also interested in art, so he decided to let it go. After a moment, Nade emerged from the trash heap, holding up a book and waving it triumphantly in the air.

Chapter 53: Overflow (3)

“Hahaha! The latest issue of the picture book! How long I’ve been waiting for this day!”

Shirone glanced at the book in Nade’s hands, and his face flushed. From the cover alone, it was clear this was far from a collection of fine art. It featured a drawing of a woman’s naked body from neck to thighs, with the words “Women’s Body Research Society” written along the seam.

“What the heck is that weird book?”

“Ah, you wouldn’t know. This *is* a picture book. A rare privilege enjoyed by only a select few in the magic academy,” Nade explained with a smirk.

Iruki added, “In simpler terms, it’s the non-productive pastime of people with too much time on their hands. Hehe!”

The “picture book” was a euphemism used by students to describe a semi-nude collection of drawings depicting women’s bodies.

Of course, it wasn’t an official publication. It was a smut book produced by students majoring in art, working in teams to publish it under the unofficial “Women’s Body Research Society”. Despite this, it was wildly popular among the students who knew about it. What made it even more infamous was that the drawings often depicted people from the magic academy.

Female students, female teachers, and sometimes even male students or teachers—anyone associated with the school could end up as a model, which was why the school administration had such a headache with it.

Though the school routinely confiscated the publications, the group operated in a decentralized manner, making it impossible to catch the core members. There were rumors

that the leader of the society was a graduating senior, but nothing had been confirmed.

As Shirone listened to the explanation, he stood in stunned silence. In a way, this society was pulling off something far more outrageous than anything Iruki or Nade had ever done.

"So, Iruki, you actually look at stuff like this? I'm surprised," Shirone remarked.

Iruki, still focused on his chess game, waved his hand dismissively.

"It's purely for information gathering. The Women's Body Study Society has a knack for collecting all sorts of rumors," he said.

Nade flipped to the back of the book, showing Shirone the detailed notes. Just as Iruki had said, there were extensive descriptions accompanying the illustrations. The backgrounds and personal details of the female students were meticulously recorded, almost too much effort for something supposedly done for fun.

The reason they stuck to semi-nudes was a clever loophole to avoid violating the laws of Creas City. Yet, the suggestive poses were so lewd that even an outsider could tell it was far from art.

As Nade flipped through the book, he let out a stream of admiration.

"Whoa! This month's issue is incredible! Iruki, can I tear out page seven?"

"Do whatever you want. I've already memorized all the details."

Shirone stared blankly at Nade. What on earth was he planning to do with that page?

"Aren't you supposed to be studying...?" Shirone muttered.

Nade burst into laughter. It was probably the first time a model student like Shirone had joined the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society, a place filled with troublemakers.

“Shirone, you’ll get used to this soon enough. Once you spend more time here, you’ll realize there are way more interesting things than class. Trust me, sticking around won’t be a waste.”

But just as Nade was gleefully flipping to the next page, his expression suddenly stiffened. He glanced at Shirone nervously.

“Uh, Shirone, please don’t freak out.”

“What now? Is there something even more shocking?”

“Well... senior Amy is in this issue.”

“What?! Give me that!”

Shirone snatched the book out of Nade’s hands. A rather risqué illustration took up an entire page, so realistic it could’ve been mistaken for a photograph.

“Shirone, don’t get the wrong idea. Just, um, how close is the resemblance? I’ve always wondered...”

“Resemblance? What resemblance?! And how would I know?!”

Iruki chuckled, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Come on, from the way you act, it’s obvious you’re not really dating her. I bet you haven’t even held her hand yet, right?”

“Ugh, why don’t you focus on your own love lives instead of poking around in mine!” Shirone shot back.

He returned his gaze to the picture book. Despite everything, the level of artistry was undeniable. It was so lifelike that the figures seemed to leap off the page.

‘Even I can tell this person has amazing talent. But why waste it on something like this?’ he thought.

Tearing out the page with Amy on it, Shirone crumpled it up. He couldn’t stand the thought of her being featured in such a disgraceful publication.

“Ugh...” He tore the page without looking, his face turned away. Nade, meanwhile, was doubled over, laughing so hard he could barely breathe.

“Pfft! What are you doing? Don’t take it so seriously! It’s just a figment of their imagination. They didn’t actually see her in real life or anything.”

Shirone glared at him. Whether it was based on imagination or not, Amy was a friend who had fought alongside him against the Black Magicia. If possible, he would have liked to find this Women’s Body Research Society and shut it down for good.

“Enough with these stupid books. If you guys aren’t going to study, at least do something productive. This is a research society, after all. Are we really going to sit around doing nothing all day?”

Realizing that studying here was a lost cause, Shirone decided to come up with something they could do together.

“How about we check out one of Nade’s inventions? He’s supposed to have a patent list as long as my arm.”

“Oh, right! I haven’t shown Shirone yet,” Nade said, diving back under the table. Curious about what was hidden in the pile of junk, Shirone crouched down to take a look. To his surprise, there was a safe concealed there.

“Ta-da! What do you think, Shirone? Can you see it?”

Shirone blinked in confusion. Nade’s hands appeared to be empty. But upon closer inspection, the air seemed to shimmer, as if something invisible was creating a distortion in the surroundings.

“Wait... is this what I think it is?”

“Haha! This is what you call an invisibility cloak!”

The invisibility cloak worked by using electrical forces to bend light, creating the illusion that light was passing through it. Shirone had read about such things in books, but it was his first time seeing one in real life.

“Did you really make this? You?”

Shirone couldn’t believe it. While he wasn’t deeply knowledgeable in magical engineering, he knew well enough how valuable an invisibility cloak was.

Electric magic had immense potential not just in combat, but in industrial applications as well. In fact, the most commonly used magic by electric mages was not lightning, but illusion-based magic. Among the highest forms of illusion magic was invisibility, known as Invisibility, which this cloak replicated.

Though the invention wasn't originally Nade's, being able to replicate and manufacture an invisibility cloak required the engineering skills of a professional in the field.

"My dream is to become a magical engineer. Of course, compared to the expensive cloaks out there, this is pretty low-grade. The material's inferior, and the charging mechanism only allows it to work for an hour. But hey, it's still pretty good, right?"

When Nade donned the cloak, his form vanished smoothly. The quality of an invisibility cloak was determined by its ability to bend light. If the refraction rate dropped below 95 percent, it could no longer be called "invisible," and the slightest difference in percentage marked a technical distinction. Although Nade couldn't achieve 100 percent refraction, the effect was still striking enough.

As Nade moved, Shirone could faintly make out a hazy outline. However, when he stood still, it was nearly impossible to tell someone was there without close observation.

Shirone was thoroughly impressed. To independently create magical equipment sold in shops required not only magical knowledge but also a good grasp of alchemy.

"That's amazing. If you put as much effort into studying, your grades would probably be much better."

"Hahaha! Maybe, but I'm happiest when I'm making things, not studying magic. And this is just one of the things I've got. Take a look."

Nade started pulling out more items from his vault. There was a miniature carriage powered by electricity and a

hologram vision device that projected illusions on a crystal plate. Both had impressive craftsmanship.

Some of the inventions, like flashbangs or smoke bombs, were based on Iruki's ideas, but they couldn't compare to the items in Nade's personal collection.

As Nade enthusiastically explained each invention, Shirone realized something important. Nade wasn't wasting his talent. In his field, he was far ahead of other students his age.

"This carriage's engine has a rotational speed of—huh?"

Nade suddenly stopped mid-sentence as the room began to tremble. The shaking grew more intense, causing the chess pieces on the board to topple.

Iruki dashed out into the hallway to check, then quickly returned, his face full of urgency.

"Damn it! The teacher's coming! Hide everything, quick!"

"What? What's going on?"

There was no time to explain. Nade swiftly hid the illicit items, including the semi-nude art book and their stash of smoke bombs, in the vault. He then dragged the flustered Shirone to the sofa, shouting.

"Shirone! Sit here! It's a surprise inspection!"

The automated system of Istas began to activate. The flashing red lights in the hallway indicated that the research lab on the first floor would soon be summoned.

"The teacher's coming? Shouldn't we greet them?"

As Shirone started to get up, Nade pushed him back onto the sofa.

"No, just act like nothing's going on! If they find the art book or the smoke bombs, we're in serious trouble."

"Oh, okay."

Shirone quickly used his mental discipline to compose himself. His friends, even in the midst of the urgency, couldn't help but marvel at how his facial expression now exuded an almost chilling calm. Now ready for the

impending confrontation, they waited for Istas to reach the surface.

“Ugh, how annoying.”

Siena massaged her temples as a headache started to creep in. It took at least three minutes for Istas to drag the lab down to the first floor. That was plenty of time for the students to either escape or hide any incriminating evidence.

In the past, some teachers had tried raiding the lab without using Istas, but they had spent over an hour searching the building and still couldn't find it. Meanwhile, the students came and went freely from the lab. Siena had a rough idea of how they did it—analyzing the movement pattern of the cubes around the lab to guess its location.

Though Istas was a commercially available magic storage system, the manufacturing company had never released its schematics. Yet, over twenty years ago, a student had figured out how to crack it, using that knowledge to cloak the activities of the research society. It was absurd.

Siena sat with her arms crossed, tapping her foot impatiently. Three minutes felt like an eternity.

‘The more I think about it, the more infuriating it is. How did a student figure out a pattern that even the teachers couldn't crack? And even if they did, why not use it for something constructive? What am I supposed to do with these kids?’

This was the problem with underground research societies. If they were just causing trouble, the school could handle it. But the intellectual abilities of these students often surpassed the school's control.

Take the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society, for instance. If they wanted to, they could easily outsmart a group like the delinquent Black Magicia. They were that sharp.

‘Why on earth did Shirone join this group? What does he think he’s going to gain from Immortal Function? These kids aren’t going to help him with that. And joining this group will ruin his performance evaluations.’

Nade, who seemed like a simple student on the surface, had a sharp intellect in the research society. Iruki, the problem child from Class Five with Savant Syndrome, skipped classes for fun yet had a brain that could solve complex problems with ease. And now Shirone, the school’s top student, had joined them. How did these three, who didn’t seem to fit together, end up so tightly knit?

‘Does talent really attract talent? Sure, Nade and Iruki can probably keep up with each other, but...’

Chapter 54: Overflow (4)

Siena steeled her heart, determined not to waver. Shirone, who had awakened the Immortal Function, could potentially fall into Overflow. Though Ethella had assured her that Shirone could overcome it on his own, if the worst-case scenario became a reality, Shirone's life could be ruined. As these thoughts lingered, Istas came to a halt. Without hesitation, Siena entered. She walked down the corridor and flung open the iron door with the sign *Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society* hanging on it. Inside, through the pale smoke that was slowly rising, the children were sitting there. Just as she had expected, they weren't startled and instead wore calm, relaxed smiles. This sight made Siena's anger rise again.

It was a familiar scene to her. The only difference was that the troublemakers she had repeatedly clashed with had all graduated, and now, Shirone had been newly added to their ranks.

'Why does everyone change when they join this society? Of all people, even Shirone?'

Normally, Shirone would greet her with a bright smile, but today, he maintained a perfect poker face. She had expected it, but it still made her feel a bit hurt. Beside him, Nade was sitting with his legs crossed arrogantly, and leaning back against the chair in a rebellious posture, head tilted up toward the ceiling, was Iruki. Even their attitudes radiated an air that kept teachers at a distance. Siena smirked as she walked in.

"You're not even going to greet your teacher? What is this?"

"We were so absorbed in our discussion that we lost track of time. Welcome," Nade replied coldly. The student-run societies fiercely guarded against teacher interference, and

it was by maintaining this stance that they had grown into a key part of the magical school community. It was only natural that the sudden surprise inspection didn't sit well with them.

'Hmph. So the school is one thing, but the society is another, huh?'

But today would be the last day they acted so smug. The teachers' council had already approved the disbanding of their society, and an agreement had been reached with their advisor, Ethella.

"So, what brings you here, teacher? We've been keeping a low profile lately," Nade said.

"I'm here because a notice regarding your society was issued. I thought I'd deliver it in person."

"Then please, come in. Though it's not much, you're welcome."

Nade gestured to a seat on the sofa, brushing it off with his hand, his attitude showing that he had nothing to hide.

"Thanks. While you're at it, why don't you pour me some tea?"

"Do you trust the tea I'd serve you? As you know, once Istas moves, no one can find this place."

Siena raised an eyebrow and smirked. She already knew there wasn't any tea—or even a glass of water—in this shabby warehouse. Despite their antics, she couldn't fully dislike them. There was a certain charm to their cleverness.

"Fine. You're right. Let's get to the point quickly, then. I need you to vacate this research lab within a month."

Nade's eyes went wide. The news hit him like a bolt from the blue, and immediately, he reverted to the mindset of a student as he protested.

"What? Vacate? Why so suddenly?"

"According to the paperwork, your society hasn't maintained the minimum required number of members this semester. The school has already cut your funding. So, if you could clear out within the next month, it would be appreciated."

“Wait a minute! But Shirone joined us! With three members, we can be recognized as an official society, can’t we?”

“But you haven’t been active at all, have you? If you want to keep the society going, you’ll have to produce some research results within the next month. Though I’m not sure what kind of research you could possibly do in a field like ‘Supernatural Science,’” Siena added with a hint of sarcasm. “That’s ridiculous! Societies aren’t required to hold presentations all the time!” Nade protested.

“This is a special case. The fact that your lab is located inside Istas and the notorious reputation you have make it different. Few societies are as inactive as yours. Even giving you a month is only because Ethella asked for it. You should be grateful.”

Shirone was dumbfounded. Just as he was starting to feel a connection to the society, they were being told to disband.

“But there is one way to save the society,” Siena said, her eyes narrowing.

Nade quickly leaned forward, full of hope.

“What is it? What do we have to do?”

“Get Shirone to quit this society. If you do that, I’ll look the other way until next semester at least.”

“What?!”

As Siena had predicted, Nade sprang to his feet.

“That’s absurd! We didn’t force Shirone to join! The three of us are always together, even in school. Why are you trying to split us up?”

Iruki spoke up.

“If it’s because I’ve been skipping class, don’t worry about it. We all have our own ways of studying.”

Shirone couldn’t stay silent any longer.

“I feel the same. I know this society has a bad reputation, and I know Iruki and Nade haven’t been attending their classes, but they’re both working hard in their own fields. They aren’t wasting their time. So, please, reconsider.”

Nade, knowing how fond Siena was of Shirone, held onto a glimmer of hope. But she held firm to her principles and replied sharply.

"It won't work. This decision is for your sake too, Shirone."

"What do you mean, 'for my sake'? I'm doing my best."

"Shirone, what's been going on with you lately?"

Shirone felt his heart sink. Nade and Iruki also avoided Siena's gaze.

Siena read their reactions and immediately knew. They had told their friend everything.

"You guys are really something. Especially you, Iruki. You should've known that Shirone could fall into Overflow, so why didn't you tell a teacher?"

Shirone turned to Iruki.

"Iruki... what's Overflow?"

"Well, it's nothing much... Just something that happens when you awaken beyond your current level. It happened to me when I was eight."

Siena wasn't satisfied with Iruki's explanation.

"If you fall into an Overflow, your mind could collapse.

Ethella told me about the Immortal Function. If you miss the critical moment, recovery might become impossible."

Shirone bit his lip, lost in thought. Every night, he suffered from nightmares and psychic disturbances. Sometimes, he wondered if he was going mad. If things continued like this, there was no guarantee he wouldn't.

Shirone asked Iruki again.

"How was it for you? What happened?"

"Hmm... Honestly, nothing much. It was a bit scary. When I told my father, he just said that I was always that way and that I'd live like that forever."

Siena's expression turned incredulous. His son cried to him, and that was all his father had to say? But knowing Iruki's father, it wasn't surprising. After all, Iruki's quirky personality likely had something to do with his father's neglect.

Desperately searching for a solution, Siena turned to Nade.
“Nade, as a friend, what do you think?”

“Hahaha, well, I can't really say much. I don't know what an Overflow feels like.”

Siena sighed. She had hoped that hearing his friends' experiences would help Shirone change his mind, but at least the danger was clear. Surely, Shirone would follow her lead now.

“Anyway, for that reason, Shirone is going to leave the club. If you truly care about him, you'll understand. Right now, his mental health is the most important thing.”

Nade answered with a nonchalant expression.

“Isn't that for Shirone to decide? I don't see it the same way.”

Siena sighed in frustration. How could they know about their friend's condition and still be so stubborn? This wasn't real friendship.

“That's because you don't understand how dangerous Overflow is. Iruki, you of all people should agree.”

“No, I also find it strange. This is something Shirone should decide for himself. I don't see why you're getting so involved, Teacher.”

It was a harsh thing to say between friends, but it was also what made their friendship real. Shirone didn't seem upset, which meant their way of thinking was the same: rooted in logic.

“So, you're saying you wouldn't mind if Shirone lost his mind?”

“There's no reason for that to happen. Besides, I believe Shirone can overcome it. If he wants to be the best, this is something he has to face.”

Nade chimed in.

“I think the same. To be honest, I think you're a bit biased towards Shirone, Teacher. It might even be a burden for him.”

Nade paused, then smirked as he added, "In fact, there's even a rumor going around that you're interested in him romantically."

Of course, no such rumor existed, but Nade knew how to get under her skin. It was a tactic he'd learned after clashing with Siena for years.

"Think what you like. Does that mean I can take responsibility for Shirone now?"

Even teachers couldn't force a student out of a club without breaking the rules. In cases like this, the club president's decision mattered most.

"Don't twist things. So, you're admitting that rumor is true?"

"If you want to think that, go ahead. But I'm not backing down. Shirone needs careful attention. It's you who's being unreasonable."

Nade, at a loss for words, was replaced by Iruki.

"I get you're worried, but if Shirone can't overcome Overflow, that's just his limit. He's not going to die from it. Isn't trusting Shirone the right thing to do?"

"Not going to die? If this were anything else, I wouldn't be so concerned. But this is the Immortal Function. There's no guarantee things won't go horribly wrong."

"Maybe. But nothing's happened yet. I just think you're overreacting to a problem that hasn't even happened. This isn't concern; it's obsession."

"Obsession?"

Siena swallowed hard. It felt like Iruki had touched on something deeper. Perhaps he was right. A darkness that had descended on her in her youth had left a scar deeper than any overflow could.

"It seems this is really about me," Shirone finally spoke after a long silence.

"I'm fine. To be honest, I'm scared. But more than that, I want to see what happens. I want to see if I can overcome it. Even if I fall into an Overflow, I'll never blame you, Teacher."

Shirone's words brought back memories for Siena. The one who had saved her from despair had said something similar. Siena, you must face whatever comes your way. No matter how terrifying, you can't look away. Closing your eyes won't make it disappear.

Go away! You don't understand anything, brother!

'If only I had that kind of courage back then...'

Chapter 55: Overflow (5)

Perhaps the terrible incident never happened. He had been someone as honest and pure as Shirone.

And yet, he lost his light. A genius whom the gods had cherished so dearly, lost his brilliance because of a coward like her.

"I see. I understand what you all think now."

Siena snapped out of her memories.

"I won't pressure Shirone to leave the club if that's his decision."

"But before that, when are you going to respect the club president's thoughts?"

"Haha, do you really have the luxury to play word games? You have one month. If you can't produce research results that the school finds satisfactory, the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club will be disbanded. The club that's produced so many graduates will end with your generation."

Nade's heart sank. He had almost forgotten that it wasn't just about being kicked out and left on the streets.

The alumni of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club held prominent positions in the magical society, despite the school's view of them as eccentrics. Particularly, the current head of the Magic Association, Michaea Gaold, had been a point of pride for generations. If the club's legacy were to end with them, they would have no face to show in the world of magic.

'Ugh, this is a nightmare. What do we do?'

Though they were given a month, it felt like nothing more than political maneuvering to dismantle the club. Moreover, the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club had never once held a formal presentation. How could they

logically prove the existence of ghosts or gods, things that might not even exist? Cornered, Nade threw away all pretense and begged Siena for mercy.

"Please, Teacher! Give us another chance! Isn't there any way besides a presentation? You know the truth. Our club exists because it holds meaning! We're the only ones who can challenge the purely logical magic society!"

Siena didn't even bother to snort in response.

"That's exactly why I'm telling you to make that challenge. This time, I can't make exceptions. The proposal has already been submitted to the teachers' council, and it can't be withdrawn. I hope you make the right decision."

As Siena left the clubroom, the sound of the heavy iron door closing signaled the end of their conversation. The students slumped onto the sofa, feeling dazed as if waking up from a bad dream. The clanking noise of Istas's mechanism echoed, gradually returning the lab to its original state.

Gauge Symmetry (1)

A leisurely holiday.

Normally, Shirone would bury himself in the library even on his days off, but now he was sitting idly in the central park. Iruki and Nade were sitting beside him, mindlessly sipping on their juice.

"What time is it?"

"No idea. But it's not night yet."

"You're a genius."

An awkward silence followed. When Shirone sighed, two more sighs echoed right after. Unable to hold it in any longer, Shirone abruptly stood up and shouted at them.

"What are we going to do about the club? Shouldn't we at least be thinking about a presentation topic instead of sitting around like this?"

"Yeah, let's think. What kind of research project could we come up with that would get the school's approval?"

Nade shook his head.

“As far as I know, we’ve never done an official presentation. Sure, we’ve caused a lot of interesting incidents, but there’s no way the school would officially recognize those as research.”

There was no way to elevate the subject of paranormal and supernatural science into a professional field. If such a method existed, it would have already spread to the world under the banner of science.

Shirone sat back on the bench, his mind going blank. He occasionally glanced at the legs of passing female students, and when a well-developed woman walked by, he would turn his head. But in truth, his mind was a blank slate.

“Hey, guys, look over there.”

Nade pointed somewhere with a casual nod of his chin. A beautiful woman they had never seen at school was heading toward the main gate. She was wearing an ivory trench coat and heels, with violet permed hair cascading down to her waist.

“Biologically speaking, she’s well-designed. Who is she?”

“Isn’t she a senior? Girls our age don’t usually dress that maturely.”

While the others were evaluating her, Shirone squinted his eyes, feeling a sense of familiarity.

“Could it be... isn’t that Ms. Siena?”

“Ms. Siena?”

Nade leaned forward and examined her closely. It was indeed her. She wasn’t wearing glasses, and her trademark neatly pinned-up hair was let down, but it was unmistakably Siena.

“Wow. Unbelievable. Can someone change that much?”

“Yeah, she looks like a completely different person with makeup on. But Shirone, how did you recognize her? Seems like you’ve got a good eye for women.”

“Huh? No, I just thought it looked like her.”

The reason Shirone recognized her instantly was that he had seen her with her hair down before. But he couldn’t bring

himself to tell them about the time she had visited him late at night, so he brushed it off.

"But where do you think she's going, all dolled up?"

"Today's her day off, and it's a holiday too. Maybe she has a date."

"Wasn't Ms. Siena always distant from men?"

"Even so, she must have someone she's seeing. She's 26, after all, definitely at a marriageable age."

"Hmm, I see..."

As Nade rubbed his chin and pondered, a light bulb seemed to go off in his head.

"Why don't we follow her? I'm curious."

"Follow her? Isn't that invading her privacy?"

"We have nothing else to do anyway. Sitting here thinking isn't going to solve anything, and my head feels like it's going to explode. It's a holiday, so as long as we're back before sunset, it should be fine."

Iruki was skeptical.

"Can we even tail her without being noticed? She's a certified 6th-class mage. Even without using Spirit Zone, she's bound to be highly perceptive. We'd get caught right away."

"Here's the plan: Iruki, you tail her, and Shirone, you act as the intermediary. I'll swing by the lab real quick."

Shirone realized what Nade was thinking.

"Invisible cloak?"

"Exactly. If we wear the invisible cloak while following her, even Ms. Siena won't notice. There's no reason for her to activate Spirit Zone just to go on a date. How about it?"

"That sounds like a decent idea. Alright, I'll start tailing her now. Shirone, make sure to bring Nade to me."

Iruki jumped up from the bench and started following Siena, while Shirone sighed. These kids were ridiculously proactive when it came to things like this.

"Okay, I'll go grab the invisible cloak. Shirone, don't lose track of Iruki. You can keep track of the checkpoints, right?"

Since the direction of the city is constrained by artificial structures like roads, tracking key points should give a rough idea of the route. Shirone had to make sure not to stray too far from Nade, so figuring out the return point was crucial.

Reluctantly, Shirone nodded. He hated that even in a situation like this, he had already finished calculating everything in his head.

“Got it. But hurry. I can’t keep up for more than 10 minutes.”

“Haha! That’s why I trust you, Shirone!”

Nade rushed off to the lab, and after tailing Iruki for 10 minutes, Shirone returned to pick up Nade at the main gate. They ran together, and 10 minutes later, they caught up with Iruki. When they arrived, Iruki wore a puzzled expression and shook his head.

“Something’s strange.”

“Why? Did you lose her?”

“No, but I almost did. She’s being unusually cautious, like she’s in a war zone.”

“Oh, this is getting interesting. Maybe she’s secretly dealing in forbidden goods, like us.”

Shirone gave Nade a disapproving look.

“Ms. Siena would never do something like that.”

“Anyway, let’s go. Now that we have the invisible cloak, we can get closer.”

The three of them covered themselves with the invisible cloak and continued tailing Siena. Entering the commoner district, they found the streets bustling with early morning vendors, making it easier to blend in.

Siena stopped in front of a two-story house. The trio peeked out from under the cloak to see who would open the door. As Siena glanced around, they quickly ducked back inside the cloak like turtles retreating into their shells. Their hearts pounded.

“She’s way too cautious. Who lives here that she’s acting like this? It’s just an ordinary commoner house.”

Driven by curiosity, they peeked out again. Since they hadn't done anything wrong, there was no need to freeze up.

A young man came out and immediately embraced Siena in a deep hug.

"No way...!"

Shirone and the others were shocked, without exception.

The nickname "Frozen Siena" not only referred to her magical specialty but also to her cold demeanor toward men. Yet, here she was, hugging a man. The trio exchanged glances, coming to terms with the reality before them.

"What's going on? That was definitely a guy, right?"

"Let's find out by going inside."

Shirone, flabbergasted, spoke up.

"What? How could we go inside someone else's house?"

"But doesn't it feel wrong to leave now? We should at least get the full picture."

"Ms. Siena is a woman, so of course she can meet a man. Why are you making such a big deal out of it?"

Iruki had a different perspective. Given the circumstances so far, there were too many strange things.

"Something's fishy. There's nothing wrong with Ms. Siena seeing a guy, but why hide it? She's officially single at school, and she's been acting so cautious."

"Exactly. That's why we need to check."

Shirone asked anxiously.

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll sneak in through the basement. Don't worry. Even if we get caught, it won't be a big deal. It's not like this is a stranger's house since Ms. Siena is inside."

Shirone gaped in disbelief.

"That's... a really subjective justification, isn't it?"

"I don't care. I'm going. I'm dying of curiosity."

As Nade and Iruki moved, Shirone sighed and reluctantly followed them. He wasn't thrilled about the idea, but leaving the two alone might lead to even worse decisions.

At the entrance to the basement, Nade examined the iron door. It was installed horizontally and firmly locked.

Taking out a device resembling a pen from his pocket, he pressed a button, and a sharp steel needle popped out. It was one of Nade's patented inventions, a lock-picking tool. Unlocking a padlock required precise manipulation of the internal mechanisms, but Nade's tool could adjust the steel needle to a hundredth of a centimeter, making it easy to pick a lock on a commoner's house.

With the tool inserted into the lock, Nade worked his wrist until the lock clicked open.

As the door swung open and a ladder leading to the basement appeared, Shirone was overcome with a sense of futility.

People trust locks because they believe in their security, but they forget that locks are human-made.

Descending the ladder, they were met with the sharp smell of onions, typical of a food storage cellar. While Shirone closed the iron door, Nade pressed his ear to the door leading to the first floor, listening for movement.

"Alright, it's quiet upstairs. Let's go up."

The three of them, now looking like disembodied floating heads under the cloak, headed for the first floor. They found themselves in a living room connected to the kitchen, but it was empty. They climbed the stairs to the second floor, where they heard movement from a room at the end of the hallway. They heard Siena's voice.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and get on with it."

As Shirone and Nade exchanged frantic facial expressions, Iruki motioned for them to be quiet. Then a man's voice followed.

"Hold on. I'm not ready yet. Just take your clothes off first."

"When will your wife be back?"

"She went to the market. She'll be gone for at least two hours."

Nade couldn't contain his excitement again. No, it wasn't just excitement anymore—it was shock, and his face showed it clearly.

Shirone felt the same. He never imagined, not in his wildest dreams, that the man Ms. Siena was seeing was married.

Chapter 56: Gauge Symmetry (2)

“Not wearing it today?”

“Yeah. Try straightening your back a little more.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah, just like that. Lift your legs slightly. Yeah, perfect.”

All three of their faces turned bright red. Sure, they were adults, and intimacy between a man and a woman was a normal thing. But this was an affair. If the school found out, Siena’s teaching career would be over.

“Shall we start? Don’t move.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve been holding still this whole time.”

Nade glanced back at his friends with a furious expression. Shirone and Iruki, understanding what he intended, both nodded in agreement.

While love may have no boundaries, it was only right to think about the wife who would be left heartbroken. This needed to end here.

Nade’s hand trembled as he grasped the doorknob. If they waited just a little longer, they could confirm everything. But the thought of seeing their respected teacher in such a situation was unbearable.

With a rough turn of the knob, the three of them burst into the room without any hesitation.

“You scumbag! Teacher Siena! I’m so disappointed in you!”

Nade’s shout was swallowed by the ensuing silence.

Shirone and Iruki, who had braced themselves for something scandalous, found themselves staring blankly at a scene that was entirely different from what they had imagined.

Siena, sitting on the bed, turned to look at them. In front of her stood a large canvas.

"Huh? What?"

The group stood there, their mouths opening and closing like fish. A single thought crossed all their minds: this was an enormous misunderstanding, a confusion of perception, and a wildly mistaken situation all at once.

"What are you doing here? How did you even...?"

Siena was just as shocked. Her face turned red at the sudden appearance of her students in such a private setting. But her embarrassment quickly turned to a frown.

"Did you... follow me?"

"Huh? No, well, the thing is, we were just sitting at the park, kind of zoning out, you know? And then we saw you pass by, and so..."

"So, you *did* follow me!"

"Eek! We're so sorry!"

The three of them shrank under her glare. Given her usual temper, they expected much worse. But, surprisingly, no further scolding came. When they cautiously opened their eyes, they saw Siena deep in thought.

'How did they manage to follow me?'

She had been careful, constantly staying alert to her surroundings. She hadn't even activated her Spirit Zone, but surely she wasn't careless enough to be tailed by students.

"What's that you're hiding? Hand it over."

Nade, terrified, shook his head. But as a hint of menace flickered in Siena's eyes, he hurriedly handed over the invisible cloak he'd been clutching. Siena snatched it from him, inspecting the cloak before draping it around her waist like a skirt. Now, her body appeared to be cut off from the waist down.

"Nade, is this one of your patented inventions?"

"Yes."

"You really made this yourself?"

“Yes, but I didn’t sell it on the black market! I have *some* sense of morality, you know.”

“Hmph.”

Siena sighed, and the three students flinched. However, instead of lecturing them further, she stayed quiet. As a certified 6th-class mage, being tailed like this was more a reflection of her own shortcomings than her students’ fault.

“So why did you come into this room? You knew you’d get caught. And what’s with saying you’re disappointed?”

Shirone, his voice trembling, explained, “At first, we were just following you for fun, but when we saw you hugging a man, we got curious. Then we overheard your conversation outside the door and... thought you were having an affair...”

“What? An a-affair?”

Siena’s face flushed bright red, more than they had ever seen. It was the first time they’d seen her so flustered.

“An affair? How could you even think that about me!”

Nade quickly retorted, “But we couldn’t help but misunderstand! You were talking about taking clothes off, and adjusting positions. Who is that guy anyway?”

He pointed at the man still hidden behind the canvas.

“You mean me?”

A warm voice came from behind the canvas, followed by the sound of a chair being pushed back. A moment later, the man appeared from behind the painting.

The group stared in disbelief. He was a handsome man in his late twenties with long blond hair that reached his waist. But what truly stunned them wasn’t his looks. It was the tattered cloth wrapped around his eyes. He was blind—a blind painter.

‘What the...?’

Shirone’s face turned pale. That eerie sensation he’d been feeling every night returned, enveloping his body.

‘Why is this happening? Why now? This never happens during the day.’

His skin prickled, and his bones felt like they were freezing. Gripping his trembling wrist, Shirone took a deep breath to calm himself. Sensing his unease, Nade patted him on the back.

“Hey, Shirone? You okay? Don’t worry too much. It’s not like Teacher’s going to kill us or anything, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m fine now.”

Gradually, Shirone regained his composure. The intense cold he had felt disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“Siena, let it go and forgive them. I don’t know the whole story, but they seem to be your students.”

“What are you talking about? That’s exactly why I can’t forgive them. It’s bad enough that they followed me, but they trespassed into someone else’s house! Honestly, they only seem to pick up bad habits.”

The man smiled kindly.

“He’s still your student, though. They must have thought it was okay since you were here,” Armin remarked, spotting an opportunity.

Nade chimed in eagerly, “Haha! We actually did think that! Honestly, Shirone never lies, so ask him. If it was just some stranger’s house, we would never have entered. We’re not thieves, after all.”

Shirone nodded enthusiastically.

“That’s right. Nade really did tell me that. I definitely heard him say it.”

Siena, rubbing her temple, looked exasperated. Their innocent expressions were almost frustrating, like they were trying too hard to look sincere.

‘Innocent kids pulling something like this? They’re too clever for their own good...’ she thought.

Hiding under an invisible cloak to follow their teacher, breaking into someone’s house — it wasn’t something to just brush off.

Despite everything, the man kept smiling. Above all, he was just happy to see Siena’s students.

"I'm Armin. Siena and I have been like siblings since we were little. I studied at the Olipher school, too."

When Armin extended his hand, Nade quickly shook it.

"Aha, I see! Well, we sincerely apologize for the misunderstanding. We're really sorry for dropping in out of nowhere like that."

Siena scolded him sharply.

"Breaking in is more like it! And you're trying to pass it off as a visit?"

"Hehe, well, that's why we're apologizing, isn't it? Honestly, we're just relieved the misunderstanding about you, Ms. Siena, has been cleared up."

"I'm really sorry, Teacher. I made such a strange mistake," Shirone added.

Siena crossed her arms and exhaled. She also felt awkward about this unexpected encounter with her students in a private setting, and a brief silence followed.

"For now, just sit and chat. I'll bring some tea," Armin said, quietly excusing himself. Despite being blind, he moved confidently toward the door, leaving Shirone and the others amazed yet again.

"Teacher, who is he? And what was that thing about taking your clothes off earlier? That's what made us misunderstand everything."

Siena shook her head, looking as if the idea was absurd.

"Armin is my older brother in all but blood. He was considered the greatest genius in the history of the Olipher school. He's a painter now, but even as kids, his talent far surpassed mine."

"Wow, he's really amazing... but, um, if it's okay to ask, what happened to his eyes?"

Siena's face darkened at the question, making Nade regret asking. But thankfully, she soon relaxed and answered calmly.

"He lost his sight to save me."

"What? Because of you, Teacher?"

“When I was about nine, I experienced an Overflow. I started to grasp the ways of the world, and everything became terrifying. I think I cried every day. It was such a horrible pain, even looking back on it now.”

Siena gave a bitter smile.

“Armin saved me from that. He brought me out of the darkness and into the light. He was only eleven at the time.” Even though eleven is still just a child, the fact that Armin was able to pull her out of an Overflow showed just how remarkable he was.

“Did Armin help you overcome the Overflow?”

Siena shook her head.

“No. I wasn’t that strong. I was an arrogant little girl who lived comfortably just because of my family name, the Oliphers. I actually hated him back then. He used to tell me the same thing over and over: ‘Whatever comes your way, you must never turn your eyes from it.’ Every time he said that, I got annoyed. I mean, I was scared, so of course I wanted to close my eyes. It was unbearable, so I had no choice but to run away. Haha, looking back, I was such a fool.”

Shirone found it hard to imagine Siena, a certified 6th-class mage, scared and crying like that.

“Then how did you manage to overcome it, Teacher?”

“At first, I just ran away. I didn’t want to see Armin, so I’d escape to the mountains, fields, or rivers. No matter how far I went, he always found me, but every time he did, I’d run away again. It was like a never-ending game of hide and seek. Then one day... something happened.”

Siena frowned as she recalled the event.

“It was during the rainy season, and it had been pouring for days. I was wandering around by the river, like always. It might’ve just passed as another day, but then the dam upstream broke. I was downstream, completely unaware, and got swept away by the flood. The flood was massive, enough to submerge half the village.”

Siena was recalling an event from seventeen years ago. She couldn't even scream as she was pulled under the water. When she finally resurfaced, she found herself in a completely different world. Buildings and livestock were being swept downstream, and sharp, broken trees floated everywhere.

For the first time in her life, Siena tasted true fear of death. 'Please... someone, save me...!'

She knew no one was coming. The place she was in was a remote area between a stream and a marsh, far from the school. No one would even imagine a little girl being there. The water quickly engulfed her. The land looked impossibly far, and what used to be a small stream had turned into a raging torrent over 25 meters wide. The water was dark, with whirlpools forming as it crashed against rocks.

"Help! Someone, please save me!"

For the first time, Siena felt utterly powerless. The pride of being the only daughter of the Olipher family meant nothing against the forces of nature. Even her innate magical talent couldn't save her from the furious current. All she could do was cry out for help.

"Siena!"

As if hearing a divine call, Siena lifted her head with all her strength. Clinging precariously to an overhanging branch was Armin.

"Brother! Brother!"

"Reach out your hand!"

Armin extended his hand toward the water. Just as Siena reached for it, a sudden surge pulled her back under.

"Siena!"

When she resurfaced, it wasn't her face but her legs that broke the surface. Without hesitation, Armin dove into the water. He swam swiftly through the current, grabbed Siena, and pulled her face above the water. She had swallowed so much water that she was barely conscious.

"Gah! Gah!"

“Siena! Stay with me! We need to get out of here!”

“S-Save me! Please, save me!”

They had passed the whirlpools, but there were still worse obstacles ahead. Armin expanded his Spirit Zone to dodge the debris. It was the only way the 11-year-old could manage in that deadly situation.

Chapter 57: Gauge Symmetry (3)

“Siena! Keep your eyes open! Focus!”

“Brother! P-Please... save me...!”

Siena was far from regaining her composure. With their young, underdeveloped bodies, crossing the river was impossible. Armin realized he had to do it alone.

‘We just need to make it to Delphons. Once we reach the delta, the water flow will slow down. At our current speed, it'll take about 20 minutes.’

Twenty minutes? It felt like an eternity. Could he hold on for 20 minutes in these rapids while keeping an unconscious Siena afloat?

‘Idiot. I have no choice.’

Armin steeled himself. The scene in front of him seemed grotesquely distorted. Broken logs floated toward them. He twisted his body with all his strength. Even as muddy water blinded him, rocks loomed, or sharp wood scraped his skin, he forced himself to keep moving.

‘Just a little... just a little more!’

He felt Siena’s tiny hand gripping his waist tightly. The weight of a fragile life completely depending on him was a crushing burden, but it sharpened his sense of duty even more.

After what felt like an eternity in hell, Armin finally spotted their destination in the distance downstream. But there was no clear path—the river was blocked by a fallen tree.

“Siena, listen carefully. We have to avoid that tree. The only way is to go underwater. I’m going to push you down. Hold your breath and stay under until we pass it, then resurface. Got it?”

“Brother! I’m scared! I can’t do it!”

“You can. You have to. Trust me!”

“Brother, I—!”

As they entered a zone where two whirlpools merged, the speed of the current doubled. Unprepared for the sudden change, Armin gritted his teeth. His view, barely above the water, showed the flood's debris rushing at them like monsters.

Armin kicked desperately, even as his legs cramped. Sharp debris tore at his body. Blood flowed steadily, and his body temperature was dropping, making his mind hazy. Finally, they reached the fallen tree. A closer look confirmed it—going underwater was the only way through.

“Siena! Now!”

Armin locked eyes with the approaching tree and timed their dive. Just before impact, he pushed down on Siena’s shoulders.

“Now!”

Siena’s scream was swallowed by the water as Armin forced her under. As his vision blurred, he saw the jagged, waterlogged bark of the tree looming larger. But all his focus was on the hand pushing Siena down. Once she had safely passed under the tree, he let go.

“We did it! We made it!”

A faint smile crossed Armin’s face as the tree came rushing toward him. He was relieved to have saved Siena. And even in that moment, he didn’t close his eyes.

“Brotheeer!”

He could faintly hear Siena’s voice calling out as she was swept further downstream.

Siena’s story ended there. The children bowed their heads in respectful silence.

“I was swept downstream to the Delphons area, where I was rescued by the villagers. Since we were out of the forest, there were no more dangerous obstacles, and Armin, who had passed out, also drifted to where I was. The scholars

arrived and treated him, but the diagnosis was permanent eye damage. From that point on, my brother lost his sight.”

“I see... so that’s what happened to you both...”

“My brother taught me, through his own actions, how to overcome fear. Thanks to him, I was able to overcome the Overflow. But my brother lost his light. The greatest talent in the history of the academy... was halted just like that.”

Shirone felt a heavy weight on his chest. For a person to lose their sight was almost like losing everything. He couldn’t read books or learn magic properly anymore.

Without even seeing it, Shirone could imagine how much disappointment and suffering Armin must have endured.

“When I heard that my brother came here three years ago, I went to see him. He’s been developing an art style that depicts light, so I volunteered to be his model.”

“I see... We misunderstood you both so badly.”

The fact that they had misunderstood their relationship as something inappropriate felt deeply disrespectful. Just as the mood started to darken, Armin came in with tea and snacks.

“Am I interrupting? It’s rare for Siena to bring up the past.”

“Brother.”

“First, have some tea. It’s not the best, but my wife’s secret ingredient is in it, so it should taste good.”

“Oh, thank you very much.”

Shirone and his companions accepted the tea with gratitude. Though Armin had turned to art, he had shown a genius for magic 20 years ago. Despite his unfortunate fate, Shirone, as a magic apprentice, couldn’t look down on him. Returning to his canvas, Armin offered them seats.

“Now, I should get back to work. Could you wait over here?”

“Oh, of course.”

The three of them awkwardly moved with their teacups. As Siena settled herself on the bed, Nade hesitantly asked,

“Sorry, but... you’re not painting a nude, are you?”

Even though Armin was an artist, they had no right to interfere with his art. Still, the thought of Siena posing like that in front of her students seemed awkward.

“Hahaha! Even if I’m blind, I wouldn’t make such an unreasonable request of my precious sister.”

“But didn’t you say she’d have to undress earlier...?”

“Oh, that’s for this. Siena, can you show them?”

Siena opened the wardrobe and pulled out a silver coat. The light reflecting off it was so bright it was almost painful to look at.

“Wow! That’s really bright.”

“Since I can’t see things clearly with just Spirit Zone, I cover people or objects with light-reflective material to sense them. This silver coat is an excellent tool for that.”

“That’s fascinating. Painting by feeling the light itself.”

“Since I lost my eyes, I’ve been able to paint things other artists can’t. But this will be my last time painting Siena. A good patron has appeared, and I’ll be moving in a few days. So I wanted to capture her true essence, without the coat dimming her beauty.”

Siena’s cheeks flushed slightly.

“Brother, you’re being silly...”

“Haha! What’s the harm? In my mind, you’re still that little nine-year-old girl.”

“Alright, enough teasing! Just get on with your work. You won’t have time once Keira gets back.”

Shirone and his group shifted awkwardly at the subtle, yet affectionate atmosphere. They were clearly close like siblings, but the fact that they weren’t blood-related might explain why Siena had reacted so strongly to rumors of an affair. Perhaps some part of her still held feelings for Armin.

“Okay, let’s begin. I’m painting by feel, so I’ll finish earlier than usual.”

Siena composed herself as Armin picked up his charcoal and began sketching her outline. Shirone’s group watched from

behind, quietly amazed. Although it seemed casual, Armin's strokes perfectly traced Siena's silhouette.

"Wow! That's incredible."

"Shh!"

Iruki hushed Nade with a finger. Losing one's sight was a severe disadvantage for a painter, so Armin had to be even more focused than usual.

But Shirone was puzzled. Something didn't add up. Even without the reflective material, Armin was capturing Siena's delicate features with incredible accuracy.

'How is this possible? Is his Spirit Zone that powerful? Even then, this level of detail...'

If his Spirit Zone was dense enough, it could enable a form of synesthesia, allowing him to perceive things in remarkable detail, like footprints left in mud. But not even Ethella, a renowned Spirit Zone master, had reached this level of skill.

The painting became more precise. Siena wore a radiant smile, one rarely seen at school. Armin, using a bread eraser, skillfully rendered that smile on the canvas.

Shirone was in awe. He had heard that lips were one of the hardest features for artists to portray, as the slightest change in the corners of the mouth could alter the entire expression.

'This... this is impossible.'

No matter how powerful Armin's Spirit Zone was, for a blind artist to capture such nuances seemed beyond belief. A chill ran down Shirone's spine as a suspicion crept into his mind.

"Uh... Armin, sir?"

"Yes?"

Armin turned his head slightly, smiling. Shirone hesitated, unsure if he should ask what he was thinking. If he was wrong, it would be a terrible insult.

"By any chance... can you see?"

Armin's hand froze. He calmly set down the charcoal, turned fully to face Shirone, and said,

“Yes. I can see.”

Shirone was speechless. Could he really see? Why then had Siena been unaware?

Armin slowly removed the cloth covering his eyes. His eye sockets were scarred, and where his eyes should have been, there was nothing but empty space.

‘He’s definitely injured. But how can he see? He’s had his eyes covered this whole time...’

“I’m sure you have many questions. I’ll show you.”

As Armin slowly opened his eyes, Shirone’s breath caught in his throat. His eye sockets, instead of being empty, were filled with a brilliant light.

“Nade, Iruki! Do you see this? Huh?”

In a panic, Shirone smacked Nade’s thigh, but something felt off. It was solid, as if he were touching an object, not a person. He turned his head to look at his friends and jumped up with a shocked expression.

“Nonsense! How?”

Nade wasn’t even moving. Iruki, too, was frozen, still smiling at the canvas. Shirone rushed to check on Siena, but she was also stuck in place like a wax figure. In a daze, he heard Armin’s voice behind him.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had guests.”

“Could this be...?”

“Yes. It’s the Stop spell.”

Shirone turned to face him, stunned. The Stop spell was only possible for mages who could manipulate light at the speed of thought. In history, only a handful had ever mastered such a spell. It meant he was experiencing the absolute mastery of time magic.

“Please, sit down. Let’s talk. We have all the time in the world.”

“Haha...”

Shirone laughed awkwardly. If time had truly stopped, then time was indeed infinite.

“To be honest, I was a bit tense while painting. I didn’t know when you’d notice and step into this temporal field.”

“How did you know I’d notice?”

Armin pointed to the light in his empty eye sockets.

“Eyes take in light and convert it into visual information. But since I have no eyes, I perceive the world through light itself. It’s a rather horrifying experience. The shapes that normal people see look entirely different to me.”

“It’s... like the world of Ideas.”

There was no guarantee that human senses grasped the truth. For all they knew, bricks might be soft like jelly, fire might be cold, or a lover’s sweet kiss could be painful.

“Let me introduce myself properly. I’m Armin, the Seer of Light. Among those who know me, I’m called the Eternal Reflector.”

“But didn’t you lose your magic abilities as a child?”

“Yes. It was a tragic accident. I left the Olipher School and wandered the world for 15 years... in a world of total darkness.”

Chapter 58: Gauge Symmetry (4)

Armin recalled the past.

“Not being able to see is like the space itself disappearing. Once the space was gone, even time seemed to vanish. It was in that darkness that I realized—I had already transcended time. That’s how the Stop magic was perfected.”

Shirone’s heart raced. He felt as if he had just heard the essence of the Stop spell, something no other time mage had conquered.

“There’s no need to be so impressed. It’s not some transcendent power. It only works within the radius of my Spirit Zone, and there are quite a few limitations.”

Armin glanced back at Siena, who was frozen in time.

“She’s a good sister. She acts tough, but she’s actually quite sensitive. What do you think, Shirone?”

“Haha! Well, I can’t say she’s fragile, but she’s certainly a good person.”

“And what about now? Do you think my sister is beautiful?”

“Uh, well, of course. She’s quite popular at school.”

“Then, let me ask you this. Do you think we could do something improper while time is stopped?”

Shirone, understanding Armin’s implication, blushed.

“What are you saying right now? Surely you’re not suggesting, Armin...?”

“Don’t worry. It’s impossible. Right now, we’re in a state where our mass converges to zero. If we truly had no mass, we’d disintegrate. The key point is acceleration. That’s why Stop magic is referred to as being within the realm of the speed of light.”

“So, when I touched Nade and felt that stiffness, it was because of that? Because with no mass, not even the fabric of his clothes could crumple?”

“Exactly. We become infinitely weak. But at the same time, no one can touch us either. That’s the true nature of Stop magic. You asked how I knew you’d notice, right? It’s simple. I came to the same realization as you.”

“The same realization... Could it be?”

“Yes, the Immortal Function.”

Shirone’s heart pounded. Standing before him was someone who had directly experienced the Immortal Function, something no one had been able to fully explain—and he was the most powerful time mage alive.

“The Immortal Function is an understanding of the essence. Since the essence is singular, your wavelength resonates with mine. This is sometimes called extrasensory perception.”

“What exactly is the Immortal Function?”

“It’s the gateway to infinity. Shirone, you’ve unlocked it. In the magical society, we refer to people like you as Unlockers.”

After thinking for a moment, Armin asked, “When you unlocked the Immortal Function, did you feel as though your consciousness was disintegrating?”

“Yes! I really thought I was going to disappear.”

“If it had continued, you probably would have. When the mind transcends the end of numbers, the Spirit Zone expands infinitely. But humans are finite beings. That’s why Unlockers accept infinity through their unique Spirit Zones.”

Shirone, his face troubled, asked, “Then what should I do? Even the greatest mages are cautious of it, but back then, I had no idea. Maybe that’s why I keep having nightmares, and I feel extrasensory perception even when I’m alone.”

Armin gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s a natural process. If you could control it from the beginning, you wouldn’t have unlocked the Immortal Function. That extrasensory

perception is your connection to yourself because you haven't yet realized what you gained from that vast expansion."

"How will I come to understand it?"

"You'll naturally figure it out. It's just that right now, you don't have a name for what you've already acquired."

"But..."

Seeing Shirone's anxious expression, Armin remembered his own past. He realized that no matter how much he reassured him, it wouldn't feel real.

"Alright, then. I'll tell you. The name of what you've realized is Gauge Symmetry."

"Gauge... Symmetry?"

"This world must exist in perfect balance. However, in reality, symmetry is broken. You've experienced that discrepancy firsthand. That's likely the cause of your extrasensory perception."

Shirone muttered the words "Gauge Symmetry" repeatedly as if it were a mantra. But nothing clicked into place like magic.

Armin gently patted Shirone's head. "There's no need to worry about anything. I'm not saying you should do nothing, but eventually, you'll reach it. When that time comes, you'll understand what I meant."

Shirone took a deep breath and nodded. He still couldn't fully organize his thoughts, but he knew that today's meeting would be a major turning point in his life.

"Thank you so much. If I hadn't met you, I might have fallen into Overflow, just like Ms. Siena warned."

"Unlockers share a deep bond because they resonate on the same wavelength. Of course, that bond can sometimes lead to major conflicts, but I'm glad I could help."

Armin looked warmly at Siena.

"It's about time we leave the temporal field. I need to finish my painting before my wife returns."

"Oh, right. Today's the last day, isn't it?"

“Yes. Even though I have quite a grand title, at the end of the day, I’m still a painter. I’ll start packing today and leave in a few days. I won’t see Siena for a while.”

“Maybe you should talk to her about it...”

Armin shook his head.

“Siena is still struggling. Even if I didn’t give up on magic, she wouldn’t regain my lost eye. Plus, I’m already married. I want to help her live her own life.”

Shirone understood how Armin felt. He didn’t want to see his beloved sister trapped in the past.

“Yeah. I’ll keep your secret. Thanks again for everything.”

“I enjoyed it as well, Shirone.”

Armin covered his eyes with a cloth again. As he turned back to the canvas, time began to flow once more. Nade and Iruki’s breathing became audible, and Siena’s smile regained its liveliness.

Shirone felt as if he had just woken from a dream. It was hard to believe he had just been talking with Armin.

Time flew by as Armin finished the painting and turned the canvas toward Siena.

“How is it? Do you think it came out well?”

“Yeah, it’s beautiful.”

“You’ve been through a lot. It was an honor to paint you.”

“Brother, we’re not strangers, you know...”

A fleeting sense of sadness crossed Siena’s eyes. Then, as footsteps echoed from downstairs, she abruptly stood, startled. Was it already time for Armin’s wife to return? It was earlier than usual, but there was no time to think about it.

“Brother, I’ll be going now. You all should leave, too.”

Siena hurriedly prepared to leave. She, who was so confident at school, was now nervous at the mere thought of Armin’s wife arriving. This made Shirone and the others feel conflicted.

“Dear, are you painting?”

Keira poked her face into the room. She was much more lively than expected, unlike the calm demeanor one might assume from Armin's personality. She appeared to be in her early twenties, full of energy. When her eyes met Siena's, she looked surprised.

"Oh my, Siena? Today's the day you came by, isn't it?"

"Hello, Keira. It's been a while."

"It really has! Why is it so hard to see you these days?"

"You're not avoiding me on purpose, are you? Haha!"

Siena fought to keep her composure.

"Oh, I just finished up with my brother. I was just about to leave."

"Why the rush? You're here, so why not stay for dinner?"

"I appreciate it, but I already have plans..."

"Hmm, this seems suspicious! Honey, are you sure you weren't up to something with Siena while I was gone?"

"Keira, watch your words," Armin said with a furrowed brow. Shirone thought it was out of line as well. Armin had been careful and respectful the whole time, yet Keira had just insinuated something suspicious.

With her face flushed red, Siena hurriedly threw on her coat and left the room. Shirone and his companions, upset, shot Keira a glance before following her. Keira, either oblivious or simply good-natured, waved with a smile.

"Goodbye, kids! Next time you come, I'll make something delicious for you!" she called out, but there was no reply. As they left with cold expressions, Keira tilted her head and muttered to herself.

"Huh? Did I say something wrong? Why do they look like that? Could it be that something really happened between you two?"

"Stop joking around and come downstairs. I want to say a proper goodbye."

"Tch, you're hopeless when it comes to your sister."

Armin quickly descended the stairs. Siena was waiting just outside, perhaps feeling uneasy about leaving things on a

sour note.

"I'm sorry, Siena. My wife can be a bit... over the top."

"It's okay. Anyway, I don't know when we'll see each other again. Take care and stay healthy."

"You too. Do your best. I'm relieved to see you getting along well with your students. Honestly, I was a bit worried at first."

Siena let out a small laugh. Armin was likely the only person in the world who still treated her like a child. He was the one person who shared the memories of her younger, more carefree days.

Shirone's chest tightened. He was beginning to understand why this genius, recognized by the kingdom, had chosen to become a teacher. Why she had been so fixated on overcoming the Overflow, and why she had distanced herself from men, earning the title "Frozen Siena".

"I'll be going now. If you get the chance, write me a letter."

"I will. Once I'm settled, I'll send word. Shirone, Nade, Iruki, keep working hard. I'll be hearing about you all becoming great mages, even from afar."

"Yes, thank you so much," Shirone and his friends said, expressing their gratitude. Without Armin's help, things would not have gone so smoothly.

Armin stood there, watching until Siena disappeared from sight. Keira, who had been leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed, spoke with a cold expression.

"Armin, snap out of it. If they find out up top that you're being sentimental, who knows what might happen."

Armin turned back to Keira, his expression souring. Though they had pretended to be married for the past three years, he had never truly grown fond of her.

"Whatever emotions I have are my own business. Just focus on your report. Have you completed the investigation?"

"Perfectly. There's nothing left to do in Creas. We need to head to Calbera within the next 15 days. It's a dangerous

zone, but with Armin the Seer of Light, it should be no problem, right?"

"There's no need for unnecessary talk. I'll keep my promises," Armin said curtly, though Keira still wasn't convinced. Despite his remarkable insight and genius-level magic abilities, making him a valuable asset, he was the type of man who could leave the organization at any moment.

"You didn't tell Siena, did you?"

Armin didn't answer.

"I don't want to harm you. I know that no one can truly hold the Eternal Reflector captive, but at the end of the day, you're still just human. If you ever betray the organization, everyone you care about will experience hell. Siena, and even the Olipher school."

Her threat was chilling, but true. The organization Keira worked for had the power, influence, and cruelty to follow through.

No matter what happened, he had to protect Siena. Meeting Shirone today had been a stroke of luck. This unexpected variable would eventually turn things in his favor.

"You don't need to worry," Armin said, turning back to Keira with a smile.

"Siena doesn't know anything."

Under the Moonlight (1)

On the way back to the academy, Shirone and his friends watched Siena nervously.

Though the atmosphere had been fine when they were with Armin, there was no telling when her mood might change.

Chapter 59: Under the Moonlight (2)

However, Siena walked on without saying a word, just staring at the ground.

Seeing her so dejected, Shirone felt a heavy heart. If not for the accident in their childhood, Armin and Siena might have developed a closer relationship.

But Shirone couldn't exactly blame Armin for suddenly getting married. In order to relieve the guilt of his beloved younger sister, Armin had left Siena's side on his own.

Nade grumbled, clearly displeased.

"Tch, relationships between men and women are impossible to figure out."

"Well, things don't always go the way you want in life."

"Damn it! At school, she's always so cold. Honestly, I didn't want to see her like this."

With clenched fists, Nade stormed ahead and approached Siena.

"Teacher."

"Oh, huh?"

"We're hungry. Since we're already out, why don't you treat us to a meal?"

Siena looked at him in disbelief. What they had done today was nothing short of a break-in that warranted severe punishment from the school. And now, he was casually asking for food.

"How can you be so shameless? You can eat in a situation like this?"

"So what? Even if we get punished, we still need to eat.

After all, we learn magic to survive, don't we?"

Shirone chimed in.

“That’s right, Teacher. Let’s eat before heading back. I’m hungry too.”

Iruki added his suggestion.

“On that note, I’d propose we head to the noble district. It’s close to the school, and I know a place there that serves expensive, delicious food.”

Siena had lost the will to even get angry. She had a vague idea of why her students were acting like this. She didn’t really want to return to the school in this mood either. After all, today was a holiday.

“Fine, let’s eat. You’re probably tired from causing all that trouble. But be prepared when we get back to school.”

“Hehe! Yes, ma’am!”

Nade winked at his friends. His main goal was to lighten Siena’s mood, but he was also hoping to buy some time and lessen their inevitable punishment.

The noble district was lined with all sorts of luxurious shops. Iruki led Siena to the most extravagant restaurant he knew. Standing in front of the six-story building, Shirone’s mouth dropped open.

The place catered to the elite nobles, and the entrance alone was grand. A pillar carved entirely from white ivory supported the balcony ceiling, and marble statues of mythical creatures stood on either side, like guards in prayer.

It was the Gold Cupid restaurant—an upscale establishment where every dish came with a hefty price tag.

“Wow! Even I’ve never been here before. We’re really living it up today. Shirone, let’s hurry inside.”

“Huh? Uh, well...”

Shirone glanced at Siena, who was looking up at the sign with a sour smile, just as expected. It was the most expensive restaurant in the area, so it was understandable. Iruki would never have chosen such a place if he wasn’t planning to splurge on their teacher.

But Siena didn't get angry. Instead, she sighed and, as if resigned to her fate, confidently walked through the entrance.

"Fine. Let's eat here."

"Wow, our teacher! You've got guts, as expected!"

Nade joined in Iruki's flattery.

"Foolish. It's dangerous to underestimate our teacher's boldness like this. A certified 6th-class mage can stroll in and out of a place like this like it's her bathroom. Isn't that right, Teacher?"

"Enough. Just hurry up and get inside. But remember, once we finish eating, we're heading straight back to school."

For Shirone, who had never been to a noble-exclusive restaurant, the scale of the interior was awe-inspiring. It was almost as if magic had been used to make the inside seem far larger than the outside.

The tables were spread out to the point of feeling like a waste of space, and one side of the room featured a bar adorned with all sorts of crystal lamps. Naturally, all the patrons were nobles, their accessories alone showing they were among the upper crust of Creas.

"Shirone! Over here!"

Lost in the grandeur, Shirone was called over by his friends to join them at the table. While Nade and Iruki occasionally glanced around, they didn't seem nervous.

A waiter approached to take their order. His slicked-back hair gave him a greasy look, and his gaze lingered on Siena, making Shirone and his friends uncomfortable.

Even though Siena was their teacher at school, outside these walls, it was customary for men to escort women. But the waiter didn't even bother to acknowledge the students, focusing entirely on Siena.

"Welcome, honored guests. Thank you for gracing Gold Cupid with your presence. I am especially at a loss for words with such a beautiful lady here."

It wasn't just that he was flirting—it was the way he blatantly ignored the students that irked them.

'Tch. So much for a high-class restaurant. What kind of training do they give their staff? As if someone like you has a chance with our teacher.'

Nade's irritation grew, and his eyes darted over the menu prices. He was determined to order the most expensive dish just to stick it to the waiter.

Without hesitation, Iruki began ordering a series of course meals. Nade, fired up, followed suit.

Shirone, on the other hand, was still deliberating. The menu was full of unfamiliar dishes—what on earth was "olaris stew", anyway? Was it meat, fish, or some kind of monster's tongue?

But not wanting to fall behind, he confidently ordered the same meal as Nade. He didn't trust Iruki's selections.

As a variety of VIP-level dishes began arriving at the table, the waiter's face turned pale. His first concern was whether they could actually afford all this. Though everything on the menu had a premium price tag, the difference between the cheapest and the most expensive dish was more than threefold. If these students were clueless, they might be in for a bill twelve times larger than expected.

Nervously, the waiter glanced at Siena, but she casually ordered her own meal without a care.

"I'll have the Dasco course, please. And a bottle of Rimunes."

Though Siena wasn't much of a drinker, she liked to enjoy cognac when she was feeling down. Rimunes, a distilled liquor with a subtle vanilla aroma, was expensive but had a smooth finish, making it popular among women.

"Oh? Teacher, you're drinking?"

"Why not? You all broke into someone's house, and I can't even have a drink?"

Nade laughed awkwardly.

"Haha, that's true. Oh right, today's your day off, isn't it?"

Seeing the waiter's dismayed expression as he walked away, Shirone and the others exchanged knowing glances and chuckled. But as their common sense returned, a hint of anxiety crept into their eyes. When they realized they had all ordered course meals, the price tag loomed large in their minds. Maybe they had been too reckless. But Siena seemed unfazed.

A certified 6th-class mage's income placed her in the top 10 percent of even noble society. On top of that, she worked at one of the five prestigious magic academies in the kingdom, Alpheas, so she could afford to live comfortably without tapping into the Olipheir faction's wealth.

'Come to think of it, our teacher is really living the dream.' A life not chasing money, but dreams. But Shirone, who knew the hardships of life better than most, understood how difficult that truly was.

With four courses on the menu, the dishes kept coming one after another. Other patrons started glancing their way with irritated expressions.

But Shirone and his friends were too engrossed in trying each other's food to care. Nade and Iruki might have been nobles, and Shirone had some knowledge of dining etiquette, but among friends, formality had no place. Forks and knives flew across the table, but Siena just smiled, watching her students enjoy themselves.

As their hunger waned and the flavors lost their edge, the conversation naturally shifted to magic. It was a pleasant and intellectually engaging discussion, one that even Siena found enjoyable. Laughter flowed, and the gloomy mood that had weighed her down lifted, confirming that Nade's plan had worked.

"Hehehe. Teacher, this humble student would like to offer a toast to his respected mentor."

"Hmph! You think I'll go easy on you just because of that? I'm only keeping quiet because we're eating. But you better be ready when we get back."

“Yes, yes, of course. Here, please accept this.”

Nade’s excellent social skills shone, and Siena didn’t seem to mind accepting the drinks he poured. Cognac was a strong drink, so Shirone asked with concern.

“Teacher, are you sure you’re not drinking too much?”

“Hehe, don’t worry. This much is nothing.”

“Of course! A certified 6th-class mage like you wouldn’t lose to something as trivial as alcohol.”

Nade was in full agreement, nodding enthusiastically at whatever Siena said, as if he’d believe her if she claimed a fork was a trident.

“Oh? You’re really putting in the effort. But I’m fine, really. I’m quite a heavy drinker.”

Ignoring Shirone’s worried gaze, Siena took another straight shot of the strong liquor.

One hour later.

“Hey, you! Yeah, you! Nade!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Siena, her face flushed, slumped on the table, propping herself up with her elbows. Meanwhile, Shirone and the others were sitting up straight, beads of sweat forming on their foreheads.

In just one hour, they had polished off an entire bottle of cognac.

Siena’s speech was slurred, and her eyes had lost a bit of focus. Shirone and his friends, unable to move their bodies, exchanged anxious glances with only their eyes.

‘This is bad. The teacher’s drunk.’

Siena, who had been mumbling something under her breath, suddenly lowered her head. Nade quickly grabbed her arm to prevent her from falling off the chair.

“Are you okay, Teacher? We should head back now.”

“You troublemaker!”

Siena shot up and yanked hard on Nade’s cheek. His face stretched like sticky rice, causing him to wince in pain as he was dragged along.

“Ouch, ouch! That hurts!”

“Why don’t you ever listen! I just want to be a kind teacher like Miss Etella. Stop getting distracted and focus on your studies!”

“Okay, okay! I got it, Teacher! It really hurts!”

“And Shirone, Iruki, you two!”

“Yes!”

Shirone and Iruki, already sitting straight, stiffened even more, bracing themselves.

“You two are the same. Don’t think I’ll let you slack off just because you’re talented. I don’t care if you think I’m a bad teacher. I won’t let it slide.”

“We don’t think you’re bad at all, so please, try to pull yourself together.”

“Phew. Yeah, I know. Why do I even put myself through all this... ugh.”

Siena’s eyelids drooped, and her head bobbed downward before she finally gave in and rested her face on the table, using her arms as a pillow.

“Teacher, you have to stay with us. Teacher? We haven’t even paid the bill yet.”

“I’m sleepy. I’m going to sleep.”

“Teacher?”

There was no response.

Nade turned to his friends, looking completely lost. But they, too, had no solution. As they were racking their brains, two men from a nearby table, who had been observing them, approached.

“It seems the lady’s had a bit too much to drink. Shall we call for a carriage?”

A well-groomed young man addressed Siena, while another handsome man behind him flashed a sly grin.

Shirone and his friends’ eyes instantly turned cold. They had noticed these men from the moment they entered, overhearing the lewd comments they had been making about Siena.

“Teacher? Please, wake up.”

Trying to lift her back up was futile—she collapsed onto the table again. The man, picking up on Nade’s use of the word “teacher”, smirked and moved in closer.

Chapter 60: Under the Moonlight (3)

“Aha! So, you’re an educator. A pleasure to meet you. I am Cosine Silver, a noble of the fourth rank. My father serves as an official in Creas. Forgive me for being forward, but I was struck by your beauty at first sight. It would be an immense honor if you allowed me the privilege of escorting you home.”

Siena slowly raised herself, but instead of looking at Silver, she rested her forehead in her hands and sighed.

‘Ugh, how annoying. I just wanted to get a little drunk tonight.’

Everything seemed to be going wrong today. She’d shown weakness in front of her students, been ignored by Keira, and now these strange men were bothering her.

A bitter smile played on Siena’s lips. Perhaps, she thought, she looked exactly like a woman nursing a broken heart right now.

‘Heh. But at least someone finds me attractive—someone like me, with a bad temper and no kindness.’

She had never felt romantic feelings for anyone. Not even when Armin appeared with Keira three years ago did she feel betrayed. But she realized she might have had some small hope—wondering what it would be like if they met again. Still, could she really call that love?

“I may have introduced myself a bit too grandly. My apologies. I just couldn’t let go of the chance to impress such a wonderful lady. If I was out of line, I beg your forgiveness.”

“It’s fine. I’m just tired, so please leave.”

Siena was truly exhausted. Sure, as a certified 6th-class mage, she could easily sober up, but she still craved the comforting haze of alcohol for a little while longer.

“Leaving a lady alone isn’t the chivalrous thing to do. Let me take you home in a carriage. Lean on me.”

Silver tried to support Siena by the shoulders, but Shirone and his group instantly protested.

“What do you think you’re doing? Don’t lay a hand on our teacher.”

“There seems to be a misunderstanding. I’m only offering to escort her. This isn’t something kids should interfere with. You should head home now. Your teacher will ride in the carriage.”

Silver tried to forcefully assist Siena again, but Shirone grabbed his wrist. The polite facade Silver had shown Siena twisted into a scowl. He could tolerate being ignored by a woman for his goals, but being disrespected by a child was an affront to his pride.

“Hey, you insolent brat. Where did you learn such bad manners? Let go of my hand before I get angry.”

“Teacher said she doesn’t want you to. So why don’t you leave? We’ll take care of her.”

“You kids are acting pretty bold, huh? I saw earlier that you were the ones giving her drinks. What’s your plan? Which school are you from? Want to all get expelled?”

Shirone’s expression turned cold. Silver had mentioned school to try to pressure Siena, knowing that if a teacher caused trouble in a place like this, it would lead to scandal. Iruki chimed in.

“So, you’ve been watching us from the start, huh? That makes it even clearer—you have no business here. And one more thing: our teacher isn’t someone a creep like you should be hitting on.”

“You just called me *you*? Do you know who I am?”

“Well, what else should I call you? Should I call you a pervert instead?”

“You little punk!”

Silver, his tipsiness now replaced by fury, grabbed Iruki by the collar. But almost instantly, he felt a sharp pain in his side, and his grip loosened. Gritting his teeth, he stepped back, clutching his abdomen.

“Ugh! What the—?”

Nade was generating electricity from his palm.

“Back off. Next time, I’ll fry your vital organ.”

The handsome man who had been standing by, ready to intervene if things escalated, stepped forward with a serious look on his face.

“Hey, those kids are from a magic academy.”

“Magic academy? Alpheas Magic Academy?”

Silver’s expression darkened. A magic academy was in a completely different league from regular noble schools. And Alpheas Magic Academy was one of the five most prestigious academies in the kingdom, attended by the nation’s elite nobles.

As Silver quickly tried to assess the situation, Iruki stepped closer with a smirk.

“So, you were going to get us expelled, huh?”

“Well, I—”

“I’m Iruki of the Mercodine family. If you think you can get me expelled, go ahead and try.”

“M-Mercodine?”

Silver felt as if the alcohol had evaporated from his system. Even though Creas was a provincial city, no noble in the Kingdom of Tormia was unfamiliar with the name Mercodine. The Mercodines weren’t just first-rank nobles; they had held the prestigious position of leaders of the royal advisory council, the Dragon’s Roar, for centuries without losing it even once.

As Silver’s eyes darted nervously, Iruki sneered, clearly expecting this reaction. Wherever he went, there were always nobles who flaunted their family name. Despite his distaste for such behavior, he had chosen to intimidate

Silver to protect Siena. He knew Silver wasn't bold enough to really act, but just in case he tried to use her position as a teacher to cause problems, Iruki had decided to nip it in the bud. Besides, he knew that someone of Siena's caliber, a follower of the Olipher School, wouldn't be shaken by such nonsense.

"Let's go, Silver. Hey, Silver!"

The handsome man tugged at Silver's arm, and grateful for his friend's intervention, Silver hastily made his exit. Even after they disappeared, Shirone and the others couldn't suppress their anger. It was clear that Silver had never considered them a threat, likely due to their small statures.

"This place is a dump. Let's not come here again."

"Agreed. Anyway, let's head out. It's getting late."

"Teacher, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's just go."

With Nade's support, Siena stood up, though it was a struggle. She was irritated by the sudden nuisance, but at the same time, she wasn't in a bad mood. After all, she had her students protecting her. Even a 6th-class certified mage, outside of official settings, was just a woman who was used to being escorted by nobles.

Suddenly, her students seemed endearing. Siena happily paid the bill and, with unsteady steps, walked out the door. The moon hung high in the sky.

As moonlight poured down from the clear sky, Siena let out a contented sigh.

She felt unusually happy. It was probably the alcohol, but it also felt like a fresh start. For the first time, she thought she could live her own life, free from the shadow of Armin. It was probably just the alcohol, though...

"Ah, I feel so good. Tonight is wonderful."

Siena spun in circles under the moon, gazing up at it like a girl, her face glowing with joy. Shirone and the others, just stepping out of the building, stared in astonishment.

Had the alcohol melted her frozen heart, even if only briefly?

With her violet hair flowing and her trench coat billowing out like an umbrella as she twirled, Siena looked beautiful under the moonlight. Even passersby couldn't help but glance at her, though no one clicked their tongues or frowned.

Siena was simply captivating.

Shirone and his group didn't feel like stopping her. Instead, they were fascinated by the rare sight of their teacher drunk.

"So, this is what she's like. That's unexpected."

"Could it be... we've got a scoop?"

Iruki's eyes sparkled as he pondered.

"Hmm. This could be useful as a weapon, huh? Something to stop the dissolution of the research club."

"If we play it right, it's possible. After all, Ms. Siena isn't the type to lie. Wouldn't she be embarrassed if she recalled her memories?"

As Nade and Iruki schemed, Shirone suddenly pointed at Siena, shouting.

"Hey! Look!"

Siena was stumbling as she continued to spin in circles, on the verge of collapsing like a spinning top losing momentum.

"Catch her!"

It would be disastrous if she fell in front of everyone. Shirone quickly supported her back while Nade and Iruki grabbed her arms from both sides.

"Teacher, please pull yourself together. We can't go back to school if you're like this."

"Ugh, I feel dizzy."

Siena was staggering, walking in zigzags. She had downed an entire bottle of cognac in an hour and spun around for a while—there was no way she could feel fine. It was as if she'd been drinking punishment shots.

"Hey, hey! This won't work. Shirone, you should carry her on your back."

"What? Why me?"

"Well, you're the strongest among us, right?"

Shirone sighed. Even though they were three 18-year-old boys, they were all physically weaker than their peers due to focusing on magic training and missing out on proper sleep and meals.

Among them, Shirone was somewhat stronger thanks to climbing mountains and chopping wood when he was younger.

"I guess I have no choice. Help me get her on my back."

"Don't act like it's such a chore. How often do you get the chance to carry her? I'm actually jealous."

Nade's face, however, showed no sign of jealousy. Instead, he smirked in relief, clearly glad he didn't have to do it.

"Tch. Just shut up already."

With Siena now on his back, Shirone began walking. As they left the noble district, the streets became noticeably emptier. For commoners who lived day by day, leisure activities were a luxury.

"But Ms. Siena is surprisingly small. I thought she was about my height, but now that I'm carrying her, she feels tiny."

"That's just a psychological thing. Teachers always seem bigger."

"Is that it? But still, she's heavier than I expected. This is getting tougher."

Iruki laughed and nodded.

"Well, of course. She's a person, after all. Women have bones, muscles, and flesh too. Did you think she'd be as light as a feather?"

Shirone hadn't thought that, but he had vaguely assumed she'd be lighter. Of course, he couldn't let them find out that he had never carried, or even held hands with, a woman before.

“No, I knew that! But this is seriously tough. I don’t think I can make it all the way to school.”

“If you can’t, neither can we. Just bear with it.”

“Can’t we use magic? We could levitate her with air magic.”

“But she’s our teacher. That wouldn’t feel right....”

Thinking about it, the image was indeed a bit off. Realizing he was stuck being the pack mule, Shirone grumbled at the unfairness of it all.

“There are three guys, and we can’t even carry one woman?

This is when I miss Rian. He’d probably carry both me and Ms. Siena at the same time. I should have studied Schema.”

Nade and Iruki fell silent. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing that they couldn’t carry a slender woman. But in reality, women were heavier than they seemed, and these bookish boys had no real strength to speak of.

“What can we do? The only exercise we get is breathing. We’re good with using our heads, though.”

Iruki snapped his fingers.

“Then use your head! We could learn Schema right now. Shirone, think you can do it?”

“Are you serious? How am I supposed to learn Schema all of a sudden?”

“You can at least try. I got Spirit Zone down on my first try. Don’t tell me you guys didn’t.”

Nade chimed in.

“No, I succeeded on my first attempt too. Once I got the feel for it, it was easy. How about you, Shirone?”

Still struggling under Siena’s weight, Shirone lifted his head.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I did it on my first try too. I didn’t even know it was Spirit Zone at the time, though.”

The idea of not knowing he’d entered Spirit Zone amused Iruki, who chuckled.

“That’s just like you. Anyway, go on and try Schema. The principles are the same, right?”

Now that he mentioned it, Iruki’s suggestion sounded plausible. While talent did play a part, it wouldn’t hurt to

give it a shot.

“Should I? Maybe I’ll try. Honestly, my arms are killing me.”

Chapter 61: Under the Moonlight (4)

Nade urged him on.

“Go ahead, try it. First, project an image of your body in a state of total concentration. Then...”

“I know how it works, just give me a minute to focus.”

When his friends fell silent, Shirone closed his eyes. He needed to reach the state of total selflessness just before entering the Spirit Zone, where he would project his body image and awaken all his senses through insight.

“Ugh... Ugh... Agh, no! This is making it worse!”

Iruki suppressed a laugh as he spoke.

“You idiot, did you really think that would work? Being specialized in the Spirit Zone means you’re completely talentless at Schema.”

“Pffft!”

Nade couldn’t hold back his laughter anymore, and Shirone glared at the two, his eyes narrowed.

“Screw this! I’m done! Someone else carry her!”

In the end, the three of them decided to take turns carrying Siena. However, Nade gave up halfway through the distance Shirone had already walked, and Iruki didn’t even make it ten steps.

Once again, Shirone found himself hoisting Siena onto his back with trembling arms. It was ridiculous.

“Hey, don’t we look totally pathetic right now?”

“Shirone, it’s rude to say out loud what we’re all just thinking.”

That was the last thing said for a while. Not because they were too disheartened, but simply because they were too exhausted to talk.

As they neared the school, Shirone suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, guys... Let’s not do this.”

“Do what? What are you talking about?”

“I mean trying to bargain with Ms. Siena about what happened today.”

“Hmm.”

Nade felt a pang of guilt too. But they were talking about the future of their research club—something too important to just brush off.

“But what else can we do? Have you come up with a better idea to save the club?”

“No, I haven’t. But I think this and that are separate issues. To be honest... I feel like today was a really sad day for Siena-sensei. I don’t know all the details, but that’s just how I feel.”

Everyone understood what Shirone meant. Siena had parted with someone she’d cared for deeply since childhood. The fact that all she did was drink a single bottle of alcohol was a testament to how strong she was.

“But isn’t it kind of weird to get too sentimental right now? I mean, why are we even alive? If we’re not thinking with our heads, we might as well be corpses. In times like these, we need to be cold and rational. We don’t have a clear plan to save the club yet, so why not take advantage of this opportunity?”

Iruki’s argument made sense. Being swept away by emotions could lead to poor decisions and a tough future. Nade started to waver as well.

“Yeah, Ms. Siena is definitely a tough one. She’s practically untouchable. Why else would we even consider something like this? It’s true—it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Iruki nodded in agreement.

“She’s sharp-tongued, never leaves any holes in her plans, and she’s thorough in managing students. Remember what we heard before? She didn’t even hesitate to suggest dating

Shirone to prevent an Overflow. How are we supposed to deal with such a perfectly airtight opponent?"

'You guys...'

Siena, who had been listening with her eyes closed, suddenly felt a surge of frustration. She had been planning to quietly ride along, feeling tired and gloomy, but she couldn't tolerate any more of their chatter.

"But now we know," Shirone said.

"Why Teacher chose the path of teaching, and why she's so obsessed with Overflow prevention. Ms. Siena doesn't want us to walk the same painful path she did."

"That's true, but..."

"It doesn't matter why she became a teacher. What matters is that she genuinely cares about us. And what are we doing? We're trying to exploit her painful past as a weakness. If the senior members of our club saw us now, they'd be ashamed of how we've turned out."

Iruki had no rebuttal. Mages always sought efficiency, but in chasing efficiency, it was easy to lose sight of what really mattered.

"...You always hit the nail on the head at times like this."

Nade, having made up his mind, spoke with a sense of relief.

"Alright, let's keep today's events a secret. How about it, Iruki?"

"As long as we can't use it to bargain over the club issue, I've got no problem. Honestly, I think Ms. Siena is the best when it comes to teaching."

"Yeah, we're the villains here. It's rare to find a teacher as dedicated as Ms. Siena, especially after everything we've pulled. She's really let us off easy."

Iruki added, "I'll let it go this time. Anyway, the three of us putting our heads together should come up with some way to save the club, right?"

Shirone chimed in.

"Alright then, it's settled. Even if we get punished tomorrow, we take today's events to the grave. Not a word to anyone!"

“Deal!”

As the burden of their earlier schemes lifted, the group felt much lighter. They quickened their pace, unaware that Siena had been awake for some time, watching everything unfold.

They finally spotted the entrance to the magic academy. Half-exhausted, Shirone noticed a guard standing with a torch and halted. Since it wasn't yet midnight, the night shift had not left their post.

“What should we do? If we walk in like this, rumors will spread. Plus, we're technically breaking curfew.”

“No choice. Let's use magic. I'll levitate Ms. Siena, and you support her.”

“Wait, put her down for a sec. Iruki, help me.”

But just as Shirone bent his knees to lower her, the weight on his back disappeared. Startled, he turned to find Siena standing upright, her posture rigid, her eyes sharp as starlight.

“Te-Teacher?”

Shirone collapsed onto the ground in disbelief. If she could walk, then what had all his effort been for?

“Teacher, are you really alright?”

“Of course. Did you really think I was that drunk?”

Shirone gasped, half-laughing, half-crying.

“Then... why did you let me carry you all this time?”

“You ate a good meal, didn't you? You've got to earn it somehow. Besides, a bit of hardship won't kill you. Now, come along if you want to get in quietly.”

Like spirits in a trance, they followed her. The guard, recognizing Siena, greeted her with half-open, sleepy eyes.

“Ah, good evening, Ms. Siena.”

“Yes, good evening. You're working hard.”

“Were you out with students tonight?”

“Yes, it was a field lesson.”

“Ah, I see. Well, welcome back, and have a good night.”

Though the rules forbade students from being out after dark, Siena's reputation at the academy was solid enough to go unquestioned.

The group hurried past the gate, their hearts pounding with the fear that the guard might call them back at any moment. It wasn't until they reached the central courtyard that Siena turned around and glared at them.

"Eek!"

At that moment, Shirone and his friends truly felt the weight of being back at Alpheas Magic Academy.

"I'll let today slide."

Her words left them blinking in surprise.

"I'm giving you one more month. That's the best deal I can offer."

They immediately understood her meaning. She was resetting the grace period, giving them one last chance.

"Find a way to convince the school within a month. Hold a presentation or summon a ghost—whatever it takes. It's your choice. If you truly believe in your research club, then fight for it. That's my philosophy as a teacher, and it's how I show my love for my students."

They were deeply moved. To hear such words from Siena of all people felt like a miracle.

"Yes! Just wait, Teacher! We'll shock the school for sure!"

"Yeah! We're not ones to give up easily. This time, we'll do it right!"

Siena watched her reenergized students with a bittersweet smile. Though their sudden bursts of enthusiasm always made her anxious, she couldn't help but feel curious about what they might achieve.

'Heh. Do your best, you insufferable students.'

The Invisible (1)

Shirone arrived at the research club later than usual and weakly raised his hand upon seeing Nade and Iruki sprawled on the sofa.

"Hey."

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“I don’t even know. Maybe I didn’t sleep at all. What about you guys?”

“Same here. So what do we do now? We stayed up all night talking yesterday, but we didn’t come up with a single good idea.”

Shirone sat down on the sofa and said, “We have to decide today, no matter what. Let’s figure out a plan.”

“But how? Paranormal phenomena are things people can’t see. And people don’t believe in things they can’t see.”

It was the same conversation they’d had the night before. Exhausted from even talking about it, they stared blankly into space. Their minds felt empty, like blank slates. After a while, Shirone’s eyes regained focus.

“What if we change the way we think?”

Nade and Iruki sat up immediately. They didn’t know what Shirone was about to say, but it felt different from the usual.

“How?”

“The dilemma we’re facing is this: we can’t show something that’s invisible, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the big issue.”

“So, what I’m saying is, maybe we don’t need to show it at all. Maybe we’ve been clinging to something impossible. Instead of trying to show the invisible, why not plan around *not* showing it?”

Not having to show anything could be taken to mean that they didn’t need to hold a presentation at all. But instead of being disappointed, his friends fell into deep thought, as if they had realized something.

“If we can’t verify it, that means we don’t need to verify it at all.”

“Exactly. I didn’t join this research club because you showed me something. So why should it be different for anyone else?”

A faint smile spread across Iruki’s face.

“How did we not think of that before? You’re right—we didn’t need to prove anything in the first place. There was no need to show what we don’t even understand ourselves. In fact, it’s the opposite....”

“We need to make them believe in what they can’t see, right?”

Nade was sure they had found the answer he’d been looking for. He immediately jumped up and hugged Shirone, rolling around in excitement.

“Shirone! Come here! You saved the club! You can have my first kiss if you want!”

“Gross! Get off me!”

As Shirone and Nade wrestled on the sofa, Iruki remained deep in thought. The real challenge was just beginning.

“So, how do we go about this? Shirone’s idea is the solution, but we still need to keep the format of a presentation. We’ll still need something visible to show.”

Nade returned to his seat, and Shirone brushed his messy hair back into place. This wasn’t the time for fooling around.

“Let’s think about what we should show.”

The three of them put their heads together and brainstormed. Once they got on the right track, ideas flowed freely. The key was to create something that made people believe in the unseen.

“Maybe something auditory? That would be easy to set up.”

“It’s efficient, but not very impactful. We also need to think about whether the school will accept it.”

“Then let’s go with something visual. If possible, we can combine it with sound. Let’s throw everything we’ve got into this.”

“So what do we visualize? The supernatural? Spirits?”

“The supernatural isn’t as relatable. I think spirits would be a better option.”

Nade raised his hand.

“I vote for spirits, too. Like ghosts, souls, or paranormal events. Which one?”

Shirone suggested, "Ghosts, maybe? They're more striking."

"But wouldn't that seem a bit childish?"

Nade looked skeptical, but Iruki agreed with Shirone.

"I think ghosts are the way to go. The key is to make a strong impression on people's minds."

"Hmm. It still feels kind of childish."

Shirone added, "What matters most is the effect. Everything else is secondary. I don't think we should dismiss it so easily."

Chapter 62: The Invisible

(2)

“Do you already have something in mind?”

“Let’s set up a psychological trap. Like this, for example.”

Shirone gathered his friends and explained the plan. After listening, Nade and Iruki were silent. Feeling a little less confident, Shirone added, “It doesn’t have to be this exact method, but if we do something like this, our chances of success will go up, don’t you think? We could even use some keywords....”

Iruki shook his head.

“No, Shirone, I think it’s good. Not just good—it’s definitely going to work. This idea is quite clever. With this method, we can use the presentation as a kind of setup.”

With the general outline in place, Shirone’s group began working out the details.

“The remaining issue is this: how do we create a ghost?”

Handling the technical side was Nade’s specialty. He stood up from the sofa and cast Lightning Shadow, creating an electric afterimage of himself.

“By casting Lightning Shadow like this, I can create a realistic ghost figure. But this alone wouldn’t fool anyone, because it can’t move.”

“Then that’s where we need to start thinking. How can we make the ghost figure move?”

“The first thing that comes to mind is this: to make the Lightning Shadow move, I could cast spells at extremely high speed.”

Nade cast Lightning Shadow repeatedly, taking steps as he did. Though a bit disjointed, the afterimage appeared to walk.

"I see. So, by using optical illusions, we can make it look real?"

"Exactly. But magic alone has its limits. Plus, at my level, I can't increase the number of images."

Shirone asked, "What if we use mechanical devices?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds. Even if we build a device, there are tons of things to consider. The biggest problem is that simply making it move won't fool anyone. To really look like a ghost, it needs to react to external stimuli."

For Nade, who had once built a hologram device, creating a ghostly apparition wasn't an issue. But if the figure didn't react to people's behavior, they'd quickly realize it was fake. Iruki, who had been deep in thought, suddenly spoke.

"What if we... predict people's reactions?"

"Predict their reactions?"

"We'd use complexity theory. We analyze the behavior patterns of the crowd and program it. It'll create the illusion that it's responding to feedback. But we're talking about a massive amount of information here. We'll need a medium to transmit the data and a control system."

"Hmm. Data transmission... My electrical power has its limits, that's true. But what if... Ah!"

Nade turned to Shirone.

"Photon Output! We've got Shirone's Photon Output!"

"Ah, Photon Output...."

Shirone also saw the potential. It was magic he had mastered for the targeting exams, but he had heard that the sharpest minds in the magic society were researching data transmission using Photon Output.

"Now it's all coming together. Nade, you'll create the hologram device. I'll write the program to go into it. Shirone's Photon Output will transmit my program to the device. It's going to take a lot of output—can you handle it?"

"I have to. We can't afford to miss this opportunity."

It was a ray of light in the darkness. Just having hope in what once seemed impossible filled Nade with gratitude.

“We can do this. We can save the research club. As long as nothing unexpected happens, that is.”

“If we succeed, the school’s going to be in for a shock, right?”

“More than that! It’s going to be chaos. I’m betting everything on this. Plus, it’s going to be so much fun. Heh heh heh. I can’t wait to see the teachers’ reactions.”

Shirone and his friends exchanged meaningful smiles. They were about to stage an unprecedented event in the history of the magic academy, risking everything for the future of the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Club.

Shirone spent a lot of time increasing the power of his Photon Output. The key was to boost its intensity while extending the duration. Since photons have no mass, they can’t be used for physical attacks, but in this case, that trait worked to his advantage. He could train in any random warehouse in Istas without causing damage.

Using a magical action with both hands outstretched, Shirone focused his concentration and activated his Photon Output. A beam of light spread in a circle on the wall. The primary challenge was duration—if he couldn’t sustain it for 10 minutes, raising the output further would remain a distant dream.

Sustaining photon output for 10 minutes was beyond a Class Five level, but both Nade’s hologram device and Iruki’s complex equations were equally ambitious challenges.

‘I have to do this. I have to...’

Shirone gritted his teeth and pushed himself. After three minutes, his consciousness began to fade. During the Speed Gun test, he had barely lasted a minute with just a single burst of Photon Output. Compared to that, he had made remarkable progress, but he was still far from reaching his goal.

“Haah... haah...”

The time he had barely managed to endure was 3 minutes and 20 seconds. He had to increase that to 10 minutes within the next 15 days. After measuring his time, he made sure to rest for 20 minutes. Skipping rest during this kind of training could be life-threatening.

As Shirone slumped to the ground, he heard noise coming from the next room. It seemed Nade had started welding. Deciding to check in while resting, he opened the door to find Nade buried in parts.

“Hey, how’s it going? How’s the output time?”

“Not bad. I increased it by 20 seconds. How about you?”

“As you can see, I’m still working on the engine.”

“Do you think you’ll make it in time?”

“I have to. Don’t worry. Prototypes always take time. Once they go into production, fixing errors becomes much harder. That’s why I’m taking my time to get it right.”

“I see. By the way, how’s the thing Iruki mentioned coming along?”

“Oh, that? I got it yesterday. Here it is.”

Nade tossed a finger-thick cable at Shirone’s feet. Its outer layer was rubber, and inside it was a transparent membrane that looked like quartz. Iruki had specially requested this item from his father, the leader of the Dragon’s Roar.

They planned to install 300 hologram devices throughout the school, so it would be impossible for Shirone to cast Photon Output on every device by himself.

At first, Nade had thought of using mirrors. The idea was that when Shirone cast Photon Output, the light would be transmitted to the machines through total internal reflection. But in practice, there were too many sections where the light would need to bend.

Nade then wondered if adding more mirrors might work. If they created a tunnel lined with mirrors inside a small hose, the light could bend like a differentiated straight line.

He proudly shared his idea, joking that if they could pull it off, they’d be rolling in money from that day forward.

But Iruki burst his bubble. In one of the monthly letters from his father, which covered various issues in the magic world, a product exactly like what Nade described had already been introduced. It was called “fiber optics”.

Nade couldn’t hide his disappointment. Even Iruki felt it was a shame, as the field was just beginning to be explored by the cutting-edge magic of Ivory Tower.

But after receiving the item and analyzing it, Nade shook his head. The technology was far too advanced for him to replicate with his current skills.

‘Still, you had the same idea as the top minds in the Ivory Tower. That’s pretty amazing, Nade.’

Shirone held up the fiber optic cable to inspect it closely. He couldn’t quite see what made it so impressive.

“Still, it’s impressive that you managed to get this.”

Nade, having finished welding, rubbed his reddened eyes and stood up.

“The tower’s version is still in its early stages, so the performance won’t be great. Let’s give it a test. I’ve made a prototype.”

Nade handed the modified fiber optic cable to Shirone. Unlike the previous one, this had a transparent sphere attached to the end.

“What do I do with this?”

“Just hold it and activate your Photon Output. I’ll calculate the efficiency, so give it a try. But make sure you use your full power. It’s important to measure the maximum output.”

Shirone gripped the crystal sphere and cast Photon Output. Since his rest period was over, he had no reason to hold back. A glowing light formed in his hand, and the sphere began to glow faintly. The needle on Nade’s device, connected to the fiber optic cable, started to move. As Shirone watched, Nade frowned after three minutes, when the output limit was reached.

“Haah, Iruki was right. This thing is still in the early development stage. I suppose we should be grateful it even

works at all.”

“It’s that bad?”

“The efficiency is only 18%. That means only 18% of the light you’re sending actually reaches its destination.”

“18%...”

Shirone felt disheartened. In a situation where he couldn’t even maintain Photon Output for 10 minutes, an 18% transmission efficiency meant he would need to increase his output fivefold just to reach 100%.

“Shirone, can you do it? If you can’t raise your output, we won’t succeed. High-output magic energy can’t be replicated by machines.”

Shirone nodded, determined to push himself further.

“I’ll try. I’ll figure it out with more practice.”

“Can you really do it?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ll find a way. Now, I’m going back to practice.”

“Really? You’ll really pull this off?”

As Shirone left the room, he shouted back, “I said I will!”

Shirone lay sprawled out in the warehouse, panting heavily. The effects of using Photon Output for half a day had drained both his mind and body.

“Haah... haah...”

His latest Photon Output time was 3 minutes and 20 seconds, the same as his record from that morning. But considering he was running on empty, it was still progress. An hour ago, his time had dropped to 2 minutes and 34 seconds, so his last effort had been worthwhile.

“Still, it’s nowhere near enough. How am I supposed to hit 10 minutes like this?”

Maybe it had been impossible from the start. Photon Output, being a projectile-style spell, drained mental energy far faster than other active magic. Sustaining it for 10 minutes was something only professionals could do.

“Screw it, I’ll try again tomorrow when I’m in better shape.”

Nade entered the warehouse.

“Shirone, are you done?”

“Yeah. I can’t do any more today. I need to rest.”

“I’m exhausted too, just from watching sparks fly. It’s past midnight. Let’s head back to Iruki.”

It was that late already? Shirone calculated that he’d been working on Photon Output for over seven hours. A dangerous level of training. If the school found out, they’d probably ban him from practicing magic.

Shirone struggled to his feet. Nade didn’t look much better. His eyes were sunken, and his face was blotchy from prolonged exposure to electricity.

When they returned to the research club, Iruki was scribbling rapidly over a map of the school. He was working on equations to account for variables on the day of the operation.

Nade watched with concern. Like Shirone and himself, Iruki hadn’t moved from his spot since sitting down.

“How’s it going, Iruki? Are the calculations coming together?”

Without looking up from his notebook, Iruki responded,

“More or less. I’ll finish in time, so don’t worry.”

Nade felt guilty for pushing his friends so hard.

“Was this too much to ask? Calculating the behavior patterns of the entire school...”

“We can do it. I said stop talking—I’m busy.”

With that, Iruki went silent again, his pen moving furiously as he scribbled equations across the page.

Chapter 63: The Invisible

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An obsession bordering on madness, and euphoria.

Shirone felt a chill. Everyone had been working non-stop for several days, with an average of only 1 hour and 40 minutes of sleep per day.

Even when Shirone had studied intensely, he had never worked this much. Yet strangely, he didn't feel as tired as he used to. It was as if the pain had been numbed.

'They were slacking off before, but now that it's crunch time, they're working like mad.'

Seeing them so absorbed in their fields that even sleep felt like a waste of time filled Shirone with an unprecedented sense of achievement.

"Nade, are you tired?"

"No, not at all. Or am I? Honestly, I'm not sure. My mind feels wide open."

"I feel the same. Iruki is still working, so let's start with the script. We also need to come up with a tagline for the poster. Even these small things take time once you get into them."

"Ah, should we? Then let's put up the poster tomorrow."

"Are you sure? We're not even at the stage where we can predict the workload yet."

"We'll have to risk it. It's best to announce as soon as possible. I don't want us to seem desperate. It's psychological warfare; we have to consider these aspects too, right?"

"You're right. Then I'll work on the tagline for the poster, and you think about the design."

The two of them spread out some paper on the table and started working on the poster. It was late at night, but their minds were still bright.

The next day.

By the end of lunch, a poster had appeared on the bulletin board. It was an announcement for a presentation by the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society. Most students were bewildered. The club was so obscure that few had even heard of it, as they hadn't conducted any official activities. The poster itself was so absurd that it made people chuckle. It depicted a distorted and eerie version of the magic school's landscape, as if advertising a circus performance.

Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society:
Shocking Presentation!

A Stunning Revelation! If you want to know the truth about spirits, come to Lecture Room 7.

"Supernatural science? What's that? Are they talking about ghosts or something?"

"I didn't even know there was a club like that. They must be really bored. Who even joins a ridiculous club like that?"

"Huh? Hey, guys, look at this."

A female student pointed to the bottom of the poster, where the members' names were listed. The eyes of the students who saw them widened.

"That's Shirone, isn't it? How did that happen? Is there another person with the same name?"

"No way! It's definitely *the* Shirone. Look, there's also Mercodine Iruki and Nade."

"But there's only three of them? Did they do this for an assignment? No matter how you look at it, this seems a bit extreme. Why would they join such a club?"

"When is the presentation? Should we go?"

"I kind of want to. Seeing Shirone's name makes me curious. Did they really uncover the truth about ghosts?"

“We’ll find out when we go. Hahaha! This is going to be fun.”

The students turned away, not thinking much of it, with the mood feeling more like they were going to see a play rather than an academic presentation. Meanwhile, those who operated in the shadows, like the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society, couldn’t hide their surprise. They gathered quietly, whispering among themselves to avoid attracting attention.

“What’s going on? A presentation by the ‘Supernatural Science Society’?”

“According to rumors, they’ve had a falling out with Professor Siena. Seems like they’re about to have a showdown. But what can they do? It’s not the same Supernatural Science Society it used to be. Their golden age is over.”

“We can’t be so sure. Iruki is a Savant, and Nade’s skills are nothing to scoff at. And their new member, Shirone, has a record of dismantling the Black Magicias. This won’t end easily.”

“Hahaha, but the Black Magicias were just low-level kids. Let’s wait and see. If the Supernatural Science Society goes down, a full-blown war will break out over who gets to claim the second-in-command spot in Istas.”

“It won’t be easy. The Women’s Anatomy Research Society has been eyeing it for a while. The economic research group Golden Wheels is also preparing to open the black market. They must see this as a golden opportunity.”

“Hmph. Don’t underestimate our Doll Collection Society either. I swear by my beloved Poco that Istas’s ‘upper echelons’ will be ours.”

Thinking of the legendary upper echelons of Istas, their eyes burned with ambition. Those who knew about the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society and those who didn’t had different perspectives, but everyone expected the presentation to attract attention.

Meanwhile, the members of the society had no time to worry about such things. Their minds were consumed with one thought:

Why are there only 24 hours in a day?

If only there were 200 hours in a day. Or at least 48, they could create something perfect.

But they weren't foolish enough to waste time on such fantasies. They divided their days as much as possible, pushing forward with their work.

Nade, who had successfully developed the prototype, held a demonstration in front of Shirone and Iruki. The hologram device resembled an overturned bowl with output terminals lined around its edges. While Iruki configured functions for the device, Shirone stood by, holding a fiber-optic crystal ball.

"Shirone, try activating the Photon Output."

"Is it okay? It's not perfect yet."

"We're the same. We need to run a test to see what needs improvement."

"Got it."

Gripping the two crystal balls tightly, Shirone cast a strong Photon Output. Electricity flowed from the device's output terminals, and the translucent shape of a person appeared. While the level of clarity that could be achieved electrically was limited, Nade thought that was actually better. After all, the image students had of ghosts would likely look something like this.

"So this is a hologram."

The ghost wore ancient armor, with a horribly disfigured face and bones showing through parts of his body.

"The frame seems fine. Iruki, it's your turn."

Iruki activated the controller that Nade had built. It only had four buttons, but with combinations, it could produce dozens of patterns. As Iruki pressed the buttons, the ghost performed various movements. Watching the ghost walk around the warehouse, Iruki was satisfied.

“The functions seem fine. We can proceed as is. Now it’s all up to you, Shirone. Are you ready? On the day of the presentation, the number of devices will be massive.”

Having tested it himself, Shirone was worried. While Nade could always recover power with his electric abilities, the issue was information transmission. Just operating a single hologram device was mentally exhausting.

“I’ll do my best. The fact that the maintenance time is increasing is promising. So Nade, you’ll start mass production now? And Iruki, are you done?”

“No, I still have a lot to refine. If I account for psychological changes, it could take a year to analyze everything. I’m working with a margin of error around 5%, but we’ll make it on time.”

“Now that I’ve finished the prototype, it’s time to go all-in. We don’t have time for rehearsals. Let’s focus on our individual tasks until the end.”

Despite his words, everyone knew that Shirone bore the greatest burden. Even if some devices malfunctioned or if Iruki’s functions were slightly off, the operation would proceed. But if the output weakened, they wouldn’t even be able to attempt the operation, and they’d be ridiculed by the students.

‘The limit are 10 minutes. If I can’t reach that, the presentation will be a waste.’

Back in the warehouse, Shirone reflected on his training process. Mental strengthening occurs in rebounds. Gradual increases in strength were rare. It followed a zigzag pattern of drops and rises. Moreover, the deeper the drop, the higher the rise.

“The more you push your mind to the limit, the greater the enhancement.”

That was Shirone’s conclusion. If this method were used for physical training, his body would break down in less than a month. But the mind had a resilience that allowed it to endure high levels of stress. For Shirone, whose mental

endurance was his strength, there was no better training method.

Pushing himself to the brink of mental collapse.

The pain would be immense, but this was the only way to overcome the current obstacle.

‘I have to push my mind even further!’

The glow of the light reflected on the wall grew larger and larger.

It was the last day he had promised his friends.

The time was approaching midnight. The warehouse where Shirone was training was as bright as day, illuminated by the Photon Output. With both hands shooting out photons, Shirone clenched his eyes shut and bit his lip. His body was twisting in pain, and his legs trembled from the strain. It felt like his consciousness was melting away. If this went on any longer, he might lose his mind.

“Urrrghhh!”

Shirone poured out every last bit of his mental strength. In the next moment, the light vanished, as if someone had turned off a faucet. In the now-darkened warehouse, a loud thud echoed as he collapsed to his knees.

“Haah! Haah!”

Shirone crawled on his knees and slammed the button on the clock, checking the time.

10 minutes and 32 seconds.

“Heh, haha...”

A laugh of disbelief escaped his lips.

He had maintained Photon Output for over 10 minutes. It was the result of enduring thousands of mental rebounds in just one month. His Spirit Zone had grown significantly stronger, and along with it, the power of his specialty magic had risen to the level of Class Five or higher.

The metal door creaked open, and Nade, whom he hadn’t seen for several days, entered. He had been sneaking

around the school under a cloak of invisibility, and his face looked much worse for wear than before.

“Shirone, training’s over. It’s time for rehearsal.”

Knowing how high Shirone’s goal was, Nade didn’t ask about his progress on purpose. Sweat dripping from his face, Shirone threw the gear-shaped timepiece across the floor. Nade caught it and his eyes widened as he checked the time. 10 minutes and 32 seconds—an astonishing result.

“You... really did it?”

Shirone, giving a thumbs up, smiled and said, “Mission accomplished. Let’s give it everything we’ve got.”

At Alpheas Magic Academy’s 7th Lecture Hall.

The presentation was set for 5 PM, but even an hour before, the area outside the lecture hall was crowded with people. Word had spread, and most of the students had gathered to attend the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society’s presentation.

“Wow! So many people! I hadn’t even heard of this research society, but I guess it’s different when you’ve got stars involved.”

Serielle marveled at the long line. Since she had advanced to the senior class after Shirone’s Speed Gun test, she wasn’t very familiar with the research society.

Amy was also surprised. For a Class Five society, and one with only three members, to draw such a large crowd was quite impressive.

“They must’ve caused quite a stir. Well, at least they’ve succeeded in drawing a crowd.”

“I never imagined Shirone would become close with Iruki. They were at each other’s throats not long ago, and now they’re inseparable.”

As the two lined up, the younger students buzzed with excitement. It wasn’t every day that senior-class students showed up. Even the Class Three badges on their collars were enough to elicit awe.

“Whoa, it’s Amy! Do senior-class students really come to a presentation by a small-time research society like this?”

“Idiot, Amy is dating Shirone. And Serielle always used to hang out with them back when she was in the advanced class.”

“Well, yeah, but... then who are *those* people?”

The students’ attention turned toward another group. Amy and Serielle turned as well, surprised by what they saw.

“Oh my, Amy, look. Kayden’s here!”

Class Two’s Kayden stood with his hands in his pockets.

Around him were notable figures like Richard from Alchemy, Lycan from Electric Monsters, and Hershey from Sona, all of them high-ranking Class Two students that the advanced students regarded with reverence.

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However, even the senior students from Class Two paled in comparison to the man who had just joined the line in terms of notoriety.

A handsome man, dressed in tailored clothing and with neatly combed hair, stood leisurely, gazing up at the sky. It was Ardino Fermi of Class One.

When a Class One student, the pinnacle of the magic school, made an appearance, the atmosphere grew solemn.

Serielle, sensing the gravity of the situation, whispered quietly.

“Never mind us, but isn’t it strange that not only Class Two, but even Fermi came?”

“It’s not because of Shirone. Do you know what the common thread is among the senior students who’ve just arrived?”

“Hmm, let me think... They’re hard to get close to?”

“Exactly. It’s probably a research society that operates in the shadows, like a Black Magicia group. Though, of course, on a completely different level.”

“Oh, right! I heard that the research society Shirone joined has a pretty bad reputation. But Fermi? That’s surprising. He’s popular, after all, and even kind.”

“Which is exactly why I find it unsettling. He always seems to be plotting something. Either way, let’s just ignore him. Among the seniors, rank doesn’t matter much.”

The 30 seniors were all competitors. Every year, only 10 students graduated, and their class rankings were determined by their performance on the graduation exams. Therefore, the current Class One students were those who hadn’t ranked in the top 10 in last year’s graduation exam.

The reason they couldn't be dismissed as mere dropouts was that they were still at the top of the pyramid. As competition intensified at higher levels, the differences in skill became minimal. Among Class One, the distinctions were almost negligible. It was a matter of daily condition, strategy, and focus that determined whether one would graduate or not.

No student dared to underestimate Fermi. Instead, they were astonished that someone at the forefront of the magic academy had shown up for a Class Five presentation.

Word of Fermi's appearance spread quickly, and by the time the presentation was about to begin, a long line of students waiting to get in snaked around the hall, even after all the seats were filled.

Finally, the doors opened, and the students poured inside. The front rows were reserved for the teachers, and the students filled the remaining seats in the order they had arrived. Amy, who had come early, sat close to the stage next to Serielle.

"What are they planning to show us with all this fuss?"

No matter how she thought about it, this level of buzz seemed unusual. It was extremely rare for a Class One student to attend a senior-class presentation. This wasn't just any presentation. Amid the tense atmosphere, Amy waited for Shirone to appear. The lights in the hall dimmed.

A single beam of light shone down in the dark room. The spotlight swept over the stage before finally resting on a boy standing in the center.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you for attending the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society's presentation. I am Nade, the president of the society. Today, we would like to introduce you to the concept of the human soul. Now, let's begin the presentation."

Applause erupted. The spotlight dimmed, and after about three seconds, the stage brightened as if the sun was rising,

revealing the eerie landscape of a mountain in the background.

“The students prepared quite a bit for this,” Alpheas commented with a satisfied expression. Normally, presentations were evaluated by the teachers, but in this case, Alpheas was also in attendance, personally observing Shirone’s progress.

On the other hand, Siena still wasn’t impressed. Replacing physical stage props with an electric curtain was a creative idea, but no matter how impressive the technology, if the content was lacking, the presentation would be a failure. Nade, having moved to the edge of the stage, began narrating.

“520 years ago, before Alpheas Magic Academy was founded, this place was a small village of slash-and-burn farmers. It was a time when people displaced by the conquest wars wandered the land. Today, we will tell the story of a woman who came to this village to escape the war.”

The stage went dark again, and when the lights came back on, Iruki, dressed as a soldier, hobbled onto the stage.

“Grrr... so hungry... so hungry...”

Laughter burst out from the audience.

“Haha! What is that?”

“Grrr, really? Is this a play?”

Nade filled in the gaps in the story through narration whenever Iruki wasn’t speaking.

The gist was this:

The soldiers who had come seeking refuge from the war were not alive.

They had been possessed by evil spirits, wandering the land, and, drawn by the smell of living flesh, they had entered the farmers’ village as hungry ghosts.

As Iruki exaggerated the grotesqueness of the hungry ghosts and disappeared behind the stage, Nade reappeared, now dressed as the male lead.

“Oh, my dear Olia! Why must someone of such noble birth suffer in these mountains? If only I could, I would sell my soul to reclaim the glory you once had, but alas, I cannot, and it tears at my heart.”

His voice and acting were of a decent level. However, the students who had come expecting a presentation were confused as the event seemed to turn into a full-on play. And when Shirone, dressed as a woman, came running onto the stage from the opposite side, many of them were shocked.

“Noah! Noah!”

Wahahahahaha!

Students, without exception, burst out laughing. Shirone, with flowing blonde hair down to his waist, truly looked like a woman. His waist was tightly cinched to emphasize his figure, and whatever he had stuffed into his clothes gave him a rather prominent chest.

“A-Amy...”

A flustered Serielle glanced at Amy. As expected, Amy was watching the play with a sardonic smile.

Since Nade, the narrator, was also acting in the play, the two conveyed the situation through dialogue.

It was a simple plot.

Noah and Olia were from noble families and had promised their future to each other, but due to war, their families were destroyed, and they ended up in a farming village, continuing their love.

“I missed you, Olia. My love. My everything. I love you.”

“I love you too, Noah.”

Shirone and Nade looked into each other’s eyes and embraced. What was coming next was predictable to anyone.

The highlight of the play: the lovers’ kiss.

Of all the spectators, Serielle was undoubtedly the most excited.

“Are they... really going to do it? Huh? Really? What should we do?”

Amy, too, felt an unprecedented tension, swallowing nervously. While it seemed unlikely that two boys would actually kiss, in a play, who could say for sure?

As the audience’s tension reached its peak, Shirone closed his eyes, and Nade slowly leaned in.

“Graaaaaaah!”

Suddenly, Iruki appeared from behind Nade and bit his neck. The sound of a scream reverberated from the audio system, causing startled gasps from the audience.

No one had expected Iruki’s sudden appearance. Such an effect couldn’t be achieved through stage equipment alone. Shirone had anticipated this, writing the script to surprise the audience using an invisible cloak. As the tension rose, the audience gradually became immersed in the play.

Iruki pretended to devour Nade, with sound effects of bones crunching, flesh tearing, and screams and cries mixing together.

“No! Noah! Noah!”

As the soldier who devoured the flesh disappeared, Olia cradled the dead Noah, wailing in anguish. The story rushed towards tragedy, and as Olia, half-mad with grief, hurled curses, she took her own life with a dagger. The sight of the dead lovers left the students in solemn silence.

As the blackout ended, Nade reappeared on stage as the narrator. Everyone awaited his narration, but suddenly, Olia stood up and let out a deranged laugh.

“Hahahaha! I won’t forgive anyone. I’ll kill them all.”

Before the audience could calm their startled hearts, Olia began killing everyone in her path. After a blood-curdling scream, she vanished offstage, bringing the story to an end. Nade walked to the center and continued his explanation.

“We discovered this story six months ago while tracing the history of this magic academy. We stumbled upon it thanks to an old journal.”

Nade pulled out a worn notebook. Although it appeared to be a 520-year-old artifact dug up from the earth, it had actually been hastily made just days before.

“As specialists in the paranormal, we immediately began investigating. And we uncovered a shocking secret that no one else knew: the vengeful spirits of that time still haunt this school.”

Dong. Dong. Dong.

A bell began to toll from backstage. The students recognized the familiar sound, signaling midnight.

“Every night at midnight, the ravenous spirits roam. This is undeniable proof of the existence of souls.”

The students furrowed their brows. They had been at the school for years and had never seen a ghost, or even anything remotely suspicious.

“You haven’t seen any ghosts, right? Neither did we.

According to paranormal science, spirits only appear to those who believe in them. This is because the mental frequency must be aligned. That’s why we decided to hold this presentation. Now that you’ve learned about the history of these vengeful spirits, your frequencies are aligned.

Starting tonight, when the bell tolls at midnight, you’ll be able to see the ghosts wandering the school.”

Nade gave a final wink.

“That is, if you’re lucky. This concludes our presentation.”

As Nade bowed and disappeared backstage, the hall fell into silence. There wasn’t even a smattering of applause, and the atmosphere remained cold.

The students shivered with a mix of betrayal and disappointment. A research presentation had been promised, but what they got was just a classic theater performance.

“What was that? Was this just a prank? I thought they were going to show us something impressive.”

“We were the fools for expecting anything. Seriously, how can they prove ghosts exist? We totally got duped. What a

waste of time.”

“Well, that’s Class Five for you. People talked so much about Shirone and Iruki, but in the end, it was nothing special.

Let’s go. We wasted enough time.”

Voices of discontent echoed throughout the hall. The students, who had sacrificed their study time to attend, were deeply frustrated that such a childish presentation had wasted their evening.

As the students began to leave one by one, Mark and Maria approached Amy and Serielle, walking against the flow of people.

“Hello, seniors. How have you been?”

“It’s been a while.”

“What did you think of the presentation, seniors?”

Mark seemed just as bewildered. Knowing Shirone’s genius, it must have been even harder for him to accept today’s presentation.

However, Amy had nothing to say. There was no excuse, no way to sugarcoat it. What they had seen was all there was, and the presentation was over.

But Serielle still defended Shirone.

“There must have been something they originally prepared, but things probably went wrong. Maybe they were running out of time or something. That’s what I think. Right, Amy?”

“Even so, it was still a failure. I should’ve guessed something like this would happen when I heard he was hanging out with those weird kids. Let’s just leave.”

As Amy stood to leave, Serielle pouted.

“How can she be so indifferent to her boyfriend?”

“Haha! But isn’t that part of her charm? In fact, senior Amy might be the most upset right now,” Mark said, and Serielle’s disappointment seemed to ease.

Even after the students left the lecture hall, the teachers remained in their seats, unsure of what to do. Frankly, they didn’t know what to write on the evaluation sheets.

‘What were they thinking, pulling off something like this?
They should’ve just done nothing instead.’

Especially for Siena, the shock was immense. Hosting such a farcical presentation in front of the headmaster was unthinkable. Just the thought of how to handle this situation made her head throb.

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Siena threw down the evaluation form and apologized to Alpheas.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster. You came all this way in person."

"Haha, it was a difficult task. Isn't supernatural science usually like that? Don't worry too much about it."

"I'll make sure to give them a stern warning."

Alpheas waved it off as if it were no big deal and walked toward the exit. But just before stepping out, he turned back to look at the empty stage, the corners of his mouth curling up beneath his beard.

'If this was really the end, they wouldn't have started it in the first place. Right, Shirone?'

"We did it. Phase 1 is complete!"

Regardless of the audience's reaction, Shirone and the group rushed to the research lab. Now was when the real battle began.

"You think it worked?"

"Yeah, I could tell just by looking at their eyes."

They had already anticipated that the audience, with their high expectations, would be underwhelmed by the presentation. In fact, Shirone had hoped for this very outcome. The less seriously the audience took it, the stronger the psychological impact would be later. This was the key to the psychological trap Shirone had planned. Mass hypnosis.

The key trigger was the sound of the midnight bells. Once the audience understood the premise, how absurd it

seemed wouldn't matter. The embedded trigger in their minds would lead them down the path of fear.

"Shirone, it's all on you now. If you succeed, everything will go as planned."

"I got it. I'll meditate for a bit."

"You have to succeed! We're counting on you!"

They had done everything they could over the past month.

Now, the baton was passed to Shirone, the final runner.

"I need to concentrate, so give me some space."

Shirone stopped Nade from massaging his shoulders and sat alone in a secluded spot. Six hours remained. In that time, he needed to elevate his mental condition to its peak.

'One. Two. Three.'

Lowering his head deeply, Shirone began his numerical sequence slowly. Nade and Iruki held their breath and quietly left the area.

The success of the presentation hinged on whether Shirone could maintain Photon Output for more than 10 minutes. But the others still had work to do as well.

Iruki had to set up the remote control devices for the holograms, and Nade had to fine-tune the core that Shirone would pour his Photon Output into. Everyone was busily focused on their tasks, and as night fell, midnight drew near. In the pitch-black darkness, Shirone's eyes snapped open.

After five hours of focusing on his sequence, Shirone's mind was as sharp as a finely honed blade. A moment later, the door opened, and Nade's quiet voice slipped in.

"Shirone, it's time."

Shirone rose from his seat, ready for anything, and followed Nade out like a warrior stepping into the colosseum.

The core of the hologram device was installed in the sewers beneath the central park. From this massive apparatus, around ten strands of fiber optics extended upward, branching out aboveground through multi-adapters, splitting into hundreds of smaller fibers.

This operation employed over 300 hologram devices. Shirone marveled at Nade's ability to mass-produce such equipment but felt the weight of responsibility all the more. Although he had successfully maintained Photon Output for 10 minutes during practice, this was his first real attempt. No one knew what unexpected variables might arise. With 10 minutes left until midnight, Shirone approached the giant device, which was ten times larger than the prototype. Nade handed him the input/output terminals with a grave expression, and Shirone grasped the crystal orb with both hands. Iruki stood by with a stopwatch. They had to be neither too early nor too late. The hologram had to activate precisely when the bell tolled.

"Ready? We need to start now."

Shirone took a deep breath and nodded. Iruki raised his right hand, eyes on the clock. When the appointed time came, his hand fell sharply. Simultaneously, Shirone's sequence sped up rapidly. The light emanating from his hands was much stronger than before. His friends were astonished at how much he had improved his Photon Output over the past month.

'More, stronger!'

The light surrounding Shirone grew larger, almost swallowing him whole. Nade rushed to the core device to check the transmission efficiency. His frozen expression alarmed Iruki, who asked in frustration.

"How is it? What percentage?"

Nade was silent for a long moment before replying in a trembling voice.

"17 percent."

"What?"

It was far lower than expected. Where had they gone wrong? But there was no time to analyze. If they didn't succeed now, everything would be over.

'The range is too wide. This isn't going to work.'

Shirone had sensed it the moment he began. As soon as he initiated the Photon Output, a hollow sensation flooded his mind, like pouring water into a bottomless pit.

The fiber optic system's transmission efficiency was 18 percent. The problem was that connecting them in parallel drastically weakened the transmission power.

Shirone poured out photons for several minutes, but no matter how hard he tried, the output efficiency never rose above 17 percent.

Iruki realized there was no point in continuing. If they activated the device now, most of the holograms would shatter like fragments.

After five minutes, Nade smiled. Although they had failed, he admired Shirone's incredible effort to reach an impossible goal. It was all his fault for miscalculating the design.

"Shirone, it's enough. We did our best. Let's stop here."

Shirone didn't answer. In truth, he was furious—so much that he felt like he could die from it. This project was something that not only Nade and Iruki, but the entire research team had worked on together with all their might. And now it was all over. They hadn't achieved anything yet, and they had to swallow their tears and accept defeat.

'After all the effort we put in to get this far...'

With a bitter resolve, Shirone closed his eyes. He hadn't given it his all yet. The light gathering in his hands began to expand, enveloping his entire body.

"W-Wait... no, it can't be..."

Nade suddenly realized what Shirone was thinking.

The Immortal Function.

It was a forbidden realm where one could easily lose everything if not careful, and once again, Shirone was stepping into it.

"Shirone! Stop! Don't do it!"

Nade and Iruki shook Shirone's body, but Shirone's mind, racing toward nirvana, couldn't be shaken by such feeble

interference.

The light around Shirone had already grown to engulf him and was spreading outward. Nade screamed, realizing that if they left him like this, something terrible would happen.

“Shirone! Please stop! I can’t lose you! Forget about the research project! Just stop!”

At Nade’s desperate plea, Shirone’s eyes snapped open. A faint glow seeped from his eyes, nose, and mouth as he glared intensely forward.

“N-Nade...”

“That’s right, Shirone! Let’s stop this! Let’s end it here!”

A faint smile crept onto Shirone’s lips.

“I’m... not afraid anymore.”

As Shirone closed his eyes once more, a massive burst of light filled the tunnel. His mental energy expanded infinitely. There was no stopping him now.

Nade and Iruki could only step back in shock, praying desperately that Shirone would return.

In the realm of infinity, Shirone felt a familiar sensation.

It was as if everything that made him who he was became meaningless. But this time, he didn’t lose sight of himself.

‘I won’t look away. I’ll face it head-on.’

A monstrous entity flicked its tongue, attempting to devour him. Shirone recalled Armin’s advice: never look away. Just because one holds the key to infinity doesn’t mean they will disappear—Armin had shown him that through his own actions.

‘I will overcome this. I will... conquer it.’

The beast opened its gaping maw, a pitch-black throat revealed as it lunged toward Shirone. Even in that moment, Shirone refused to avert his gaze, staring directly into the darkness of its gullet.

“Grrrr!”

His mind, expanding throughout the world, crashed into the barrier of the Spirit Zone, causing a sharp, excruciating headache. He had captured it. Gritting his teeth, Shirone

held on, pouring all his overwhelming energy into Photon Output.

“Shirone! Are you okay? Say something!”

“Check the output first!” Shirone shouted.

Nade looked back at the core. Output efficiency was at 22 percent. The efficiency, which hadn’t budged from 17 percent, had suddenly risen by 4 percent.

“It’s going up! It’s really going up! Shirone!”

“Raaaaah!”

Shirone focused even harder. The infinite mental energy rushing through the Spirit Zone coursed through his arms and into the crystal orb.

Nade yelled out in shock. The output efficiency had jumped to 36 percent.

‘More! I need more power! Even more!’

The Spirit Zone trembled. Its formidable endurance couldn’t hold back the oncoming surge of mental energy. It felt as if the energy was being compressed hundreds of times over, ready to explode. Shirone’s mind was on the verge of breaking apart.

“Raaaahhh!”

Output efficiency: 59 percent.

“Shirone! Just a little more! Hang in there!”

Even the normally calm Iruki was shouting, his voice strained. The needle on the gauge swung wildly as if caught in a storm.

Shirone shifted the Spirit Zone into a defensive mode. He could hear the sound of the framework tightening with a creaking noise. Just as the pressure became unbearable, and all the output was channeled through his hands, a devastating sense of loss washed over him, as if the world had vanished.

Output efficiency: 87 percent.

“Ughhhh!”

His entire body trembled, his brain shaking violently. Shirone suddenly realized just how incredible of a mage Armin was.

Applying infinite energy to reality was truly madness. A misstep could result in something far worse than entering nirvana—it could lead to death under the overwhelming pressure of such power.

Shirone forced all his remaining mental energy through the single outlet of his palm. Even with the aperture fully opened, the power of the photons did not wane.

Output efficiency: 100 percent.

“Raaaaahhh!”

At the moment Shirone unleashed his final burst of strength, the core’s lamp blinked red.

Nade trembled at the unbelievable outcome. The ravenous beast that had barely registered 17 percent under normal conditions was now howling as if it would burst from being overfed.

“We did it! Iruki, start it up!”

Snapping out of his daze, Iruki hurriedly grabbed the remote control. His hands shook as he pressed the button, sending light surging upward through the lines, out to the ground above. From there, hundreds of fiber optic strands spread out like a spider’s web across the entire school.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

The bells signaling midnight rang out.

“Phew. It’s already midnight. Time really flies.”

Maria, studying in her dormitory, closed her book and stretched with a yawn.

A faint sound of bells drifted in from outside.

She unconsciously thought about the presentation and shook her head, trying to erase the thought from her mind. But the more she tried to forget, the more the thought lingered.

Nade’s story about ghouls appearing and devouring people kept playing in her mind.

“Ugh, why can’t I stop thinking about it?”

Shirone knew that he didn't even need to forcibly brainwash them. Just planting the keyword would make them imagine it on their own.

'Tuning to the frequency of a soul lets you see ghosts?'

Her thoughts spiraled, one after another. Maria shivered as her body became tense, turning back toward her bed. Then, her heart dropped with a thud. Her pupils shook as a sharp electric sensation traveled up her spine and struck her brain.

"O-Oh..."

A rotting corpse shuffled across the room.

Maria's jaw trembled uncontrollably.

The decayed soldier, ribs exposed, turned toward her and raised its arm, slowly approaching.

"Kyaaaaah!"

Her scream echoed so loud that it shook the windows. But no one could hear her. The same screams were reverberating throughout the hallway, coming from every room.

Chapter 66: The Invisible

(6)

Crash!

The vase hit the wall and shattered into pieces.

Amy, who had thrown the vase, leaned against the opposite wall, panting heavily.

“What is going on, what’s happening?”

The moment the bell rang, a ghost actually appeared. Could this be the resonance effect that Nade had mentioned? At first, she thought it was a hallucination, but the figure before her was undeniably real.

“Grrrr...”

As the ghost let out a groaning sound, Amy activated Schema and dashed toward the door. She flung it open with such force that it almost broke, revealing a hallway filled with screaming girls running for their lives.

Amy was stunned. Behind them, dozens of ghosts were snapping their jaws as they chased after the fleeing students.

“Amy! Help me! A ghost is after us!”

Serielle screamed through her tears and snot. Amy’s face turned pale. She had never believed in ghosts, but like anyone, hearing a scary story had always made her hesitant to walk alone at night.

“Ugh, ughhh!”

Swept up in the flood of panicked students, Amy ran towards the exit.

“Grrrr...”

A strange groaning sound broke the silence in the secluded training hall nestled at the foot of the mountain.

Ethella woke from her meditation. As she stood and turned, a hideous, translucent figure was approaching her. She thought it might be a ghost, but as someone who had trained to fight against the world's evils, it barely fazed her. Squinting her eyes slightly, Ethella observed the ghost, which had come right up to her. The ghost, in turn, tilted its head, looking at her with equal curiosity. This moment confirmed how precise Iruki's formula had been.

"Grrrr..."

"Grrrr?"

With a curious gaze, Ethella reached out to press the ghost's nose. Of course, her hand passed right through, coming out the back of its head.

"Hah! Hah!"

Inside a frozen steam-filled barrier, Siena gasped for breath, barely covering her bare body with her hands.

She always bathed in the girls' public bathhouse on the nights she was on duty, but as soon as the midnight bell rang, her heart almost jumped out of her chest.

"What's going on?"

The first thing that came to her mind was the soul frequency. Could it be that Nade was right? That didn't seem possible, but she couldn't deny what was in front of her eyes.

"Grrrr..."

The ghostly soldier broke through the ice barrier. In that moment, Siena regained her composure. It wasn't that she had realized it was a hologram; rather, her pride as a mage told her that nothing could so easily nullify her ice magic.

"How dare you..."

Siena boldly stepped forward. As expected, the soldier passed right through her without causing any harm.

She quickly assessed the situation.

Looking up, Siena spotted two small devices attached to the ceiling and walls. From the hemispherical devices, about the size of a gold coin, thin beams of light were being emitted.

Sighing in relief, Siena calmly exited the bath.
As she entered the changing room, the moisture on her body froze with a crisp sound.
She lightly shook her body, scattering sparkling ice crystals like diamonds in all directions. In no time, her body was completely dry.
“Those little brats...”
Siena’s eyes narrowed with fury.

Alpheas Magic Academy was in complete chaos.
The once-dark windows now flickered with light, and students were bursting out of their rooms, screaming in terror.
The same scene was happening all over the campus.
The holograms, designed to anticipate people’s movements, shifted directions at will, and the panicked students, unaware they were being tricked, simply ran blindly.
“Ahhh! Somebody help me!”
“It’s a ghost! A ghost is here!”
When humans are plunged into extreme fear, their predictable behavior patterns become surprisingly simple. They move solely on emotion, with their rational minds paralyzed.
Younger students were crying out for their mothers, while upper-level boys and girls joined the largest groups of people.
From higher ground, a wave of senior female students, along with a few scattered male students, descended like a flood.
The ghosts appeared to be chasing people wildly, but if one watched from above, they were actually guiding the masses to converge in one place. Soon, nearly 400 students had gathered in the central park on the northern side of the campus.
Trapped between people and buildings, the students finally realized that they were surrounded by ghosts on all sides,

with no escape.

“Kyaaaa! They’re coming! Someone, do something!”

“Ughhhh! Bring it on! Come at me, you bastards!”

As screams of terror echoed through the crowd, hundreds of ghostly soldiers simultaneously raised their swords and charged at the students. Whether they were crying out in fear, screaming, or bravely stepping forward, every student squeezed their eyes shut.

At that moment, the soldiers’ bodies began to glow.

Hundreds of figures flashed like lightning, then shot up into the sky, as if being sucked into a single point.

“What... What just happened?”

All eyes turned toward the roof of the central building.

Shirone stood at the edge of the roof. Nade and Iruki appeared behind him, flanking his sides.

“Thank you, everyone, for attending our presentation.”

The students stared up at them in a daze, still struggling to grasp the situation.

Teachers came rushing into the park, having flown there in haste. Every staff member, regardless of their role or which class they oversaw—lower, upper, or graduating—had responded to the commotion.

Siena pushed her way through the crowd, fuming.

“You three! Get down here right now! What do you think you’re doing? You’ve completely trashed the school!”

Nade winked and greeted her with a smile.

“Ah, Ms. Siena. Lovely evening, isn’t it?”

“Lovely evening, my foot! Get down here before I come up and kill you myself!”

“Still, it’s a presentation, right? Let’s at least finish it before we go.”

A presentation? In the middle of the night? The students murmured at Nade’s words.

“What? So, it was all fake?”

“Damn it! I thought I was going to have a heart attack!”

Most students were still dazed, but a few quickly grasped the situation, pointing fingers and hurling insults at Shirone's group.

"You tricksters! How dare you, just a Class Five, deceive us? This isn't a presentation at all!"

"Those guys should get a zero for their performance assessment! You're finished! Who pulls off this kind of scam when ghosts don't even exist?"

Despite the flood of criticism, Shirone and his group maintained their calm smiles. But when the insults and complaints didn't seem to let up, Nade raised his hand to calm the crowd.

"The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society has proven the existence of ghosts through this presentation. Yet, it seems none of you believe us."

"Of course not! You created these fake ghosts, tricked us, and think you'll get away with it? You're definitely failing for this."

"Yeah! This was nothing but a cheap trick! Anyone could pull this off if they wanted to..."

A male student from Class Four trailed off, blinking in confusion. The others also started murmuring as they looked around, realizing something.

"But... how did they do it? Do you know?"

"No, I haven't a clue. It really seemed like they were alive. And they tricked all 400 students..."

The students realized this wasn't just a simple prank. Creating hundreds of holograms was astonishing enough, but the way they had moved them? That was still a mystery.

"What did those guys do...?"

As the students started discussing, Siena furrowed her brows and closed her eyes. To be honest, even she hadn't fully grasped what method had been used.

Nade's exceptional production and engineering skills, Photon Output from the realm of infinity, and thousands of

lines of equations from Savant Syndrome... It was impossible to figure all of that out right away.

"Heh, looks like they got us this time."

The teachers turned around.

Alpheas let out a hearty laugh, looking up at Shirone and his group.

Siena approached, shaking her head.

"Headmaster, this is no laughing matter. I don't know exactly what they did, but there's evidence they trespassed in the forbidden area. Some sort of hologram device..."

"Oh? Even Siena doesn't know?"

Alpheas thought it was understandable. Even he wouldn't have realized this was an information transmission technique if he hadn't specialized in light magic.

But could this really be pulled off by students?

In a way, it must have been a gamble for Shirone and his group as well. Alpheas wanted to commend them for that.

Siena admitted, "Honestly, I still don't know. But just because we don't understand the mechanism doesn't mean they've convinced the teachers."

"Ahaha, I misspoke. When I said 'they got us,' that's not what I meant."

"Pardon? Then...?"

Alpheas kept his words brief, looking up at the students.

"Let's wait and see. It seems the presentation isn't over yet."

The students were still arguing, trying to figure out the trick Shirone's group had used.

In a flash, the central park had turned into a massive debate hall.

But the more they discussed, the more they became lost. Especially the Class Four students, who felt insulted. Being outsmarted by their juniors and unable to grasp the mechanism was a blow to their pride.

"Hmph! There's no need to think about it! They pulled off some ridiculous stunt. The point is, this presentation is a

joke! Showing us ghosts and claiming it's proof? Give me a break!"

The students of Class Four banded together in agreement.

"Yeah! We can't accept this! This isn't supernatural science, it's just a show!"

As the criticism grew louder, Nade stepped forward to ask them a question.

"Do you still refuse to believe in the existence of ghosts?"

"Of course! Ghosts? This is just a type of illusion magic! It's not a real ghost!"

"If that's the case, let me ask you. If you truly believe that, then why are you all standing here?"

"What? Well, obviously..."

The student's voice trailed off, and silence spread.

Not a single one of the hundreds of students could refute Nade's words. If they didn't believe ghosts existed, why had they all run in terror?

The answer was simple. Somewhere deep down, they hadn't been able to dismiss the possibility of ghosts.

"The emotions you're feeling now are the essence of supernatural science. Humans live their entire lives with questions and curiosity about the unknown. If we dismiss something just because it hasn't been proven yet, then what's the point of intelligence? This is exactly why the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society deserves its place at Alpheas Magic Academy, a cradle of intellect."

The students were left speechless.

Ghosts may not have actually appeared, but what did it matter?

What was important was that everyone present had considered the possibility that ghosts might exist. And if they had thought so, then someone had to strive to uncover the truth.

For the first time, the students began to take this presentation seriously. It wasn't just a prank to cause chaos

at the school. The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society had delivered a perfect presentation in their own way.

“With that, we conclude the presentation by the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society. Thank you for staying with us until this late hour.”

Shirone and his group bowed courteously. Silence filled the air, and no one said a word.

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(7)

However, after a moment, the students began to burst into laughter, feeling a strange sense of exhilaration welling up inside them.

“Pwahaha! This is truly a masterpiece! Yeah, you guys did it!”

“That’s right! To be honest, I’ve been interested in this kind of stuff for a while! Please hold more of these fun presentations from now on!”

“It’s been a while since I broke a sweat like this. You guys win! You’re the best!”

The teachers were taken aback by the students’ sudden change in attitude, but Shirone had already anticipated this. Any rational human would possess a natural curiosity about the essence of things.

Where do we come from, and where are we headed?

Perhaps that is the most important question for humanity. And that is precisely why the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society needed to exist.

Alpheas nodded in satisfaction.

“Showing the unseen without revealing it. There really was a method like that. The kids did an excellent job.”

“Headmaster, then are you thinking of allowing the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society to continue?”

“Hmm. It’s not up to me alone to decide. Well, what do you say? If anyone wishes to challenge their argument, speak now.”

None of the teachers stepped forward. Even Siena, who had been vocal earlier, had no choice but to remain silent this

time.

To be honest, she felt as though her students had delivered a significant blow to her. The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society must continue to exist. Hundreds of students gathered here were proof of that.

Thadd raised an objection.

“But what will you do if it turns out they broke school rules? There’s bound to be some backlash. Approving the club like this leaves a lot to be desired.”

Quite a few teachers, like Siena, had verified that the students had trespassed in restricted areas. With several people pointing out the same issue, a teachers’ meeting was held on the spot.

Siena spoke first.

“It’s true the students broke school rules. However, I believe this is separate from the matter of whether the research society should continue.”

The teachers were puzzled by her defense of the club, especially since she had been leading the charge for its dissolution just moments ago.

But Siena felt it was enough. She had made a promise to them. Shirone and his group had fulfilled their part, and now all she had to do was acknowledge their success.

Meanwhile, in a secluded corner of the park, members of the underground societies were whispering to each other.

“They say even rotting fish still have value. It’s not over yet. The seniors who graduated left behind some bold kids.”

“There won’t be any war. For now, the Paranormal Society will stay strong. Our Ant Language Research Society won’t get involved.”

“Tch! It’s only Class Five. They’ll eventually reach graduation, but by then, I won’t even be at this school.”

“Don’t be so sure. If you fail this year, you might be competing with those guys next year.”

“What? Are you saying I’m scared of them?”

“Everyone, stop. It’s ridiculous for us, who don’t even meet normally, to be arguing like this. If you want to go against them, then do it. Of course, our Hide and Seek Research Society won’t be stepping in.”

“You say that, but I bet you’ll be watching their every move. You guys would dive into sewer water just to stay hidden.”

“Let’s stop here. People are watching. If we stay together like this, it’ll only damage the reputation of our societies.”

The leaders of the underground societies, who controlled the shadows of the Magic Academy, decided to disperse and headed toward the graduation building. Siena, noticing them, frowned.

‘Ugh, those nuisances.’

She was sick of them just by looking at their faces. These were the worst troublemakers who had tormented her endlessly from the lower grades to the advanced classes. Yet, there was nothing she could do because they used their God-given talents to hide their tracks like ghosts.

‘How many more students like them are there in this school? This is all because these absurd research societies are allowed to exist.’

It was impossible for a teacher to deal with the genius tricks passed down from senior to junior, and then from those juniors to the next generation.

Siena had tried to disband the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society not because she hated Shirone and his group but because she wanted to root out the source of all this trouble.

‘But in the end, it’s come to this.’

Clicking her tongue, Siena made her way through the crowd. She called out to Shirone and his group, who were standing on the rooftop railing.

“I will now announce the results of the teachers’ meeting.” The applause and cheers from the students gradually died down.

“The Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society was on the verge of being disbanded. It had not held official activities for a year, and its members were too few. However, after today’s presentation and considering Headmaster Alpheas’ opinion along with the majority of the teachers’ discussions, we have decided to allow the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society, represented by Nade and his two members, to continue for now. But...”

Siena struggled to continue, growing angrier the more she thought about it, until she finally shouted, pointing at them. “The three of you are suspended for a week! It’s a suspension, you idiots!”

Wahahaha!

The students burst out laughing. While the idea to prove the society’s legitimacy was brilliant, the group had installed unauthorized mechanical devices throughout the school. Shirone, Nade, and Iruki stood there, mouths agape, before slowly looking at each other. As their mouths curled into smiles, their eyes filled with joyous triumph.

“We did it! We succeeded!”

“Wahaha! We saved the society!”

They didn’t care at all about the suspension. Overjoyed, the three embraced each other while Siena looked on in disbelief.

But they had no regrets. They had given their all, holding nothing back, and were genuinely happy with the result.

“Hahaha! Hey, congrats! Keep up the good work from now on!”

“Where’s your lab? I’ll drop by sometimes!”

The students congratulated them, including Shirone’s devoted followers, Mark and Serielle.

“Waaaah! Senior Shirone, as expected! I knew this wasn’t over from the start! As expected, Senior is a step ahead of me! No, two steps!”

“Right? Who would’ve thought that the future of the society was at stake in today’s presentation? You really pulled it off again, huh, Amy?”

Amy, however, was pouting despite this being a moment she should have celebrated the most.

“What’s so great about getting suspended? Why are you doing such silly things? You should be studying harder and joining the graduation class already.”

Serielle found Amy’s awkward expression endearing. She knew exactly how much Amy wanted to be with Shirone in the graduation class.

“Isn’t it cool, though? I mean, I could never do it myself, but don’t we all have that dream at least once? The dream of shocking the world.”

Serielle gazed at Shirone with admiration.

Shirone, smiling brightly among the cheers, showed no signs of worry.

Amy’s eyes filled with longing. She knew it deep down too. More than anyone, she wanted to be the one standing next to Shirone right now.

But, as if trying to push that feeling away, she shook her head.

‘I don’t have time for this if I want to graduate. I refuse to keep looking up to you.’

She wanted to be with Shirone. She wanted to climb high and laugh as the happiest person in the world. Amy suppressed those thoughts and turned her steps away.

‘So hurry up... and catch up with me, you fool.’

4 AM.

The staff working night shifts had gone home, and both the students and teachers were deeply asleep.

Shirone and his group were lying in the grass in the central park, where their historic presentation had taken place, gazing up at the stars.

The cheers and clamor had vanished, but they could still hear the echoes in their minds.

With a hoarse voice, Nade spoke.

“In the end, we pulled it off.”

“Yeah. But I feel kind of bad for Shirone. I’m used to getting in trouble, but this is your first time, right?”

Shirone chuckled. He didn’t mind at all.

“But it was fun, wasn’t it? It was so much fun.”

“Yeah, it was the best. Do you think we’ll ever have another day like this in our lives? I still can’t get the sound of the crowd’s cheers out of my head.”

“When the three of us work together, this is the least we should expect. After all, we made history at Alpheas Magic Academy.”

Shirone suddenly sat up.

“And besides, it’s not like it was all bad. We gained a lot from this. After this presentation, my Photon Output increased dramatically. I think this will work even in the graduation class.”

“I feel the same way. I learned a lot about optical fibers, and above all, I got to experience the mass production process firsthand. Honestly, it was an incredible learning experience. It’s all thanks to you guys.”

“Same here. I learned a lot from applying the behavior patterns of 400 people in real-time. Without Shirone’s use of Immortal Function, it would’ve been impossible.”

“What are you talking about? You were amazing too. Without your Savant Syndrome behavior equations, the students wouldn’t have been fooled.”

“By that logic, Nade deserves the most credit. He installed hundreds of devices without a single error. I could never have done that.”

Shirone and his friends, who had been chatting excitedly, suddenly realized something and went silent all at once. A brief, awkward wind passed. Nade, who had sat up, lay back

down again and said, "Let's stop. What's the point of us praising each other?"

"Yeah. We shouldn't become frogs in a well. It's fine to enjoy the results, but we mustn't get complacent."

Shirone gazed at the stars that sparkled as if they were about to spill from the sky.

"I want to go higher. I need to become the brightest star."

Iruki felt the same way.

"It feels like we've done all we could while taking it easy. I think it's time to start climbing again—time for graduation class."

Nade suddenly jumped to his feet, doing a flip.

"Alright! Let's set a new goal then! Let's rise to the next class as fast as we can! And graduate at the same time! Then we can have fun out in the real world!"

Shirone and Iruki nodded.

"Yeah. Let's keep running until then."

"Haha, I haven't felt this fired up in a long time!"

The three of them put their hands together and cheered energetically.

Someday, they would become the greatest mages. They made that vow as they looked up at the night sky, their eyes sparkling like stars.

The brightest and only star.

The North Star was looking down on them.

At the Peak (1)

When Shirone returned to the dorm, he collapsed and immediately fell asleep. Though it was unfortunate that he'd been suspended for a week, he was far too mentally and physically exhausted to care.

An entire day passed.

The sound of the piano in the morning and the sun high in the sky had nothing to do with the suspended Shirone.

"Hey, Shirone. Shirone."

Feeling someone shake him, Shirone frowned and opened his eyes. Two blurry figures hovered before him, and soon

Nade and Iruki's smiling faces came into view.

"Ugh. What?"

"You're something else. Are you still asleep?"

"I don't care. I'm tired. Leave me alone."

"Don't be like that. Get up. We can't attend classes anyway. Let's go have some fun instead."

"Fun?"

"Iruki knows a casino. If we go there, they'll give us free drinks and there are plenty of pretty girls too. Since things are like this, let's at least get something good out of it."

Shirone didn't even want to respond once the word "casino" came up.

"Aren't you guys tired? I feel like I'm dying here."

"We've been sleeping all day too. You've been asleep for 27 hours straight. Come on, let's just go for three days. With Iruki's Savant abilities, we'll be able to make money in no time."

Chapter 68: At the Peak

(2)

Shirone knew that so-called experts often went to places like that and ended up losing everything, down to their underwear. Sure, with Iruki's Savant abilities, no one could beat him at probability calculations, but there was a reason people called it gambling. Probability was just that—probability. To win at gambling, you needed the instincts of a gambler who could sense when victory was near. Shirone could already imagine Iruki slowly racking up winnings only to lose it all in one go.

"I'm not going. You guys go ahead. I don't do gambling."

"You don't have to gamble. They say pretty girls serve drinks and give massages. Are you *sure* you don't want to go?"

Hearing that made Shirone even more disinterested in going.

"Sorry, but I'm really too tired. I just need to keep sleeping. You guys have fun."

Once the word "sorry" came out of Shirone's mouth, there was no changing his mind. In fact, when it came to preparing for the presentation, Shirone was the most exhausted of them all. Nade and Iruki were also sleep-deprived, but their tasks were divided between physical and intellectual labor.

On the other hand, Shirone had to focus on raising the level of Photon Output, which required both physical and mental exertion in high-intensity training for a full month. On top of that, he entered the infinite realm toward the end, draining all his mental energy. It was no wonder his body and mind were completely worn out.

"Alright, got it. Rest well then. We're going, though, just so you know."

"Yeah, win big and buy me something tasty."

"Haha! Don't worry! By the time you wake up, we'll have magically turned into millionaires."

Hearing the door close, Shirone buried his face back into his bed.

'You're already rich, so what's with the fuss...'

Shirone quickly fell back into a deep sleep.

That night.

"Hrrrk... huff."

Shirone tossed and turned in his bed, drenched in cold sweat. The nightmare that hadn't appeared when he first collapsed into sleep now resurfaced as his body recovered from exhaustion.

"Hrrrk..."

Shirone grimaced, shaking his head from side to side. In the vastness of space, humans were insignificant. That hollow sense of loss struck him with overwhelming force.

Once again, the nightmare sucked him into a single point. Time flowed backward, and he reached the beginning of the universe. A light appeared, and that light transformed into trembling strings, then into bubbles that filled his vision. It was only light. Then, in the next moment, from a space of complete nothingness, an enormous explosion erupted.

"Hah!"

Shirone shot up in bed, his eyes wide, still focused on the afterimage left by the memory. His sweat-soaked pajamas clung to him as he slowly turned his head toward the window.

It was morning, and birds chirped outside.

"Phew... Just when I thought it might pass."

He had yet again experienced the nightmare. A strange sensation enveloped his entire body, making him shiver slightly.

But Shirone no longer felt fear.

After Armin had explained the cause, and Shirone had managed to escape the infinite realm on his own will during the presentation, he felt more in control. Now that he could manage his power to some degree, Shirone calmly observed the phenomena happening within him.

‘The universe in my dreams. It must be showing the beginning of the universe. And that gauge symmetry...’

Though he lacked concrete information, he had a faint sense that things were starting to come together. It was likely his unconscious mind sorting through the data. Remembering Armin’s words about self-realization, Shirone’s mind calmed, and the heightened senses faded.

He went into the bathroom. Having slept so deeply that he lost track of time, he felt remarkably refreshed. As he brushed his teeth, memories surfaced—Nade and Iruki had come by at some point.

‘Was that a dream? Or did they really come?’

He vaguely recalled their faces, talking about striking it big at the casino.

‘Maybe I should’ve gone with them. Now what am I supposed to do alone?’

Shirone left the bathroom, still brushing his teeth, and suddenly stopped in his tracks as he glanced back at his bed. Tiny particles of dust were floating above it, spinning in circles. The window was closed, so it wasn’t an air current. Forgetting he still had foam in his mouth, Shirone ran over. Upon closer inspection, the dust was indeed moving. He reached out his hand toward the center of the rotation. Just when he thought he couldn’t feel anything, a strong sensation jolted through him.

“Huuurgh!”

Shirone gagged and bent over, spitting out the toothpaste foam.

What was that?

It was like he had just confirmed something he already knew but couldn't name, as though he had directly touched the nerve in a tooth that had been pulled.

'This is it! I already know what it is, but I don't know the name. But what *is* it?'

Shirone frantically waved his hands in the air, but the strange sensation didn't return. Calming himself, he returned to the bathroom and washed up with hot water. Even as he did so, his mind kept going back to the phenomenon he had just witnessed.

'It's not wind, pressure, or temperature. So how can dust move like that?'

It wasn't just floating. It was clearly being moved in a circular pattern by some force.

After an hour of deep thought, Shirone, feeling restless, changed his clothes and went outside. Since classes were in session, there wasn't a single student outside the building. Feeling a bit out of place, Shirone headed toward the main gate. He still had four days left of his week-long suspension, meaning he was free to do whatever he wanted.

'But where should I go?'

The first thought that came to mind was his home. As he pictured his parents, the urge to visit them grew stronger.

'No, no. That's ridiculous.'

It was only half a day's journey by carriage, but there was no good reason to go. He couldn't just walk into the house saying, "Mom, Dad, I got suspended." And visiting the Ogent family when both Rian and Reina weren't around would be awkward too.

"Ah, that's right!"

Shirone suddenly realized his destination and snapped his fingers.

It was the bookstore.

Of course, the school library had more than enough books, but buying a book from a bookstore had always been Shirone's dream.

A smile crept onto his face as he recalled the childhood memory of being overjoyed by the old book his father had brought him.

Even though he had been happy with that one book, deep inside, there was always a desire to buy more.

And now, he could finally do it. Thanks to the allowance Temuran sent him every month, it had accumulated nicely. If he bought books from the commoner district, he could fill a basket with them even if he spent just a little.

'Come to think of it, this will be the first book I ever buy for myself.'

Borrowing from the library wasn't bad, but Shirone, who loved books, had a strong desire to own them.

Having made up his mind, he quickened his pace, swiftly passing through the noble district and entering the commoner district.

The street he used to visit often with his father's cart during his childhood remained unchanged. With a bounce in his step, Shirone confidently walked into the bookstore, tapping the pouch of coins at his side. The storekeeper, an older woman, recognized him. He was the child who would stand for hours, gazing at the shelves every time he came to the city.

"Welcome... Oh my, aren't you Shirone?"

"Hello, ma'am."

"Well, look at you! You've grown so much. I haven't seen your father around lately. I thought he'd left for another city since he always bought a book whenever he came."

"He won't be coming anymore. That's why I'm buying them myself now."

"I see. You still love books, don't you? Feel free to look around."

"Thank you. I will."

Shirone smiled happily as he browsed the bookstore. Each stack of books had price tags, and it seemed that regardless of the content, books in better condition were priced higher.

While only a small number of commoners could read, a large city like Creas still had enough readers for the bookstore to do decent business.

However, novels were still more popular than academic books, and the few academic ones available only covered basic subjects. This made Shirone realize how much more advanced the books in the Alpheas Magic Academy library were. Though there weren't any related to his specialization here, Shirone, who loved all books, picked up a novel about a mage protagonist.

It seemed to be quite a popular book, as there were multiple copies available, each priced according to its condition.

Since Shirone had some extra money, he chose the cleanest, newest copy and handed over his coins. Though this was a bookstore for commoners, and books were generally cheaper, they were still valuable items. A brand-new copy cost ten times as much as the least pristine one.

"Oh my, you're buying such an expensive one? Are you running an errand for someone?"

"No, it's actually the first book I'm buying for myself. So, I wanted to splurge a little and get a nice, clean one."

"Well, that's admirable. Not many people spend money on books these days. Make sure to read it thoroughly. A sharp mind means you'll have an easier life later on, and you won't make your wife suffer when you get married."

Completely unaware that Shirone was attending the prestigious magic academy for geniuses, the shopkeeper gave him a passionate lecture, speaking as a proud bookstore owner. Shirone didn't mind at all and politely listened, feeling good as he left the shop with his new book. 'This is my book.'

It wasn't borrowed, and it wasn't second-hand—it was his own book. Just feeling the weight of it made his heart race like a child's.

"Hey, isn't that Shirone?"

A voice called out to him, and Shirone turned to the side. A group of kids had gathered by a cart. Something about them felt familiar, and when he looked closely, his eyes widened in recognition.

“Huh? Altor? Martin? And even Lumina?”

They were the children from the slash-and-burn village that Shirone used to play with as a child.

“Wow, it’s really Shirone!”

The group of kids rushed over to him. They were all around the same age, with only a one or two-year difference between them. But in the time they hadn’t seen each other, they had grown so much. Altor, the leader of the slash-and-burn village kids, had become an enormous giant, far bigger than most adults. Only Martin, who had always been small, was still about the same size as Shirone.

Altor wrapped his arm around Shirone’s shoulders and laughed.

“You little rascal! What happened? You haven’t come by in years! Even when we asked your dad, he’d just say you were living in the city.”

“Haha, sorry. A lot’s happened.”

Even though his head was spinning from their enthusiastic greeting, Shirone was equally happy to see them again. Martin, whose front teeth stuck out like a rabbit’s, looked at Shirone’s outfit in awe.

“Wow, you’ve made it big! Anyone would think you’re a noble.”

“Really? I didn’t realize.”

Shirone was puzzled at the thought of looking like a noble. He had never once considered it before. But it seemed that after living with the Ogent family and attending the magic academy, he had unconsciously picked up some of the noble aura.

The only girl in the group, Lumina, spoke up.

“Shirone always kind of looked like a noble. Anyway, I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Thanks, Lumina. You’ve gotten prettier too.”

Lumina’s face flushed bright red. The Lumina Shirone remembered was a freckled, chubby little girl, but now her skin was tanned, her freckles had faded, and she had lost her baby fat, looking like a fully grown young lady.

Altor burst into laughter.

“Still as full of it as ever, Shirone! Even back then, no one could out-talk you. What’s so pretty about this loud-mouthed tomboy?”

“Shut up! Who are you to judge me, calling me a tomboy and everything?”

Lumina snapped back at him with a level of anger Shirone had never seen before, leaving Altor looking sheepish.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I was just kidding...”

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“Fine! Don’t talk to me, then. I’m embarrassed to be hanging out with a girl like you anyway!”

Shirone found himself chuckling. The exchange brought back so many fond memories. Though it looked like they were fighting, this was just the daily life of the slash-and-burn village kids.

Chapter 69: At the Peak

(3)

“So, Shirone, what have you been up to lately? What are you doing in the city? Are you working in a shop or something?”

“Huh? No, well...”

Shirone decided to tell them the truth. He knew his father had kept it secret, but when they asked, he couldn't bring himself to lie to his old friends.

“Actually, I'm attending a magic academy.”

“Whaaaaat?”

The kids all widened their eyes and shouted in disbelief. It was an incredible thing to hear. They had always known Shirone was special, even as a child, but for the son of a mountain man to get into a magic academy?

“H-How did that happen? Is it really true?”

Shirone was surprised by how shocked they were. To calm them down, he spoke with a bit of playful bravado.

“Haha. Well, I just got lucky. I used to work as a librarian for a noble family, and they were kind enough to help me get in.”

The kids were even more stunned.

No matter how much Shirone had worked as a librarian, it was unheard of for a noble to go that far for a commoner. It was natural that they didn't understand the hardships Shirone had gone through to get to where he was.

“Still... that's amazing. So, are you learning magic now?”

“Wow! Magic! Can you use magic? Come on, show us! Let's see it!”

The kids crowded around him, excitedly shouting, and Shirone broke into a nervous sweat trying to calm them

down.

“Well... I’m still a beginner, so I can’t do much yet. Plus, it’s against school rules to use magic outside of class.”

Altor shot Shirone a suspicious glance. Honestly, he found it hard to believe. Even as a child, Shirone’s good looks and character had made the other kids respect him. But Altor had been able to stay their leader because, in the world of commoners, physical strength was what mattered most. But now?

Shirone was a student at the prestigious magic academy attended by the highest-ranking nobles, and Altor was still just a boy from the slash-and-burn village.

“If you’re attending magic academy, why are you out here? Shouldn’t you be studying right now?”

“Oh, well... I just got a break. I had a tough exam a few days ago, so I’m taking some time to rest.”

This time, Shirone had to lie. If he told them he was suspended, the news would reach his father. Even though it wasn’t the worst situation, his parents would still be disappointed.

Most of the kids seemed to believe him. They’d never been to school, so they just assumed students could get breaks. Lumina tugged at Shirone’s sleeve and asked, “How long are you on break for?”

“Hmm, let’s see... about three days?”

“Really? Are you going to go home, then?”

“Haha, no. I’m planning to go home when the semester ends. My parents are probably busy anyway.”

“True. With only three days, your break would be over by the time you got there.”

The kids, who had parents like Shirone’s, understood better than anyone how busy mountain men were.

Martin chimed in, “So, have you figured out where you’re going to stay? Where are you going to sleep?”

“Well... I haven’t decided yet.”

Lumina's face lit up as she shouted, "Really? Then why don't you stay with us! You used to sleep over all the time, remember?"

Shirone was tempted by the offer. Even if he returned to school, he was suspended, so he couldn't borrow books from the library or do much else besides lie around in the dormitory. Plus, the thought of spending the night alone in a place where he knew no one didn't sound appealing either.

"Are you sure? Is it okay for me to come?"

"Hahaha! What are you talking about? We still have sleepovers at each other's houses every other day."

Shirone remembered it well. Their community lifestyle made them not just friends, but brothers, sisters, and even family.

"Alright then. I'd love to. It'll be great to see everyone again."

"Alright! We've sold all our goods, so let's head back! Let's have a big drink tonight!"

Altor wrapped his arm around Shirone's shoulders and led him toward the cart. His grip was much stronger than before, and Shirone let out a small groan of pain.

"Ow, ow, that hurts."

"Hahaha! Are you still that weak? You need to get stronger if you're going to be a great mage!"

Shirone knew that Altor's rough play was a way of reestablishing the pecking order and asserting his leadership. But it didn't bother him. Shirone understood the life of a mountain man's child all too well.

Altor easily lifted Shirone and plopped him onto the cart.

Lifting an adult man like that required quite a bit of strength, and Shirone, stunned by how much his friend had grown, could only stare. Altor, noticing his reaction, laughed and patted his head.

"Good to see you, Shirone! Let's drink till we drop tonight!"

As Shirone rode the cart into the slash-and-burn village, he was filled with nostalgia at the familiar sights. Green shoots

sprouted in the fields lining the mountain slopes, and smoke rose from the chimneys of the scattered mountain houses along the ridges. The villagers working their fields noticed the approaching cart and called out.

“Martin! You’re back?”

“Yes, sir! And Shirone’s with us too!”

“What? Shirone? Where’s Vincent?”

“Vincent didn’t come. But guess what, sir? Shirone’s going to magic academy now!”

“What’s that? He’s going to school to eat?”

“No! Not eating school! He’s attending a magic academy!”

“Hah! What nonsense.”

“ ... ”

Martin fell silent, and the man returned to working his field. Altor understood the reaction. He could hardly believe it himself—how could someone who had spent their whole life working the land believe such a thing?

Lumina pouted.

“What’s that about? Why won’t they believe you? Don’t worry, Shirone, I’ll spread the word for you later.”

“Haha, there’s no need for that.”

Altor chimed in, “ Uncle Vincent didn’t say anything about it, did he? Best to stay quiet and not stir things up.”

As the leader of the village kids, Altor knew the power of words. If, by any chance, Shirone was lying, it could put Vincent in a difficult position.

‘If uncle Vincent’s trade with them is cut off, it would hurt my family too.’

After unloading the cart at the communal storage, Altor led the group to the only shop in the village that sold alcohol. It was a simple place with a few tables propped up on a dirt floor, run by the wife of an herbalist as a side business.

“Auntie, we’re here,” Altor called out as they entered.

“Oh, welcome, Altor. Wait, aren’t you Shirone?” the woman asked, recognizing him.

“Yes, it’s been a while. How have you been, ma’am?”

“Well, well! I heard Vincent was working in the city, but I guess you must have met him there. Anyway, it’s good to see you.”

The group, familiar with the place, pushed three tables together. Altor, sitting at the head, placed an order.

“A round of beers for all of us, and the usual for snacks.”

Shirone couldn’t help but feel how much things had changed. When they were younger, none of them would have touched alcohol, but now they sat there, legs crossed like adults, downing their beers. Compared to them, the kids at magic academy still seemed so immature.

“So, Shirone, can you drink?” Altor asked.

“Huh? Oh, no. I’ve never tried it before.”

“What? You’re still just a kid then, huh? I bet you haven’t even grown a single hair down there, have you? Hahaha!”

Altor’s joke made the others burst out laughing, but Lumina scowled in disapproval.

“What kind of thing is that to say to a friend you haven’t seen in ages? Your mouth is always so crude.”

Her open defense of Shirone made Altor blush slightly.

‘Right... it’s always been like this.’

Altor had always known that Lumina liked Shirone, even when they were kids. But they weren’t children anymore. Now, the man with power would be the one to win a fine woman. Altor believed he should be Lumina’s match, as he was set to become the next village chief. However, the joy of seeing Shirone again quickly pushed aside any irritation, and Shirone himself was happy to be reunited with his friends. Surprisingly, his first beer wasn’t bad, and the cheerful atmosphere continued.

“Hey, do you remember when Hauran tried to jump Shirone?”

“Hey! Why are you bringing that up now? Don’t!”

Shirone waved his hands, trying to stop him, a little tipsy from the drink.

“What’s the big deal? It’s all in the past. Besides, Hauran got married last year, so she’s not even around anymore.”

“Oh, really? That’s a relief.”

Shirone’s comment made the others laugh so hard they banged on the table. As the mood lightened, Lumina, emboldened by the alcohol, leaned in close to Shirone.

“So, what kind of girl do you like, Shirone?”

“Huh? I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

Altor wasn’t happy with Lumina’s flirting, but he couldn’t find a way to stop her. Instead, he turned the conversation back to Shirone.

“Shirone, are you really attending a magic academy?

Shouldn’t you at least be able to do some basic magic?”

“Well, the thing is, I started learning magic late, so I’m behind the others. Magic is a really difficult field of study. It’s not that I can’t do it, but it’s against the school rules to use magic outside of class...”

Even though Shirone could use magic, he was still just a student. Until he earned his official mage’s license, using magic outside of school grounds was strictly forbidden. The only exceptions were in cases of life-threatening danger or if someone else’s safety was at risk.

Of course, most students didn’t follow the rules, and the school couldn’t do much to enforce them. But rules existed for a reason.

Shirone had once broken the arms and legs of thugs he’d encountered in an alley at the age of twelve. And not long ago, Nade had used an electric spell at a restaurant, which could’ve escalated into a huge brawl if the other party had been more aggressive.

Magic wasn’t just about brute force. It was about drawing on the immense powers of nature with human will. Shirone’s specialty, Photon Output, didn’t carry even a gram of physical force, but he knew that demonstrating it would inspire fear and awe in his friends. He didn’t want to ruin the mood of the gathering by showing off magic.

Martin, chewing on some dried jerky, asked, "So, if it's that hard, does that mean you might not be able to become a mage?"

"Of course. There are far more people who fail to become mages than those who succeed."

"Really? So, what will you do if you don't make it as a mage? How will you make money?"

"Huh? How will I...?"

Shirone had been so focused on becoming a mage that he hadn't seriously considered what he'd do if he failed.

Making money to support themselves was the biggest concern for kids their age, so when Shirone hesitated, the others looked at him curiously.

"So, who's paying your tuition? Are the nobles covering it?"

"Yeah, for now, I'm getting support."

Their eyes widened in amazement.

"Wow! Really? How much are they giving you? Have you saved any money? How are you planning to get married? Have you dated a noble before?"

"No, I've never really thought about that..."

"Have you ever been to one of those places? You know, where they have lots of women? Nobles go to those kinds of places all the time, right?"

"Well, some do, but not all of them..."

As the barrage of questions continued, Altor's expression darkened. Wasn't Shirone starting to feel like the leader now?

In the village, the hierarchy wasn't just about who could beat up the weaker kids. If a strong leader didn't maintain control, people would start to get greedy for a bigger share. For those isolated from the world, conflict meant the collapse of the community. The reason they chose a leader from a young age was to prepare for the day when they would take responsibility for the village.

Altor spoke in a dry voice, "That's enough. Why are you all so curious? Are you jealous of Shirone's life?"

“Of course! Nobles are giving him money!”

Chapter 70: At the Peak

(4)

“Even so, if you can’t become a mage, it’s all for nothing. Isn’t that right, Shirone?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, of course.”

“Relying on someone else’s money means you’re handing your life over to them. It’s fine if you succeed, but if you fail, you’ll be left with nothing. You can’t do that either, Shirone. You need to make sure you have a way to support yourself, even if it’s just out of consideration for your parents. Are you planning to live off them for the rest of your life? It’s not like you’re strong enough to make a living doing physical labor.”

Even if he didn’t become a mage, with the knowledge he’d acquired, he could still find a job. Since he was a commoner, if he swallowed his pride, there were plenty of places that would hire him. But it was true, just as Altor said, that he had never seriously considered what would happen if he failed.

How could he not have? Was it overconfidence? Arrogance? What kind of life would I lead if I couldn’t become a mage? His stomach churned. Failure. Anyone could fail, and Shirone was no exception. The realistic questions of the kids from the slash-and-burn village sent a chill through his heart. Sensing the mood had darkened, Altor suggested a game. It was partly an attempt to reassert his authority as the leader.

“Alright, enough serious talk. Hey, Shirone, how about an arm-wrestling match with me for old times’ sake?”

“Huh? With me?”

“Yeah. You used to have surprising strength back then. Let’s see if you’ve still got it.”

The kids banged on the table, egging them on.

“Ooooh! It’s a warrior versus a mage! The showdown of the century!”

As the lively atmosphere returned, Shirone set aside his gloomy thoughts and found himself smiling again. Arm-wrestling against someone who could lift a full-grown man? It was ridiculous, to say the least, but also kind of funny.

“How about we bet on the drinks?”

As Altor placed his thick forearm on the table, Shirone, not wanting to back down, reached out his hand. If there was a bet involved, win or lose, male pride dictated that he had no choice but to accept.

“Fine. Let’s do this. But no going easy on me.”

“Of course not.”

The moment their hands met, Shirone felt like he was gripping a boulder. Using photon-enhancing magic to flip him over would make the drinks a freebie, but that was just a fun thought.

Martin volunteered to be the referee.

“Alright, get ready... Go!”

Shirone squeezed out all his strength, but Altor’s power surged like a wave, forcing him down despite his best efforts. He crashed under the table and rubbed his elbow. It wasn’t just strength—it was raw, brute force.

“Ouch... Wow, you’re really strong.”

“Whoa! As expected of Altor! He beat Shirone, the mage, in one go!”

Magic had nothing to do with arm wrestling, but to the kids, the title of ‘mage’ carried a lot of weight.

“Of course! Altor once hunted a bear, you know!”

Having regained his authority, Altor finally let out a hearty laugh.

“Hahaha! Shirone, you’ve gotten so weak! You weren’t this bad back in the day. This ended up being a strange bet.

Don't worry about the drinks, Shirone—I'll pay for them.” Lumina came over to help Shirone up, her eyes filled with sympathy.

“Shirone, are you okay? Honestly, Altor—how can you be so rough?”

As a fellow member of the slash-and-burn village, Lumina knew why Altor had overpowered Shirone so easily, but Shirone, familiar with the rugged mountain life himself, wasn't upset.

“I'm fine. But wow, Altor's gotten really strong.”

As Shirone stood up, a coin pouch fell from his pocket. The pouch opened, and the sight of the gleaming gold coins rolling across the floor made the children's eyes widen.

“Huh? Wait, are those real gold coins?”

“What? Where? Whoa, they really are! There are five of them!”

Even the kids at the end of the table gathered around, mesmerized by the coins. It was rare to see gold coins in the village, even for adults. For children who earned small amounts doing odd jobs, the sight of those golden coins was almost divine.

“You've got a lot of money, Shirone. Why are you carrying around five gold coins?”

Feeling embarrassed, Shirone picked up the coins and said, “I brought extra just in case. There's a book I really want, and it'd be a problem if I didn't have enough money.”

“Yeah, books are expensive.”

The kids knew Shirone loved books. Whenever he came with Vincent in the past, he always had a book tucked under his arm. The people in the village, who couldn't read, didn't care about books, but the number of gold coins showed just how successful Shirone's life had become.

“Shirone, so you can spend that however you want? Since it's yours, you can buy whatever you feel like, right?”

Shirone's expression turned uneasy. He had never once spent money carelessly—because, as Altor said, it wasn't his

own money. But the children seemed shocked just by the amount of money he had, and Shirone realized that if he wasn't careful, he could hurt their feelings. Choosing his words carefully, he responded.

"There's not much I need to spend money on. I usually skip meals because of all the classes at school."

"Come on, but you can at least pay for the drinks, right? You lost the bet."

"The bet? Oh, right."

Shirone clearly remembered that Altor had offered to pay, but showing off the gold coins and pretending not to hear would only hurt Altor's pride even more. Altor, for his part, wasn't ignorant and let things flow naturally.

"Alright, I'll pay. A bet's a bet."

The kids cheered in excitement.

"Awesome! So, we're really spending the gold coins, right? Shirone, can you give me the money upfront? I've never even touched a gold coin before."

"Let me handle the bill. It's been my lifelong dream to pay with gold coins!"

"No way! I'm doing it!"

Before they knew it, Shirone had become the group's leader. Lumina watched Altor with concern, seeing the pained look on his face.

Even so, Altor didn't get angry, for the same reason Lumina didn't. Having watched Shirone since they were young, she knew he hadn't changed at all. He was still the kind-hearted boy who thought of others before himself.

"Come on, stop it! You guys are acting all stingy over a single gold coin! When are you going to grow up? Let's talk about something else already."

At Lumina's scolding, the kids quietly returned to their seats. Shirone was grateful to her.

Sensing the change in mood, Martin quickly changed the subject.

"By the way, did you hear? They spotted it again on the back mountain yesterday."

"Yeah, I heard. At this rate, there won't be any wild animals left. How much longer is it going to keep eating?"

"It's probably a pregnant cow bear. Their appetite is insane."

The cow bear was the largest species of gray bear, and when pregnant, the female would eat twice her normal amount, causing a headache for hunters.

Shirone, who had done some hunting himself, showed interest.

"A cow bear came this far? Don't they usually live on the other side of the mountain range? That's a serious problem."

"Tell me about it. My dad's a hunter, and he's been coming home empty-handed every day. The wild animals are practically wiped out."

"Why don't you all team up and catch it together? Cow bears aren't particularly aggressive, so five people should be enough."

"It's logging season right now, so we're short on people. Everyone's out cutting trees, and no one's willing to help. But looking at its movement range, it probably won't give birth around here. Things should go back to normal after a week or so."

"Got it. Your dad must be having a hard time."

Altor's eyes lit up as he snapped his fingers.

"Hey, Bread! What if we went and caught that cow bear ourselves?"

"What? Us? Isn't that dangerous?"

"How could you say that? You know how many red bears, the most aggressive kind, I've hunted. A cow bear is nothing."

Altor saw this as an opportunity to restore his tarnished reputation. The only things he could surpass Shirone in were

physical strength and hunting skills, so in a way, this was a godsend.

“Hey, what do you say? Let’s all help Bread out.”

“Well, I’d really appreciate that.”

If he didn’t bring home game, Bread’s family would go hungry. Knowing that, the kids couldn’t turn him down. Besides, Altor was the one who had hunted the notorious red bear, small in size but vicious in temperament.

“Alright, let’s go catch the cow bear tomorrow!”

“Woohoo! I’m fired up! Don’t worry, Bread! I’ll shoot an arrow right into that bear’s head!”

“You idiot! You think you can do that? We’ll dig a trap and let Altor handle the rest.”

“We leave at dawn tomorrow! Shirone, you’re coming too, right?”

Altor’s eyes gleamed as he asked. To fully regain his place as the leader, Shirone had to come along. Knowing this, Lumina shook her head and interjected.

“Okay. I learned something from my father, so I can do my part.”

“Good! Now, cheers!”

The foamy beer glasses clanked in the air.

The next day, at dawn.

Shirone woke up at the crack of dawn and started preparing for the hunt.

While the kids would share the professional tools, each person had to bring their own basic equipment.

He rolled the rope neatly to avoid tangling and strapped it to his backpack, then checked his bow and arrows.

He packed fabric and glue to make torches, along with large nails and a hammer.

He placed spare arrowheads in a leather pouch, and, in case of an emergency, he brought dried food and a whistle.

When he lifted his backpack, the familiar weight brought him a sense of satisfaction.

As Shirone, the man, thought to himself that he wasn't out of the game just yet, he opened the door to find all the kids, already geared up, gathered at the entrance.

"Hey, Shirone, you're so late! What took you so long? Haha!"

Shirone chuckled awkwardly. It seemed like people working in the field had a different level of preparedness.

"Haha, sorry. I haven't done this in a while, so I'm a bit out of practice."

"Anyway, let's get going. We need to be back before sunset."

Altor took the lead, and Shirone followed in the middle group with Lumina. Martin covered the rear.

By the time they reached the cow bear's territory, the sun had risen.

Lumina lit a fire and started cooking. Breakfast was corn soup with melted goat cheese and bread. Shirone dunked his hard bread into the soup and swallowed it down.

"This is delicious. Lumina's cooking skills really are top-notch."

"Hehe."

Lumina smiled shyly. In the past, she would have fussed and demanded he pay her back for the meal, but now, she seemed different. The kids had certainly grown, and Shirone felt relieved to see that his friends were doing well.

"Alright, if you're all done eating, let's head out. It looks like the bear might be further up."

Altor led the group toward the mountainside. His hunch seemed right—every tree was marked with the bear's territorial scratches. Martin pointed to a tree deeply gouged by claws and spoke.

"Look at this. The tree's completely shredded. That thing must be crazy strong."

Altor approached and inspected the claw marks closely.

"Hmph. This isn't a problem. Its paws don't seem too big, either."

“Still, isn't it dangerous?”

“Bears are known for their strength, sure. They're also faster than you'd expect. But cow bears tend to be slower. With this many people, we can definitely take it down.”

Shirone belatedly examined the claw marks, and a sense of unease crept over him. Though it was just a scar on the tree, he couldn't quite imagine a bear making those markings.

‘That's strange. It doesn't look like something done with brute strength. More like something sharp and incredibly fast slashed it...’

Altor then pulled out his bow. With an arrow nocked and his upper body crouched, he turned to the group.

“Alright, we should start being careful from here on. Let's head a bit further up and set up the traps.”

Following Altor's lead, the kids quietly ascended the mountain. They moved with ease, clearly accustomed to this way of life.

Shirone entered his Spirit Zone, sensing his surroundings. While its 40-meter radius was less than an experienced hunter's range of vision, it didn't hurt to be cautious, especially with the unsettling feeling gnawing at him.

As they neared the summit, a wave of dread hit Shirone through his senses. He stopped in his tracks, trying to identify the source of the ominous feeling. Noticing, Altor turned and asked, “Shirone, what are you doing? We're not setting traps here”

“Altor, something feels off.”

“What do you mean? I don't sense anything.”

Altor dismissed Shirone's concern outright. No matter how smart Shirone was, when it came to hunting, Altor considered himself the expert. But Shirone, still uneasy, left the group and began walking toward a different area. Altor, irritated, followed after him. Independent actions in the mountains could put everyone in danger.

“Shirone, if you keep doing this, you might as well just head back down—Ugh!”

Altor froze, horrified by the sight before him. For once, even Shirone was speechless. A wave of nausea hit him, and the smell of the goat cheese he had eaten earlier rose in his throat.

“What... is this...?”

Chapter 71: At the Peak

(5)

The wild animals were brutally torn apart and hung from the tree branches like laundry. Among them were even some ferocious carnivores.

The children who arrived later quickly covered their mouths. Just the fact that they didn't scream was proof enough that they were living up to their roles as hunters.

"Altor, what in the world happened here? Are you telling me a cow bear really did this?"

Martin's voice trembled, and Lumina, unable to bear the sight, turned her head and squeezed her eyes shut. Shirone, however, made a decision faster than anyone.

"We need to go down. This isn't something we can handle."

"No, let's go a little further. We need to find out what's going on."

"Altor! This is serious!"

"That's why we need to go! If something like this is roaming the mountains, all the game will leave, and we'll starve to death!"

"I know that, but it's too dangerous. Let's go back to the city and report this."

"Report? Have you lost your mind playing with nobles? Do you think anyone cares about a hunter's situation?"

"You idiot! That's exactly what I'm saying! This isn't something trivial enough to ignore. Look at those animals. Can't you see how dangerous this situation is?"

Martin cut in, "Shirone, Altor, look over there."

The bushes rustled as they shook. Shirone and Altor immediately nocked their arrows, aiming in the direction of the noise.

Rustle... rustle...

The trembling of the leaves heightened the tension. The children, too, drew their weapons, waiting for whatever was behind the noise to reveal itself. Finally, when the creature responsible for the slaughter emerged, Shirone and Altor's arrows flew far above their original target.

"This... this can't be..."

Even the usually fearless Altor's voice was laced with fear.

"Grrrr."

A creature resembling a wolf over two meters tall hunched over, glaring at the children. Its chest muscles were swollen like balloons, but its waist was thin. Its arms hung down to its knees, and its hooked claws were as long as a human's pinky finger. Its knees were bent backward like a cat's, supported by long, agile feet that made it look incredibly swift.

Martin barely managed to speak.

"M-Monster..."

Evolutionary scientists believe that humans and animals evolved from a common ancestor. However, monsters come from a completely different origin, unrelated to any known species. Because of this, monsters cannot be fully analyzed based on animal characteristics alone. They are stronger, faster, and even possess intelligence far surpassing other creatures.

'A bipedal wolf-like monster... It's an Ulk.'

Shirone recalled the knowledge he had learned from books. The Ulk was a monster that, although lacking in linguistic ability, could express hundreds of emotions through sound. Living in tribes, they had a sense of community.

Equipped with sharp claws, agility, and immense strength, they were a balanced type of monster, one that even professional monster hunters were reluctant to face when they formed groups.

'But why is it here? I thought there were no monsters in this region.'

Only one possibility came to Shirone's mind. Ulks that had lost in a tribal war must have fled and wandered into this area. The wounds on the Ulk's body seemed to support his theory. Its fur was matted with the blood of countless beasts, making it impossible to gauge how much blood it had lost.

The sound of the children's labored breathing brought Altor back to his senses. As their leader, he had to do something to break the stalemate.

'It's still a living creature. If I hit it in the head, it'll die.'

Altor took a deep breath and aimed his arrow. Even though the Ulk knew it was being targeted, it calmly rested its hand on a tree, watching its prey with cold eyes. This was evidence of its intelligence.

'Die, you filthy beast!'

Altor's arrow flew like the wind, but the Ulk merely tilted its head slightly, dodging it with ease. Then it made a sound, almost as if it were mocking him, scratching its throat.

"Grrrr. Grrrrr."

The children were horrified by the creature's reflexes, dodging the arrow at such close range. But this was only the beginning of their despair.

Crack!

The Ulk crushed a tree trunk with its jaws alone. Then, it let out a thunderous roar directed at Altor.

"RAAARRGH!"

"Damn it! Run!"

At the sight of the creature tearing the tree apart with its sheer strength, Altor's desire to nock another arrow vanished.

They all sprinted toward the summit, but Shirone stayed behind, firing arrows at the Ulk.

"RAAARRGH!"

Shirone's taunts only enraged the Ulk further, but his actions bought the children time to escape.

The Ulk leaped with incredible agility, slashing down at Shirone's head with its claws. At the same time, Shirone's body flashed and soared into the air.

"Grr?"

Floating mid-air thanks to his Teleportation, Shirone looked down at the Ulk from above. However, teleporting repeatedly deep within the mountains was too taxing.

'Not here. I need to head for the summit.'

Meanwhile, Altor, supporting the exhausted children, ran with all his might. Avoiding the downward slope had been the right choice. Running down would have only resulted in them tumbling to their deaths.

"Hurry! Run faster!"

The children, having thrown away all their gear and weapons, climbed the mountain with their tongues hanging out. Lumina shouted, "Where's Shirone? I can't see him!"

"He's buying us time! Just keep moving!"

Altor urged the children onward. Though he was worried about Shirone, he knew that concern wouldn't help their situation. His priority was to protect the children.

"RAAARRGH!"

As they reached the summit, the Ulk's roar echoed from below. Altor's brow furrowed. If the monster had reached this far, it meant either Shirone had escaped or... he was dead.

"Damn it! There's nowhere to hide!"

The summit was a nearly flat clearing, and at the edge, a cliff dropped 20 meters down. However, there wasn't enough time to climb down.

"Altor! The monster's here!"

The Ulk climbed up the slope, its rock-hard muscles gleaming in the sunlight. Separated from the children, Altor willingly made himself the bait.

"Over here! Come at me!"

But there was no clear escape route, surrounded by cliffs. Altor turned back in despair. Despite all his training, his

strength felt like that of a child compared to the monster.

“Damn it! I don’t care anymore!”

Determined to fight to the death, he raised his fists, only to see the Ulk suddenly disappear before his eyes.

“Run!”

Altor turned in surprise. Before he had even realized it, Shirone was wrestling with the Ulk, rolling on the ground.

“H-How?”

Altor tried to run to Shirone, but then Shirone’s form shimmered and vanished into light once more, stopping him in his tracks.

“Wow, that’s magic, right?”

The children, who had never seen Teleportation before, were shocked. No matter how fast the Ulk moved, Shirone would flash with light and vanish, causing it to miss its target repeatedly.

“RAAARRGH!”

The Ulk roared in frustration, but its anger wasn’t simple, like that of an animal. It was calculated. The monster decided it didn’t matter who it ate—meat was meat. With that, it turned and charged toward the children.

“Ahhh!”

The children scattered in terror, their faces pale. Only Lumina, frozen in fear, couldn’t bring herself to move.

“Lumina! Run!”

“A... Ah...”

Shirone reached out toward the Ulk, channeling the full power of his photon energy. But Lumina was just outside the range of his Spirit Zone.

‘Damn! It’s not enough!’

Shirone quickly shifted his targeting form to a cross-shaped pattern, extending his zone just enough to sense the Ulk.

‘Photon Output!’

A flash of light burst forth, striking the Ulk in the eyes.

Blinded by the sudden brilliance, the Ulk howled in agony.

“We did it! Shirone took it down!”

The impact of the light was so intense that the children believed the Ulk's face must have been shattered. But Shirone, knowing that Photon Output had no physical force, ran toward the beast, shouting.

"Lumina! Get up and run! We don't have time!"

Lumina tried to scramble to her feet, but her legs had locked up, and she collapsed onto the ground like a log.

Realizing that Shirone's magic lacked destructive power, the children anxiously shuffled in place.

"What do we do? His magic only seems to be light."

"Grrrr!"

The Ulk, recovering its vision, charged at Lumina. Its sharp, hooked claws snagged her hairband, snapping it, and her hair fell loose. In that instant, Shirone lunged forward, grabbing the Ulk around the waist, and activated Teleportation. A flash of light shot into the sky, and the two began to plummet toward the cliff below.

"Shirone! No!"

"Grrrrr!"

As the Ulk flailed, trying to break free, Shirone continued to teleport in quick succession. Directing the Teleportation downward was a dangerous maneuver, something strictly forbidden even in school, but it was the only way to keep the Ulk disoriented.

'What now? What do I do?'

Crashing into the ground wouldn't kill the Ulk. In his photon form, Shirone lacked mass, so any fall would result in zero impact energy. But if he stopped teleporting, the Ulk's violent thrashing would be too much to handle.

'Mass. I need mass...!'

Suddenly, a chill ran down Shirone's spine—a powerful sense of intuition he had never felt before. Countless fragments of thoughts rushed through his mind. The beginning of the world. Gauge symmetry. The swirling vortex above his bed. Mass is not power. The force that

initiates the universe's activity. The rupture that breaks symmetry.

As Shirone's consciousness expanded into an infinite realm, he felt a profound sense of loss, which was the source of his heightened awareness.

A dissonance between omniscience and omnipotence.

The missing fragment's name was gravity.

When omniscience finally aligned, omnipotence, which had long made its presence known through nightmares, clicked into place perfectly. As the conditions for the magic were met, Shirone transformed the Ulk into a photonic state and hurled it downward.

"Grrrr...!"

Before the scream could even finish, the Ulk's body hit the ground with a hollow thud, bouncing from the impact.

Shirone landed gracefully with a Rainbow Drop and glared down at the Ulk.

It was dead on impact. The reason it had suffered such a fatal blow despite being in a photonic state was because the light carried weight.

"Hah... hah..."

Matter is not born with mass. There is another element that imparts and removes mass from matter.

An unknown particle, beyond human observation.

That was the revelation Shirone had grasped from the infinite realm—the secret behind omniscience and the reason why gauge symmetry appeared to break.

"It worked. I finally understand it."

Shirone clenched his fists in triumph. His entire body trembled with emotion, his chest so tight with joy that it nearly brought him to tears.

But then, a piercing scream echoed from above the cliff where the children were.

Shirone snapped back to reality and looked up.

"No way..."

He had momentarily forgotten that Ulks were social monsters. Even if they had lost the war between clans, the chance of one roaming alone was low.

“No!”

Shirone immediately activated Teleportation and shot up toward the cliff. When he reached the top, he froze, just like the others. Dozens of Ulks had surrounded them. The entire tribe had moved together.

‘I underestimated their social nature.’

The children whimpered in fear.

“W-What do we do? We’re all dead now.”

“I didn’t even get married yet. I don’t want to die like this.”

Shirone shared their fear of dying. But unlike before, he now had the means to fight back, even against this many.

“It’s okay, guys. I’ll figure something out.”

“What are you going to do? Just run! You can escape with your magic!”

“It’s fine. This time, I’m not breaking any school rules.”

Shirone began walking toward the group of Ulks.

“Shirone! It’s dangerous!”

Altor shouted, but Shirone ignored him. His focus remained on recalling the revelation he had just experienced, while keeping his eyes fixed on the Ulks.

The silver-furred Ulk, who appeared to be the chief, tilted its head dismissively. At its signal, a subordinate Ulk charged forward.

“Grrrr!”

Shirone gathered photons into his palm.

‘This won’t be enough. More... more...!’

The light gathered in his hand grew paler and paler until it became a brilliant white, almost too bright to look at.

Meanwhile, the charging Ulk rapidly closed the distance.

As the Ulk lunged, Shirone teleported just a meter backward, dodging the swipe by a hair’s breadth. With his eyes narrowed in focus, he unleashed his spell.

‘Now!’

Shirone hurled the compressed photons, and a pale beam of light struck the Ulk's abdomen. The concentrated photons expanded, pushing the Ulk back, then transformed into a golden line that pierced through it.

"Grrrr!"

The Ulk let out a final, agonized cry as it was flung backward, crashing into another Ulk before tumbling down the mountainside.

The children's eyes widened in disbelief.

"N-No way. Did you see that? That huge monster just got thrown dozens of meters!"

"How did he do that? Is that what magic is?"

The chief Ulk furrowed its brow, and a low, guttural voice slipped out in broken human speech.

"Ma...ge..."

Countless Ulk eyes now locked onto Shirone, but he focused solely on the chief.

He felt confident.

The mass embedded in the photons was minimal, but the speed at which they traveled—near the speed of light—added an unexpected force to the impact.

And this was something only Shirone could do in the world—his unique Unlocker magic.

The Photon Cannon.

Chapter 72: Dream On (1)

Photon Cannon.

The mass contained within the photon was minuscule, but the impact delivered by the fast speed of photon output was far beyond what a single monster could withstand.

The eyes of the Ulk chieftain blazed with fury. Having fought numerous battles with humans, he knew just how dangerous a mage could be.

“It’s working! I think they’re scared! Shirone did it!” Martin shouted.

But Altor’s thought differently. They weren’t up against mere beasts; these were monsters. Though they possessed some intelligence, their animalistic savagery couldn’t be underestimated.

“This isn’t over. No matter how strong Shirone is, he’s still human. A pack of beasts won’t retreat just because they lost a few members.”

True to his analysis, the Ulk chieftain had no intention of retreating. Even though a mage’s power was destructive, the collective violence of the pack wasn’t something to fear just from one person.

“Grrr... Kill... him...”

“Graaaah!”

With a roar that shook the ground, more Ulks lunged forward.

‘I can do this. Stay calm, and I can win.’

He leaped into the air with Teleportation and bombarded the ground with the Photon Cannon. Beams of light rained down like hail. Even if the Ulks weren’t directly hit, the shockwaves from the impact pounded them.

Yet the Ulks showed no sign of fear. In packs, even creatures like ogres—the kings of the forest—would cower before

them. The Ulks had lost many comrades, but that didn't matter. Each one of them leaped forward, claws ready to strike.

Shirone landed back on the ground, where seven more Ulks lay in wait, ready to pounce.

Quickly, Shirone shifted his Spirit Zone to offensive formation, setting up for an omnidirectional attack. As soon as the spikes of his Spirit Zone touched the Ulks, a barrage of Photon Cannons fired. The light was so intense it could blind anyone watching. The Ulks were hurled back to where they had come from.

"Whoa... That's incredible... Shirone."

The children murmured in awe. The sight of a human fighting on equal footing with dozens of Ulks was beyond anything they had ever imagined. Heroic tales of battles with monsters had always seemed like exaggerated myths. But seeing Shirone fight, they were starting to believe any story could be true.

"Haah... Haah..."

Shirone's breathing grew labored. Firing the Photon Cannon in rapid succession made him feel like his consciousness was about to slip away. Maintaining Photon Output for more than ten minutes drained his mental stamina to its limits. Photon Cannon was a fusion of light and mass—a hybrid magic.

A mage had only one slot they could use for focusing energy. Much like how humans can't focus on two things simultaneously, no matter how skilled, a mage can only cast one spell at a time. There were exceptions, like those with the Savant Syndrome like Iruki, who could use double Spirit Zone, but those were rare cases.

Most high-level mages combined two or even three attributes in their magic to maximize the effectiveness of a single spell. For example, Siena's Ice Tornado, which combined cold and wind, or Thadd's Fire Sun, which merged light and flame.

Fusion magic had the advantage of maximizing efficiency in the moment, but it required intense mental energy. Given the amount Shirone had already cast, it was only natural for him to feel exhaustion.

‘This is bad... I don’t have many shots left. I can’t take them all down.’

Ulks weren’t like common thugs. Their beastly senses were sharp, and they could read the emotions of their prey like a sixth sense. If Shirone showed any sign of weakness, they’d tear him apart.

Realizing Shirone was tiring, a second wave of Ulks charged forward. Although the numbers were similar to the first wave, they now felt far more menacing.

Shirone hastily fired another Photon Cannon. The ball of light struck an Ulk charging at the front, lodging in its abdomen.

“Graaahhh!”

The giant creature was pushed back, its body scraping against the ground. But unlike before, it didn’t fall. It dug its feet into the earth and stood firm. Shirone was taken aback. The power had significantly weakened.

Sensing an advantage, the Ulk chieftain ordered a full assault.

“Graah! Graah! Graah!”

The Ulks rushed forward in unison, sensing victory.

‘In that case...’

Shirone realized he had only one option left—Immortal Function.

But could he withstand it?

Casting Photon Output was one thing, but Immortal Function was on an entirely different level. If he unleashed fusion magic from the realm of infinity, there was no telling what kind of backlash he might face.

“Grrr!”

As Shirone activated the Immortal Function, immense pressure filled his mind. It felt like his head might explode.

“Aaaargh!”

Shirone forced himself to focus, unlocking his consciousness. It felt as if his sense of self was loosening, and with it, an overwhelming power surged through him. Spirit Zone filled with light, and it exploded in a blinding burst. The resulting mass waves sent the Ulks flying as golden fragments scattered into the air.

Holding a glowing orb in his hand, Shirone aimed forward with all his might. The Photon Cannon fired, a white beam that scorched everything in its path. The continuous barrage swept the Ulks aside as if they were being swept by a broom.

However, Shirone couldn't keep this up forever. The power of the infinite realm was like an ocean, while his mind was but a stream. Immortal Function was the dam holding the ocean back. He was drawing water through a small hole, but if the dam broke, he'd be swept away.

Since the mental power required to pay for each magic differs, mages choose the magic that is most effective for the price depending on the situation.

In the magical world, magic that is far more effective than its price is called Over Power, and representative examples include Time Magic Stop, Transparent Magic Invisibility, Alchemy Magic Injection, and Heal of Almighty.

Then what about the Photon Cannon?

Shirone thought it was close to Over Power.

Excellent attack speed, a mix of single and continuous fire, and even the form of a beam of the heart, it had all the conditions necessary for an attack magic.

However, it was only a story of high efficiency compared to the price. Basically, the Photon Cannon was an expensive magic. If it was cast indiscriminately like now, a terrible situation could occur.

‘I can't do this anymore! I'll die first!’

Finally, Shirone stopped the barrage. The entire assault had lasted barely three seconds, but dust billowed so thickly

that nothing could be seen.

As the wind cleared the dust, the children trembled at the sight before them. The battlefield had been utterly devastated. The area where the Photon Cannon had swept through was laid waste.

The Ulks lay crumpled, some buried in the ground. Those who survived had no time to mourn their fallen, shaking in fear as they fled.

Shirone realized the full power of his Photon Cannon.

Nothing remained in the wake of its light.

Even the Ulk chieftain, eyes wide with terror, had no choice but to accept the truth.

They could not win against this mage.

"Grr... we... leave... Let us... go..." the chieftain stammered.

Shirone was utterly exhausted, unable to cast any more magic. But he stood tall, forcing himself to stay on his feet.

"Never come here again. If you enter this mountain once more, it won't end like this."

The Ulk chieftain, in broken human speech, relayed his submission.

"Won't... come... Strong... mage..."

"Go."

Shirone waved them off, and the chieftain turned to leave.

The remaining Ulks followed him without hesitation, disappearing into the forest.

Only after the Ulks were gone did Shirone's body finally give out. He collapsed, his eyes closing in exhaustion.

"Shirone! Shirone!"

"Shh! Be quiet. They might come back," Altor cautioned the others, causing the children to cover their mouths.

Altor checked on Shirone again. He couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of him peacefully asleep.

The children of the mountain village had grown up over the years, but Shirone seemed to have remained the same as he had always been.

'They say mages don't age...'

At first, Altor had thought of Shirone as nothing more than the child of a mere mountain man—possibly even an adopted one, since he bore no resemblance to Vincent. Perhaps that's why Altor had underestimated him. But he had been wrong. Shirone was like the ugly duckling from the fairy tale, destined to be something far greater. A human unlike any other. Altor picked Shirone up. He was feather-light compared to Altor's strength, but there was no pride in the act. He understood now that while Shirone's body might be light, the weight of the intellect he carried was immeasurable. "Let's go. The hunt is over."

"Ugh!"

Shirone woke up abruptly, sitting up straight. He found himself in someone's house.

As he placed his hand on the back of the sofa and looked around, a cozy living room came into view.

The warmth from a hearth fire filled the room, and sounds of cooking could be heard from the L-shaped kitchen.

"Oh? Shirone's awake! Lumina, Shirone's up!" Martin shouted, and a clattering noise came from the kitchen. A moment later, Lumina poked her head around the wall, her face flushed with excitement.

"Where am I?"

Shirone finally remembered. It was Lumina's house, where he used to stay often with his father when he was young.

A group of children came rushing down from the upstairs.

They hadn't gone home but stayed by Shirone's side, still dressed in the clothes they had worn for hunting.

"Shirone, are you okay?"

Altor asked, his voice filled with concern. They had checked Shirone's condition as soon as they arrived at the house and found nothing unusual. However, since they were unfamiliar with magic, there was always a chance of some hidden symptoms.

Shirone performed a few mental tests to check if anything was wrong with his head. His memory was intact, and his mind seemed fine.

"I'm okay. I think I just collapsed from exhaustion."

"Phew, that's a relief. We thought something bad had happened to you."

Shirone felt a bit guilty for making them worry, even though the children felt the opposite.

"I had such a deep sleep for the first time in a while. I feel really refreshed. It's like the fatigue is finally fading."

Even though he had rested at the lodge for a while, the exhaustion hadn't really gone away. But now, he genuinely felt good, as if the lingering sense of unease had finally lifted.

'I guess Armin was right. As soon as I mastered the Photon Cannon, my senses returned. No nightmares either.'

His stomach growled. It had been a long time since he'd felt real hunger. The delicious aroma wafting from the kitchen only made him hungrier.

Licking his lips, Shirone asked Lumina, "What are you making, by the way?"

"Pork stew. Mom bought some meat."

Lumina's mother came out from the kitchen holding a ladle.

"Hello, Shirone. It's been a while."

"Hello, ma'am. I'm sorry for causing you trouble."

"Haha, don't say that. Lumina's been waiting for you for so long."

Lumina's face turned bright red. But suddenly, her expression shifted to sadness, and she lowered her head.

Altor understood how she felt. He, too, along with the other children, had realized it by now.

Shirone couldn't be their leader. He wasn't one of the children from the slash-and-burn farming village, nor was he the child of a woodsman.

Shirone was a mage.

As the mood grew somber, Altor broke the silence with a hearty voice.

“Alright! Enough of that! Let’s eat, I’m starving.”

“Yay! We’re having meat! Meat! Meat!”

Lumina’s mother placed a large pot on the table. The stew, filled with pork, was bubbling over the edge.

Even though Lumina’s family only had four members, in the farming village, it was common for multiple families to eat together, so there were plenty of utensils.

Chapter 73: Dream On (2)

When about ten children sat around the table, Lumina's mother served generous portions of boiled meat.

Shirone felt a bit self-conscious. Preparing this much food must have cost quite a bit. Paying for it wasn't an issue, but it still felt strange.

Sensing Shirone's thoughts, Altor spoke up.

"Don't worry. We can make money by selling the monster's hide. We're planning to start working on it tomorrow. Of course, we'll need your permission first."

"Huh? No, of course you should. Oh, and the monster's name is Ulk. I heard its claws and fangs can fetch a pretty good price too."

Altor had assumed Shirone would give his permission, and Shirone didn't hesitate. Besides, learning that other parts of the monster were valuable meant they'd earn more than expected.

But the best part was that they had learned the monster's name.

In this world, knowledge was also money.

If they had gone to the market without knowing the name, they would likely have been scammed. In fact, they could have lost far more than the effort they put into skinning the beast.

"I see. Either way, thank you. If it weren't for you—and the Ulk—our village would've had no choice but to move."

For people who had farmed the land and made their living selling the fruits of the mountain for generations, losing their home was a terrible fate. In that sense, Shirone had become the village's hero.

"It's nothing. This place is important to me too," Shirone said, genuinely meaning it. Even though the Ulk's meat

would spoil soon, the children had stayed by his side rather than heading into the mountains.

They weren't wealthy. Their lives were hard, and because of that, they had more reasons to blush than nobles did, but Shirone liked them. They knew how to live together.

As Martin chewed on his meat, he spoke up.

"By the way, sorry your hard-earned vacation turned out like this. Why don't you come with us to the mountains tomorrow? We'll sell all the hide and claws, and then use the money to have some fun."

The children from the farming village never missed an opportunity to have fun, but Shirone, with a hint of regret, shook his head. He wanted to return and analyze the new insights he had gained as soon as possible.

"No, I've rested enough. Thanks to you, I've recovered from the fatigue. Now I have to get back to studying. I'll return to school tomorrow morning."

After dinner, the children returned to their homes. Though the moon was up, they still had work to do. They had to prepare their equipment and check the carts throughout the night.

Shirone climbed a hill and looked down at the slash-and-burn farming village. The children, holding torches, went from house to house, preparing for tomorrow's work. Seeing them joking around and laughing brought a gentle smile to his face.

"Shirone, there you are."

"Huh? Altor, how'd you find me?"

"I just figured you'd be here. What are you thinking about? You didn't even notice me coming."

"Just thinking about the past. I used to run around a lot with my father here. We even played tag in those fields over there."

"Yeah, but you spent way more time reading books on your own. Probably because of us."

“No, it’s just that I liked reading a lot...”

Altor let out a hearty laugh.

“You don’t have to say that. It’d be strange if I didn’t know. The kids have admired you since back then. Honestly, I used to be jealous of you. Now that I think about it, I’ve got quite a few things to apologize to you for.”

“No, I was the strange one. I think I was afraid of meeting people. It was a confusing time for me.”

In the farming village, unlike the other children, Shirone had always been the pride of his parents, never getting into any trouble. But ever since he’d encountered magic at the age of twelve, his life had been a constant struggle of endless worries and doubts.

Altor nodded, seeming to understand. Today, after seeing Shirone’s magic, he finally realized.

The boy he thought only knew books had, in fact, been fighting harder than anyone else.

“I’m sorry, Shirone.”

“It’s really fine.”

“No, not just about that. I mean at the party last night. I said some things I shouldn’t have. Everyone has their own limits. I overstepped. Don’t take it to heart.”

Shirone recalled Altor’s blunt words from the previous night. He hadn’t been hurt by them. It was simply part of the burden he had chosen when he decided to walk the path of magic.

“I didn’t take it that way. In fact, I’d never really thought about it before—just how blessed I am, how lucky.”

“No, Shirone. You’ve worked hard. That’s why others help you.”

“Maybe, but facts are facts. What you said is the reality I live in, and it’s something I’ll have to carry for the rest of my life.”

Altor smiled bitterly. No one in the farming village could criticize themselves the way Shirone could.

“You’re something else, being a mage.”

Altor couldn't fully grasp the way mages thought, but maybe that's why people revered them. Shirone and Altor looked down at the farming village together. They said nothing, but their eyes were both fixed on the same place.

The next morning.

The adults had already started their day at dawn, leaving only the children behind.

Shirone had breakfast at Lumina's house before heading out.

The children gathered to see him off, each carrying tools needed for the disassembly work on the Ulk.

Watching their never-ending days of labor, Shirone realized again the weight of the path he was walking.

"Take care, Shirone. Study hard and become a mage!"

Altor reached out for a handshake, and the other children crowded around to bid Shirone farewell.

"Shirone, you'll visit us again, right?"

"When you come back, tell us lots of stories about magic academy!"

"Haha! Sure thing. I'll come back after the term ends. Take care, everyone."

After exchanging farewells with the children, Shirone turned to Lumina. Even in the lively atmosphere, her face looked solemn.

Shirone was vaguely aware of Lumina's feelings for him. But what could he do? Matters of the heart couldn't simply be resolved with logic.

"Lumina, thanks for all the delicious food. You'll cook for me again, right?"

At last, Lumina managed a smile. It was a smile of acceptance; she knew that wishing for more would only be selfish.

"Of course! So come by often. If you ignore me just because you're a mage, I'll give you a good smack."

“Alright. I’ll be sure to return.”

As Shirone walked down the village’s hilly path, he glanced back and shouted to the children who were still standing there.

“Take care, everyone! Stay healthy!”

As Shirone turned to leave and his figure grew smaller in the distance, Lumina finally lowered her head with a helpless expression. The saddest part wasn’t that he was leaving; it was the realization that she couldn’t keep liking him.

“Hey, you okay?”

Altor placed a hand on her shoulder, and Lumina couldn’t hold back her tears. Altor felt a pang of frustration. He’d known about her feelings for Shirone since they were kids, but he hadn’t realized how serious they were.

“Tch, if you’re that upset, you should just tell him. Want me to go grab him and bring him back?”

“No, it’s alright. Shirone isn’t really leaving.”

Lumina wiped her tears, lifting her head. Before long, a bright smile returned to her face.

“He’s just going toward his dreams.”

She prayed to the gods of the mountains and forests.

May a warm light guide him on his path.

On his way back to school, Shirone pondered the question posed by his time in the farming village.

How far could he truly go?

Being a guest of the Ogent family and studying alongside the students of the magic academy didn’t mean he had actually achieved anything.

The advice to learn from failures and steadily improve didn’t apply to him as a commoner.

He had to constantly unleash his potential, advancing without hesitation at every moment.

With the support of the Ogent family and the sacrifices of his parents, he was studying the advanced field of magic.

Was this truly the right path?

If, by some chance, he failed, would he be able to accept it and live life as he once had?

When Shirone arrived at the school, he headed straight to the research society building. His mind was too unsettled to return to the dorms.

‘I wonder if the kids are having fun? Hopefully, they haven’t lost too much...’

By now, Iruki and Nade would be at some far-off casino, eagerly placing bets. He hoped they weren’t betting their house on it.

After winding through Istas’s maze, Shirone entered the storage room where the research society met and stopped in front of the iron door. He could hear voices coming from inside.

“Huh?”

When he opened the door, Iruki and Nade were on the sofa, deep in a heated argument. Iruki was more excited than usual, a sign that the debate had intensified.

“You idiot! Perpetual motion machines are absolutely impossible!”

“Why are you so closed-minded? I’m not talking about infinite energy—I’m talking about a second-type perpetual motion machine!”

“That violates the law of entropy!”

“Then what do you call this? Look at what I made!”

Nade pointed to a clockwork carriage on the table—a crude iron box with wheels that didn’t even resemble a carriage.

“Uh, guys...”

Nade turned toward Shirone and, without wasting a word, waved the carriage in front of him.

“Shirone! Look, tell him I made this. First, you wind it up like this and set it on the floor...”

The carriage began to move in circles, yet the spring coil remained tightly wound.

Iruki jabbed his finger toward the carriage, his eyes flashing.

“Hey, Shirone! Don’t fall for it. That thing’s a complete fraud!”

“What’s a fraud? You’ve been staring at it, waiting for it to stop, and now you’re arguing with me!”

“Idiot! If it could be proven in an hour or two, anyone could make it! Your machine is only efficient. And winding it up was annoyingly hard!”

“What? It’s a miniature, so it has limitations! If I made it bigger, the performance would be a hundred times better!”

“How big? As big as the sky? It’d be easier to feed a horse to pull it!”

“We just need to show it has potential! Technology naturally moves toward miniaturization over time!”

“Technology without theory is bound to fail in the end!”

“Who cares about theory? As long as it works, it’s good enough!”

Both the mathematician and the engineer had valid points. Shirone blinked, listening, then inspected the carriage. Watching them passionately debate over a useless little carriage, Shirone suddenly felt his previous worries slip away.

‘Ah... I see.’

One day, that clockwork carriage might be given a proper name through the research of many scholars. And someone else would eventually build upon it to create new knowledge.

How arrogant it had been to think he had to do it all alone. He wasn’t here because of his own merits.

If his father hadn’t bought him books, if he hadn’t joined the Ogent family, if there hadn’t been a Teleportation test, if he hadn’t met Iruki and Nade...

There would be no Shirone as he was now.

It was a continuous series of lucky coincidences that had led him here.

‘Thank you... for letting me be here.’

Caught up in his own feelings for a moment, Shirone quickly regained his smile and asked his friends,

“So, how’d things go at the casino?”

Nade, who had been arguing face-to-face with Iruki, turned toward him with a frustrated expression.

“How’d it go? We lost everything in a single day. Just one more bet, and we could’ve hit the jackpot!”

“I told you it would be spades, with a 57% probability!”

“Are you kidding me? I lost a ton listening to you! 57% my foot! How’s that different from gambling?”

Chapter 74: Dream On (3)

“Should have kept pushing! Don’t you know that the more attempts you make, the smaller the margin of error gets?”

“But that takes money! Following your strategy, we’d end up betting the deed to our homes!”

“You see? Nothing in the world is limitless! That goes for energy too!”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Ahahaha!”

Shirone burst out laughing. Everyone is one when it comes to following dreams. Success or failure is just a minor issue. Even if the world scorns these so-called “useless pursuits” or mocks idealists who can’t even support their families, humanity has reached this point precisely because someone has dared to pursue those very dreams.

‘It’s okay even if it’s not me. I... don’t mind being someone else’s stepping stone.’

Shirone stopped worrying. Grateful for all the good fortune that had led him here, he knew he’d continue toward his dream.

Iruki looked at him, puzzled.

“Shirone, what’s with that weird smile? Did you eat something strange?”

Shirone shook his head without a word, and, with renewed resolve, he walked on.

“I’m back, guys.”

Two days remained until Shirone’s suspension was lifted. Nade and Iruki arrived at the fourth training ground at dawn to meet him. Though it was early, the summer sun had already brightened the surroundings, and both boys were stifling yawns as they watched the entrance.

Rubbing his sleep-deprived face, Nade muttered, "Why drag us out here so early?"

"Didn't he say he had something to show us?"

"What could he possibly have to show? I'm already blown away by everything he's done so far."

"Maybe he got a tattoo on his rod."

"Pahahaha!"

Imagining Iruki's suggestion, Nade broke into hysterics just as Shirone walked into the training ground.

"Oh, you guys are already here? What's so funny with Nade?"

"I dunno. Probably because he's a pervert."

"Pahahaha! A tattoo! On his rod. Pahahaha!"

Feeling uneasy, Shirone decided not to ask further. They were clearly just messing around with each other.

"Anyway, let's start. I'm eager to show you guys."

"What are you gonna show us, a tattoo?"

Iruki sighed.

"Enough, it's not even funny anymore. So, why'd you call us here?"

"Just wait. I'll show you right now."

Shirone walked to the center of the training ground and extended his hand toward a rocky cliff.

"What is he doing? Photon Output? Did he boost the power?"

Shirone cast a Photon Cannon. A bright white flash shot past Nade and Iruki's eyes.

Boom!

A heavy blast echoed as the rocks exploded.

Nade and Iruki, initially disinterested, suddenly gaped, jaws practically unhinged.

The impact left a wide dent in the rock. Without a word, the two ran over to inspect the mark.

"What... What is this? Magic? Or is it an actual spell?"

"Curious... Embedding force in light itself. I thought fusion wasn't possible with photon energy. Shirone, what's going

on?”

Shirone beamed with pride.

“It’s a new weapon I developed: the Photon Cannon, not just Photon Output.”

“Photon Cannon, huh? The name fits. So, how does it work?”

“Well... it’s a bit complicated.”

As Shirone hesitated, Nade ran over, his sleepiness forgotten, and shook Shirone’s shoulder eagerly.

“Tell me already! How did you do it? Physical power in light—that’s practically unheard of!”

Since light and electricity are closely related, Nade realized precisely how extraordinary Shirone’s achievement was.

“I’ll explain. So... Why don’t we go somewhere else?”

The group entered a dining hall in the noble district. Over plates of seafood pasta, Shirone recounted the journey to mastering the Photon Cannon: the vortex of dust on his bed, the intense moment he threw Urk off the cliff, and the realization of the Photon Cannon’s principle.

Without mentioning Armin specifically, Shirone easily explained the Photon Cannon’s mechanism as it was his original idea.

Nade and Iruki listened intently, barely noticing their pasta as they absorbed his tale.

Finally, after an hour of explanation, Iruki set down his fork thoughtfully.

“I remember my father mentioning gauge symmetry before. So this is the core idea: there’s a particle that conveys mass, and you can control it now?”

Shirone was struck by how knowledgeable Iruki’s father must be. To teach such advanced topics to his son—truly fitting for the head of the Dragon’s Roar family, staying current on the latest theories in the magical community.

Nade chimed in, “So the result of the Immortal Function is mass, essentially. Mastering the Photon Cannon must have removed your hypersensitivity too?”

“Yes, plus, I don’t have nightmares anymore.”

Iruki and Nade grew pensive. A particle that transfers mass to matter. Shirone’s realization was a groundbreaking discovery.

The Photon Cannon, in particular, was unique to Shirone. No one else could replicate it since it required one to have directly experienced the infinite realm. Simply knowing omniscience wasn’t enough.

“Amazing, Shirone. This could be way more significant than we realize. If you patented it, you could make a fortune instantly!”

Nade’s mind was already racing with inventions based on Shirone’s new theory.

“I actually have a favor to ask. Could you come with me to the library?”

“Huh? The library?”

“Since I’m restricted from entering the school library, I thought I’d check out the noble library. I want to research the Photon Cannon further. But I can’t get in alone, so I was hoping you two could take me.”

“No problem. It’ll help us too. But why can’t you go in alone?”

Commoners couldn’t access the noble library. He could visit the school library once his suspension lifted, but after his time in the villager settlement, he’d come to accept that denying his roots changed nothing. At least with his friends, he wanted to be honest.

“Actually, I’m not a noble.”

Nade, who’d been eating, stared blankly, and Iruki gaped at him, equally stunned.

“I’m a commoner. I was abandoned in a stable as a child, and my adoptive parents took me in. My father is just a humble woodsman.”

Though he’d come to the magical world late, the last thing he’d expected was for Shirone to be a commoner, especially

abandoned by his birth parents. It didn't match the untroubled Shirone they knew.

"Sorry I never told you before. I'll accept any criticism. But I didn't want to hide it anymore."

Nade and Iruki exchanged a glance, and their mutual understanding was clear.

Iruki spoke up first.

"It's a surprise, for sure. But honestly? I don't feel anything about it. You're still Shirone."

"I feel the same. It's not like our time together just disappears now. We've made real memories."

Shirone had expected his friends to accept him, but he hadn't anticipated the depth of their understanding. His chest swelled with gratitude.

Iruki chuckled, lowering his head.

"So that's why you're on a special admission. You started magic late because you weren't a noble. But hey, talent doesn't come based on birth. It's truly impressive."

"Thanks... It means a lot."

Seeing Shirone so moved, Nade waved his hand dismissively.

"Oh, hey. It's not a big deal. I actually think it's great. I got to know you without any preconceptions. If I'd known before, I might've missed out on moments like that research presentation."

Iruki stood up, his mind made up. Lingering here would only kill the mood.

"Alright, let's go to the library. I was getting bored anyway. Let's fuel that academic fire!"

Shirone and Nade rose with him, both of them shouting, "Let's go!"

Return of the Archmage (1)

In the capital city of the Tormia Kingdom, Baschka.

In the underground mountain range that flows around the royal palace, there is a dungeon that is 70 meters deep and was completed 100 years ago. This place, called the Dark

Labyrinth, was once the hideout of the archmage Viltor Arcane who ruled the world.

Arcane, a master of dark magic, had fought numerous battles against many nations, vanishing abruptly forty years ago due to a mysterious incident.

At that time, Arcane held an unofficial rank of 3rd-class mage.

Once a mage reached the 3rd class or higher, they were designated as an archmage, whether officially recognized or not.

The ranking of mages was based on achievements and fame, managed by the Mage Association through a specialized scoring system.

To rise from 10th to 9th class, a mage needed to accumulate a total of 1,000 points in achievements and fame. However, to advance from 4th to 3rd class, a whopping 280 million points were required.

This meant that a 3rd-class mage was someone who had amassed an unimaginable level of accomplishments and renown.

To put it into perspective, a Level A dungeon-clearing mission typically awarded 500 points for achievements, while receiving an invitation to meet with the king could grant 100 points in fame. These examples illustrated just how much Arcane had shaken up the world.

At 89 years old, forty years ago, Arcane ascended to the rank of an unofficial 3rd-class mage. His achievement score was 100 million points, while his fame scored at 180 million points.

The fact that his fame exceeded his achievements was due to his notoriety as a disruptor across the continent.

He'd conducted forbidden experiments and founded dark organizations that produced anarchists, causing such upheaval that nations trembled. Those who were now well into their seventies shuddered at the mere mention of

Arcane's name—a testament to the infamy he'd built, even without having to mention his 280 million points.

"Whew... whew."

Inside a crystal chamber filled with a green liquid, Arcane opened his eyes. He wore not a stitch of clothing, his skin sagging with the frailty of a body now 149 years old.

'Finally... the Essence of Darkness... is complete.'

It was the culmination of forty years of accumulating dark power. Arcane intended to absorb it, reliving the glories of his past.

Human death occurs when cells reach their replication limit, but Arcane had suppressed his cellular division using a life-support device.

His gleaming eyes turned toward a crystal on his desk. Initially as bright as a diamond, it had now turned pitch black, thanks to his daily ritual of storing dark power into it through an injection spell.

'Alpheas, wait for me! I will make you pay for this humiliation.'

Arcane's power had significantly declined after suffering a critical injury from a young Alpheas, then only in his early twenties.

However, driven by vengeance, he had survived, and now, today, he would regain his strength and once again rise as an archmage.

As the green liquid in the life-support device drained, Arcane's body bent as the water level lowered, the frail body of a man who seemed ready for the grave.

When the front of the crystal tank split open, Arcane crawled out, gasping heavily.

"Canis! Arin! Are you there?"

A young boy and girl entered through the door. Dark mages as well, they both had a slightly unsettling aura.

"You called for us, Master?"

"My clothes. Bring me my clothes."

Chapter 75: Return of the Archmage (2)

Canis brought a light-green robe. Though Arin was watching, Arcane changed clothes without hesitation.

Arcane, steadying himself on the table as he walked, sat down in a chair, finally able to catch his breath.

"Phew, now I feel a bit more alive."

"Are you alright, Master?"

Canis asked with concern. His dark circles contrasted sharply with his pale skin, instantly revealing his identity as a dark mage.

'What striking eyes. That's why I took him on as a disciple.'

In contrast, Arcane was not particularly fond of Arin. While her black hair and eyes hinted at innate talent, she had a soft heart and lacked sound judgment.

Her delicate, pretty face betrayed no malice, and her large eyes revealed her every emotion.

Seeing her trembling gaze since she'd seen his naked, aged body, Arcane clicked his tongue in irritation.

'Tch, what use is she? Useless thing.'

If she hadn't been Canis's closest friend, he wouldn't have brought along such a fragile girl.

It had been seven years since that day.

Even with his life-support device, his movement was difficult, and he had expended his last ounce of strength to enter the capital, Baschka.

The streets were affluent and splendid, as expected in Tormia Kingdom's largest city. Yet, behind its brightness lay the destitution of those abandoned by society.

The slums of Radum.

Radum's residents, a stark representation of the city's severe wealth divide, led far more wretched lives than beggars in other cities.

In this desolate place, where even scraps of food were scarce, the only means to survive was to rummage through garbage bins. Competition was so fierce that people sometimes even killed each other over fish bones.

It was in Radum that Arcane found Canis and Arin.

In the harsh battle for survival that defined Radum, the ten-year-old Canis had only survived alongside Arin by hardening his heart.

His eyes burned with animosity toward the world.

Arcane had liked that intensity in Canis's gaze. So, he had taken the two of them back to his dungeon and taught them the ways of dark magic.

'My instincts were correct. This boy is indeed promising.'

Arcane refused Canis's offer to help him up. Today, the day he'd break free from his wretched aging, he didn't want to show any signs of weakness.

"Watch closely, observe the greatness of dark magic."

Arcane held the black crystal and closed his eyes. Though his hands trembled from lack of strength, his face showed undeniable excitement.

"Ahh!"

As he shouted, the crystal softened, coiling around him like a stream of liquid, then spread like dark clouds that enveloped his entire body.

"Aaaahhhhh!"

Arcane let out a monstrous scream. Absorbing the power he had stored up for forty years was something no ordinary person could withstand without losing their mind.

Dark magic involved absorption and assimilation.

Arcane reclaimed his former strength by assimilating the darkness stored in the crystal into his own.

"Uooohhhh!"

The shadow under Arcane's feet began to flare like flames, then broke off from his body and scattered like fragments. It was hard to tell how much time had passed. Canis and Arin slowly opened their eyes. There was no trace of Arcane's previous frailty. Though he didn't appear younger or stand straighter, his face now held a healthy glow, and his eyes radiated vitality. Feeling an overwhelming aura from his rejuvenated master, Canis trembled with emotion. 'Is this my Master's true form? I'd heard stories, but he's even more incredible than I imagined.' Arcane smiled in satisfaction. He was once again the powerful mage he had been before being struck down by Alpheas. "Let's go. Today begins a new chapter in Arcane's history." Having waited forty years for this day, Arcane left the dungeon without a moment to relish the surge of power.

Arcane arrived at Inferno, the western prison of Baschka. Known for its impenetrable security, it held mid-level criminals ranging from D to B grades.

"Halt! Who goes there? This is a restricted area!"

Despite seeing an old man with children approaching, the guards did not take them lightly. They drew their weapons and shouted in warning.

"Identify yourself! If you refuse, you will be arrested!"

"You insolent brats..."

The shadows beneath Arcane's feet extended, merging with the guards' shadows. Without understanding what was happening, the guards' eyes rolled back as their eyelids twitched. Then they dropped to their knees and collapsed to the ground.

"Hmph, not even worth a snack. Canis, open the door."

Canis took a set of keys from a guard's belt and unlocked Inferno's main gate. Though his master could crush an iron

gate with ease if he wished, it seemed Arcane wasn't inclined to make a grand scene.

But Canis's assumptions were quickly overturned. From the moment they passed through the gate, Arcane began to show his true colors.

"An intruder! Attack! Permission to kill!"

"Alert the royal palace! Request support! It's a mage!"

The guards charged with their weapons drawn, but numbers meant little against a dark mage. Arcane's shadow stretched out like tendrils, joining with the shadows of the soldiers.

"Gah! What's going on?"

"I can't move my body!"

The guards couldn't move. When Arcane flicked his wrist, they turned on each other, wielding their weapons against their comrades despite their will.

"Aaaah! Are you crazy? You'll kill me!"

"It's not me! I'm not doing this!"

Arin's face went pale. With her unique eyes, she felt the guards' fear without a filter.

"Canis, Master didn't tell us he'd come to a place like this."

Canis was just as surprised, but his faith in Arcane remained unshaken.

"He must have his reasons. Let's just follow."

Arcane strolled calmly through the battlefield toward the building. As his connection to the guards' shadows broke, those who had been fighting collapsed with foam at their mouths.

It was mind control—a hallmark of dark magic.

Darkness unites with other darkness. Using this trait, Arcane infiltrated others' shadows, controlling their bodies and minds.

In terms of sheer power, the nature of dark magic was overpowered.

Yet, despite its strength, dark magic was seen as marginal. One drawback overshadowed all its advantages.

It was vulnerable to light.

In daylight, darkness could only exist in the form of a meager shadow. The stronger the light, the more mental energy it took to cast dark magic.

Of course, at night, a dark mage's power surged, but even that was waning with the popularization of the photonization theory developed by the genius Kergos.

In magic schools across the continent, there were almost no students who majored in dark magic—testament to how much it was despised in magical society.

However, Canis knew that Arcane had overcome dark magic's weaknesses perfectly. And the supreme mastery Arcane had achieved had been passed down to him.

'Yes, I must trust my master, the one who gave me everything.'

Breaking down the entrance, Arcane entered the prison and dealt with more guards in the hallway. Then, he opened the iron door of Block A-3, where the prisoners were held.

Sensing the disturbance, prisoners banged on the bars with their meal trays.

"Hey! Whoever you are, get us out!"

"Hey! Open this damn door! I'll make it worth your while! Or I could kill someone for you, if you'd prefer!"

Arcane slowly raised his hands. The prison's grim atmosphere was an ideal stage to showcase his powers.

"Power of Darkness."

The shadows cast along the corridor transformed into hands and reached out three-dimensionally. Hundreds of hands grasped the bars, wrenching them until the metal twisted.

As the terrified prisoners backed against the walls, the cell bars were ripped open one by one down the corridor.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Power of Darkness allowed him to manipulate shadows as his limbs by absorbing surrounding energy. A single shadow could barely lift a pebble, but hundreds of hands

moving together with mechanical precision could tear down even iron bars.

After a long pause, the prisoners shuffled out, dragging the heavy iron balls attached to their ankles.

“What’s this? You’re a mage? That’s some impressive magic.”

“Anyway, thanks. Let’s introduce ourselves. I’m Crown the Night Cat. Everyone here knows the name.”

Arcane frowned in disdain as he sensed the prisoners’ pathetic energy. Forty years ago, Inferno hadn’t been like this. Once filled with the most vicious criminals, it had fallen so far.

‘How times have changed. Does it mean the world’s become softer?’

According to Arcane’s philosophy, as civilization advances, the quality of criminals declines. Fraudsters who can’t do more than scheme proliferate, while the truly wicked infiltrate society.

“Pathetic fools. Introducing yourselves as criminals? Just because the bars are gone, you think you can just walk out?”

“What’s this old man babbling about? I was trying to let him off, but does he even know who I am?”

The prisoners grew cocky, trusting in their superior numbers. Just because they’d shared the same prison didn’t make them allies.

“Listen up, you idiots. If you don’t have the power to defeat me, stay locked up. Defy my command, and you’ll experience bone-crushing pain.”

The prisoners burst into laughter.

“Hah! What’s this old man rambling on about? Does he think we’re just gonna go back after coming this far?”

“Let’s trample him! I’ve had enough of this cursed prison!”

In their excitement for freedom, the prisoners charged thoughtlessly. Then, they suddenly remembered the shackles still fastened to their ankles.

Had they momentarily forgotten in their fervor? Or had they grown so accustomed to wearing them for years that they didn't even notice?

"What? Dammit!"

The prisoners began to panic. Arcane snorted, watching their pathetic display.

Anyone who chooses a life of evil needs either skill or brains. Those without either were nothing more than parasites taking up space in prison.

"Power of Darkness."

"Aaaah! What is this!"

The hands that had torn down the bars now wrapped around the prisoners, dragging them into the shadows. Their eyes, noses, and mouths vanished under a black veil, as though submerged in a massive, dark jelly.

Soon, the sound of bones breaking echoed.

"Mmmph! Mmmph!"

"Mmmmrgh!"

With their mouths sealed, the prisoners could not even scream.

Hearing the eerie crackling of bones, Arin shuddered and turned to Canis.

"Canis, do we really need to do something so gruesome just for revenge?"

"Arin, doubting Master means doubting ourselves."

"But still..."

"Have you forgotten what happened in Radum? We went through worse than this. Besides, these prisoners are just like the ones who tormented us in Radum."

"But we promised to forget everything that happened in Radum. We promised to be happy from now on."

"Nothing's over yet. Until Master's grudge is resolved, there's no happiness for us either."

As the shadows in the corridor dissipated, the prisoners lay sprawled in grotesque positions, groaning in pain from their broken bones.

Looking down at them with contempt, Arcane muttered to himself.

“Such weaklings. Was it a waste coming here? Or will the next cell block be any better?”

Inferno held 320 prisoners. Perhaps it was only this block that happened to be filled with low-level scum.

Chapter 76: Return of the Archmage (3)

Clink, clink.

While immersed in his thoughts, a sound of chains echoed from the end of the hallway. A man resembling a wolf emerged from one of the cells, catching Arcane's attention with a spark of interest.

Unlike the others who had rushed out thoughtlessly as soon as a single cell door opened, this one had a different mindset. Furthermore, he was not only shackled but also wore handcuffs, which pleased Arcane.

"Still one more left, huh? Were you hiding your presence? Impressive skill."

The man glanced at the beaten-down prisoners and let out a chuckle.

"Heh, what a spectacle. Do you even know where you are? This is the West Prison, Inferno. Are you planning some kind of rebellion?"

"Rebellion, huh? That sounds fun. Care to join me?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"If you're gonna get me out, why not?"

"Your ears may have been open even if your eyes weren't. There's no freedom unless you can take me down."

"Ha, strict, aren't you?"

The man raised his cuffed arms and scratched his head. At that very moment, his eyes flashed sharply, and without warning, he launched himself forward. With the force of the chains weighing on him, he spun his legs and slammed the iron ball directly into Arcane's face.

"Master!"

Boom!

The man landed in a crouch, his face a mix of shock and disbelief. Hitting someone shouldn't make that kind of sound.

"Tch, annoying magic."

Arcane hadn't moved an inch. The side of his face where the iron ball struck was enveloped in a thick shadow. This was Dark Skin, a spell that amplified the absorption power of dark magic to neutralize impacts.

"Not bad. You pass."

As Arcane invoked his Power of Darkness, shadows on the ground rose to grip the man's shackles and handcuffs.

"Don't move. A limb could fly off."

Before the man could respond, the shadows sharpened like blades and spun rapidly. The chains were cut in an instant, yet his skin was unscathed. This was the essence of dark magic—precise manipulation without limits.

"Enjoying your freedom, aren't you? Now, follow me. There's work for you to do."

"Oh, come on now. I never actually agreed to join."

The man's smirk wavered slightly.

He already knew how strong his opponent was. But if he were dragged along, wouldn't that defeat the whole point of breaking out?

"What drives you is money, right? Aid me, and you'll make plenty."

Everyone knew that mages were wealthy.

And since the man himself was the type to do anything for a payday, he had no reason to refuse.

"Heh, a big payday, huh? But if it's anything less, I'm out in the middle."

The man followed Arcane out of the prison. Thus, Inferno recorded the escape of one inmate.

Meanwhile, Shirone and his friends had booked a room at an inn after organizing the research materials they'd gathered from the library. After two days of intense discussion, they

had a rough understanding of the principles behind the Photon Cannon.

“Why does mass exist?”

Without mass, no changes would occur. It would make for a reasonably okay world, wouldn't it? If each day repeated just like the last, would it really be so catastrophic?

But mass had existed since the beginning, as though the world needed to be filled with new things.

“Mass isn't weight. Weight is the force exerted in the direction of gravity, but the universe has no direction. Then, what is mass? Cohesion? But that doesn't seem to fully explain it either.”

Nade asked, “So what do you think it is?”

Shirone's intuition was clear, yet not entirely articulated.

“Existence.”

“Huh?”

“Proof of being in this space. Maybe that's what mass is.”

Life is a code unique to living organisms. Perhaps mass itself was the true proof of existence across the entire universe.

“Hmm. Now that you say it, that does make sense. Like the will or breath of a creator.”

Hearing Nade's interpretation, Iruki snapped his fingers.

“A god particle.”

“What? What did you say?”

“The god particle. Isn't it fitting? We'll call the particle

Shirone discovered the god particle.”

“Ah, I like that! Shirone, what do you think?”

Shirone nodded enthusiastically. It felt as though Iruki had unearthed something already existing, perfectly capturing the essence he was experiencing.

“I love it. And it's important, too.”

“Right. A mage's power connects to intuition, after all. It's best to use a name you feel good about.”

In that sense, the name “god particle” was an excellent choice.

With the discussion wrapping up, Iruki flopped onto the bed. After a whole day spent buried in books, his eyes felt ready to fall out.

“Whew, analysis is done. Let’s head back to school tomorrow. Classes resume the day after, so let’s mentally prepare ourselves. You didn’t forget our deal, did you?”

Nade agreed eagerly.

“Of course not. This semester, we’re aiming to reach Class Four. From now on, I’ll study like mad. Worst case, Shirone might graduate before us.”

That could happen.

What started as a joke became a genuine concern as Nade and Iruki’s expressions turned serious.

At this rate, Shirone might indeed graduate first. The discovery of the god particle was just that significant.

“Shirone, even if you graduate, you wouldn’t stay on for an extra year, would you?”

“Haha! What are you talking about? I’m the one most at risk of not keeping the promise. At least you guys are already in the top ranks.”

While Shirone’s point was valid, his rate of growth was enough to make his friends feel a sense of urgency. A student who didn’t even know the basics of magic six months ago was now considering graduation.

“I can’t sleep. I’ll study a bit before bed.”

“Oh? Th-Then me too!”

As Iruki got up from the bed and opened a book, Nade quickly set himself up at the corner table to study as well. Watching his friends, who were usually content to relax regardless of tomorrow, so driven to study filled Shirone with warmth.

‘I have such good friends.’

Shirone was the last of the three to open his book.

Educational Symposium of Royal Board of Educators.

The symposium held by the Royal Board of Educators was a gathering where representatives from the kingdom's magic schools, swordsmanship academies, various sects, scholarly factions, alchemy foundations, and the 99 Club of Elite Artists assembled to discuss and shape the vision of the kingdom.

Thaddd attended as a representative of the Alpheas Magic Academy. The seemingly endless discussions about the pros and cons of rote education were wearing him down to the brink.

'Damn it. Do these people ever sleep? I want to go home already.'

Though he'd only come because he'd drawn the short straw, he was thoroughly fed up. A former troublemaker in his school days, he couldn't care less about education or motivation.

The only consolation was the presence of many impressive female teachers. Especially the woman seated across from him at the round table—she was his ideal type.

She had flowing, wavy blue hair and a hint of mischief that was irresistible even in formal attire.

'Quite lovely, isn't she? I think her name was Reina Ogent.' Reina was part of the 99 Club, the kingdom's elite artist circle, attending as a musician and a disciple of the renowned pianist Märchen.

At 7 PM., the symposium wrapped up.

With the evening party hosted by the Board of Educators, the heated discussions melted away. Attendees eagerly mingled with professionals from various fields over glasses of wine.

A crowd of high-profile figures, whose names were recognizable even to those uninterested in the Board, formed around Reina.

'So, that's what they mean when they say a beauty's charm can be a burden.'

He waited for his chance to speak to her, eavesdropping on the conversation. Most of it was stiff, pompous chatter or teasing remarks.

Despite it all, Reina responded with a gentle smile, pleasantly obliging. To Thadd, this was surprising; her warm demeanor didn't match the notorious reputation of the 99 Club.

Art, after all, was a craft of emotions, and its influence over the public was a force even politicians couldn't ignore.

Given the critical role of art, many artists held staunch and inflexible views.

But Reina seemed to defy such rumors, mingling gracefully with people from all walks of life.

'Ah, if only Professor Siena had half of her personality,' he thought with a sigh as he sipped his wine. Just then, Reina finished her conversation and walked over to him.

"Good evening, Professor Thadd."

"Oh, yes! Wait, you know who I am?"

"Of course. You're a teacher at the Alpheas Magic Academy, aren't you? The Ogent family estate is in Creas."

"Ah, that's right! I nearly forgot. Pleased to meet you."

Sharing the same hometown, they quickly struck up a long conversation. Just as Thadd expected, Reina was cheerful and funny.

"By the way, how is Shirone doing?"

"What? How do you know Shirone? Ah, I see."

Thadd, who had been Shirone's proctor during his entrance test, recalled that Shirone had listed his place of origin as the Ogent family estate.

"Shirone was a guest of the Ogent family. You certainly have a sharp eye, as expected from a noble family. He's doing well—although he did get into a bit of trouble recently."

"What? Trouble? What happened?"

Seeing her wide-eyed reaction, Thadd realized his mistake. If she found out that the student the Ogent family

sponsored had been suspended, it would be a blow to her pride.

“Haha! It’s nothing serious. He’s so exceptional that even the smallest incidents get blown out of proportion. Just a minor scuffle.”

“Oh, I see.”

Reina let out a relieved sigh. From Thadd’s words, she could already guess what kind of life Shirone led.

“I’m glad to hear he’s doing well. Does he have many friends?”

“Of course! He’s popular with everyone, boys and girls alike. Sometimes I’m just plain jealous, honestly. Haha!”

“Oh, I see... then, does he perhaps...?”

She stopped herself, wondering if she could ask about a girlfriend. As his sponsor, it was a fair question, but her interest went beyond that of a patron.

“Is there something you’d like to know?”

“No, no. I’m just glad to hear he’s doing well.”

“Haha! Don’t worry about it. I probably shouldn’t say this, but Alpheas is a top-notch school. You can rest assured he’s in good hands.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry if I was overstepping.”

“Not at all! In fact, I may have been too bold. How about joining me on my trip back to Creas? I’m leaving in the morning and would love to treat you to a fine lunch.”

With a disappointed look, Reina shook her head.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I have a performance coming up, so I’ll have to return to Baschka.”

“Ah, I see. That’s a shame.”

Thadd couldn’t hide his disappointment. Normally, he wouldn’t mind letting someone go, but she was truly a woman worth pursuing.

“It can’t be helped. But I would love to attend your performance. Could you let me know the date? I’ll make my way to Baschka to see it.”

“Oh, I’d be honored. I was a bit worried, to be honest. With all the unrest in the capital, I was afraid attendance might suffer.”

“Unrest? What happened in Baschka?”

“They say a dark mage attacked Inferno and broke out a B-rank fugitive. The city’s security is now almost on lockdown.”

“A dark... mage?”

Thadd’s expression tensed. It could just be another news story, but this was unusual.

Dark mages were rare in this day and age. And why attack Inferno, of all places? Just to free one B-rank fugitive?

A dark mage, Inferno, a B-rank fugitive...

A scene from history flashed through Thadd’s mind.

Chapter 77: Return of the Archmage (4)

“Could you share a few more details?”

“It happened about a week ago. The escapee is a man named Lucas, formerly the vice-leader of the Parrot Bandits before he was captured. The leader is still at large.”

“Is there any information on the one who broke into Inferno? Any details on their appearance?”

“Hmm, I only heard rumors. Supposedly, he was an old man with completely white hair. I think he had two followers with him, and I heard he used dark magic to break them out. Something about ‘powers of darkness,’ or...”

“The Power of Darkness?”

“Yes, that’s it! You’re certainly a magic school teacher.”

Reina praised him, but Thadd didn’t hear it. A dark mage—a man skilled enough to use the Power of Darkness—had attacked Inferno.

‘Could it be?’

Thadd suddenly raised his head.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

He managed to maintain his politeness, but his focus was elsewhere. He no longer saw the party hall or the beautiful women around him.

‘Damn it! And just when I’m on assignment!’

They said the prison break happened a week ago. If they’d traveled non-stop from Baschka, they would have reached Creas by now.

“Carriage! Carriage!”

Thadd ran out of the mansion and boarded the first available carriage. He opened the driver’s window and

shouted.

“To Creas! As fast as you can!”

“Sir, this carriage is reserved, and only pre-booked names are...”

It was a carriage intended for high-ranking officials, so a simple bribe wouldn't do. Thadd reached into his pockets, gathering all the money he had.

“Here! Take it. Are we going or not?”

The driver, seeing the gold coins scattered on the box seat, quickly changed his expression and prepared to depart.

“I'll get you there quickly. We'll travel overnight?”

“No sleep, no breaks! Just go as fast as possible!”

The rhythmic clatter of the horses' hooves echoed through the night air.

“Damn it, I can't be late.”

Thadd leaned back, rubbing his forehead. Though he wanted to teleport, attempting such magic repeatedly in unfamiliar terrain without proper coordinates would be a risk to his life.

Inaction helped him regain his composure. As his mind cleared, questions arose.

What on earth could have brought him back into the world?

Thadd had neither met nor seen the man, but the dreadful connection he'd learned of from Alpheas was still vivid in his memory.

“Viltor Arcane...”

Thadd's gaze grew intense as he stared straight ahead.

At around 4 AM, Canis and his party entered the training grounds halfway up the mountains surrounding Alpheas Magic Academy.

Though he had never attended a magic school, as the apprentice of a grand mage, he recognized its high-level facilities.

A cheeky voice broke the silence.

“Phew, they’ve done well. Must’ve lined it with gold coins. Wonder how much the land here is worth?”

Canis turned, frowning. The B-rank fugitive, Lucas, had his twin swords with a parrot engraved on them slung over his shoulder.

“Keep your voice down. The guards may be patrolling.”

“What are you worried about? I’ll cut them down and bury them if they’re in the way.”

Canis’s irritation deepened. He was following his master’s orders, but this man had nothing he could respect.

“Don’t get it twisted. You were hired by us. If you mess up the operation, you’ll be the first one I deal with.”

“Ooh, scary. Kids these days are so lucky. They get to insult adults just because they have impressive mentors.”

Lucas sat down heavily in the training ground, ceasing his disruptive antics for the time being. Canis suppressed his anger.

‘The master’s revenge is what’s most important. Even if I can’t stand him, I’ll put up with it.’

Lucas yawned, asking, “So why are we waiting here? We’re supposed to head into the school anyway, aren’t we?”

Arin, revealing her distaste, replied, “Our master will be casting a spell. Since it’s a wide-range spell, we wouldn’t be safe in its radius. But go ahead if you’re confident you can handle it.”

Lucas shrugged. Though tempted to show bravado, he knew he wanted no part of Arcane’s magic.

“Ah, don’t be so bitter, kiddo. When you’re mad, that cute face of yours loses its charm.”

“Hmph, I don’t care what you think about my looks.”

“How about you date me instead? I can teach you something way more fun than magic.”

Arin’s face flushed, and she was about to shout when Canis cut in.

“Quiet. It’s beginning.”

All eyes turned to the sky. Arcane floated in the center of the moon, casting the Fly spell.

Fly was a fusion spell that combined the Press and Blow aspects of the Air element. First, it compressed the surrounding air with Press magic, then created lift with Blow magic. Though it required a delicate touch due to constantly changing air currents, the ability to fly classified it as Overpower magic.

As darkness enveloped the moon, Arcane, who had been concentrating, opened his eyes. A blend of omniscience and omnipotence, he spread his arms wide, casting his magnum opus, Abyss Nova.

There was no roaring noise, no terrifying aftershock, yet the sight of darkness enveloping the school was breathtaking. As the effects of Abyss Nova faded from the outskirts of the school, the moon reappeared, illuminating the surroundings. "Hah... hah..."

Arcane panted heavily. Even for an archmage like him, the spell had consumed nearly all his mental energy.

'It will be difficult to cast that spell again anytime soon.'

Turning toward the mountain, Arcane redirected his flight. Even though he struggled to maintain the spell, his anger was fiercer.

With Abyss Nova deployed, no one would be able to interfere. Moreover, he had trained his apprentices precisely for this moment.

"Ha-ha-ha, just wait, Alpheas. You'll taste the same humiliation I suffered forty years ago."

The dark night receded, and pale light was beginning to rise over the eastern slopes of the mountain.

The Uninvited Darkness (1)

It was the last day of Shirone's suspension. After studying at the inn until dawn, Shirone and his friends woke up well past morning. They teased each other a bit over their disheveled appearances before going for a bath.

By the time they returned their books to the library and entered the school grounds, lunchtime was over. Since classes were in session, the campus was quiet, with janitors sweeping the stone pathways here and there.

"This is it, our last day off."

"Day off? You call this suspension a vacation?"

"Still, we had fun, didn't we? So, what are you planning to do next?"

Turning towards the dorms, Shirone replied, "First, I'm going to tidy up my room. Classes start tomorrow, so I should get everything cleaned up today."

"Ugh, you're so meticulous. Alright then, we'll be in the research club. Come find us if you get bored."

"Sure, see you later."

After saying goodbye to his friends, Shirone returned to his dorm. The room was a mess, as he hadn't been able to keep it in order while preparing for the recent presentation.

Rolling up his sleeves, he began cleaning and finished by arranging his study materials in order on the bookshelf.

The week-long suspension that had come without warning. But it wasn't all bad—he'd gained something from it. In fact, it was a deeper insight than he'd acquired from any of his classes so far.

'Finally, back to normal classes. I can't wait for tomorrow to come.'

It was only natural that he'd fallen behind in his studies, and he was determined to focus on classes even if it meant cutting back on study club activities for a while.

'Nade and Iruki probably feel the same way.'

He recalled the passionate looks in his friends' eyes back at the inn, filled with enthusiasm for learning. Their determination came from a solid goal—to advance to Class Four before the semester ended.

At Alpheas Magic Academy, students were evaluated at the end of each semester, with promotions based on first-semester grades. To advance, students needed to score

over 80 points in every subject. Not an 80-point average, but at least 80 points in every single subject—a daunting challenge.

It wasn't impossible, but it was tough for everyone since each student inevitably had weaker subjects based on their aptitudes.

Still, the school's educational policy was unwavering. Before students chose a specialization, they were expected to master a minimum standard of knowledge across all fields.

Therefore, it was expected that graduates of the magic school would be proficient in the basics of each branch of magic. This was also why graduates from the school were highly regarded in the professional magical community.

Not every mage in practice was a graduate of the school. Many mages were trained as apprentices, achieved breakthroughs on their own, or learned through unofficial, sometimes dark, routes outside of magic schools.

Those who took those alternative paths often excelled in hands-on experience and practical magic. However, compared to school graduates, they usually had a weaker understanding of magical theory and less potential for growth.

Employers generally chose based on job requirements, but school graduates often had an advantage in the job market. The 80-point benchmark set by the school was, in part, a response to the modern job market.

"Ugh. So what does that mean? I'd need to increase my average by more than 30 points."

No matter what insights he'd gained, this was still a school. To advance, he'd need a total score of 80 points or higher in all subjects.

Using his newly structured knowledge as a foundation, it wasn't impossible. Plus, the skills he'd built while preparing for the presentation and studying the God Particle would likely boost his scores significantly.

Even with all that taken into account, he estimated his chances of promotion at around 30 percent.

‘But really, isn’t that amazing? Promoting to Class Four in just six months with a 30 percent chance—that’s not bad at all.’

Shirone chose to think positively. A 30 percent chance was a challenge worth taking, wasn’t it? Just imagining himself left behind in Class Five while Nade and Iruki moved ahead was... terrifying.

Besides, getting into Class Four would mean he could apply for graduation. That would allow him to keep his promise to Amy.

“Oh no! Amy!”

He hadn’t seen her once since the presentation ended. He’d been so caught up in the excitement that he hadn’t even thought to look for her.

‘Ah, I should’ve at least said hello. I’ve been so inconsiderate.’

Amy had been a supportive friend, cheering him on whenever he faced tough challenges. This time, he’d be the one to lend her support. With that thought in mind, Shirone left his dorm, a playful glint in his eye.

“Hehe! I bet she’ll be surprised!”

Shirone walked toward the graduation class building, carrying two cups of coffee. One was for Amy, the other for Serielle. The memory of running coffee errands for Amy in the past made him chuckle wryly.

‘Back then, I thought my world was falling apart.’

Looking back, it had been a strange connection.

Who would have guessed that the rough girl he’d met in an alleyway at twelve would become his friend?

Shirone climbed the hill to the senior class building, where an archway known as the Steel Gate stood tall at the entrance. From a distance, he hadn’t realized how large the structure was, but now he saw just how imposing it was.

‘This is the pinnacle of the magic school.’

Passing under the structure, which symbolized the essence of a mage’s spirit, Shirone felt an inexplicable solemnity.

As soon as sixth period ended, students from the graduation class began to emerge. Shirone spotted Amy and Seriel chatting near the main entrance and called out to them.

“Amy! Amy!”

The senior students turned their heads, but Amy and Serielle were too engrossed in their conversation to hear him. Shirone, feeling mischievous, snuck up behind them and held out the coffee cups in front of Amy’s face.

“Ta-da! Surprise!”

Amy looked at him with wide, surprised eyes. Grinning broadly, Shirone handed Seriel her coffee too.

“Here you go, senior! Enjoy and get energized!”

Serielle tilted her head, puzzled. Amy blinked a few times, then furrowed her brows.

“What the—who are you, giving us coffee like this?”

Chapter 78: The Uninvited Darkness (2)

Shirone thought Amy was just playing a prank on him.

“Sorry, did I startle you? I didn’t tell you on purpose to surprise you. How are your senior classes?”

Amy’s gaze turned wary. As Shirone tried to move closer, she quickly struck his arm, causing both cups of coffee he was holding to go flying.

Shirone stared at her, bewildered. This wasn’t something he could brush off as a joke. Amy’s face was turning red, as if she were genuinely angry.

“Who are you, pulling a stunt like this? And why do you talk so casually to me while addressing Serielle as a senior?” she snapped.

Serielle looked annoyed too, as if she felt this had gone too far.

“Are you in the advanced classes? Even if you’re interested, this isn’t the right approach, don’t you think? And you should use formal language when talking to seniors. What is this? You’re acting like a delinquent.”

Shirone was speechless. Amy and Serielle were acting as if they didn’t know him at all.

“Senior Serielle, it’s me, Shirone. Don’t you recognize me? Amy, do you really not know me? You’re joking, right?”

“How would I know you? If you’re a student, go study or something. Can’t you see this is neither the time nor place? Do I look that easy to you?”

Amy grabbed Shirone by the collar, clearly frustrated. She had thought she’d finally be rid of troublesome guys after reaching the senior class, yet here she was, dealing with one again.

'It's been peaceful for a while, and now this. It's all because *he* couldn't get his act together. Hanging out with weird people, doing pointless things...'

As she grumbled internally, Amy tilted her head in confusion.

'Wait... *he*? Who is that?'

She felt as though there was someone connected to why those bothersome boys had kept their distance, but she couldn't remember who.

Held by the collar, Shirone felt a hollow ache in his chest.

Amy's eyes held no hint of warmth or familiarity.

"No... this isn't right."

He shook off Amy's hand from his collar.

"No! Don't lie!"

"Ow."

Amy winced, holding her wrist in pain. But Shirone, looking at her with an almost bitter expression, raised his voice.

"Why are you pretending not to know me? What did I do wrong? If you don't like me, just say it! This isn't fair, and it's hurting me too!"

"Get lost!" shouted Serielle, pushing Shirone away. Since it was Serielle, of all people, Shirone couldn't bring himself to resist and stumbled back, landing hard on the ground.

"Why are you tormenting my friend? And you're doing it to a senior! What class are you in? Are you looking to get scolded?"

Shirone looked up at her, feeling as if he'd lost everything.

'Senior Serielle...'

Amy's closest friend. Though she was always a top student, she'd shed tears over romantic novels and was, at heart, a gentle girl. Shirone remembered the way she'd cheered him on whenever he faced tough challenges.

But now she was a completely different person. Her gaze burned with anger, and her tightly pursed lips showed only hostility.

Shirone shook his head. It wasn't that he couldn't believe it—he simply didn't want to believe it. Something like this... could never really happen.

"No! This is a lie!"

He jumped up and ran away as fast as he could. If he stayed here a second longer, he felt he would lose his mind.

"Don't ever come back here again! If you pull something like this one more time, I'm telling the teachers!"

Seriel shouted after him, cupping her hands around her mouth. Still fuming, she turned to Amy, her expression still twisted with anger.

"Honestly, can you believe that guy? He looks all innocent, but he's so persistent. Oh, Amy, are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

Lost in thought, Amy snapped back to herself. But something still felt unsettling. Watching Shirone's retreating figure, she felt a strange sense of longing.

"Who could he be? He acted like he really knew me."

"He probably just got desperate and tried to pull something like this. There are a lot of guys like that lately. Dream on if he thinks he has a shot."

"Is that so?"

"Well, anyway, I'll head back. I wanted to catch up with you, but that weirdo ate up all of our break time."

Although they were in the same senior year, their majors were different, so they rarely had time to talk unless they made an effort.

As Serielle returned to her classroom, Amy followed her. But as she entered the main entrance, she turned to look in the direction Shirone had run.

"..."

She stood there in silence until the bell for the next class rang.

'Why are they doing this! What's the reason?!'

Shirone ran frantically. By the time he reached the senior building past the iron gate, the class bell rang, and students started entering their classrooms.

“Mark! Mark!”

Mark, who had been chatting with Maria, turned around.

Shirone dashed over to him and asked,

“Mark! You know me, right? Who am I? Tell me quickly!”

Mark looked at Maria, clearly confused. Maria simply shrugged as if she had no idea either.

“Um... who are you?”

Shirone’s heart started pounding wildly. He couldn’t understand what was happening to him.

“It’s me. It’s me.”

“So, who are you exactly? You need to tell me so I can know.”

“It’s me! Shirone! Class Five! We even took the test together! You really don’t remember?”

Mark’s face twisted slightly, but at the mention of Class Five, he refrained from further questioning and bowed his head politely.

“Oh, I see. Sorry for not recognizing you.”

“That’s not it! Why are you acting like that?!”

What on earth was he supposed to do? Normally, Shirone would have argued, but with everyone around, he couldn’t. Just then, a voice interrupted.

“What are you all doing here when class has started?”

Ms. Siena was walking down the hallway. Shirone ran over to her, feeling as if he’d finally found salvation.

“Teacher! It’s me, Shirone!”

If anyone would remember him, it was Ms. Siena. She was strong, a certified 6th-class mage. But her response was cruelly blunt.

“Shirone? There’s no such student in the senior class. Who are you?”

“Teacher, you really don’t know me? It’s Shirone.”

Siena tried to recall, but it was an unfamiliar name and an unfamiliar face.

“There must be some misunderstanding. I haven’t heard of any new students. Are you really from our school?”

Mark and Maria’s expressions turned sharp. Suddenly perceived as a suspicious person, Shirone was terrified.

“S-Sorry! I made a mistake!”

“Hey! Wait right there!”

Ignoring Ms. Siena’s voice, Shirone desperately ran away. Now he understood. He finally knew what was happening. Everyone had forgotten him.

“Hic, sniff...”

He felt like a lost child. So utterly helpless. The whole world seemed terrifying.

After stumbling through the maze of Istas three times, he finally reached the Paranormal and Supernatural Science Research Society.

‘They’ll be okay. Of course, they will, right?’

They had been joking together just hours earlier. Even if everyone else forgot him, surely they would remember.

As he entered, Nade and Iruki were chatting. They looked surprised when they saw him.

“Nade, Iruki, it’s me. I’m Shirone.”

His friends blinked without answering. Holding back his emotions had been impossible, and Shirone’s face crumbled.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? You remember me, don’t you? You didn’t forget, right?”

Nade looked at Iruki, then scratched his head and stepped closer to Shirone.

“Um... who are you?”

Shirone’s eyes welled up with tears.

“You really don’t know? We were just together a few hours ago. We were studying together just yesterday and the day before!”

"I'm sorry, but we don't know you. Did someone from another club send you to spy? Don't cause trouble and leave."

Then Iruki suddenly shouted as if realizing something.

"Wait! Maybe that's possible. How did you find your way to Iostas? Speak up! Who are you really?"

"You... you both..."

Shirone's lower lip began to tremble. He couldn't hold back anymore. No, he didn't even want to try holding back.

"Ha...ha..."

Nade let out a burst of air, then grabbed his stomach and burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha! Did you see that? His expression! This is priceless!"

"Yes! Yes! He was totally freaked out, saying 'You... you both...' Ha ha ha! Shirone, what are you trying to do, make me die of laughter?"

Nade laughed so hard he clutched his aching stomach.

"Haha, haha! The more I think about it, the funnier it gets!

Why would you do something like that... Ha ha ha!"

Shirone couldn't understand what was happening. He couldn't tell if it was reality or a dream.

"Wait, so you do recognize me?"

"What nonsense are you talking about? Did you have a nightmare or something? Do you even realize how funny your expression was? Ha ha ha!"

Shirone finally felt the tension drain from his body, as if a boulder pressing on his chest had rolled off.

"Hey, geez! You should have just told me! Why did you pretend not to know me?"

"Your face looked so funny when you walked in, so we just played along. You were like, 'It's me! It's Shirone!'"

Nade mimicked Shirone, making Iruki double over in laughter again. Too drained to even scold them, Shirone sank into a seat and covered his face with both hands.

"Geez, I thought I was going to die from fright."

“Just sit down and tell us what happened.”

Seated on the sofa, Shirone eagerly recounted what had just happened. His friends had been chuckling initially, but as he spoke of Ms. Siena, their expressions grew serious.

“Hmm, even Ms. Siena didn’t recognize you? There’s no way she’d joke around about something like that.”

Nade couldn’t believe it.

“Is that even possible?”

“If it’s a mental spell, it could be. Although manipulating the memories of the entire student body is another story.”

“I’m telling you, it’s real! I experienced it myself!”

Iruki reached out, calming Shirone.

“All right, calm down. We believe you. You’re saying that everyone has lost their memories of you, right?”

Nade added, “But we still remember you. Doesn’t that hint at something about the situation?”

“I think so too. There’s only one reason we wouldn’t forget Shirone: we weren’t on campus for two days. What could have happened while we were gone?”

They all fell into contemplation. Could someone have altered not only the students’ memories but also the teachers’? The possibility was hard to believe.

“Could it be some kind of supernatural occurrence?”

Historically, there have been similar cases,” Iruki suggested. Nade was skeptical.

“Maybe. Though I think such cases have more to do with magic. But if that’s the case, how do we explain why we didn’t forget?”

“Maybe it’s because we were in Istas. We’ve been here since we parted with Shirone.”

Shirone asked, “What does Istas have to do with it?”

“There’s always been talk of some kind of mysterious power surrounding Istas. It’s just a rumor, but we should explore every possibility, especially since it concerns us, too.”

Iruki spoke, “So there’s a chance we might lose our memories too.”

“Nothing’s certain yet.”

Silence fell. Shirone was saddened by the thought of everyone forgetting him, but the possibility of his friends losing their memories was even more troubling.

Finally, Nade spoke bravely, “But... we should still investigate, right?”

“Yeah, hiding won’t solve anything.”

His friends were right. But having already gone through something so horrible, Shirone looked less than eager.

“What if you forget me too? I might really go crazy then.”

“Here’s what we’ll do. Let’s leave a mark, something to prevent the worst-case scenario if we lose our memories.”

Chapter 79: The Uninvited Darkness (3)

Nade picked up a pen and wrote something on the palm of his hand. The friends watching did the same, each engraving the same words:

I have lost my memory. Anyone who knows the keyword can be trusted. The keyword is Polaris.

Satisfied, Shirone's group spread their palms. Now, even if they lost their memories, they would still have a way to cooperate.

"There, it's set. Let's head out now."

With his confidence restored, Shirone stepped out of Istas. Students wandered the campus, having finished their classes. Now calmer and more observant, he noticed something was distinctly off.

Normally, students would walk in small groups, chatting together. But today, they were each walking alone. The oddest thing was how they bustled about, each with a different path, going in no clear direction.

"Guys, those people..."

"Yeah, I noticed it too. They have no destination. They're just wandering aimlessly, aren't they?"

Nade spotted someone he recognized among the crowd—Gabe, a fellow classmate from Class Five.

"Hey, Gabe. Where exactly are you going?"

Gabe came over, looking at him as if he was a complete stranger and responding in a detached tone.

"Who are you?"

Nade pursed his lips. Knowing what Shirone had gone through, he brushed it off and got straight to the question.

"Never mind that. Where are you heading?"

"Where am I going?"

Nade patted his chest, frustrated.

"You were just on your way somewhere. Where's your destination?"

"Was I?"

Gabe looked down at his legs, then suddenly glanced around, as if he'd just realized where he was.

"Where... am I?"

"Hey, snap out of it. What's going on? Have you noticed anything strange over the past few days? Seen anyone suspicious?"

"Do you... know who I am?"

"Of course I know you. How could I not?"

Gabe's face paled. He gripped Nade's shoulders, shaking him urgently.

"Then tell me! Who am I? And where exactly is this place? My... my name... what is it?"

Terrified, Gabe clutched his head. Nade slowly backed away, readying himself in case things got out of hand. Thankfully, Gabe didn't become violent. He just seemed to be spiraling into madness.

"What's that sound? There's this weird noise! Why do I keep hearing it?"

As Gabe shouted and looked around, his speech started to slur, eventually devolving into unintelligible noises.

Shirone's eyes widened in shock. He'd realized what was happening to Gabe. Iruki, however, seemed unaware and continued to listen intently to Gabe's rambling.

"What's that noise he's talking about? Is he hallucinating?"

Shirone replied, his voice trembling.

"No, he's hearing his own voice."

"What? His own voice?"

"He's forgotten how to understand language. He's speaking out of habit, but he doesn't understand the meaning of his words. So, of course, it's terrifying."

Gabe had completely lost his language ability. He couldn't even remember individual syllables, eventually reverting to making primitive sounds.

Shirone's group felt a chill run down their spines. Given how quickly Gabe was deteriorating, his memories were vanishing at a frightening pace.

After some time, Gabe's voice trailed off, the light faded from his eyes, and he eventually lost all motor control. At that moment... everyone around them froze.

An eerie silence fell over the academy, as if wax figures stood where students once were. None of them showed any signs of life.

"What... what on earth is happening?"

"Well, at least we're safe. It's not ideal, but we still have room to investigate."

Shirone examined the people around him, one by one. The world felt frozen, much like Armin's Stop magic. Yet time was indeed moving; occasionally, someone would blink, proving they weren't entirely paralyzed.

"Their... thoughts have stopped."

If this was some sort of spell, it was far more dangerous than Stop. It could leave anyone vulnerable. Even a child could harm everyone here if they wished.

The three of them tested various things on the people in the crowd. When they tickled one underclassman, he laughed, but as soon as they stopped, he returned to a blank expression. They mimed poking another in the eye, and he blinked. It was clear his nerves still worked.

"Fascinating. So, their thoughts alone are frozen?"

"That means their stamina must be limited. They won't be able to keep standing indefinitely. What's the point of all this?"

"First, we need to figure out who did this. Let's keep looking around."

Shirone and his group headed north, wanting to confirm whether the older students and teachers—those with high-

level magic—were also affected.

When they reached the slope, they saw senior students streaming through the iron gate's arch.

The group hid behind some bushes.

With everyone else unable to move, seeing only the seniors on the move was more than enough reason to be wary.

Within the group of seniors, there were a few unfamiliar faces.

A young man and woman who looked around Shirone's age, along with a man carrying twin swords—a sight uncommon in a magic school.

Whistling as he moved, Lucas spoke cheerfully.

"Whew, I've seen my fair share of grim sights, but this is a first. They're all zombies now, aren't they?"

Abyss Nova was a spell that, when cast, blocked the memories of anyone exposed to it within 24 hours. Without memories, thought was impossible; it was practically a petrification spell. The memories vanished in the reverse order of recency, starting with the most recent, most prominent ones.

It was Arin's job to shepherd the memory-wiped students.

As a mental mage, she led the seniors up to the campus square, where Shirone's group had encountered Gabe.

'Shadow of Captivity.'

She cast the spell once more. Her shadow extended like tendrils, curling and snaring the shadows of the students around her.

It was an unusual form, not something you'd find in a typical four patterns spellbook. But among mental mages, tendril form was regarded as a staple technique.

The tendril form unfurled the Spirit Zone like fine threads, allowing far more freedom of shape than a four patterns formation.

But it took much longer to complete. To fully weave through all the advanced students' shadows, it would take at least 20 minutes.

While Arin worked, Lucas passed the time by eyeing the female students. As nobles, they had fair skin and carried pleasant scents. His gaze scanned over their figures, like a snake sizing up its prey, until he stopped at one that caught his eye.

“Well, well, look at this.”

She had sharp, bright eyes, even in her memory-wiped state. Her reddish bangs fell across one eye in a retro style, and she was by far the most attractive among the students.

“She’s probably got a bit of a bite, too. I like my women a bit fierce.”

Just as Lucas’s hand reached out to touch Amy, Canis grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“Lucas, stop it. Have some dignity.”

“What? Stop it? Are you telling me what to do?”

“If you pull anything, I won’t let it slide.”

Lucas gave a dismissive laugh, his voice oozing boredom.

Had the reputation of the Parrot Bandits fallen this low?

“Hey, what’s with the seriousness? From what I hear, this is all revenge anyway. What’s the harm in having a little fun?”

“It’s revenge to restore our master’s honor. I won’t tolerate lowly behavior.”

“What if I don’t care? Want to fight about it?”

“I’ll terminate our contract.”

“Haha! Kid, you seem to be under a bit of a misunderstanding; I was hired by Arcane, not by you.”

“It’s all the same. Arin is currently casting the Shadow of Capture. If you do anything to disrupt the mission, you can be dismissed at any time. And if you have any objections to that...”

A swirling depth ignited in Canis’s eyes.

“I’ll kill you right here.”

Lucas clicked his tongue and backed off. Having ascended to the deputy leader of the Parrot Bandits, he knew all too well the danger of showing hostility within the Spirit Zone.

“Fine, let’s drop it. Not like I’d profit without getting paid.”

“Let me make myself clear. If you interfere with our mission again, I won’t stand for it.”

“What a fuss from a supposed ally. I haven’t even seen this master of yours around. Where’s he hiding?”

“The master is doing important preparations. He means for us to handle a simple task like this ourselves.”

Arcane was currently hidden, recovering his mental strength after the toll of the Abyss Nova. But since sharing this wouldn’t benefit anyone, Canis kept it to himself.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” Lucas muttered dismissively as he turned away, but his eyes flashed with determination for a moment.

‘Ha, he’s just lying low somewhere.’

Lucas knew plenty about the price of magic. To cast a spell that severs memories for hundreds would be beyond an average mage. Even for an archmage, it would be impossible to remain fully capable for a while after such a feat.

‘Puff up all you want now, kid. I’m not about to miss out on a good opportunity like this.’

Once Arin finished her work, the senior and upperclassmen students all began moving at once. After they were out of sight, Shirone’s group emerged from the bushes. From what they had observed, it seemed like the entire school was being taken somewhere.

“Who on earth are those people?”

“There’s no time to think. It doesn’t seem like anything drastic will happen immediately, but once they reach their destination, who knows what they’ll do? And even the teachers were captured.”

Shirone spoke up.

“The spell that girl cast looked like dark magic. Could this whole situation be their doing?”

“It’s unlikely. To cast magic on this scale, the Zone itself would have to be massive. Of the three, two look too young,

and the guy with the weapons doesn't even seem to be a mage."

"You're saying there's a third party involved?"

"That would be my guess. Let's just focus on tracking them for now. If things get dangerous, we'll intervene then."

"Taking over a magic school... Whoever did this is completely insane. And using dark magic, no less..."

With a growing sense of foreboding, Shirone's group continued to tail the intruders.

Ethella was still in the training hall, dressed exactly as she had been the day before. Her eyebrows twitched as she sat there, unmoving. Her brow furrowed, and her nose wrinkled. Veins popped at her temples as her body began to shake violently.

Rrrrrumble.

The entire building trembled along with her body, causing dust to fall from the vibrating walls and ceiling. Finally, her eyes shot open, and she collapsed forward, panting.

"Hah... Hah..."

Her whole body drenched in cold sweat, Ethella had spent the entire night battling a sudden nightmare that had come at dawn.

'What was that?'

She couldn't be entirely sure, but it felt like something that infiltrated the human mind to sever memories. Dark magic was classified within the orthodox school of magic, yet the malice behind this spell was intense enough to push Ethella's vigilance to its limits. If not for the strictures of the Karsis Monastic Order, she too would have been left utterly without memory.

'Dark magic. But it's strictly forbidden here at the school.'

Ethella checked the time. Though it was as bright as midday in the summer sun, it was already well past the end of classes.

‘Does that mean I was trapped in that nightmare for over twelve hours?’

Considering Ethella’s formidable mental strength, this was no ordinary spell. Even more alarming was the fact that she had missed classes entirely, yet no one had come looking for her.

She wasn’t the only one affected.

Having reached this conclusion, she left the training hall immediately without even changing clothes.

A bright flash streaked across the sky over the magic school. Then, as if drawn by a magnet, it veered sharply downward and plunged toward the ground. Without even a sound of impact, a lone man landed.

Chapter 80: The Uninvited Darkness (4)

“Damn it! Am I too late?”

Having traveled through the night by carriage, Thadd arrived at Creas and cast a teleportation spell to reach the main gate immediately. As expected, the guards stood there blankly, showing no reaction at all.

It was dark magic. And of a very high level.

‘I need to find Master first.’

Thadd turned toward the teachers’ quarters, but before he could take ten steps, he heard the characteristic rumble of Teleportation from the sky.

Just as Thadd’s caution heightened and he entered the Spirit Zone, Ethella descended, riding a beam of light.

“Ms. Ethella! What’s the situation?”

Just back from a mission, Thadd spoke as if he knew what had happened at the school, which surprised Ethella. But given the urgency, she went straight to the point.

“It seems everyone has been affected by dark magic. The students and teachers alike have all lost their memories.”

Thadd had anticipated this, but facing the reality of it left him speechless. Even for someone mad, attacking one of the kingdom’s five most prestigious schools, the Alpheas Magic Academy, was beyond comprehension.

“There’s no time to lose. Tell me what’s going on first.”

“After scouting with the Spirit Zone, it looks like all the students are climbing the mountain. Judging by the direction, they’re headed toward the bridge that can’t be crossed. There are three people leading them and three others following them. As for the teachers... it seems I’m the only one who managed to escape.”

Though Arcane's dark magic was at the level of an archmage, Ethella was also a bishop of the Karsis Monastic Order, so her mind couldn't be dominated. Thadd, grateful for this, shared what he knew.

"Let me tell you quickly: the one behind this is Viltor Arcane, the archmage who wreaked havoc on the world forty years ago."

"I've heard of him. But why would someone like him come to a magic school...?"

Thadd bit his lip. It was a difficult matter related to his master, Alpheas. However, Ethella was his only ally here, and he trusted her judgment to understand without bias.

"Viltor Arcane was the headmaster's mentor."

Ethella blinked, but as Thadd expected, she didn't imagine anything beyond what she'd heard.

"I see. But it doesn't look like Arcane is one of those taking the students. I don't know the full story, but we should focus on rescuing the students first."

"That's not an option. As you've probably noticed, mental magic isn't easy to dispel. If we try to rescue the students one by one, we'll only end up counter-attacked."

"But we can't just leave them."

"You said there were three people trailing the others. Do you know who they are?"

"I couldn't confirm for sure, but... it might be Shirone."

"Shirone?"

The moment he heard Ethella's words, Thadd recalled something. The timing of Arcane's spell would've been roughly twenty-four hours ago. Shirone's group, who had been suspended, was likely the only one that could have been outside the school at that time.

"I didn't see them clearly, so I'm not certain. But judging by their aura, it felt like Shirone, Nade, and Iruki."

"That's probably right. If it's those kids, they'll be okay for a while. They're smart; they'll know what they need to do."

Better to leave it to them while you, Ms. Ethella, go after Arcane.”

“What about you, Mr. Thadd?”

“I’ll find the headmaster. Dispelling the dark magic through him is our priority.”

Ethella nodded in agreement.

“Understood. Then I’ll go after Arcane.”

Thadd looked back toward the mountains. The grounds of the magic school were so vast that he had no idea where Arcane might be hiding.

“Hundreds of people were affected all at once. For magic of this scale, his mental energy must be significantly depleted. He’s probably hiding somewhere with no people. Focusing on the mountain would be faster. When expanded in Zoner mode, what’s the radius of the Spirit Zone?”

“Hmm, about two kilometers in diameter.”

Thadd did a quick mental calculation and nodded.

“Covering five key points should do it. Patrol around the training grounds, if you would. I’ll head back to the school.”

“Got it. I’ll capture Arcane first, then rescue the students.”

“Don’t overdo it. Arcane is...”

Thadd held back his words. Warning her about his strength would only stoke her sense of duty. And if he couldn’t trust a bishop of the Karsis Monastic Order, who was recognized for her prowess in mental magic, then who could he rely on?

“Never mind. Please take care of it.”

Feeling a sense of duty as Alpheas’s disciple, Thadd bowed his head. Ethella offered a modest smile and shook her head.

“Whatever this is about, I am also a teacher at this school. I’ll do my best for the students.”

“Thank you. Then...”

Now, time was of the essence.

Thadd cast a teleportation spell to fly toward the school while Ethella took a deep breath and focused her mind.

The sequence of her spell rapidly escalated as the Spirit Zone expanded. As her unique extended field activated, she sensed everything within a two-kilometer radius through synesthesia.

‘First, the 26th training ground.’

Ethella’s body transformed into light, shooting to the mountaintop, covering a kilometer with a single Teleportation.

The Battle of the Mages (1)

Canis and his group gathered the mind-controlled people at the start point of the Bridge of No Return.

Arin’s face was pale, having just completed her mission.

Even with the assistance of Abyss Nova, moving hundreds of people under mind control was an exhausting feat.

From the bushes where he was observing, Nade whispered, “Why here of all places? It’s just a bridge and a cliff.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re waiting for someone,” Iruki replied, counting on his fingers as he thought aloud.

“Cliff, mind control, villains. If we take only those three elements into account, the answer’s obvious: they plan to throw everyone off the cliff.”

“What? Why would they do something that crazy?”

“Logically, it doesn’t make much sense. Killing students would gain them nothing. But if it’s an emotional matter—revenge or hatred, perhaps?”

Shirone felt Iruki’s theory held some weight. And if such a plan was indeed in place, just waiting and watching wouldn’t help.

“Before that can happen, we need to intervene. We might even have to fight.”

For about ten minutes, nothing happened. The students and teachers stood dazed under the influence of mind control, while Canis and Arin looked out over the cliff, seemingly waiting for their master.

“Canis, are you sure this is okay? We searched the entire school, and still didn’t bring Alpheas here.”

“We had no choice. Master warned us to be especially cautious when it came to Alpheas. We just do our part.”

“Even so... I feel like he’s going to be mad.”

Canis turned to Arin, looking irritated.

“Arin, our master is a kind man. He’d never scold us over something like this. Don’t worry.”

Listening to their conversation, Lucas began to feel increasingly annoyed. He’d joined them with the promise of a large payment, but hadn’t expected to be part of an assault on an entire magic school. Considering the difficulty of the mission, even the upfront contract fee felt inadequate. And Arcane was now considerably late.

“Hey, when exactly is your master coming? He hasn’t run off, has he?”

This was no small incident—they’d attacked one of the kingdom’s top five magic schools, where many students came from elite noble families. Even if they somehow got away with this, the consequences would be severe. There was a chance, Lucas figured, that even an archmage might have fled in fear.

“Don’t you dare talk about my master like that. He’s beyond the likes of you.”

“Hah. You’re ridiculous.”

Lucas scratched his head in irritation, but then suddenly looked up, locking Canis in his sharp, snake-like gaze.

“What, do I look that easy to you?”

The intense malice hit with such force that Arin, sensitive to psychic shifts, immediately backed away. Canis, however, kept his composure, as he’d endured similar looks countless times back in Radum.

‘Is this Snake’s Eye?’

The Snake’s Eye technique targeted the brainstem, paralyzing the central nervous system. It wasn’t something one could learn from training alone; it came from intense real-life experience and innate aptitude. Just from this technique, it was clear Lucas had lived a violent life.

"I won't hold back just because you're younger. From now on, watch what you say. You keep bringing up contracts, but your side is the one delaying things here, isn't it?"

This time, Canis didn't retort. Why hadn't his master arrived yet? For someone who'd been looking forward to today more than anyone, his delay made no sense.

When Canis dropped his fighting stance, Lucas released his Snake's Eye technique as well. After all, they were still on the same team, and Lucas had yet to receive the remaining balance of his payment.

'I wasn't following you from the beginning.'

Lucas looked back at those caught in Abyss Nova. Since their metabolism is normal, there is not much time left for them to be able to stand. If people with low stamina start to fall first, handling will become more complicated.

"Hey, why don't we just kill them now? If they collapse, it'll be a hassle to deal with each one, and we can't throw them over one by one."

Lucas was hired as a blade for a reason. While magic is ideal for mass slaughters, for individual executions, nothing beats a swordsman's efficiency. Once these people wore themselves out, it would be Lucas who had to finish them off, so he figured it was best to reduce their numbers while he could.

"No. Not until the master arrives. The core of the plan is to massacre them all right in front of Alpheas."

"Fine, then we might as well enjoy ourselves. After all, these people are bound to fall off the cliff sooner or later."

Canis shot him a look of pure disdain but couldn't stop him under the current circumstances. Being from Radum, he was well aware of the type of danger Lucas represented. Lucas would get his way eventually; that thought made Canis feel nauseated.

"What a piece of trash."

Lucas stopped dead in his tracks. He should have killed Canis after that first encounter. The human brain adapts to

shocks, and using Snake's Eye on the same target repeatedly has diminishing returns.

"Heh, do you know why I hate you? Because you act like you're driven by some lofty ideals. You and I, we're just criminals. After today, you'll be a mass murderer just like me."

"I don't hold to my ideals because I want to be 'great'. It's just that you disgust me."

"Oh yeah? You know what's really disgusting? Weaklings who talk big. So what if I disgust you?"

With that, Lucas turned and grabbed Siena by the neck. Her face twisted in pain as he lifted her with one hand and walked toward the edge of the cliff.

"Once you kill one person, you will find out. I mean, you're trash just like me."

Siena's legs dangled over the cliff as she gasped for air, her desperate sounds echoing around them.

"She's decent, too. Shame to kill her, but..."

Lucas relaxed his grip, letting her slip over the edge. His eyes suddenly sparked with a peculiar sensation—a tingle only felt by Schema users within a Spirit Zone.

'Where?'

His hypersensitive nervous system had picked up on a focal point of Spirit Zone. As he leapt into the air, an explosion erupted where his right knee had been. Had it struck directly, it would have shattered bone.

Lucas backed away as soon as he landed, doing a somersault. Even if you couldn't guess the radius of the Spirit Zone, it was standard practice in battles with the archmage to keep as much distance as possible.

Chapter 81: The Battle of the Mages (2)

Nade and Iruki, who had cast Teleportation, appeared before the cliff on the Bridge of No Return. Both of their eyes burned with fury as they watched the humiliation that Siena had endured.

“How dare someone like you insult our teacher...!”

“Well, look at that, some are still sane, huh? Anyway, mages...”

Lucas was also in a foul mood. For a so-called archmage to make such a blunder and miss his target—it was ridiculous. Worse still, he had to handle all those who remained in control of their minds.

“So that woman was your teacher? My apologies—she’s probably about to arrive... all over the ground, that is. Hahaha.”

As Lucas’s words ended, Shirone appeared, teleporting up from the cliffside, cradling Siena in his arms. His gaze was just as fierce as his friends’. How corrupted did someone have to be to throw a person off a cliff?

“I won’t forgive you.”

Lucas didn’t even pretend to care. All he felt was annoyance over this turn of events.

“Hey. What’s the plan now? Is this all part of the strategy?”

Lucas made it clear where he wanted the blame to lie. After all, things could come up when it came time for payment. Canis, however, didn’t shy away. With Arcane still missing, he was the leader for now.

“Arin, stand back.”

“But, Canis...”

“There’s no need for you to get involved. Focus on controlling the people. I’ll take care of this.”

Controlling hundreds of minds while fighting was too much for Arin. As she slipped back into the crowd, Canis, now more at ease, approached Shirone and his friends.

“Who are you? And how did you break free from the mind control?”

Iruki spoke up.

“Dark magic—hasn’t it already been left behind by the times? There are plenty of countermeasures for it.”

“Nonsense. If it were so easy, then none of those people over there would still be affected.”

‘That’s true...’

Canis raised his head to check the sun. Despite being atop the mountain, the light remained strong. But as the apprentice of an archmage, he saw no reason to worry about conditions in a fight against students.

Lucas, who had been standing by with his arms crossed, yelled out.

“Hey, what are you going to do? This wasn’t in the contract. If you double the pay, I might take care of it for you.”

“I don’t need any help. I’ll handle it myself.”

“Suit yourself.”

Lucas licked his lips and stepped back, acting as if he’d stay out of it, but his real intentions were the opposite. He’d just wait for the battle to start, then strike from behind when they least expected it. That was his plan.

“Come on already. I’m a busy man.”

Shirone and Canis slowly closed the distance between them. Through his synesthesia, Shirone could sense Canis’s Spirit Zone, a spherical area about 50 meters in diameter, on par with Shirone’s own.

“I’ll take him. You two stop that swordsman.”

At Shirone’s words, Iruki glanced back at Lucas.

“That guy? Judging from his attitude, it doesn’t seem like he’ll get involved.”

“Don’t be so sure. There’s no telling how he’ll act when things heat up. He’s ruthless enough to throw Ms. Siena off a cliff.”

Shirone looked back coldly.

“Don’t believe a single word he says.”

Iruki gulped. Shirone’s usual demeanor had shifted; his eyes were entirely different as he shifted into a battle-ready state of mind.

Shirone began timing his move. Photon Output was among the fastest attack spells. But dark magic was equally swift. There was no way to read anything in Canis’s eyes. Like the empty pupils of an ape, only an uncertain future loomed within.

These weren’t human eyes. Only someone who’d survived countless life-or-death struggles could have such feral eyes. Both of them moved their fingers, ready to cast. And at the moment a bird fluttered up, they moved simultaneously. The clash between Photon Output and the Power of Darkness was a mesmerizing display that confused the eye.

Shirone shot up, casting Teleportation, as the dark power chasing him melted away in the sunlight.

Canis sneered. He wasn’t targeting Shirone’s body, but rather the shadow he left on the ground. Realizing too late the dark magic’s nature, Shirone quickly teleported off the cliffside. As his shadow fell a thousand meters below, the dark power that had been aiming for him evaporated like fire.

As the Photon Output fired in rapid succession, Canis conjured a Shadow Wall. A thick wall of shadow rose before him, absorbing all the photons.

‘What sheer force. To block light with darkness...’

Canis’s dark magic defied the natural order. Having intensified the Photon Output through countless rebounds, Shirone realized just how powerful Canis’s mental fortitude must be.

‘Then let’s try this.’

Shirone focused photons into his hand, clenching his teeth as he threw them forward. As the Photon Cannon fired, Canis thickened the defensive wall to its maximum. Just as a smirk crossed his face, the Shadow Wall exploded as a flash broke through.

‘What... is this?’

Feeling a chill, Canis instinctively cast Dark Skin. As his body turned pitch black, the Photon Cannon struck his abdomen.

“Ugh...!”

The force exceeded what Dark Skin could absorb; the shockwave reverberated, jarring his insides. Both legs lifted off the ground as Canis was hurled into the forest.

“Canis!”

Arin was in disbelief. The idea that light could contain physical force was impossible. Light was pure energy; if any mass were included, every planet in the sun’s vicinity would have been obliterated long ago.

Lucas’s expression also turned serious for the first time. The magic fired beams of light rapidly to strike the target. Had he been in Canis’s position, his odds of dodging would have been fifty-fifty.

‘This isn’t just bad luck; it’s like stepping on a landmine.’

Murderous intent flickered in Lucas’s eyes. This wasn’t the lucrative job he’d signed up for, but he’d still need his payment. His twin blades vibrated with tension as he locked his gaze on Shirone.

Ethella was somewhere about 800 meters away from the Bridge of No Return in the mountain range. Standing before her was Arcane, who had earned the title of an unofficial 3rd-class archmage forty years prior.

To Arcane, she was an unwelcome visitor. Despite his rest, the mental energy he’d depleted by casting Abyss Nova was only around 60% recovered.

But that thought only lingered for a moment. Arcane squinted, recognizing the woman’s true nature.

‘Well, well, look at this?’

She wore oversized, clumsy-looking glasses and had a gentle, lamb-like appearance, her chest well-developed, giving the impression of someone who had never fought a battle.

But he could feel it. She was simply standing there, yet every energy flowing through her body was completely unblocked.

Most striking were her eyes, holding a rare serenity. This was the spirit of one who had transcended the Eight Passions and Eight Desires: joy, anger, sorrow, love, pleasure, and hate.

A true seeker.

One too extraordinary to merely be a teacher at a magic school.

‘No wonder you could dispel Abyss Nova.’

Facing such an authority on dark magic, renowned before she was even born, Ethella was equally tense.

“I’ve heard of your illustrious name.”

“Are you from some monastic order?”

Without her answer, Arcane could guess she was a monk. However, her reply far exceeded his expectations.

“I am Ethella, a bishop of the Karsis Order. Why does one who earned fame through dark magic now commit such atrocities?”

“A bishop, you say?”

Arcane let out an astonished laugh. To hold a bishop’s title before even reaching thirty would have been unheard of in his day.

Especially since Karsis was one of the continent’s largest orders, with over 2,000 congregations. And a bishop, responsible for an entire parish, held authority equivalent to the leader of a small city.

“Where is Alpheas?”

Ethella remained silent. She didn’t know either, but even such an admission could be valuable information to the

enemy.

"I can hear the gears turning in your head from here. It doesn't matter if you tell me the truth. I never expected that sly brat to be easily caught in my spell, anyway."

Calling Alpheas a "sly brat", despite his advanced age, spoke volumes about the longevity of the archmage standing before her.

"Why do you seek the headmaster? If there's a personal grudge, I'd say it's only right to settle it in person. If you free the students from mind control and withdraw, I could arrange a meeting."

"Ha-ha-ha! So the brat's built quite the reputation while I was gone, has he? But listen, child—Alpheas is not the man you imagine. He's the most stubborn and arrogant fool on earth."

"I don't care about his past. The headmaster today is respected by his students."

"Oh, really?"

Arcane stroked his chin in amusement. Come to think of it, his memory of Alpheas was stuck in his twenties, when he'd been ablaze with youthful ambition.

"Now I'm curious. What did that brat do to earn such respect? Why don't you tell me?"

Ethella understood Arcane's plan. The sun was about to set soon. He was buying time until nightfall, when dark magic would be most potent.

"If you're stalling for darkness, then stop. As a teacher, I cannot sit by and watch any more of this evil."

"What?"

Arcane scowled. This young girl, nearly a century his junior, dared to treat him as if he was just another time-wasting mage.

As he cast his Power of Darkness, Arcane's shadow stretched out, consuming the trees around him. Branches shivered, and then entire trunks began to bend toward a single point.

“Did you think I’d be afraid just because the sun is up? If so, you’re sorely mistaken about who I am.”

Ethella looked up. The trees within a radius of several hundred meters were bending together, interlocking into a massive dome. As the sky closed off, the surroundings became darker than night.

“Die. Insolent thing.”

Arcane vanished into his own shadow. It was Dark Port, a dark magic specialty. By assimilating with shadows, he could eliminate the concept of distance, allowing him to move instantly anywhere his shadow touched.

The ability to approach soundlessly was Dark Port’s most formidable advantage. As he closed in from behind and prepared to unleash his Power of Darkness, Ethella’s body transformed into a flash of light, darting away. Dozens of shadowy hands slashed through the empty air.

The high-speed battle began as Arcane recast Dark Port. It felt like there were dozens of Arcanes and Ethellas all fighting at once. As Arcane tightened his radius around her, Ethella chained Teleportation moves with extreme precision. Her form blurred, dozens of afterimages blending as the shadow hands passed through her unreal decoys.

‘A bishop of the Karsis Order. Impressive.’

Even the fierce Arcane had to admit it. Though her mental power couldn’t match his, her skill and sense far exceeded her age.

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to strike where you’re weak.”

Ethella’s eyes wavered, showing a hint of alarm. As Arcane’s Power of Darkness intensified, thousands of hands came flying at her all at once.

Unfathomable magical strength.

While Ethella’s sensory ability alone could be called a kind of magic, even so, she could not dodge thousands of hands. As a branch shadow gripped her wrist, Ethella had to stop abruptly. Attempting Teleportation in this state would tear her arm off.

“Ugh...!”

The tensile force of the shadows was as solid as rubber. But Ethella’s physical strength wasn’t easily dismissed either. As she gritted her teeth and pulled, the shadow ripped apart in the middle.

“Hand-to-hand combat too? A sturdy one, aren’t you?”

Arcane smirked, his lips curling slyly.

“If that’s what you prefer, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Chapter 82: The Battle of the Mages (3)

Sensing the killing intent, Ehella turned to her side, where a shadow burst out from the darkness at incredible speed, striking her chin.

‘A fist?’

Then, dozens of shadowy fists rained down upon her. Ehella crouched, guarding her vital spots with her arms. Though dull impacts echoed across the mountains, she remained as immovable as if she had rooted herself into the ground.

‘Ho? Still standing?’

Anyone else would have had every bone shattered. Yet Ehella’s gaze, visible through the guard of her arms, was still sharp and clear.

“I’ll give you credit for endurance, but it’s time to end this.”

Shadowy hands emerged from every direction, seizing the groggy Ehella. The Power of Darkness tightened around her wrists and ankles, spreading her limbs outward. Her large glasses were cracked and tilted, and blood trickled from her lips.

Arcane began casting Poison Cutter. This was a triple-mix magic, far more complex than fusion magic, which added a toxic element to rotating darkness.

The deadly blade-like magic cut through the air, rushing toward her. Realizing its lethal intent, Ehella broke free from the shadows with all her might, took a deep breath, and let out a powerful scream.

“Aaaaaaah!”

The shrill high-frequency sound, strong enough to topple shrubs, shattered Arcane’s darkness like smoke.

This was the cry of the monk’s technique, Parma.

According to Karsis Jung, the founder of the Karsis Monastery, enlightenment—awakening of the human mind—was ushered in alongside a thunderous sound. Parma was a sacred technique that shattered malevolent magic with a piercing noise, like how sinful humans flinch at the sound of thunder.

Buried under the booming noise, Arcane trembled. His skin tingled, and his hair stood on end. Parma, something he had encountered only a few times in his 130 years, was now being performed by a young woman in her mid-twenties.

‘Heh heh heh, this is why I can’t leave this world.’

A masterful talent had refined a single skill to its ultimate form, wielding her sharpened mind like a fine blade.

What an exhilarating affair.

Some would die, and others would survive.

Through countless cycles of destruction, creation, and rebirth, magic had evolved, hadn’t it?

‘That’s right. Indeed.’

Arcane cast Poison Cutter again. Judging that this was her only chance, Ehella cut free of the shadows binding her ankles and activated Spatial Movement. As she vanished in a flash, the Poison Cutter sliced through her afterimage.

“Whew.”

Arcane whistled. The stronger a person is, the more humiliating retreat feels. However, the ability to withdraw without hesitation was also essential in battle.

Arcane moved toward where Ehella had stood. Though she hadn’t completely dodged, there was blood left on the ground. If the poison had seeped in, she wouldn’t get far.

“The feisty lady will be having a hard time.”

Arcane was thrilled to have met a powerful opponent after forty years. Spirit Zone of a Zoner, darkness-breaking martial arts, and the transcendental mind of a monk—a genius who embodied all three.

‘A certified 6th-class mage, was it?’

Her rank was indeed high for her age. But geniuses didn't conform to social standards. Had she not been tied down by her duties as a teacher and seeker, Ehella's current rank would likely be much higher.

"Milch Alpheas, they say that brat is respected?"

Arcane looked up with a sad expression. As his mental control loosened, the trees straightened back, revealing the dim sky above.

"Aren't you ashamed, Alpheas? To be respected by someone greater than you? How tragic."

Lamenting his disciple's incompetence, Arcane began walking slowly. The darkness in the forest guided his path.

'Damn it! Where could you be?'

Thadd grew increasingly anxious. Alpheas was nowhere to be found in the lodgings where he'd been sure his mentor would be. Yet he hadn't been captured either, so only one place remained.

"Master!"

He burst into the headmaster's office. But Alpheas was absent here as well.

Refusing to give up, Thadd examined the bookshelves. He'd known for a long time that Alpheas had a private space set up in the room.

'There must be a mechanism. I can't search through every book.'

His eyes quickly scanned the shelves until he spotted a book. Amid the dusty magic tomes, there was one titled *Glimpsing the Dark*. Knowing his mentor's past, Thadd was convinced that this was linked to Alpheas's memories.

As he pulled the top of the book, a heavy mechanism activated, and the bookshelf split apart. Behind it lay a tunnel with stairs leading downward.

As Thadd descended the stairs, the book settled back into place, closing the bookshelf. At the bottom, he opened a metal door to find a small room lit by crystal lamps. On a

worn shelf sat various items that looked so old-fashioned it could have passed for an antique shop.

A portrait of a woman hung on the wall. She wasn't strikingly beautiful, but her expression was gentle and modest.

'Is this...?'

Thadd gazed at the portrait, lost in thought. Alpheas had spoken the truth. Her eyes seemed to hold a mysterious allure, as though drawing one in.

"Who's there?"

Startled, Thadd turned. Alpheas sat hunched over in a chair in the corner, his face twisted in anger and confusion—a look that was entirely uncharacteristic.

"Master! You're safe after all!"

"So... you know me?"

Thadd stopped mid-step, piecing together the situation from Alpheas's words.

"You've lost your memory, haven't you?"

Just like the other teachers, Alpheas too must have fallen under Arcane's spell. But being a certified 4th-class mage, he had likely taken precautions and hidden himself here before fully losing his memory.

Hearing Thadd's words, Alpheas walked over to a bronze mirror and examined his reflection with a troubled expression.

"Hm. Lost my memory, have I? For a moment, I thought I'd suddenly leapt into the future. Either way, to think that my 18-year-old face has turned into this old man's. It's thoroughly annoying."

Thadd's eyes widened. Eighteen years old meant roughly forty years had been wiped from his memory. If Alpheas weren't such a rational person, he might have lost his mind already.

"So, I've lost my memory... Perhaps it's for the best. At least my life wasn't stolen. But, where am I? What happened that I've lost my memory?"

"A certain mage cast dark magic to harm you. You managed to escape just in time."

Though it would only worsen his confusion, Alpheas remained unperturbed by Thadd's explanation.

"Is that so? And how old am I now?"

"Yes, you're sixty-three."

"Sixty-three, huh? Then, what have I become?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm asking what achievements I've accomplished in magic society."

"Oh, you are currently serving as the headmaster of a magic school, known for your honorable character."

Alpheas looked utterly baffled. The genius once hailed as the Light of the Milch Family, now teaching others? Knowing his personality, it was almost unimaginable.

"So, what you're saying is, I became a teacher?"

"Yes, everyone follows and respects you, Master."

"Pahahahaha! Hahaha!"

Alpheas burst into a grandiose laugh. At first, he was annoyed by his sudden transformation into an older man, but once he realized he'd lost his memories, he didn't mind as much. In fact, he was rather excited to hear about his accomplishments from here on.

"Seems I've gained a sense of responsibility. A headmaster, eh? Then, this must be the royal palace, right? Has the prince ascended to the throne?"

Thadd began to feel uneasy. Though Alpheas was rational, he couldn't ignore the vast chasm of forty years he'd now traversed.

"This is a private academy. You established it yourself—Alpheas Magic Academy."

"Private?"

Alpheas's expression darkened. If he was truly the brilliant Alpheas, then at the very least he should have been instructing royalty. And yet, a private school? What could have happened during those forty years?

“...What class am I?”

“Uh... well...”

Thadd hesitated. Records attested to Alpheas’s incredible feats in his youth. To tell him the blunt truth now required more courage than Thadd could muster.

“Hurry up and tell me! What class am I? You said I’m sixty-three, right? Then am I first class? Or second?”

With his head bowed like a man guilty of a crime, Thadd muttered, “Fourth class...”

Alpheas staggered. For his now-aged body, it was too great a shock to bear. Yet, unable to contain his burning anger, he stormed around furiously.

“What the hell did I do? Fool! Idiot!”

Alpheas struck his head with his hands in self-reproach. With forty years invested in divine talent, he should have at least reached the second class. But fourth? Not even third?

What on earth could have happened? What kind of muddled thoughts must he have had to arrive at this point?

He needed to know everything—each detail, from beginning to end. With this resolve, Alpheas fixed Thadd with a steely gaze.

“You, can you break dark magic? You said you’re my disciple, so you should have learned photon magic by now, right?”

“Yes. I’m not sure how long it will take, but with your assistance, Master, it should be possible. However...”

Thadd suddenly had a revelation.

Perhaps this was not a curse, but a blessing.

Due to a mistake in his youth, Alpheas had carried guilt for forty years. If he could close that chapter by losing his memories, then it would be a release from a lifetime of regret.

“Master, do you truly need to recover your memories?”

“What? What are you saying? Of course, I need to get them back. Something must have gone wrong. If I just correct whatever it was, I can still reach even higher levels.”

“Master, I understand that you must be feeling confused. It would be difficult to accept that the Light of the Milch Family, gifted by the gods, would end up as a mere fourth-class headmaster. But perhaps that’s precisely why I beg you to reconsider. You made a grave mistake once. And you’ve spent forty years tormented by it. Isn’t it time for you to finally be free? Couldn’t this be the gods’ way of granting you a reprieve?”

Though Alpheas had reverted to an eighteen-year-old, he understood well how deeply past scars could mar a life. And if there truly had been such a painful past, perhaps acknowledging it and moving forward was indeed a way to live.

As he paced the room, lost in thought, Alpheas suddenly noticed a portrait on the wall and asked, “Who’s that woman? This is my room, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is, Master.”

“Really? And I hung that painting? She’s no beauty, and why are her eyes so lackluster? She looks like she’s lacking something.”

Thadd’s emotions surged, and he struggled to contain his sorrow. Knowing who she was to Alpheas, Thadd couldn’t help but feel the pain.

“Master, you shouldn’t speak like that. She is...”

Annoyed, Alpheas turned away from the painting. Nothing here was making any sense to him.

“I will regain my memories. This future is far too out of line with my plans. I need to know what happened.”

“Master, please reconsider. Life itself is...”

“Hey, you.”

Alpheas cut him off with an arrogant glare, and Thadd realized the unyielding truth in his master’s words. This was indeed Alpheas, as he had been in his youth.

“You said you’re my disciple?”

“Yes. It’s an undeserved honor, and I am always grateful.”

“Then as of today, you’re expelled.”

“Pardon?”

Alpheas meant every word. He was Alpheas, after all. Even after losing forty years of memories, his rational mind didn’t flinch.

“What’s the big deal about recovering memories that have passed away? I don’t need a pathetic disciple like you.”

Chapter 83: The Battle of the Mages (4)

“That’s precisely why I’m telling you this, Master. You know it yourself, don’t you?”

Even if he regained his memories, there was no guarantee Alpheas would return to who he once was. Living the same life twice does not always lead to the same destination.

“No. My judgment has always been correct. No matter what form I take, I am only and always myself. This is your last chance. Cast the Photonization Spell.”

With a sigh, Thadd nodded. Now, all he could do was hope that Alpheas’s true nature would bring back his original character.

“Understood. Please have a seat here.”

Thadd brought over a chair from the corner and seated Alpheas.

“I will begin. I’ll cast the Photonization Spell, but from that moment on, it will be up to you, Master.”

“Haha! Think you have the nerve to worry about what’s up to me? Stop with the useless concern and get on with it. Once I regain my memories, I’ll give you a good scolding.”

With a heartfelt wish, Thadd began the spell. As the light permeated into Abyss Nova, a slight drowsiness washed over Alpheas. He slowly closed his eyes and sank into thought. Time, which had been frozen since he was eighteen, began to flow once again.

Light and Darkness, Good and Evil (1)

Canis lay buried in the bushes, unable to move a single finger as the shockwave spread through his abdomen.

After realizing Arin had a talent for mental magic, he had intensively trained in physical dark magic.

Absorbing force was also a physical skill, so his Dark Skin absorbed shocks to a significant degree—enough that even a hammer swung by an adult would only feel like a child's punch against it.

However, the Photon Cannon he had been struck by had a power far beyond his expectations. Above all, it was impossible to analyze how physical force could be infused with light.

"Kekeke... took you by surprise, don't you, Canis?"

A raspy voice grated in his ears. Though there was no one in the mountain forest except for Canis, the voice was unmistakably real.

"Harvey... what exactly hit me?"

"I couldn't tell you. But if I had to guess, it was mass. A massive force flew at an incredible speed and struck you in the abdomen."

"Mass? But light has no mass."

Since studying opposing attributes was basic for a combat mage, Canis was familiar with photon theory.

"Of course, light has no mass. But it does carry energy."

In reality, moving photons carry a tiny amount of mass, known as kinetic mass. A common example is the solar wind.

"But that's just a mathematical reduction. It's similar to how strong wind feels like being struck with a stick."

"There's logic to what you're saying. But theoretically, it's possible, isn't it? Which means it's not entirely impossible."

"No, something's missing here. To achieve this level of force, there has to be something that connects mass with energy. But nothing like that exists in the world."

Harvey's voice sounded indifferent.

"Seems like someone managed to find it."

Canis didn't respond. Though he and Harvey were distinctly different entities, they also shared a single mind. Perhaps sensing Canis's displeasure, Harvey reluctantly conceded.

“He’s quite something. A unique one. So, even the magic school has talents like this.”

Finally, Canis, satisfied, got to his feet. Assessing an opponent’s true skill was the first step toward victory. A rival worthy of respect—it was exhilarating.

“You think I can win, Harvey?”

“Keh keh keh. Canis, if that’s what you want...”

The eerie voice melted into the darkness.

“There’s no enemy we can’t defeat.”

Canis lengthened his unusually long shadow and headed back up the mountain toward Shirone.

Shirone gazed into the darkness of the forest for a long time. Although he wasn’t certain that Canis had cast Dark Skin, the faint traces caught by his retina but not processed by his brain triggered a warning signal.

Canis emerged from the trees. The sight confirmed Shirone’s assumption, and Nade scowled.

“Damn it. He’s actually fine?”

“Nade. The sun has set.”

Since the power of dark magic would be at its peak at night, Iruki cast an illumination spell. Its brightness was nowhere near that of a Fire Sun, so Nade added his strength. Two glowing spheres hovered ten meters above them, though it was still too dim for open combat with a mage moving at high speed.

“Tsk. It’s still too dark like this.”

Just then, Canis cast an illumination spell of his own. A light spell from a dark mage unsettled both of them.

“What’s he thinking? Why use an illumination spell?”

“What do you mean? Any branch of magic includes photon theory—it’s essential, as it’s the basis of Teleportation.”

“That’s not what I meant! Light should be a weakness for a dark mage, right? Why would he willingly use something so self-destructive?”

“Hahaha! Hahahahaha!”

Canis burst into laughter.

“As I thought, graduates from magic schools are such fools. No branch of magic is without weaknesses. What matters is learning to compensate for those weaknesses. The illumination spell proves that point. Arin, fire another shot.” It didn’t seem like overconfidence; even cautious Arin readily cast another illumination spell.

With four glowing spheres gathered, it was almost as bright as daylight. But Canis wasn’t yet satisfied and turned to Shirone. The light mage who wielded a unique brand of photons—he’d be able to create the perfect stage.

“Hey, why don’t you fire one too? I’m looking forward to it.” Shirone didn’t know how to cast an illumination spell. During the technical evolution from Teleportation and Rainbow Drop to Photon Output and Photon Cannon, he hadn’t had time to invest in other spells.

“What? Don’t tell me you can’t do it. Unbelievable. A light mage who can’t cast an illumination spell?”

Sometimes, such cases occurred—mages with limited talents who excel in only one type of magic, gaining fame for circus-like spectacles. But magic wasn’t a trick; it was a lethal skill. In a battlefield flooded with tactics and psychology, someone like Shirone, capable of only one type of magic, was fit to be killed.

“I must have misjudged. I thought this would be an interesting fight, but you’re just a good-for-nothing rookie, aren’t you?”

As Canis finished his words, a bright glowing sphere popped into existence above Shirone’s head. It shone brightly enough to put the other illumination spells to shame.

Nade and Iruki stared at it in disbelief. He had cast an illumination spell he had never learned before. They could feel his anger more than his insight, his boundless capabilities.

Shirone stepped into Canis’s Spirit Zone. He could not forgive someone who, while holding the entire student body

hostage, dared to speak of a good duel.

“Is this enough for you? I’ve done as you asked—do whatever you want.”

Canis quickly revised his assessment. This was no simple magic juggler. But what did it matter? No matter how strong his opponent was, Canis was stronger. This situation was perfect for proving it.

“Anything, you say? You’re going to regret those words.”

As he invoked the Power of Darkness, the shadows beneath his feet rushed toward Shirone like a torrent. Shirone leaped into the air, conjuring photons in his palms. It seemed like the same old attack pattern as before.

‘You think you can provoke me just to put on a show?’

As Shirone launched a Photon Cannon, Canis’s body sank into the shadow below. This was a slight variation, though it was still just another Teleportation spell he had learned from books. As Shirone unleashed bombardment at Canis, who kept emerging from the shadows like a mole, the mountain peak was laid to waste.

‘Got him!’

By strategically analyzing Canis’s movement path, Shirone aimed his shot at an unavoidable position. Canis appeared precisely in the path of the descending Photon Cannon—inescapable, and even Dark Skin couldn’t withstand such a powerful attack.

Just when everyone thought it was over, a shadow rose from beneath Canis’s feet. It looked like an extended human shadow that caught the Photon Cannon with its hands and torso. The photon caught between its palms burst with a pop and was absorbed into the shadow.

Shirone, shaken, landed on the ground. The shadow had destroyed his Photon Cannon—proof that darkness had overwhelmed the light.

“Kekeke, what an entrance. How did I do?”

“How is that possible? For darkness to consume light...”

Nade was incredulous. No matter how powerful dark magic was, it couldn't overpower light. How would one feel if they lit a torch, only for the surroundings to remain pitch dark? Despite the light from the illumination spell covering the ground, the creature connected to Canis's shadow moved without hindrance.

Its face was small, but its shoulders and chest were massive. It had a panther-like waist and ape-like arms, with shield-like hands and fingers long and thin like blades. The perfectly balanced physique indicated it was an artificial creation.

"Hehe, didn't I tell you? Hey, rookie. Those photons you fired were quite delicious."

As the shadow spoke, Shirone was dumbfounded. The fact that it used the term "photon" rather than "light" meant it was intellectually capable.

Canis introduced his shadow.

"The essence of dark magic. The ultimate magical creature—Harvest."

"A magical creature?"

A marvel of alchemy and magical engineering, the essence of magical biology. It was surreal to see something previously confined to books brought to life, and a creature with intelligence no less.

"Kekeke! That guy's completely stunned, isn't he? Why does he look so shocked, like some country bumpkin seeing a magical creature for the first time?"

Harvest laughed with exaggerated humor. Was it a reckless, twisted monster? No, it was a highly human yet transcendent being.

"Harvest is immune to light. Moreover, his life is linked to mine. As long as I'm alive, so is he."

"Exactly! We are two yet one, one yet two! Of course, I'm the better-looking one. No joke—I'm seriously handsome, though there's no way for me to show it. Keh-heh-heh!"

Harvest joked, but Shirone didn't have time to pay attention. If it was immune to light, then even the sole weakness of a dark mage was gone.

'Can I... really win this?'

There was still no external help, and the whereabouts of Alpheas remained unknown. In the end, the lives of hundreds rested in the hands of those present.

Canis was pleased to see Shirone's expression falter. The timing of revealing Harvest, following the illumination spell, had been perfect—a strategy crafted by Harvest himself. The insolent attitude was a complete act; in fact, Harvest a tactician who used psychological manipulation to control his foes' spirit.

Canis, let's head into the forest. We're at a disadvantage here.

Do you think he'll follow that easily?

He's the one in a rush. Plus, Lucas is quite strong. If we get him involved, it'll boost our forces.

I don't like it. I don't want help from someone like him. If you hadn't stopped me earlier, I would've fought him right then.

This is for your sake, Canis. He's strong, and he's not dumb. If we look at it in terms of sheer calculation, you'd be at a disadvantage. I can't let you get caught up in a draining fight of emotions.

Lucas was yet another face of the thugs who tormented Canis back in Radum. The thought of needing help from someone like him made Canis's blood boil.

Canis, your heart rate has increased by 1.7 times. An adrenaline spike could cloud your judgment. If you're angry because of what I said, I apologize.

The magical creature's concern, aimed at preventing combat inefficiency, calmed Canis's heart. With the cold and calculating Harvest by his side, he felt confident he wouldn't lose to anyone.

No, Harvey. I'm sorry. Your judgment was right. Let's get started.

Chapter 84: Light and Darkness, Good and Evil (2)

Canis, clearing his mind of distractions, glared at Shirone. He couldn't stand the sight of Shirone's immaculate face, looking as though it had never known hardship.

'Hmph. You probably think I'm the villain. But...'

From Canis's shadow, the Power of Darkness began to rise. Even as it was worn down by photon magic, its regeneration rate was astonishing.

'To me, you all are the real evil!'

As the Power of Darkness surged forward, Shirone responded by sweeping the ground clean with Photon Output. Then, he threw the Photon Cannon attached to his right hand. Harvest intercepted it, taking the blow with his body. As the Photon Cannon embedded in his torso, Harvest's body was pushed back into the forest. Yet, far from looking hurt, he simply wiggled his long fingers, taunting Shirone.

"Heh heh. Come on, come on in."

For a dark sorcerer, the forest was practically home ground, but Shirone charged in without hesitation, firing dozens of photon blasts from left to right, right to left.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

Hundreds of flares burst through the forest canopy. Nade and Iruki looked up at the sky, which was now as bright as midday.

"That guy, he's really going all out."

“I’m sure he knows. If Shirone doesn’t hold that guy off, we’re done for.”

Iruki slowly shifted his gaze. Lucas was following Shirone into the forest. Seeing gray smoke rising in front of him, he leapt back just as an atomic bomb spell detonated with a loud *boom*. From ten meters away, Lucas fixed Iruki with a furious glare.

“You little punk...”

“Don’t waste your energy. We know what you’re thinking. Just stay right there.”

“Unbelievable.”

Lucas was speechless. No matter how reckless they were, for a trainee mage to challenge a B-class criminal was unheard of. As he drew his dual swords, a faint metallic ring echoed. His energy emanating through the Spirit Zone felt like burning embers, shimmering with intense heat.

The range of physical enhancements possible with Schema was vast, but improper balance led to serious side effects, so most used tried-and-true builds.

A build skewed too far in one direction would damage the body. For example, excessive nervous system enhancement could lead to muscles rupturing from the nerves’ heightened speed.

Lucas’s current build was a mitochondrial build, enhancing the mitochondria, the body’s energy factories, to maximize energy efficiency.

This build, though it rapidly drained stamina, was attractive because it raised overall physical performance, making it a default for many users.

‘This might be risky...’

Iruki checked Nade’s condition. The way Nade looked at Lucas with cold eyes reminded Iruki of a summer five years ago, on a day when rain poured down as they clashed. The fact that Nade could smile now was almost a miracle; he’d probably never show his former self again. He loathed the face that resembled the person he once loved most.

“Be careful, Nade. That guy’s a Schema user.”

“I know. Let’s increase firepower and take him down quickly.”

Lucas scoffed. The word “careful” was for dodging puddles or crossing shaky bridges, not for situations where your neck was about to meet a blade.

“Hah. Kids these days...”

As Lucas scratched his head, his figure became blurred. A golden flash materialized between Iruki and Nade. The flash of Teleportation dissipated, leaving them ten meters from Lucas. Iruki looked at his chest; his shirt had a clean cut, with blood trickling from the line across his chest.

“You okay?”

“It’s not fatal, but he’s really fast.”

Even if magic had extraordinary power, a mage’s body was still fundamentally human. Without the effects of magic, responding to and countering the movements of a Schema swordsman was challenging.

However, from a reversed perspective, the same held true for the swordsman. Magic’s power wasn’t something Schema could withstand. Even low-level magic could be fatal if it hit directly.

Iruki and Nade focused their firepower. A chain explosion of atomic bombs followed like a serpent, and Nade calculated Lucas’s path, shooting in anticipation. But Lucas’s movements were nothing like the mechanical patterns they’d trained for, making direct hits difficult.

‘Damn! These kids are pretty good.’

Lucas wasn’t having an easy time either. The mitochondrial build rapidly depleted his stamina by the second.

Maximizing his metabolic rate, he shot forward in speed, circling a wide radius to jump at Iruki’s side, swinging his dual swords. Nade charged from the opposite side, extending both hands, sending an electric shock spell into Lucas’s abdomen. The oscillating current shook Lucas’s body sixty times a second.

“Iruki! Now!”

Iruki was already prepared. Gray smoke rose from Lucas’s face, now stunned. Watching the imminent detonation, Lucas tried to move with all his strength. His muscles felt as though they were scorched and unable to respond.

‘Damn it! Damn it!’

Being cornered by mere kids, at the brink of death—was he really going to die? The unexpected situation made reality feel surreal.

Iruki was certain it was over. Given the impending explosion, it was a logical conclusion. But suddenly, the Spirit Zone vanished. Before he could figure out the cause, his legs began to go numb. Somehow, someone else’s shadow was now connected to his feet. Iruki knew without looking that it was Arin’s work.

‘Holy shit!’

Lucas broke free from the electrical shock with a desperate effort and lunged at Nade, the one who had humiliated him. His rage, brought to its peak by near-death, shone in his eyes, raw and unfiltered.

“Nade! Run!”

Even under Lucas’s fierce gaze, Nade summoned electricity to his hands. Lucas raised his dual swords, aiming an attack from both sides. Just as the blades descended, thick ice pillars unexpectedly erupted on either side of Nade.

With a clang, the dual swords embedded into the ice.

Lucas’s eyes widened with shock. His sword technique could cut through stone, yet it was halted by a mere block of ice.

Lucas slowly turned, recognizing the face of someone he thought he’d thrown off a cliff earlier—a woman, a teacher.

“Ms. Siena!”

Nade shouted with joy, his face brightening. But Siena remained silent, her eyes devoid of emotion, focused only on Lucas.

“Huff... huff...”

Ethella leaned against a tree trunk, her knees bending as if about to give way. She had been locked in a relentless chase for a full 30 minutes, yet she couldn't completely shake off Arcane.

'The poison is spreading. I can't delay treating it any longer.' Sitting down, Ethella ripped open her monk's robe around the waist. Black blood was oozing from a wound just above her navel—the result of a cut from a poisoned blade. She was using breathing techniques to slow the poison's spread, but it was a temporary measure. She had to extract the venom from the wound, but the position made it impossible to reach with her lips.

Ethella stretched both hands behind her to grasp the tree trunk, interlacing her fingers as she bent forward. She arched her back, her spine cracking as she used her spinal erector muscles to lift her hips, raising her lower body off the ground while sharply bending her torso. Coiling her body in a spiral shape, she finally brought her lips close enough to the area below her navel.

Ethella forced the poison back to the surface, pushing it toward the wound. Filling her lungs with air, she sucked out the venom. The instant it left her body, the pain hit like searing flames. Her brows knitted as she threw her head back, spitting out the blackened blood onto the grass, where it scorched the vegetation on contact.

Life began to return to Ethella's face. She removed her crooked glasses, tossing them to the ground, and wrapped her fist with a strip of her robe that she had just torn off.

"Whew... that's better."

As her Spirit Zone regained stability, her surroundings sharpened in her heightened senses. Eyes wide open, she pushed off the ground and took flight. From below, dozens of inky-black hands erupted from the earth as if squeezed out of the shadows.

'Made it this far already...'

The fact that Arcane could chase a master tracker like a Zoner without giving him a moment's rest was a testament to just how relentless a dark archmage could be in the shadows.

"So, you've neutralized the poison. You're impressing me more and more."

Arcane emerged from the veil of darkness, but this time Ethella didn't need to flee.

"It won't be easy for you now."

"Have you finally decided to fight? Then I'll happily indulge you."

As Ethella focused power into her fist, the energy of Yin-Yang Wave Fist filled her entire being. Arcane quickly picked up on her change. She had entirely abandoned the Spirit Zone. While mages wield the Spirit Zone and swordsmen master Schema, monks train in both. A monk's purpose isn't just to climb the highest peaks, but to embrace the world with the broadest mind.

Arcane found this choice distasteful. If she had devoted herself to just one discipline from the start, there would be no one on the continent who didn't know her name.

'What a waste... How could someone with the potential to stand atop the world choose to walk the monk's path instead? Not that such words would matter to someone who doesn't even aim to ascend.'

Arcane extended a hand and began casting a spell. For an opponent using Schema, he had a special countermeasure.

"Minions of Darkness."

Countless spiders crawled out from the shadows of the forest. Each was the size of a human head, their writhing mass enough to make anyone's skin crawl.

Thrrrrrrr...

But this was only the beginning of what Arcane's dark minions could do. Beside him, a Dark Golem rose over three meters tall.

Its face seemed sunken into its shoulders, while its limbs and torso appeared swollen, as if wrapped in coarse yarn. Its arms were long and its legs were short.

The Minions of Darkness were conjured creatures that could transform mental strength directly into raw physical power. Unlike the Power of Darkness, which absorbed external energy, this was a different breed of magic altogether. Though they weren't immune to light as pure magical beings would be, no battle machine could match them in power on a moonless night.

"Go, my minions!"

The Dark Spiders made the first move, and with their massive numbers swarming together, it was nearly impossible to keep track of their movements.

Ethella knocked spiders away in every direction with a series of jabs. She followed up with a straight punch where the spiders were thickest, scattering shadows with an explosive sound.

Graaaagh!

The Dark Golem charged through the scattering spiders.

Ethella leapt like a flying squirrel just as a thick arm smashed into the ground, sending ripples through the earth and eventually a blast so forceful it shattered the ground.

Witnessing a power rivaling the eruption of an Earth Magic spell, Ethella's face grew pale. Arcane's mental strength had been converted entirely into physical force, with an unimaginably destructive might.

The golem drove both hands into the earth, twisted its head, and swung its arms in wide arcs, launching a follow-up attack as though swinging a massive hammer.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

Ethella backed away from the rapid succession of windmill punches. A juggernaut with speed, flexibility, and power, the Dark Golem was indeed a near-invincible weapon.

But since she couldn't keep retreating forever, Ethella finally planted her feet and faced the golem.

Graaaaagh!

She lunged into the golem's embrace, punching it in the side.

Boom!

The towering golem staggered, the force of the blow rippling back to Arcane's mind through the law of equivalent exchange.

Chapter 85: Light and Darkness, Good and Evil (3)

‘Is this a human punch?’

It was a blow that rivaled magic. And it didn’t stop with a single strike. Ethella held her breath, launching successive punches. Her wrists throbbed from striking the dense darkness, but the damage her enemy endured was several times greater.

Gritting his teeth, Arcane steadied his mind. Ethella’s punches were not just powerful; they had a unique quality. They didn’t destroy the surface but instead generated shockwaves inside. The issue was the wave interference created as the shockwaves overlapped.

‘A wave technique... This could be dangerous.’

Grrraaah!

The Dark Golem writhed in pain as Ethella’s eyes gleamed, sensing an opening. She took a step forward and struck its solar plexus with the palm of her hand. A massive wave rippled outward, resulting in approximately 400 instances of interference. This meant an internal shockwave 400 times stronger than a single punch from Ethella erupted within. The Golem’s swollen body convulsed as if it had swallowed a bomb, its dark flesh bulging ominously as if it were about to burst.

“Khh...!”

Arcane clenched his face, sustaining his mental grip. If his Spirit Zone shattered, the Dark Golem would collapse. When the Golem’s trembling subsided, Ethella bit her lip.

‘Not enough? I should have added more layers of interference.’

Yin-Yang Wave Fist was a martial art that stacked waves in the opponent’s body before injecting a powerful wave to make them explode. While it required time to reach its peak, the final strike delivered a devastating shock.

But Arcane endured. The Dark Golem had withstood a force 400 times that of a Schema warrior’s strike, but Arcane’s mental fortitude was formidable.

“Not bad, kid.”

“The next one won’t end like this. Surrender now.”

“Haha! Still got some fight in you? Good. I’ll stretch my limbs properly for the first time in a while.”

As Arcane raised his hand, the Dark Spiders all merged into the Dark Golem’s body. The Golem grew until it broke through the forest canopy, shadowing the sky.

Ethella felt a wave of dizziness. The Dark Golem before her was the terror Arcane had become infamous for across many nations. It could level a medium-sized city in a matter of days.

“Well, then. You’d better throw all you’ve got, because the depths of my Golem’s power are deeper than the ocean.”

A towering Golem over ten meters tall would hardly let her shockwaves penetrate. But Ethella clenched her fists with determination. She would be a light to the world. Even if death awaited her, she would press forward.

Grrraaaaaaah!

The massive Golem roared as it approached, moving as swiftly as before despite its size. It moved at the speed of thought—one of the reasons the dark servants were considered overpowered.

Thud!

The Golem’s fist struck the ground where Ethella stood, sending seismic waves that toppled trees and tore the earth like hundreds of moles burrowing below.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Blow after blow hammered down, shaking the ground and scorching everything around. By the sixth strike, Ethella sprang up the Golem's arm, ran to its shoulder, and crossed her arms as she leaped. Her fists struck the Golem at an inhuman speed.

Drrrrrrrr!

This was the pinnacle of the Yin-Yang Wave Fist technique: Thousand-Armed Avalokitesvara Thunder Palm.

"Krrraaah!"

Arcane's mind was being hit with a continuous burst of sparks, as shock after shock flooded him, exceeding a rate of 30 impacts per second. Estimating roughly 300 waves generated each second, and with two seconds needed before landing fully, a total of 600 waves would propagate. This alone would result in approximately 3,000 instances of interference. However, the true essence of the Yin-Yang Wave Fist lay in its final strike, the Palm Technique. What would happen if Ethella managed to reach that point? Considering all aspects—interference, refraction, and reflection—after two seconds, the total number of interference waves would amount to an astonishing...

'68,000 times.'

A shockwave 68,000 times stronger than Ethella's original strike exploded from within. Arcane's hair stood on end, yet, in contrast to his alarm, the corners of his mouth twisted into a bizarre smile.

"Hehehe! Now it finally feels like I'm back."

There was no thought of retreat. If the enemy was powerful, he'd simply crush them with even greater strength. How he had longed for this moment. The glory of the past, facing off against countless geniuses, flashed before him like a montage.

Graaahhh!

The Dark Golem twisted its torso like a coil, while Ethella, having landed on the ground, drew both hands to his sides. The energy of Thousand-Armed Avalokitesvara Thunder

Strike's final technique, Thunder Palm, gathered in his palms. As the Dark Golem's fist came rotating toward him, Ethella clenched his jaw and thrust both palms forward.

'Thunder Palm!'

Boommmmm!

A mushroom cloud rose in the middle of the mountain range.

The trees within a 20-meter radius were uprooted entirely, turning the once lush forest into a barren wasteland.

The stars sparkled in the night sky. Ethella blinked as starlight poured down through the branches above him.

"....."

How much time had passed?

Or rather, how far had he been thrown?

All the trees where he'd landed were shattered.

Ethella lay sprawled out in the remnants of the devastation, unable to move even a single finger. His muscles twitched involuntarily, and he felt no sensation in his hands or feet.

'Master...'

Ethella was completely incapacitated.

'An archmage really is formidable.'

Even the ultimate technique of Yin-Yang Wave Fist was insufficient to overcome the dark minion summoned by the Grand Magician.

So, this was magic on the level of a catastrophe?

The shame of failing to vanquish evil weighed heavily on his heart.

If only he had stacked the waves a bit more, if he had mastered the ultimate skill of the Thousand-Armed Avalokitesvara more perfectly, if he had amplified the power of Thunder Palm even further...

"Urgh... sniff..."

Ethella raised his trembling arm to cover his eyes, and hot tears streamed down like a waterfall.

"I'm so frustrated, Master."

Ethella's sobs echoed through the mountains.

Crowd (1)

Shirone and Canis kept track of each other's positions even within the intricate terrain of the forest. Rather than an intense battle, it was a cautious, psychological duel, with a focus more on strategy than raw firepower. The contrasting attributes of light and darkness meant that if the delicate balance was broken, the tide of battle could shift in an instant. It was all about who would strike first.

Canis felt the pressure more acutely. While dark magic lent itself to counterattacks, Shirone left no openings and heightened the tension with purely tactical movements. Through a neural exchange, Harvest's thoughts came through.

Impressive indeed. To maintain such cool-headedness in battle isn't something just anyone can manage.

How about I pretend to fall for it and engage? We need to create an opening. I can't keep being dragged along like this.

Hmm. This feels like a game of mirror chess.

Using the same approach as the opponent keeps the gap in strength close through the mid-game. But once one side succumbs to pressure and makes a mistake, an opening appears, ready to be exploited. Yet, if the opponent maintains their pace until the end, the consequences of being on the defensive will add up.

'He doesn't show even a hint of wavering. If this continues, we may end up at a disadvantage.'

Canis saw an advantage in striking first and sent his intention through their mental channel.

Harvey, what do you think?

...Hm? Ah, yeah. The longer this drags on, the worse it'll be for us. Let's take an active approach.

As the response over the channel took longer than usual, Canis retreated a bit using Dark Port and asked.

Is something wrong?

No, I just sensed a seismic wave earlier. It was about two kilometers from here.

With his heightened sensitivity, Harvest could distinguish and analyze even minute vibrations, allowing him to see, hear, and even “taste” through them.

A seismic wave?

It’s still reverberating. For a shock of this magnitude, only Arcane could be responsible. I think he might have summoned a Minion.

Master did? But the Minions of Darkness is supposed to be a trump card. What does this mean?

There are both good and bad interpretations. The good is that the old man is in top shape. The bad is that he’s facing an opponent strong enough to force him to use a Minion.

A strong opponent... Alpheas, perhaps?

That’s the most reasonable assumption. Either way, we need to move now. If Arcane has found Alpheas, we should clear things up here too.

Understood. Let’s begin.

Canis closed the gap, and, defying expectations, Shirone didn’t back down, meeting him head-on. Shirone’s rapid adaptation to the flow and ability to retain control was nothing short of animalistic feedback.

Canis summoned his Power of Darkness. His shadow manifested with a distinct, mage-like character and transformed into a double-edged saw specialized for offense.

As Shirone fired a series of Photon Cannon, Canis’ shadow power was gradually whittled down like a boulder battered by fierce waves. Though light was indeed the natural nemesis of darkness, Canis persisted with dark magic. He could wield the basics of every school of magic, but this wasn’t the kind of battle that could be handled with mere tricks.

‘Hold on. He can’t maintain a spell this powerful indefinitely. If I endure, the tide will inevitably turn.’

As Canis had anticipated, Shirone's mental fatigue was mounting. Even with the advantage in attributes, the defensive resilience of dark magic was not to be underestimated.

'I need more power.'

Because photons are highly active, they naturally cause energy loss. So Shirone compressed the photons faster than they dissipated, thereby increasing their mass. Though it consumed more mental energy, it greatly amplified the power, and the orbs of white light began to swell and tremble in size.

Canis sensed the shift immediately.

What's this?

He's increasing his power. I'll handle it.

Blocking Canis's path, Harvest braced himself. As the massive Photon Cannon struck his abdomen, he clamped his hands around it, trying to crush the photons. However, instead of shattering, the photon blasted with a loud pop, sending Harvest hurtling backward through the forest.

Canis's expression turned to shock.

Harvey, are you okay?

Barely. That thing's damn heavy. It's a damn lethal weapon.

Above his head, Shirone summoned another Photon Cannon, followed by two more, each forming over his shoulders. As the three Photon Cannons teetered with overwhelming mass, Harvest spread his arms wide, not backing down an inch, and roared.

"Hah! Tickles! Is this the best you've got?"

"No. That was just practice."

"....."

Harvest's voice fell silent. With twice the intensity of the first, the Photon Cannons fired, rupturing massive trees along their path. Canis's mental channel sped up to the extreme, and Harvest's thoughts flooded in.

Canis, let's dodge this one.

Once we start dodging, we'll lose the initiative. We can't back down now.

I don't think I can block this!

You can. Absorb my mental power.

Damn it! You're a real handful, you know that?

Absorbing Canis's mental energy, Harvest's body expanded massively. As his abdomen opened, his shadow transformed into a gaping maw, roaring as it clashed with the three beams of light.

"Graaaahhh!"

Light struck the dark.

Creas was a warm southern city, and it was currently summer. Yet, at the peak of the Bridge of No Return, a snowstorm raged as if they were in the heart of a winter wasteland.

Iruki and Nade pulled their collars tighter. The snowstorm obscured their view, making Shina and Lucas appear hazy.

"Ugh. It's freezing. What's going on? Why would Ms. Siena be casting magic?"

"Maybe she's come back to her senses? She could've awakened when she fell off the cliff."

Chapter 86: Crowd (2)

“It doesn’t seem like that’s the case, does it? What is this magic, anyway? This isn’t like her. At this rate, we’re all going to freeze to death.”

Nade was equally perplexed. There were hundreds of students here. He doubted that the ones who had lost their memories could last long in the -20°C cold. Still, it was remarkably effective at putting pressure on Lucas, as cooling down his cells reduced the potency of his mitochondria build.

“Damn it! This is driving me crazy!”

Lucas’s position was especially harsh, with powerful winds dropping the perceived temperature even further. Frostbite was already beginning in his extremities.

This was precisely why skilled ice mages often started battles by casting blizzards. While not particularly lethal, it was a wide-ranging spell that inflicted continuous freezing damage, making it essential in battles against master swordsmen.

“Mages are such a nuisance.”

Lucas was fed up with mages, who would torment swordsmen with strange and varied spells. But now wasn’t the time to give up. Besides, she clearly wasn’t in her right mind.

When a sharp ice spear shot through the snowstorm, Lucas quickly dodged, but with his mitochondria weakened, he couldn’t avoid it entirely, and it grazed his side.

“Damn it!”

Most living creatures inevitably slow down in extreme cold. Swinging his sword through the freezing wind, his fingers were already showing symptoms of erythematous frostbite.

‘The temperature seems to have dropped even more. Is she really trying to kill us all?’

If even a skilled Schema user was beginning to show signs of frostbite, then the students should have frozen to death by now. But in reality, Lucas was the only one trapped in the blizzard. The snowstorm had gradually shrunk, following him with a focused intensity.

Unaware of this, Lucas bared his teeth as Siena appeared, cutting through the blizzard.

“Are you insane? Just how long are you planning to keep up this damned snowstorm...?”

Lucas stopped mid-sentence. Siena’s eyes were still empty, void of emotion, thought, or even a sense of self.

“Could it be...?”

Lucas’s shoulders trembled. She was casting magic from memory with her body rather than her mind.

It was, quite literally, muscle memory.

Just as swordsmen mastered techniques through endless repetition, Siena had reached a level where she could manifest specific brainwave patterns even without memories.

Repeat, over and over again. She must have relentlessly pushed herself to the brink of death from the day she was born.

‘How much training did she endure?’

A chill ran down his spine. He could picture the merciless path of suffering she must have walked.

‘Damn! This is way beyond stepping on crap.’

It was time to retreat. No amount of gold was worth more than his life.

Lucas gathered every bit of his remaining strength to flee. Once he escaped the blizzard, she likely wouldn’t pursue him. But that was only wishful thinking; ultimately, he paid the price for turning his back on a certified 6th-class mage. As Siena raised a finger and pointed at Lucas, moments later, he let out a scream, falling into the snow.

“Aaaaargh!”

There was no pain, but when he looked at his body map in Schema, it was as though both his legs had been cut off. Lucas twisted around to check his legs. Frozen solid, they were numb to any sensation.

‘This... this can’t be.’

It was Absolute Zero—the legendary technique he had only heard about in rumors.

It was a pinnacle of ice magic, capable of severely restricting particle activity through cryonic condensation.

Siena had ascended to a 6th-class mage at only 20 years old by achieving an understanding of Absolute Zero.

Yet, even she could only apply it in a limited way due to the tremendous mental power required.

‘Damn it! They said this was a crappy school... but both students and teachers are monsters!’

With a blank expression, Siena began casting her next spell, Glacier Bombing, an advanced technique derived from cryonic condensation. As dozens of massive ice chunks formed in the sky, the color drained from Lucas’s face. With his legs frozen, he had no way to evade them. All he could do was entrust his life to fate.

Nade and Iruki ran toward the students. While it wasn’t a large-scale spell, the sheer size of the glaciers made it dangerous. The scattered ice blocks, falling from different angles, slowly pushed against each other, and a large almond-shaped glacier began to fall toward the students. Nade rushed over to Arin, grabbed her shoulders, and forced her to the ground.

“Ahh! What are you doing?!”

“Get the students to safety! Otherwise, they’ll all die!”

“We don’t have enough time!”

Iruki shouted as she blocked their path.

“I’ll do it!”

“But how?”

Without waiting to explain, Iruki gritted his teeth. Was it possible? The glacier weighed tens of tons. Even if he shattered it with an Atomic Bomb, the splintered fragments would be a problem. To prevent anyone from getting hurt, he would need to break it into at least a thousand pieces.

‘I have no choice but to try...’

Momentum could be predicted through physics. If he calculated and controlled the physical forces to keep breaking and breaking the glacier, he might be able to destroy it before it fell.

“Here we go!”

His detachable Spirit Zone shot toward the center of the glacier. After a detonation process at maximum capacity, the Atomic Bomb exploded, causing the glacier to split into seven pieces.

Iruki activated Double Spirit Zone and relentlessly fired Atomic Bombs, shattering the glacier piece by piece.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ice fragments scattered, exploding like fireworks in the sky.

Nade and Arin watched the chain of explosions in the sky in a daze. Realizing small fragments of ice were now raining down, they turned to the students. While it rained down like hail, no one was injured.

Arin’s eyes wavered in shock. Arcane had always disparaged the magic school students, labeling them as weak and passive. Yet, what she witnessed far exceeded her expectations.

‘This is a magic school? Wait.’

Turning her head, she suddenly realized she was leaning into a strange man’s chest. Abruptly, she pushed Nade away and shouted.

“Get off me! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Nade, who had fallen on his backside, blushed.

“W-What did I do? I just saved you!”

“Why would you save me? We’re enemies!”

“Who cares? Snap out of it! Do you really plan to kill everyone here? Are you even sane?”

Arin bit her lip. By the time this day ended, she would go down in history as the instigator of a massacre, but she felt no fear. If not for Canis, she would have fallen into misery anyway.

“I don’t care. Even if the entire world dies for Canis’s sake.” Nade saw the emptiness and sarcasm in her eyes. What kind of life must she have led to look like this?

“Alright.”

Iruki lifted the fallen Siena onto his back. Then he turned to Lucas. Perhaps even the wicked had a guardian angel?

Lucas lay lodged between glaciers a few meters away, his jaw dislocated from screaming and his eyes rolled back in terror. Having lost both legs, there would be no more stealing for him. He was destined to return to the dim dungeons of Inferno just seven days after his escape.

Boom!

At the sound of a massive explosion in the forest, Nade and Iruki turned their heads. A thick beam of light pierced the forest canopy.

“Whoa. That’s huge.”

“It’s Photon Cannon. He must’ve had a breakthrough.”

The forest shook as if parting to reveal Shirone, who staggered out, looking as though he’d crawled out of the mud.

Seeing this, Arin’s face lit up. Canis must have gained the upper hand.

But her assumption was immediately shattered.

As Harvest tore down trees with its long arms, Canis hobbled out, looking even worse than Shirone.

Iruki murmured in disbelief, “It’s... a draw?”

“No way. Shirone’s Photon Cannon evolved in battle. And yet he still couldn’t win?”

Supporting himself on the ground, Shirone said, “I can’t beat him.”

His friends couldn't believe what they were hearing. It might've been the first time any of them had heard such words from Shirone.

"What? Don't talk like that."

"It's not I'm weak. He... he's really strong."

Shirone admitted it honestly. Knowing Canis was the disciple of an archmage would have made it easier to understand, but even without that, he could feel the intensity in every spell.

The will not to lose. The determination to destroy humanity.

The desire to prove his own supremacy.

Even with Photon Cannon at maximum strength, Harvest, powered by Canis's mental energy, had absorbed it all.

The clash that followed was relentless. A fierce, grueling exchange of darkness and Photon Cannons slowly drained them both.

In the end, Canis succeeded in countering, pushing Shirone outside the forest.

'How can someone so strong... also want to hurt people like this?'

Choosing evil for a reason—that much, he could understand.

After all, people make mistakes.

But he couldn't accept the idea that evil could be strong.

Strength was not born from mistakes; it was forged from effort.

"Why are you doing this? What did the students ever do to you?"

"Is this what you resort to when your strength fails you?"

Typical noble weakness."

Since it wasn't true, Shirone held back his anger.

"Answer me. What you are about to do is so terrible that it will be recorded in history. At least I need to hear the reason."

"History? Who cares about that? Those who are abandoned live only to survive the day. If I don't kill someone, then I'm the one who dies."

“Don’t try to justify it with twisted logic. No matter what you went through, the world is hard on everyone. Every person carries pain that’s hard to bear.”

“Have you ever eaten something that dropped to the ground?”

Shirone fell silent. A cold wind cut through the air.

‘Canis...’

A sadness filled Arin’s eyes. No one who hadn’t lived through Radum could understand the reality of that place. Radum was another world, cut off from the rest.

Canis and Arin were abandoned there. They couldn’t remember when it started or why it was just the two of them.

They only knew they had been there as long as they could remember, surviving even while other friends died or were sold off.

From a young age, Canis had shown a remarkable mind. Despite his small, frail body, he demonstrated just how strong someone could become when natural talent combined with sheer tenacity.

In Radum, a place teeming with criminals and savages, Canis had only one goal.

To protect Arin for one more day.

There were no women in Radum. To be precise, there were no girls beyond infancy.

In a place where food was so scarce, a powerless young girl was considered a liability and disposed of the moment she was born.

But somehow, Arin survived in Radum until she was ten.

She was the sole female in Radum.

It was Canis who protected that rare, terrifying reality.

He fought with the ferocity of a mad dog. When anyone threatened Arin, he attacked them with reckless abandon. Because of Arin, he could never join any faction. Instead, they lived day by day, scraping by on whatever trash they could find.

The grim irony was that, in Radum, even trash had an owner. Canis would fight with desperate ferocity, tearing at his enemies just for a scrap of someone's discarded leftovers.

After countless brutal battles, Canis managed to snatch half a moldy loaf of bread.

Chapter 87: Crowd (3)

Arin hadn't eaten in three days. Because of that, Canis himself hadn't eaten in twenty days.

'Hah! Hah! I did it! I got it! I actually got some bread!'

Canis was running frantically down an alley. Only after losing his pursuers did he lean against a wall to catch his breath.

His mind was hazy, and all he could feel was hunger. He couldn't even remember how long he'd gone without food.

That one piece of bread came into focus.

With eyes filled with desperation, Canis swallowed hard.

He wanted to eat it. To put it in his mouth.

'Yes, if I stay strong, Arin will survive too. This much is fine.

Arin can last a few more days.'

This thought seemed so logical.

What could be more reasonable? He'd eat this, use the strength it gave him to find more food. That's how it would go.

Canis opened his mouth and brought the bread close. The dryness in his mouth turned to a flood of saliva, and his hands trembled.

"Ugh!"

He closed his eyes tightly and tucked the bread into his chest. It was all a lie. How much strength could he possibly get from a single piece of bread?

'I have to endure. It doesn't matter if my body breaks. But if my mind shatters, it's over.'

He looked around like someone losing his sanity. He was even thinking of filling his stomach with rocks.

He crawled toward a pile of excrement that someone had left at the end of the alley. Without thinking, he extended his hand and shoved it into his mouth.

"Gah! Gah!"

His tongue, his mouth, his stomach, his whole body rejected it. But Canis forced himself to swallow.

Better than rocks.

Dung was better than rocks.

After a long battle with his stomach, Canis stumbled back to their hiding spot. The nausea still lingered, but he put on a bright face as soon as he saw Arin, holding out the bread.

"Arin, ta-da! I got this!"

"Oh, you really did? Wow, amazing."

"Haha, I figured out a trick. I'll be able to get more from now on. Eat up."

Arin looked sadly at the bread. She wanted nothing more than to go out and find food with him, but in Radum, stepping outside as a woman was suicide.

Aside from Canis, she'd never spoken to anyone else. It had left her with a fear of people, but what did that matter? At least she hadn't ended up as food, tossed into someone's stomach.

"Canis, let's eat together."

"I'm fine. I snacked on some things while I was out. There was a huge centipede, and I got some protein from it. You can't eat stuff like that, so this bread is for you."

"I can eat it too. How long are you going to treat me like a child?"

With a gentle look, Canis placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Arin, I know you're brave. But it shouldn't come to that. Do you understand? In this hellhole of Radum, the only reason I keep going is that I can still feed you properly, like a person. If you ended up like me, I'd lose my mind. So just eat."

He'd told her this countless times. And each time, she'd taken a reluctant bite of the bread.

But this time was different.

Arin looked at his mouth with trembling eyes. Something was smeared there, and an odor hung in the air.

"Canis... what did you eat?"

Canis was caught off guard.

"Huh? Haha! It was cake. Cream fell off, so I licked it up. Guess some of it got stuck. Sorry for not telling you. I was just so hungry..."

Smack!

Canis's head snapped back. He'd been hit by thugs in the alley countless times, but this was the hardest slap he'd ever felt.

"A-Arin..."

Arin's face was contorted in a terrifying expression he'd never seen before.

"You're awful... How could you do this to me? Am I some kind of livestock to you? Are you just keeping me alive, feeding me so I can be like this? What am I to you?"

"No, Arin! It's not like that! This is my punishment! It has nothing to do with you!"

"I don't care! I don't want this at all!"

Arin grabbed the bread and threw it away. Canis, glaring in anger, turned his head as the bread rolled onto the dusty ground.

"Arin! What are you doing?! Do you know what I went through to get—"

Arin pulled him in close and kissed him, licking his lips to taste what was left. Tears spilled from her eyes.

It wasn't a sweet kiss. Nor was it an exchange of pure, beautiful emotions between two humans. It was simply the act of two creatures born with the curse of existence, sharing in mutual sympathy.

Only then did Canis realize what he had eaten. For the first time in his life, tears began to fall. All the anguish he'd suppressed his entire life erupted at once.

"Huuk! HUUUUUUK!"

"Never do that again. If you do that one more time, I won't be able to stay with you."

"I'm sorry, Arin. Don't leave me. You're my only family. You're everything I live for."

"Yes. Let's survive, Canis. Let's make sure we live."

Overcome by sorrow, Canis could only nod repeatedly, unable to say a word. But Arin did not forgive him. Not until he had eaten every last crumb of that piece of bread that lay on the ground.

Canis spoke of his past calmly, as if recounting someone else's life.

"We lived in hell. But Master saved us from that place. He gave us food, gave me the strength to protect Arin, and even granted me Harvest, the essence of dark magic."

Everyone's eyes turned to Harvest. Usually a chatty magical creature, it remained silent this time.

"I understand," Shirone said, "what kind of life you've had. But that doesn't justify killing people. Living through hardship doesn't make doing wrong somehow right."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm not defending myself; I'm teaching you. Teaching you how shallow the justice you believe in is, how hypocritical the world you live in is. The justice you speak of didn't save Arin and me. I'm simply following what I believe in."

"Hurting people won't get you anything. If you don't try to understand others, your own past will never find peace."

"Tch! Peace? You're still spouting such nonsense. Want me to tell you what's really going on? My Master will destroy this entire school—including your friends."

"No. The only person you'll hurt is yourself."

Shirone raised photons in his hand, and Harvest stretched out a broad hand to shield Canis from the front. Then it extended its other arm to surround Canis as well, as though that might be enough.

"What are you doing, Harvey? There's no need to be so scared."

"It's dangerous. His aura feels strange."

Canis snorted. He'd already seen Shirone's skills during the forest encounter. While impressive for a magic school student, it was like a greenhouse flower at best.

"Hmph. Besides, I have..."

Canis's expression went blank. The Photon Cannon hovering over Shirone's palm was vibrating violently, more powerful than the one he'd cast in the forest. But with his injuries, it seemed impossible to conceal his true ability.

'How could this be? To have such power...'

Canis and Harvest's assessments were mostly accurate. But they overlooked one crucial detail: Shirone was an Unlocker who had opened the realm of infinity.

"This is your last chance. Release the mind control."

Canis's face twisted. Realizing he could no longer look down on Shirone bruised his pride.

"What a joke. Even if I die, I'll follow Master's will. My conviction cannot be broken."

Shirone's eyes turned cold. The Photon Cannon, amplified by Immortal Function's power, now held an entirely new level of strength.

He didn't want to kill. But if Canis posed a threat to the students, he had no choice.

"Restore everyone's memories. If you don't..."

The Photon Cannon burst into radiant light, transforming into a sphere of blinding white so cold it was like ice.

"I have no choice but to hurt you."

Thadd, who was casting photon magic on Alpheas's head, was already sweating heavily. Viltor Arcane. An infuriating man, but the power of his spell was beyond imagination.

'Phew. Such powerful mind control. This might even work in today's age.'

At first, he thought it would be simple. After all, forty years had passed since Viltor had earned his title of Archmage. Magic had evolved through generations, and dark magic was considered obsolete.

Yet Abyss Nova was so complex that even Thadd, a beneficiary of advanced magic, couldn't fully analyze it.

After twenty minutes, he finally felt the light penetrating the core of darkness. With maximum focus, he pushed the light

in, and the darkness began to lift, allowing Alpheas' memories to emerge brilliantly along the light's path.

Forty years ago, the capital of Baschka.

The Kingdom of Tormia experienced an unprecedented magic boom. Unlike his predecessor, who idolized brute strength, King Adolf XII was intelligent, cultured, and compassionate.

Upon his ascension, he separated the magical department from the military and attracted countless talents.

Scholars came not only from the provinces but from other nations, and as a result, the capital streets bustled daily with voices of intellect.

It was common to see fresh graduates from magic schools gathering in pubs to debate magic from noon.

Gypsy-style clothing with bold colors was in fashion.

For women, short hair that bared the neck symbolized intellect. In contrast, men wore their hair down to the waist.

Factionalism arose from academic clashes in pubs, and it wasn't unusual to see people being dragged away by guards after clumsy fistfights.

The most famous pub in Baschka was the folk-themed "Home of the Ancient Gods".

With over two hundred tables, the enormous hall featured a central podium where people would frequently stand to share magical insights.

Every type of conversation and diverse topics swirled there.

While magic debates dominated, nobles' gossip circulated in real time at Home of the Ancient Gods.

It was an age of romance.

Alpheas recalled his golden youth fondly.

"Oh, girls! He's here! Alpheas has arrived!"

As a woman made a fuss at the entrance, the women around the tables squealed and turned to look.

"Hello, ladies! It's lively as ever!"

With golden hair flowing to his waist, the handsome young Alpheas entered Home of the Ancient Gods, accompanied by a young man with a half-shaved head—Ogent Clump, Rian's grandfather.

Though Clump was a swordsman and likely not casting transparency magic, the women acted as if he were invisible and flocked around Alpheas.

"We've been waiting for you, Alpheas! What magic will you teach us today?"

"I need a drink first. My tongue freezes if it doesn't get soaked in liquor."

"Hahaha! You're so funny, Alpheas!"

Students now would probably jeer at his corny jokes, but Alpheas, back then, could say anything and still charm the crowd.

A highborn noble, a magic academy valedictorian, blessed with good looks and refined elegance—there wasn't a woman in the world who wouldn't like him.

Meanwhile, men looked at Alpheas with disdain. Even those not inclined to jealousy would narrow their eyes when judging him, a testament to the bitterness he stirred among men.

The Light of the Milch Family.

That was his official title, but those who knew him had another nickname for him.

Arrogant Alpheas.

Chapter 88: Crowd (4)

Anyone involved in the world of magic would have recognized that Alpheas was a person chosen by the gods. The issue, however, was that he displayed his talents without regard for time or place.

Once he got into a debate, he would see it through to the end, and if his opponent made even a small mistake, he would tenaciously dig into it until they conceded. The only person who understood that Alpheas' actions lacked malice was Clump. It wasn't arrogance so much as purity; his passion simply overwhelmed people.

In fact, when Alpheas made a mistake, he would freely admit it and congratulate his opponent on their victory. The problem was, those instances were rare.

Alpheas grew bored even waiting for his beer, so he moved around the tables, mingling with people. Clump watched him worriedly, wondering if he'd stir up more trouble, but finally shook his head, as if he had no energy left to intervene.

"Sarof! Here for a drink in broad daylight?"

Sarof, a local of the capital, was one of Alpheas' few rivals, and he raised both hands in welcome. Although he lost to Alpheas in every debate, the general opinion was that he was the top talent in the field of photon studies—if not for Alpheas. Although Sarof's feelings toward Alpheas weren't exactly warm, Alpheas approached him without concern.

"Oh, right. Sarof, I saw you submitted a thesis to the royal library recently. I read it briefly; it was very intriguing."

"What? Why did you read my thesis?"

"Isn't it obvious? I specialize in photon studies too, and the royal archivist is an ardent fan of mine. Anyway, it was a great read."

“Oh, really? What did you think?”

Among young mages of the time, the highest honor was to have a thesis recognized and to work under the Royal Magic Department’s banner. If selected, one would receive a personal research lab and all the funding required, making it a coveted role.

Sarof had submitted what he considered his life’s work just a week earlier, so he couldn’t help but feel curious about the opinion of his rival, Alpheas.

“You accurately captured the nature of light. There was nothing to criticize. The section on energy concentration—I’ll admit, it stumped me.”

Sarof’s expression immediately brightened, but Alpheas, once again, didn’t let it go easily.

“But there was one mistake: the wave nature of light. Clearly, that’s a flawed theory.”

“What are you talking about? The wave nature of light has already been validated through experiments.”

“It’s true, but my perspective is different. Recent experiments have shown that there are too many aspects that can’t be explained by waves alone. Perhaps light might be closer to particles.”

“Ha! Alpheas, now you’re resorting to dragging up tabloid gossip? Numerous critics have pointed out the flaws in particle theory! If light is a particle, then how do you explain its wave nature? The two concepts are fundamentally different!”

Whether light was a particle or a wave was the hottest topic of debate in Alpheas’ time. The wave theory was popular, but a small group of scholars, including Alpheas, continued to propose alternative views.

“Do you believe those critics? I’ve seen the data claiming to find errors in particle experiments, but it wasn’t approached scientifically. Isn’t that, in fact, the real error?”

Having had a bit to drink, Sarof slammed his hand on the table and stood up. Already suffering from insomnia due to

his thesis, Alpheas was only adding fuel to the fire.

“Enough! Who asked for your evaluation of my thesis? If you’re so confident, why don’t you write and submit something yourself? Go ahead and entertain the world with that nonsense!”

“I’m saying this out of concern. Even if it’s rejected now, you can always reinforce it later. Isn’t uncovering truth more important than a thesis?”

Sarof could no longer hold back. Wasn’t the underlying message really, “You’re going to be rejected”?

“Get lost! I won’t even speak to you from now on!”

Alpheas smacked his lips and returned to his table, unfazed. He saw debates with a rival in the same field as beneficial for both, so he wasn’t particularly annoyed. But Clump was concerned.

They’d first met in an inn in Baschka. Since Clump was also from Creas, they’d bonded as fellow students, and it had been about a year since they’d started hanging out together.

To be honest, Alpheas could be insufferable. As a swordsman, Clump thought so, so how much worse must it be for his fellow mages?

“Alpheas, are you some kind of fighting cock? Why can’t you just let it go when people are wrong?”

“It’s not about them; truth is truth. That’s the essence of intellect.”

“My goodness. Do you know what people are calling you lately? Arrogant Alpheas—that’s your nickname now.”

“Haha! I like that! Much better than something as cringeworthy as ‘Light of the Milch Family’.”

Magic was a domain of talent, and Alpheas was blessed with more than enough of it. To him, modesty was mere pretense, because even when he tried to hide it, his talent inevitably shone through.

“It’s all part of a genius’ fate. Come on, come on! Don’t stress and just have a drink. Hey, Rafne! Pay special

attention to the snacks. This guy eats more than a bear.”

“Haha! If Alpheas requests it, I’ll provide as much as you want!”

The gaze of the waitress, Rafne, was filled with love. Judging by her behavior, it was clear she, too, had fallen for Alpheas. Clump felt a headache coming on, watching Alpheas treat every woman as if she were his lover.

Not that he was seriously pursuing any of them. Many men had missed their chance with these women because of Alpheas’ superficial charms, making him a common enemy among the men here—even outside the field of magic.

“Even Rafne now? Why don’t you just have a proper romance? What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Hehe, as you know, I’m everyone’s lover. And it’s not like I’m hitting on them. They’re just melting from my killer smile.”

Alpheas stroked his chin and flashed a smile. His looks certainly made it easy to see why women were smitten. Could a smile like that actually work? Clump, who had no luck with women, experimentally lifted the corners of his mouth.

“How’s this? Does this give me a killer smile too?”

“Oh, definitely! A real killer smile! Like a killer’s smile. Hahaha!”

“Do you want to die?”

“Haha! Just joking. Actually, it was rather dashing. Wear that smile to the party later, and the ladies will swoon.”

“Party? Do I have to go to that? I’m not even a mage.”

Tonight, the Bastard family was hosting an event called Night of the Young Mages. The family had no real ties to magic, but holding parties under any pretense had become one of the ways the nobility asserted their status.

“Who says only mages can attend? All sorts of people from different backgrounds will be there, so build some connections. It’s not just skill but who you know that matters.”

“Funny hearing that from you.”

“What can I say? You need a high standing to achieve great things. Just come along. You never know, you might find your other half there.”

Clump, filled with enthusiasm for swordsmanship, had no interest in networking, but he couldn't ignore that last part. Who knows? As Alpheas said, perhaps this rustic swordsman from the countryside might find himself falling for a sophisticated city maiden.

Suddenly, Clump started clearing his throat as if he'd caught a cold.

“Hmph! Well, maybe I'll take a look.”

The Bastard Mansion, belonging to one of the wealthiest families in the capital, was a grand display of opulence, as if carefully toeing the line of a law that forbade any noble building from outshining the royal palace.

Three hundred crystal chandeliers adorned the ceiling of the grand hall, while marble tables with gold accents were laden with delicacies sourced from across the world.

Nobles danced with partners to the music of musicians, while older statesmen conversed over wine in one corner.

“Hello there! My name's Ogent Clump. Did you come here alone?”

“Eek!”

At the sight of Clump, the woman shrieked and ran off. It was only natural; with his rough features and a smile that seemed to belong to a twisted villain, he truly did look like he had a killer's grin. Clump froze in shock while Alpheas burst into laughter and clapped him on the back.

“Pfft! You actually did it! Oh, my stomach!”

“Damn it! I was stupid to trust you. Anyway, where've you been, coming over just now?”

“Oh, you know. Had to chat up a few lovely ladies who couldn't stop talking to me.”

Clump glanced over at the women Alpheas gestured toward. Refined city ladies were glancing at Alpheas and blushing.

"Damn it. Seems your back is even better-looking than my front. All of them are looking right at you."

"Haha! Don't worry about it. Happens to everyone, right? Now that we're here, let's eat until we're full."

Since the table was filled with delicacies rare to his countryside eyes, Clump, now left to his own devices, figured he'd eat his fill without minding any women. As he headed to the table, Alpheas chuckled. Simple, but optimistic, this friend was a delight.

While Clump devoured food like a starving man, Alpheas struggled to fend off the nobles who approached him every five minutes. When even the head of the Bastard family himself came over, all the nobles turned their attention to Alpheas.

"A pleasure to meet you. You're Alpheas, the new rising star, aren't you?"

"It's an honor to be recognized, sir. This is a magnificent party. Thank you for inviting me."

"Haha! Befriending young minds like yours is my pleasure. Let's meet again soon."

"Yes, sir. I'll gladly come whenever you call."

"All right, then. Enjoy yourself."

Though brief, the head of the Bastard family personally exchanging more than a few words with a young mage just starting his career was a clear mark of favor.

Turning back satisfied, Alpheas glanced at Clump, who was still stuffing his mouth with meat, looking like a man possessed. Clearly, he was venting some pent-up energy on the food.

"Don't your jaws ever get tired? Where is all that food going?"

Clump, munching away, pointed at his biceps. Alpheas shook his head in amused disbelief. He could feel numerous eyes on him, but he was already bored of it. He scanned the

hall with a frustrated sigh for anything entertaining, when a woman flitting between the tables on the far side caught his attention.

“Huh?”

His first thought was that she was no mage. Her dress was simple, not the typical gypsy style, and she wore her long black hair down to her waist, rejecting the short hair that symbolized intelligence in this world. With a plate in one hand and a fork in the other, she hopped around without a care, completely out of place in this atmosphere of strict etiquette and decorum.

“Oh? Isn’t that the lord’s eldest daughter?”

Clump’s comment intrigued Alpheas, who kept his gaze fixed on the woman while asking casually.

“The lord’s eldest daughter?”

“You came here without knowing even that? Seriously, you have no sense of manners.”

“I don’t know. Just explain it.”

“Her name is Bastard Erina, age nineteen. She’s said to be the sole troublemaker in the Bastard family.”

“A troublemaker? Ha, because she’s a bit wild?”

“No. It’s more that her intelligence is... lacking.”

Alpheas finally turned to look at Clump, convinced he was telling the truth. This bear of a friend he met from Baschka wasn’t one for malicious jokes.

Chapter 89: Crowd (5)

“I heard she was in an accident as a child. That’s why her mental age is around ten. They don’t even let her leave her room—how did she get to the party?”

Alpheas glanced back at Erina with mixed emotions.

However, she appeared entirely unbothered by the stares of others, innocently smiling as she greeted the young men around her.

Just as one would expect at a ball, she seemed to be looking for a partner. Yet, not a single person returned her a warm smile. Instead, they gave a quick, awkward greeting and hurried away, though it was only thanks to the influence of the Bastard family that they acknowledged her at all.

Alpheas stole a glance at the head of the household across the table. As expected, he was visibly angry, his face flushed red. Unable to hold back, he burst out at his wife.

“I told you not to bring Erina! Get her out of here immediately!”

“Dear, please calm down. Erina loves parties. If we drag her out now and she causes a scene, it’ll only be worse. Let’s just leave her for now, and I’ll quietly take her away when no one notices.”

“Ugh! It’s so embarrassing. She’s the shame of our family, a disgrace!”

Alpheas pouted. He could understand his frustrations, but calling his daughter a disgrace? He was well aware of the high status of the first-class nobility in society. Alpheas himself was born into a first-class family and had even earned the shudder-inducing title of Milch’s Light.

‘Just like the old folks in my family. Nobles, honestly.’

Alpheas kept his gaze fixed on Erina until the music changed three times. And in doing so, he realized she was

genuinely enjoying the party. She seemed content with just exchanging greetings with others.

But what kind of people are mages? Arrogant types who deem ignorance as a sin. They would smile at her but would turn away and mock the “dim-witted” Erina behind her back.

“Clump. Hold this for a moment. No, actually, drink it.”

As Alpheas handed over his glass and turned towards the ballroom, Clump urgently grabbed him back.

“What are you up to now? For heaven’s sake, don’t cause any trouble here.”

“Those fools, just because they learned some letters, are rejecting the lady’s kindness. As the most popular man in Baschka, I should step in and help her uphold her dignity.”

With his bear-like strength, Clump held Alpheas back.

“Alpheas. That’s wrong. Erina might take sympathy as mockery. Those people around her are already enough.

Don’t make her feel any worse.”

Clump was sincere. The usual foolish look in his eyes was gone, replaced with a glow of righteous determination.

Alpheas smiled and patted Clump on the shoulder.

“You’re always so simple. Don’t you think I know that? I’ve never been insincere with any woman. All sins come from discrimination. Ever heard that? If we start treating her differently, she’ll be like a bird in a cage. I know what I’m doing, so leave it to me.”

“Are you serious? You’re really going to do it? Hey, wait!”

As Alpheas crossed the ballroom, he glanced back at Clump and flashed him a smile recognized as his “killer smile”.

“Don’t worry. I’m everyone’s lover.”

By the time Alpheas arrived, no one was left around Erina. Everyone had subtly withdrawn. But she seemed used to it, eating her apple happily, showing no hint of sadness.

“Hello there. Enjoying the ball?”

Erina stopped chewing on her apple and blinked at Alpheas. Even before exchanging a word, he could tell her

intelligence was lacking.

Yet she was pure.

So pure, in fact, that it felt as though she reflected others' emotions like a mirror. Alpheas thought that perhaps this was the real reason people avoided her.

"Oh! Hello! I'm Erina!"

Erina greeted him with a bright smile as if she had suddenly realized something. But her reaction was noticeably different than when he observed her from afar. She looked subtly afraid.

'Well, of course. This is probably the first time anyone's approached her.'

Alpheas bowed politely.

"I am Alpheas of Milch family, a mage. I was so captivated by your beauty that I'm only now introducing myself. If it's not too bold of me, would you be my partner for the ball tonight?"

Erina stared blankly, her mouth slightly open, a piece of apple rolling out from her mouth. It was clear to anyone watching that her face showed a *"What is happening?"* expression.

Suddenly, Erina lowered her head and, without saying a word, turned and walked past him.

Alpheas was taken aback. "Rejected" was the exact word for it. Had he approached her too much like he would a regular person? Regaining his senses, he quickly moved to block her path.

"Wait, wait just a moment. Was I too forward? I'm sorry. I only wanted to get to know you, Erina."

Erina still didn't respond. She was only staring at the ground, shifting her feet as if searching for an escape.

But Alpheas wasn't willing to give up this time. He continued to block her path wherever she tried to go, constantly trying to engage her in conversation.

"Alright, if you don't want to dance, let's just talk. How about we have a conversation? I have a really funny story to

tell. Do you like star signs, by any chance?"

"I want to go. I want to go back to my room. Mom's going to scold me."

"Why would your mom scold you? No one's going to scold you. You came to the party, and here I am, asking you to be my partner."

"She told me not to talk. She said anyone who talks to me is a bad person. I want to go to my room."

Alpheas felt frustrated. No, he was anxious. All his usual charm, which had won over countless women, was gone. All he wanted now was to make eye contact with Erina just once more.

"I'm not a bad person at all. Look at me. Does this look like the face of a bad person?"

Alpheas placed his hands on her shoulders. At that moment, Erina shrieked, her body convulsing as she screamed.

"Aaaah! No!"

Everyone in the hall turned to look at Erina. To them, it appeared as though Alpheas was doing something terrible.

"Mom! Help me! Mom!"

"Erina! Look at me! I'm not going to hurt you!"

"Mom! Mom!"

Among the invited mages was Alpheas's rival, Sarof. Watching the absurdity of Alpheas's behavior, he couldn't believe his eyes. He knew Alpheas was a crazy person, but he had never imagined he was this much of a lunatic.

"Isn't it enough that he's swept through all the women of Baschka, and now he's bothering a girl with intellectual disabilities? He must be desperate to advance."

Most of the nobles shared his sentiments. Even though she lacked intelligence, Erina was the eldest daughter of the Bastard family. If he succeeded in courting her, his future would be secure.

The only person who understood Alpheas's sincerity was Clump, but even he gave up once things had reached this point.

‘Fine, you madman. Clean up your own mess.’

Erina struggled almost frantically. A reasonable person would have let go of her in front of her family, but Alpheas held onto her shoulders stubbornly.

“Erina, please, just wait a moment. Look at me. Look at me.”

“Mom! I’m scared, Mom!”

“Erina!”

When Alpheas shouted, Erina flinched, her movements stopping abruptly. Yet, her trembling grew even more intense, filled with fear.

“Please, just once—look at my face. I’m asking you.”

With a face stricken with terror, Erina slowly turned her head. She saw Alpheas’ fiery gaze. It was as if the intensity in his eyes seeped into her heart, heating it up from within.

“See? Nothing’s happening. I’m not a bad person. I won’t do anything you don’t want. But it’s a party, isn’t it? Don’t you want to dance?”

A barely hidden excitement spread across Erina’s face. The sparkle of light shattered like crystals, the sound of the musician’s tunes, the voices of countless people mingling and chatting—all she wanted was to smile, just like everyone else.

“Erina. I want to be with you. Please, be my partner tonight.”

There was no response, but he wasn’t waiting for one. Holding Erina’s hand, Alpheas led her to the center of the hall. She walked hesitantly, like a child taking her first steps. And for the first time in her life, she found herself in the arms of someone outside her family.

When the quick-witted musicians resumed playing, Alpheas began to lead her in a dance. The nobles around them looked on in shock, even Erina’s parents were at a loss for words.

But Alpheas didn’t care, because Erina didn’t care. It was as if the two of them were the only ones there, swept away by

the music. The dance was far from dignified. It was instinctive, passionate. They spun like tops, occasionally bumping into others in the crowd. Each time, Erina's laughter grew louder.

And after about ten minutes, Erina, for the first time, became the center of the party.

Playful laughter echoed through the garden. Having practically caused a scene at the party, Alpheas and Erina had dashed out and were now running wildly through the woods.

At the top of the hill, Alpheas came to a halt, panting heavily. Humiliatingly, Erina didn't appear tired at all. To think he had less stamina than a woman. With a sigh, he glanced up at the sky.

It was a night so full of stars, it felt like they could pour down at any moment.

Erina, it turned out, was surprisingly quiet by nature. But Alpheas was known around Baschka for his talkativeness. He kept the conversation going so tirelessly that the atmosphere never had a chance to cool.

As time passed, it almost felt as though Erina was the one drawing out the conversation. No matter the topic, she listened intently. When she occasionally smiled as if she understood, Alpheas got even more excited, letting words flow out like a waterfall.

Eventually, the conversation wandered to a topic that had been troubling him lately: the nature of light.

Is light a wave, or is it a particle?

Sarof had defined it as a wave, but Alpheas was convinced that was wrong. And yet, he couldn't fully support the particle theory either.

To be honest, he wasn't sure. He just thought that acknowledging what he didn't know was the best place to start.

“Isn’t it strange? Light is such a bizarre phenomenon. In interference experiments, it behaves like a wave, but then on the other hand...”

Alpheas stopped mid-sentence, suddenly realizing how caught up he’d gotten in his own story. He’d been so absorbed, he’d forgotten his listener was Erina. She was crouched on the grass, gazing down the hillside. But there was still that gentle smile on her lips, radiant as ever.

“Haha! Did I talk too much? I think this is the first time I’ve talked so long without boring someone.”

“You’re a good person.”

It was the first words Erina had spoken, and Alpheas blinked, as if hearing those words for the first time in his life. He couldn’t explain why his heart started to race.

He felt confused.

Why am I here? What am I hoping for from this woman?

It was an unknown world—a world he wanted to enter but feared at the same time, leaving him unable to make any decision.

He avoided it. As if he hadn’t heard her, he continued talking as before.

“Haha! Embarrassing as it is, as a mage, I’m supposed to be writing a paper, but I really don’t understand any of it. I don’t even know which direction to go in. What do you think, Erina? Is light a wave or a particle?”

Erina didn’t seem disappointed in his response. She rose from her seat, gazed up at the stars in the sky, and spoke.

Chapter 90: Crowd (6)

“Light is beauty.”

“What? What did you say?”

Alpheas asked again, puzzled. It was only natural that she wouldn't know photon theory, but this kind of answer was unexpected.

“Light is beautiful. Flowers are beautiful. And so are we. But the light you speak of... it doesn't sound beautiful.”

Alpheas felt as if he'd been struck on the head with a hammer. It was a direct hit—a pure thought form impossible to reshape with words.

“I... I see. But why is light beautiful?”

To Alpheas, light was merely photons. Yet Erina, as though she understood everything, answered without hesitation.

“Because light reveals the darkness. Without light, how could we ever see the night sky?”

The world fell silent. Like the universe itself.

Alpheas couldn't say a word. The thoughts he truly desired cascaded over him like a waterfall.

Why had he tried to separate the two? Just one step back, and it became so clear.

Because it's beautiful.

No contradiction was truly a contradiction.

“Beauty... Yes, it's so beautiful, Erina.”

Erina turned her head, smiling with the pure innocence of a child. At that moment, as he saw her smile, Alpheas made a decision.

To remember this moment for the rest of his life.

Alpheas knelt on one knee before Erina and extended his right hand with the utmost sincerity.

“Please, be my light.”

That night forty years ago.

That confession under the moonlight became a cherished memory that Alpheas would trade for nothing in the world. As the veil of Abyss Nova began to lift, a gentle smile graced his lips.

The Reversal of Master and Servant (1)

Canis glared at the brilliant white light blazing in Shirone's palm. It was overwhelmingly intense. He had the warrior's spirit that allowed him to charge toward death without hesitation. However, if he was to die, he at least wanted to get something out of it.

Harvey, I'm leaning towards fighting. Let's take him on. That magic... How fast do you think it is? We might not be able to dodge it.

Then you can block it.

"If I can't, you'll die. And if you die, I'll disappear too. We'll have to fight, but there are just too many unknowns."

Exchanging thoughts at the speed of thought was an enormous advantage in battle. Yet, it also had a drawback when their opinions were at complete odds, making it difficult to reach a decision.

"What's going on here?"

A sudden voice broke the tense standoff. A shadow slithered up from the cliff like liquid, and an emaciated old man rose above the surface of darkness.

It was Arcane, the archmage.

Arcane's expression twisted as he took in the situation in an instant. He had been able to give his all in the fight with Ethella because he was certain that the situation here had already been resolved.

Arcane had placed his trust in Canis. Or more precisely, in Harvest bound to Canis.

But upon arrival, he found the situation vastly different from his expectations.

Lucas lay sprawled on the ground in a miserable state, while Canis and Harvest were being intimidated by a single young boy.

"I apologize, Master."

Arcane was not known for his leniency. Ignoring Canis' apology, he coldly turned his gaze on Shirone.

'I thought he looked familiar.'

He resembled Alpheas. It wasn't his face or appearance, but the overall aura he exuded. He had the same boldness to speak his mind under the gaze of an archmage.

"Did you plan all this?"

"For such a young one, you're arrogant. What is your name?"

"I have no interest in giving my name to a murderer.

Release your mind control spell immediately and leave the school. Otherwise, I won't let you go unscathed."

"Haha."

Arcane let out a deep laugh. He wasn't angry. The standard by which he decided to kill someone wasn't based on anger but rather on how entertaining it would be. In that sense, Shirone was a ripe fruit ready to be picked.

"Sorry, but I can't release the mind control. You see, Alpheas' disciples must die."

Sensing the killing intent, Shirone felt chills run down his spine, and, almost involuntarily, he fired a Photon Cannon. A clear misfire.

Arcane effortlessly twisted his body to avoid the Photon Cannon. Only after confirming that the spell had dissipated did he turn back around.

"The Spirit Zone radius... 52.7 meters. Impressive. Quite advanced for your age."

Even though photons had mass, and thus couldn't exceed physical limitations, their base speed was much faster than most flying objects. Dodging the Photon Cannon in an instant and measuring the Spirit Zone radius wasn't within the scope of human ability.

Gritting his teeth, Shirone compressed the photons again. He was facing an opponent of unknown caliber, but if he

wanted to prevent hundreds of students from falling off the cliff, he had no choice but to fight.

“Stop, Shirone.”

Ethella emerged from the mountains. Her clothes were torn, her bare skin exposed, and she was covered in dirt from head to toe.

“Don’t rush in. Arcane is a dangerous man.”

Arcane’s expression twisted. He had enjoyed their battle, but he had long erased the memory of sullied food.

“The defeated are shameless. You should cherish the life you’ve been spared.”

Shirone and his companions were in shock. Could it really be that Professor Ethella had lost to this skeletal old man? The Bishop of the Karsis Monastery, the master of Spirit Zone, a certified 6th-class mage—her titles were not ones to be given lightly.

“No way... Professor Ethella...”

Nade doubted the possibility. While 5th and 4th-class mages existed, imagining anyone stronger than Ehtella was beyond his grasp.

Supporting Ethella, Shirone asked, “Are you alright, Professor?”

“More or less. But it’ll take time to recover.”

“What happened? Who is that man? Why is he doing this?”

“Viltor Arcane. An unregistered 3th-class archmage from forty years ago.”

Shirone and his companions’ eyes flickered. Every magic school student knew what an unregistered 3rd-class mage signified.

Mage ranks were divided into ten classes, with specific points between which the required honor and achievement points skyrocketed.

Those critical thresholds were between classes 7 and 6, and classes 4 and 3.

While a 6th-class mage held a senior position in the mage society, a 3rd-class mage could head a kingdom’s core

institution. Even Alpheas, a certified 4th-class mage, was merely the headmaster of a private school. This gave them an idea of Arcane's elevated status.

"Arcane holds a grudge against the headmaster. He won't stop until he achieves his goal."

"You talk too much. Complaining to your students only makes you look more pathetic."

"I'm not interested in winning. I'm a teacher. If it's for the students, I'll do whatever it takes to protect them."

"Oh? And what can you do? Do you think you could stop me now when you couldn't even at full strength?"

"Your bravado is excessive, Arcane."

Arcane's expression turned menacing.

"Indeed, I failed to stop you. But you're not in the mental state for a full fight either, are you?"

Ethella's words were half right. After casting the Minions of Darkness spell, Arcane's magical power was only about a tenth of its normal state. But that was still a tenth of an archmage's strength, more than enough to wipe out an exhausted Ethella and a group of fledgling mages.

"Times have certainly changed. Spoiling you brats has made you forget your place, hasn't it?"

Arcane began gathering magical power. He'd reserved the remaining tenth to kill Alpheas, but that no longer mattered. Tedious calculations never suited his way of life.

"Master, leave this to me."

Canis stepped forward. The Abyss Nova was an enormous spell that consumed mental energy beyond what average mages could attempt. Considering Arcane had both cast it and fought afterward, he couldn't be in top condition.

Arcane looked at Canis with mild irritation. Even if it was his disciple, he couldn't tolerate a challenge to his authority. Yet, after thinking it over, he turned his gaze back to Shirone with a gleam of interest.

"Hey, boy. You're also one of Alpheas' disciples, aren't you?"

“Don’t dare speak the headmaster’s name with that murderous mouth of yours.”

“Heh. Heh-heh-heh! Is that so? You must hold him in high regard.”

Shirone didn’t even feel the need to respond. How could he not respect Alpheas? He was the one who opened Shirone’s eyes to magic and allowed a commoner like him to attend the school.

“I don’t care if you’re an archmage or a 3rd-class mage. Compared to him, you’re not even a real mage.”

“Hahaha! Hahahaha!”

Arcane burst into laughter, though his eyes blazed with rage.

‘Alpheas. How long have you maintained this false image? You know, don’t you, that you don’t deserve anyone’s respect?’

After making his decision, Arcane nodded.

“Very well. It’ll be entertaining to watch the disciples fight. Canis, test him.”

“Yes, thank you, Master.”

Canis finally felt relieved. This was his chance to make up for the mistakes he’d made so far. But Harvest had a different opinion.

Canis. Think again. It's better to leave this to Arcane.

What are you talking about? I already disappointed Master.

Now, I have to defeat Shirone, even if it kills me.

Facing an impending battle, the two disagreed, which was hardly ideal.

Harvey. Answer me. No matter what, I can’t back down this time. We’re going to fight, no matter what.

Harvest remained silent. This had never happened before, leaving Canis uneasy. But with Arcane watching, he couldn’t afford to show weakness.

In a flash, Canis used Dark Port to close the distance to where Shirone stood, only for Shirone to cast Teleportation

and launch himself off the cliff. He was trying to avoid the battle's impact from reaching the other students.

"So, you want an aerial fight, huh?"

In the darkened night sky, Canis found that moving with Dark Port didn't put him at a disadvantage.

Hovering over a 1,000 meter cliff, the two clashed, flying in combat reminiscent of hawks in flight, unleashing all their power.

Shirone concentrated seven photons at once, firing them simultaneously. The Photon Cannon, activated within the infinite realm, was now several times stronger, though it generated an equally enormous recoil.

Each time he cast the spell, his consciousness blurred. The infinite realm, which allowed him to threaten his opponent while simultaneously eroding his own mental energy, was indeed a double-edged sword.

"What on earth..."

Ethella stared blankly up at the sky. The Photon Output, which created shockwaves, was something she'd never seen before.

Streaks of Photon Cannon light ripped through the night sky, like golden pens wildly scribbling on a black canvas.

Iruki and Nade were mesmerized by the beams. Firing the powerful Photon Cannon in rapid succession was practically weaponizing Shirone himself.

"He's incredible, but... is he going to be okay?"

"We just have to believe in him. He did well at the presentation too."

"But this is different from back then. This is a life-and-death fight. He could cross the line without even realizing it."

Ethella turned to the two, asking, "What do you mean by that? Are you saying Shirone has entered Immortal Function before?"

"Uh, yes? Well, actually... he kind of does it whenever he's bored these days."

Ethella sighed. She'd warned him about the risk of losing his life, but he hadn't even bothered to pretend to be careful. Then again, without that kind of passion, his rapid growth wouldn't have been possible.

Chapter 91: The Reversal of Master and Servant (2)

Canis struggled to evade the flashing Photon Cannon streaks, more unsettled than ever. Why didn't Shirone seem to tire? It was as if he had no mental limit.

Harvey! At this rate, I'll be defeated!

Yet Harvest remained silent. This had never happened before, which filled Canis with dread. And there was no reason for it. Canis knew better than anyone that Harvest wasn't the type to remain silent during battle over something as petty as a disagreement.

Harvey! Answer me!

A Photon Cannon shot past Canis, grazing his side. He barely twisted in time, but it was a sluggish reaction. He hadn't avoided it; it simply hadn't hit him.

"What's going on?"

Ten or so flashes fired from Shirone, but once again, his aim was off. Canis finally realized: the countless blasts were obliterating all the darkness he could travel through with Dark Port.

'This maniac...!'

Shirone's strategy was clear—if he couldn't hit Canis, he'd trap him and pummel him. It made sense, but wasn't it recklessly crude? Shirone had already fired over 200 Photon Cannons, a spell that heavily drained mental energy. Yet he seemed not only unfazed but was firing even more shots.

'How vast is his mental strength?'

The thought sent a chill down his spine. As dozens of Photon Cannons filled Canis' field of vision, a wave of despair rose within him. Every route Dark Port could take him was now blocked by beams of light.

‘There’s no escaping this. This is the end.’

He felt resentment and bitterness. It wasn’t the fear of death that bothered him most—it was the humiliation of being defeated by a light mage in front of his master.

This is infuriating, Arcane.

Harvey?

For the first time since the aerial battle had begun, the mental channel opened. Harvest leapt in front of Canis, taking a direct hit from the Photon Cannon. A ghastly groan escaped him as his body quivered under the relentless shockwaves.

Deciding that his outer shell alone wouldn’t suffice, Harvest opened his body wide, swallowing the Photon Cannon whole. His body, narrow as a tiger, swelled like a balloon as he began to digest the photons by activating his maximum absorption power. Gradually, his body contracted, returning to its original form.

“Gah...!”

Canis’ face contorted in shock. The only way Harvest could absorb the Photon Cannon was by tapping into his mental strength. Yet, taking energy without permission was supposed to be impossible under the terms of their contract.

Harvey?

Focus and prepare!

After draining all of Canis’ mental energy, Harvest flew at Shirone, claws slashing. Shirone, unaccustomed to close combat, was caught off guard. Harvest moved with such speed that even Shirone’s Teleportation couldn’t keep pace. How was this possible? He seemed even stronger than Canis.

Ethella, who had the same thought, glanced over at Arcane. Seeing his expressionless gaze observing the fight, she grasped the full extent of the situation.

‘Viltor Arcane. You’re truly a cruel man.’

It wasn’t love for his disciple that led Arcane to assign the most powerful magical creature to Canis. For a man burning

with vengeance, his disciple was nothing more than a disposable tool, a fuel tank to maximize Harvest's power. That was Canis' only reason for existence.

As Shirone increased the speed of his Teleportation, Harvest moved even faster. Canis' complexion turned deathly pale. His mental energy had been drained, leaving him unable to think. Only feelings of betrayal and emptiness echoed in his mind.

Harvey. Why?

Only silence responded. Realizing who was truly in control, Canis' gaze dulled. Memories flashed before his eyes as tears began to fill them.

Shirone retreated to the ground, blood flowing from a wound that seemed as if it had been slashed by a blade.

'The Photon Cannon doesn't work. There isn't much time left before the Immortal Function closes.'

Canis, who had landed with Harvest, placed a hand on the ground, his pupils unfocused. Ignoring him, Harvest charged toward Shirone. He needed to end the battle before Canis' mental strength was fully depleted.

Dodging Harvest's razor-sharp claws, Shirone realized just how quickly the tide had turned from his earlier advantage. The reversal of roles.

Now that Harvest, who had previously only supported Canis, was fighting on the front line, the nature of the fight had shifted entirely. A magical creature without the fear of death—could there be a more troublesome opponent on the battlefield? Harvest was a weapon fueled by Canis' life force.

'A combat weapon...?'

Shirone suddenly realized his mistake. He had been blinded by Harvest's intelligence and had failed to see the obvious truth. The reversal of master and servant meant one simple thing: the opponent had changed from a living being to an inanimate object. Naturally, his magic needed to change accordingly.

Shirone canceled the Photon Cannon and cast Photon Output instead. The danger of the Photon Cannon lay in its destructive force against living beings. But since Harvest lacked life, physical force was irrelevant. If he specialized in absorbing energy, then overwhelming him with an energy output beyond his limits could destroy him.

Photon Output, as a form of pure magic without mass, was more flexible than the Photon Cannon. And the Immortal Function was still active. Concentrating his power through 300 hologram devices installed in the academy, Shirone fired a beam large enough to envelop a person.

“Grrraaaah!”

Harvest staggered back, shrouded in light. Though the photons emitted no physical force, smoke rose from his dark-matter body. Since he was immune to light, the photons themselves couldn’t harm him, but the energy they carried could chip away at him.

‘I need even stronger energy.’

Shirone recalled the core equation of the photonization theory: energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. The god particle grants mass, so reversing the equation to convert mass into energy was possible.

Shirone reconstructed the Photon Output cells based on mass, then combined it with the omnipotence of the Immortal Function, triggering a real-time conversion of mass to energy. When theory and reality aligned so perfectly, he felt an unparalleled thrill as he stepped into the unknown.

“What... what is that?”

Everyone watching the battle widened their eyes. The Photon Output began to narrow and turn blood-red. They didn’t know what magic it was, but the color alone was menacing.

Iruki recalled a story his father, the head of the Dragon’s Roar, had once told him about a phenomenon of light.

“Is that... a laser?”

“A laser? What’s that?”

“It’s when light energy is highly amplified. It’s the ultimate evolution of radiant-type magic. But how can this be possible?”

Laser magic was a matter of sheer power rather than talent or skill. It required at least a decade of mental reconditioning to accumulate the power needed to amplify photons to the level of a laser.

However, Shirone bypassed this requirement by reconfiguring the photonization theory around the god particle. Instead of sheer force, he amplified the energy through mass conversion. His unique cells had developed a new pathway.

“Graaaargh!”

Harvest writhed in agony. The laser was far thinner than Photon Output, but the concentrated energy was staggering. The color was never the issue. The real danger lay in the invisible thermal radiation beyond the red wavelength. The single-wavelength laser was vibrating his molecules, generating immense heat.

“Harvest!”

Canis clutched his aching head and screamed. The overwhelming shock hitting his mind meant that Harvest had exceeded the limits of energy absorption in just two seconds. This was the power of Shirone’s new magic, the Laser Pulse Cannon.

Harvest tried desperately to absorb the energy, but the molecules were vibrating too quickly. With his absorption reaching its saturation point, his body swelled like a balloon. Ethella glanced at Arcane. Seeing his unchanged expression despite the increasingly dire situation, she felt a wave of anxiety.

“Canis! Stop and surrender!”

What was Harvest’s next state after swelling so massively? It might be annihilation, or it could be something far more terrible.

“Shut up! I’ll keep fighting!”

“You’ve been deceived by Arcane. Harvest isn’t your servant. In fact, you were his servant all along. Arcane was only using you.”

Canis didn’t respond, though he couldn’t deny the nagging feeling. Since being told that he would be given the ultimate magical creature created by the archmage, part of him had known. He simply lacked the courage to face reality.

Admitting the truth would leave him with nothing.

“I will win! I’m not afraid to die! I’ll never bow down to the likes of you!”

When he came to his senses, he was in Radum, the place called hell of the world. To Arcane, he was merely a disposable tool. To Harvest, the friend he once believed in, he was nothing but a fuel tank. Nothing else mattered anymore. Only a burning hatred for the world remained.

‘Canis...’

Arin covered her mouth, tears streaming down her face. Canis had always been that kind of person—someone who could only inflict suffering on himself for the sake of those he loved.

“Master! Please, save Canis! I beg you!”

She barely even thought of him as a master, yet she humbled herself, setting aside her pride to plead for Canis’ life. But Arcane only ordered Harvest with a cold gaze.

“End it here, Harvest.”

Harvest, saturated with energy, couldn’t respond. He was on the verge of exploding from the vibrations resonating through his body. And that was precisely the result Arcane desired.

Canis. Listen closely.

Harvey.

Arcane intends to blow me up. Everyone here will be caught in the explosion. That will be the end for both of us.

Arin released her mind control over the students and, sobbing uncontrollably, ran toward Arcane.

“Save Canis! If you don’t, I’ll never forgive you!”

“Arin!”

Canis spoke, struggling to his feet.

“What do you think you’re doing to Master? Stop it right now.”

“Canis! This man has...!”

“Yes, Master saved us. He helped us escape from Radum. That alone is enough. I will keep fighting until the end.”

Was Canis truly sincere in his words? It didn’t matter anymore. His anger was so intense that he felt almost relieved at the thought of his own death.

“Fine! We’ll all die together!”

Canis screamed toward the sky, hot tears streaming down his cheeks. His life had been filthy and miserable, but if that was his fate, he would face his last moments with all the rage he could muster.

“Graaaaaaah!”

As Harvest’s molecules began to boil, massive blisters formed across his body. By now, everyone understood what Arcane intended—to blow up the entire school.

“Shirone! Stop! Harvest is going to explode!”

Shirone, who had been pouring out energy in a trance, heard Ethella’s cry and urgently halted his output. But the detonative reaction within Harvest’s body had already begun. The contorted angles he took on signaled the inevitability of multiple explosions.

“Hahaha! Farewell! It must feel disgusting to die alongside trash like me! This is the end of everything!”

Canis. I’m sorry.

Canis’s expression froze.

I’m releasing our contract.

Harvest absorbed the last of his mental energy and severed the bond. Feeling the agonizing emptiness of a spirit being torn away, Canis fell to the ground in shock.

“Wh... why... Harvey...?”

Harvest ascended into the sky. How many seconds were left before he exploded? Three? Two? In the fleeting final

moments of his existence, memories seeped back in, resonating in vibrations within him. *Harvey. Harvey. Harvey.* He regretted that he would never hear that endlessly repeated name again.

‘Heh. Canis, that’s your problem. You always pretend to be so strong.’

Since he had never truly been alive, death didn’t frighten him. Only concern weighed on his mind. Through their mental link, he had felt Canis’ overwhelming sense of betrayal, so strongly it still reverberated in him, as if they were one and the same. But now, unable to say anything further, Harvest could only hope.

He hoped Canis wouldn’t be hurt too deeply.

At 2,000 meters above the ground—far beyond where his voice could reach—the twisted grin on his shadowy face stretched wide.

“It was still fun, wasn’t it, Canis?”

BOOOOM!

A colossal explosion shattered the world’s darkness.

Chapter 92: A Genius Who Lost His Light (1)

“Your name is Harvest.”

At Arcane’s words, the black orb trembled. As molecular bonds loosened, the dark substance began to smoke. The creature born from darkness spoke in a murky voice.

“I am Harvest.”

“I’ll be conducting several tests. For now, remain in the test tube.”

Arcane pointed to a glass tube three meters high. For a human, it would be uncomfortably cramped after only ten minutes, but for a magical lifeform, time had no meaning. That night, Canis and Arin snuck into the lab, their nervousness clear since they didn’t have Arcane’s permission. But that anxiety vanished the moment they saw Harvest.

A two-meter-tall humanoid shadow.

Its slender waist and broad, powerful shoulders left Canis in awe.

“This is... Master’s creation...”

The essence of magical biology perfected over 150 years by an archmage. Moreover, this magical being possessed intelligence inherited from Arcane’s memories.

Unlike Canis, Arin shivered as though she’d seen a monster.

“Ugh, this is so strange. I thought it’d look more human.”

“If a magical being didn’t look intimidating, who would be scared of it? To me, this form is incredible. It’s made for battle.”

“Well, it still feels strange...”

Canis didn’t mind. If Arin didn’t like it, that suited him just fine.

“Just wait, Harvest. I’ll be your master.”

Arcane had said that either Canis or Arin would be chosen as Harvest’s master. Arin was his dear friend, but there would be no holding back on this. Through fair competition, he would prove himself worthy.

“Canis, let’s leave now. Master might come.”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

Arin turned off the lights and followed Canis out. She glanced back with a start, feeling Harvest’s powerful, turbulent emotions vibrating in the air.

“Eek!”

Arin bolted from the room and avoided the lab afterward. However, she couldn’t ignore Harvest, trapped in that tube, remembering her own time locked away in the warehouse as a child.

When everyone was asleep, Arin summoned her courage and returned to the lab. Harvest remained confined in the glass tube, just as before.

“Is it stifling in there?”

When no response came, Arin examined the tube’s controls, searching for a switch.

“If it’s just for a bit, I could let you out.”

“Why do you think I feel stifled?”

Arin stepped back, startled by the eerie voice that seemed to evoke fear.

“You’ve been in there for a month already.”

“Only humans find confinement uncomfortable. I don’t perceive time. I could stay like this forever, and it wouldn’t matter.”

Arin tilted her head, skeptical. She could sense Harvest’s suppressed and frustrated energy.

“...But maybe you’re right, in a way.”

“Did something come to mind?”

“Perhaps you’d call it curiosity? The term feels inaccurate. I was created to learn from the moment I came into being, but now that’s impossible.”

“That’s exactly what I meant by ‘stifling.’”

Harvest fell silent, pondering. Was that really the case?

“How can you read my emotions?”

“Heh, it just turned out that way. I lived in Radum for a long time.”

“Radum. The slums of Baschka, capital of Tormia. Concealed poverty, volatile population shifts. Supposed haven for outcast races who’ve lost land on the continent.”

Even Arin, who grew up in Radum, was hearing this for the first time.

“Harvest, you know a lot.”

“What information do you have?”

“Are you... trying to have a conversation?”

“Indeed. Conversation is the only option since I have no master with whom to share my mind.”

Arin spent the entire night talking to Harvest. As a child who had spent most of her time alone, this was the first time she’d had such a long conversation with anyone.

Two months later, the experiments ended, and Harvest was finally released. Arcane opened the glass tube. Yet, Harvest remained motionless.

“Come out. You’ll resonate with Canis. However, you won’t be restricted. I’ll explain why in due time.”

Harvest remained silent. Surprised by the lack of response from a magical lifeform with superhuman calculation speeds, Arcane turned his head.

“What’s wrong? Do you object?”

“Why Canis?”

“Hmph. Are you against it? It’s odd that you’d have preferences without mind resonance.”

“Having inherited your memories, I understand why being bound to you holds no appeal. But Canis is stubborn and prideful. He won’t listen to my advice. That will be a liability in battle.”

“You’re not wrong about that.”

“Arin, however, is different. She lived in Radium for ten years, seeing no one but Canis. As a result, her mental receptivity is extraordinarily sensitive.”

“Are you referring to the initial sensitivity?”

This “initial sensitivity” was a unique brainwave pattern, a perception that seemed as though every object was being seen for the first time. Arin had grown up in isolation, which froze her brain development at that stage.

Thus, she couldn’t perceive objects as regular people did. But she could read the essence of things with absolute clarity. Though often inconvenient, this was an invaluable gift for a mental mage.

Arcane was aware that Arin’s talent was extraordinary, even compared to Canis.

“Arin is out of the question. Her heart is too tender.”

“I don’t understand. Her initial sensitivity compensates for all her other weaknesses. She could amplify my abilities to their fullest.”

Arcane gave a bitter smile.

They shared the same memories, yet they saw the world differently and came to different judgments.

“Maybe your point is more rational. But Arin is not an option. You’re going to Canis.”

“Kuhahaha!”

Harvest’s body quivered as he fell.

‘So that’s what it was, Arcane.’

Only in his final moments did he understand why Arcane, despite Arin’s great magic potential, had chosen Canis instead.

‘You were just as stubborn as I was.’

Harvest’s descent felt weightless. That made it feel even more pathetic.

“Harvest!”

Canis ran to Harvest. His body had shriveled like a sheet of thin paper, riddled with holes that made it unbearable to

look at.

“Why! Why did you do it! I didn’t care if I died! If it was going to end like this, why didn’t you betray me from the start! Why, Harvest!”

“Kuh... How would I know? You’re my master, aren’t you?”

Canis clamped his mouth shut as if realizing something.

“Magic lifeforms, you know, just do whatever their masters want.”

“Harvest...”

Canis lowered his head. The thought of living felt so unfair and agonizing that he’d rather die. Yet, at the same time, he wanted to live. Why wouldn’t he? That’s what it meant to be human. Harvest seemed to understand that; that was why he broke the bond of servitude and chose to self-destruct.

“I’m sorry, Harvest. I...”

Harvest didn’t mind. A magical creature only did what its master wanted. It was designed that way, so death wasn’t something shocking. What intrigued him more was Shirone’s combat power, which had subdued his and Canis’s combined attack.

‘Hmm. He uses strange magic. But it’s not just that we lost in magic.’

He was indeed a formidable opponent. He showed no hesitation in subduing his adversary. Still, it wasn’t out of an aggressive nature. Rather, his thoroughly calculated, result-oriented combat style resembled that of a magical creature. ‘His emotional recovery speed is extraordinarily fast. It must be a kind of superhuman insight. The time from problem to solution is so short that he appears unshaken.’

Having completed his analysis, Harvest cracked a grin. He was highly specialized in something, though what it was remained unknown. It was not a trait commonly found in nature.

‘Heh heh. Arcane, you’re in for some trouble.’

Arcane’s expression was dark. None of these people, neither this one nor that, acted according to his intentions.

Disgusted with the situation, he began to walk slowly, speaking.

“How pathetic, Canis. Even if you disgrace my face...”

“Shut up.”

Shirone interrupted him. The uncharacteristically harsh words made his friends’ eyes widen. Arcane, on the other hand, turned his head with interest. When something was utterly absurd, it didn’t even make him angry.

“Haha! What a spirited child. How about it? I have a proposal for you...”

“I said shut up. Can’t you hear me?”

This time, even Arcane’s face hardened.

“I’m already doing my best to hold back, so shut up. If you say one more word, I’ll crush you.”

Shirone’s body began to glow with a subtle red light—a laser. Its power had already been demonstrated. If it was enough to make the energy-absorbing Harvest explode from excess energy, it could even threaten an archmage.

But his friends, watching, felt their blood run cold. The opponent was an archmage who had ruled the world, and Shirone was nothing but a student. This kind of provocation was nothing short of a suicide attempt.

“What’s he thinking? Isn’t he going to get himself killed?”

“No. He’ll be fine.”

Nade and Iruki both turned to Ethella.

“Teacher, what do you mean? Shouldn’t we stop him right now?”

“It’s a tricky situation for Arcane. He’s at a disadvantage in compatibility. If Shirone’s magic just now was a type that concentrated energy, then in his current state, Arcane can’t defend against it. With a chance of being overpowered, he won’t act out of mere emotion. Shirone understands this.”

Nade looked back at Shirone. Even if that was true, Shirone was likely the only person bold enough to defy an archmage.

‘He’s so cunning.’

Arcane calmly acknowledged it.

"Fine. As you are now, you might be able to overpower me."

For a moment, silence enveloped the area. To hear those words from the archmage was nearly unbelievable. But it wasn't out of cowardice. Arcane even wore a relaxed smile.

"Red waves. It seems to work on the principle of particle vibration. It's truly the nemesis of dark magic. And I am indeed tired right now; it would be rather difficult to hold you back."

Arcane closely observed Shirone's reaction.

"How does it feel? Hearing that from an archmage."

"What's that supposed to mean? Didn't I tell you to stop talking?"

"Magic, isn't it fascinating?"

Shirone furrowed his brow, unsure what Arcane was getting at.

"Magic is like that. It's neither fair nor bound by rules of 'should' or 'must'. With no limits, it's impossible to predict. In the world of magic, a meteor-wielding mage who could destroy a city can be killed by a lowly mercenary mage. So, it wouldn't be strange if you were able to defeat me."

"So, what's your point? Are you saying you're ready to pay for your sins?"

"You could take it that way..."

Dark smoke began to rise from Arcane's body. The whites of his eyes showed, and his expression turned ghostly. A murderous intent, sharp as a blade, erupted and spread in all directions.

"I'm saying that you only know the result of a fight after you've done it."

Shirone, without realizing it, stepped back. It was pure fighting spirit, regardless of skill or level, a deathly aura that only someone who'd crossed countless lines of life and death could exude.

"No matter how favorable the match-up, if you can't win, it's useless. So, how about it? Want to face me?"

For the first time, Shirone's once-confident lips fell silent. To be honest, he didn't feel like fighting. Arcane's killing intent was that overwhelming.

'Now this is something else.'

Relentlessly exploiting a weakness, only to instantly switch tactics once it's gone—that is, no stubbornness whatsoever. His thoughts flowed like water, his vision open in every direction. Shirone began to understand, at least a bit, why Canis had lost.

Chapter 93: A Genius Who Lost His Light (2)

“That’s a wise decision. Ignoring the nine just because you’ve acquired one would be foolish. No matter the circumstances, you should never stop thinking. Everything in the world is determined by the amount of thought you put in. Combat is no exception.”

“Don’t fool yourself. I’ll never forgive you.”

“Ha! You even have spirit. Let me guess—you’re the type who grows through real combat. A school that teaches only rigid concepts doesn’t suit you. So, what do you think?

Come with me, and I’ll make you into the greatf,fst mage.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I respect the teachers here far more than a murderer like you.”

“Then tell me—what have you learned here? Photon Cannon? Red Wave? Or maybe some advice on the Immortal Function?”

Shirone’s eyes wavered slightly.

‘How do you...?’

Arcane burst into laughter. This was why he enjoyed being a teacher. Gathering naive students and filling their heads with whatever he wanted to say.

“It’s rare, isn’t it? The Immortal Function is an exceptional ability. But, boy, there are terrifying monsters in places you don’t know. If you find yourself among them, and truly immerse yourself...”

Arcane squinted with a sly smile.

“An Unlocker wouldn’t seem so rare either.”

Shirone swallowed dryly. How many life-and-death experiences would one need to say that being an Unlocker

isn't rare? The sheer depth of accumulated experience set him apart.

"I've met seven in a hundred years. Four were impressive; three, I killed. An Unlocker's trait is uniqueness. The possibilities of distortion are endless. But uniqueness, if undisciplined, perishes before greater stability."

The words were frustrating, yet undeniable. Uniqueness can be a variable that ignores objective strength but can also be a double-edged sword, helplessly vulnerable to straightforward power.

"A school that ignores individuality to teach everyone the same thing won't benefit you. You need to hone your talents to a razor's edge. I can help you do that."

"I didn't learn magic to defeat someone. Don't compare me to someone like you."

Arcane detected the conflict in Shirone's eyes. It was only natural; without a drive for achievement, he wouldn't have come this far.

"You may think everyone likes you now. But people are naturally drawn to greatness, not necessarily to you as a person. Do you think you can forever associate with such insincere people?"

Everyone around scowled at Arcane's insinuations, but Shirone just listened quietly.

"Grow stronger. Make it impossible for them to look down on you. If not, they'll trample over you. Do you think you can avoid confrontation with clever excuses when that day comes?"

Arcane held up three fingers.

"Three years. Within that time, I'll make you strong enough that no one on this continent will dare to ignore you. Do you think three years is too short? I don't. If you sharpen your unique talents, it's certainly achievable."

At least to Shirone, it didn't sound like nonsense. As an Unlocker, he had little to gain from staying in school and

missing an archmage's guidance. What would he gain?
Maybe just an easier job in the magic society?

"You may be right."

Iruki and Nade's faces turned grim.

"Shirone..."

It would be foolish to deny the truth. Unlockers held a unique position even within the magic society, and standard schooling had its limits in developing their abilities.

"You may be right. But even so, I won't go with you. The school isn't somewhere I go to fight; it's where my life belongs. My teachers, my friends, my sense of belonging—I don't believe you can offer me any of that."

Arcane's face hardened. He didn't know what tricks Alpheas used, but he couldn't help but be impressed by his brainwashing of the students.

"You're being deceived. Such things are unimportant when you face real life. If you weren't strong, you'd be just another face at school. Proving strength is all that life is about."

"If that's truly everything, then why are you doing this?"

"What?"

"Now that you've fought and become an archmage, what's left for you? Everyone despises you. Aren't you just lonely? You act out like this because it's the only way you know to prove yourself since no one else cares."

Arcane ground his teeth, his face flushed red.

"Ha! Loneliness is the fate of the strong. The weak band together. Look around. All are kneeling beneath me. I dominate them. This is loneliness."

"No. You're just a murderer that no one wants to care for."

At the word "murderer", a wild gleam appeared in Arcane's eyes.

"Ha! You could see it that way. But did you know? Even I once had a companion. But he led everyone around him to ruin. That person you respect so much—Alpheas."

Shirone refused to believe it. Ethella had told him they were enemies. The Alpheas he knew would never ruin others.

"Whatever happened in the past, I won't listen to you.

You're a murderer. And you're killing now, too."

"A murderer. Even if Alpheas... was a murderer like me?"

Shirone's eyes widened. This time, he couldn't help but be shocked.

"That's a lie. What do you know about Headmaster?"

"Haha! Of course, I know. He was my disciple."

"What... did you say?"

Shirone was left speechless. Alpheas had been a pioneer in the magic of light from a young age. How could someone who practiced dark magic claim to be his master?

Perhaps sensing the irony himself, Arcane gazed into the sky with a nostalgic expression. The events of that day were still vivid as if they'd happened yesterday. Suddenly, as if reminded of something, he stopped and looked back at Ethella.

"Has Alpheas married?"

"No. He's remained single, dedicating his life to teaching."

"I see."

For a moment, sorrow flashed in Arcane's eyes. After forty years of resentment toward Alpheas, there was still one thing he couldn't help but pity—Erina.

"You may not know, but Alpheas was once married."

Ethella tilted her head. As far as she knew, Alpheas had never married. Even if he had and later divorced, the union would still be documented in official records.

"But according to the records, Headmaster is unmarried."

"I suppose it was never recognized officially. But he was married. They lived together for three years. Her name was Erina. A remarkable woman. She shone brighter and was more beautiful than anyone."

"What happened between you two? Was it so terrible that you hold a grudge even after fifty years?"

“At the time, Alpheas was one of the rising stars, recognized for his Photon Theory. You can imagine his reputation, having received the Golden Circle Award from the emperor. He had secured a position in Yongrae magic division and settled down with a lady from the Bastard family. He had everything. But even he had a worry.”

Arcane tapped his head.

“His wife, Erina, had limited intelligence. She was like a ten-year-old child.”

“I see.”

“But Alpheas didn’t mind. He truly loved his wife. His love was neither sympathy nor pretense.”

Arcane’s memory drifted back over time. It was forty years ago when he ruled the world and Alpheas, a rising star, was hailed as a prodigy.

“The Gold Circle Award of the Year! Milch Alpheas!”

The grand hall resounded with fanfare. Alpheas shed tears of joy under a shower of colorful confetti raining from the ceiling. The Gold Circle Award, presented to the mage who made the greatest achievements of the year, guaranteed entry into Yongrae, along with support from numerous noble families.

“Congratulations, Alpheas. I knew you’d win for sure.”

“Look after us in the future, will you? You’re not going to forget your old classmates just because you’re moving up, are you?”

Mages crowded around Alpheas, hoping to get his attention before his status skyrocketed.

But there were also some less pleased. Sarof, who had been a close contender until the very end, wore a bitter expression.

“Hmph. He really climbed the ladder by marrying that simpleton. The Milch and Bastard union—how do you compete with that?”

“Indeed. The guy’s got cunning. But, hey, we have to accept the results, don’t we? Guess we’ll have to start being careful

around Alpheas.”

Sarof knew it as well. Staying on good terms with Alpheas was the safest move if they were going to remain in the magic society.

“What do you say, Sarof? If you meet him alone, it might just get awkward. Why not join us now and make amends?”

“No, I’m not in the mood. Go on without me.”

“Honestly, same here. We can handle this later. Besides, two’s better than one. How about we just go grab a drink instead?”

“I could use that. I don’t want to stay here any longer.”

With that, Sarof and his friends left the royal palace. Sarof had been a close runner-up for the Gold Circle Award, but no one paid attention to the defeated today.

Just then, Clump barged through the crowd around Alpheas, laughing boisterously, and dragged him out of the throng.

Alpheas thought he might catch his breath, but soon found his head locked in Clump’s arm, being shaken vigorously.

“Ha ha ha! You did it, my friend! Can’t believe it—my friend actually won the Gold Circle Award!”

“Ow! It hurts!”

Alpheas cried out, but Clump was far from finished congratulating him.

“Back when you were always showing off how smart you were, I thought I might smack you! But look at you, you genius! You really did it!”

Despite the dizzying pain, Alpheas didn’t resist. The Gold Circle. If he didn’t experience this kind of thrilling suffering now, when would he?

“Now, now! Let’s go drink until we can’t see straight! I already booked the bar; just bring your stomach and leave your brain behind.”

Alpheas, finally released from Clump’s hold, smiled sheepishly.

“Actually, I can’t go right away. I need to make a quick stop.”

“What? And who will we toast without the guest of honor?”

“I just want to stop by home. I want to put the medal on my wife.”

Clump couldn't argue with that. Alpheas had married Erina a year ago, but with both families opposing the match, they were barely managing in a small house in the commoners' district.

It had started with the Mirhi family. They couldn't accept that their well-educated son would marry a woman who was simple-minded.

In response, the Bastard family retaliated, insisting that while their daughter might be a bit different, they would not be humiliated as a family from the capital by a provincial house.

In the end, Alpheas and Erina could only hold an unofficial wedding with their friends in attendance.

“Of course, you have your lady to see. Why don't you bring her along instead?”

“No, thanks. What kind of wife would enjoy seeing her husband get sloppy drunk? I'll just pop by quickly.”

“You've got a sense of decency, I see. Then go on and get it done quickly.”

“I'll be right back. Head to the bar without me!”

With that, Alpheas darted out of the royal palace. He had spent countless nights and days engrossed in his research, leaving him physically drained, but tonight his excitement overshadowed any exhaustion.

‘I did it! I really did it!’

He'd won the most prestigious award in the kingdom. With this accomplishment, the Milch family would have no choice but to accept him back, allowing him to officially wed Erina.

“Honey, I'm home.”

Erina knew today was the day the award would be announced. At other houses, they might've prepared a surprise party, but Erina simply came out of the kitchen, looking as she did any other day.

“You’re back? Have you eaten?”

Chapter 94: A Genius Who Lost His Light (3)

Alpheas loved her just the way she was. Even with the mind of a ten-year-old, her thoughtfulness wasn't limited to that age. The way she'd considered how he might feel if he failed to win the award nearly brought him to tears.

"Darling, I..."

With trembling hands, Alpheas took out the golden medal.

"I did it! I won! It's the Gold Circle Award!"

Erina, usually calm and composed, couldn't help but be shaken. Her radiant eyes, capable of holding the entire world, sparkled. The day Alpheas had talked about endlessly had finally arrived.

"Congratulations. I knew you'd win."

"Erina, it's all thanks to you. You're the one who made this possible. Come here; let me put it on you."

To Alpheas, Erina was the true recipient of the Gold Circle Award. Of course, his steadfast friend Clump didn't understand; he thought it was amazing that Alpheas could interpret Erina's childlike words so deeply. But Alpheas knew. The small ideas from Erina's mind held the core that would shape humanity's future.

"This award is yours. Your ideas have amazed the world."

When Alpheas leaned in for a kiss, Erina, bashful as a new bride, pulled away.

"Let's eat first. Come on, hurry."

"Oh, sorry. Clump's throwing a party, so I should go over there. I'll eat later."

"Oh, I see."

This time, Erina couldn't quite hide her disappointment.

Alpheas, grinning playfully, lifted her up in his arms.

“Which means we need to save every possible minute.”

“Ah!”

Holding her tight, Alpheas bounded up the stairs to the second floor.

“Wait! The bread’s going to burn!”

“Let it burn! Otherwise, I’ll be the one who burns!”

After Alpheas received the award, dozens of invitations poured in daily. They were all from prestigious nobles and influential institutions. Associating with everyone would be as good as associating with no one, so he raised his value by selectively rejecting anyone who wasn’t essential for connections. His reputation spread quickly due to this strategy. As part of this approach, today Alpheas left his house to attend a banquet hosted by the Alchemy Foundation, an organization that managed 40% of magical material distribution—a gathering he couldn’t miss.

However, unaware of this, Sarof and his friends had been camped outside Alpheas’s house since before sunset. They were waiting anxiously for evening to come.

Sarof sighed and said, “Hah, it’s humiliating.”

“Is pride really the problem? Alpheas’s status has risen too high. He’s more than just a talented mage. We should have expected this.”

Sarof deeply regretted it. When Alpheas won the Gold Circle Award, he should have taken the chance to mingle with the crowd and settle any resentment. Only a month had passed since the award, but Alpheas’s fame had grown dizzyingly high, all thanks to his remarkable political skill. Now, as Alpheas had become more selective with people, Sarof’s chances to approach him had diminished even further.

‘Damn it. I tried not to bow, and now I might as well kneel. Why does nothing go my way?’

But he knew there was no answer to that question. At least he had friends with him, which somewhat eased his embarrassment.

“Let’s go in. I’ll do the talking.”

Sarof led the way and knocked on Alpheas's front door.

"Is Alpheas here? It's me, Sarof."

Unexpectedly, Erina answered the door.

"Who are you?"

"Oh, you're here. I'm not sure if you remember, but I'm Sarof, Alpheas's classmate. Is he home?"

"No. My husband is out. He went to the Alchemy Foundation."

Sarof already knew about the banquet at the Foundation. Since it wasn't a drinking event, he figured Alpheas wouldn't be out too long, so he replied courteously, "I see. Would it be alright if we wait inside? I'd rather avoid attracting attention from people outside..."

It was embarrassing enough to come all the way to his house, and lurking at the door would surely draw gossip.

"Please, come in."

Sarof and his friends sat in the living room, nervously wringing their hands. Erina, noticing their unease, invited them to the dining table and offered snacks and drinks.

"Please have something to eat. My husband will have already eaten when he returns."

"Thank you. You're very kind."

Sarof felt increasingly awkward and regretted not bringing a gift. He had one prepared, but when the time came to bring it, he couldn't stand the thought.

It wasn't that he lacked skill. Even though both Alpheas's and Erina's families had severed ties with him, Sarof believed their noble rank still influenced public opinion to some extent.

As he drank, he felt the alcohol hit him fast. At first, he held his composure, but after experiencing Erina's sophisticated presence, he found himself relaxing against his will.

"Listen here! I was once called a genius, you know. Me, the one and only me!"

"Who's to argue with that? Life's just unfair! People who work hard end up with nothing, while others get ahead by

pulling strings! Magic's already dead!"

One of his friends' words made Sarof raise an eyebrow. The one they were taking aim at was none other than Alpheas. But he let it go, figuring Erina wouldn't understand what they were talking about. Suddenly, the drink tasted sweet. For the first time, he felt as if he had beaten Alpheas. To openly criticize him in front of his wife like this—wasn't it a victory?

'Hmph, he's humiliated me so many times. This is nothing compared to that, nothing.'

Sarof went a step further and spoke directly to Erina.

"Don't you agree, sister? You see, magic isn't just about skill. Don't you think so, too?"

"Yes, I don't really know."

"Haha! Of course. You wouldn't. But trust me, it's true. Everything I say is true."

Sarof relished the satisfaction of his supposed victory. He had criticized Alpheas and mocked his wife. His friends, understanding his intent, joined in, drumming the table.

"Why don't you sing us a song, sister? The mood's right for it."

"Yes! Let's celebrate Alpheas's success with a song!"

Erina's smile faltered. People often thought that having a low intelligence meant being oblivious, but understanding others' feelings was always the burden of the vulnerable. Erina, too, knew that Sarof's group wasn't friendly. Yet, she put up with them, thinking they were her husband's friends.

"When the wheat in my hometown ripens..."

As Erina started singing, Sarof's group clapped and whistled. Even as her voice trembled, she sang on.

But she hadn't gotten past the third line when a cold voice came from the living room.

"What's going on here?"

Everyone turned. Alpheas stood there, fists clenched, his face red with anger. Sarof sobered up instantly. With his senses returned, he realized the gravity of his actions.

"I-I'm sorry. We drank too much, and it got out of hand."

"You jerk!"

Alpheas strode forward and punched Sarof squarely in the face, knocking him to the floor. His friends sprang up, shouting.

"Alpheas! How could you be so rough, no matter how upset you are...!"

"No, enough. Let's go."

Sarof raised a hand, stopping his friends. He felt humiliated. Had he really stooped so low, to the point of taunting his rival's wife for comfort?

"Get out. Get out of this house before I kill you."

"I'm sorry for today. We won't come again."

Sarof and his friends were thrown out of Alpheas's house. Silence filled the now-empty living room. Alpheas struggled to contain his rage, knowing full well why they'd made Erina sing.

"What happened? Why were those people here?"

Erina was frightened, unable to respond. She had never seen her husband this angry.

"Answer me! Why did you let those jerks in?"

"I'm sorry. They were your friends, so I thought you'd be happy..."

"What are you talking about? Those guys aren't my friends! Can't you even tell the difference? And you were just singing away? Are you really that much of an idiot?"

Alpheas turned roughly. He lowered his head, a look of regret on his face. He'd uttered words he'd sworn never to say, words he'd promised himself he'd never use.

'What a piece of trash. I'm not even human.'

He wished he could turn back time, but it was already too late. And even if he could rewind, he feared he might have said the same things again. He was so furious he felt like he was losing his mind.

"Forget what I said. I made a mistake."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Her apology hurt him even more. She had nothing to apologize for. But then, where was he supposed to release all this pent-up rage?

"I'm going out to get some air. I'll be fine after a while. Sorry. Go ahead and sleep."

Alpheas left the house. It was the only way to handle things rationally.

He found Clump at a nearby inn and drank with him all night. But he couldn't get drunk. As he drank, Sarof faded from his mind, but the thought of Erina's hurt remained.

"Damn it. I'm trash. I'm not fit to be a husband. She's followed me, trusted me, and I... I said such things."

Clump looked at him sympathetically. As a man himself, he understood Alpheas's anger. But he still knew Alpheas had made a mistake.

"They say marriage fights are like trying to cut water with a knife. You have a bright future ahead, and the bad times are behind you. Maybe this will bring you closer."

When Alpheas didn't respond, Clump mentioned something he'd been thinking for a while.

"So why not have a child? This might be a good time."

For a moment, Alpheas's eyes brightened. But then he shook his head with a bleak look.

Clump's eyes widened, as if realizing something.

"What, don't tell me... Have you... not yet...?"

"What nonsense? We're married. Even if Erina's a bit naive, she knows all she needs to know."

"Tsk, no one said anything. I was just saying maybe you're the problem. All scrawny and weak. Hahaha."

Alpheas, in no mood for humor, looked down into his drink and gulped it bitterly.

Clump sighed. "So, what's the issue? Just have a kid and live happily ever after."

"Erina... I don't know if she can have a child."

"Why? Is she unwell?"

“No. It’s just... childbirth is horrible pain. I don’t know if she could handle it. And then there’s raising the child...”

Clump considered this and sighed. It was true that a woman with the mind of a ten-year-old might not withstand childbirth. Intelligence is an immense force. There’s a world of difference between an idiot and a genius. To love a woman who barely understood the concept of pregnancy or its hardships took boundless patience.

And even with his extraordinary genius, Alpheas was starting to reach his limits.

“Alpheas, I know it’s hard to say, but you’ve been aware of this since you started considering marriage, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t regret it. No, I really don’t regret it. I can’t live without Erina. Without her, no glory would mean anything.”

Clump downed two drinks in quick succession. If he was feeling frustrated, how much worse must it be for Alpheas himself?

“So what are you going to do about it? Sitting here complaining isn’t like you. Why is a smart guy like you acting this way?”

Alpheas twirled his glass around, lost in thought. Then, at some point, his eyes, resisting the effects of the alcohol, shone with clarity.

Chapter 95: A Genius Who Lost His Light (4)

Arcane knew that someone had broken into his dungeon the night before. However, he wasn't concerned; countless people had ventured into the Archmage's dungeon, lured by the promise of treasure. By now, the intruder would likely have fallen victim to monsters or traps, turning into yet another corpse.

Arcane dismissed the thought and refocused on his research. Lately, he'd been delving into the effects of dark magic on memory. His hand, furiously scribbling down notes for his paper, suddenly halted. He took off his glasses and looked toward the door. The dungeon's security mechanisms were being dismantled rapidly. This wasn't just any ordinary intruder.

"Has a worthy prey come my way after such a long time?" For Arcane, who would sometimes seclude himself for years at a time, dungeon intruders were a rare source of entertainment. Today, it seemed, he had a rather interesting human in his trap.

The iron door crashed open, and Arcane checked his clock. Precisely 32 hours, 28 minutes, and 5 seconds. That was how long it had taken to disable the mechanisms and reach this point from the dungeon's entrance.

"Are you the Archmage... Viltor Arcane?"

The man before him was covered in blood. Handsome, with eyes gleaming with intelligence.

"You don't look like someone who's after money. Who are you?"

"My name is Milch Alpheas. I had no other way to meet you, so I came here directly."

“Oh?”

Arcane’s eyebrows rose. Just because he hid away in a dungeon didn’t mean he ignored the outside world. Through discreet channels, he had already heard of Alpheas’s photon theory.

“A mage of light seeking a mage of darkness—it’s an unusual affair. Take a seat. I’ll treat your wounds.”

Arcane activated a life-support device. Alpheas stepped into the hemispherical machine filled with a green liquid, and as he was submerged, he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Three hours later.

“Gasp! Ahh!”

Alpheas raised his upper body above the liquid, barely avoiding suffocation. But how had he even managed to fall asleep? Turning his head in confusion, he saw Arcane, seated at his desk, intently working on his research. Despite being a notorious archmage who had once thrown the continent into chaos, he seemed almost scholarly.

“Thank you for the treatment. It’s a remarkable device. I’m curious about its principles.”

“No need for small talk. It doesn’t change the fact that you’re an uninvited guest. Tell me why you came to see me.”

If someone moved with the curiosity and drive Alpheas had shown, there was no need to delay. Alpheas got straight to the point.

“I want to learn dark magic. Please accept me as your apprentice.”

“Oh?”

Alpheas was currently one of the most talked-about figures, so even the great Arcane couldn’t help but feel intrigued.

“Do you have a specific reason?”

“I have a wife, but she lacks mental acuity. I’ve heard rumors that you’re studying the transfer of memories through dark magic, and I want to give her my own memories.”

Arcane's eyes gleamed. Given that both of them were experts in their respective fields, there was no need for lengthy explanations.

"I have done extensive research on memory manipulation. But what you're asking is on a whole other level. There's the issue of personality, not to mention the task of transferring an entire person's life memories."

"I believe it's possible. If we combine the absorptive properties of dark magic with the information-transmitting abilities of photons, couldn't we create an artificial intellect?"

"Hmm, constructing a neural network with photon magic and implanting memories into it?"

It was certainly a novel idea. So far, photon magic had been as limited as time magic, but with the recent revelation of the photon theory, Arcane anticipated its prominence in the information sciences.

"Before examining the theory, I have one question. Did your wife consent to this experiment?"

"She doesn't know yet. But she will agree."

"Seems like there's a story behind this."

Alpheas recounted the circumstances that had led him here. Arcane listened and empathized with him. Alpheas's proposal was undeniably ingenious. The two of them spent the entire day examining the possibilities. They ultimately agreed on a theoretical foundation, and Arcane accepted that this wasn't a mere fantasy.

"Alright. If you're truly prepared to stake your life on this, I'll take you as my apprentice. But convincing your family won't be easy."

Becoming the archmage's apprentice would be a prestigious opportunity, but Alpheas also hailed from a noble family with a secure position waiting for him in the prestigious Magic Division of Yongroe. It seemed unlikely that he would forsake such a future for a life in Arcane's dark, obscure research chamber.

However, Alpheas had no intention of choosing another path. If Erina were unhappy, he would be unhappy. His sole desire was Erina's happiness.

"Thank you. I'll return with my family soon."

Back home, Alpheas consulted with Erina. As it was a life-altering decision, Clump was also present. Alpheas emphasized the potential to improve Erina's cognitive future. But as soon as he finished speaking, Clump objected.

"Alpheas, what are you talking about? Why would you go to someone like him? That man's a criminal!"

"Things like that don't matter to a mage. What really matters is that he understands dark magic better than anyone on the continent. He's also an expert on human memory and brain structure. It won't be a wasted effort."

"No, it is a waste. You're under some kind of spell.

Implanting memories in a human brain? That's impossible!"

"Clump, the reason you think that way is..."

"Yeah! I'm stupid! I'm not smart like you, not a genius! But even someone like me knows one thing. You're throwing away a golden opportunity right now. If you keep associating with that kind of person, you won't be able to join Yongroe. And what about the family? Your family will surely disown you!"

Of course, Alpheas already knew that. But he had thought about it countless times and came to his own conclusion.

"I don't care. None of that will dictate my life. Yongroe, family—they don't matter. As long as Erina can be happy, I'll be even happier than I am now."

Erina hesitated, but her decision was essentially made with Alpheas' last words. If her husband was happy, then she could be happy too.

"Dear, I'll do it."

"Erina! This is something that needs more thought!"

"I'm going to do it. Because I believe in my husband. Alpheas will make me happy."

“Of course! Who am I? A mage who holds a Gold Circle. And my teacher is an archmage. Once we join forces, fixing any flaw you have will be easy.”

Clump tried day after day to dissuade Alpheas, but he couldn't sway the couple's determination. In the end, Alpheas liquidated his assets and entered Arcane's dungeon with Erina.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Viltor Arcane.”

“Hello. My husband has relied on your kindness.”

Erina greeted him courteously. Since he was now her husband's teacher, she couldn't afford to act carelessly. But Arcane brushed it off, as though such formalities didn't matter to him.

“Don't worry too much. I've spent decades immersed in this field. You've made a significant decision. If we succeed, we could help countless people suffering from mental illnesses. Your husband, too, will gain a fame incomparable to anything he could achieve at Yongroe.”

Becoming the apprentice of an archmage. If, on top of that, her husband could reclaim everything he'd given up as a reward for success, Erina thought it was worth trying.

For two years after that, Alpheas resided in the dungeon, conducting research on transferring memories to his wife. With the facilities and expertise to run a private dungeon, Arcane was a master of experimentation. Under his rational care, Erina could spend her time in the dungeon without too much discomfort.

“Hello, Erina. How have you been?”

Once a week, Clump came with food. After all, he couldn't let Erina, even if she was alright with it, eat tasteless dungeon food.

“I'm alright. They said the experiment will be over soon. Then my husband will be able to go out into the world again.”

Clump laughed heartily. She'd endured the past two years, full of various tests, remarkably well. And he felt a twinge of

sadness. What did it matter if she was less intelligent? Her heart, sacrificing so much for her husband, was in no way inferior.

Hearing Clump's arrival, Alpheas appeared in the room. Just as Erina had said, his face looked even more gaunt every time Clump visited, likely from the pressure of pushing toward the experiment's completion.

"You're here? Thanks for coming every time."

"How's the experiment? Any progress?"

"It's nearly complete. We successfully completed the clinical trial too. By next month, Erina will be free from the scornful looks forever."

"Next month? That soon?"

"What are you talking about? It's been two whole years. My master and I have been pulling all-nighters to get to this point. Anyway, you'll have to come on that day too. And bring plenty of drinks instead of food."

A month felt like an eternity for everyone.

But eventually, time passed, and the long-awaited day arrived.

Erina lay on the bed, waiting. Arcane and Alpheas were busy inspecting the machinery, so Clump sat beside her, trying to ease her nerves with conversation.

"Erina, how are you feeling? After today, you'll have Alpheas' memories. Even the memory of wetting the bed as a child. Maybe he even looked at another woman—try to remember that carefully. Haha!"

Erina laughed at Clump's joke. Though she couldn't entirely suppress her nerves, the atmosphere was light-hearted. It felt like everything would go smoothly; the experiment equipment had also been given the all-clear.

"Alright, Erina, let's begin."

Alpheas lay next to Erina, gently stroking her hair. She was the person he loved most in the world, the one he was willing to share his memories with. Embarrassing memories, even shameful ones—none of it mattered with her.

“Thank you, dear.”

“What are you talking about? I should be thanking you. You really held on well. Let’s live happily together. Let’s have kids too.”

He worried that his smile might seem awkward. Truthfully, he was so nervous he felt close to fainting. Arcane approached, attaching the apparatus to both their heads. It was an experiment integrating all knowledge across fields—magic engineering, magical biology, alchemy, photonics, human biology, and more.

“We’re starting. Relax. It’ll be over before you know it.”

As Arcane prepared to activate the device, Clump walked to a corner, anxiously wringing his hands. With a click, the apparatus descended, its mechanisms whirring as countless components hummed to life and the crystal emitted a dazzling array of colors.

Alpheas accepted the dark magic infiltrating his mind without resistance.

The core principle was simple. The apparatus would absorb Alpheas’ memories through dark magic, and then project them via Photon Output, overlaying them onto Erina’s memories.

“Ah!”

Erina’s eyes shot open. As the massive influx of information poured in, sparks seemed to fly from her eyes. Every moment of Alpheas’ life, from his earliest memory to their last conversation, flashed through her at the speed of light. Erina’s smile softened. She felt truly united with Alpheas. The excitement of their first meeting, the anticipation of their marriage, the happiness of their honeymoon. His pure love, unmarred by any prejudice, was passed on to her, just as he had felt it.

‘Dear, thank you. And I love you.’

Erina closed her eyes. She had no regrets. She had been born into this world to receive more love than she could have ever hoped for.

Meeting Alpheas had been her good fortune.

As the lights faded, the experiment concluded. Arcane checked the display. Memory transmission rate: 100 percent. All memories had been perfectly transferred.

“Dear! Dear!”

Alpheas turned to Erina. Her face was pale, and beads of cold sweat covered her skin.

Chapter 96: A Genius Who Lost His Light (5)

“Master! How did it go? Did the experiment succeed?”

“Yes, it succeeded! Our magic was a success!”

But Alpheas couldn't feel any joy. No matter how he looked, Erina's condition seemed abnormal.

“But why is my wife like this? Dear! Please, wake up!”

Arcane checked the gauge again and was shocked. While each metric was balanced, her overall bodily rhythm was rapidly declining. It was as if her very life force was fading away.

“How... how can this be? It didn't turn out like this in the clinical trial.”

“Dear! Erina! Open your eyes, please!”

Erina opened her eyes halfway, giving him a faint smile.

“Dear... I'm alright.”

“Erina! What's going on? Why is this happening? Where does it hurt?”

“There's a rejection response starting from the peripheral nerves. There must be some difference in the human brain. But you accomplished something truly amazing. With a little more research... Ah!”

Erina took a sharp breath and convulsed.

“Don't talk! I'll find a way! No matter what it takes, I'll save you...!”

Alpheas cursed his own intellect for realizing it was already too late. Yet he couldn't help but say those words.

Erina slowly shook her head. What he knew, she understood as well.

“Dear... hold my hand.”

Alpheas gripped her hand tightly. If there had been even a 1% chance, he would have tried. But now, staying by her side was all he could do.

“Erina, this can’t be happening. How could this happen...?”

Erina gave him a sad smile.

“Dear, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? What could you possibly be sorry for?”

“For being stupid.”

Alpheas’ heart was torn apart. Trying to change his wife—how could he have forgotten her words, that just existing was beautiful?

“No... why are you apologizing? What are you sorry for? I’m the stupid one! I was the fool!”

“I’m so glad to have met you.”

For the first time, Erina could truly understand her husband. A brilliant world governed by logic—that was the place he had lived. She felt grateful to share even a fleeting moment in that world with him and to carry his memories as she left.

“Dear! Please, open your eyes! Please... I was wrong, dear!”

As Erina’s eyes closed, Alpheas hugged her face and cried.

“Noooooooo! Dear! Dear!”

Arcane lowered his head with a heavy expression. What made the human brain different from an animal’s? Had they performed human testing from the start, this tragedy might have been avoided.

But it was a meaningless thought. Erina had placed only one condition on testing herself: the experiment could never be conducted on anyone else.

And so, they had put every ounce of effort into it. The data they had gathered would serve humanity in invaluable ways.

‘I’m sorry. Your sacrifice will not be in vain.’

A dull thud echoed. When Arcane turned, he saw Alpheas banging his head against the wall.

“Ahhh!”

Each time his forehead hit, a cracking sound resonated. It was unclear whether it was the wall or his head breaking. "What a joke! The light of the Milch family? Light? Light my ass!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

After repeatedly slamming his head, Alpheas' body bounced back like a rubber ball. But he didn't stop. The horror of being the one left alive while his wife had died tore at him from within.

"Arrogant Alpheas!"

He charged at the wall once more.

Bang!

Clump grabbed hold of Alpheas. If left like this, he would undoubtedly die.

"Alpheas! Get a hold of yourself! What do you think you're doing?"

"Let go! Damn it! Aaaah!"

Even with Clump's strength, restraining Alpheas was no easy feat. It was as if he were burning his soul, racing toward death. But finally, as shock set in, his pupils rolled back, and he started losing consciousness.

"Erina... Erina..."

Even in his fainted state, Alpheas called his wife's name, and Clump shed tears as he watched.

Erina's funeral was held. Only members of her family gathered, and Alpheas was prevented by relatives from attending. They hadn't even held a wedding, and there was no offspring. In the end, they parted as strangers.

Alpheas sat outside the funeral hall, lost in thought. Then, as the sun set, he rose like a man out of his mind and walked somewhere.

He arrived at Arcane's dungeon. The equipment they had used for countless experiments over two years remained untouched.

"Erina..."

Alpheas picked up a can of oil and poured it throughout the laboratory. As oil splashed around, tears also streamed down his face. The moments of laughter and conversation with her felt as fresh as if they'd happened just yesterday. Once the oil can was empty, he sat down, leaning against the wall. This knowledge should never have existed. How could a human being perform such cruel experiments?

"You're here, Alpheas?"

Arcane entered the lab. He knew that Alpheas hadn't even been invited to the funeral. This place had, in a sense, become his wife's grave.

"I'm sorry about Erina. Take care of yourself for a while. Then, come back and—"

Arcane trailed off, noticing something and turned his head. The smell of oil was too strong to have merely leaked from a machine.

"Alpheas... don't tell me..."

Alpheas stood up, his expression dark. A single fire spell would send the entire lab up in flames.

"No! What are you doing?"

"Master, this was wrong from the beginning."

"I understand you're shaken by your wife's death! But no! The experiment was almost a success! Don't forget Erina's wishes! Destroying this place is an insult to her sacrifice!"

"It doesn't matter. Without my wife... there's nothing left."

"Even so, you can't! This doesn't belong to just you and Erina. It holds the knowledge of my life as well! These records cannot be destroyed without my permission."

Alpheas cast a fire spell. Arcane tried to absorb it with dark magic, but he couldn't stop the temperature from reaching the ignition point.

Flames filled the room.

Thousands of pages of documents, precision magic devices, and unstable alchemical materials began to transform in the heat.

Alpheas, who was watching the flames indifferently, turned and left the dungeon.

But Arcane couldn't leave. He had to put out the fire. No, even if he lost everything, he had to save the experimental data.

"No, no!"

Arcane moved through the fire, desperately gathering documents. Then a box containing volatile materials caught fire and exploded.

The lab was obliterated, and the blast was powerful enough to shake the entire underground dungeon.

The flames roared, rushing down the tunnels like a beast.

"Ahhh! Alpheas! I won't forgive you, Alpheas!"

Arcane clenched his teeth in rage. Losing the data just before completing his life's work felt worse than death.

"I will... I will survive, no matter what. And I will have my revenge. Wait for me, Alpheas!"

Even as he burned, Arcane's hatred for Alpheas grew. The arrogant Alpheas had remained arrogant to the very end.

Fueled by vengeance, Arcane survived, building his strength and using every connection he had to scour the continent.

Yet no one knew where Alpheas had gone.

Alpheas reappeared seven years later.

It was at the main residence of the Ogent family in Creas.

"Alpheas! Hey, you! What happened to you?"

Clump stared, astonished at the completely changed Alpheas. The once clean-shaven face was now overgrown like that of a madman, his clothes tattered, his skin sunburned and darkened.

Clump took Alpheas to the bathroom and washed him himself. Scars covered Alpheas' body. As a swordsman, Clump could distinguish their sources: some from wild animals, some from torture, and others were clearly self-inflicted.

"Did you go looking for a place to die?"

Alpheas, his face covered by his wet hair, didn't respond. Only after a long silence did he finally speak.

"I didn't intend to die. Nor did I intend to live. I just wandered aimlessly."

"I see..."

"I heard you became an official examiner. Congratulations."

"Forget it. Out of our peers, I was the last to make it."

Clump answered sheepishly. The achievement didn't feel worthy of pride, knowing his friend had gone through hell in the wilderness.

"I'm sorry. I had nowhere else to go. Let me stay for a while."

Clump gazed at Alpheas' withered, bony back with a heavy heart.

How did it come to this?

Once a prodigy of the magic society, he was now expelled from his family, a beggar with no noble acquaintances.

After the bath, Clump instructed the maids to prepare a meal. But Alpheas, with a shrunken stomach, could barely eat.

Clump knew that it wasn't just because he had nowhere to go that he'd come here.

Bringing Alpheas into the study, Clump poured him a drink. Alpheas didn't even glance at it, though, and for a moment, a flicker of the sharp intelligence he'd had seven years ago returned.

"Tell me. If you're here, your wandering must be over. You have to start over somehow. I'll help if I can."

Alpheas spoke directly.

"Lend me one hundred million gold."

"One hundred million... gold?"

It was a staggering sum.

Of course, passing the certification exam had qualified Clump to succeed his family. But even as the head, he'd be limited in the funds he could provide.

"I don't expect you to lend it all at once. I'll withdraw it over four years. Hire a financial manager. With a monthly limit of 7 million, you can manage it without a big hit. I'll pay interest too, but not compound. Instead, I'll set an annual rate of 20%. I'll start paying the headmaster after a year." Normally, the lender would decide the repayment terms, but Clump didn't mind. He knew Alpheas would have planned out the optimal terms long before coming.

Clump was more curious about how he intended to raise a profit of 80 million gold, excluding the headmaster, in four years.

"What's your plan? Did you come up with a new magic?" Alpheas shook his head.

"I no longer have any passion."

"Then what are you going to do with one hundred million gold?"

"I'm going to build a school."

"A school?"

Clump's eyes widened. Alpheas, who had always believed himself superior to everyone, wanted to teach?

"What are you...?"

When Clump saw the tears streaming down Alpheas' face, he couldn't finish his sentence.

"Never again... should someone like me exist. I'll teach students while atoning until the day I die. I'll devote myself to ensure that talent is never destroyed by a single mistake. I'll live off my suffering."

Alpheas covered his face with both hands and sobbed. Even then, he couldn't hold back the tears.

Clump's eyes grew red.

Erina Bastard. Perhaps Alpheas would never forget her.

Maybe he would carry this pain for the rest of his life.

But that made the decision easier.

If the pain Alpheas bore could become someone's growth, if that transformation were real, then perhaps one day, his

friend, who once dreamed of happiness over success, might find himself smiling again.

“I’ll lend it to you. One hundred million gold.”

Alpheas founded a school bearing his name in the city of Creas. During construction, he worked as a mage to repay the interest and studied at night to earn his teaching certification.

And four years later.

Headmaster Milch Alpheas of the Alpheas Magic Academy paid back 180 million gold to the Ogent family.

As the effects of Abyss Nova faded completely, Alpheas slowly opened his eyes. All his memories had returned, but he stayed silent for a long time. Those forty years, replayed over and over, had been so unbearably long and heavy.

Chapter 97: A Genius Who Lost His Light (6)

“Master...”

Saad hesitated to speak further. Was Alpheas truly the same as before? People cling to hope because they cannot see the future. But for Alpheas, his memories held no hope. Any trace of happiness was buried under relentless, torturous suffering.

Alpheas closed his eyes again. A single tear slipped down his cheek.

“Master, are you alright?”

“Thank you, Thadd.”

The gentle tone in Alpheas’s voice allowed Thadd to breathe a sigh of relief, if only briefly.

“You’re really alright, aren’t you?”

“Of course. I apologize for my harsh words to you. But that was... the old me.”

“No, no. I’m the one who should be sorry. I... I was afraid that something terrible might happen to you. So, in some ways, I wished you would have stayed as you were...”

Alpheas patted Thadd on the shoulder.

“That was a judgment in line with your nature. Perhaps it would have been better.”

“Master, then...”

A fresh wave of worry crossed Thadd’s face. Maybe he should have stuck with his original plan after all; it might have been Alpheas’s one and only chance for escape.

“Yes, they’re memories I’d rather never recall. And yet...”

Alpheas’s gaze drifted to the portrait of Erina. A soft smile appeared as he remembered meeting her for the first time

at the ballroom, and the moment he had confessed his love to her.

“No matter how painful life may be, there are times we live just to protect a single moment.”

“I see.”

Thadd finally felt at ease. Alpheas was the same Alpheas he had always known.

The woman, Erina, who had shaken his life to its very core, now lived in his heart as a memory laden with pain—but one he could never forsake.

“Master, Arcane is the one responsible for all this. Currently, Teacher Ethella is—”

“I sensed it from the moment the incident happened. This isn’t the time for explanations. Let’s go.”

Alpheas moved toward the door, with Saad following closely behind. The initial crisis had passed, but the true problem lay ahead. The entire student body was now caught in Arcane's trap.

“I just hope... we aren’t too late.”

To Infinity (1)

Upon learning about Alpheas’s past, Shirone and his companions fell silent. It was a profoundly shocking revelation—a heartbreaking story of love.

“For something like that to happen to the Headmaster...”

A certified 4th-class mage and headmaster of a prestigious school, Alpheas seemed like a model of success. But from Arcane’s account, young Alpheas had truly been remarkable: a Gold Circle recipient who proved the Photon Theory at a young age. Particularly notable was his memory transfer experiment—a progressive idea that the magic society was only beginning to research.

“Yes, Alpheas was a genius. But he was weak. If he’d just endured a little longer, the world would have changed. But he destroyed everything for a trivial attachment. I can never forgive him for that.”

Shirone was deep in thought. Arcane was, by the world's standards, a villain, but he was also a mage. In Erina's experiment, he was a skilled collaborator, at the very least. "True. Perhaps the Headmaster was a hypocrite for destroying your research."

Arcane's hostility had waned, allowing Shirone to approach him a bit closer.

"But even so, I would have made the same choice."

"You still say that after seeing Alpheas's state? I suppose a certified 4th-class might seem impressive to you. But no one can reach the top while being swayed by emotions. Erina's death was unfortunate, but magic is magic. Alpheas simply didn't have the qualifications."

Shirone shook his head. History might be the one to judge right and wrong, but Alpheas hadn't been swayed by emotions, or at least that's what he believed.

"If the experiments had continued, there would have been many more victims. You would have resorted to human experimentation without hesitation."

"I don't deny it. But with the sacrifice of a few, many could be saved. Pain is inevitable; isn't it the duty of intelligence to save more, even at the cost of sacrifice? Suppose you saw parents with a mentally disabled child before you. Could you still make that claim?"

"I could."

Arcane's brow furrowed in irritation, but Shirone wasn't being stubborn for its own sake.

"If sacrificing one person could save ten thousand, then, yes, it would be rational. But even so, I wouldn't sacrifice that one."

"Then those ten thousand would die."

"It can't be helped."

Shirone spoke with unwavering resolve.

"Perhaps ten thousand might die. But even in such a situation, it's not within the realm of human control to meddle. The very act of weighing human lives is arrogant."

Even if more people have to suffer, we should do what we can. One day, we might reach a point where we can save those ten thousand. What you're trying to do isn't different from a dictator attempting to rule over humanity."

Arcane realized that Shirone stood in direct opposition to him. To be unable to sacrifice a few for the sake of the many? Some might call that virtue, but in reality, few people would accept it if such a situation arose. People, existing between good and evil, are driven by self-interest. But Shirone was at the farthest edge of virtue. Both cruel murderers and saviors of humanity step beyond human norms. Both are equally reviled by the public.

'Your life won't be smooth, either. Dying here might be a blessing for you.'

Mages choose between good and evil based on reason. Arcane, who believed in the efficiency of evil to advance humanity, saw Shirone as a future threat that had to be nipped in the bud.

"We are irreconcilable. It's unfortunate, but you must die."

Shirone recoiled. A moment ago, Arcane had seemed exhausted, but now he radiated the true power of an archmage.

"Surprised, child? Magic is a mysterious thing."

According to the Magic Association's research, the mental strain on a mage casting pure magic is equivalent to the focus an ordinary person would need to maintain for 48 minutes on a single task.

But Arcane disregarded such arithmetic, summoning power in an instant.

"Let's end this. It will be painless."

Shadows surged from Arcane's body, spreading a black veil across the sky. Its massive size astonished everyone present, dwarfing the scale of Canis's display of dark powers.

Arcane raised his right hand, and the veil condensed into the shape of a fist. Shirone could only marvel. Judging by its

size, if that fist fell, it would obliterate half of the basin.

‘It’s unstoppable. And there’s no way to dodge it.’

In measurable terms, the Power of Darkness exerts roughly 0.1 N per cubic centimeter (1 cm by 1 cm by 1 cm)—slightly stronger than an ant’s mandible. But when it surpasses the billions, it becomes a tremendous force capable of sweeping away everything on the surface with thousands of tons of pressure.

“Stop this display, Master.”

All eyes turned to the cliff. Alpheas stood with his hands behind his back. A piercing sound accompanied a beam of light as Thadd landed beside him.

“Teacher Thadd!”

Shirone and his companions brightened. The arrival of Alpheas and Thadd felt like the arrival of a powerful army. Thadd looked up at Arcane’s dark powers and cast Fire Sun. A stream of flames spiraled upward in a double helix, gathering into a massive ball of fire.

“Wow...”

The intense white light turned the surroundings pale, making it hard to keep their eyes open. But Arcane negated the blinding light with dark magic and stared intently.

“Hmph.”

As he raised his hand toward Fire Sun, the dark power in the sky mirrored his gesture, engulfing the massive fireball.

Hissssss!

Shirone shuddered. He had never heard such an immense sound of something burning. As darkness once again settled, Thadd frowned, transforming his Spirit Zone into an attack mode.

“Damn, you irritating old man...!”

Alpheas raised his hand to stop him.

“Let it go, Thadd.”

“But, Master...”

“This is my problem. It’s between Arcane and me. Leave it to me from here.”

Alpheas strode forward calmly, and Arcane dispelled the Fire Sun and reshaped his dark power into a veil over the sky.

"You've aged, Alpheas. After all, even a Time Mage is but a mere human before the passage of time."

Alpheas ignored Arcane's greeting after 40 years. At least for now, it wasn't the time for two foolish old men to settle past scores. He scanned the hundreds of students, the injured Iruki and Nade, and finally, Shirone, before his gaze fell on Ethella, bruises marring her fair skin, evidence of her clash with Arcane.

"You've done well, Ethella. My lack of virtue has caused this. All I can do is apologize."

"No, I am sorry. I failed to protect the students."

Alpheas shook his head. With her mastery of magic, martial arts, and spiritual technique, he had been baffled when she applied for the teaching position. But today, he couldn't have been prouder of his decision to hire her. Without her, the students would not have been as safe as they were now.

"Headmaster, please be careful," Shirone said with a worried look. If Arcane had been weakened, Alpheas, a certified 4th-class mage, would stand a chance. But now Arcane was undoubtedly at his peak.

Alpheas smiled knowingly.

"Don't worry. There's no magic that defies the principle of equivalent exchange."

"But surely Arcane's mental strength..."

"Yes, it must be restored. But that, too, is magic."

"Magic?"

"The Abyss-type magic controls memories. It's a spell Arcane created and wields best. Isn't that right, Master?" Arcane snorted.

"Not senile yet, I see. For reference, the magic used on you is the Abyss Nova, a far more advanced spell. I don't need to explain its effects—you've experienced them firsthand."

"A remarkable spell. It was nice to recall old memories."

“Don’t try to act tough. You must have run away trembling, probably even sobbing.”

“You’re exactly right. But it seems you’ve weakened since I last saw you, Master, to the point where you had to use Abyss Memory against children a hundred years your junior.”

Arcane didn’t get angry. As long as Alpheas remained calm, so did he. Forty years of accumulated resentment couldn’t be resolved with mere words.

Alpheas looked over at Shirone as if savoring the calm before the storm.

“Shirone. Casting a spell requires intense focus in a brief moment. It’s like using up an hour’s worth of concentration in just one second. That’s how Arcane does it,” Alpheas said, tapping his temple with his finger.

“He casts magic on his own mind, erasing his memories.”
“Ah...”

That was one way. By erasing memories from the brain, mental fatigue disappears. While it puts immense strain on one’s functionality, it allows the restoration of mental strength, at least once.

Alpheas understood Shirone’s sentiments. Viltor Arcane, a mage who had survived on battlefields for a century with his niche dark magic, was deserving of respect regardless of old grudges.

“Yes, it’s a bold and impressive technique. Arcane is a mage who lives in that world. So remember this: Anyone without even one final option is never a true combat mage.”

Chapter 98: To Infinity (2)

Arcane wore a disdainful expression.

“Hmph. You, of all people, praising me? Even a stray dog would laugh at that.”

“Are you certain about this? Although your mental strength is restored, it’s ultimately just an illusion of the mind. If you push further, I cannot guarantee your life.”

There was no such thing as free magic. The mental restoration granted by the Abyss Memory came with the grave risk of brain death—an equivalent exchange that could not be overlooked.

“So? Are you really going to try to stop me?”

“If you step back now, we can end it here. Perhaps this is your last chance. I offer it because, so far, everyone remains unharmed. But if you refuse to let go of your obsession, there will be a price to pay.”

“Heh heh heh. That sharp tongue of yours hasn’t changed one bit. You pretend to be considerate, but all you care about is yourself. Do you think that if I step back, your past will be buried? It’s already too late. Everyone here, even the students who fell to Abyss Nova, has ears. You’ll no longer be able to stay on as the headmaster.”

Shirone looked at the students who had lost their memories. When the magic dissipated, everything that had happened here would remain in their memories. Even if the battle ended safely, the repercussions would be enormous.

“Keh keh! Just realizing the situation now? Why not kill everyone here? If so, I’d even be willing to take the blame myself.”

Alpheas allowed a small smile to slip.

“How noble of you.”

“In that case, how about coming with me? I am the one offering the last chance. Don’t you think we should carry on Erina’s legacy? Look, behold the results of my work: the magical creature Harvest!”

Shirone and his companions turned to look where Arcane pointed. The Harvest lay collapsed on the floor, tattered and shredded.

“...Well, it may look a bit unsightly now, but the experiment was a success nonetheless. If you were to assist me, we could achieve even greater results. Besides, that’s what Erina truly wanted.”

Hearing Erina’s name, Alpheas’s eyes flashed coldly.

“Master, please act your age.”

Arcane finally revealed his killing intent. Though their words had seemed casual, they were, in truth, entirely meaningless. This had been an ill-fated relationship from the very beginning.

“Do you really think you can defeat me? Headmaster? Don’t make me laugh. Always pretending to be clever, yet your foolish decisions remain unchanged, Alpheas.”

The dark power in the air condensed into the shape of a fist. In response, Alpheas raised his hands slowly, preparing to cast his spell.

“No, this is the right choice. One foolish decision is enough.”

Alpheas compressed photons between his palms. Seeing this Photon Output—a spell any mage of light could perform—Arcane scoffed derisively.

“You think you can stop me with that? You’ve grown weak, Alpheas.”

“You won’t know until we try.”

“Keh keh! Isn’t that the phrase you detest most? Where’s the Alpheas who always insisted that things should be known before attempting?”

“Mages live in the future. Though my sharpness has dulled, I haven’t aged without wisdom. Do you think I couldn’t calculate the outcomes of your forty years?”

“Oh? So you foresaw today? And the best you could come up with was Photon Output?”

“Let’s finish this.”

Alpheas raised both hands to the sky. The photon compressed between his palms shrank to a speck, smaller than dust. At that moment, Arcane swung his fist. The immense dark power crashed downward, a strike infused with forty years of pent-up resentment.

Shirone and his companions stared in stunned silence at the dark power plummeting towards them. Up close, it was even larger than they had anticipated.

Alpheas’s hands slowly descended. His movements flowed smoothly and then began to split into dozens of afterimages, each one moving so slowly that it filled the onlookers with bewilderment.

‘What...?’

Alpheas’s afterimages moved with an agonizing slowness. The compressed photon between his palms vanished in an instant. Yet the dark power hadn’t even covered half the distance.

Shirone couldn’t move a single finger. No, even breathing felt impossible. Time was passing slowly. Only a tiny droplet of photon, smaller than a speck of dust, was moving at the speed of light.

The photon dropped into the massive darkness. Ripples spread slowly, as if even time itself had been stretched thin.

And in the next moment—

Flash!

A powerful explosion of light blanketed the world in white. The dark power shattered, ripping apart as it spread. The radiance that had enveloped the entire magic academy faded from the center, dissipating in the form of a ring. As time returned to normal, Shirone and his companions looked up at the sky in disbelief. Even the clouds had vanished, revealing the pale moon in the night sky.

‘What kind of magic... is this?’

It was neither like Photon Cannon, with its physical impact, nor like Shining, with its sustained brilliance. It was a spell created solely to release the strongest light in a fleeting moment.

Arcane's expression twisted.

"Alpheas..."

"It's called Big Bang. I'm a bit embarrassed to submit it to the association, but I thought it was sufficient as a parting gift."

"Indeed... It seems you didn't spend the last forty years merely running away."

Arcane understood Alpheas's true intention. It wasn't a magic developed to counter dark magic or to surpass him. No, Alpheas had refined Big Bang for forty years solely for this moment, this very scenario.

"Impressive... for someone like you."

Arcane's knees crashed to the ground. The aftereffects of the Abyss Memory had left his brain function severely impaired.

"Must be nice, Alpheas. You won your fifty-year wager. Defeating Arcane, your fame will surely rise. Are you aiming to become the archmage you've always dreamed of?"

Alpheas shook his head. Even now, Arcane's competitiveness remained unshaken, his pride an unrelenting drive that had defined him.

"Master, you're no longer an archmage. That title was left behind fifty years ago. Enough time has passed for a novice at 10th-class to surpass a 2nd-class archmage. Our era has already ended. The world has changed, and we're too old to pursue ambition. How do you not see this?"

A vein bulged at Arcane's temple. Even though he had lost, he had lived a life without regrets, with wisdom gained over the years, making Alpheas's lecturing feel almost laughable.

"Do you know why you're called the arrogant Alpheas? You think you're simply caught up in unfortunate circumstances.

I'll tell you the truth. You're no genius. Just a hapless mage who can't stop running from misfortune."

Arcane steadied his shaking legs and forced himself upright. "Old? At your age, I had already ascended as an archmage. Why not just admit it? You don't have what it takes. You're using age as an excuse because you no longer have the drive to climb higher, aren't you?"

"Climbing isn't the only thing that matters. With age should come introspection. But even now, you're no different from a boy chasing sweet dreams."

"Keh keh keh! Foolish Alpheas! What is it you're so afraid of? Take one step back and look around. There is no categorical imperative that things must be this way!"

A terrifying aura exploded from Arcane once more.

Alpheas's eyes widened in shock, realizing that Arcane had used Abyss Memory to erase his memory again. While the brain might withstand one use of Abyss Memory, a second time would almost certainly lead to death.

"Foolish old man! Are you determined to die?"

Arcane sneered in response and cast his dark power.

Shadows extended beneath him, vast enough to blanket the valley, lifting the memory-lost students into the air and toward the cliff.

For once, even Alpheas was terrified.

"Stop! This is meaningless slaughter! What on earth will you gain from this?"

"The satisfaction of victory."

"You foolish idiot! Even at your age, you want to win! Do you think you'll remain a boy forever?"

"Fool, listen carefully."

In his final moments, Arcane smiled with conviction and said, "A mage... is eternally young."

Four hundred people, bound by the Power of Darkness, were thrown over the cliff's edge like water splashed from a bucket. Alpheas could hardly believe it. To waste his life-restoring strength on such a senseless act?

‘What drives you, really? What do you expect from such a foolhardy conviction?’

But now was not the time to be distracted by Arcane.

Exhausted after pouring all his power into the Big Bang spell, Alpheas quickly turned to his side and shouted, “Save the students!”

At his command, Thadd shot forward like a flash of light.

Shirone followed, and soon, Nade and Iruki teleported to the cliff. There were four hundred students. It would be impossible to save them all. The situation was so desperate that even such thoughts felt like a luxury.

Descending to mid-cliff, Thadd created a wall of air with his wind magic. But to cover over fifty square meters, the wall was forced to be thin, compromising its durability.

A weak spot in the wall soon gave way, and students spilled downward.

Beneath Thadd, Iruki and Nade were working as well, but it was too late to change the outcome. Watching the children and older students fall in droves brought tears to their eyes.

“Damn it! Damn it, damn it!”

Iruki looked up at the sky through blurry, teary vision. A star twinkled in the night sky, then a flash of light streaked down, vertically.

“Shirone!”

The flash streaked past Iruki, continuing down. Amid his rapid descent, Shirone’s eyes locked onto a red-haired girl.

“Amy!”

Hearing Shirone’s voice, Amy turned her gaze. Such a response was impossible under the Abyss Nova spell, and Shirone held on to a shred of hope as he shouted again.

“Amy! Snap out of it!”

‘Snap out?’

Humans are creatures that think. Avoiding thought is harder than engaging in it. But under Abyss Nova, which blocks memory, even the source for thoughts is denied.

“Amy! Amy!”

Yet, Amy could still think.

Because she was Amy of the Carmis family.

“Amy! Snap out of it!”

‘Leave me alone... Stop it, please...’

“It’s me! Shirone!”

‘Shirone?’

What did that mean? She didn’t know the word. But she couldn’t shake the three-syllable word that kept tickling her mind.

‘What is it, what is it? What did it mean? I’m so curious.’

Amy kept thinking. Electric pulses began searching her brain for information. Finally, a flash ignited, and the meaning of “Shirone” rushed through her body.

‘Oh, right. Shirone! It was Shirone.’

Amy let out a relieved sigh, as though she’d been suffocating. At the same time, her eyes blazed red, and her Crimson Eye activated. The Abyss Nova burned away in an instant, and memories came flooding back.

‘You fool! What am I doing right now?’

Her trait, Crimson Eye, was also known academically as Self-Imprint Memory.

In the Carmis family, when the red eyes awaken, a person can revert themselves to a previous state.

For instance, they could store the motion of wielding a sword and repeat the action endlessly with exact accuracy. And since the sense is Schema-based, errors are instantly corrected.

Their family motto saying, One mistake is the stepping stone to progress; two mistakes bring shame to the family, highlighted their confidence.

‘What’s going on? What’s my current state?’

Using her self-imprint memory, Amy analyzed every neural error. She was within the reach of gravitational acceleration. Her body was tilted at 87.6 degrees, and her heartbeat was 1.6 times faster.

‘So I’m falling.’

She didn't particularly mind that. She saw Shirone descending like a flash of light. She remembered what she had done to him. How could she have forgotten Shirone?

Chapter 99: To Infinity (3)

‘Fool... so stupid...!’

He had come to her first, had handed her a cup of coffee, but she had cruelly pushed his hand away. As if trying to shut out the scene full of regret, Amy tightly closed her eyes. Then, she shouted with all her strength.

“Shirone!”

Shirone smiled. He was relieved that Amy had regained her memory. At least, in the final moments, he could leave as someone remembered by someone else.

“Thank you, Amy.”

Shirone’s tears fell onto Amy’s cheek.

‘Why are you crying, Shirone?’

Amy felt uneasy. Something was wrong. Then she realized it as she saw the light of life gradually fade from Shirone’s eyes.

“Shirone! No!”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t keep my promise.”

Embracing Amy, Shirone fully unleashed the Immortal Function. As his consciousness expanded infinitely, his sense of self began to dissolve as if submerged in water.

‘Goodbye, everyone...’

Father, mother, the members of the Ogent family, school friends. Because of the love he received from countless people, Shirone could smile. A great light filled the space below the cliff. The falling students, including Iruki, Nade, and Thadd, were enveloped in the radiance and disappeared from view.

The next moment, a huge beam of light shot upward vertically.

It was a mass Teleportation of 400 people simultaneously.

‘Ah, I see.’

Lying sprawled on the ground, Arcane looked up at the light rising from the cliff and splitting into dozens of rays. It was only at the very end that he became certain of where he was and how magnificent a life he had lived.

‘A playground that would never tire you out, even if you played for a lifetime. Isn’t that so, Alpheas?’

And so, the legendary archmage who once dominated an era departed this world.

“Master?”

In front of Arcane’s lifeless body, Canis stood in a daze. After all, he had been a disciple, hadn’t he? Yet, Arcane had left without even a word of farewell, doing only what he wished until the very end.

“Was it really all for nothing? Were we just mere tools to him?”

Canis grabbed Arcane’s collar and shook it.

“Wake up! How could you do this? I could have died instead! Why did you leave me alone?”

With sad eyes, Arin approached Canis. The reflection of his figure in her eyes was like a person made of muddy water. That figure never stayed still, spreading like liquid before forming back into a human shape, only to repeat the process.

“No, Canis. He didn’t die because of you. That man used us. He was a villain to the end.”

“Heh, what do you mean, ‘no’? Seems like you’ve finally realized it.”

Harvest spoke in a hoarse voice.

“Yes, Canis. It was all because of you. Arcane died, I died, and eventually, Arin will die too.”

Arin, who had been glaring at Harvest, hurriedly turned to look at Canis. As expected, he was in shock, his form breaking apart and clinging to the ground like a slick puddle.

“Why? What did I do? Surviving Radum? Just being an unlucky bastard?”

“Because you’re weak.”

Harvest's conclusion was simple.

"How long will you live seeking others' validation? Saying you have to live for this reason or die for that reason—there's no such thing. Arcane lived his life and left, that's all."

Arcane sacrificed his life to uphold the ideals of evil. Harvest chose self-destruction to fulfill his contract as a magical creature.

'Why was I willing to die?'

There was nothing he could find. He had been a blind, rampaging colt. His life had been one made solely of shells.

"Like Master..."

"Yes, and like that boy over there."

At the center of the fallen 400 students lay Shirone. He had said that he wouldn't let anyone get hurt. And he had kept that conviction until the very end.

Canis approached Harvest and assessed his condition.

"How about you?"

"No matter how I am, I'll die. I can't live without feeding off life."

Arin said, "Form a master-servant contract with me. Canis won't be able to withstand it after exhausting his mental strength."

Harvest shook his head.

"Sorry, but that's not going to work."

"What? Why not? You'll disappear at this rate!"

"My master is Canis."

Harvest's words pierced Canis's heart. It was time for him to raise the banner of his own convictions. Would he be able to endure? Both of their lives were at stake.

"Harvest. I will take you as my servant. But I won't forgive betrayal a second time."

"Heh, yes, Master."

"Canis! It's too dangerous! If something goes wrong...!"

Arin trailed off. The form of Canis, made of liquid, was hardening as mud seeped into it. Would he one day attain

an unwavering heart? Just as Shirone had appeared in her eyes.

Canis placed his hand on Harvest. As the servant contract proceeded, Harvest began absorbing the last of the remaining life force. Canis's vision dimmed as his eyes slowly closed.

At a distance from Canis's group, Alpheas stood solemnly. He had barely managed to save the students, but the losses were immense.

"Headmaster."

Ethella shared the same sentiment. From this day forward, the magic school would face significant changes. The students who regained their memories would be confused, and Alpheas's mistake from 40 years ago would be brought to light.

"Ethella, I am a sinner."

"Please, don't blame yourself too much. If life cannot tolerate mistakes, then the very existence of humanity is a sin."

Alpheas shook his head. Anyone could make mistakes. But every action had its consequences. Like Arcane, he had no intention of running away.

"I am the one who raised dark magic to the level of great magic. Harvest could be seen as a breakthrough in the field of memory transfer. Abyss Nova will be registered as a sanctioned spell by the Magic Association."

Before Arcane's lifeless body, Alpheas clasped his hands and mourned.

"The archmage Arcane, who was always young at heart. The path of magic you walked will be carried on by future generations."

Alpheas opened his eyes, now appearing relieved. On the other hand, Ethella was still anxious. It had been an incident that threatened the lives of all the students, so it was not an issue that could be resolved internally.

"Headmaster, what do you plan to do from now on?"

“What more can be said? I am simply in a position to await judgment. Let the matter of punishment be handled by the appropriate authorities. For now, how about we celebrate today’s hero?”

Alpheas looked around for Shirone. The boy never ceased to amaze him. Even he couldn’t confidently say he could transport 400 people at once.

“It’s emergency!”

Amy was on the verge of tears by Shirone’s collapsed form. Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Alpheas and Ethella quickened their pace. Iruki and Nade were rushing in from afar.

But before they could reach him, Amy cried out first.

“Shirone isn’t breathing!”

Meeting the God (1)

Shirone expanded enormously and faded away. He was blending into everything, forgetting even the lingering attachment to the world. At that moment, an intense force pulled him into a single point. If there were anything beyond life for humans, it could be described as the hijacking of a soul.

“Hah! Hah!”

As Shirone’s consciousness reassembled, the memories from just before he attempted the Immortal Function returned. Shivering briefly from the fear of death, he exhaled heavily and checked the condition of his body. Apart from realizing he was not wearing any clothes, there seemed to be nothing abnormal.

“Where am I?”

It was a space filled entirely with white. In this monochromatic landscape stretching infinitely, there was no sense of distance. He tried taking a step forward but felt as if he wasn’t moving at all.

‘This is strange. It’s as if my senses are numbed.’

Shirone suddenly had an unusual thought. As an experiment, he bent his knees slightly and lifted one foot as

if stepping onto a stair. To his surprise, his body floated upward.

“Huh?”

Shirone continued to climb an endless staircase. When he paused and looked around, he was at a loss for words.

“.....”

He didn’t feel as if he had risen higher. No matter where he moved, the white landscape remained the same.

“There’s no sense of distance.”

If measurement is impossible, space cannot exist. To verify his hypothesis, Shirone tried descending this time. His guess was correct. No matter where he moved, it didn’t feel as though he had changed his position.

While he stood there, unable to find a reason to continue moving, he heard a woman’s voice.

“That’s impressive. To grasp the meaning of space so quickly. You truly deserve to be here.”

Shirone did not turn around. In a place like this, there was no concept of direction anyway.

“Who are you? Am I dead?”

An elegant woman emerged from the gap in the white landscape. The moment a sense of distance appeared, the scenery shifted instantly. A massive temple unlike any he had seen loomed over Shirone, as if to crush him.

“Wow...”

The scale was unimaginable. Even ancient temples weren’t this grand. Hundreds of pillars supported the ceiling, each roughly 2 kilometers tall.

“Where on earth is this...?”

“Welcome, Shirone. I’ve been waiting for you.”

The woman’s hair, the color of water, cascaded down to her ankles. Shirone had never seen such a beautiful woman in his life. It wasn’t her appearance that captivated him. It was her essence. Just as a man in love feels that his beloved is the most beautiful person in the world, her value here was absolute.

“Oh no!”

Shirone hastily covered himself. He hadn't even realized he was standing naked.

“Hehe. There's no need to be embarrassed. This isn't your world. Your body still remains in your original realm.”

With a wave of her hand, clothes appeared on him in an instant. Shirone, staring blankly at his attire, finally gave up resisting and spoke what came to mind first.

“Is this the afterlife?”

“No. This isn't the afterlife. It's just a different spot from the world you lived in.”

Shirone tilted his head in confusion. A point is one-dimensional, devoid of space. When a point moves, it forms a line; when a line moves, it forms a plane; and when a plane moves, a three-dimensional space is created.

“Could it be...?”

Shirone recalled the white space he had just been in.

“That's correct. That was a spot. It's not that there's no space; it's compressed infinitely.”

As she spoke, it made sense why he hadn't felt any distance. However, even if he was trapped in a one-dimensional space, his body was still three-dimensional. If he could measure the distance between his right and left arms, wouldn't space still exist?

“Oh, I see. A three-dimensional object exists within a one-dimensional space.”

“Your insight is truly remarkable. Yes, that's the essence of space-time. No matter how vast the world is, from a distance, it's merely a dot. Conversely, even the smallest dot, when looked into, contains an infinite worlds.”

Shirone finally felt at ease. If logical conversation was possible, even if this was the afterlife, there was nothing to fear.

“Then, who are you?”

The woman smiled like an innocent child. The sight was eerie, but to Shirone, even that was beautiful. She was the

most valuable existence here.
“I am God.”

The magic school was in a state of chaos.
It took eight hours to recover Arcane’s body and send the students back to their dorms.
The students, still blocked from their memories, lay in their respective rooms. While the faculty’s memory restoration would expedite the process, the potential commotion when the entire student body regained consciousness gave them headaches.
To make matters worse, with the disappearance of the suspects, Canis and Arin, only Nade, Iruki, and Amy remained in the infirmary to look after Shirone.
In fact, the term “looking after” wasn’t quite appropriate. Shirone was not breathing, and his heart had stopped. Yet, no one dared to speak the word “death”.

Chapter 100: Meeting the God (2)

“Shirone...”

Amy grasped Shirone’s hand, her eyes swollen from crying. The teachers were too overwhelmed to come; perhaps they had already accepted that Shirone was gone.

But Amy shook her head, refusing to believe it. She couldn’t accept that Shirone was dead. There were too many things that didn’t add up for it to just be an obsession.

Nade offered words of comfort.

“Don’t worry, Senior. Shirone will come back.”

“Right. It doesn’t even make sense. Why would he die? If he was going to die from using mass Teleportation, it wouldn’t have activated in the first place. Something strange must have happened to Shirone.”

Iruki scowled in disapproval. He had stayed by her side all night, but mistaking a dead person for someone alive was foolish, he thought.

“If you put it that way, then Arcane should’ve survived, too. Just casting a spell can be fatal.”

“It’s different with Arcane! Shirone fully unlocked Immortal Function. That has nothing to do with any degradation of brain function!”

“Either way, it’s the same in that he exceeded his capacity. Humans can die from any number of things. The point is whether he’s dead or alive, not why he died. That line of reasoning isn’t rational.”

Nade frowned. Even if Iruki was correct, there were things one shouldn’t say in front of someone’s girlfriend. Just as he was about to snap back, Amy walked over to Iruki, her eyes cold.

"You haven't changed at all. Still as unpleasant as ever, aren't you?"

Iruki rested his chin on the table, staring at Amy, her eyes blazing red.

'The Carmis family, huh? Well, with those red eyes, I guess she'd be immune to mental magic.'

Crimson Eyes were a famous trait across the continent. With anti-magic being the only thing capable of penetrating their minds, it made sense that she could escape from the Abyss Nova. But Iruki's interest stopped there; he averted his gaze, uninterested.

"It's a bad habit to blame others just because you're upset."

"Excuse me? You're the one killing the mood. Who even are you? Are you really Shirone's friend? How could you just assume he's dead?"

"I didn't say he might be dead. I said he is."

"That's even worse! And who are you to talk down to me, being a Class Five?"

"If you're so bothered, report me to the student council. I don't mind facing discipline."

Amy couldn't hold back any longer. She grabbed Iruki by the collar and, using the strength of Schema, lifted him right off the ground. Iruki's feet dangled above the floor.

"Say it again. But this time, say it properly."

"Oh, I'm so scared."

Iruki's eyes showed no emotion. He simply looked down at Amy with a hollow gaze. But Amy was just as fierce when pushed; once her temper was ignited, she didn't back down.

"Repeat after me: 'Shirone is not dead.' Otherwise, you'll be lying beside him."

"Shirone is dead."

"Shirone is not dead! Say it!"

"Shirone is dead."

Amy's red eyes flashed. She aimed a punch directly at Iruki's third and fourth teeth. But even so, Iruki's expression

didn't change. As her fist slowed down, it was clear she planned to stop just short of landing the punch.

As expected, she halted just before hitting him. Watching her trembling fist, full of pent-up rage, Iruki spoke dryly.

"Oh, what a relief."

"Don't be ridiculous! You worthless Savant. You probably don't even understand why I held back my punch."

She couldn't bring herself to hit Iruki. As much as she hated him, he was still Shirone's friend.

"Oh, I get it. It's a waste of strength."

Amy's eyes blazed with anger.

"So, are you going to keep saying that Shirone's dead with that filthy mouth of yours? You know what? People like you don't even deserve friends."

"Maybe. But do you?"

"What was that? You little...!"

Amy raised her fist again, yanking him by the collar, but this time, Iruki's expression changed slightly. He grimaced and shook off her grip.

"Damn it!"

As Amy released her grip and watched him, Iruki walked over to Shirone's bed and pointed at him.

"You're the pathetic ones. Does this really look alive to you? He's not breathing, and his heart has stopped! And yet, here you are, babbling about how he's probably still alive, or that something strange must've happened. What kind of friends are you?"

"What are we supposed to do, then?! Shirone is lying here like this—what do you expect me to do?!"

"I expect you to think!"

For the first time, Iruki raised his voice, his face uncharacteristically tense.

"Do you think a dead person will come back just because you want them to? If you have the mind to spout nonsense like that, then try coming up with a way to bring him back to life!"

Amy bit her lip, searching for a response, and finally lowered her head in realization. Iruki was right. Mathematically, Shirone was in a state of death.

Nade spoke up with a sorrowful look.

"I understand what you're saying, but, Iruki, how? How can we save him? Bringing someone back to life... there's no way that's possible."

"Hmph, that's exactly your limit."

With a loud slam, Iruki left the room, shutting the door behind him. Silence filled the infirmary. Amy sat down in a chair, covering her face, and Nade comforted her gently.

"Senior, don't hate him too much. He's just as frustrated as you are."

"Forget it. I don't even want to waste my energy on him. Think of a way to bring the dead back to life? He doesn't get how hurtful that is."

Nade had no response to that. It was typical of Iruki, but even he felt some disappointment in his friend today.

As Iruki left the infirmary and walked down the hallway, he frowned. Waiting ahead were the two people he least wanted to see. Canis leaned against the wall, and Arin stood by, looking around uneasily, unable to settle her gaze.

As key figures in this incident, they required strict surveillance, but things were too chaotic to spare attention for them. Iruki, too, had no room for patience. If they'd intended to escape, they would have done so already—though even then, they couldn't evade the eyes of the Magic Association.

"Here to rub salt in the wound? Or are you here to apologize?"

Canis pushed himself off the wall, stepping away.

"A bit of both. I came to rub salt and apologize. Dying in combat is one thing, but Shirone sacrificing himself for something so pointless leaves a bad taste. But it seems like I've come at a bad time."

He must have overheard Iruki's quarrel with Amy. Annoyed at having exposed such a scene, Iruki scratched his head irritably.

"Good call. If you go in now, it won't end well. The girl in the infirmary will start by breaking your legs. Anyway, good luck with whatever you're doing. I'm off."

Canis followed Iruki with his eyes as he walked by.

"Doesn't matter. The timing's wrong because the opportunity is gone. What apology could I give to someone who's already dead?"

Iruki stopped in his tracks, his gaze locking onto Canis with a fierce glint.

"What?"

"I agree with you completely. Dead is dead. Seeing all that fuss over a corpse lying there drained my desire to apologize."

After a moment's thought, Iruki let out a quiet laugh.

"Big talk from someone who nearly died. Whose thoughts are those? Yours? Or the Shadow's?"

"...Are you looking for a fight here?"

"Shirone, to me, was a pretty annoying friend."

At the odd declaration, Canis frowned.

"The truth is, I'm a strange and nasty guy. So, I decided to put certain restrictions on myself. In a way, Shirone was like a lock for me."

"Hah. That's a weak excuse."

"Is it? Maybe I wouldn't have thought that way if it weren't for Shirone. In any case, he's not here anymore. So, I'd suggest you watch what you say."

Sensing something in Iruki's stance, Arin shrank back a little.

"Because I'm not like Shirone. If I feel like it, I can do anything, no matter how crazy. So, you'd better pray that Shirone wakes up and stops me."

Iruki's eyes began to gleam, small sparks flashing from his cerebral cortex, visible through his pupils.

“If Shirone really doesn’t come back, I’ll make sure you’re the first to die.”

Canis felt his mental channel open as Harvest’s brainwaves came through.

Canis, this is a warning level. He’s locked onto us.

I’m aware. We already knew he was a Savant.

It’s more than that. His calculation speed is incredibly fast.

Based on the movements in his Spirit Zone, I estimate it’s more than 10,000 times faster than our mental channel.

Canis found this hard to believe. Communication with Harvest operated faster than thought itself. That Iruki’s speed was 10,000 times faster than that was beyond human understanding.

How fast is that, exactly?

He could analyze every event in an entire city within three seconds. To deal with him, we’d need a specific strategy. But as criminals, causing a disturbance here would only put us in a worse position.

Canis didn’t want to back down. His stubbornness was part of what had earned him the position of Arcane’s apprentice, but the timing was wrong. As Harvest urgently tried to dissuade him, Arin spoke up.

“But in the end, doesn’t that mean you think Shirone isn’t dead?”

Iruki’s Spirit Zone dissipated. Arin, who had been feeling his intense hostility through her perception, finally felt like she could breathe. Iruki steadied himself. He needed to remain rational, now more than ever. Letting emotions ruin things was a mistake best left to the fools in the infirmary.

“Shirone’s dead. If I don’t accept the reality, I can’t find a solution. I’m just thinking rationally.”

“No. You believe Shirone is alive. Maybe even more than the two people in that room.”

Iruki scowled. Savants were unmatched at calculating causal relationships. For them, there was no place for irrational emotions.

“What do you know about me?”

“I have a skill called initial sensitivity. I see everything as if it’s the first time, so I don’t retain the forms of things. They look different every time.”

“So? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I can see your emotions. In a completely different form from how others do.”

“I’m fine. Dead is dead. There’s no room for sentimentality.”

“No. It’s different.”

Arin shook her head.

“Because right now, you’re crying with the saddest expression on your face.”

Iruki couldn’t respond.

Against her perception, a hundred words were useless.

That night.

The infirmary door slowly opened.

Amy lay exhausted on a cot, having cried herself to sleep, and Nade sat dozing in a chair in the corner.

Iruki approached Shirone. Sleeping and dead felt worlds apart; seeing Shirone’s cold face made his chest ache.

By morning, the teachers would come to check on Shirone.

They would begin embalming before a funeral, but once that happened, there would be no way to save him.

Taking a deep breath, Iruki pulled out a scalpel hidden within his coat.

‘I will save you.’

He checked on Amy and Nade, who showed no sign of waking. They’d been under immense stress for two days straight. Only then did Iruki bring the scalpel closer.

The blade reflected the moonlight as it drew near Shirone’s skin.

Chapter 101: Meeting the God (3)

Shirone felt as though he'd been struck on the head with a hammer. If this was indeed the afterlife, he could believe it, but meeting a god was something else entirely.

"You're saying you're a god?"

"Is it hard to believe?"

"Well, I didn't even know gods existed. And if they did, I didn't think they'd seem this... human."

The woman smiled.

"All creations must resemble their creator. Anything humans make naturally reflects human thoughts and forms. Plants, animals, mountains, seas—all are reflections of the divine. But to varying extents. The measure is creativity. For instance, a squirrel is more creative than a rock. By that same measure, humans resemble gods more closely than most creatures. And you, Shirone—you are one of the few humans who most resembles a god."

She reached out a hand and softly touched his face.

"Shirone, would you join me in creating a new world?"

Shirone felt confused. Everything was so sudden and unfamiliar. Yet, her statement that this wasn't the afterlife lingered in his mind. Perhaps there was a small hope.

"Is there no way I can return?"

She tilted her head, looking at him as though he were an enigma, then shook her head.

"I'm afraid not, Shirone. There is no way back. You chose to end your life, didn't you? Do you want to return now?"

"No, not exactly. I was prepared for this, and if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have regained my senses like this... Um, may I call you that?"

"Of course. 'God' is just a concept. I don't have a name."

"In that case, may I ask one more question?"

"Hehe, ask anything you'd like."

"Why are you lying to me?"

The woman's brow furrowed. Even that slight change in expression made the temple seem to tremble.

"Gods do not lie, Shirone. In fact, gods cannot lie."

If she was truly an omnipotent being, then lying would indeed be impossible, for every word she spoke would be reality. But Shirone sensed something hidden in her eyes. She was concealing something.

"When I asked if there was a way to return, you said there wasn't. But that's not the truth."

"Whether or not there's a way back is irrelevant if I say there isn't. That's the reason."

"Which means it's a lie."

"You don't understand, Shirone. I said there is no way back. So, there is no way back. Absolutely none!"

"Then I'll rephrase it. Regardless of your intentions, what I want to know is if there exists a method to return to my original world."

"There is no such method!"

"Another lie!"

The woman flinched. Shirone didn't miss her reaction. As she faltered, the temple's scenery shimmered as though submerged underwater.

"Are you... really a god?"

He had been suspicious from the start. Although there's no reason a god must fit the human concept of divinity, her behavior seemed overly human.

She nodded as if acknowledging something.

"Shirone, we seem to hold different concepts of divinity. That's why there's a misunderstanding. Gods aren't as noble as you might think. They are merely architects of worlds."

She extended her hand, and a glass orb floated above her palm. Within it was the miniature scene of a village, with tiny people scattered throughout.

"As you see, I've created a village. Though it's only a model, I can still move people within it."

She reached into the orb and shifted a farmer feeding his horse to a nearby field.

"See, the farmer moved. Changing space means granting time. Can you see any difference between this and the world you lived in? No, this is what being a god is. Right now, I am the god of this village."

She held the orb up to Shirone's face.

"A god is simply an architect who creates a realm of a lower dimension than their own. Even so, they seem omnipotent to those within that realm. That's the fascinating part. This farmer will never know that an external force moved him to the field."

She pulled the orb close to herself and cradled it between her palms. As she opened her arms wide, the village expanded, engulfing the temple.

Shirone glanced around. They were now within the village. He stood at one end of a narrow path, the woman at the other. Everyone else remained motionless.

The woman approached the farmer working in the field.

"This farmer doesn't know how incomplete this world is because he was born here. There's only one way to become aware."

"Immortal Function."

"Correct. The Immortal Function expands one's perception to encompass the whole. This village exists within an orb. It would not be inaccurate to say there is no world beyond it."

She placed her hand on the farmer's shoulder. He transformed into light, spreading across the entire sky. As she clenched her fist, the scene shrank again, and the village fit back into the orb.

Shirone stared at the orb, which glowed with light radiating from the farmer.

"This farmer expanded into the whole through the Immortal Function. Yet even so, he cannot perceive me. And Shirone, the same goes for you."

Shirone couldn't help but feel akin to the farmer. Had the woman attempted to hijack his consciousness, he too might have dispersed into a meaningless light.

"What do you want from me? What could I possibly do with this knowledge?"

"This is it, Shirone."

She placed the orb between her palms and pressed. It compressed into a single, black dot.

"A spot..."

"Yes, this is the true nature of the world we inhabit. The world you lived in is also just one of these points. Yet within it lies an endlessly vast universe, a matrix of space and time."

She demonstrated. The scenery within the orb disappeared into a single point and then gave birth to a new world. A world within a world, and another within that... Then she clasped her palms together, and the orb vanished. Billions of worlds ceased to exist in an instant.

"Enter the space I've created and create your own within it. That will be the birth of a perfect universe."

She seemed to desire some kind of innovation in her world. It wasn't an unappealing offer. Becoming a god of another realm might be a fitting end for someone who had already embraced death.

"I can't do that."

The woman looked at him, puzzled.

"Why not? Surely there's no reason to refuse."

"Because if I enter your world, I would have to sacrifice someone else like myself."

For an instant, sadness flickered in her eyes. But her expression turned cold again as she addressed him.

“What does that matter? It’s your world.”

“But you aren’t a god.”

Her eyes now glimmered with animosity for the first time.

“You’re a human, residing in the same world as I am. The fact that you brought me here before I fully disintegrated proves it. If you were truly a god, wouldn’t you be outside the world?”

She didn’t deny it. Yet, it didn’t change her intentions.

“Shirone, you must follow my will. I called you here for a purpose. If you refuse, I can begin your disintegration right now.”

His mind had been restructured by her abilities, so reversing it might be equally easy. But now that he had the slightest chance to return to his original world, he had no intention of yielding.

“I won’t disintegrate.”

She extended her hand toward him, invoking the power of disintegration. But Shirone remained whole. He had already entered the Spirit Zone.

“Another answer correct. An excellent choice.”

Her arm slowly lowered.

“I see it now. The Spirit Zone itself is also a spot.”

Due to the space-time matrix’s principles, spots could be infinitely deepened. This explained why he, a mental entity, could delve further into the Spirit Zone.

“And this place... is your Spirit Zone.”

Shirone focused, gathering a crimson energy that radiated menacingly, making her scowl with unease.

Vajra (1)

It had been five days since Shirone’s death.

All the students had regained their memories, and the younger ones were especially disoriented. Yet, being of strong mental resilience, they handled it with fewer aftereffects than expected.

But the real challenge was only beginning.

The incident where the school was overtaken by monsters had exposed critical weaknesses in its security systems. Given the boarding school structure, safety was paramount. The biggest issue was that a student had died—a particularly promising one, Arian Shirone.

At the request of Iruki and Nade, Shirone's body was kept in the infirmary rather than the morgue. Normally, a funeral would have been held, but the teachers were wary of making a decision.

The student council hadn't yet taken any action to determine responsibility, largely because Shirone's death hadn't been formally certified.

In essence, they were biding their time, trying to avoid responsibility by keeping Shirone in a limbo between life and death.

Some teachers, of course, felt morally uncomfortable with this approach. They had gathered in the faculty meeting room, emphasizing the urgency of the matter.

"We must hold Shirone's funeral immediately. We owe it to his family as well. If we don't address this now, the school's reputation could face harsh criticism in the future."

"This isn't a simple decision. If word gets out that a student died, the repercussions will be massive. The reputation we've built could crumble in an instant."

"Are you suggesting we lie and pretend he's still alive? The truth will come out eventually! The only ethical course for the school is to make a public statement. We're not just risking our reputation here; the school could be shut down!"

"Do you think we don't understand that? All we're asking is to take a little more time to consider our options."

"Can't you see the longer we delay, the worse this gets? Several of Arcane's disciples are also missing. Letting the criminals escape is a grave failure. We need to take action, now."

Teachers who favored delaying Shirone's funeral generally fell into two groups. Some calculated the political

implications and thought it best to manage the students' emotions carefully.

Others simply couldn't accept Shirone's death. Teachers like Ethella, Thadd, and Siena, who had been involved in the incident, were especially doubtful about Shirone's death.

"Headmaster, we need your guidance! I hear the student council is meeting today. The teachers must act as well."

Their anxiety was understandable, especially since the student council was influential; students with backing from powerful families could lodge formal complaints against the school, making the window for action even smaller.

"My stance is that we wait and observe."

Most of the teachers erupted in protest.

"Headmaster!"

Alpheas understood their urgency. The school's position would weaken with each passing moment. But for him, something mattered even more than the survival of the school itself: Shirone's true condition.

Was Shirone really dead?

It was an implausible question to ask in a school dedicated to rationality and reason.

Which only made him more cautious. Would he even entertain such a question if it were anyone else but Shirone?

'Think rationally. But it's impossible.'

Perhaps Shirone was receiving special treatment. Yet, despite knowing this, Alpheas couldn't ignore the subtle feeling lodged in the back of his mind.

Chapter 102: Vajra (2)

"I don't want to rush any conclusions about Shirone. Right now, we lack sufficient information about the Unlocker."

Ethella, who shared Alpheas's perspective, added a comment.

"Shirone entered the Immortal Function three months ago. And in this recent battle, he unleashed it to an extreme degree. The Order views the Immortal Function as a process of mental transcendence. It may be a matter entirely separate from life itself."

"What are you talking about? We're not here to discuss the Order's stance. What we want is to resolve this situation as quickly as possible."

Some teachers couldn't understand Ethella's point. The Immortal Function was not a mere skill but an attainment, a level beyond most knowledge. Even the most learned teacher would admit that in matters of enlightenment, they might know less than a common beggar.

One teacher, who had dismissed Ethella's remarks, addressed Alpheas directly.

"Headmaster, you need to reconsider. If I may be frank, this all began with your personal alliances and enmities. For us, nothing is more important than the school. If things continue as they are, we could face the worst possible scenario."

Alpheas looked around the room. The silent gaze of dozens of eyes bore down on him.

"The worst scenario? What do you mean by that?"

"The school could face a closure order."

"No, that's not the worst scenario."

Another teacher, frustrated, clutched his chest.

"Headmaster, I don't understand your point. What could be worse than the school being shut down?"

“The worst scenario for a school would be if all of its students and teachers died.”

The room fell into silence. The intense gazes fixed on Alpheas gradually shifted away.

“If not for Shirone, no one would have survived. And that death toll would have included all of you.”

Alpheas felt disappointment toward those teachers who sought to exploit a student’s death rather than honor it.

“Isn’t there even the slightest chance left? Even if it’s less than one percent, wasn’t this the child who gave his life for us? Shouldn’t we at least try until we’ve exhausted every option? Even if it means the school might close, isn’t it our duty as teachers to do everything we can for Shirone’s return?”

“But, Headmaster, the school means everything to us. And while Shirone’s situation is tragic, if we shut down...”

“The school will not close. I’ll take full responsibility for everything. So please, let’s do what we can for Shirone. For a student who saved us, isn’t it worth sacrificing a little in return?”

The teachers had no counterargument to Alpheas’s words. No matter the circumstances, they couldn’t deny the fact that they owed their lives to a student.

With that, the meeting concluded, and the teachers left the room with somber expressions.

The Magic School Student Council.

The student council members from each class gathered in a large conference room. Unlike the teachers, who were more worried about their reputations, the students—much more sensitive—felt a sense of betrayal toward Alpheas because of his past actions.

“Hello, everyone. I am Amira, the student council president. I have called this meeting to reach an agreement regarding the current situation. Please share your constructive opinions.”

Amira from Class Two, specializing in climate magic, declared the meeting open from the podium. At twenty-two years old, she was the top candidate for graduation this year.

Known for her progressive stance, it was clear which direction the discussion would take. As expected, the first to speak was a conservative student defending the school's position.

"I'm Serielle from Class Three. I'm aware that criticism against Headmaster Alpheas is quite severe within the school. However, I believe we should be cautious. The school's honor is tied to the students' honor. Attacking the faculty in this situation could negatively impact future graduates as well."

"Cass from Class Four here. While Serielle makes a valid point, the issue at hand concerns the teachers' morality. Even if it happened forty years ago, it was still a criminal act. If they don't take responsibility for this, I believe there is no future for this school."

Naturally, Amira agreed with Cass's opinion. However, as the chair, she merely nodded without expressing her agreement outwardly.

"This is Olivia from Class Six. The main issue right now is whether Shirone is actually deceased. As we know, Shirone has died. Yet some students and teachers are distorting that fact. Because of this, the school lost two suspects who had been collaborating with the Arcane, and the headmaster's indictment is being delayed. This is a clear evasion of responsibility, and I believe the student council should take a stand."

Amira shared in that anger. The teachers were currently delaying Alpheas's indictment under the pretext that Shirone's status was uncertain.

Serielle countered.

"Aren't you overinterpreting the faculty's intentions? Shirone's heart isn't beating, but there is also no decay. I

understand there has been significant discussion about the Immortal Function in the Ivory Tower as well. Given these considerations, I can understand the faculty's judgment." The students reacted indifferently. The Immortal Function was an achievement that even teachers struggled to understand, so it was even harder for them to comprehend. Some students didn't even know what the Immortal Function was.

Amira felt the same. The highest achievement a mage could pursue, but so what?

Magic was a knowledge-based phenomenon. Talking in lofty terms about the "pinnacle of power" meant nothing to her if it couldn't be practically grasped.

"Excuse me, this is Veronica from Class Ten."

An eight-year-old child raised her hand. The student council elected representatives from each class, so despite her age, her opinion carried the same weight.

"Yes, go ahead, Representative Veronica."

"What did Grandpa Alpheas do wrong?"

In a voice that sounded as if she might burst into tears any second, Amira frowned, sighing.

'This is why I suggested separating classes for these discussions.'

Veronica sniffled and continued.

"Even if Grandpa Alpheas did something wrong, can't we just forgive him?"

"No, we cannot, Representative Veronica. This is a matter concerning the school's honor."

"But doesn't everyone make mistakes...?"

The room stirred. Her words sparked a considerable ripple. Conservatives sensed an unexpected opportunity and began paying attention to her statement, monitoring the situation's development.

"I get scolded by my mom a lot too. But she doesn't punish me too harshly because people can make mistakes."

Grandpa Alpheas made mistakes but has also led the school well until now. Can't we forgive him?"

Sensing an opening, Mark raised his hand and stood.

"I'm Mark from Class Seven. I agree with Representative Veronica's view. Naturally, those who commit crimes should be punished. However, for us to aggressively intervene, when we've always trusted in the school's stability, feels like an overstep. As long as the faculty isn't neglecting the situation, I believe the student council should also exercise patience and wisdom."

'Well done, Mark.'

Serielle gave a thumbs-up under the table, and Mark nodded in return.

As the atmosphere shifted, the room became evenly divided in opinion.

Amira considered the statements and began estimating the votes. Overall, the younger classes sided with the school, while the graduates criticized it. The advanced classes were split evenly.

'At this rate, we might lose.'

If things continued this way, there would be no way to indict Alpheas. She needed a way to turn the tide, but it was difficult to sway the younger students, who were more emotionally driven.

"This is Ardino Fermi from Class One."

Fermi, who had been silent until then, raised his hand, drawing the room's attention. As the top senior and the top graduation candidate, his opinion was naturally of interest. Serielle watched him uneasily. He was a young man with neatly slicked-back dark brown hair, dressed in formal business attire. Yet, behind the dignified appearance, there was a mischievous glint.

Fermi was more than capable of graduating but always seemed to fail just at the end. He had also been a strong candidate for student council president, but he eventually withdrew, allowing Amira to take the position.

In truth, no one really knew what he was thinking. The only thing known about him was his tendency to create discord and enjoy stirring up conflict.

“We all owe a debt of gratitude to Shirone. Without him, we’d already be dead. Therefore, it’s understandable that some people refuse to accept his death.”

The students fell quiet, understanding how hard Shirone had fought for the entire student body.

However, Serielle grew anxious. From what she knew, Fermi wasn’t the type to feel grateful to anyone. She couldn’t figure out why he was suddenly bringing up such a subject.

“I am grateful to Shirone as well. However, the faculty is using him as a shield. Therefore, our judgment is not an overreach. It’s a fight to preserve Shirone’s soul.”

“What do you mean, preserve his soul? Shirone isn’t dead...!”

“It’s been five days already. Shirone’s heart isn’t beating. There isn’t a single one of you who doesn’t miss Shirone, is there?”

Most nodded. Even if they didn’t feel that way, it wasn’t difficult to show respect for someone who had passed.

“We all miss Shirone and feel grateful to him. So, let me ask again. Is there anyone here who truly believes that Shirone is still alive?”

Serielle realized Fermi’s tactic. By separating emotion from logic, he was removing any guilt and making the reality clearer. The students would make a cold, rational judgment.

“Of course, no one believes that. It’s not cruel; it’s common sense. And yet, the teachers still insist that Shirone is alive. They sound like members of some cult.”

Serielle slammed the table and stood up.

“That is not accurate! Shirone’s condition is definitely...!”

“What exactly is strange about it? I’ve read the report on the Immortal Function. However, the level of magic has nothing to do with whether someone is biologically dead.

I've also learned that Shirone's body has already been embalmed."

"That... that's...!"

It had been Alpheas's order. If the Immortal Function influenced the mind, then physical preservation had to be handled here to minimize damage.

But how Fermi had uncovered this secret, known to only a few, was a mystery.

Amira's eyes glinted sharply as she asked, "Embalming? Is that true, Representative Fermi?"

Serielle glared at Fermi, and his innocent smile only increased her irritation.

'That scoundrel. He's just causing trouble for the sake of it.'

"Representative Serielle, please answer."

Serielle sighed. A fight she might have won had now turned uncertain because of one misstep.

"I'll exercise my right to remain silent. If you want more answers, please convene a formal hearing."

Remaining silent was itself an admission, though very different from openly declaring it. The importance of silence lay in allowing room for rebuttal, avoiding the foolish act of closing off possibilities when an unforeseen factor could still turn the situation around.

Amira didn't delay. With the atmosphere charged and opinions divided, now was the best time. She concluded the meeting and moved to the voting.

"Now, we will begin a secret ballot."

The results... were just as Seriel had expected.

"Alpheas must resign! Submit to the Inspection Department's investigation!"

"Hold Shirone's funeral! It's not a teacher's place to toy with the deceased!"

Over a hundred students, in line with the student council's decision, held up signs and protested outside the infirmary.

Chapter 103: Vajra (3)

At the front of the group, Amira rallied the students.

"The school must fully disclose the truth about this incident. Only by pressing charges against Headmaster Alpheas can we secure the future of this academy!"

"Exactly! Alpheas, step down! Hold a funeral for Shirone!"

Their shouts traveled through the infirmary windows, reaching Amy and her friends. Just then, the door flew open, and Serielle entered.

"Amy, it's a disaster!"

"What's going on? Why are they acting like this all of a sudden?"

Amy's confusion was understandable. She thought the student council meeting was wrapping up, yet now students were gathering, demanding Shirone's funeral.

"The graduating students have banded together to press charges against the headmaster. We thought we could at least protect Shirone, but that troublemaker Fermi stirred things up..."

Amy understood the situation without needing to see it.

With Fermi, it was entirely possible. The student council had apparently settled on removing the headmaster. Still, she couldn't entirely fault them. If the leader of the school had a moral failing, it was better for the future to address it.

But this was too extreme. That's why Fermi's behavior was infuriating. While it was the teachers' tepid responses that sparked the students' anger, it was Fermi who ultimately set the fuse alight.

"That bastard. He owes his life to Shirone, too."

"So, what do we do now, Amy?"

Biting her nails, Amy replied, "What else? We hold on."

Alpheas had decided to keep Shirone under observation for a while longer. The fact that he, as the one primarily responsible, had managed to convince the other teachers was itself something of a miracle.

Peeking out the window, Nade turned to glare at Iruki.

"Happy now? There's a whole crowd out there who share your view. Shouldn't you be out there with them?"

"If that's what you want, I could go."

Iruki shot back, unyielding. Ever since their fight that day, the two had remained tense around each other.

Serielle frowned and intervened.

"Enough. Bickering among ourselves won't change anything. We need to unite right now."

"Tch! You think this guy, Iruki, will join us? He's as heartless as they come."

"I said stop it. And Iruki, you need to restrain yourself too. The situation has become critical. Just a single word could sway public opinion, so stay here for now."

"I don't plan on leaving anyway."

Iruki rested his head on the table, lost in thought. It had been five days since Shirone's death, already longer than he'd expected.

'If the student council's moved, then the teachers won't hold out much longer. Maybe forty-eight hours...'

The atmosphere in the infirmary grew colder. Everyone was on edge, worn down by the ongoing turmoil.

Amy gently stroked Shirone's forehead. Reason dictated he was dead. But was clinging to hope in this situation truly rational?

'Please, please come back, Shirone...'

Amy couldn't be certain of Shirone's return. With five days since his heart stopped, certainty was already behind them. Now it was a matter of faith.

The woman kept a close watch on the red light emanating from Shirone's body. If it was a mechanism that emitted

high energy to vibrate particles, it could destroy any material in its path.

"Shirone, don't do this. That spell is too destructive. It doesn't suit your nature."

"I don't want to fight, either. But you intend to keep me trapped here. I can't allow that. I must return."

"Do you really think you can win against me?"

Shirone shook his head. He was being honest. Even if she was from the same dimension, her power was formidable enough for her to call herself a god. At the very least, she was on a level higher than Arcane.

Who was this woman, exactly? And where was this place? Shirone stopped thinking. At the very least, this wasn't where he was meant to be.

"Please, tell me how to return to my original world."

"Even if I told you, it's not possible. Attempting it would lead you to death once again."

"Even so, I think I need to try."

The woman didn't fear Shirone's magic. But the force of his laser wasn't something she could take lightly. She had to prevent the destruction of this world at all costs.

"Fine. I'll let you try. But promise me one thing: if you fail to return to your world and come back here, you'll submit to my will."

"What is the method to return?"

"I can't make any more concessions. Are you sure you still want to go through with it?"

Shirone didn't know what kind of frightening challenge she was implying, but his resolve didn't waver.

"Alright. But I won't give up, no matter what."

"Your life is your own. Use it however you wish."

The woman conjured a glass sphere before Shirone. Inside, a deep darkness was spinning.

"To return to your original world, Shirone, you must reverse the process by which you arrived here."

"I see."

“It’s not as simple as it sounds. You’ll have to revert from pure spirit back into a human. Humanity is a mixture of many unpleasant elements. If you can’t accept that, you’ll ultimately transform into something neither human nor anything else recognizable.”

The woman was certain Shirone would fail.

“The darkness you see now is a spot that cuts through space and time. We call it a black hole. You can use it to return to your original world.”

As the glass sphere vanished, a massive darkness materialized in front of Shirone.

“What do I need to do?”

“It’s simple. Enter it. It’s a spot connected to your physical body.”

“Thank you. I won’t forget your kindness.”

Shirone was sincere. Though he’d been hijacked, he wouldn’t have had the chance to return to his world if it weren’t for her.

“Don’t thank me prematurely. I don’t think you’ll succeed. If you want to give up, just come back here.”

Would such a situation ever come to pass? Shirone couldn’t say for sure. It was something he had yet to experience.

“Well, I’ll be going then.”

The woman narrowed her eyes as if she were sleepy and said, “Have a good journey.”

Shirone took his first step into the sphere. It felt similar to the moment he’d first entered the spot. As expected, he couldn’t locate an exit. No matter how far he walked, nothing changed.

Turning around by chance, Shirone was startled. The woman was still looking at him with sleepy eyes. Time wasn’t moving. He was trapped at the event horizon, where only extreme gravity existed.

‘There’s no escape. Getting out of here is absolutely impossible.’

Shirone finally understood the woman's warning. In a place where even time couldn't escape, he had no options.

Quick to accept reality, Shirone turned back in despair. He had to return to her. Better to live where there was at least someone, than be trapped here in eternal darkness.

'Wait... Maybe...'

Shirone stopped in his tracks. At the event horizon, time is eternally trapped. But he had the ability to produce time: the Photon Magic.

Sub-light speed, near-light speed, light speed, and super-light speed.

Photon mages classified speed into four levels. By Shirone's calculation, to pass the event horizon, he would need a speed faster than light—super-light speed.

"Super-light speed... is it even possible?"

Shirone could only reach sub-light speed at his level. If he added god particles, he might reach near-light speed, but he was still far from super-light speed.

'Think.'

Now that he had a solution, time wasn't an issue. After a long contemplation, his gaze sharpened. It could work.

Without a physical body, achieving super-light speed might just be possible.

'Immortal Function.'

Even at the speed of light, the vastness of space remained. But the limitless expansion of speed was instantaneous. The Immortal Function might hold the key to reaching super-light speed.

In any case, the priority was getting back. Shirone took a deep breath, casting the Photon Magic and simultaneously unleashing the Immortal Function.

The effect was immediate. His acceleration shook the Spirit Zone intensely as he approached sub-light speed, near-light speed, and then light speed.

"Uuugh...!"

Yet, he still couldn't reach super-light speed. Without a true understanding of what it meant to surpass time, he couldn't wield magic through omniscience. His only remaining option was to fully unleash the Immortal Function. Even if it might mean being erased again, he expanded his consciousness without hesitation.

Shirone's form shattered and broke down into particles. At last, something faster than light breached the event horizon, surging toward the light.

'It worked!'

Shirone was still conscious. Even with the full release of the Immortal Function, nothing could disturb particles within a black hole. The exit was visible in the distance. His physical body was waiting there.

'I'm coming! I'm finally coming back!'

Then, suddenly, his speed began to slow. Between his particles, strange particles began to cling, creating a sense that acted like voices and clouded Shirone's mind.

Consume. Consume. Consume. Consume. Consume.

Consume. Consume. Consume.

Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce.

Produce. Produce.

Shirone saw the exit drifting farther as he grew heavier. The particles intertwined, simple meanings evolving into more complex ones.

Ah, birth. Such a lowly existence.

I don't want to die. A mortal's life.

Shirone realized this was the process the woman had mentioned: becoming human. A being thrown into the world, harboring both desires and fears.

Perhaps every human heard these voices in their mother's womb.

"I won't lose! I'll return no matter what!"

To where? There's nowhere that welcomes you.

"To my world! Where my friends are waiting!"

They'll kill you. They'll prevent consumption and production. All that awaits you is the clash of desires, the painful struggle, and the journey toward inevitable death.

"Aaaah! I can't hear anything! No words can stop me!"

Shirone cried out with all his might. Yet as the combination progressed, the sounds around him grew louder.

Humans were ultimately beings made up of countless voices. Just as a solo is lost in a chorus, Shirone eventually lost his own voice.

Consume. Consume. Consume. Consume. Consume.

Consume. Consume. Consume.

Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce. Produce.

Produce. Produce.

Seven days since Shirone's death.

The student council was still protesting. Specifically, it was the radicals loyal to Amira.

In opposition, the conservative students blocked the entrance, preventing any access. Factions had splintered even within the centrists, and the number of protesters had doubled.

Most of the student body gathered in front of the building, protesting day and night, leaving Shirone's friends guarding him almost worn out.

"Hold a funeral for Shirone!"

"Hold it! Hold it!"

"Let Alpheas be judged by the Magic Association!"

"Judge him! Judge him!"

Serielle covered her ears. Even with the windows closed, the noise was unbearable.

"Aren't they going too far? Why are they so bent on tearing Shirone apart?"

Hearing her, Amy, who was resting her face on the adjacent bed, lifted her head.

"They probably have their reasons. Even those who disliked Shirone before are probably joining in."

“Is it Shirone’s fault he was exceptional? They’re just narrow-minded.”

“Well, that’s humanity. For every person who respects Shirone, there’s bound to be someone who rejects him.”

Chapter 104: Vajra (4)

Iruki, slumped over the table, spoke.

“Have you achieved some kind of enlightenment? Just yesterday, you were talking about chasing after them and beating them up.”

Amy didn't even have the energy to get angry. Iruki probably felt the same way. After a week of relentless stress, they both felt too drained to even lift a finger.

Amy, resting her chin on the bed, said, “Now that things have come to this, I get it. At least there are still people willing to fight for Shirone.”

Nade, who had been watching the protest from the window, interjected, “But most of our supporters are either in the lower or upper classes. Meanwhile, the protesters are mostly seniors. If they really come at us, we won't be able to hold them back.”

Serielle added, “But for now, we should be okay. We still have the teachers on our side. The Headmaster, and Teachers Siena and Ethella, they're with us.”

Nade responded, “You don't know what's going on, Serielle. Something's off... Their behavior has been suspicious since yesterday.”

“Hmm? In what way?”

Serielle turned to Nade, but it was Iruki who answered.

“It seems a few people are missing. Especially Amira and Fermi—it's strange that they're gone. At least one of them should be here rallying the others.”

Amy flared up, shouting, “Hey! Why do you always speak politely to Serielle, but keep speaking casually to me?”

Iruki averted his gaze, seemingly annoyed. He didn't really have a reason; he just assumed that since Amy was Shirone's girlfriend, she was his friend as well.

The infirmary door opened, and Alpheas entered with Siena and Ethella. The relentless pressure from the student council had visibly aged the teachers day by day.

"You've been through a lot. How is Shirone doing?"

"As you can see... still the same."

"Yes, there's nothing we can do."

Even Alpheas couldn't ignore his doubts anymore. A whole week had passed. If some omnipotent being could guarantee that Shirone would wake up, they would wait a year, even a decade. But no one could assure them that Shirone would ever come back to life. It was a race against time.

"I'll cast the spell on Shirone."

Amy and Serielle stepped aside. Alpheas placed his hand on Shirone's chest and cast a Slow spell. It was a preservation spell, harmless to the body.

After the spell was complete, Alpheas withdrew. This would allow Shirone to endure another day.

But how long could they keep this up? The teachers were silently supporting them now, but as time passed, voices of discontent would inevitably rise.

Siena stared intently at Shirone and then gently stroked his hair. The more she thought about it, the more it felt tragic and unfair. Such a promising mage, taken down before he could even fully bloom.

'I told them we should have stopped him.'

Shirone had successfully overcome the Overflow. But what he gained in return was constant exposure to the Immortal Function. At the time, Ethella had taken full responsibility. She wasn't looking to assign blame now. If Shirone were to die, she would spend the rest of her life consoling his soul.

"Teacher! Something's happening!"

Serielle shouted. Amy and Nade, who were also looking out the window, struggled to contain their anger. Siena walked to the window. Amira and Fermi, who had been absent until

yesterday, were now approaching the infirmary with documents in hand.

“On behalf of the students of Alpheas Magic Academy, we submit charges against all faculty members! We demand the handover of Headmaster Alpheas!”

Siena’s head throbbed. The worst-case scenario had happened. The student council had made an aggressive move, signaling their intention not only to hold Alpheas accountable but also to punish the other teachers.

If these charges were filed, the situation would spiral out of control. If the families of the student council got involved, the school would collapse beyond repair.

When Siena opened the window, the crowd immediately quieted.

“What is this commotion? Is it the student council’s duty to incite students and disrupt the school?”

Amira stepped forward toward the window.

“This isn’t incitement. We don’t want to go this far, either. That’s why we haven’t filed the charges yet. But there are too many questions. It’s already been seven days since Shirone’s death, yet none of the faculty has made any announcement.”

“Shirone isn’t dead. He’s only in a state of suspended animation.”

“There’s no such thing as suspended animation without a heartbeat. It’s also suspicious that his body hasn’t decayed. That’s only possible if Headmaster Alpheas is using magic, isn’t it?”

It seemed the student council had come to their own conclusions, and they were mostly right.

But in this world, there are situations where one can’t rely solely on results. The student council didn’t understand why Shirone had to be preserved in this way.

The root of the problem was Immortal Function. Even magic students couldn’t grasp the essence of Nirvana and could only react emotionally.

"You're correct. Shirone's decay is being prevented by the Slow spell."

Siena admitted this readily. Both the student council and the students blocking the entrance murmured among themselves.

"Are you confessing to your guilt?"

"You're too hasty, Amira. 'Guilt' is a word you'd use if the teachers were using Shirone as a shield to escape consequences."

"You may be right, Teacher. But we've seen no circumstantial evidence to justify this approach by the faculty. The student council can't understand why you're handling it this way."

"The faculty hasn't acknowledged Shirone's death, nor are we trying to escape responsibility. We're simply asking for your understanding."

"Teacher, we are saddened by Shirone's death as well. But the student council doesn't want to see our cherished school fall like this."

"I understand that you can't trust the teachers right now. But we have thought this through carefully and have made the best decision possible. Whether you believe it or not is up to you."

Amira considered Siena's words, wondering if the teachers knew something she'd missed. People tend to believe what they think is right.

But no matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't understand. Shirone was already dead. Honestly, it didn't matter whether he was dead or alive; the fact that all the teachers were shielding him was irritating.

'Is this the right path? Am I being rational? What if Shirone actually wakes up? But that's impossible...'

As student council president, Amira didn't want to press charges if she didn't have to. But if she backed down now, it would be the students who would suffer.

Watching, Fermi grew displeased with Amira's indecision. Fearing their plan might fall apart, he stepped forward himself.

"So we've reached an impasse. In that case, we'll have to use our final option."

Siena looked at Fermi with an annoyed expression. In her four years as a teacher, she had never encountered a student like him. He was exceptionally talented but even more skilled at concealing it.

He believed in lies, enjoyed controlling situations with his power—traits that, while useful for a mage, were not suitable for a student.

"Fine, go ahead and file your charges. Do whatever you want. In the end, you'll be the ones regretting it."

"Very well, we'll proceed that way! First, we'll retrieve Shirone's body and initiate the complaint process! Let's go! We're going to rescue Shirone with our own hands!"

Fermi led the senior students toward the infirmary. Now swept up in mob mentality, there was no one to stop them.

"Let's hold Shirone's funeral and report the teachers! The school belongs to the students, not the faculty!"

"Wait! Don't do this!"

Shirone's supporters, led by Maria, tried to block them, but they were quickly overpowered. Most of those with Fermi were seniors, and if it came down to force, numbers wouldn't matter.

"Isn't this too much? This is a matter of a fellow student's life!"

Mark, known for his grit, blocked their path. But the seniors leading the charge barely acknowledged him.

At that moment, glass shattered on the third floor. As shards fell, the crowd scattered. Nade had leapt from the building, and as the gusts from his Fly spell scattered dust on the ground, the crowd grimaced.

Nade's eyes burned with fierce determination as he slowly raised his head.

“Get lost, all of you, before I kill you. No one can lay a finger on Shirone.”

Faced with this situation, Amira pushed aside her hesitation and took action. The line had already been crossed, and if she lost momentum now, public opinion would turn against her as well.

“What do you think you’re doing? Do you think whining will solve anything? And threatening a senior, saying you’ll kill them? Where did you learn such language?”

Nade heard none of it. His only thought was that he had to protect Shirone.

“Do you want to take Shirone? Then come in, all of you. But I can’t guarantee your lives.”

Above Nade’s head, a bluish bolt of electricity appeared and began spreading powerful lightning around him. It was the electric spell Lightning. But more intimidating than that was the plasma emanating from him.

Amira, startled, took a step back.

‘A lower-class student able to create plasma...?’

To cast plasma magic, one must either generate an ultra-high-temperature current or simulate such a temperature using powerful magic.

However, the former method hadn’t yet been developed, so all plasma users had to use the latter technique—a feat so advanced it couldn’t be mastered through theory alone.

Iruki looked down at Nade with a dissatisfied expression.

‘What a fool. You held back all this time.’

In the entire school, Iruki was the only one who knew about Nade’s past. Five years ago, Nade had been a completely different person. But he had vowed never to reveal his true self again, putting on a mask. Now, though, he had cast that mask aside, all to protect Shirone.

‘This is going to make me feel guilty,’ Iruki thought with a bitter smile, turning away. He quietly slipped out of the infirmary as if he’d never been there.

The protesters were visibly taken aback. Even in the senior class, students knew how dangerous plasma was, especially with Lycan, who was nicknamed the Electric Monster, among them.

Nade glared at Amira and spoke.

"I'm warning you one last time. Get lost."

"Why go to these lengths? What does protecting a friend who's already dead mean to you?"

"Shirone isn't dead."

Tears welled up in Nade's fierce eyes.

"What do you know? What right do you have to speak so casually about Shirone?"

Seeing Nade's tears, Amira felt pity for him. But she wasn't about to back down.

"If it's a physical confrontation you're after, I won't stand by idly. I'll take you down before any students get hurt."

Amira stepped back, gathering her fists at her abdomen.

Wisps of grayish clouds billowed around her and began to swirl. It was Cloud magic, a type of climate magic with excellent synergy with electricity. Given Amira's level, she could likely absorb Nade's electricity into her clouds and turn it back against him.

"Really... Why do things that you can't handle later?"

Iruki walked out from the entrance. Nade frowned. What was he planning to meddle in this time? But Iruki didn't stop by Amira; he stopped beside Nade.

"What's this? Don't get in the way. This is my fight."

"But from now on, it's my fight too."

"Aren't you on their side?"

Nade's tone was curt. Although there was no resentment between them, Iruki believed Shirone was dead, so he had no reason to involve himself in this battle.

Chapter 105: Vajra (5)

“Are we really dividing into sides like children? I mean it—I don’t want those guys taking Shirone.”

Amira looked at him in disbelief. His loyalty to a friend was admirable, but in the end, they were just lower-class students. There was no way they could stand up to a group comprised mostly of graduating seniors.

“You kids think you’re so tough because we’ve been too soft on you? Do you really think you can beat us?”

At Amira’s signal, the entire group of protesters entered the Spirit Zone. The overwhelming power of the seniors’ zone radiated through Nade and Iruki’s senses.

‘Heh heh heh... heheheh...’

Watching their standoff, Fermi shook with laughter, barely containing his amusement. The situation struck him as almost unbearably hilarious.

‘Yes, fight, fight. Tear each other apart.’

Fermi knew well that profit emerges from chaos and conflict. In this sense, war was the ultimate “blue ocean”.

Accumulating wealth isn’t possible unless the few victors exploit the many losers.

Fermi knew how to win in war. You had to suppress your emotions. Humanity’s vulnerability ultimately lay in emotions. Those who could manipulate others’ emotions ruled the world.

‘Grieve. Rage. Shout that only you are right. That’s how you set the board. And of course, I’ll take all the winnings.’

Siena, watching the situation from the infirmary, turned her gaze to Fermi.

‘All of this is your doing, isn’t it? You wicked scoundrel.’

She was furious but couldn’t bring herself to accuse him.

Fermi’s philosophy was far from shallow. Perhaps he was

even taking advantage of Shirone's situation.

Alpheas approached Siena.

"There's nothing more we can do."

"Headmaster..."

"I suppose this is as far as we go. We have no choice but to accept the student council's demand."

Amy cried out.

"Headmaster! No! What about Shirone?"

"Amy, I'm sorry."

"How can you do this? You know, Headmaster! You know that Shirone isn't dead yet!"

"No. The truth is... I really don't know."

Stunned, Amy froze in place. Alpheas placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Amy, no one truly knows Shirone's condition. We just believe. I, too, believe that Shirone will return."

"Then why..."

"But look around. Even students who have nothing to do with this are fighting, aren't they? How we got here doesn't matter anymore. I can't stand by while my students tear each other apart."

To Alpheas, every student was as precious as Shirone. But now, these students were setting up a Spirit Zone to kill each other. Focusing only on Shirone in this situation would be selfish.

"I'll go myself and inform his parents. We'll arrange a funeral. We can discuss any disciplinary actions afterward."

Amy sank into a chair, feeling her strength drain away.

Seriel approached, her eyes welling with tears.

"Amy, what do we do? Shirone, Shirone is..."

Amy felt no different. In the end, Shirone hadn't returned.

The moment Alpheas acknowledged this, it felt as though Shirone had vanished from her heart as well.

"Shirone..."

The atmosphere in front of the building was on the verge of exploding. Everyone was in Spirit Zone, and if anyone made

a move, deadly magic could erupt at any moment. Amira felt a wave of doubt. Was this really the right path? Could the logic of students pointing Spirit Zones at each other and casting lethal spells justify anything? She bit her lip and looked back and forth between Nade and Iruki. Nade was already in full combat mode, but Iruki seemed as if he might still be open to dialogue.

"You, you're Iruki, right? The one with Savant abilities?" Iruki didn't respond.

"Do we really have to do this? Your friend's being too emotional. But you're different, aren't you?"

"Sorry, but I'm emotional too right now."

"Lies. But even so, it doesn't matter. You know it, don't you? Do you really think your friend is still alive? Is that your conclusion?"

"A conclusion, huh? Then there's only one answer."

Iruki, lost in thought for a moment, lowered his gaze before looking sharply at Amira.

"Shirone isn't dead."

Nade looked at Iruki in shock. Until just recently in the infirmary, he had insisted Shirone was dead. Nade couldn't understand his sudden change of heart.

"Iruki, you..."

Iruki continued staring straight ahead. Amira felt her disappointment deepen. She had expected more from him, thinking he was one of the most rational people on campus, but he was still just another high-level student.

"If you really believe that, I suppose you must have some logic to convince us."

"Of course."

Amira blinked in surprise. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Then explain. Why do you think Shirone is still alive?"

"Let's just say... it has to do with the time. It's four o'clock... now."

Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong.

The clock tower chimed.

Iruki knew the time without looking at the clock because he was a Savant. The method was simple: he counted every second from a fixed starting point.

Nade realized why Iruki had been so quiet lately.

‘He’s been counting seconds. But since when?’

Amira stared blankly at the clock tower, then turned her head, realization dawning on her.

“So that’s it. You’re just insane. What does time have to do with Shirone’s death?”

Iruki didn’t respond. He had expected some margin of error, but this was taking longer than he had anticipated.

‘Four o’clock, seven seconds... eight... nine... What’s going on?’

Amira finished her thoughts. She was sure she was right—trying to reason with an emotional Nade and an already mad Iruki had been a wasted effort.

“We’re taking Shirone. Let’s see how long you can last against the graduating seniors.”

Nade’s eyes filled with killing intent as he sensed the pressure radiating from the best mages in the academy. Just then, a familiar but unexpected voice sounded.

“You all seem to be having fun. Mind if I join? This is my specialty, after all.”

Everyone looked around, but they couldn’t locate the source of the voice. Then, from the shadows cast by the building, two figures—one man and one woman—emerged. It was Canis and Arin.

Amira’s eyes flared with anger.

“You two! Do you have any idea where you are? I’ll have you detained immediately!”

“Go ahead and try. Not that I plan on running,” Canis replied with a snort, approaching Iruki.

Iruki scowled, visibly irritated.

“You’re late.”

“You said by four, didn’t you?”

"It's past twenty-seven seconds."

Canis bit back his irritation, calming himself. Clearing up old grudges came first.

"Here, the documents you asked for."

Iruki quickly took the papers from Canis and flipped through them. Nade, curious, leaned over to look at the document, and asked:

"Iruki, what is that?"

"A report from the Yongroe Institute. I took a tissue sample from Shirone and sent it in."

"What? When did you do that? And how did it arrive from the capital in just five days?"

It would have taken four days by carriage alone, and Yongroe would still need time for analysis. Realistically, the round-trip journey should have taken no less than forty-eight hours.

"I asked Canis to help. He knows the geography of Baschka well."

Canis clenched his teeth, recalling the ordeal. He had made it on time, but the journey was grueling. By day, he traveled by carriage, and by night, he used Dark Port. Though he moved faster at night, he often lost consciousness from exhausting his magic.

"Anyway, with this, I've cleared my debt to Shirone."

Canis didn't feel particularly guilty about Shirone's death. But as a fellow disciple, he felt a responsibility for Shirone's sacrifice due to Arcane's atrocities.

"Well, not that it matters to me. But I'll be sure to tell Shirone as much."

Amira started to feel uneasy as the situation shifted.

Especially since the Yongroe Institute was led by Iruki's father, the most respected institution in the kingdom.

"What are you playing at? Just because it's the Mercodine Institute doesn't mean we'll back down!"

The name Mercodine certainly held weight, but the families of the gathered students were no pushovers either. In terms

of numbers, it was still a fair power struggle.

"Don't worry. I used a pseudonym. If my name appeared, who knows what stunts the old man might pull. The important part here is what's in the report, isn't it?"

"Hmph! What, does it have a magic spell to bring back the dead?"

Iruki closed the report and began reading from the beginning.

"Title: A Report on Immortal Function and Cessation of Vital Activity."

The protesters, startled by the title, fell silent. Those in the infirmary on the third floor also perked up at Iruki's words.

"Analysis of tissue samples from the subject. Non-biological suspension of vital activity. No organic alterations were observed in samples taken twenty-four hours after death. Data attached."

Iruki turned the page.

"Based on the above data, although the subject appears to have ceased vital activity, it is premature to conclude this as a cessation of life or complete absence of vitality."

Iruki emphasized this section, sensing its significance.

"At Yongroe, they classify heart stoppage into three cases: First, complete cessation of heart function. Second, temporary cessation of heart function. Third, a state in which the heart appears to be stopped but is not."

Amira shouted in disbelief.

"What nonsense is that? The first case makes sense, but the other two are ridiculous!"

Expecting this reaction, Iruki turned to the next page.

"Explanation of cases. Though an organism can be considered deceased upon heart stoppage, there are two new cases where this assumption may not apply in relation to Immortal Function."

In the tense silence, Iruki raised his voice slightly.

"Case 1: If mental expansion is delayed by a special event, the body may enter a temporary functional pause until the

mind reaches a conclusion. See attached report.”

Iruki nodded in agreement, flipping to the next page.

“Case 2: Even if mental expansion has concluded, a time discrepancy from the observer’s perspective may exist. In this scenario, life activity remains, but a spatial-temporal barrier prevents external confirmation of that activity. See attached report.”

Iruki skimmed through the remaining pages and finally reached the conclusion.

“Based on these magical findings, it is determined that the subject, who currently lies in the infirmary...”

Iruki held out the report from Yongroe in front of the protestors.

“...Arian Shirone cannot be considered deceased.”

The protesters, who had been so loud, fell into silence. They, too, were mages and understood that no one could easily dispute an opinion from Yongroe.

“Iruki, since when did you...?”

Iruki smiled faintly as he looked at Nade’s dazed expression.

“What do you think? I found a way to bring back the dead.”

Nade pursed his lips sheepishly. There really was a way.

While everyone else had drowned in grief and clung to false hope, Iruki had fought on, all alone.

“Go on, see for yourself.”

Iruki handed the report to Amira. She took it without a word, looking at the cover page first. The seal of Yongrye was indeed stamped on it.

Further struggle was pointless. The kingdom’s foremost academic institution was proving that the teachers’ judgment had been right. Even if a complaint were filed, the court would likely side with the academy.

“You’ve worked hard, Amira.”

Alpheas appeared at the entrance to the building.

“Headmaster.”

Chapter 106: Vajra (6)

For the first time, Amira's eyes, which had been fixed firmly, began to waver. Her steely resolve melted when she saw Alpheas's face.

And why wouldn't it? He had been there for her since the days when she wet the bed.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for making you go through this trouble."

Amira bowed her head, struggling to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill.

"I am not trying to cause you pain, Headmaster. It's because people as respected as you shouldn't leave mistakes unaddressed. And if things keep going this way, even the school itself might be..."

"Of course, I understand. And I don't hold any resentment toward any of you. You all are the future of this school."

Alpheas looked at Amira with sympathy. To him, every student gathered here was like a child he had raised himself. He felt only regret that he had caused them any pain.

Amira lifted her head again, her tearful eyes meeting Alpheas's gaze. He was smiling kindly, just like in her memories from childhood.

"Won't you trust me just this once? When Shirone's matter is settled, I will handle everything transparently. No matter what punishment may come, I will stand before my beloved students with pride. I will not run away."

Hot tears rolled down Amira's cheek.

"You'll really come back, won't you? The one I look up to..."

"Of course. There won't be a single deceit in my punishment. I promise you that, on my lifelong honor."

Amira wiped her tears with the back of her hand. She couldn't allow herself to cry in front of Alpheas. She wanted

to show him that she had grown, that she was far more mature than when she was a child.

“Understood. Since you say so, the Student Council will accept the Headmaster’s proposal and review the matter once more. I hope you do nothing that would bring dishonor to your name.”

Alpheas smiled with satisfaction. She had grown into such a thoughtful, capable student. The little girl who had once run up to him with a lisp, calling him “Headmastah!” had grown so much.

‘Erina, it seems my life wasn’t all for nothing after all.’

With the Student Council president’s decision, the demonstrators dispersed immediately. The conservative faction, which had taken control of the entrance, scattered, leaving the front of the building desolate within moments. Only Fermi remained, scratching his head awkwardly.

“Well, I was doing well, and then I messed it all up at the end.”

Alpheas burst into hearty laughter.

“Haha! Looks like things didn’t go as you planned this time, Fermi.”

“What can I do? Honestly, I think it’s kind of unfair for the Headmaster to get involved.”

“Isn’t it time for you to graduate? You’ll be twenty-two next year.”

“Well, I don’t know. There’s no other place that pays as well as here, so...”

“Oh, really?”

Alpheas knew well enough that Fermi was one of the primary instigators of this incident, but he only felt pride in this student who had grown so much.

“Besides, this place is still fun. Well then, I’ll be off.”

Without further farewell, Fermi saluted and walked away. He likely wouldn’t be coming back to the Student Council after today. Peaceful places didn’t pay well, after all.

As they headed toward the infirmary, Iruki and Nade walked in silence. It had been the first serious fight they'd had in five years, and the awkwardness lingered. But, as usual, Nade couldn't stand the tension.

"Hey! How can you just stay silent like that? You didn't have to hide things from me, did you? You were just trying to look cool, weren't you?"

"How ridiculous. Why would I strategize with someone doing a backstroke in a sea of sorrow? Besides, if any information leaks, the other side will just come up with countermeasures. Why can't you get that through your head?"

"Fine, I'm an idiot! Think you're so great, huh?"

The awkwardness faded the moment they started arguing, whether shouting or cursing. With a concerned look, Iruki asked, "By the way, what about you? Even if you're mad, isn't it bad to show your old temper like that?"

Nade clutched his head, clearly full of regret.

"I don't know. I didn't have time to think about anything else in the moment. Anyway, it's fine as long as we didn't fight."

"I guess I was just too cool for you to handle. You probably forgot all about it already."

"Yeah, right. So, you planned it all along?"

"Heh, so what? Bow down to me."

Their conversation ended as the infirmary door opened, and Amy came out to meet them. Iruki scratched his head, feeling awkward. Talking to Amy comfortably was still difficult, even if he could do so with Nade.

"Well, anyway, things turned out like this. At least Shirone's safe, so..."

But as he was about to brush it off, tears streamed from Amy's eyes.

"Thank you. Thank you, Iruki..."

Iruki's face went pale with dread.

"Tch, whatever."

Not good with emotions, he quickly darted into the infirmary to escape. But waiting for him there, arms wide open, was Serielle, another bundle of emotions.

Iruki deftly dodged Serielle's embrace with a boxer's weaving technique, taking refuge near Shirone.

"Ugh, this is why I can't deal with women."

At the door, Serielle and Amy hugged each other and started bouncing in joy. Even Nade joined them, whirling around the infirmary.

"Yay! He's alive! Shirone is alive!"

A gentle smile crept onto Iruki's lips amid the bright atmosphere. But deep down, he felt uneasy. Officially, Shirone's death had only been postponed; nothing about the situation had truly improved.

Shirone still lay motionless, as if in deep sleep. The memories of their promise to stay together even after graduation were still vivid, but it felt unreal with him lying there as if dead.

'Come back. I'll wait, however long it takes.'

Shirone regained consciousness. Or, more accurately, he went from madness to madness once more. His mind spun like a coin between the north and south poles, shifting rapidly between clarity and insanity.

It felt like he had gone mad a thousand times. He struggled desperately to hold onto his unhinged mind, but the powerful surge invading his core began to alter his very nature.

"You were a child they found. Your parents would have been fine with any child, not just you. Do you think raising you was ever easy for them? They must have regretted it, thinking they never should have taken you in. Your real parents wouldn't have thought that way."

"No! That can't be true!"

"You're a bastard. Anyone could be their adopted child. They aren't your parents."

As Shirone's spirit trembled, a wail of his soul echoed.
Oooooooooo!

"Your essence is that of a ruthless predator. With your superior abilities, you trample everyone beneath you. Your power inevitably brings failure to others. You're a worthless tumor to the world."

Oooooooooo!

Shirone descended into madness again. He felt as if his mind emitted a foul stench. If he were to come together like this, what would he become? A demon? A fiend? A monster? He didn't know.

His madness accelerated, reaching the threshold, and at that extreme, two natures began to coexist in his mind. It was a new world.

In a transcendent mental state that no drug could ever replicate, Shirone finally discovered the one way to hold onto his sanity.

Returning to the origin.

If the limit of a circle's rotation is the extreme, the origin is its starting point. Yet within it lay endless possibilities that encompassed the entire world.

Some called it the Spot. Others, the Spirit Zone. Some, the Taiji. But a mage had named it this:
Infinity.

Shirone's eyes opened wide. The Spirit Zone was drawn into his mind, and the multitude of particles scattering at lightning speed began to restore themselves as a spirit body.

In the center of infinity, Shirone stood unwavering. The tormenting voices faded, and his spirit grew as solid as diamond.

He had attained the state of Vajra, reached only after thousands of struggles.

The indestructible and irresistible state.

With his body blazing with brilliance, Shirone looked toward the exit. No confusion remained. He stepped forward, letting

the warm, bright light at the exit fuse with him.

A small, transparent glass bead floated before his eyes.

Small enough to fit in his palm, it held within it the temple he had just left, where a woman looked up at him.

"So you're leaving after all, Shirone."

"I'm sorry, but I want to return."

"No need to apologize. Honestly, I didn't expect you to succeed. You've earned this."

The woman's willingness to let him go weighed down his steps. Perhaps that's why, though it no longer mattered, he had to ask.

"Were you ever lonely?"

The woman blinked, then smiled warmly.

"You're a kind person, Shirone. But gods don't feel loneliness. I'm only a little sad you're leaving. Just a little."

"Thank you for bringing me back to life. I had to say this."

Her expression grew momentarily serious.

"Remember this: there will be no second chance. Now that you've reached state of Vajra, you're beyond any invitation I could extend."

Shirone nodded firmly and turned toward the exit. As his mind was pulled into a different dimension, he felt the warmth of the light enveloping him.

'Finally, I'm going back.'

In the fading consciousness, he heard the woman's voice.

Please send my regards to the Headmaster.

Even in his hazy state, Shirone wondered. How did she know Headmaster Alpheas? But his thoughts quickly faded, and his spirit was drawn into his physical body.

Ten days after Shirone's death.

"Ugh."

Amy woke up, rubbing her sleepy eyes. As she stretched her back in the chair, her bones cracked. Staying up night after night left her feeling as if her brain were still asleep even if her body moved.

Looking around, she saw the others still asleep. After a drink of water and washing her face, she approached Shirone.

"Shirone, I hope today you'll..."

Her voice caught in her throat. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and a shiver ran down her spine, leaving her shoulders, neck, and face trembling.

Shirone's eyes were open.

"Huh? Huh?"

Amy quickly called out to Nade and Iruki, who were sleeping on makeshift bedding on the floor.

"H-Here... over here..."

She couldn't form coherent words. At the very least, she needed to make a sound, but her throat felt like it was blocked. So she tried her final option: she took a deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and screamed.

"AAAAAAAH!"

Nade and Iruki bolted awake at her piercing scream that shook the infirmary.

"What? What?!"

Into Daily Life (1)

Alpheas calmed his racing heart and extended a hand. Seeing Shirone's open eyes had shocked him, even as an official 4th-class mage.

Currently, Shirone was under a Slow spell. It must have taken him all night just to lift his eyelids. To truly know if he was alive, the spell would have to be removed.

Alpheas placed his hand on Shirone's chest and reversed time. But Shirone still showed no signs of movement. What would happen next was up to the heavens.

"Haah!"

Then, Shirone took a deep breath and raised his upper body. The faces of those watching anxiously brightened. But Shirone looked as if he had returned from hell, his face pale with fear.

"What... What happened?"

He was overwhelmed by the sudden intake of air. In the slowed state, the world had been an abstract painting of colors. As the scenery returned to normal, he saw the faces of his friends, with Amy and the others teary-eyed behind Alpheas.

Chapter 107: Into Daily Life (2)

From Shirone's perspective, not much time had passed. He had met the woman within the Immortal Function and escaped through the black hole, and that was it. Yet, ten days had already passed in reality.

Shirone awkwardly smiled and raised a hand.

"Haha, hi?"

"Hi? Hi, my foot, you jerk!"

"Ugh!"

Amy punched Shirone in the face. Although it didn't hurt, the force of her swing sent him sprawling back onto the bed. Shirone looked at her with a teary expression.

"Ouch! Why'd you hit me all of a sudden?"

Amy's face was streaked with tears.

"You jerk, making me worry so much... You terrible guy!"

Shirone blinked in confusion, overwhelmed by the speed of everything happening around him. But then, as he looked closer, he recognized her emotions and responded with a warm smile. Amy's tears told him everything he needed to know about what had happened in his absence.

"I'm sorry... for putting you all through that..."

"Shirone's back!"

Nade and Iruki pushed Amy forward, forcing her into Shirone's arms as they practically tackled him back onto the bed. Red-faced and embarrassed, Amy shrieked.

"Ah! Get off me!"

"Ow! That hurts! Seriously, it hurts!"

Shirone let out a pained cry, mostly from embarrassment rather than any real pain. Feeling like he wouldn't be able to

look Amy in the eyes if they stayed like this, he twisted his body forcefully, sending his friends tumbling to the floor.

“Whew, what was that all about?”

Sitting on the bed, Shirone looked as though he’d just survived a bombardment. Meanwhile, Amy was on the floor nursing her back, chiding Nade and Iruki with a mix of pain and frustration.

“Well, what a dramatic welcome. Youth is truly something.”

Noticing Alpheas, Shirone straightened his expression. The fact that the headmaster himself was here told him how severe things must have been.

Shirone turned to Nade, asking the most pressing question on his mind.

“What happened to Arcane? And the others? What exactly went down?”

Nade, who was still getting scolded by Amy, looked at him incredulously.

“Is that what you’re worried about? You were dead for ten days!”

“What? Ten days? And dead?”

“Of course, you fool! Your heart had stopped. How do you think you could have survived that? Now explain what happened!”

Shirone fell silent, shocked. He knew he had to tell them what he’d gone through, but he wasn’t sure where to start. The door to the infirmary opened, and the teachers came in. Seeing Shirone awake, Siena looked stunned. Though she had prayed for his recovery, seeing him in person was an overwhelming experience.

She hadn’t reached Shirone’s level of enlightenment, but she could imagine the sheer horror and pain of returning to one’s body after having the mind practically torn apart.

‘I’m so glad you’re back. Thank you.’

Siena smiled and cast a sidelong glance at Ethella, who had been wracked with guilt for the past ten days. As expected, she looked on the verge of tears as she approached Shirone.

“Shirone.”

“I’m sorry, teacher. I... again...”

But before he could finish, Ethella pulled him into a tight embrace.

“I’m so sorry. This is my fault. I should’ve been more careful. I promise this won’t happen again.”

To his friends, it was a beautiful, heartwarming scene, but Shirone was mortified. Ethella hugged him so tightly he could barely breathe. Embarrassment aside, he genuinely felt like he might suffocate.

“Um... Teacher?”

“Yes?”

“Please... I can’t breathe.”

“Oh my!”

As Shirone’s muffled voice emerged, Ethella quickly released him, looking apologetic.

“Sorry. I was so happy, I couldn’t control myself...”

Shirone, face pale, took a deep breath. Yet, this too was a sensation of the real world. Relieved to be back, he smiled.

“It finally feels like I’ve really returned.”

Seeing his friends scowl at him, Shirone realized his mistake and waved his hands defensively.

“No, it’s not like that. I didn’t mean it in that way, it’s just that...”

“Oh, really? Then what do you mean?”

Amy grabbed his cheeks and pulled.

“What? Am I not real enough for you?”

“No! I didn’t mean it like that!”

Nade and Iruki burst into laughter, while Alpheas, watching Shirone interact with his friends, smiled in satisfaction and quietly slipped out of the infirmary. Now, he knew, he’d be the busiest person around.

“Headmaster.”

Shirone, who had also slipped out, closed the infirmary door behind him and approached Alpheas.

“What is it? You should be resting for a while. Catch up with your friends, learn what happened. Besides, the academy will remain closed for some time.”

“Yes, thank you. It’s just... I have a question.”

“Hmm? A question?”

Shirone told him everything, sparing no detail—from the moment he entered the realm of infinity to his journey back to this world through the black hole.

Alpheas initially listened with interest, but as the story continued, his expression grew more serious. When Shirone spoke of the woman’s powers, Alpheas closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

“Did she say she knew me?”

“Yes. She told me to send you her regards. It’s a bit hazy, but I think that’s what she said.”

Shirone wondered if he’d overstepped. Alpheas’s reaction was much grimmer than he’d anticipated.

“Yes, I think I know who she is.”

“What? You know her?”

Shirone’s eyes widened. Alpheas was a brilliant mage, but the woman had dwelled in a realm beyond life itself. The fact that Shirone had met people from two entirely different worlds seemed uncanny.

But Alpheas thought differently. It was no coincidence.

Shirone’s encounter with her was destined from the moment he attained the Immortal Function.

“Who is she, exactly?”

“Adrias Miro. Back then, she was known as the Labyrinth of Time and Space. She specialized in Scale Magic and was my disciple.”

Shirone’s face was blank with shock. He hadn’t expected her to be Alpheas’s disciple. Even more surprising was that her abilities, which he’d thought divine, were simply magic.

“What is Scale magic?”

Alpheas scratched his brow, trying to find the right words.

“Shirone, in the world of magic, those who reach the Immortal Function are called Unlockers.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“It should make things easier to explain then. Miro is an Unlocker as well. Since she was young, her curiosity was immense. She kept delving deeper and deeper, into a world larger than the universe itself, and into worlds smaller than particles. Scale magic is something only those who understand the boundlessness of space and time can wield.”

Shirone recalled the moment he met Miro. Indeed, her main power, the glass orb, manipulated the relativity of space and time at will.

“Miro said she had been watching over me the whole time. Is that possible?”

“There’s no need to worry. Miro exists in a different dimension from you. However, when you unlocked the Immortal Function, you might have momentarily reached the same dimension. Miro was likely waiting for that exact moment.”

“But why me, specifically? Unlockers are rare, but according to Arcane, there are more than just a few of us. Surely there are others far more skilled than me.”

Alpheas stroked his beard, hesitating. What he was about to say was a classified secret known only to teachers with more than 20 years of experience.

“Miro is the founding president of the Paranormal Supernatural Science Society.”

Shirone thought of Miro’s face. He was shocked to learn that she founded the research society he belonged to. And since she was the first president, she was from nearly 20 years ago, yet she hadn’t seemed to age.

“Miro wasn’t attached to appearances. She believed there were too many things that couldn’t be explained by knowledge alone. With her colleagues, she founded the research society here in Istas. Even the current president of

the Tormia Magic Association, Micaea Gaold, was one of the early members.”

Shirone imagined the members from back then. According to Nade, the master key to Istas’s magic vault was made by someone with the same Savant ability as Iruki. It wasn’t Miro, and it wasn’t Gaold either. He had a rough sense of just how talented the founding members must have been. While Shirone was deep in thought, Alpheas was also lost in memories of 18 years ago. Miro had been a kind child—if only not for the incident that day. Realizing he had left something out, Alpheas turned back to Shirone.

“Shirone, do you happen to know the total number of students enrolled?”

It didn’t seem he was asking for an answer, as Alpheas continued immediately.

“Of course, the total number always fluctuates. Some graduate, some take a leave, and others face disciplinary action. But regardless of the total, there’s always one person missing from this school.”

Alpheas looked out the window as he spoke.

“Miro never graduated. She’s still here, staying at this school.”

Shirone gulped, feeling as though he were hearing a spooky school legend. But what did “staying” mean? She was supposedly living in another dimension, wasn’t she?

In that moment, Shirone’s mind recalled Scale magic.

“Then... could it be...?”

Alpheas nodded.

“Yes, Miro resides within Istas. It’s in a higher dimension created through Scale magic. Those who know call it the Upper Layer.”

Alpheas placed a hand on Shirone’s shoulder.

“Promise me, Shirone. You won’t speak of this to anyone.

The Upper Layer is nothing you need to be concerned with. Never, ever get involved with it. It could bring chaos to this world.”

Shirone found himself unable to respond right away. The unknown world, Unlockers, Scale magic—all of it stirred something in his heart. He wasn't one to rush headlong into danger, but saying he'd never involve himself would be lying in some way or another.

Sighing, as if he had expected this reaction, Alpheas spoke. "If you truly want to know about Miro, I'll allow you to investigate the Kergo Ruins. This isn't to pacify you. The Upper Layer is too dangerous to delve into directly. Please, just heed this warning."

Only then did Shirone nod. There had to be a good reason Alpheas was so strict about this. He, too, wanted to approach it cautiously.

"Understood. But the thought of her staying here in Istas is pretty unnerving. I feel like I won't be able to sleep in the research society room. She could appear at any moment."

"Don't worry. Miro will never leave the space she created."

Shirone tilted his head, realizing that Alpheas's certainty implied he had a way to know this.

"She's an incredibly skilled person, but is there some special reason for that?"

With a sad look in his eyes, Alpheas gazed out the window. It wasn't something he could say with absolute certainty, but he knew Miro would never return.

"For Miro, this world... is a place of unending sorrow."

Alpheas, Canis, and Arin left for the capital, Baschka, to be questioned by the Magic Association. According to the teachers, the temporary school closure would continue until the society made its decision.

Shirone stayed in the infirmary. Since his heart had been inactive for ten days, the medical team wanted to monitor his condition. Shirone, wanting to take a break from everything for a while, spent time with his friends, chatting.

"Shirone, I'm sorry. You must have felt really hurt."

Serielle said this, looking tearful. If there was anything she regretted after regaining her memory, it was that she had pushed Shirone away coldly the day he brought her coffee.

"It's okay. It was because of the magic. You didn't do anything wrong, Senior Serielle."

"But still, how could I forget about you?"

"Really, it's fine. Please don't dwell on it."

Serielle's eyes softened like a gentle fawn's.

"Shirone, you're so kind. So, what now? Will you demand my body as payment?"

"Huh?"

Chapter 108: Into Daily Life (3)

Shirone's face shifted to utter bewilderment, and his friends looked no different. Amy shook her head, pressing her fingers to her temples as she spoke.

"Serielle, what kind of books have you been reading lately?"

"Oh! This one, actually!"

Serielle eagerly pulled out a novel she'd been waiting to show off. Its provocative red cover was emblazoned with the title *Primal Snare*.

"It's the hottest book at the stores these days. It's about a married nobleman who falls in love with his maid, and there's this one line where he says, 'I've broken your plate. Now, what will you do? Will you demand my body in compensation?' And then he ties her up with ropes and..."

"Stop! That's enough!"

Amy raised her hand to interrupt, sensing that this was a topic better left alone.

"Why stop now? It was just getting to the good part."

"Serielle, I know you're into novels, but please don't confuse fiction with reality. Books like that capture readers with nothing but provocative and sensational scenes."

"Hmph! You just don't get it because you haven't read it. If you tried it even once, you'd be hooked on this world too. I could lend it to you if you'd like?"

Serielle held *Primal Snare* out to Amy, who quickly looked away, sensing that accepting this would mean enduring Serielle's analysis for at least a week.

With a sigh, Shirone leaned back against the cushion.

"Well, today's my last day in the infirmary. Thanks for stopping by so often. You too, Senior Serielle."

“Oh, don’t say that! Honestly, it was a nice break from studying. Amy and I are in our final year, and the workload has been grueling, so a breather like this was welcome.” Amy didn’t deny it. The relentless competition in class rankings had been stressing everyone out, so the temporary school closure felt like a welcome rain after a drought for the seniors.

Then Serielle’s expression turned serious.

“I’m worried about the headmaster, though. Honestly, his decision surprised me. The incident could’ve been dealt with within the Creas district, but he insisted on submitting himself to a full inquiry by the Magic Association.”

Alpheas had voluntarily filed the complaint. Although he was respected enough across the continent to have quashed the situation himself, he had chosen to accept all the Student Council’s claims. The matter ultimately escalated to the Magic Association’s notorious Third Division of Inquiry.

“They call the Third Division the Association’s special prosecutor. They enforce the law strictly, with no room for personal connections. Even Headmaster Alpheas might not avoid disciplinary action.”

Shirone found himself seeing it as a good thing.

“The headmaster has lived with this burden for forty years. If accepting disciplinary action would lessen his load, then I think it’s the right thing to do.”

Nade chimed in.

“Let’s wait and see. Who are we worrying about here? He’s Alpheas, a publicly recognized 4th-class mage. Once the school break ends, we’ll all be busy again, so we should rest up now while we can.”

“Yes, I think that’s best.”

Shirone turned to look out the window.

The afternoon sun filtered in, casting a warm, drowsy light.

Baschka, the capital.

The view of Baschka from the underground mountain range showed the royal palace towering skyward, with the capital's key institutions radiating outward in concentric circles. Locals say the buildings visible from the mountain symbolize the nation's core institutions.

One of those was the Magic Association. This 18-story building managed all mage affairs in the Kingdom of Tormia, coordinating with other institutions to oversee mage society's surveillance and intelligence missions—a central organ of the state.

The Association was a place every mage aspired to visit at least once, but Thadd, who'd been appointed to lead Alpheas, Canis, and Arin, felt like he was being dragged to the slaughter.

"Master, are you sure this is the best choice?"

"This is what I wanted. My only regret is that I didn't do this sooner."

Alpheas's resolve was firm, though Thadd hadn't really asked with any hope of changing his mind. He only wanted to confirm his mentor's determination, knowing that once they crossed the Association's threshold, there would be no turning back.

"Understood. I'll wait until the trial concludes."

Alpheas looked relaxed. Taking Canis and Arin with him, he went to the Inquiry Division and turned himself in. Each was placed in separate rooms, where they awaited the next day's proceedings.

The following morning, Alpheas was called to the investigation room first. Canis and Arin waited their turn in isolation, surrounded by magical control devices that prevented them from accessing the Spirit Zone or even using their Harvest abilities.

After about three hours, they received their call.

"Canis, Arin. Come out."

Though their charges hadn't yet been proven, the Association officials were already treating them like

criminals. They must have heard Alpheas's preliminary report.

Silently, Canis and Arin followed the guards' instructions. Entering the corridor to the investigation room, they spotted Alpheas approaching from the opposite side. Canis planned to pass by him without a word, but just as they were about to cross paths, Alpheas turned to one of the guards.

"Would you mind if I had a quick word with them?"

"Oh, of course. Just don't take too long."

Canis scoffed at the guard's shift in tone. Alpheas was being treated well, not because of his strength, but because of his reputation. Canis was annoyed to see someone whose magic fell short of Arcane acting like he had the composure of a victor.

With the guards giving them space, Alpheas spoke.

"There's no need to worry. Just answer their questions, and you'll be fine."

"Do you think we're scared? We're not some docile students of yours. We've been through countless battles and aren't afraid of anything."

Canis's countless experiences on the battlefield had given him a level of toughness that his peers lacked. But in leading such a life, there were things he'd lost, and Alpheas wanted to help him recover those missing parts of himself.

"Actually, that's why I wanted to talk to you."

"What do you mean?"

"If we get through this, how about enrolling in the Academy?"

Canis felt as though he'd been insulted. Didn't Alpheas understand how he'd lived? After learning magic in life-and-death situations, to suggest that he join the flowers in the greenhouse.

"Don't make me laugh. You didn't lose because you were weak. If it hadn't been for Abyss Nova—or if we'd fought seriously—I could've taken you down with a single strike."

"That may well be true."

Alpheas conceded the point calmly.

“But if it hadn’t been that way, I might have knelt down and begged for forgiveness first.”

Canis bit his lip. He couldn’t accept such words, but he had no way to refute them.

“Canis, that’s the nature of evil. No matter how justified, it inevitably invites resentment. You have the potential to rise higher. I want to offer you a future filled with light, not darkness.”

“Why are you concerned with me? Do you pity me?”

“I, too, was once Arcane’s disciple. In a sense, I am your senior. Just as time cannot be reversed, connections are forever. If you want to lead a new life, I will help you.”

Canis didn’t respond. What could he even consider a “new life” at this point? All he knew was battle, and that meant he was bound to the battlefield.

As Alpheas moved farther down the hallway, the guard took hold of Canis and Arin and led them to the interrogation room. It wasn’t as nightmarish as they’d imagined an Inferno prison would be; in fact, the room was clean and orderly. A slight man sat at the table with his back turned. All that was visible was his silver hair.

“Investigator, these are the suspects, Canis and Arin,” the guard announced.

“Ah, come in, please.”

His voice was chilling, grating like the sound of grinding metal. The aura radiating from him was as sharp as a blade, fitting for someone known to operate in the notorious Division 3 of Enforcement. Canis and Arin circled the table and took seats across from the investigator. Contrary to their expectations, his appearance wasn’t frightening. He had a sharp chin and narrow eyes that gave him a cat-like grin.

“I am Sakiri, investigator from Division 3 of Enforcement. You are Canis and Arin, correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Canis answered calmly, but no response came from Arin. Canis turned to her, noticing she was trembling, her face pale.

“Arin, what’s wrong?”

Arin’s gaze was fixed on Sakiri with shock, her eyes wide with disbelief.

‘What could she be seeing to make her react like this?’

“Canis... I can’t read him...”

It was unlike Arin to be unable to sense someone’s aura.

That meant either he had no aura to read, or he’d somehow erased it.

What Arin was seeing was bizarre. Sakiri’s entire body appeared smooth and metallic, like a mirror, and his egg-shaped face had no discernible features. His hands and feet came to pointed ends, making it impossible to gauge even the faintest emotions. This form could only appear if someone had fully mastered their emotions.

“Ah, seems I frightened the young lady. I understand you have initial sensitivity, correct? Though magic has been neutralized, there’s no way to block inherent traits. Not that I expect either of you would act up.”

Amused, Sakiri placed his pen down and crossed his legs.

Arin watched as his pointed legs twisted and contorted, unwinding and re-coiling like a braid.

‘This man is toying with us.’

It wasn’t simply emotional suppression. This man was manipulating his feelings at will.

“Focus.”

Arin snapped her head up. The smooth, mirror-like face of the investigator had stretched into a pointed shape, inches from her forehead.

“Let’s begin. This is official business, after all. Arin, correct?”

“Yes... yes, that’s correct.”

Arin’s voice was barely audible, her fear so overwhelming she wasn’t even sure if she’d answered. The sharp, cone-like feature pointed at her forehead must have been Sakiri’s

piercing gaze. She had never encountered such a controlled and intense sensitivity form before. She felt that anyone, no matter how hardened, would be utterly broken if they came under his scrutiny.

For the first time, Canis and Arin grasped the reality of their situation—they were prisoners of the most powerful and authoritative institution in the kingdom. With their spirits subdued, Sakiri's needle-like face retracted to its original smooth, egg shape.

"Well, based on Alpheas's statements, we have written up a preliminary report, but I still have a few things to clarify. Answer my questions."

Sakiri went through a series of questions to confirm details, and both Arin and Canis responded truthfully. After about an hour, Sakiri appeared satisfied as he filed the documents away.

"Yes. Your statements match for the most part. There are some discrepancies, but nothing particularly important."

The words sounded far too lax to be coming from a Division 3 investigator. But Sakiri leaned back in his chair as if it were trivial.

"In the end, isn't this just a form of brainwashing? The story goes something like this: Arcane used your unfortunate lives to indoctrinate you from a young age."

"What?"

Canis's eyes flared. Being labeled a mere tool of a villain would've been less insulting. Sakiri's remark was as if he were ripping out the roots of Canis's entire life.

"My master never forced me to do anything. I acted of my own will. I did it, and I am here to answer for it."

Arin, aware of the investigator's power, felt tense as she watched Canis's anger. Yet, Sakiri's form remained unchanged, unmoved even by her sensitivity.

"What a vicious tactic. 'I'll save you,' he says. 'I'll inspire respect,' and then he adds, 'I need this from you, though of course, I'm not asking you to do it.'"

Canis couldn't understand what he was implying. He was here to atone, to pay for his actions. And now they were claiming he'd been brainwashed? Were they planning to lock him away in an asylum?

Chapter 109: Into Daily Life (4)

“So, what do you expect me to do? Admit I was brainwashed? And how does that change anything?”

“Well... you’d both be acquitted, of course.”

Canis’s expression turned blank. He had broken criminals out of Inferno under Arcane’s command and endangered hundreds at the magic academy. Even if he hadn’t been the mastermind, there was no way he could be acquitted.

“Acquitted... us?”

“Yes, if you admit to being brainwashed. For now, the association is primarily focusing on that possibility.”

If he accepted it, he would be released. Free. He could start a new life—as could Arin—as if none of this had ever happened.

For once, Canis felt truly unsettled. The association’s judgment was the most baffling part. Why were they clamoring to release him instead of arresting him?

“Oh, and one more thing.”

As if it had just occurred to him, Sakiri sifted through his documents. Perhaps it really had; after all, Arin couldn’t read anything from the investigator.

“Arcane’s personal attorney sent an official letter. They requested anonymity, but it’s been authenticated. Here—his asset records, will, and inheritance documents.”

“A will?”

Sakiri pushed the documents onto the table as if they spoke for themselves.

With trembling hands, Canis checked them over, one by one. Arcane will was unremarkable, written in plain script,

simply noting instructions for handling matters after his passing.

One line stood out:

[Document] All assets are bequeathed to Canis.

‘Master...’

He wasn’t suddenly struck by thoughts of Arcane being a kind man or secretly looking after him. Arcane was someone who relentlessly pursued his convictions, so there was no falsehood in how he had treated Canis.

The will proved it. Arcane, indifferent as he had been to Canis’s life, nonetheless regarded him as his only student. After putting down the will, Canis reviewed the assets list. Various dungeons, properties, magical devices, costly artifacts, rare herbs, and a sum neatly detailed in his bank account.

‘Ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand...’

Canis counted up the total value.

‘4.8 billion gold...’

A fortune worthy of the wealth that Archmage Arcane had amassed over 150 years. It only left Canis more perplexed. Suddenly, they were telling him he was innocent—and now that he was heir to 4.8 billion gold?

Sakiri scratched his head awkwardly.

“There’s just one small issue. Arcane must have truly thought of you as his student to leave you an inheritance. But, from the association’s perspective... well, brainwashing would mean what it sounds like, wouldn’t it? That your personality was fabricated. So, we’re convinced you were deceived by Arcane. After all, would Canis really have committed such horrors otherwise? That’s why the association is even considering your acquittal. However, if that happens...”

“I wouldn’t be able to receive the inheritance? Because I wouldn’t be Arcane’s student?”

Sakiri offered his first soft expression, though his outward appearance remained as sharp as ever.

“Yes, exactly. The heir Arcane left behind was the brainwashed Canis, not the unbrainwashed one. So, in that case, the funds would be reclassified as illegal and ultimately revert to the association. But before that happens, we want to hear what you think. If you admit to being brainwashed, you’ll be acquitted. All that’s left is for you to sign here.”

Sakiri slid another document across the table. Canis stared at it with hollow eyes.

A disclaimer renouncing the inheritance.

If he admitted to being brainwashed, he’d be free. Merely a victim used by Arcane. But in doing so, he would lose everything Arcane had left to him, now someone else’s property.

The association had decided it was more profitable to claim 4.8 billion gold than to imprison two young apprentices.

“I could give you more time, but that might hurt your case. It could give the impression of willful intent in your crimes. Doesn’t it make sense? Of course, you were brainwashed. Canis and Arin couldn’t have committed such heinous acts of their own accord, after all.”

Canis’s mind went blank. He’d always thought he’d die in battle without fear. But the investigator claimed he was innocent. Insisted he had done nothing wrong.

‘This place isn’t any different from Radum.’

The outside world, too, wasn’t some sunny, protected haven. It was a battlefield, a vortex of greed dressed in the guise of law.

As Canis hesitated to answer, Sakiri clicked his tongue and rose from his seat.

“In that case, I’ll give you some time. An hour or so—”

“I’ll sign.”

Half-rising, Sakiri stopped. With a smile, he resumed his seat.

“A good decision. Now, right here...”

Sakiri personally handed him his pen. Canis signed his name in the designated area of the waiver.

The pen scratched across the paper. Watching Canis sign, Sakiri took back the waiver, wearing a satisfied smile.

"Congratulations on your freedom. Now that it's all over, I can say you made the right choice. If you'd hired an attorney, this would've become much more complicated." An attorney. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. Should he have considered it?

No, Sakiri hadn't lied.

If the Magic Association were the lenient type, they wouldn't have even bothered with the waiver in the first place.

"What do we do now?"

"Well, go on and leave, I suppose. You're free."

Canis and Arin were left with nothing, so to speak. But Sakiri, unaffected, gathered his documents and turned away.

"And the release paperwork...?"

"There isn't any. You're free to just go."

From Sakiri's tone, as if dismissing a bothersome door-to-door salesman, Canis understood the underlying reality.

The Magic Association had never paid them any mind.

They'd only endured a two-hour hassle to reclaim Arcane's wealth.

The humiliation was far less stinging than the helplessness in the face of the Association's overwhelming power.

Arcane, a man once bold enough to stand against the great powers of the continent, was indeed extraordinary.

Canis steadied his heart. It was clear to him now. He was a combat mage. And now that he knew how to fight, he had no reason to hesitate.

"Hey, you."

Sakiri paused at the door and turned.

"Did you call me?"

"You're a mage, too, right?"

"Hmm. You could say so. All the association's staff are mages, after all."

"What rank are you?"

"I'm officially certified at level five."

Canis gauged the strength of his opponent. The investigator of the Magic Association was a 5th-class mage and this kind of man.

"I won't end here. I'll never fall like this."

"Understood. You shouldn't. Well, I'll be going, then."

"One day... I'll make you my subordinate."

Sakiri, hand on the door handle, paused. After a moment's thought, he looked back at Canis with a thin smile.

"Well, then. Study hard, I suppose. The competition for my position was pretty fierce. But, if the day comes..."

Sakiri placed a hand on his chest.

"I'll be in your care."

Even the investigator's atypical behavior didn't move Canis. He only saw the extent of Sakiri's pragmatic realism. Bowing his head cost him nothing; no one knew what the future held, after all.

After Sakiri left, Arin turned to Canis with a smile. They'd been acquitted, after all. It was far better than rotting in a cell for life while holding onto 4.8 billion gold, wasn't it?

"Canis, you made the right choice."

"There are... so many powerful people in the world."

A faint smile appeared on Canis's lips. With his new goal, his heart beat as fervently as it had when he first met Arcane.

"Arin, let's become stronger."

"Yes..."

Arin gazed at the door Sakiri had exited. Canis would one day return here. This wasn't the end for them; now, she too could move forward toward the future.

Stepping out of the interrogation room, Sakiri headed straight to the Inspector's Office. Given the gravity of the situation, it had wrapped up surprisingly easily. Arcane's death had played a significant role—no legal clashes arose,

and Alpheas' acknowledgment of the additional charges also weighed in favorably.

The Inspector's Office was a luxurious room with a marble floor. The man known as the Iron Inspector, a legendary figure of the third division, stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out the window.

"Inspector, here are the final approval documents for the case."

"Leave them on the desk."

Sakiri placed the file on the desk. Normally, he would have left immediately, but this time, he couldn't suppress his curiosity and turned back from the door.

"Do you think it's all right to leave the Alpheas matter as is?"

"Why? Are you concerned that there might be backlash from above?"

"Six months' suspension does seem a bit lenient. But I doubt there'll be any complaints. It happened forty years ago, after all, and without intent to harm. Besides, converting 4.8 billion gold into collateral makes for a reasonable compromise, in my opinion."

"Then why ask?"

The fact that he responded with a question signaled he was unsurprised. Realizing he may have touched a sensitive nerve, Sakiri clicked his tongue. But since he had brought it up, retracting it now felt foolish.

"I wondered if there was a sense of remorse at play."

The Inspector was silent for a while, then turned slowly, facing Sakiri.

"I'll admit, we did Alpheas a disservice. But I've never issued a sentence based on personal feelings."

"My apologies, that was out of line."

"Just leave now."

Sakiri, flustered, exited the office quickly. Despite his reputation as a notorious interrogator among criminals,

within the Association, he was just another mage beholden to his superior's expectations.

The Inspector opened the file. Carefully reading through the lines, he took out his fountain pen and prepared to sign the approval line. Memories flashed through his mind—a cascade of moments. Now a white-haired old man, he could still feel the sting in his jaw from the time Alpheas had struck him in his house all those years ago.

“Ha, told you I should have brought a gift.”

Since his blunder with Erina, he hadn't visited Alpheas once, though he had also refused to admit any sense of defeat.

Yet, over the last forty years, quantum theory had continued to evolve and innovate, transforming the world even now.

At last, he had to acknowledge the genius of Alpheas's work from back then.

“Heh, better late than never. The Gold Circle was truly yours to claim.”

The Inspector imprinted his signature on the document.
Ardiano Sarof.

End-of-Term Report Cards (1)

The end of the semester, the most nerve-wracking time for magic school students, had arrived. Half a year's efforts condensed onto a single sheet of paper. The merciless cutoff line determined who would advance and who would fail, like the blade of a guillotine.

Alpheas had been sentenced by the Magic Association to a six-month suspension of his teaching credentials. The sanction would take effect next semester, and for now, the oldest teacher, Colley, was serving as acting headmaster. Alpheas, tending to the flowerbed's weeds, straightened up and smiled. From afar, his cherished students were approaching. Shirone, Iruki, and Nade—the school's notorious troublemakers, yet their futures held the highest promise.

“Hello, Headmaster!”

“Haha, now, didn’t I say you shouldn’t call me ‘Headmaster’? I’m just an old man passing time.”

“Oh, come on. In half a year, you’ll be the Headmaster again, right?”

Alpheas simply chuckled. He felt both grateful for their unwavering support and a bit undeserving of it.

Chapter 110: End-of-Term Report Cards (2)

“Right. And how are you guys? The end of the school break must feel like torture, right?”

Nade’s face immediately turned gloomy.

“It’s killing me. I have to score over 80 in every subject for the rest of the term. I’m dead.”

“Haha! Well, how about aiming for a promotion this time?”

The only way to advance from Class Five to Class Four was by scoring over 80 in every subject. It wasn’t an average of 80, which made it one of the most challenging tasks.

“Of course! Isn’t that what every student would think of?”

“Well, that’s true. Do your best, then.”

Nade had been hoping for some encouraging words and looked a bit dazed. But Alpheas’s teaching philosophy was firm: students were not racehorses. Leave them in the meadow, and they’d eventually find their own worth.

“Shall we give you a hand?”

With his sleeves rolled up, Shirone approached to help with the weeding.

“Oh no, I can’t let you take away the only joy an old man has. I’ll handle the weeds; you go on and do whatever you want.”

Disappointment flashed across Nade’s face. He had been hoping to use weeding as an excuse to escape reality, if only for a little while.

“All right, take care.”

As Shirone and his group headed back to their dorms, they wore expressions of concern. Other students felt the same way. Ever since Arcane’s attack, the school remained

unsettled, and it was difficult to concentrate on studies as before.

Frustrated, Nade let out a burst of irritation.

“Ugh, it’s driving me crazy. I need to study. Study! Study! But I just can’t focus.”

“When you have a major event, it’s normal to be too distracted to do anything else. Remember how it was after the presentation?”

At Iruki’s words, Shirone sighed deeply.

“Well, at least you’re better off than I am. I have twice as many subjects to raise above 80 as you two. I don’t know if I’ll make it.”

“The only thing I’m good at is math. My humanities scores are practically zeros. By that measure, Nade has the best chance.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t have a single strong subject. Shirone and you can at least aim to be the best in practical skills, but I can’t even do that. I’m at the biggest disadvantage.”

In Class Five, practical exams focused primarily on the ability to use the Spirit Zone rather than magic itself. Shirone, with his Immortal Function, and Iruki, with his Servant Syndrome, were capable of top scores in any practical skills exam. Nade, however, had to compete with the same Spirit Zone abilities as other students.

“The more I think about it, the more my head hurts. How about we just relax today and start fresh tomorrow?”

Shirone and Iruki neither agreed nor disagreed with Nade’s suggestion. Even Shirone, usually the role model, remained silent, showing that his motivation had been dampened.

“Hey, guys... look over there...”

When Shirone pointed toward the central park, Nade and Iruki turned their heads, their eyes widening.

“What? How are they here?”

Canis and Arin were wandering around the campus. When they made eye contact with Shirone’s group, they walked

over, and Canis waved in acknowledgment.

“Hey there. Classes over already? The facilities and environment here are decent, but it feels like they go way too easy on you kids.”

“You! What the hell are you doing?”

Nade stepped in front, blocking their way. Of course, he had heard from Thadd that they had been released without charges, but he’d thought their connection would end there—no, he needed it to end there. Yet here they were, strolling around campus.

Shirone asked, “What’s going on? Do you have some business at the school?”

Canis glanced at Shirone without answering. The person who intrigued him most in the entire school wasn’t Alpheas or the other teachers—it was Shirone. The one who had handed him his first defeat. If he couldn’t surpass him, all the strength he gained would be worthless.

“Mark my words. The next time we face each other, the outcome will be the exact opposite.”

Before Shirone could respond, Nade shot back.

“Are you still not getting it? You’d need ten years to beat Shirone.”

“And you? You’d need more than ten years just to take me on.”

Nade’s face contorted. Memories of the time Shirone had been on the verge of death came flooding back, igniting a momentary surge of anger. Iruki, wanting to avoid unnecessary trouble, stepped in to break up the tension.

“Enough. Let’s put that aside. Why are you here, anyway?”

“Why? We’re here to scope out our new place. We’ll be staying here from now on.”

“What?”

Shirone’s group stared at them, wide-eyed with shock.

“Just as I said. This magic school or whatever—figured it wouldn’t be a bad experience.”

Nade folded his arms, glaring. "You think you can just waltz into a magic school? Like they'd accept someone like you?" Canis raised a finger in correction.

"Senior."

"What?"

"Call me 'Senior.' I looked it up; you're in Class Five, right? I'm in Class Four."

Shirone's group was dumbfounded. They figured it must have been Alpheas who admitted them, but to start right in Class Four? It wasn't unheard of, but it was rare.

"Why so surprised? We're apprentices of an archmage. We've learned all the basics of magic already. Treating us like some idle students like you is laughable."

Though riled up, Shirone's group held their tongues. After training for over ten years under Arcane, Canis's level of magic skill was undoubtedly advanced, even for Class Four.

"So, I expect you to address me properly as Senior from now on."

"That's funny! Anyway, we're going to Class Four next semester. By then, we'll be in the same class!"

"Is that so? I was honestly disappointed when I checked your grades. You guys aren't exactly excelling, to say the least. I can't believe I struggled against such a ragtag group."

The first thing Canis had looked up at school was Shirone's group's grades and friendships. He'd expected them to be among the top, only to be shocked to find them in Class Five, and mid-ranking at that.

Yet, none of the advanced students dismissed them. It was common knowledge that, if they set their minds to it, they could rise to the top at any time.

As Shirone's group ground their teeth in silence, Canis turned away, pleased.

"Well, do your best. If you join as juniors, I'll look after you. Haha!"

As Canis's shadow receded, Harvest turned back, lifting both hands with middle fingers raised. Shirone, Nade, and Iruki, visibly seething, stood shaking with rage.

Breaking the heavy silence, Shirone spoke.

"Today's break is canceled."

"Right. Canis as a senior? I'd rather quit school than bow to him!"

"Hmph, why quit? We should make it to the next class level and show him up."

The only thing on all three of their minds was leveling up. But how? The end-of-term evaluations were in a whole different league compared to regular hurdles. With half a year's worth of studies on the line, even starting something now was no guarantee of success.

"I've thought about this before..." Shirone began, his expression serious.

"The odds of me advancing, given my current skills, are around 30%. That's if I study with everything I've got."

Though not a mathematical analysis like Iruki's, Shirone's intuition was reliable, and his friends took his words seriously. Nade's face grew somber again.

"Honestly, I was talking big, but it won't be easy. If you've got a 30% chance, then maybe I have about a 50% shot? And Iruki's probably around 60%."

"No, I'm closer to 58.7%. Sure, the promotion mainly depends on the end-of-term grades, but I haven't been attending class."

Each of them sighed. At this rate, they would be bowing their heads to Canis and Arin from the next semester.

"So, I was thinking... what if we did this?"

Nade perked up, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"What is it? You have a plan?"

"Honestly, if we keep studying the way we have been, our chances of success are too low. We need a new method."

Iruki chimed in, "A new method? But how exactly?"

“The 30% figure I mentioned is assuming I study hard. But if I focus only on the exam itself, I think I could raise it above 50%. And that means for you guys, it could be closer to 70 or even 80%.”

“Hm, so you’re suggesting we focus on the exam? I get it—prioritize and specialize, right?”

“Exactly. We only need to score above 80. We don’t need to invest time in subjects we’re already strong in, or areas that won’t show up on the test. The sixteen subjects can be broadly divided into four categories: humanities, math, science, and practical skills.”

Shirone counted on his fingers as he explained.

“The good thing is that at least one of us should be able to clear each category. And, on top of that, none of our strengths overlap. I’ll focus on humanities, Iruki on math, and Nade on science. Practical skills are something we’ll each have to tackle on our own.”

Iruki nodded in understanding.

“So, you’re suggesting we form a study group. Since we’re already good in certain fields, we can skip those and spend our time helping each other where we’re weak?”

“Exactly. If we can concentrate on the specific skills needed to pass the exam, our chances go way up. I’m confident this will raise our odds to at least 50%.”

A grin spread across Iruki’s face. Shirone seemed to be going all out here, which meant it really bothered him to consider Canis and Arin as seniors.

Either way, it was a solid plan. And if all three of them could level up together, the result couldn’t get any better.

“I’m in. Let’s head to the study room right now and work out a plan. Sound good?”

“Let’s go!”

Fueled by determination, the three boys raced to Istas.

Shirone devoted himself to studying, day and night.

He had to learn how to manage time. For someone who isn't aware, an hour can fly by, but for someone who divides an hour into ten-minute segments, it can feel like a long time. Shirone broke down every hour left until the end-of-term exams. By mentally keeping track of every minute, he made sure not to waste any time.

Using this powerful efficiency, he targeted his study at the exam.

Instead of focusing on understanding concepts, he mastered question types, analyzed the test's intentions, and honed his problem-solving strategies. In this way, the study group was very effective. By helping each other cover weak areas, Shirone was able to raise his practice test scores to over 70. Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. As he studied, Shirone realized that the reason he struggled with some subjects wasn't laziness but actual difficulty with the material.

For example, Iruki's performance in humanities and math was polar opposites. As he poured over the problems Shirone had prepared, he stretched and put his pen down after just 30 minutes.

"All done."

"Let me see."

As Shirone checked each of Iruki's answers, his hand trembled more and more. He could finally understand why the humanities teachers turned pale at the sight of Iruki. Pointing to the test paper in frustration, Shirone said, "Hey, how is 'You eat pasta, I eat pasta' supposed to make sense? I explained how to use particles, didn't I?"

"Why doesn't it make sense? 'You eat pasta! I eat pasta!' It's straightforward. It emphasizes that each of us is independent."

"Oh? Uh, well..."

For a moment, Shirone felt like Iruki's argument actually made sense. But then he snapped back and shouted.

“That’s not it. Language isn’t math. It’s not a tool for proof; it’s a tool for expression! You’re supposed to read between the lines, not split the sentence up!”

“What’s this nonsense? Math is the best!”

“Quiet! I know you’re just being stubborn! You know this sounds weird, don’t you?”

Chapter 111: End-of-Term Report Cards (3)

“Of course, it sounds strange. But that’s just a matter of perspective. Mathematically, there’s nothing wrong with the sentence.”

Iruki’s pride in math was enormous. How irritating must he have been for the humanities teachers to mark his tests with a zero?

Shirone decided to use his last resort.

“Are you planning not to advance?”

“Grr... damn it!”

Iruki had no choice but to give in to that. He would rather die than become Canis’s junior.

As Iruki focused back on the problems, Shirone returned to his seat with a sigh.

‘If he does this on the actual test, it’ll be a disaster, really.’ Nade, who seemed to have just remembered something, lifted his eyes from his book and asked.

“Oh, come to think of it, the practical exam is next week. Have you guys been practicing much?”

Both Shirone and Iruki looked at him in surprise.

“What exam?”

“Are you kidding? You didn’t even know? It’s the Mental Pulse Test—an endurance evaluation of the Spirit Zone.”

“Do we really need to practice for it? Both Shirone and I can easily score over 80, can’t we? Why, are you worried?”

“No, but there are a lot of variables in the practical exam. Unlike other subjects, it’s graded on a curve. If others do better, our scores could drop. I thought we should go over it at least once.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We don’t have time for that.”

Iruki didn't pay attention, absorbed in solving problems. He believed that as a Class Five student, his control over the Spirit Zone was already more than adequate to pass the practical exam.

Shirone, working on math problems, chimed in, "I'll skip it too. I just can't spare the attention for that right now."

Nade had confidence of his own. But he knew it would be hard to score higher than the other two.

'Hmm... What should I do?'

If it got truly difficult, he could ask for help. But taking his friends' time just because he was feeling anxious would be bending the rules.

'Never mind. I just have to place in the top ten anyway.'

Nade put the thought aside and got back to studying. Each of them had to do their part, contributing 33.3% to the group. If one of them failed, the efficiency of their study group would be broken.

They would work together for their collective benefit, but ultimately, results weren't something others could hand to them.

The Spirit Zone practice area.

This was usually the time for combined classes for the advanced students, but today, only Class Five students were present.

This was the notoriously difficult practical evaluation period that had repeatedly cornered Shirone. And with the end of the semester nearing, the tension among students was higher than ever.

Stepping into the Spirit Zone, Ethella, as always, spread a 20-meter diameter Spirit Zone and began her explanation.

"Today's evaluation is the Mental Pulse Test. It measures how long you can sustain changes in the Spirit Zone."

Ethella stretched her hands to her sides, pointing to a tall, black pole with mysterious symbols carved on its surface.

“The evaluation standard is a 20-meter diameter between the ends of the pole. You cannot participate if your Spirit Zone falls short of this diameter. But I’m sure no one here will have an issue reaching 20 meters.”

She shrank her Spirit Zone, and when the volume on the measuring board dropped below two cubic meters, a buzzer sounded from the sound device.

“When the buzzer sounds, one cycle is complete. The test lasts 30 seconds, and your score is determined by the number of pulsations of your Spirit Zone. Since you rarely practice with the recorder on, I’ll give you a demonstration.” With a signal from Ethella, the Spirit Zone’s Mental Pulse mode activated. Her Spirit Zone expanded and contracted repeatedly, pulsing like a heartbeat.

“Wow...”

Watching a 20-meter diameter Spirit Zone contract to under two meters and then expand back almost instantly was spectacular. Though the cycle wasn’t particularly fast, the repeated contraction and expansion was powerful, resembling bursts of energy.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The sound machine, one of the functions of the Spirit Zone, calculated the expansion rate and produced explosive sounds.

It wasn’t just for show; converting the intangible Spirit Zone into sensory cues provided the best efficiency for magic training.

After 30 seconds, the scoreboard displayed a score of 30. Ethella had achieved a pulse every second.

According to upperclassmen, a minimum of 90 points was needed to pass the advancement cutoff—three pulses per second. Using Ethella’s demonstration as a reference, the students checked the final strategies they had prepared. After completing her demonstration, Ethella spoke with her hands behind her back.

“In actual combat, you may need to switch between various forms of the Zone at high speed. The Mental Pulse is foundational training, so keep practicing even after the practical test. Now, let’s begin the evaluation.”

Based on their ranks from the previous Speed Gun test, students started from the back of the line. As expected, most of their ranks hadn’t changed much, since improving one’s skills significantly in just a month or two was difficult. One by one, students recorded their scores, with the lowest score at 48 points. Now, it was Nade’s turn. Since he had placed in the upper-middle rank on the Speed Gun test, he had to go much earlier than Shirone and Iruki.

“Good luck, Nade”

“Hoo, I’m getting nervous.”

With Shirone and Iruki’s encouragement, Nade stepped into the Spirit Zone and closed his eyes to concentrate. At the start signal, he opened his eyes and expanded his Spirit Zone, pulsing rapidly like the heart of a person sprinting with all their strength.

“Whoa! What’s going on? Nade?”

The other students’ eyes went wide. In only 10 seconds, he had already passed 50 points. The rate of five pulses per second felt powerful even to those watching.

“Wasn’t he originally middle-rank? At this rate, he’ll definitely place in the top-rank!”

“Looks like hanging around with Shirone really paid off. If I’d known, I would’ve joined their study group too.”

“Right? Those guys have been studying like crazy lately. Even Iruki, who used to slack off, hasn’t missed a single class.”

After 30 seconds, Nade’s score was displayed: 173 pulses. Accelerating in the last 10 seconds had boosted his score.

“Well done, Nade.”

Ethella recorded his score with a satisfied smile, pleased with her student’s remarkable progress.

‘I expected no less from him, though.’

Nade returned with a shy grin, high-fiving his friends as he took his seat.

“Phew, I thought I was going to die from the nerves.”

“Good job. You cleared one hurdle. Now it’s just the two of us left.”

Inspired by Nade’s performance, the remaining participants gave the test everything they had. However, no one managed to surpass his score of 173.

With Nade holding first place, the second-to-last participant, Iruki, stepped into the Spirit Zone. Without a hint of nervousness, he triggered his Savant ability right as the test began.

He had pre-designed a mechanism for expansion and contraction to repeat mechanically. While this approach wasn’t useful in real combat, it was highly efficient for the test.

As a result, his score reached 210.

The students stared at the number in disbelief. Achieving seven pulses per second without any change in speed required a machine-like precision.

“Wow, that’s amazing. Is his mind just like an equation?

That guy probably didn’t even do his best on this.”

“Well, he’s a Savant. This time, it’s going to be hard for Shirone to beat him.”

Just then, a voice filled with disdain cut through the air.

“Ha, making a big deal out of a trivial score. Class Five must be full of pathetic fools.”

The students, bristling, turned around, only to freeze in shock. Canis and Arin, who were set to join the academy next semester, were watching the practical evaluation.

Ethella, who was recording scores, asked, “Oh? You two, what brings you here?”

“The Headmaster said we could observe. We came to see how the test works.”

“Ah, I see. Come over here, then. You’ll get a good view from here.”

Canis frowned. Was this woman really the one who had fought evenly with his master? During the battle, there had been no time to analyze, but now, watching her teach, she seemed gentle and almost naive.

‘Is she acting, or is she really that clueless?’

Still, he was interested in the test. Canis stood at the back of the line with Arin.

“What do you think, Arin?”

“I’ve practiced heart pulse training to exhaustion. Master insisted on maxing it out. I could probably score over 250 without a problem.”

Arin was a mental-type mage and needed to handle the tentacle form, one of the most challenging Spirit Zone forms, with ease. His Spirit Zone endurance was unparalleled.

‘As expected of the Archmage’s students. They’re on a whole different level.’

Hearing Arin’s words, the students couldn’t help feeling intimidated. They, too, were from noble families, but anyone aiming to become a mage dreamed of becoming a direct disciple of an archmage. Despite coming from humble beginnings, these two had been trained on the elite path of elite paths.

‘Hmph. But we have our own ace up our sleeve.’

As Shirone, the final participant, entered the Spirit Zone, the students cheered him on with one voice.

They remembered now that Shirone, upon regaining his memory, had managed to overpower Canis. They were eager to see him make a powerful showing this time as well. Standing in the center of the Spirit Zone, Shirone took a deep breath. With Iruki’s score at 210, even reaching that vicinity would be enough for him to advance.

However, his expression was different now. With a clear goal in mind, he didn’t plan on taking the test half-heartedly, even if it wasn’t Canis he was up against.

At Ethella's signal, the device powered on, and Shirone began by pulsing his Spirit Zone at its maximum from the start.

Without precise design like Iruki's, it was difficult to divide each second evenly. But humans possessed an incredibly accurate internal clock known as rhythm.

Shirone accelerated the pulses of his Spirit Zone, riding the beat. The sound machine erupted with rapid-fire beats that could only be heard in a drumline.

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!

The students' jaws dropped. They watched, unblinking, but could only perceive his Spirit Zone's movement about once per second.

"How is that possible? How many pulses per second is he doing?"

The layers of his Spirit Zone were moving simultaneously, making it impossible to count visually. The students anxiously awaited the 10-second mark. Soon, the scoreboard displayed an astounding score: 120.

"Twelve pulses per second..."

Could anyone imagine a 20-meter sphere contracting 12 times in a single second? Simply watching it wasn't enough to grasp what was happening inside. Only the explosive bursts and the blurring count of numbers testified to the intensity of Shirone's focus.

Even Canis and Arin watched in awe. Arin, especially, wore an expression of disbelief. At such a high pulse rate, the mind would typically collapse before speed even became an issue.

The essence of pulsation lay in how quickly one could expand to the largest diameter and how much impact one could withstand when contracting.

In this sense, Shirone's display was the pinnacle, maximizing both speed and endurance.

'Vajra.'

Ethella instantly recognized Shirone's mastery.

'He's truly incredible. I can't even gauge the full extent of this child's potential.'

Even now, she couldn't be sure where Shirone's current limits lay. Just as she thought she had an idea, he would already be miles ahead.

Chapter 112: End-of-Term Report Cards (4)

‘Shirone’s already formidable mental endurance has become remarkably stronger, to the point where he now has a degree of control over the Immortal Function.’

Shirone’s specialty was defensive, a four-directional barrier type. Most teachers assumed he would naturally develop into a defensive-oriented mage, as with most others in that classification.

However, the Immortal Function had turned that assumption upside down. Now, his endurance—a key strength—had become an essential element supporting his offensive capabilities.

At the 20-second mark, Shirone gritted his teeth and made a final push for acceleration. An explosive rhythm erupted, shattering the score beyond 340 points.

Beeep—!

The measurement ended, and the buzzer sounded. Shirone took a deep breath, eyes closed for a moment. Though dozens of students were present, a hush settled over the space, as everyone’s eyes were fixed on the scoreboard. 410 points.

This meant he had averaged 13.6 beats per second for 30 seconds. In the final 5 seconds alone, his bursts had likely exceeded 15 beats per second.

“This is insane. What’s going on with them these days? At this rate, are they actually going to make it into the upper ranks next semester?”

“It won’t be that easy. His theory grades are only middle-rank. Improving his score in such a short time would be tough.”

Shirone turned to face Canis, a silent challenge that questioned whether he, too, could claim senior status.

“He’s incredible, that kid,” Arin murmured, genuinely awestruck. The boundless mental stamina granted by the Immortal Function, combined with his resilience to harness it, plus a unique magic ability to add mass to light.

There was no other way to explain it: he was a mage exceptionally blessed.

“Hmph. Now that’s what a true rival should look like,” Canis declared, feeling his competitive spirit flare like never before. Initially, he thought it was merely a difference in attributes. But Shirone’s demonstration dispelled that illusion. At this level, even in raw power, he would lose.

After a long, intense stare at Shirone, Canis spun around.

“Let’s go, Arin. The tour’s over.”

The students watched Canis and Arin walk away, feeling a sense of relief. Shirone might not represent the entire Class Five, but they shared a certain satisfaction knowing he had humbled the Archmage’s apprentice.

“Shirone, that was incredible. Maybe I didn’t do great on the test, but I feel great. Just because they’re Archmage’s apprentices, they think they’re better? Who do they think they are to look down on Class Five?”

“Yeah, Shirone, Iruki, and even Nade... are you three actually aiming for promotion this time?”

“Eh, just giving it our all,” Shirone deflected with a half-smile, avoiding a clear answer. But Nade, who had placed third, was riding high, exhilarated by his successful practical exam.

“Haha! Of course! You’d better start practicing how to treat me with respect! Come on, let’s try it out now—go on, call me ‘senior’!”

A chorus of protests erupted.

“Get a load of him! Full of himself, isn’t he? Hope he fails big time!”

“If you’re a senior, I’d rather not attend this school at all!”

“And how will you live down the shame if you fail theory? I’ll be praying every night that you don’t make it!”

Unfazed, Nade just straightened his back and laughed heartily. Being well-liked, he took the jabs in stride.

Meanwhile, Shirone and Iruki slipped away quietly.

“Ahh, this is embarrassing,” Shirone sighed.

The final practical test had concluded.

Summer was coming to an end.

A chill breeze blew in the mornings and evenings, and the trees seemed ready to exchange their green for a patchwork of autumn colors. The midday heat lingered, and the students busied themselves, throwing their all into the last days of the semester.

With just one week remaining, classes had ended the previous week, leaving only the final exams.

Exams were administered one class at a time, starting with Class Ten. Finally, on the sixth day, the Class Five students walked to the exam hall, their hearts pounding.

Shirone’s group had barely touched their breakfast but had arrived early at the hall.

The exam would last exactly 12 hours, with only 5-minute breaks in between. While it was an almost grueling schedule by ordinary standards, students at the magic school were expected to maintain concentration as much as retain knowledge.

The test was divided into A, B, and C versions. The questions were the same, but the answer keys were shuffled to minimize the chance of cheating or blind guessing.

Shirone was assigned Test A, Iruki Test B, and Nade Test C. Standing in the hallway before their respective exams, the three worked to calm their nerves. Even for the notorious pranksters, the weight of six months of work settled on them.

Nade was shivering despite the mild weather.

“Ugh. I’m dying. Shirone, how’re you feeling?”

“Like I’m going to puke. One mistake, and it’s all over—especially with the math section.”

“Stay calm. We have enough time. Let’s save the nerves for when the test starts,” Iruki said, his words helping Shirone and Nade find a bit of composure. But as the starting bell rang, everyone’s faces turned pale.

“Alright, let’s head in. Let’s all meet after with smiles.”

“Yeah. Let’s do this!”

The three entered their respective exam rooms, with the next 12 hours ahead.

The Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Room.

Shirone and his friends were engrossed in grading their answers. Although it was impossible to take the test papers out of the examination room, Iruki had perfectly reconstructed the exam questions.

A Savant’s memory doesn’t forget; it’s as if a file is stored in a drawer in one’s mind, ready to be pulled out and read whenever needed.

Iruki would recite the questions, Nade would write them down, and Shirone would find the answers. Working through the night, they managed to reconstruct the test papers for all subjects by dawn.

Exhausted but determined, each of them began scoring their own tests.

Since the reconstructed test was of Type B, they had to match Shirone’s answers one-by-one against it to confirm their scores.

“Phew, I’m nervous. I think I might have blown a few subjects,” Nade groaned, but all of them had a few weaker areas.

“Same here. Now that I’m checking, this is brutal. Even if I got perfect scores in other subjects, it’s over if I missed even one subject,” Shirone muttered anxiously, a rare look of concern in his eyes. Even with his insight, he couldn’t be sure about his advancement.

“Anyway, that’s what our study group was for. Let’s finish grading first and evaluate later.”

Hours passed, and their scores slowly started to take shape.

Nade was the first to stand up, raising his fist in triumph.

“Yes! Made it! Average of 82! I scored over 80 in every subject!”

Though he didn’t score particularly high in any one subject, he balanced all of them well enough to get an average of 82. In the past, he might have scoffed at the idea of advancing to Class Four, but now that he’d actually achieved it, he felt nothing but joy.

Iruki and Shirone, however, stayed silent; they’d celebrate only when all three of them were certain to advance together.

After finishing his grading, Iruki leaned back in his chair, wiping his forehead.

“Phew. I’m good—87 points. I had one subject at 80, and if I’d missed even one more question, I’d have failed.”

“Wow! So you passed too? Congratulations, Class Four!”

“Yeah, it’s not bad.”

Both Nade and Iruki turned to look at Shirone, neither of them needing to say it aloud. With one more pass, their shared goal of advancing together would be complete.

But Shirone remained unresponsive. Iruki noticed his hand wasn’t moving to grade anymore.

“Shirone, what’s wrong? Did you fail?” he asked.

Up close, Shirone’s face was pale as a sheet. Something had definitely gone wrong.

“What happened? What’s your score?” Nade asked nervously.

“Eighty-six...”

“Wow, that’s great!”

Nade was genuinely astonished. Their goal of all advancing together had been ambitious, but hearing Shirone’s score, he felt as if it were nothing short of a miracle. Shirone, after all, came from a commoner background, where studying

was not a part of his daily life. Yet he'd managed to score an average of 86 after only half a year of hard work.

In comparison, Iruki's 87 was largely thanks to his Savant abilities, which had helped him ace math. Shirone's score was a testament to his sheer determination.

Iruki, looking thoughtful, tilted his head.

"You did well, didn't you? Was there one subject you struggled with?"

"I'm... not sure," Shirone said, biting his nails anxiously. He couldn't seem to recall.

"What do you mean you're not sure? Tell us clearly."

Shirone bit his nails nervously. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't think of it.

"Iruki."

"Yeah?"

"For the last question in math proof, what was the answer?"

"Oh, that one? It's the one where you had to connect two mathematical formulas for the proof, right? That answer was really long," Iruki said, suddenly pausing as if realizing something.

"Wait... don't tell me..."

"I... I can't remember. I'm not sure which proof I chose as the answer. I tried redoing it, but it's the same. Back then, I was torn between two answers," Shirone admitted, gripping his head.

"What score would it be if that question's wrong?" Iruki asked.

"Seventy-eight..."

The seriousness of the situation dawned on Iruki and Nade. The final question on the multiple-choice section was worth two points, which meant Shirone's advancement depended on this one question.

"How could you forget it? What answer did you mark?" Nade asked frantically.

"Choice three. But since I had Type A, I can't check it myself," Shirone said.

Nade quickly pulled out his test notes. The proof, with its intricate formula, covered an entire page. To be honest, he himself got it wrong; likely, only Iruki from Class Five had answered it correctly.

Shirone clutched his head, looking distressed.

"I kept debating between two and three, but with ten seconds left, something suddenly came to mind. But now... I can't remember what it was."

It's common enough to freeze when time's running out.

Nade and Iruki, who'd been in the academy since childhood, knew that feeling all too well.

But this was different; their advancement was at stake. If Shirone failed, he'd have to spend another half-year in Class Five.

Nade was about to lose his mind with worry.

"Ugh! I can't just sit here!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll go and find out directly. Let's ask Teacher Siena; she's in charge, right?"

Shirone, feeling just as stuck, nodded. Making up their minds, the three left the research room and headed for the test building.

They'd spent all night scoring their exams, so by now, Class Four's tests were already underway. Taking advantage of lunch break, the three waited in the building, anxiously watching the hallway for the teachers' return. After about thirty minutes, they spotted Sheena coming down the corridor and sprinted toward her.

"Teacher! Teacher!"

"Hm? What are you three doing here? Class Five's test finished yesterday, didn't it?"

"The last math proof question in Type A! What's the answer?"

Siena tilted her head in confusion. Chemistry was her specialty, but every teacher reviewed the test papers

multiple times, and she was certainly proficient enough in math to remember a student-level question.

“Why the sudden question?”

“Please, Teacher, this is really important!”

Seeing his desperation, Siena recalled the final question. It was indeed challenging, so it had stuck in her memory.

“Oh, that one? For Type A, it was choice two.”

“Choice two...”

Shirone, who was mumbling the same thing, suddenly grabbed the back of his neck. Then, in the end, he couldn't hold on and fell back. Before he fell down in the hallway, Nade hurriedly helped him up.

“Shirone! Are you okay? Stay with us! I thought you were unbreakable!”

“Two? Why... how is it choice two...”

“We'll be going now, Teacher! Thanks for everything!”

Shirone muttered the same thing while being dragged away.

Siena, who had been watching quietly and blinking, smiled and headed toward the teacher's office.

“Those kids never seem to get tired. They're so full of energy every day.”

The faculty room was buzzing as teachers graded test papers. Siena took a seat and began her own grading. Then, on a whim, she opened her drawer and pulled out the Type A math proof test.

“They said it was the last multiple-choice question, right?”

Siena scanned it, working through the proof for a moment before letting out a cheerful chuckle.

“Oh, it was choice three.”

Arian Shirone. Advancement confirmed.

Chapter 113: End-of-Term Report Cards (5)

Kaizen Swordsmanship Academy.

Located in the capital of the Kingdom of Tormia, the Kaizen Swordsmanship Academy boasts a 200-year history and has produced many knights with outstanding achievements.

Among its graduates are over ten certified 1st-class swordsmen, three of whom were even granted the title of Swordmaster.

Iron Will. Symbol of Courage.

Anyone in Tormia who dreams of becoming a knight aspires to join the Kaizen Swordsmanship Academy.

However, the academy has no entrance exam. Instead, candidates go through a one-month probationary period during which their abilities are assessed to determine their eligibility for final admission.

Each semester, about 300 cadets apply, yet only 30 make the final cut.

Rian, who had proudly made it into this select group, was currently taking classes at Kaizen.

Urban Combat Training Grounds.

The academy's pride was its training ground, which was designed to replicate the exact landscape of a city.

A skeletal instructor with prominent cheekbones glared at the first-year students sitting on the steps.

"Today's practical lesson is on movement. For you first-years, the focus will be on balance shifts, which will be a key aspect of your assessment."

The instructor's name was Parca Quan. He was a certified 6th-class swordsman, known as the Magician of Death before an injury to his leg during the war.

“Balance shift is a vital skill for a swordsman. It’s where the three pillars of swordsmanship—speed, strength, and accuracy—begin.”

Quan walked to the stairs limping on his right leg. Then he asked, pointing at the boy with long bones.

“You. Where is a swordsman’s center of gravity?”

“Yes, sir! The navel, sir!”

“Wrong. You, answer.”

Quan gestured at a cadet with slitted eyes like a shark’s. Even if they didn’t know the answer, they had to stand up immediately, or risk punishment.

“Yes, sir! The soles of the feet!”

“Wrong. You, answer.”

“Uh... the sword, sir!”

“Down. Two hundred push-ups now.”

“Understood!”

The cadet stepped out of line to begin push-ups. Even though exhausting one’s energy right before a test was a nightmare, the academy instructors couldn’t have cared less.

Quan drew the longsword from his belt. The blade’s tip fanned out like a leaf, with a slender shaft.

“Where is the center of gravity for a swordsman? The answer lies outside. In Schema terms, this is called external gravity. Repeat, external gravity.”

“External gravity!” the cadets shouted, though inwardly furious. To teach them an unfamiliar term right before an assessment?

“The reason I haven’t explained this before is simple—laziness. Besides, thickheads like you wouldn’t have understood it anyway. But I’m in a foul mood today, so I’ve decided to add this external gravity to the evaluation criteria. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

The cadets’ voices echoed loudly, filled with frustration. Changing the criteria at the last minute? Their grueling

efforts over the past six months would be for nothing.

'I swear, I'm going to do something to this guy. How is this a teacher?'

"I'll demonstrate once. Watch carefully and incorporate it into your movements."

Anyway, everyone had their own thoughts, but silence fell over the originally quiet Colosseum.

"You strike as you advance, and again as you retreat," Quan said, showing slashes as he moved forward and back.

Despite his limping, the wind cutting through the air sounded intimidating.

"This is the typical movement in swordsmanship. The body's power shifts the balance, and balance increases the sword's destructive force. Moreover, with Schema enhancing muscle strength, the destructive force of the sword can increase exponentially."

The cadets gulped. They'd heard this lesson many times, but the tension before the test was higher than ever.

"...Or that's the kind of low-level thinking you're probably having. But approaching a real battle with that mindset will get you killed in three seconds."

'What a jerk.'

Their glares grew more intense.

"Remember, no matter how strong the destructive force, if your movements lack balance, the fight is over before it starts. Therefore, swordsmen use balance shifts in response to different situations. For example, something like this."

Quan stomped his foot against the ground, raising one leg until his body tilted toward the floor.

The cadets stared, dumbfounded. Quan's balance point was tilted over 70 degrees.

Was this even possible? Without a line holding him up, how could any human maintain such a stance?

"When Schema-enhanced strength shifts the center of gravity outward, this is called external gravity."

Quan's body sprang back upright like a toy.

“With external gravity, the potential for movement becomes limitless. For instance, watch this.”

Quan hit the ground with the sole of his foot again and fell backwards. His body, tilted to the point where his back touched the ground, rotated in a cone.

“External gravity isn’t real gravity—it’s simply extreme inertia. So when rotation is added, the body itself spins.”

Quan extended his sword outward, slowing the rotation. As he began to return to his upright position, the centripetal force accelerated him back.

Swish swish swish!

Quan, now fully upright, spun at a tremendous speed, then stopped with precise control, holding his stance as if frozen in time.

The cadets stared at Quan with shocked eyes. What would have happened if they had been in that position? Their ankles would have been severed first. Then they would have been sliced into dozens of pieces by the accelerating blade. Defense was impossible. It was akin to trying to stop a tornado caused by a difference in atmospheric pressure. That was how explosive the centrifugal force was. If one were to draw an analogy, it was like a mechanical device with blades spinning rapidly.

‘This is the Magician of Death.’

It was a nickname given to someone who could bring death so swiftly that the victim wouldn’t even know what happened.

“This will be today’s practical evaluation. The first task is passing through the obstacle course, and the second is urban warfare movement.”

“Instructor, I have a question.”

“Drop down. Do 200 push-ups.”

The cadet stepped out of line and began the push-ups, wondering what mistake he had made.

“Remember this. To get the answer you want, you must overwhelm your opponent. The instructor is not your parent.

Don't look at me with eyes eager for praise. It's disgusting. Understood?"

"Yes, sir! I'll correct myself!"

"Try again."

The cadet who finished the disciplinary action raised his hand again, shouting.

"Instructor! I have a question!"

"Go ahead."

"What is being evaluated in urban warfare movement?"

"That's what I'll explain now."

The cadet felt embarrassed. The real reason he asked was to get on Quan's good side. But Quan believed even admiration stemmed from weakness.

"Urban warfare movement. Let's keep it brief and end it here."

Quan stepped into a building. It was open at the front, like a dollhouse, so there was no issue hearing his explanation.

"The place where centrifugal force shines is in complex terrain. Particularly in urban warfare, where space is narrow, the outcome often depends on the level of movement skills."

Quan stomped on the wooden floor but didn't apply centrifugal force.

"The reason for stomping is to generate force and shift your center of gravity. This is called the first impact. Of course, in real combat, you won't have the time to do such a crazy thing, but as beginners, you should definitely stamp the ground."

Though mixed with scorn and ridicule, the students, impressed by Quan's mastery, didn't get angry.

"But I don't stamp for the first impact. If I use my power here, the floor will shatter. In Schema, centrifugal techniques use various first impacts, and I'll demonstrate the fundamental technique of using muscle vibration."

Quan contracted his upper body muscles, creating a vibration. He then jumped up and touched the wall. By

adjusting the inertia with his bent elbows, he created a spectacle of floating in the air for over three seconds.

“Wow...”

The cadets expressed their amazement. Normally, this would call for a “Drop down!” command, but Quan, perhaps too uninterested, continued explaining.

“Create centrifugal force with the first impact and leap. Of course, in this case, the force acts in the direction of the wall. With this application, such movements are possible.” Quan walked along the wall. The cadets, slowly tilting their heads up, looked at the vertical scene with disbelief. Quan stood upside down with both feet on the ceiling.

“Centrifugal force, in essence, offsets gravity by using inertial force. Thus, gravity isn’t currently acting on my body.”

Quan walking on the ceiling was more than astonishing—it was uncanny. However, it wasn’t magic.

Running along walls could even be done by acrobats in circuses, who didn’t use Schema. Quan had only magnified and precisely controlled the force to maximize inertia. As the centrifugal force dissipated, Quan’s body fell in accordance with gravity. When he stepped out of the building after the demonstration, the cadets’ expressions had completely changed.

“All of you, drop down. Do 200 push-ups.”

“Yes, sir!”

The cadets, realizing their mistake, dropped down with regret. Most official cadets could handle Schema, so the number wasn’t impossible. However, as first-years, their enhancement abilities weren’t highly developed, making 200 push-ups quite a grueling punishment.

“Listen while you do them. The first practical task is a horizontal obstacle course that gets lower as you advance. The final stage is impossible to pass without centrifugal force. The time limit is 20 seconds. The obstacles are made with real blades, so severe injury could be fatal. I trust none

of you will try to avoid the obstacles. If injured, Instructor Kaina will treat you.”

Kaina was the best surgeon in the swordsmanship school. While mages had healers, swordsmen had surgeons who performed operations. The problem was that the surgeries were excruciatingly painful. Especially in cases of severed limbs, the procedure connected to the nervous system, often causing patients to pass out from the pain.

‘Damn! Hearing that makes it even scarier!’

“Urban warfare movement is simple. Create centrifugal force and rely on the wall. The longer you hold on, the higher your score. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

Quan glanced at the fiercely determined cadets before taking his evaluation sheet and moving to a different spot.

“Starting from number one. I won’t call names, so come out when ready. Those waiting, rest.”

Rian sat down and propped his chin on his hand. It would take at least three minutes per person, so he had plenty of time.

“How do you feel? Think you can do well?”

It was a woman’s voice, rare in the swordsmanship school. But Rian turned without much interest. It was a beautiful woman with flowing blonde hair. She had a tall, slender frame with long limbs, giving her a refreshing presence. Elzaine Tess.

The only daughter of the prestigious Elzaine family, she had entered the swordsmanship school to inherit the role of her father, a colonial commander.

Her face could be seen as cute or fierce, but her personality was fierce regardless. Exceptional in skill, unmatched by any other first-year, she was a natural-born warrior who never backed down among men.

“Sit down. If the instructor catches you, it’s execution.”

“Oh, the great Rian is afraid of the instructor? He’s too busy grading to notice.”

“Who knows? That man might have eyes in the back of his head. Anyway, why did you suddenly move over here?”

“Isn’t that what friends are for? I came over to help ease your nerves.”

“When have you ever seen me nervous?”

“Ha, true. You can’t be nervous when there’s no lower place to fall to, right? You’re just the carefree last place.”

A comment that could annoy any swordsmanship cadet, but Rian only pouted his lips. Tess smiled. His temper, rarely angered by anything, distinguished him from others.

Why did a man like this always end up at the bottom?

Rian was undoubtedly the hardest worker among the first-years. No, it was almost as if he was putting himself through excessive torment daily.

Chapter 114: End-of-Term Report Cards (6)

Despite his efforts, his grades did not improve.

It had been said that he had grasped the concept of Schema a month ago, but the rate of his progress in enhancement was so slow it was hard to believe it was true.

“No matter how much I’m at the bottom, you never know until you try. Who’s to say things won’t go unexpectedly well when I give it a shot?”

“Heh, that’s so like you.”

Tess had never seen Rian show signs of anxiety. It was a strange sight to see Rian, the weakest in skill, so composed in the face of a test that could result in the loss of limbs.

‘Come to think of it, he was like that back then too.’

Tess first met Rian during their training period.

Swordsmen, by nature, love combat. With 300 such youths gathered, the atmosphere from day one was tense. The instructors didn’t particularly interfere with what went on inside the barracks. As expected, a few wolves bared their teeth.

The hierarchy was established in an instant.

Those who mastered the Schema were in Group 1, those with strong physical abilities were in Group 2, and those who were neither in Group 3. The real issue was with the cadets who couldn’t even make it into Group 3. They were boys with no interest in swords, pushed into the academy by their parents’ pressure.

Richard Feiger, the leader of Group 1, relentlessly bullied such boys. He was naturally violent, and being in a military academy that legally taught killing skills only set him loose further.

Tess didn't pay it any mind. Though she had the skill of Group 1, the ten or so female cadets were exempt from the hierarchy battles.

At the time, Rian was somewhere in the middle of Group 2. At that level, he shouldn't have been in a position to be bullied, but Rian didn't associate with anyone. His sole reason for applying to the swordsmanship academy was clear. Graduation didn't matter; he just wanted to improve enough to become a swordsman worthy of standing by Shirone's side.

"Puhaha! Run! Faster!"

"Hee-heeing! Hee-heeing!"

One day, cadets from Group 1 were racing inside the barracks, riding on the backs of weaker boys. Each time they struck the boys' rears with sticks, whinnies like horse cries erupted.

Some cadets frowned, but most cheered enthusiastically as if watching an actual horse race. It was a real race with money, though small, at stake. Showing any sign of dislike risked becoming one of those crawling underneath.

"Faster! We're winning! We're winning!"

Feiger, leading the race, was elated. True to his personality that wouldn't tolerate defeat in anything, he put all his effort even into this mock race. Seeing the finish line ahead, he struck harder. The cadet acting as the racehorse had tears streaming as he crawled on bleeding knees.

"Hee-heeing! Hee-heeing!"

"Yes! I'm first...!"

Just as he was about to cross the finish line, Feiger saw a blurry figure. The next moment, a strong impact struck his nose.

"Ugh!"

Caught off guard, Feiger was kicked and fell off the boy's back. Meanwhile, the trailing cadets crossed the finish line one after another.

"Enough already. Do you think this is your playground?"

Feiger clutched his throbbing nose and glared at the boy with blue hair.

“You little...!”

Ogent Rian.

To Feiger’s knowledge, he was mediocre even within Group 2. Realizing he had been struck by someone who hadn’t even mastered the Schema hurt his pride.

“What’s this, punk? Do you have a death wish?”

Rian didn’t reply. His reticent nature hadn’t changed since he entered the swordsmanship academy. If he had nothing to say, he wouldn’t make up words.

“Look at this punk...”

Feiger stood up, exuding hostility. Though the situation was on the brink of exploding, the frightened cadets couldn’t move.

Of course, there were those who didn’t feel the need to intervene. Tess was one of them.

This was the swordsmanship academy. Sticking up for the weak in a place dedicated to learning the art of war changed nothing. In the end, the situation would settle according to the hierarchy of power.

“Oh, it’s Rian? Looks like he’s finally made a mess.”

Tess turned around. A fellow female cadet, but a head taller than most of the boys, stood there like a wall.

“You know his name? He doesn’t seem particularly strong.”

“He’s weak. But he’s stubborn. Last time, the Group 2 kids pooled money for Feiger’s birthday. The only one who didn’t contribute was Rian.”

“Aha, so he got marked?”

“I guess they’ve been holding a grudge. But honestly, I’m surprised. I thought he was quiet, but turns out he’s hot-headed.”

“Hmm...”

Only then did Tess observe Rian closely. He still had his mouth shut, but he didn’t seem to be thinking of backing down.

‘A kid like that exists, huh. The kingdom really is vast.’
Her interest ended there. Having grown up seeing countless eccentrics due to her father being a commanding officer in occupied territories, this was nothing new to her.

No matter how much someone held onto their beliefs, if their sword wasn’t strong, it would eventually break—this was the iron rule of their world.

“Hahaha. What, cat got your tongue? Too late for regrets. Did you really think you’d come out of this with all limbs intact after doing something like that?”

“Let’s go outside. If the instructors find out, it’ll hurt your evaluation.”

Feiger was dumbfounded. The kid who should have been begging for his life was instead suggesting they fight somewhere the instructors wouldn’t notice.

“Fine, I’ll grant your wish. Follow me. Everyone else, come along. I’ll show you clearly what happens when someone dares to challenge me.”

Feiger led Rian to an open space behind the building. Groups 1 to 3 stood behind Feiger, while only the boys outside of any group were on Rian’s side.

But they were already demoralized. No, they had never intended to fight from the start. They were just kids who hadn’t been accepted into Feiger’s group. In their hearts, they resented Rian for escalating the situation this far.

“Hey, anyone who doesn’t want to get beaten, move over here.”

Feiger extended an amnesty. The cadets didn’t hesitate. Passing by Rian, they rushed to the opposite side.

“Puhaha! Pathetic. So, Rian, what now? Everyone ran, and it’s just you left.”

“Relying on numbers, huh? You were rotten to the core from the start.”

“What did you say?”

“A knight fights when there’s no other choice. Someone like you doesn’t even deserve to be called a knight.”

Feiger snorted dismissively. In the end, knights tore each other apart like rabid dogs once war began. Chivalry was nothing more than the wrapping paper for those who survived to glorify themselves.

“Fine, let’s see if your fists are as strong as your mouth. I’ll take you on personally. Don’t get too comfortable. Saying I’ll fight you alone means I intend to kill you.”

Rian raised his fists and assumed a combat stance.

Meanwhile, Feiger approached casually, as if taking a stroll.

“I’ll let you land the first punch. Go ahead and try.”

When Feiger beckoned with a finger, Rian threw a punch. In that instant, Feiger dodged and countered with a blow to Rian’s abdomen.

“Ugh!”

Rian’s eyes widened from the searing pain that felt as if his gut had been ripped apart. It was as if a heavy rock had slammed into his stomach. Was this what it felt like to be struck by a punch reinforced by Schema?

“You idiot. Why would I let you hit me?”

Feiger mocked Rian, but he was surprised that it wasn’t over with one hit. He had been too careless. Realizing this, he launched a series of full-strength blows.

Rian was on the brink of collapsing. Although it was a bare-handed fight, Schema itself was a lethal weapon. It felt as if he were being pummeled by a heavily armored soldier.

When Feiger’s fist slammed into Rian’s abdomen again, Rian’s feet left the ground.

When he landed, even Rian, known for his resilience, couldn’t stay standing. His knees buckled, and his body pitched forward to the ground.

‘As expected...’

Feiger sneered at Rian. But just then, Rian shot up like an arrow and closed the distance.

‘What the—? He’s still standing?’

Feiger was taken aback. Rian hadn’t mastered Schema. He could tell from the feel of his punches that they had

connected properly. Without the defensive reinforcement of Schema, Rian should have been unconscious by now.

Rian aimed for Feiger's abdomen. Targeting the face would be too easy for Feiger to dodge. But by blocking Feiger's view with his broad back and attacking from below, even Feiger couldn't easily counter.

The strategy worked, and Feiger retreated step by step. Each punch sent a throb of pain through his abdomen.

'What's with this guy?'

From Feiger's perspective, even winning now felt like a loss. The fact that he was struggling in a brawl with someone who couldn't even wield Schema was humiliating.

"You damn bastard!"

Feiger lost all self-control. He grabbed Rian's shoulders and pushed him away, then swung his fists wildly. The sound of dull impacts echoed across the clearing. The cadets looked on with pale faces as the one-sided beating continued.

When Feiger came to his senses, Rian was crumpled on the ground like a rag. But he hadn't lost consciousness. As Rian's fingers twitched, a fiery rage ignited in Feiger's eyes.

"Argh! This is infuriating!"

Feiger's kicks bombarded Rian. The severity of the situation finally dawned on the members of Group 1, and they rushed over.

"Hey, stop! He'll really die at this rate!"

"Get off me! I'll kill him! Die, you bastard!"

Rian's responses grew sluggish until he finally stopped moving. Feiger glanced around. The fear on the cadets' faces seemed to soothe his anger somewhat.

"Listen up! This is what happens when you mess with me! Hey, bring some rope!"

Rian was stripped down to his trousers. His muscular body was bruised and swollen. Feiger decided it was time to make an example and had Rian, bound with rope, hoisted up a tall tree.

Blood dripped from Rian's face, which was bent like a shrimp.

"Hahaha! He looks just like a worm on a fishing hook! Why'd you act out of your league?"

"Haha, this must be so embarrassing. Acting cocky and now look at him."

Sneers and mocking comments poured in from all directions. It was as if they had won a war.

Tess frowned. No matter how weak a person was, treating someone with such humiliation was despicable.

Moreover, girls their age were present. What could Rian be thinking right now? No, how deeply scarred would he be?

"Ugh..."

Rian regained consciousness. Though he hadn't fainted, he was far from okay. A swarm of cadets laughed as if watching a monkey at a zoo.

Tess met Rian's eyes. She tried to keep a composed expression. In his state, even sympathy could feel like an insult. Yet, to her surprise, Rian smiled and winked.

"Ah, my apologies, ladies."

Tess kept her indifferent expression, but inside, something stirred.

"Haha! What's he saying now? Still acting tough? What an idiot."

"Hey, be honest. Do you think pretending to be cool will make you look good after getting beaten up like that? You're hilarious right now."

"Isn't it embarrassing? So embarrassing? Getting shown up in front of the girls. Might as well bite your tongue and die."

Rian looked down at the cadets. Despite their jeers, his eyes were calm.

"It's fine. Even if it's embarrassing."

"Haha! Well, yeah, someone like you probably lives like that your whole life. Or wait—are you actually a pervert? Are you secretly enjoying this?"

Rian spoke calmly.

"I'll forget it soon enough."

Silence fell. An uneasy tension took over.

"I have no shame because I fought with everything I had. A day like this will fade from memory as time goes by. But... will you really be able to forget?"

No response came. Each of their hearts was pounding.

"The sight of you all, giving up before the fight even began, will haunt you forever. And you'll regret it. 'If only I had fought, if only I had stood up then.' But you already know, don't you? Time can't be turned back."

The cadets' faces twitched. It was a different kind of fear than Feiger's violence.

Chapter 115: End-of-Term Report Cards (7)

“Losing is acceptable no matter how many times it happens. The disgrace suffered for the sake of upholding one’s beliefs can be forgotten quickly. But the memory of running away in fear will haunt you for the rest of your life. Whether eating, sleeping, or on the battlefield, you will be tormented by it. That’s why a swordsman’s conviction is as valuable as life itself. Once broken, it can never be restored.”

There was no one left who mocked Rian.

“No one wants to carry the memory of cowardice. Especially not a swordsman. A day will come when recalling today will be worse than dying. So end it here. If you want to stand proud in the future, right now, at this moment, in this place...”

Rian shouted, blood gushing from his mouth.

“Fight! You idiots!”

Rian’s cry pierced the hearts of the cadets. Their blood boiled. Their skills varied, but their desire to be known as battlefield legends, the greatest swordsmen, and knights of steel was the same.

The surge of determination from hundreds of cadets was palpable. The air grew hot. The look in their eyes toward Feiger was no longer one of fear.

Feiger and the members of Group 1 sensed the danger and exuded killing intent in response.

“Shut up! No one listens to the words of a loser! Want to take me down? Then come at me. I’ll make you end up like the guy hanging over there!”

Tess smirked and touched her lips.

“Hmmm.”

Ogent Rian.

A candidate for the swordsmanship school.

“Good.”

Tess pushed off the ground and leaped. She landed past Feiger and untied the rope. With a thud, Rian fell, his body writhing in pain as he sat cross-legged.

“Your name is Rian, right? I’m Tess. Let’s fight together.”

Tess extended her hand for a handshake, but Rian only stared. He couldn’t move as he was still bound by the rope. Tess’s appearance resonated with the cadets. Although she was part of the female group, her skills shown in training were considered on par with Feiger’s.

“I’ll fight too! I can’t stand this any longer!”

“If even a girl steps up, how can we men stay silent?”

One by one, they began to side with Rian. Eventually, all the cadets, except those in Group 1, gathered and shouted together.

“Let’s show them! Let’s drive those bullies out of this school!”

“Drive them out! Drive them out!”

Feiger’s group found themselves surrounded by nearly 300 cadets. No matter how much they used Schema to enhance their strength, they couldn’t handle such a large number.

“You brats! Do you want to die?”

“Try killing us if you can, you bastard!”

A boy known for his strength in Group 2 struck first. As Feiger grimaced and glared at him with a dislocated jaw, dozens of cadets charged and slammed him to the ground.

“W-Wait! Stop!”

Realizing the situation, Feiger shouted, but the anger of the cadets wouldn’t subside so easily.

Everywhere, members of Group 1 were receiving the same treatment. Even boys who weren’t part of any group joined in to beat them up mercilessly.

“S-Somebody help! Instructor! Instructor!”

Tess turned to look at Rian, who was watching the battle with an indifferent expression, and laughed.

“Ha ha, sorry about this. It feels like I just put a fork into someone else’s meal.”

“Enough. I hate playing the hero. That’s why I called you over here.”

“Huh? Did you really not know?”

Rian looked at Tess in confusion, and she gave him an incredulous look, realizing he was serious.

“Are you an idiot? There’s no way the instructors would just let us do as we please. They’re probably observing everything even now.”

Tess’s prediction was correct. Feiger, who had suffered a fractured bone, was expelled, and other members of Group 1 who had supported him were also disqualified after completing a probationary period.

And as for Rian... despite his mediocre training scores, he was accepted as the top candidate among 30 successful entrants to the Kaizen Swordsmanship School.

Recalling her first meeting with Rian, Tess smiled slyly.

“That Rian~ is now scraping the bottom of the rankings.”

“Shut up. Why are you bringing up the past all of a sudden? Did I ever ask to be first?”

“Ha ha, still, it’s impressive. If it were me, I’d be drowning in self-pity. But you train every single day without rest.”

“Self-pity? I left that behind a long time ago.”

“Aren’t you worried, though? You got into the school, so you have to graduate and make a name for yourself as a swordsman. At this rate, you won’t achieve anything.”

“...Are you just trying to bring me down?”

“What are you talking about! I’m genuinely concerned. And I’m curious too. What drives you, anyway?”

Rian looked up at the sky and thought. What drives him? Compared to the other cadets, his position was much simpler.

"Of course, it'd be great to make a name for myself as a swordsman, but it's not necessary. I just need to become stronger. For my lord."

"Your lord? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I made a knight's vow."

Tess's eyes widened. It was like asking a neighborhood kid who they were going to marry and finding out they already had a fiancé.

"Really? But you're not even twenty yet?"

A knight's vow was a sacred pledge that a swordsman could only make once in their lifetime. It required careful consideration of the person's future and potential.

"Are you sure that's wise? Who is it? Is it someone I know?"

Tess assumed it must be someone famous. A war hero, a royal court official, or at least a regional lord. Someone of that stature would be necessary to entrust one's life to.

"Shirone."

"Shirone? Huh, Shirone... I don't know that name. What does he do?"

"He's my friend. Right now, he's attending a magic school back in my hometown."

Tess's jaw dropped in disbelief. A friend? And not even a certified mage, just a student?

"What were you thinking? No matter how close you are, there's no need to make a knight's vow. Wait, don't tell me..."

A sudden realization struck Tess. There were rare cases where someone pledged loyalty to someone without fame or potential.

"Is this Shirone... a girl?"

"Are you insane? What's going on in your head? Even if I have no talent, I wouldn't make a knight's vow for a reason like that."

"Really? Hmm."

Tess let out a sigh of relief.

“Either way, don’t say anything careless. I believe that Shirone will be the greatest. That’s why I’ve staked my life on it.”

For some reason, Rian looked different to her today. Frankly speaking, this was just a matter of camaraderie between boys. It would have to be someone extraordinary to inspire such loyalty that he would make a knight’s vow.

‘Who could it be? Shirone...’

Just then, an idea popped into her head. She had been wondering how to bring it up, and Shirone seemed like the perfect opportunity.

“Can I meet him? This Shirone of yours?”

“What? Why do you want to meet my friend?”

“You talk about him so highly that I’m curious. It’s like you’re already working while going to school, right?”

“That’s a sudden thing to say, don’t you think? Besides, Shirone is in Creas. It’s really far from here.”

“So what? The term will end in a few days anyway. My family is in occupied territory, so I don’t have anyone to visit. I could just go to Creas for a trip. Oh, right, there’s an island to the south that’s a tourist spot. I’ve always wanted to visit. We could go there with Shirone.”

Tess’s words flowed as if she had planned everything in advance. Hearing this, Rian’s thoughts shifted. Of course, he had no desire to go on a trip alone with Tess, but if Shirone were involved, that was a different story.

“Hmm, with Shirone... But wouldn’t it be a bit awkward if it’s just the three of us? He’s not very social. Especially around girls.”

Tess’s eyes sparkled at Rian’s unexpectedly positive reaction. Normally, he wouldn’t listen at all, but now he had suddenly changed, and she felt a pang of jealousy.

“Then have Shirone bring someone. Surely he has some female friends at the magic school. It’ll be a 2-on-2 trip. What do you think?”

A double date of sorts. It sounded fun. More importantly, Rian had already been planning to hang out with Shirone after the term ended, so he had no reason to refuse.

“Well, I’ll think about it for now.”

He spoke as if he hadn’t agreed yet, but it was essentially already permitted. Tess nodded in satisfaction.

“Good. Then let’s wrap up the final practical evaluation with a flourish for the sake of the holiday.”

Most of the cadets had already finished their practical evaluations, and it was now Tess’s turn.

“Cadet number 47, Elzaine Tess. Ready for evaluation!”

Standing at the starting line of the obstacle course, Tess shouted, and Quan signaled with a bend of his finger.

“Go.”

Tess sprinted forward, dodging obstacles that lowered like limbo bars. But she hesitated in front of a blade obstacle lower than her seated height, causing her body to tense up.

Although she had grasped the concept of Schema earlier than most, today was her first time using external gravity.

Due to the nature of Schema, which affects the body, it is rare for someone in their growth period to fully master it.

Even if they did, it wasn’t a recommended practice.

Tess calmly initiated the first impact. The shockwave, triggered by her stomp on the ground, resonated through the Schema.

‘Shift the center of gravity outward here!’

External gravity wasn’t magic. It simply created powerful inertia to overcome gravity. With that confidence, Tess leaned her upper body back.

‘It worked!’

Tess’s body drew a fan-shaped arc as she slid under the blade. It wasn’t luck. Every training she had done without relying on external gravity led to this moment.

“Cadet number 47, Elzaine Tess. Obstacle cleared!”

As Tess spread her arms and reported, applause erupted from the cadets. Yet, with her heart pounding, she couldn’t

hear any of it.

‘I did it. It actually works?’

Quan’s training hadn’t been in vain. From the start, he had trained her with this in mind.

‘He might be a twisted person, but he is still a teacher.’

Tess, who had perfectly executed even urban combat movements, confidently secured first place. With only a few participants left, it seemed unlikely anyone would surpass her score.

“Cadet number 52, Ogent Rian. Ready for evaluation!”

When it was Rian’s turn, Quan’s brow furrowed. He didn’t expect much from Rian, but paradoxically, that made him a cadet who piqued Quan’s curiosity.

“Go ahead.”

Rian kicked off the ground and dashed forward. He navigated the obstacles that didn’t require Schema with exceptional skill. But the problem lay with the final obstacle.

‘First impact!’

He stomped down hard and tilted his upper body back. At the same time, Quan’s eyes flashed.

Rian felt something was wrong. The blade was inexplicably approaching his neck.

‘Huh?’

Quan flew forward at an incredible speed and kicked Rian square in the face. Rian rolled across the ground and couldn’t get up for a long time. Struggling, he raised his upper body, only to see the furious instructor limping toward him.

“You idiot! Are you out of your mind? Do you have a death wish? Where did you throw away your Schema and push your neck toward the blade?”

A now-alert Rian sprang up and shouted.

“I’m sorry! But I did it! The Schema...!”

“What nonsense are you spouting? Do you even know what Schema is? If you can’t use it, you’re disqualified from practicals!”

“No, sir! I definitely succeeded! I passed the muscle enhancement test and was given a pass!”

“What did you just say? Muscle enhancement? Don’t lie to me...”

Muscle enhancement was a test used to verify Schema by lifting twice one’s body weight. Quan surveyed the area and found an appropriate object to use, calculating Rian’s weight.

“Hey, come here and lift this.”

It was a large stone leftover from the construction of the training ground.

Rian took a deep breath and approached. To be honest, he barely managed to pass the muscle enhancement test before, so he was understandably nervous.

“Whooo!”

Rian wrapped his arms around the stone and straightened his back with all his might. His trembling legs held the weight steady, and as he lifted his arms, the massive rock rose above his head.

Quan pressed down on Rian’s body with his fingertips. The vibrations through the muscle fibers told him everything, darkening his expression.

‘Damn it.’

It wasn’t Schema.

Quan had trained countless cadets, but he had never seen someone with so little talent.

No matter how lacking someone was, with top-notch facilities and training, they would typically manage at least a basic Schema. Yet Rian couldn’t even achieve that.

Of course, if someone lacked talent, he could just dismiss them. There were plenty of aspiring swordmasters in the world.

But Quan didn’t want to abandon Rian. There was something about him that made Quan reluctant to let go.

‘How much training must he have done...’

A cadet like this wasn't despicable. In fact, as a fellow swordmaster, it was a willpower deserving respect. Yet one major problem blocked any path forward. He had no talent. If there were even a hint of it, something could be done, but he had none.

"Rian, I'm sorry to say this, but you haven't mastered Schema."

The cadets' faces showed shock. It was the first time in six months that they had heard Quan say the word "sorry".

"That's impossible! I'm holding this... this huge rock right now! Then what is this?"

Quan sighed.

"That... is nothing but your ridiculously strong muscles."

Rian's face was one of disbelief. Moments later, the stone he held dropped with a heavy thud.

Ogent Rian. Confirmed last place.

(End of Volume 5)

Translated by CHesky Aseka

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A knight's vow was a sacred pledge that a swordsman could only make once in their lifetime. It required careful consideration of the person's future and potential.

"Really? But you're not even twenty yet?"

Tess's eyes widened. It was like asking a neighborhood kid who they were going to marry and finding out they already had a fiancé.

"Oh, I made a knight's vow."

"Your lord? What do you mean?"

"Of course, it'd be great to make a name for myself as a swordsman, but it's not necessary. I just need to become stronger. For my lord."

Rian looked up at the sky and thought. What drives him? Compared to the other cadets, his position was much simpler.

“What are you talking about! I’m genuinely concerned. And I’m curious too. What drives you, anyway?”

“...Are you just trying to bring me down?”

“Aren’t you worried, though? You got into the school, so you have to graduate and make a name for yourself as a swordsman. At this rate, you won’t achieve anything.”

“Self-pity? I left that behind a long time ago.”

“Ha ha, still, it’s impressive. If it were me, I’d be drowning in self-pity. But you train every single day without rest.”

“Shut up. Why are you bringing up the past all of a sudden? Did I ever ask to be first?”

“That Rian~ is now scraping the bottom of the rankings.”

Recalling her first meeting with Rian, Tess smiled slyly.

And as for Rian... despite his mediocre training scores, he was accepted as the top candidate among 30 successful entrants to the Kaizen Swordsmanship School.

Tess’s prediction was correct. Feiger, who had suffered a fractured bone, was expelled, and other members of Group 1 who had supported him were also disqualified after completing a probationary period.

“Are you an idiot? There’s no way the instructors would just let us do as we please. They’re probably observing everything even now.”

Rian looked at Tess in confusion, and she gave him an incredulous look, realizing he was serious.

“Huh? Did you really not know?”

“Enough. I hate playing the hero. That’s why I called you over here.”

“Ha ha, sorry about this. It feels like I just put a fork into someone else’s meal.”

Tess turned to look at Rian, who was watching the battle with an indifferent expression, and laughed.

“S-Somebody help! Instructor! Instructor!”

Everywhere, members of Group 1 were receiving the same treatment. Even boys who weren’t part of any group joined in to beat them up mercilessly.

Realizing the situation, Feiger shouted, but the anger of the cadets wouldn't subside so easily.

"W-Wait! Stop!"

A boy known for his strength in Group 2 struck first. As Feiger grimaced and glared at him with a dislocated jaw, dozens of cadets charged and slammed him to the ground.

"Try killing us if you can, you bastard!"

"You brats! Do you want to die?"

Feiger's group found themselves surrounded by nearly 300 cadets. No matter how much they used Schema to enhance their strength, they couldn't handle such a large number.

"Drive them out! Drive them out!"

"Let's show them! Let's drive those bullies out of this school!"

One by one, they began to side with Rian. Eventually, all the cadets, except those in Group 1, gathered and shouted together.

"If even a girl steps up, how can we men stay silent?"

"I'll fight too! I can't stand this any longer!"

Tess's appearance resonated with the cadets. Although she was part of the female group, her skills shown in training were considered on par with Feiger's.

Tess extended her hand for a handshake, but Rian only stared. He couldn't move as he was still bound by the rope.

"Your name is Rian, right? I'm Tess. Let's fight together."

Tess pushed off the ground and leaped. She landed past Feiger and untied the rope. With a thud, Rian fell, his body writhing in pain as he sat cross-legged.

"Good."

A candidate for the swordsmanship school.

Ogent Rian.

"Hmmm."

Tess smirked and touched her lips.

"Shut up! No one listens to the words of a loser! Want to take me down? Then come at me. I'll make you end up like the guy hanging over there!"

Feiger and the members of Group 1 sensed the danger and exuded killing intent in response.

The surge of determination from hundreds of cadets was palpable. The air grew hot. The look in their eyes toward Feiger was no longer one of fear.

Rian's cry pierced the hearts of the cadets. Their blood boiled. Their skills varied, but their desire to be known as battlefield legends, the greatest swordsmen, and knights of steel was the same.

"Fight! You idiots!"

Rian shouted, blood gushing from his mouth.

"No one wants to carry the memory of cowardice. Especially not a swordsman. A day will come when recalling today will be worse than dying. So end it here. If you want to stand proud in the future, right now, at this moment, in this place..."

There was no one left who mocked Rian.

"Losing is acceptable no matter how many times it happens. The disgrace suffered for the sake of upholding one's beliefs can be forgotten quickly. But the memory of running away in fear will haunt you for the rest of your life. Whether eating, sleeping, or on the battlefield, you will be tormented by it. That's why a swordsman's conviction is as valuable as life itself. Once broken, it can never be restored."

Chapter 116: An Unexpected Visitor (1)

The first term at the magic school had come to an end. Despite the many ups and downs, the atmosphere was warm as the term concluded.

Even the teachers exchanged jokes with their students while awaiting the time to head home.

At the swordsmanship school, where physical training was emphasized, rest was considered an essential discipline.

However, the magic school, which focused on mental training, did not overlook this fact.

Although the mind is invisible, it is undeniably a function inherent to humans. Even the most diligent student needs time to cool down their overheated mind.

However, to prevent complacency, Alpheas Magic Academy required students who hadn't given a presentation to submit a thesis on a topic of their choice.

Of course, this did not apply to Shirone. He had received the highest score at the presentation of "The Invisible" held by the Paranormal Supernatural Science Research Society and could enjoy his break without worry.

On the day of the break when students were leaving one by one, Shirone found his way to the empty Third Training Ground.

The place, which was usually noisy with chanting voices and the blasts of magic, was now wrapped in a serene silence.

The Third Training Ground was one of the larger facilities. A 1,600-meter track circled the perimeter, and the area was divided into eight sections equipped with devices to test various magical effects.

Shirone stepped into the training area for movement magic. Magic involving Teleportation, Flight, Dark Port, Air Walk, and countless other movement spells could be practiced there. A barren open field provided the ideal environment for practicing all these spells.

He reflected on the achievements of the past half-year.

‘First, movement magic.’

The movement magic Shirone specialized in was Teleportation. He had progressed further to master the Rainbow Drop, which allowed curved movements, and Patrol, a technique enabling rapid side-to-side movement. Among his accomplishments, the advancement in Photon Output was also noteworthy.

Initially just a spell for transmitting information, he transformed it into a powerful offensive spell, the Photon Cannon, after realizing the existence of god particles.

This led to his easy mastery of flash magic, which could maintain light for an extended period.

Shirone did not stop there and continued to evolve. He reverse-engineered the Photon Cannon mathematically to develop the laser.

While the Photon Cannon had a higher singular impact, the accumulated damage from the laser was nearly infinite. It was a formidable spell that could destroy any solid object unless it was immune to the laser’s waves.

‘Come to think of it, I really did work hard.’

A contented smile spread across Shirone’s face. What delighted him most was the fact that his level in his specialized magic had made a significant leap.

Currently, Shirone’s theory on photonization was beyond sub-light speed, reaching the realm of near-light speed. The reason Shirone had come to the training ground was to try out Spatial Movement, something only feasible for a mage who had achieved near-light speed.

“I wonder what it feels like.”

It was on a different level from regular Teleportation. He had heard that with Spatial Movement, one could vividly experience the unique nature of light as it folded space-time.

When he activated the Spirit Zone, the surrounding landscape felt sharply clear through his synesthesia. Concentrating his consciousness on a single point, Shirone cast the photonization spell at near-light speed.

The moment omniscience and omnipotence combined, tilting the center, his body evaporated into light. The flash shot up into the sky and, in an instant, plummeted back to the ground.

Arriving at his destination, Shirone gasped, his face pale.

“Hah! I... I did it!”

His heart raced with the unfamiliar sensation he experienced for the first time. The scenery itself was different from what he saw during regular Teleportation. Regular Teleportation felt like the world crumpled as it rushed at him. But with Spatial Movement, it felt as though the world folded and the sky and ground spun around him. ‘So, this is Spatial Movement. It’s disorienting. I can’t use this in battle like this.’

Even Ethella, a certified 6th-class mage, was said to have relied on regular Teleportation when facing the Archmage. This proved that Spatial Movement wasn’t practical for combat.

Spatial Movement truly shone not in combat but in travel situations.

For long-distance movement, Teleportation posed the risk of colliding with obstacles. Thus, even if a Spirit Zone was extensive, most mages used it within a 10-meter range. However, Spatial Movement allowed one to leap over space itself, unaffected by obstacles.

Of course, to see tangible benefits, the radius of the Spirit Zone needed to be much greater than it currently was.

Currently, Shirone's Spirit Zone diameter was about 50 meters. It was exceptional among students, but inadequate for advanced spells like Spatial Movement.

The situation had become one where his magic level far outpaced the size of his Spirit Zone. Usually, magic followed the level of one's Spirit Zone, but as an Unlocker, Shirone's keen insight allowed him to surpass theoretical barriers.

'There's an imbalance. Should I be happy about this?'

The growth of his Spirit Zone wasn't insignificant, either. Its size was similar to what it was at the start of school, but its durability was on a different level.

If he were to deploy a Spirit Zone at the level it was six months ago, a 100-meter diameter wouldn't be an issue.

But casting advanced magic in that state would shatter the Zone. Hence, it was reasonable to consider the Zone's radius to still be 50 meters.

'Haha, saying I'm using Spatial Movement with a Zone of this size would make people laugh.'

Rough calculations suggested that, in actual combat, a Spirit Zone with a 200-meter diameter was needed for Spatial Movement to be effective.

For instance, if a mage had to travel 10 kilometers for an urgent mission, using Teleportation would require casting the spell 1,000 times. However, a mage with a 200-meter diameter Spirit Zone could cover the distance with only 50 Spatial Movements.

Reducing 950 spell casts in a real battle, where every second counted, was an incredible efficiency.

"Learning powerful magic isn't everything. Without a solid Spirit Zone, I can't become an exceptional mage."

Moreover, training the Spirit Zone wasn't just about expanding its radius.

It had to be expanded with durability sufficient for major spells. To increase the accuracy of magic, density also had to be considered.

"Oh my..."

Shirone stared blankly with his mouth slightly open. It felt as though the path he was to walk stretched endlessly to the horizon.

The radius and durability of the Spirit Zone, omniscience and omnipotence, application and proficiency, practical experience and judgment—there was no end to what a mage needed to master.

What thrilled Shirone most was the realization that all these skills had to advance in harmony simultaneously.

Understanding this, he started to see, albeit faintly, the shape of the path he pursued and what magic truly was.

Shirone felt a surge of joy.

This is because feeling a vague sense of reality in an almost infinite magical world is evidence of growth.

It was the same for Siena, Ethella, and Arcane. They all reached that point after extensive training. Of course, it was a difficult path, but it never felt like an impossible one.

‘I can do it. I can rise even higher.’

Having successfully advanced to Class Four, he could apply for the graduation year anytime from the next semester.

And once he finally graduated, he would become the mage he had always dreamed of.

“I’ll be a mage...”

Just the thought of it made Shirone’s heart race. There was a time when he believed he would spend his entire life on the mountain. But now, things were different. The dream he had longed for was becoming reality.

“Come to think of it, so much has happened.”

When he first joined the academy, he couldn’t even manage a single spell and was ridiculed by his peers. In response, hadn’t he taken the extraordinary step of participating in an instantaneous Teleportation test?

“Haha! Now that I think about it, I was so pathetic.”

Shirone left the Teleportation training area and entered the slashing magic training field in the 4th sector.

It was a place to test magical cutting power, where a cylindrical target with a high viscosity floated above a magic circle.

Shirone approached the target and extended his hand.

“Wind Cutter.”

At the incantation, a fierce gust of wind surged. The sharp wind slashed the target, making a slicing sound as the cylinder split in two.

Though wind-element majors would practice with the target set at maximum viscosity, Shirone, who was trying it for the first time, was satisfied just to see the magic succeed.

“Hehe, this is pretty easy.”

Shirone’s magic had grown incomparably stronger since the beginning of his schooling.

Having passed all subjects with scores above 80, basic spells like Wind Cutter were no longer an issue for him.

Of course, knowing the theories didn’t mean everyone could wield them. The reason Shirone could immediately cast a spell on his first attempt was because his approach was more intuitive than analytical.

Mages could broadly be divided into theorists and sensory types. Each had their strengths and weaknesses, but when attempting something for the first time, sensory types usually learned faster.

Shirone, in particular, was clearly in that category. This was why Arcane once said that Shirone was the type to learn best through hands-on practice.

Reviewing his progress over the past six months, Shirone smiled contentedly. He felt that he was finally becoming more like a true mage.

“Hey, Shirone!”

“Huh?”

When he turned around, he saw Nade and Iruki waving at him.

Just as he was about to run over to them in excitement, Shirone suddenly had a playful idea and stopped walking.

He then adjusted his Spirit Zone to a targeted mode, calculated the distance to his friends, and cast Spatial Movement.

With a scraping noise, Shirone's body instantly appeared right in front of them.

"Whoa! What the—what did you just do?"

Nade jumped back in shock, and Iruki widened his eyes in surprise.

"Spatial Movement? Have you been practicing until the last day of the semester?"

Shirone chuckled sheepishly and responded.

"No. I couldn't practice in the training grounds for a while, so I just wanted to do a final review."

"But wasn't today the first time you succeeded with Spatial Movement? That's pretty amazing. Do it again!"

As Nade made a fuss, Iruki clicked his tongue.

"What's so amazing? It's not like it's the first time you've seen it."

"No, but it's different seeing someone our age doing it.

When the teachers did it, it just seemed normal, but seeing Shirone do it feels special."

"Well, I guess so. Spatial Movement is difficult even for graduating seniors."

There was a reason specialists were called as such.

Teleportation was basic for mages, but Spatial Movement leaned more toward specialization.

Just like Teleportation, Spatial Movement was classified as an overpowered spell, so it was mandatory for those certified at 6th-class.

However, even for specialists, achieving near-light speed movement as a student was far more difficult than expected.

"But it's not that useful yet. The movement range is too short."

"How can you say it's not useful? At the very least, you managed to surprise Nade."

“What? When did I get surprised? I can use Plasma too, you know. Want me to show you right here?”

Nade bristled, but the moment was already past. Iruki waved his hand dismissively at Shirone.

“Enough already. So to summarize, you were casting impressive spells where no one could see, indulging in a bit of self-admiration?”

Shirone’s face turned red. Though he was just reviewing his progress over the last half-year, Iruki wasn’t entirely wrong.

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

“Well, for someone like you, that’s completely fine. You were the one who made the most progress this semester, after all. Anyway, if you’re satisfied now, let’s go and pay our respects.”

“Oh, right. It’s already that late.”

Most students had gone home, but a few, like Shirone’s group, had stayed behind to thank the teachers who had guided them through the semester.

The trio left the training grounds and headed toward the building where the faculty resided. The dormitory doors were all open, and cleaners could be seen tidying up each room.

Shirone searched for the meeting hall. As expected, many teachers were chatting over tea, preparing to leave for their hometowns.

Chapter 117: An Unexpected Visitor (2)

“Hey? What are you all still doing here, not gone yet?”

Shirone and his companions, who had been standing awkwardly, entered the conference room and bowed their heads as Shiina greeted them.

“Ah, we wanted to thank you before leaving. Thank you for teaching us this semester.”

The elderly teacher let out a hearty laugh.

“Haha! Hearing that from the school’s biggest troublemakers makes me laugh. Anyway, you all worked hard enduring it too. Make sure to play hard during the break. A good student should know how to enjoy themselves too.”

Siena, who had made room for Shirone’s group, poured them tea and offered her well-wishes.

“Congratulations to all three of you for moving up. You’ll be busier starting next semester, right? Resting is good, but don’t let your guard down. I’ll be keeping a close eye on you once school starts.”

True to form, Siena never let anything slide.

But considering she was a teacher who would freeze the classroom for making noise, these words were quite kind. It seemed even the teachers were relaxing as the semester came to an end.

“Yes, I’ll do my best,” Shirone said, sipping his tea. Just then, Thadd, who was standing nearby, spoke to Ethella.

“Teacher Ethella, if you have time, would you join me for a meal...?”

Shirone nearly spat out his tea.

No matter how much of a flirt he was, trying to hit on a cleric was a bit much.

Ethella, taken aback, gave an awkward smile and waved her hands.

“Sorry, I have to oversee the parish during the break.”

“Ah, I see. If I could be guided by a beautiful woman like Teacher Ethella, I’d join the Karsis Order immediately.”

Ethella was stunned. No sane person would say such things to a bishop of the Order.

But true to her graceful nature, she maintained her composure.

“Haha, that’s too bad. So, what will you be doing during the break, Teacher Thadd?”

Siena interrupted with a snarky comment.

“Hmph, probably out seducing women as usual.”

Thadd’s brow furrowed.

What was with this woman constantly picking fights with him? It seemed she couldn’t rest easy without sparring until the very last day of the semester.

Knowing that getting angry meant losing, Thadd shrugged nonchalantly.

“Haha, there’s no shame in falling in love at my age. I’m more worried about you, Teacher Siena. With that prickly personality, finding a partner might be difficult.”

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me. I’m saying you lack charm. It’s obvious just by looking. You’ve never been on a date, have you? That’s because of your prickly personality.”

Siena’s eyes flared as she shouted back.

“Don’t make assumptions! I have dated before!”

At her unexpected statement, the teachers all turned to look at Siena.

Shirone and his friends, who knew of her bittersweet relationship with Armin, couldn’t help but be surprised.

“Teacher, really? When? Who did you date?”

Thadd burst out laughing, holding his stomach.

“Haha! Do you guys believe that? She’s just making it up out of embarrassment. Isn’t that right, Teacher Siena?”

“You’re mocking me. I really have dated before!”

“Oh, really? Then who was it? Asking for a name isn’t rude, is it?”

Siena gritted her teeth and glared at Thadd.

She could not stand losing to this man, no matter what.

“Ma…”

“Ma…?”

Everyone’s ears perked up.

“I’m dating magic.”

Siena’s face flushed red.

It’s said that when stubbornness takes over, people sometimes blurt out irrational things, and that was exactly what was happening now.

As the atmosphere in the conference room turned somber, the teachers, their faces now red, averted their gazes.

Thadd, too, wanted to leave but held on and managed to respond.

“Ah, I see. Understood.”

“Are you ignoring me? I’m dedicating my life to magic. Is that so wrong?”

“No, my apologies. It seems I misspoke.”

Thadd gulped down his hot tea and turned away from Siena.

Shirone and his companions, watching the scene, stifled their laughter.

This was a side of their teachers they rarely got to see.

“You’re all still here, I see.”

“Ah, Headmaster!”

Alpheas entered the conference room.

Due to his teaching credentials being temporarily suspended, he had been staying in his quarters. Now, with most students having left, he decided to stop by.

“Oh, the troublemakers are here too. You all worked hard this semester.”

"It's thanks to your great leadership, Headmaster. We're grateful."

"Ha-ha, am I still even the headmaster? From next semester, an interim headmaster from the Magic Association will be taking over. Treat them as well as you've treated me."

Nade's face drooped.

No matter how he thought about it, he doubted the next person would be better than Alpheas. Even without saying, "The old is better," Alpheas was undoubtedly the best headmaster.

"I wonder what kind of person it will be. Will next semester be even harder?"

"Haha! It could be. But you should have confidence. The achievements you made this semester were remarkable. You'll do well next semester, too."

As the teachers finished their tea and started gathering their things, Shirone's group prepared to leave as well.

"Headmaster, we'll see you when school starts."

"Yes. Go on trips with your family and rest well. Oh, and Shirone, could I have a moment with you?"

Shirone, who was about to follow his friends out, turned back.

Nade gestured with his thumb toward the door.

"We'll be waiting outside, Shirone. Hey, we'll be in the hallway."

"Alright, got it."

In the now-empty conference room, Shirone stood face-to-face with Alpheas.

Seeing the seriousness in his expression, Shirone also braced himself, waiting for him to speak.

"The reason I wanted to talk to you is because of Miro."

"Ah, I see."

Shirone recalled Miro's face.

Though he had been busy after his promotion was confirmed, her image still lingered strongly in his mind.

"I'm curious about her. Do you still wish to investigate Miro?"

"Yes. I need to discuss it with my parents, but I'll try to make time. It's the break, so this might be the only chance."

"I see. It will be a valuable experience."

Alpheas readily agreed but had an unsettled look on his face.

"Was that the only reason you called me?"

Alpheas finally spoke what had been on his mind.

"No, actually, I wanted to ask you something. Can you tell me about Miro's condition back then?"

"Her condition... do you mean her mental state?"

"Yes, not just mentally but anything about her appearance that you observed."

Shirone thought back to the events of that time.

Although the meeting had been brief, the event was so significant that he remembered even their small conversations.

"Now that I think about it, her emotions seemed a bit... volatile. At the time, I brushed it off because she was so mysterious."

"How severe was it? Was it serious?"

"No, not that serious. Although there were moments that felt a bit eerie."

Alpheas let out a faint sigh.

A complex emotion, one Shirone could not describe with his young mind, emanated from him.

"Did Miro seem lonely to you?"

"When I asked her about that, she said that gods do not feel loneliness."

"Gods do not feel loneliness. Hmm."

A shadow crossed Alpheas' face.

Perhaps Miro had wanted to convey something through Shirone.

'Or was it meant for them...?'

Shirone studied Alpheas intently.

What had happened that made his expression so grave? But he couldn't outright ask, as he had promised not to pry. "If you're that worried, Headmaster, I won't go to the ruins."

Alpheas came out of his thoughts at last.

He realized he had been lost in them while someone was sitting right in front of him.

"Hm? No, it's fine. The Kergo ruins are a tourist site. If you get the chance, visit them. You might get a sense of the world Miro lives in."

"Do you mean there really is a secret hidden there? But it's a tourist spot."

"Haha! Where's the fun if I tell you everything? Just make sure never to let your guard down. I'm allowing this investigation because I trust your skills."

Shirone realized there was weight in his words.

Alpheas was someone who let his students experience freedom. But because of that, he also had a playful side that could tolerate a reasonable amount of risk.

"Yes. I'll do my best to investigate."

After bidding farewell to Alpheas and leaving the meeting room, Shirone encountered his friends waiting in the hallway.

"Shirone, what did you talk about?"

"It was about that person, Miro, whom I mentioned before."

"Ah, right. Now that I think about it, you said you were curious about her, right? Was it something related to the Kergo ruins?"

"That's right. But after hearing what the headmaster said, I'm even more intrigued. I'm planning to go and check it out when I have time."

"That's a shame. We'd like to go with you if we could."

"It's fine. You should spend time with your families during the break."

"Ugh, who said we're worried about that? It's just that we'd get half-killed if we didn't go home."

Nade stuck out his tongue as if the mere thought was horrifying.

It was the same for Iruki. His father was the leader of the Yongroe, so he couldn't behave recklessly when out in public.

"Still, it's really intriguing. Miro being the president of our research society means she was my direct senior, right? Do you think she might have been watching over me too?"

Iruki shattered Nade's hopeful thoughts.

"Shirone already said it, didn't he? Without entering the Immortal Function, it's impossible to make contact. She's probably staying in some intermediate dimension between this world and the next."

"Ugh, I wanted to meet him and pay my respects."

"Well, maybe you'll get to see him before you die. Anyway, it's time to part ways. Take care, everyone."

At the place Iruki pointed, three carriages were waiting.

Among them, the most striking was the dazzling twin-headed carriage sent by the Mercodine family.

"Oh wow, as expected from a first-rank noble family. Totally different class."

"Shut up. It's all a waste of money. And it's slow as a turtle, too."

The three of them exchanged farewells.

Although they would see each other again soon, when the moment of parting came, a sense of sadness crept in.

"Shirone, Iruki. I'm going to miss you. This is the first time I've disliked a vacation this much."

"Will you be okay? Can you hold up?"

Iruki asked with concern.

Knowing what kind of family Nade came from, he could easily imagine how scared Nade must have been at the moment.

But contrary to expectations, Nade smiled brightly.

It was a different sight from the previous semester. This time, he was taking with him cherished memories made

with Shirone.

“No problem. I’ll go back, regroup, and next semester, I’m going to have the best time. Stay healthy, and take care.”

The three, who had shared their ups and downs for half a year, waved as they walked toward their respective carriages.

“Alright then! See you on the first day of school!”

A week earlier.

The Kaizen Swordsmanship School, like other schools of its kind, had completed its first semester of training.

Rian received the worst report card, but his steps were light as he headed home, thanks to his naturally positive personality.

He wanted to go straight back to his hometown, but he had to stop by his sister’s house to collect his belongings, so he had no choice but to head toward the palace.

‘Damn it, having to see that witch again. If I’d known this, I would’ve left my stuff at Grandpa’s place. She’ll probably try to kill me when she sees my grades.’

Rian hoped Reina would be out as he opened the mansion door.

The mansion, fitting for an artist recognized by the royal palace, was grand and luxurious. To Rian, however, it just meant more escape routes to navigate.

As he tiptoed stealthily past the hall, a loud piano melody shattered his hopes.

“Damn it! She’s home?”

The piano was so loud it drowned out his voice.

Reina was seated at the grand piano that adorned one side of the hall, completely absorbed in her playing.

Chapter 118: An Unexpected Visitor (3)

As she became the apprentice of Märchen, the virtuoso pianist, her skills improved rapidly.

Her senses became so acute that she could detect even the slightest change in air pressure around her, and her fingers moved so fast across the keys that they were almost invisible.

Even the highly esteemed royals would praise Reina's performance.

But to Rian, who had been troubled by that sound since childhood, it was nothing but murderous noise.

"Damn it, the witch has gotten stronger. But no human dies from just that."

Reina seemed oblivious to everything but the sound of her own playing.

Seeing her lower lip jut out was a sure sign that she was deeply focused.

Her hair was disheveled, and her eyes were sunken, indicating that she had stayed up all night.

She was only wearing underwear, exposing her thighs.

In fact, she had been playing the piano for 17 hours straight.

It was a famous requiem known for its difficulty across the continent, and lately, she had been struggling with its challenges.

For an artist, a barrier is both a curse and a blessing. It is a sign that one's skills are about to improve.

In such cases, Reina would spend days and nights pushing past that barrier.

Rian glimpsed a new hope.

If he could sneak into the room without his sister noticing and gather his belongings, he could escape through the window or break down the wall.

‘Alright, stay calm. Just get back home.’

Rian moved slowly along the blind spot of the grand piano. If he could just reach the stairs, the plan would be a complete success.

Of course, Reina was always one step ahead of him.

Just as hope lit up Rian’s eyes, her playing came to an abrupt halt.

‘Oh, damn it.’

Without turning her gaze, Reina spoke.

“What are you doing over there? Have they started teaching clown tricks at sword school these days?”

“Tch, if you saw me, at least pretend to acknowledge me. And what’s with that look? Playing the piano in just your underwear? Stop disrespecting art.”

“You’re acting up again. Haven’t you had enough?”

Despite the threat in her voice, Reina picked up her skirt and put it on.

Only the family knew that the more stressed she became during practice, the more clothes she shed.

“Heh, so you do feel embarrassed in front of your brother, huh? Ow!”

The moment Rian laughed, Reina’s foot struck his face.

Even though Rian had trained hard, he still couldn’t react in time to her speed.

“Damn it. What the hell was that? Tsk!”

As Rian spat and wiped his mouth, Reina extended her hand.

“Hand it over, your report card.”

Rian’s face hardened.

Of course, the inevitable had come.

“W-Why do you care so much about my report card? I’m not a kid anymore. Ow, ow, ow!”

Reina shouted as she grabbed Rian’s ear.

“Not going to hand it over? Want to die today?”

“Okay, okay! Here, here!”

Rian took the report card from his inside pocket and threw it on the floor.

Then, without looking back, he bolted to his room.

“Hmph! He still hasn’t grown up. When is he ever going to mature?”

Reina picked up the report card and spread it open before her eyes.

Scores for his training subjects were listed one by one, and at the bottom, the total number of students and his overall rank were noted.

Reina’s hand trembled as she saw his ranking.

Last place!

Not second to last—dead last.

‘This can’t be. As pathetic as he is, he still tries.’

Reina flipped the report card to read the teacher’s comments.

Her eyes filled with shock as she scanned the writing.

We regret to inform you that your child has finished the term with the lowest grades.

Currently, Rian believes he has awakened his Schema, but the faculty has concluded that it is merely a placebo effect caused by an increase in physical strength.

This phenomenon is known as an Imaginary Schema, which, although rare, can occur at times. This is a period when the warm attention of family is crucial.

“Ugh, seriously! I can’t take this anymore!”

Reina crumpled the report card and stormed up the stairs.

When she threw open the door, Rian was inside, sitting like a bear and packing his things.

“Hey! You’re in last place!”

“Yeah, I know. It happened.”

“And an Imaginary Schema? What on earth does that mean? Is it like... an imaginary pregnancy or something?”

“Maybe. Who knows.”

Rian answered as if it were someone else's problem and continued packing.

Since revealing his report card, he felt detached from all his worries.

Reina glared at Rian, her frustration boiling over.

Unable to hold back, she smacked him on the back repeatedly.

"You idiot! Take that! Die already!"

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Is it really that hard? You just have to open your Schema!"

"I don't know! What am I supposed to do if it doesn't work? I tried my best. Anyway, I'm leaving now, so move. I might miss my carriage."

"Where do you think you're going? Stay right here at home! We're heading down with Grandpa as soon as everything is settled, so you're coming with us then!"

"No way! I have plans!"

"Plans? What kind of plans could you possibly have? Do you feel like playing around after seeing these grades?"

Rian almost revealed the truth about Shirone in his moment of frustration.

But he held back. It was something Reina should never know about.

It was none other than a paired trip.

If Reina found out Shirone was going on a trip with a girl, she would do everything she could to prevent it.

'Jealous witch, always acting out of spite.'

At first, he thought it would be nice if Shirone and Reina got along, but now, he was glad he hadn't pushed for it.

A composed and gentle girl suited Shirone far better than this witch.

"What kind of plans? Speak up already!"

"I have a date. We're going out to have fun."

"A date? What kind of girl would date a guy from sword school?"

“There are girls there too. Like Elzaine Tess. You know the Elzaine family, right? She’s their daughter.”

Reina knew of the Elzaine family, renowned for their influence in diplomacy for many years.

However, for the daughter of such an elite family, high standards were expected.

The idea of her going on a trip with her younger brother, who came back as the bottom of his class, was unthinkable.

“Don’t lie! Be honest! What’s your real plan?”

“I don’t know. Just mind your own business! I’m leaving now!”

Despite Reina’s barrage of nagging, Rian focused on packing his backpack. As soon as he saw an opportunity, he jumped up and bolted out of the room.

“Hey! Stop right there!”

By the time Reina stepped outside the door, Rian had already leaped down the stairs and was heading for the front door.

If she activated her Schema, she could easily catch him, but Reina just rolled her eyes and let him go.

She was confident she could control him even from afar if necessary.

“Ha, sure. Go on, ride that carriage all you want. Let’s see who arrives first.”

Reina waved the crumpled report card in the air as she watched Rian flee.

After seeing his friends off, Shirone walked toward the carriage sent by the Ogent family.

Temuran, the deputy butler, was there to greet him.

Even after half a year, the man who had been relentless while organizing the Grand Library looked just as strict as before.

However, his demeanor had changed significantly.

Not only did he bow politely, but a kind smile also graced his lips.

"It's been a while, young master. You've done well."

"It's been a while, Deputy Butler."

Initially, being called 'young master' felt strange, but after six months, he no longer minded.

Of course, it was still a little embarrassing.

The two exchanged light conversation as they traveled toward Shirone's home.

Shirone was particularly pleased to hear about how the people of the Ogent family were doing.

"Wow, so Rai has already passed his certification?"

Rian's older brother, Ogent Rai, had passed the certification exam.

Naturally, as was the case for many swordsmen with a 10th-class certificate, he didn't have much time to rest and was kept busy on the front lines.

"Yes. And Lady Reina has been promoted to conductor of the royal palace's 7th Music Corps. She's doing exceptionally well. The head of the family remains busy with his official duties, and the elder is planning to retire and return home soon."

"Oh, I heard there's also an older brother. What does he do?"

"Well, I can't speak much about that. Just know that he's a 6th-class certified swordsman. A word of advice—it's best not to bring up the eldest when at the main house."

"Ah, I see."

Given the nature of the Ogent family, it didn't seem like there could be discord among them.

Still, if it was a topic they avoided, it might be political in nature.

"Is Rian doing well? I'll see him soon, anyway."

Temuran's response was the shortest of their conversation.

"He hasn't made contact for six months."

"Haha! That sounds just like him."

The carriage soon entered the forested mountains.

Shirone opened the window and took in the landscape of his homeland.

The colorful forest scenery seemed to welcome his return.

The carriage pulled up to the yard of Shirone's home.

It was the very spot Temuran had picked him up from previously.

"Thank you for the ride. I'll visit again soon."

"I was just doing my job. Enjoy your time."

Shirone walked toward the house with excitement.

Seeing the modest but cozy log house filled him with nostalgia.

'Thank you. I'll make the most of this break.'

As he approached, thoughts of his parents filled his mind.

His mother, who had endured so much, and his father, who hadn't hesitated to kneel to get him into the magic school.

Bursting with emotion, Shirone flung open the door.

"Mother! Father!"

"Hoho! That's right! Beer goes best with pork!"

"Do you think so too, sir? I've never thought beer went well with lamb!"

"Exactly. Lamb has a gamey taste that spoils the drink.

Come on, let's have another round!"

Shirone stood in the entryway, stunned.

The festive atmosphere surprised him, but what truly shocked him was the burly boy sharing drinks with Vincent.

The boy had grown taller and now had shorter hair. But the tough look on his face was unmistakably Rian.

"Shirone! You're here!"

Rian jumped up.

But before he could react, Vincent had already rushed over.

As soon as he embraced Shirone, the strong smell of alcohol hit him. It was clear he'd had quite a bit.

"Aha! My son's home! Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Ugh, you reek of alcohol. What's going on? And why is Rian at our house?"

“He’s been waiting to see you for two days. He even helped with woodcutting and joined me on hunts. Right, Rian? Wasn’t it fun?”

“Haha! Absolutely, sir! A real man should know how to hunt!”

Shirone was baffled.

The father he knew wouldn’t be so informal with a noble, even if it was his son’s friend.

What had happened over these two days for them to be drinking together before lunch?

Shirone wriggled out of Vincent’s hug and called out to Rian. “I heard you weren’t in touch. Did you stop by the main house?”

“No, why would I? This is the home of my master, right, Uncle?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! What trouble did you get into now?”

“W-What trouble? I didn’t do anything!”

Though he tried to play it cool, one look at Rian’s face made it obvious.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t gone home; he couldn’t.

Shirone sighed and stepped further into the room.

‘Ah, this isn’t how I imagined it...’

The reunion he’d looked forward to had turned into a drinking fest.

But seeing his father, now thinner than before, gave him a strange sense of relief that he wasn’t crying.

“Shirone, dear, you’re home. Come here, my sweet.”

Olina enveloped him in a warm hug.

Feeling once again that there was nothing more reliable than a mother, Shirone finally felt at peace.

“Mom, you’ve been through a lot while I was gone, haven’t you? I’m sorry.”

“What are you talking about? The Ogent family helped out a lot.”

Olina patted Shirone’s back while shooting a disapproving look at Vincent.

Having her son home after half a year, only to see his father drunk, wasn't exactly what she'd hoped for.

Chapter 119: An Unexpected Visitor (4)

Oblivious as ever, Rian fanned the flames of Olina's concern.

"Uncle, instead of just talking, let's go chop some wood right now! To celebrate Shirone's arrival!"

"Haha! Why not? Great, let's burn some energy with the three of us men together!"

"Honey! You've been drinking, and now you want to go chopping wood? Get some sleep first!"

"Mother, it's fine. We'll be back soon."

Shirone readily agreed. Given how things had unfolded, it seemed like a good idea to properly enjoy the moment.

Olina, however, couldn't shake off her worry. While Vincent could hold his liquor well, hiking up a mountain in a drunken state was risky even for seasoned woodsmen.

"Will you be okay? What if someone gets hurt?"

"It'll be fine, Mother. We'll be back before lunch."

In the past, Shirone would have heeded his mother's concerns, but things were different now. After all, he'd faced terrifying Ulks and protected others, so there was little cause for concern.

Olina found this new side of her son unfamiliar. His expression was noticeably brighter, and confidence radiated from his words and actions.

Was this the power of education? He'd always been a good boy, but there had been times when she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Now, he seemed like a completely different person, someone who had learned to value himself more.

With Olina's approval, the three men set off toward the logging area, exchanging stories they hadn't shared in ages.

Rian, eager to show off his progress, quickened his pace. During the two days he'd stayed at Vincent's home, Rian had heard stories about Shirone's childhood. One that stuck with him was the story of Thunder Strike. Given that he had struggled when sparring with Shirone back at the main house, it piqued his interest even more.

Upon reaching the logging area, Rian shouted, "Alright! Let's cut some wood like real men! What do you say, Shirone? Want to make a bet? Loser grants the winner a wish."

Rian, now bigger and stronger, handled a double-handed axe with ease using just one hand. If Rian resembled a mighty oak, Shirone stood like a squirrel beside it.

"Sure, why not."

Shirone agreed without resistance. He'd never lost a bet to Rian. How could a victor run away when the challenger came forward?

Rian nodded at Vincent, who raised his thumb from under his crossed arms, signaling him to go ahead.

"Then I'll start."

Rian swung the axe with all his might. With a thud, the tree trunk shuddered and trembled.

It was an impressive display of raw power, a testament to the rigorous training he had undergone for half a year.

"Wow, that's amazing. Is that your Schema?"

"Huh? Haha! Of course not! Why would I need a Schema just to chop wood?"

Though Rian's answer was somewhat awkward, Shirone let it slide.

Rian hoisted the axe again, this time winking at Shirone.

"Now for the real deal."

Rian struck the spot where the bark had split, and with a crack like thunder, the tree fell in one swift motion.

"Thunder Strike..."

Shirone recognized it immediately. Successfully performing Thunder Strike meant Rian had mastered the art of the sword's killing strike.

“Hahaha! What do you think, Shirone? I’m not the same as before!”

Despite his boastful shout, Rian’s heart was racing. There had been a slight chance he might fail.

Although he had learned the killing strike at sword school, his success rate against live opponents was low.

But thanks to Vincent’s explanation of Thunder Strike and a day of dedicated practice, he had managed to achieve a nine-out-of-ten success rate on inanimate targets like trees.

“That’s impressive. It’s much more powerful than my Thunder Strike.”

“Well, it’s only natural, isn’t it? Anyway, a bet’s a bet. I succeeded in two strikes, so you have to fell it in one.”

Vincent burst out laughing.

“Haha! Shirone, give it your all. If it’s a tie, you’ll keep going until someone wins. We might end up clearing a whole mountain!”

Vincent had confidence that Shirone wouldn’t fall behind. While Rian’s strength was notable, Shirone had always possessed exceptional skill since he was a child.

“Here, use my axe.”

“No, that’s alright. I’ll do it my way.”

Shirone approached the tree and extended his hand.

Vincent and Rian exchanged puzzled glances. How was he going to cut down the thick tree without an axe?

Shirone assessed the position and entered the Spirit Zone. Using the basic magic known as Wind Cutter, he struck the tree.

A sharp crack resounded from inside the trunk.

That was all it took.

As the two onlookers tilted their heads in confusion, Shirone gently pushed the tree. With a clean slice exposed, the log toppled over.

“Yay! I win!”

Shirone jumped up and down in excitement, while Vincent and Rian stood slack-jawed.

How could a tree be felled without any physical impact?
Without magic, it was impossible.

‘Ah, so that’s magic.’

Rian examined the stump Shirone had cut. Even the most skilled sword trainees couldn’t create such a smooth cut.

“What kind of magic is that?”

“It’s called Wind Cutter. It creates a sharp wind that slices through the air. It’s actually pretty basic.”

Vincent was at a loss for words as he looked at his transformed son.

He had expected Shirone to learn some magic at school, but he’d thought it would be nothing more than circus tricks.

But cutting through a log in one go? Depending on how it was used, it was practically a deadly weapon.

“Haha. This is unbelievable. Could you teach it to your father? I’d earn so much more if I could chop wood with that spell.”

Shirone laughed awkwardly at Vincent’s simple remark.

“It’s a basic spell, but it’s not something you can learn easily.”

Knowing Wind Cutter, one could cut down over a hundred trees a day. But no mage in the world would ever cut wood for a living.

Even if one chopped a thousand trees, a mage’s daily wage was far higher. It wasn’t that the trees were of little value, but rather that a mage’s salary was substantial.

Realizing this, Shirone felt a sense of comfort. While he had been plagued by fears of failure when he first enrolled, now he was at ease, knowing he had a skill to support his family even if he didn’t graduate.

To others, it might sound absurd that a mage capable of opening the Immortal Function would consider such a thing, but to Shirone, his family was that important.

“Anyway, since I won, I’ll state my wish. Rian, you’ll carry the wood back home.”

“Tch! Fine. I was going to carry it anyway.”

Rian split the fallen tree into manageable logs and prepared a carrier to haul them back.

Although Rian lost the bet, he had a smile on his face as they descended the mountain. Shirone had proven firsthand that Rian's judgment wasn't wrong.

'You're incredible, Shirone. I bet what you showed today isn't even the half of it.'

When they returned home, they found Olina had prepared an array of dishes. It was a feast, with delicacies that seemed to come from land, sea, and sky all at once.

"Wow, this looks delicious. Thank you for the food!"

As they ate, Shirone shared stories about what had happened at school.

Naturally, he left out the life-threatening moments, but even without them, there was plenty to talk about.

"...So, the answer ended up being number three. Haha!

Thanks to that, I'll be promoted to Class Four next semester."

"Ah, I see."

To his surprise, Vincent and Olina didn't show much reaction. Shirone paused, thinking they might be waiting for more, and then spread his hands in realization.

"It's a pretty big deal."

Finally, their faces lit up. They hadn't been able to follow half of what Shirone said, having never been to school themselves, but their joy at their son's success was no different from any other parent's.

"Ah! Is that so? Congratulations, Shirone!"

"Well done, my son. You don't know how much I worried."

Olina lifted the tablecloth to wipe away her tears.

Rian looked at the warm scene with a contented smile. He felt like he understood where Shirone's calm nature came from.

"By the way, Rian, why did you really come here?"

"Oh, right. I did have something to ask your permission for."

"Speak, then. If it's within our power, we'll gladly help."

Although Vincent spoke with confidence, a flicker of worry passed through him. What would a noble's son have to ask permission from a woodsman for?

"Can I go on a trip with Shirone? For about a week."

Shirone turned to Rian, astonished.

"A trip? Why are you the one saying this when I don't even know about it? Where are we going?"

"To Galliant Island. Don't worry, I've already planned everything."

"Wait, Galliant?"

Shirone's eyes widened. He was shocked to hear Rian mention a place that had been on his mind recently.

"You were cooped up when you worked at the library. This is a great chance to get some fresh air. Plus, it's close to Creas. It'll be fun; Galliant Island is one of the most popular vacation spots in the world."

"And there's also the Kergo Ruins."

Now it was Rian's turn to be surprised.

"Huh? You knew about that?"

"No, just that there are ruins there. I didn't know how famous they were. Interesting."

Shirone had discovered a few days ago that the Kergo Ruins were located on Galliant Island while poring over maps. The thought of visiting had crossed his mind, but realizing how close they were solidified his decision.

Shirone glanced at his mother. He had planned to visit during the break, but telling her he was going on a trip right after coming home might disappoint her.

As always, Olina supported Shirone's wishes.

"Go on, dear. We're all for it."

"But Mother, I was going to help Father with his work this time..."

Vincent burst into hearty laughter.

"You fool! What, did you come back from a battlefield? You came home from school, so you can take a vacation during

your break. A man shouldn't be clinging to his parents all the time."

Shirone's lips pursed into a sheepish expression. Technically, magic school was just that—a school—but the dangers he had faced there were as intense as any battlefield.

"Then, can we make it ten days?"

"Huh? Ten whole days? I don't mind, but is there that much to see there?"

"Oh, actually, I have some research I'd like to do."

Rian made a face as if he'd heard enough.

"Even there, you plan to study? You really are something else."

Given that Shirone had devoured every history book in the Ogent library, studying at a resort would be no challenge for him.

'Heh, but this time it won't be that easy. Let's see if you can even think about studying there,' thought Rian, smirking as he secretly anticipated what was to come.

Shirone packed his travel bag and lay down to rest. Rian, who was staying one more night, lay beside him on the floor, their blankets spread out side by side.

"So, tell me, why didn't you go home?"

"Huh? Oh, well..."

Rian's voice trailed off. Just as Reina knew her brother, Rian knew his sister well. She would likely have sent his report card home to keep him from escaping.

But he couldn't bring himself to tell Shirone that. He wasn't ashamed of coming in last place, since he'd done his best, but saying it out loud was difficult.

"It's just some minor family issues. Haha."

Shirone didn't push further.

"Anyway, this worked out well. I was planning to go during the break anyway."

"You said it's about the Kergo Ruins, right? What exactly are you going to investigate?"

“I’m not sure yet. Don’t worry; I’ll enjoy the vacation too. We’ll have fun on the island, and then I’ll stay behind to do my research.”

Rian felt a twinge of unease. The Kergo Ruins were a tourist spot, and if Shirone intended only to do some basic investigation, he wouldn’t have planned to stay alone.

Chapter 120: An Unexpected Visitor (5)

"But Shirone... if you're really planning to do something on the island, there's one problem."

"Huh? What problem?"

"This vacation was actually planned as a couples' trip."

"A couples' trip? So, like, boy-girl, boy-girl, like that?"

"Yeah. My partner is supposed to join us here. I should have told you sooner, but I didn't expect you'd say you wanted to investigate the ruins."

Shirone looked up at the dim ceiling. A couples' trip. That meant he'd have to bring a partner as well.

"Got it. I'll bring someone along, too."

Rian looked at Shirone in surprise. The Shirone he knew was awkward to the point of blushing just from seeing women's underwear. Rian had kept quiet, thinking that finding a partner would be his biggest challenge, but Shirone unexpectedly agreed easily.

"You... must be pretty popular with women?"

"Huh? No, not really. But there is someone who could come along. I was actually considering it. If you hadn't suggested it, I would've asked her myself."

Rian's eyes gleamed. Whatever his reason for saying this, didn't it mean he had someone in mind?

"Haha! My witch at home would be disappointed if she heard that!"

"Reina? Why would she be?"

"Haha, no reason. But now I'm dying of curiosity. Who is this girl? Is she pretty?"

"Yeah. She is pretty, but... I'm not sure if she'll come along. She might turn me down on the spot."

“No way, you have to bring her. Go tomorrow and get her agreement. Meanwhile, I’ll head home and get ready.”

Shirone postponed his answer. If Rian was bringing a partner, then he’d have to bring one too.

But he wasn’t sure. If he guessed based on her usual personality, the odds were high she’d turn him down flat and kick him out.

A mix of worry and anticipation twisted Shirone’s heart. Yet part of him was excited, too.

It would be his first trip, and it was with friends. On top of that, he’d heard that Galliant Island was a famous tropical tourist spot.

Shirone lay awake late into the night, unable to sleep.

A New Encounter (1)

Shirone parted ways with Rian in the noble’s residential area. Since they were leaving tomorrow, he had to find a partner today.

Unfamiliar with the area, he asked for directions to find her house. When he finally arrived, the mansion was so beautiful that it seemed far more than just a comfortable home.

‘So, this is the Carmis family’s main estate.’

At school, they’d talked freely without formality, but now that he was at her house, he was suddenly gripped by fear.

The guards at the main gate looked at him suspiciously, making him even more nervous.

“Um... hello?”

“What business do you have here?”

As Shirone approached, the guard’s grip tightened on his sword, reacting instinctively. Shirone’s aura had developed through countless challenges, enough to overwhelm most opponents.

“Is Amy here by any chance?”

The guard’s expression hardened. He had heard rumors that Amy was admired by young men her age, but very few dared come to the main estate to see her.

“May I ask who you are?”

“Oh, I’m Shirone. I’m her friend from the magic academy.”

The guard looked to his superior for guidance, unable to decide. His superior’s face took on a resigned expression.

Though rare, this wasn’t unfamiliar to the man who had served at the Carmis main estate for twenty years.

‘Ah, troublesome. The break just started, and here we go again.’

Since there was no directive from the main house to restrict outside visitors, he had no choice but to report it.

The superior signaled the guard to notify someone inside, who rode toward the mansion at once.

Shirone waited anxiously at the gate, while the superior occasionally glanced at him.

He appeared decent and seemed polite, but there was no way he would be allowed in.

Countless men had been rejected here. Even a distant relative of royalty had once left without catching a glimpse of Amy.

If not for the renowned Carmis family, this would be unthinkable.

After about ten minutes, the guard returned in a hurry. The superior, seeing the worried expression on his subordinate’s face, guessed the outcome.

At times like these, it was always difficult for the gate guards. If a frustrated noble slapped them, they had no choice but to endure it.

Trying to ease the guard’s burden, the superior made something up.

“So, how’d it go? I heard she had urgent business today.”

“Well... they said he can come in.”

“Hmm, I see. They’re quite busy, so... wait, what?”

The superior couldn’t believe his ears. The reporting guard looked just as bewildered, as this was also his first time with such a situation.

“Well... Miss Amy said to bring him in.”

“Oh, so she’s home. Thank goodness.”

Shirone let out a sigh of relief, thinking he’d have no way of getting into the mansion if Amy were out.

A pink carriage soon arrived at the main gate. An elderly man with a gentle face stepped down from the carriage, causing the guards to turn pale.

It was Adell, the head butler of the Carmis family.

Seeing someone approaching, Shirone asked the guard.

“Can I go in now?”

“Yes! Welcome to the Carmis estate!”

The superior hastily saluted, though he couldn’t comprehend the situation.

It was one thing for the boy to be allowed in, but for Adell to greet him? Regardless of who Shirone was, even if he were from a prominent family, it was unusual for the head butler of the Carmis family to personally come out.

Adell’s presence was typically reserved for significant family events or important guests of the head.

“Who on earth is he? He said he’s a friend of the young lady, so he can’t be a guest of the head... Is there some event I haven’t heard about?”

Adell, leaning on his cane, approached Shirone. For a butler in charge of a grand mansion, he looked surprisingly kind.

“Welcome to the Carmis mansion. I am Adell, the head butler.”

“Hello, I’m Shirone.”

“I see. Pardon me, but there’s something I must confirm before escorting you inside.”

“Oh, what is that?”

“Verification of your identity. I must ensure you are truly Mr. Shirone.”

Shirone looked at Adell, bewildered.

“The young lady specifically instructed, ‘If it’s Shirone, bring him in.’ I interpret this to mean that only the real Shirone can enter. Thus, I must ask you to provide proof that you are indeed Shirone.”

Shirone was exasperated. Amy's words likely meant no more than to verify his name and bring him in. But how could they interpret it to the point of needing proof of identity?

"How can I prove that I'm myself? I am Shirone."

"That alone isn't sufficient. As the head butler of the Carmis family, I have both the duty and authority to verify the identity of any guest."

"Can't you just take me to Amy...!"

Shirone stopped mid-sentence. Adell's gentle face suddenly appeared intimidating, and a strange energy seemed to press on his chest and back, making him feel as if his organs were about to burst.

"The Carmis family stands at the pinnacle of noble lineage, refusing to be compared to others. And as head butler, I answer only to the head of the family. Since I've been entrusted to personally escort the young lady's guest, I must show an appropriate level of respect."

Shirone realized Adell's attitude stemmed from displeasure at having to handle something beneath his rank. Yet, he couldn't reveal his irritation outright, as the oppressive energy bore down even more.

'So... it begins. The Pressure.'

The guards empathized with Shirone. Adell, known for his strictness, often summoned subordinates for any minor mistakes and subjected them to Pressure.

The Pressure was a technique where he amplified emotions to disrupt the target's nervous system.

Though it caused no physical harm, the accumulating stress could affect the body, and if taken to an extreme, could even damage internal organs.

'Hmm, and he's holding up?'

Shirone remained tense but didn't show any drastic change. Seeing Shirone endure the pressure, Adell gradually intensified it.

Originally, he hadn't intended to go this far, but he decided a little scare might serve as a valuable lesson for the presumptuous boy.

Shirone felt his heart rate quicken, mainly out of anger.

Adell's hostility was stoking Shirone's own fury.

'Stay calm. It's just emotions. If I control them, nothing will happen.'

Like someone sinking deeper under pressure, his breathing grew strained, yet Shirone quietly observed his emotions, not struggling.

As the pressure neared a critical threshold, Adell trembled, disbelieving.

Sweat trickled down his forehead.

'What is this boy?'

To break free from Pressure, one had to amplify their emotions to the same intensity.

Perhaps if he had Carmis's Crimson Eyes, he could reset his emotions entirely, but for Shirone, who lacked self-awareness, enduring so long was strange indeed.

'Patience alone doesn't explain this. The only possibility left is that he's in perfect control of his emotions.'

Another way to counter the Pressure—though incredibly difficult.

As they say, even a saint loses composure after prolonged stress. But Shirone showed no signs of cracking.

Adell pondered possible explanations, considering if Shirone was foolish, insane, or perhaps a monk of the Vajra level.

"Vajrapani? That can't be... he's not even twenty."

Though he couldn't admit it, Adell had reached the correct conclusion.

In the infinite realm, Shirone had gone mad countless times, acquiring an absolute center of self that let him disregard any induced emotions.

Adell released the Pressure. He didn't know how Shirone had endured, but it no longer mattered.

The boy standing before him was indeed the young lady's friend.

When Adell's face returned to its gentle expression, Shirone finally breathed out.

What a terrifying skill. If not for his mental training, his heart might have burst.

Adell placed his hand on his chest and bowed.

"Please forgive this foolish old man's rudeness."

The guards were puzzled. They'd thought it strange when Shirone's expression didn't change, and now, to their shock, the head butler was bowing in apology.

"When we return to the mansion, please scold me for my actions. I'll accept any punishment, so I beg for your forgiveness."

"Wasn't it because you doubted me?"

"Yes. My overinterpretation of orders and reckless actions put you at risk. The head gave no conditions for escorting you."

"Why? Did I do something wrong?"

Adell smiled and shook his head.

"Quite the opposite. I've watched over Miss Amy since birth, and this is the first time she's invited a man into the house. I was so curious that I overstepped my role."

Shirone felt deflated. Was this all an act to test him?

But there was no real basis for reprimanding him. To visit a noble's house—especially the main estate—one must make an appointment in advance.

Having worked for the Ogent family, Shirone could imagine how seriously Adell took his duties.

Chapter 121: A New Encounter (2)

“Understood. Then, can I meet Amy now?”

“Of course. She’s waiting for you. Please, get in the carriage.”

As the carriage started moving, an exquisitely blooming rose garden came into view outside the window.

If the Ogent family’s style represented strict order, the Carmis family seemed more expressive and free-spirited. The garden was dotted with unique, individualistic artworks that disregarded uniformity.

“This is incredible. It feels like I’m in a dreamland.”

“I’m glad you like it. The Carmis garden reflects each family member’s personal tastes. Each person is given their own area to arrange as they wish. This is a tradition that values individuality. The fountain you see now was actually suggested by Miss Amy when she was ten. We call it the Rainbow Fountain.”

Shirone leaned out the window. The fountain, shaped like a cone, sprayed water that scattered into droplets, creating a beautiful rainbow.

“Haha! The Rainbow Fountain. That’s so Amy.”

Adell watched Shirone admiring the garden with a gentle gaze. He began to understand why Amy had seemed brighter since returning home after the term ended.

“The Carmis family has an ability called the Crimson Eye. Thanks to this, each member can excel remarkably fast in whatever they pursue. Knowing this, the family avoids unnecessary interference. Even when we received a report on the Arcane Incident, the head of the family only ensured her safety and instructed us to leave her be.”

Shirone's mouth hung open. To simply "leave her be," despite the danger Amy had faced—he could sense the Carmis family's audacious worldview.

"Of course, that doesn't mean they lack affection. It's just their nature. Amy, being the youngest, didn't always understand this about her family. She was troubled by it when she was younger."

"Oh, I know about that. But I didn't realize there was more to it."

Shirone recalled his first meeting with Amy. When he was around twelve, she had saved him from some bullies in an alley, though he had harbored resentment at first. Now, understanding the family context made him feel closer to her.

"When I see Miss Amy lately, I think she's changed a lot from when she was little. She seems to enjoy her pursuits, like the other gentlemen of the family. I believe that's largely thanks to you, Mr. Shirone. Thank you."

Shirone could see Adell's sincerity as he bowed his head. Of course, someone who had cared for Amy since birth wouldn't see himself as just a servant.

The reason he had been so strict with Shirone earlier was due to this deep care. Though it likely also came from a protective jealousy, as if Shirone were encroaching on his beloved young lady.

"I'm sorry if I caused any trouble. There was no need for you to come out to meet me personally, Head Butler."

"You're very considerate, Mr. Shirone. But please don't worry. Miss Amy allowed your entry, I was just a butler who happened to be nearby, and the head simply sent whoever was available."

Shirone found himself curious about the Carmis family. If even the head butler cared so deeply for Amy, how strict would her family members be toward him? He couldn't help but feel nervous.

"Ugh. I just hope I don't get turned away."

“Haha! They’ll likely surprise you, but try not to be too offended. It’s just their way.”

As they talked, the carriage arrived at their destination.

Shirone followed Adell into the mansion, where a grand hall adorned with countless works of art welcomed him. On both sides, winding staircases spiraled up to the fourth floor like the coils of a snail shell.

“Sir, Miss Amy’s friend has arrived—”

“Kyaa! Amazing! A real boy!”

A woman who looked just like Amy slapped her cheeks in excitement. She was Isis, the lady of the household.

Once famous as a dancer in the kingdom, she looked youthful even in her fifties. Yet, she exuded an almost childlike impulsiveness in her every action.

“What? Shirone’s a boy?”

“Me too! I want to see!”

Two men dashed over from the corridor adjoining the sitting room—Dian, the eldest son, and Ares, the second son.

Dian looked unusually youthful for his mid-thirties, while Ares, two years younger, sported a thick beard that hid his features.

The two men stared at Shirone in disbelief, their eyes betraying their confusion.

“Um... hello. I’m Shirone, Amy’s friend...”

“Enough with introductions; come here quickly. Dear, Amy’s boyfriend is here!”

Isis grabbed Shirone’s wrist and practically dragged him to the sofa, where a man awaited. It was none other than Shakora, the head of the Carmis family—a name even Shirone knew well.

Though he’d once wielded considerable influence in politics, Shakora had retired, disillusioned by widespread corruption.

“Hm.”

When Shakora lowered his newspaper, a refined face appeared. He was the tallest among his family, with a perfectly balanced physique that defied his age.

Shirone felt like a rabbit in a lion's den, breaking out in a cold sweat. The way the family's gazes inspected him like an art piece was unbearable.

As the men's eyes gleamed red, Shirone gulped. It was terrifying to see all three activate their Crimson Eyes at once.

'Ugh, they're memorizing me. They're engraving me into their minds.'

Aware of the abilities of those with photographic memory, Shirone felt like he was shackled. Those eyes would retain this moment, transcending time and space, indefinitely.

"Um... hello?"

Unable to withstand the awkward atmosphere, Shirone braved another greeting. Finally, the men's red gazes faded, and Isis clung to her side with undisguised excitement.

"Wow, handsome! This is unexpected! Are you really Amy's friend?"

"Yes, I am."

"Oh-ho? Then are you a graduating student?"

"No, I'm in Class Five."

"Hmm?"

Isis frowned, and her brothers tilted their heads, puzzled.

Shirone, feeling he had to say more, quickly added:

"But next term, I'll be moving up to Class Four."

"Aha!"

Suddenly, all three of them beamed identical smiles.

Shirone was utterly bewildered; it seemed they hadn't cared about his class status in the slightest.

'Where am I, exactly? And who are these people...?'

Then, Shirone remembered Adell's words.

"They'll likely surprise you. Try not to take it personally."

Adell's advice hadn't been a lie. But this family exceeded Shirone's expectations in a way he hadn't imagined—they were a cheerful yet eccentric bunch.

"When did you meet Amy? You're dating, right? Hmm? Do you hold hands at school?"

“W-What? No, that’s...”

Shirone tried to stall. It was best to say as little as possible since Amy’s perspective would be what mattered here.

“What’s going on? Why are you all crowding around him without the person involved?”

A voice descending from upstairs saved Shirone from his imminent breakdown. Amy was looking down at the hall from the spiral staircase on the second floor.

Ares, the younger brother, wiggled his mustache and commented.

“Huh? You changed your clothes? You dashed into your room as soon as you heard Shirone was here.”

Amy quickly shut down any misunderstandings.

“So what? Should I have met him in pajamas? Anyway, everyone, disperse. Father, I’m going to talk with my friend, okay?”

“Of course, go ahead. Isn’t he the first boyfriend you’ve ever brought home? Here in the Carmis family, we believe in trying everything we can to avoid regrets. Hahaha!”

Amy didn’t bat an eye at Shakora’s mischievous remark. If she showed any reaction, they would pester her endlessly, so it was best to give them no room to do so.

As Shirone climbed the spiral staircase, Isis’s questions continued.

“Amy, be honest. He’s your boyfriend, right? You two are dating, aren’t you?”

Amy walked faster, pretending not to hear a word. But her mother, who had passed on her persistent spirit, was just as relentless.

“Come on, tell me! What’s the nature of your relationship? You two are dating, aren’t you?”

“Ugh!”

Finally losing her patience, Amy snapped and stormed into her room.

Isis’s mouth fell open in surprise. Even Shakora looked up at the stairs, clearly startled.

But by then, the two of them were already out of sight. Once inside her room, Shirone and Amy sat facing each other awkwardly across a table.

Shirone took a moment to glance around her room.

Bookshelves filled with magical texts lined the walls, and in a dusty corner, a few romance novels lay untouched.

‘Haha! Serielle must have lent her those.’

Though Amy was known as a tough girl at school, her room was surprisingly feminine. His gaze fell on a large stuffed animal on her bed—a fierce-looking teddy bear with slashed eyes.

“You have a stuffed animal. And it’s a bear.”

“So what? Is there a rule against having stuffed animals in my room?”

“No, I just think it suits you. Haha!”

Amy clicked her tongue and went silent. To be honest, she was at a loss for words. This was the first time she’d shown her room to a man outside her family.

“Are you really okay with this? At school, we just pretend to date, but there’s no need to lie to your family.”

“Don’t worry. They’re just amusing themselves. It’s not like they actually care.”

Just as she said, her family was free-spirited and unique. But he could also sense an underlying bond of love that connected them.

“Enough with the idle talk. What brings you to my house?

Did you have something you wanted to say?”

“Well, actually—”

Just as Shirone was about to explain, the door creaked open, and Isis peeked in through the narrow gap.

“Oh dear, did I interrupt something? Here, have some tea.”

Isis tiptoed over to the table, placing the tea down without taking her eyes off Shirone.

As Shirone prepared to continue, the door opened again, and this time Dian entered.

“I brought some snacks...”

Dian's gaze, too, stayed fixed on Shirone. It was almost comical how he tried to walk forward while turning his head sideways.

Amy let out a sigh. This had never happened before, so it was probably entertaining for them.

Her brothers, usually indifferent to anything but the bizarre, had never had one of her male friends visit the house.

"Alright, you might as well all come in. I know you're all waiting outside."

As soon as Amy spoke, Ares practically burst through the door, holding a plate in both hands.

"I brought some fruit... haha."

"Just come in already. Since things are this way, let's make it official. Is that alright with you, Shirone?"

"Ah, of course."

So, with Shakora as the only exception, the whole family sat across from Shirone.

"This is Shirone, a promising student from the magic academy. And Shirone, this is my mother. She was a dancer when she was young."

"Ah, I see. No wonder you're so beautiful."

"Oh-hoho! Amy takes after me. But don't go falling for me; I wouldn't want my daughter to get hurt."

"Uh... yes."

Shirone agreed, finding nothing else to say.

"And this is my eldest brother, Dian. He's a licensed 5th-class swordsman and the head of the archer division at the royal palace. He's here visiting our hometown to consult with Father about a political matter."

The family members glanced at Amy, surprised.

Even if Shirone were her boyfriend, there was no need to reveal family details. Pretending to be calm, she had actually betrayed her own nerves.

Chapter 122: A New Encounter (3)

‘So this boy actually makes my daughter nervous? The Amy?’

Though the Carmis family was known for being open-minded, Amy’s bold personality was something special. Her ability to command respect from even the roughest kids when she was young wasn’t just because she was a noble. Apparently, her brothers shared the sentiment as they scrutinized Shirone. It made them a bit jealous, seeing their sister—who normally ignored her brothers completely—be so conscious of an outside male’s opinion.

“This is my second brother, Ares. And as for what he does...”

Amy, curious, asked directly.

“Honestly, what *do* you even do?”

“Haha! I’m an explorer. I excavate ruins and venture through remote areas to make maps. Places like the Dragon’s Nest in the Alphonse Mountains or the Crystal Cave along the northern border of Corona—those are my work.”

“Oh, really? I’ve heard of the Alphonse Mountains too.”

The Alphonse Mountains, known as a habitat for various dragons, were a place full of danger and adventure, even appearing in literary works.

Rian once mentioned, after reading *Knight of the Dragon*, how he’d love to visit the Alphonse Mountains someday.

“That’s impressive. I’ve heard it’s an extremely dangerous area.”

“Risk is part of the romance. I enjoy my work. Mapping pays well, though Amy doesn’t seem to like it.”

“Just shave that beard, at least. You hole up here for months at a time, not going anywhere, like you’re unemployed.”

“Oh, don’t be so harsh. I’ll be heading out with an expedition soon, and won’t return for two years. I’ve been waiting all this time to see my dear little sister’s face.”

“Hmph...”

Amy turned her head away dismissively, but Shirone couldn’t help but smile. For all her complaints, she was actually worried about her brother the explorer.

Once he set off on his adventures, they wouldn’t hear from him for a year or more, leaving his family anxiously waiting for any news of his safety.

“Well, I think it’s amazing. I’d love to go on such an adventure one day.”

“Once you’re in, you can’t get out. You’ll have a lifetime’s worth of experiences that most people will never have. Look me up after you graduate. I’ll add you to my expedition.”

“Oh, that’s enough! Don’t give him strange ideas, and if introductions are over, everyone, leave.”

At Amy’s dismissal, the family members, unwilling to miss the fun, suddenly peppered him with questions. They couldn’t just leave before getting to the interesting part, could they?

“So, what do you like about Amy? You haven’t crossed any boundaries, have you?”

“Wh-What? No, that’s, uh...”

“Amy has a pretty strong personality. How’d you approach her? Did you charm her with words? Or maybe give her a kiss in some secluded spot...”

Amy’s eyes flared red.

“I said get out, didn’t I?”

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed, and within moments, Amy and Shirone were alone. The door still shook slightly from their frantic escape.

‘It’s clear what kind of personality she has at home.’

As the bustling room fell quiet, the silence became even more pronounced in contrast.

Having lost the moment to start the conversation, Shirone looked around, feeling a bit embarrassed.

Amy pretended to sip her tea, hiding her face as she sank into her thoughts. The awkwardness was almost enough to break them into a cold sweat.

‘Why did he come here?’

Not that she had much to say herself. Even if it was something important, she never would’ve expected Shirone to come all the way to her house to ask.

“Well? You came, so say something! It’s not like you’re here just because you were bored.”

Shirone turned from looking out the window to meet Amy’s gaze.

“Oh, well... actually, I came to ask you for a favor. But coming here unannounced felt rude. I hope I didn’t bother your family.”

“Don’t worry about it. Coming over to a friend’s house is normal. So, what’s this favor?”

“Well... do you have time to go on a trip with me? To Galliant Island?”

Amy froze, teacup in hand. She hadn’t expected this, not even in her wildest dreams. Shirone asking her to go somewhere with him? To an island, no less?

“So, you’re saying you and I go to this island together?”

“Actually, there’s this friend of mine, Rian. He suggested the trip first. But he’s bringing someone along, so I need a friend to join us. So it’ll be four of us.”

“Oh? And this friend of Rian’s... it’s a girl, isn’t it?”

“Seems like it. Wait, how did you know?”

Without answering, Amy took a long sip of tea, quickly putting together the situation in her head.

‘So, it’s a couples’ trip. Rian, that sneaky guy. Wait... a couples’ trip?’

A cold sweat ran down her back.

‘And he wants to bring me? But why?’

Even when they pretended to date back in school, Shirone had remained entirely unaffected. So for him to suggest a couples’ trip now, of all times, was confusing. If he only needed to make up the numbers, he’d have asked someone else.

As a graduating senior, Amy needed intense studying during breaks to stay competitive. Shirone, who understood this well, wouldn’t come here to ask unless it was important.

“Why bring me along? You have friends in the advanced class, don’t you? You know I’m graduating soon, and my classmates are all training hard over the break. Why me, specifically?”

Amy had asked, but part of her dreaded the answer. Could it be what she was thinking?

As she raised her cup again, her hand shook slightly.

“Amy, no matter how I think about it, there’s no one else but you.”

“Pffft!”

Amy spat out her tea in a perfect arc, soaking Shirone. He sat there, stunned, as if he’d just been caught in a downpour.

“What are you saying all of a sudden, you idiot!”

Amy yelled, wiping her mouth with her sleeve as she turned away, blushing furiously. She quickly grabbed a towel and came back.

“Here, hurry and wipe yourself off! Ugh, this is disgusting!”

“...You’re the one who sprayed tea on me. Anyway, about what I was saying... do you remember that person I told you about before? Miro?”

“Miro? Oh, the founding president of the Paranormal Supernatural Science Society, right? You met her during the Immortal Function, didn’t you?”

“Right. Recently, I’ve developed a theory that the Immortal Function may be related to super-light speed, and I want to know more about her. The headmaster said it would be fine

if I investigated the Kergo Ruins, so with Rian's invitation, I thought this might be a good chance to go."

Amy finally felt at ease. The Kergo Ruins were a famous tourist site on Galliant Island.

"Ah, so you want to investigate that place together?"

"I don't think it'll be dangerous. But the headmaster hinted that it's more than just a tourist spot, so I'd feel more comfortable if you came along."

Since Rian had proposed a couples' trip, Shirone's partner had to be female. But even without that condition, Amy was the strongest among Shirone's friends.

Besides the unique ability of her Crimson Eyes, her strength was evident; she regularly competed with some of the strongest seniors and was ranked among the top middle levels in her class. In any situation, she'd be a reliable partner.

"Hmph! Of course. I'm on a different level from those supernatural kids."

"That's... not exactly what I meant."

Shirone gave a sheepish smile, trying to cover his tracks.

But Amy understood. She knew he wasn't the type to ask friends along just because they were strong.

Shirone had saved Amy once when she fell from a cliff. That fleeting yet profound experience had forged an unshakable trust between them.

That was why he could ask her now. Knowing the potential dangers, he could ask her to come along because they shared a bond beyond mere friendship.

"So, that's what this is all about..."

Amy walked to the window, deep in thought. Since it wasn't just the two of them going, she felt no pressure. In fact, it made her want to go even more.

She'd gain valuable experience, but more than that, it would be fun to do something with Shirone.

'He actually has good taste. Alright, I owe him anyway, so I'll help him out this time.'

Amy slowly turned around, and seeing Shirone's nervous face as he waited for her response, she couldn't help but smile.

No matter the purpose of the trip, it would still be a night away with a girl. Even with all his convincing words, he was stiff and tense, and no girl would agree to go with him in such a state.

'Same as when he was twelve. Not one bit different.'

Would this boy ever grow up? Maybe all his energy had gone into his magic instead.

Amy gave a firm nod.

"Alright, let's go to the island."

"Hello! I am Elzaine Tess, Rian's friend!"

Tess energetically greeted the Ogent family, while beside her, Rian stood with a slightly anxious expression.

The reason Rian had been lingering at Shirone's house was because he had devised a strategy to confront his family, using Tess as a shield.

After all, no parent would easily let a son who ranked last at swordsmanship school enjoy a break. But bringing a friend along could change the dynamics, especially if that friend was the top student at the swordsmanship school. Rian had calculated that it would work.

"Hm, I've heard of Elzaine's reputation. How is your father?"

"Yes, he continues to train with his sword daily, even while stationed in the occupied territories."

In truth, Tess had no idea how her father was doing and didn't particularly care to know. But Rian's father, Bischof, nodded, clearly impressed.

"As expected of a man who's made a name with his sword. If the chance arises, I'd like to visit him."

Tess's father, Elzaine Veron, was a master swordsman known by the nickname "The Flash".

If the Ogent style was aggressive and dominant, Elzaine's swordsmanship was sharp and eerie. The skill of each

practitioner varied, but there was a fierce pride on both sides in preserving their distinct swordsmanship heritage.

“Rian, it’s unlike you to have such a good lady friend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend, just a friend.”

Tess gave Rian a sharp look, but what could she do? The one who thirsts must dig the well; if she wanted to travel with Rian, she’d have to bear with it.

“So, you want to take a vacation to Galliant Island?”

“Yeah. Swordsmanship school was so brutal I thought I was going to die. I need some time to recover. Oh, and Shirone’s coming too. We’re planning to leave directly from here. Is that alright?”

“You can go, but did you actually work hard? Hard to believe, considering you never listened, even with private lessons.”

“Haha! Figured you’d say that, so I brought proof. I’ve finally unlocked Schema!”

Rian proudly took out a document. Although Reina had taken his report card, he still had his certification for passing the physical strength assessment.

The paper was technically useless since Schema’s placebo effect had been exposed, but Bischof, unaware of the backstory, had no reason to doubt it.

“Hm, you really passed. Congratulations.”

Though Bischof hid his emotions as usual, his voice trembled slightly.

Parents often feel an especially deep attachment to their less accomplished children. Rian had finally unlocked Schema, something his family hadn’t been able to help him succeed with, so Bischof was surely clenching his fists in pride on the inside.

“So, now you’ll keep your promise, right? I can take the sword Grandfather promised to give me once I unlocked Schema?”

“Of course. Now that you’ve unlocked Schema, it’s time for you to begin learning Ogent swordsmanship. But where’s

your report card? Judging by your confidence, it must be quite decent.”

Chapter 123: A New Encounter (4)

“Uh... my report card? My sister has it.”

“Reina? Why? Go get it.”

“I don’t know. She took it, saying she wanted to show it to Grandfather. How am I supposed to guess what that witch is thinking? Anyway, hurry up and give me the sword already. I’ve wanted it for so long and worked so hard.”

The sword Rian desperately wanted was a special type of straight sword, ideal for Ogent family swordsmanship. It was twice as heavy as a standard longsword, and the blade was long enough that only someone tall and strong could wield it.

Since he’d begun training, Rian had his eyes set on this particular sword. His grandfather had once used it himself, and Rian had practically claimed it as his own.

Clump, his grandfather, had always planned to pass it on to Rian. Of all his grandchildren, only Reina and Rian inherited his blue hair, and since Reina was a girl, Clump saw Rian as the only suitable heir for his sword.

“The sword’s in your grandfather’s room. But you’re going on vacation, so why do you need the sword? Tess came a long way, so that’s understandable...”

“I’ve got my reasons. I’ll go get it now.”

Rian dashed up to his grandfather’s room. Though he hadn’t fully unlocked Schema yet, he was determined to bring this sword on their journey.

He was sure Shirone planned to explore the ruins, and like a thread follows the needle, if Shirone were to dive into any danger, it was Rian’s duty to be there by his side.

‘This is the greatsword of the Ogent family.’

Rian looked up at the massive sword hanging in his grandfather's room with awe. It embodied the essence of Ogent swordsmanship and was said to be difficult to wield even without unlocking Schema.

Of course, he still couldn't wield it with Schema. But Rian managed to grab the sword with one hand and bring it up in front of him.

'It's heavy, but not so much that I can't swing it.'

When he was deemed to have imaginary Schema in his evaluation, Rian felt just as bitter as anyone. But in his usual way, he looked on the bright side.

Whether it was real Schema or not, he'd passed the strength assessment, and his combat power was the same. While he'd eventually need to master Schema, for now, he felt he could manage.

Since the sword was so heavy, carrying it in a metal scabbard was impractical. Instead, Rian attached a mesh-like leather scabbard across his back and sheathed the sword.

Such an outfit would certainly draw attention, but as long as carrying a sword wasn't illegal, it didn't matter.

As long as one observed basic regulations outside designated areas in the city, anyone could carry a sword.

For commoners, there was Sector Level C, for nobles, Sector Level B, and for royals, Sector Level A.

With his new sword strapped on, Rian strode confidently down the stairs—only to miss his moment of attention.

The head butler, Louis, opened the front door and announced:

"Master, young master Shirone has arrived."

Shirone entered the hall with Amy and greeted Bischof first. Though strict and stern outwardly, Bischof was a devoted family man who even took leave from work to be home when his son visited.

Shirone also regarded him as a guardian, one who'd not only helped him attend the magic academy but had also

supported his family's household needs.

"Hello, sir. Have you been well?"

"Yes. I hear you've been doing well at school."

"I've been promoted to Class Four this time, thanks to your support. I'm very grateful."

Bischof's expression turned bittersweet as he remembered Rian's struggles. Class Four... the talent it must have taken to reach that level at the academy in just six months?

Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to compare his children to others. His only concern as a father and a knight was that Rian might not meet Shirone's standards.

"It's thanks to your hard work. I'm glad my support has been worthwhile. So, I hear Rian's taking a trip with a lovely young lady. Are you going as well?"

"Yes, I'm going with them."

"And the young lady with you—is she your partner?"

Bischof looked over at the red-haired girl. She seemed familiar, though he couldn't quite place her.

"Hello, I'm Carmis Amy."

Bischof's eyes widened, and both Rian, Tess, and even the head butler, Louis, turned to look at Amy with curiosity.

The Carmis family, a 1st-class noble family, didn't have the highest standing within the kingdom, but their free-spirited nature and the talent of the Crimson Eye were renowned across the continent.

The Carmis identity was built upon accomplishments that extended beyond any single nation.

Bischof, too, didn't believe that a family's rank reflected its power. After all, some nobles achieved high rank through flattery and underhanded tactics, completely disregarding tradition and family values to climb the social ladder. But families like the Verons and the Carmises stood apart from such petty ambition.

True tradition is founded on principles, and the pride of families like theirs, who had chosen only one path since the

kingdom's founding, couldn't be bought with wealth or power.

"Alright, alright, we'll save this talk for later. Let's go—we'll need to leave now if we want to catch the boat on time!"

Rian's voice cut through the tension, lightening the mood. Even though he'd gotten permission from Bischof, his anxiety hadn't faded.

By now, Reina's urgent letter was probably flying toward them like an arrow.

Once his report card was revealed, paradise would vanish, and hell would surely begin.

"Father, we'll be gone about ten days."

"Alright. You've worked hard with your training, so have fun. And here, use this to cover your expenses."

Bischof tossed him a hefty pouch of gold. When Rian looked inside, he was shocked—it was the most money his father had ever given him.

In fact, Bischof was feeling rather pleased. When he'd made Rian swear the knight's oath, he'd feared he'd ruined his son. But Rian had unlocked Schema, made good friends, and was flourishing.

And Shirone, who would be Rian's liege, was developing his remarkable talents steadily.

If training was an investment for real combat, then perhaps paying a half-year's wages for this outing was well worth it. Rian felt a pang of guilt, but such feelings were a luxury he couldn't afford right now. All he could think of was escaping this house alive.

"Got it. I'll head out with my friends now. Ah, Temuran—could you arrange for a carriage to the harbor?"

"Of course. I wish you a pleasant journey."

Temuran gave Rian a pitying look as he watched him leave. Seeing Rian breaking out in a cold sweat and fleeing, he could easily guess the situation.

'I've bought you ten minutes at best. Good luck, young master.'

Temuran focused on the envelope tucked inside his pocket. It was an express delivery from Reina that had just arrived from the capital.

There were no free carriages today, likely because the servants had so much work. The family carriage was available, but it would take an hour just to saddle and prepare it.

Though Rian insisted they could skip any prep, he had to agree to let them at least check the wheel bolts; if anything happened on the road, the carriage manager would take full responsibility.

So the four waited by the stables for the carriage to arrive. For a while, there wasn't much conversation—an awkward silence common when people meet for the first time. Yet, each one was quietly assessing the others.

Tess studied Shirone first. She knew he was training as a mage, but since Rian had taken a knight's oath, she'd expected Shirone to be a fiery, passionate type. But in person, he seemed unexpectedly gentle and composed. She was also intrigued by Amy of the Carmis family. The Carmises were continental celebrities; what kind of person would someone from such a famous family be?

Finally, Tess decided to break the silence. She figured it would help avoid any awkwardness once they were in the carriage.

"How about we introduce ourselves first? I'm Elzaine Tess."

"I'm Carmis Amy. Nice to meet you."

"Oh, I'm Arian Shirone."

Tess shook hands with Shirone as well, but upon hearing his family name, she raised an eyebrow.

With her family's extensive diplomatic ties, Tess knew most noble family names, even minor ones. But she'd never heard of the Arian family.

"Ah, Arian, I see. So... is your main family in Creas?"

Sensing she'd asked delicately, Shirone answered her honestly.

"Ah, I don't have a main family. I'm a commoner."

"What? A commoner?"

Tess's eyes widened in surprise. At first, she wondered if he was so nervous he'd said something absurd. How else could it be that Rian had taken a knight's oath to a commoner? She glanced at Amy, whose unchanged expression confirmed that she already knew.

'What's going on here? What's Rian thinking? And what about Amy? How could someone from the Carmis family come along as a commoner's partner? Isn't this supposed to be a couples' trip?'

Not having met Shirone before, Tess was completely bewildered. As stunned as she was about Shirone, Rian's decision struck her even more.

Even if Shirone possessed some extraordinary talent, disregarding status wasn't something done lightly.

And this was no simple friendship; it was a knight's oath, committing to serve Shirone as his lord for life.

'In a way... it's very much like Rian.'

As Tess struggled to find the right words, Shirone spoke first.

"Sorry, if it's uncomfortable, then maybe—"

"Oh, no, no. I was the rude one. Honestly, I was just so shocked I lost my composure. But... am I the strange one here? You're all so calm, it's starting to make me feel like the odd one out. Haha!"

Tess hurried to smooth things over. Commoner or noble, Shirone was Rian's lord, and she felt she should treat him with respect.

'Tess is a noble-hearted person,' Shirone thought, sensing her character. She was indeed a fitting choice as Rian's friend.

To lower herself to put others at ease—that required genuine consideration.

“Thank you for saying that. I’ve heard a lot about you. You’re Rian’s girlfriend, right?”

“Oh my, what are you saying? Do we really look like a couple? Do we suit each other that well? Haha!”

Tess was beginning to warm to Shirone. Meanwhile, Rian’s face turned bright red. He knew he’d need to dispel this misunderstanding eventually, but he was happy that Tess was treating Shirone well, so he stayed quiet.

Amy glanced at Rian in mild surprise. When she’d first heard about the island trip, she’d wondered what kind of sly person would come up with such a plan, but he was unexpectedly honest and considerate.

‘The Ogents... a family that built its legacy on swordsmanship alone. They say there’s one genius among the black-haired members, but this guy’s got blue hair.’ Though the Ogents were a 2nd-class noble family and not part of the royal family, this was due to their unyielding character.

In political circles, families like the Ogents were called “pure”.

The term implied a neutral stance; such families didn’t wield significant influence in day-to-day politics.

But in times of national upheaval, where the votes of the pure families fell could shift the entire political landscape, making them a force to be reckoned with.

While Amy pondered this, Tess continued observing Shirone and Amy.

Both had cute looks and a sharp gleam in their eyes. And while she didn’t know their personalities well yet, she guessed they were both likely just as strong-willed.

“So, what’s the relationship between you two? You look really good together. Are you a couple?”

As Tess gestured between them, Amy felt a twinge of irritation. It felt like Tess was suggesting they were two little kids who just happened to fit well together.

Chapter 124: A New Encounter (5)

Indeed, Tess herself had a build that made her a fitting match for Rian, with long legs, tall height, and a well-defined figure.

By contrast, Amy knew she looked the part of a mage. Her height was average, and her frame was slimmer than most her age.

Physical beauty wasn't everything, of course, but standing next to Tess's imposing presence made Amy feel uncharacteristically small.

"No, we're just friends. He asked me as a favor, and I agreed to go along."

"Ah, I see."

Tess didn't fully believe her. Just the fact that a 1st-class noble was accompanying a commoner as a partner suggested something deeper.

Rian thought similarly. When planning this trip, his biggest worry was that Shirone wouldn't find a partner.

There was the issue of social rank, but Rian also worried that Shirone's reserved nature would lead him to get hurt if he asked and was rejected.

Yet, against all odds, Shirone had brought along a strikingly beautiful girl who had agreed to go with him.

Rian had always believed that a girl like Amy, who inspired a desire to protect, was ideal.

On the other hand, Tess was stronger than him, so he felt no romantic interest.

Even if her strength was due to her mastery of Schema, few men would be drawn to a woman who was stronger than they were.

‘Well done, Shirone. I’ll back you all the way.’

As Rian was strategizing, the carriage arrived, freshly prepared. The four grabbed their luggage and began walking toward it.

And then—

“You brat! Rian!”

A booming voice echoed from the manor. From the very tone, Rian knew they’d been found out.

“Oh, crap! Guys, run!”

“What? And the carriage?”

“If we take the carriage, it’ll be too late! Look behind us! We have to jump the wall!”

The others turned to look. A towering dust storm was advancing from the mansion, headed their way.

Still processing what was happening, Shirone’s group took off.

“Rian! What’s going on?”

“Damn it! My report card must have arrived! I was last in my class! My father’s going to kill us!”

“Are you serious? Like, really kill us? Maybe we should just tell him the truth and head off. This is crazy!”

“Sure, if you want to try, go ahead. I’m running. For the record, my father is a certified 4th-class swordsman.”

The color drained from their faces. Tess activated Schema and surged ahead, with Amy following close behind.

Falling behind, Shirone’s heart pounded as he ran. They were moving forward, but the wind was blowing from behind.

That meant Bischof was pushing through the air so fast it created a tailwind—a speed beyond normal human limits.

“Rian! I think we’re going to get caught!”

“No choice! I’ll sacrifice myself! You guys go to the island and have fun without me!”

Rian sounded deadly serious, but Shirone couldn’t imagine abandoning him. Amid the chaos, he came up with an idea.

“Amy! Let’s teleport! Rian, don’t move!”

Shirone grabbed Rian and cast a photonization spell. In a flash of light, the two were flung forward as beams of light. Experiencing Teleportation for the first time, Rian felt disoriented. His vision narrowed, and it felt like the scenery was rushing toward him.

It was the mage's perspective.

Amy, understanding Shirone's plan, grabbed Tess, and they teleported as well.

Two streaks of light blazed across the garden. Although they risked crashing into obstacles, neither Shirone nor Amy allowed any mistakes.

Thinking they'd gained enough distance, Shirone looked back. But he quickly realized with a sinking feeling that they weren't out of danger yet.

The dust storm was closer, tearing through trees and obstacles in its path.

It was easy to imagine Bischof wielding the emblematic Ogent greatsword.

"Amy! Over here!"

Shirone yelled, stopping abruptly in the dense forest. Amy canceled her next Teleportation and closed the distance.

The dust storm was now just 100 meters away.

Tess, growing anxious, cried out.

"What now? Are we just going to get caught?"

"Hold on to me! We're going to fly!"

Shirone extended his Spirit Zone to its maximum range.

They couldn't escape the estate grounds, but there was a way to evade.

If they couldn't outrun Bischof, they could at least disappear from his sight.

"Here we go!"

When his friends reached him, Shirone searched with his synesthesia for a safe spot. He hadn't expected to use this spell so soon, but here he was, in a real situation.

Targeting the forest's edge, he cast Spatial Movement. Their bodies glowed, drawn upward toward the sky.

Simultaneously, a fierce gust swept through, erasing their former location.

Bischof clenched his fist in frustration, just missing Rian. By a fraction of a second.

“Damn it...!”

Spinning 180 degrees, Bischof braked with both legs, skidding back several meters like on ice.

The earth rose in heaps from his heels, showing the sheer physical force he’d exerted.

Bischof looked at the trail he’d left, the ground churned, and trees broken.

All because of Rian. His son had dared to deceive him.

“Imaginary Schema?”

He pulled out the report card with trembling hands, sighing as he examined it.

But, despite himself, he felt a pang of pity for his wayward son. Just how hard must he have trained to reach Schema-level strength?

‘I’ll take it as an award for effort.’

And Shirone—it seemed he had already mastered Spatial Movement. Given its difficulty even for professionals, his growth in half a year was remarkable.

Shirone and Rian. Rian and Shirone. Bischof thought about the two boys bound by a shared destiny.

Their abilities and personalities couldn’t be more different, yet the effort in each of their steps might one day match in the name of excellence.

‘Well, it’ll be a good memory, this too.’

Bischof tossed the report card over his shoulder and turned back toward the mansion.

Galliant Island (1)

After leaping over the wall of the Ogent estate, Shirone and his group ran as fast as they could out of the noble district.

Thanks to their Teleportation, they’d escaped the location Bischof would have expected, but they couldn’t rest easy just yet. A master of Schema could pursue them with a

nearly animalistic range of movement, far beyond what ordinary Teleportation could avoid.

They only relaxed once they entered the city's bustling commercial district. Bischof's face was still vivid in their minds.

He probably wouldn't actually hurt his son, but the aura of deadly intent he'd projected with that whirlwind suggested otherwise.

Shirone sighed.

"So, what now? We can't exactly go back."

"Doesn't matter. We have plenty of travel money. Let's rent a carriage and get to the port."

With his father out of the way, there was little to fear. Sure, he'd face the consequences eventually, but now wasn't the time for gloomy thoughts with an exciting trip ahead.

They arrived at a stable on the outskirts of the city. The place not only sold horses to travelers but also offered carriage rental services with drivers who could take them to their destination.

Since they were pressed for time, Rian rented a four-person carriage ready for immediate departure.

Rian and Tess sat beside each other, while Shirone and Amy sat across from them. The seating was cramped, as it was the type of carriage commonly used by commoners, forcing them to sit close.

Though the atmosphere was initially awkward, the refreshing breeze through the windows quickly eased their tension.

Tess, fanning herself, glanced over at Shirone. She didn't know much about magic, but she understood enough to know that teleporting through a dense forest was no easy feat. He was indeed a skilled mage, as she'd expected.

Still, there were plenty of skilled mages among the nobility, and she couldn't quite understand why Rian would pledge himself to Shirone.

“Oh, right. What was that second spell you used? It felt different from regular Teleportation.”

“Oh, that was Spatial Movement,” Shirone explained.

“Because space bends along the time axis, it probably felt a bit dizzying.”

“What? That was Spatial Movement?”

Tess exclaimed in shock. None of her friends at the magic academy had mastered it.

Spatial Movement wasn’t something one could do just by knowing the theory. It required immense mental fortitude, something only conquered through time and effort.

“That’s impressive. Did you have some kind of... unique opportunity? I don’t mean to sound dismissive, but I thought Spatial Movement was a spell only pros used. Isn’t it hard to learn if you don’t start training young?”

Tess assumed Shirone must have had an extraordinary opportunity to begin his magical training. After all, a commoner learning magic through conventional means was unheard of.

Shirone nodded casually. While her assumption was only partly true, it wasn’t a critical issue, so he didn’t feel the need to correct her.

“Yes. If it weren’t for Rian, I wouldn’t be able to attend the magic academy. The Ogent family helped me enroll.”

“I thought so. Still, that’s quite an achievement on its own. Competing with nobles from a young age must have been tough in more ways than one.”

“Haha! It was challenging at first, but I’m okay now. Amy helped protect me a lot, too.”

“Hmph. Helped? I didn’t even know about it until now.”

Amy turned her head with a huff, though she hid her annoyance. Shirone’s modest response frustrated her.

Tess seemed to dismiss the idea that Shirone could have mastered advanced magic through sheer effort alone. Given that she didn’t know him well, her reaction was understandable, but Amy bristled at the thought of

Shirone's arduous journey being reduced to mere good fortune.

Rian, however, picked up on Amy's irritation and decided to clarify things.

"It's only been half a year, you know. Shirone's only been learning magic for six months."

"W-What? Six months?"

Tess turned to Rian so sharply it looked as if her neck might snap. For once, she was at a loss for words.

No one could master Spatial Movement in six months. This was common knowledge, even beyond noble circles.

Tess glanced over at the other side of the carriage. Shirone was smiling, but Amy was sulking, her chin propped up on her hand, avoiding eye contact.

It was then that Tess realized her misstep.

Warriors and mages had fundamentally different mindsets, often with opposite ways of expressing themselves.

Whereas warriors spoke directly, expressing exactly what they felt, mages tended to read between the lines, interpreting layers of meaning in conversations. To Amy, Tess's comments might have come across as dismissive of Shirone.

"Oh my, I'm sorry. I just kept rambling without understanding. I didn't mean to upset anyone. Honestly, if my boyfriend were treated like that, I'd be angry, too."

Amy's face turned red. Mages prided themselves on their way with words, but ironically, she had no defenses against a direct apology like this.

"W-What are you talking about? I didn't say anything. And he's not my boyfriend! We're just friends."

Her tone was curt, but her expression softened visibly.

"It's normal not to know everything about each other when you first meet," Rian chimed in. "Tess may be blunt, but she doesn't mean any harm. If you have anything you want to say, go ahead."

Rian's straightforwardness left Shirone and Amy at a loss for words.

They were used to weighing their words carefully, so the unfiltered honesty of warriors felt a bit overwhelming.

Chapter 125: Galliant Island (2)

Tess struggled to suppress a laugh as she observed how Shirone and Amy had suddenly fallen quiet. Having spent so much time among the tough, blunt classmates at her swordsmanship school, meeting the students of the magic academy made her feel like she was among younger siblings despite being the same age.

“But Amy, you’re impressive yourself. When did you master Schema?”

“Before I entered the magic academy. I trained for about two years.”

“Really? It’s rare for someone so young to learn Schema. Doesn’t it supposedly hinder physical growth?”

“It wasn’t exactly physical training... It just... happened that way.”

Tess understood immediately. While innate talent in Spirit Zone could produce prodigies, Schema training was grueling on the body, making it particularly difficult for someone young to master.

But Amy’s Crimson Eye—a gift that allowed her precise body control through photographic memory—had likely let her bypass the harsher training.

“Ah, so Crimson Eye can be used like that. That’s incredible.”

“It’s not much. I don’t have a build technique, and all I can do is strengthen my physical power a bit. Compared to you, I’m practically a kid. Watching you earlier, I could see how fast you were. If you’d accelerated any further, I wouldn’t have even been able to teleport in time to keep up.”

“Well, it’s my specialty, but you’re a mage, after all. Besides, Rian hasn’t mastered Schema either. I guess it’s no wonder the Carmis family has such a reputation across the continent.”

Shirone looked at Rian in surprise.

“Rian, you haven’t learned Schema? Then... what was that thing with the logs back at my place? You didn’t say anything, so I thought you were using Schema.”

Tess chuckled.

“Rian? If you ask Master Quan, he’d say Rian’s strength is just ‘dumb muscle.’ Want to know how he did in his final exam at swordsmanship school...?”

“Oh, come on! Why so interested in my private life?”

Rian cut in quickly. He’d rather not let Shirone know, at least not yet.

Still, the lighthearted banter lifted the mood, and everyone began sharing stories of school life. Despite their different areas of study, they were all students, and conversation flowed naturally.

They were slowly getting to know each other.

Upon arriving at Creas Harbor, Shirone’s group sought a boat heading for Galliant Island.

In Dock 6, a large galley was spreading its sails, seemingly ready to set off.

With all the schools in the kingdom on break around the same time, there were more tourists than usual. Carried along with the crowd, Shirone boarded and found a spot on the third deck.

There were cabins below, but since this was his first time on a ship, he thought it would be fun to enjoy the view.

The waves crashed against the hull, and a salty breeze filled the air. Once the harbor faded into the horizon, the group felt the reality of being out on the open sea.

“How long will it take to get there?”

“About five hours from Creas Harbor, from what I’ve heard.”

"Guess we almost had to leave tomorrow if we'd been any later."

As Shirone said, there were many people coming and going on the deck. Half of them were merchants, but there were also tourists dressed in noble attire. There were also quite a few people who came from other places than Creas.

"It seems like it's a famous island like Rian said. What kind of place is it?"

"I came prepared," Amy said, pulling out a notebook as if she'd been waiting for this moment. Now that everyone felt comfortable, Tess spoke to her freely.

"Oh? You're thorough."

"Really thorough. I didn't even think of looking it up," Shirone admitted, scratching his head sheepishly, which earned him a disapproving glare from Amy.

"You're planning to explore ruins without even researching beforehand?"

"Haha, well, I..."

Some people travel impulsively, while others meticulously plan every detail. The former are romantic, seeking the unknown, while the latter prefer efficiency. Amy was clearly in the latter category.

But Shirone didn't fit either category. Since this was his first trip, everything seemed new and exciting to him.

"Alright, I'll tell you about Galliant Island. It has an area of about 1,500 square kilometers. It's crescent-shaped, with natural cliffs to the north, so boats have to sail to the southern port. The western side is a mix of villages and resorts, while the Kergo Ruins are on the eastern side. The ruins are the remains of a temple from the Kergo civilization, which thrived about two thousand years ago."

"Kergo?"

"Yes. They're extinct now, but a few indigenous people still live in an autonomous zone in the center of the island.

They're usually small, with deep-set eyes and narrow pupils.

Oh, and they have tattoos on their faces as an offering to their deity, Anke Ra.”

“What’s Anke Ra?”

“The ancient god worshiped by the Kergo. And... apparently, the indigenous people chew on something called Loop, a hard root that induces hallucinations. They call it the ‘god’s awakener’ since it lets them commune with their deity in a trance. Though it’s said that religious conflict led to their civilization’s fall, some say they overused Loop root, which caused internal discord.”

“Interesting. A civilization brought down by hallucinogens.”

“Because they abused it under the guise of faith. Oh, right. My brother said most of the ruin managers are from the Kergo, so we might get to see some. But as for the autonomous zone, outsiders aren’t allowed in. Though my brother...”

“Hmm? What did he say?”

Shirone, curious, asked. Amy was likely referring to her brother Ares, the explorer, who probably knew quite a bit about the Kergo ruins.

“He told me this, ‘The fall of a civilization isn’t defined by scholars. If you want to know about them, you’ll need to give something more important than the admission fee.’”

Shirone nodded thoughtfully.

“So, that means there might be something even more significant within the autonomous zone than in the ruins?”

“I’m not sure. My brother always talks like that. He thinks giving a riddle makes everything sound more important.”

“Haha! But I think it makes it more exciting. ‘Something more valuable than an admission fee.’ What could that be?”

Shirone’s heart pounded with excitement. Alpheas’s comments and Ares’s words both suggested that the Kergo ruins were more than just a tourist spot.

Seeing Shirone’s childlike excitement, Rian felt motivated as well. With his lord so eager, his duty as a knight felt more

pressing than ever. No matter what secrets the ruins held, Rian was determined to protect Shirone.

“Shirone, when are you planning to go? Not right when we arrive, right?”

“No, it’s vacation, after all. We should have some fun first.”

“Then let’s secure a place to stay first. Once we reach the port, we’ll head to the resort area. There’s a beach on the western shore where we can swim. There are also plenty of sights and some famous seafood restaurants.”

Eager to see the tropical sights, Tess clenched her fists, practically trembling with excitement.

“Oooh, this is going to be fun!”

Though there were still over four hours left before they arrived, the thrill of travel quickly ate up the time, and soon they saw the island appear on the horizon.

“Look! It’s Galliant Island!”

Passengers at the bow pointed excitedly at the distant island. Hearing their shouts, Shirone’s group rushed to the front of the deck.

They were greeted by the towering cliffs of Galliant Island’s northern side. Sheer rock walls jutted up like the blade of a sword, splitting the lush forest canopy.

Passengers cheered with excitement.

“We’re finally here! It’s amazing!”

“Wow! Look at that water! I can’t wait to swim!”

Meanwhile, the merchants remained lounging with their goods. They knew that the island’s harbor was on the southern side, so they still had another 30 minutes to circle around.

Galliant Harbor.

The harbor was packed with people. Merchants disembarking from the ships and island vendors rushing toward them were creating a scene of utter chaos.

Tourists, including Shirone and his group, had to wait until the crowds thinned before they could step onto solid ground.

The warm air was the first thing they noticed as they set foot on the island. Creas had already entered early autumn, but Galliant Island was still in the height of summer. Once the merchants had cleared out, the harbor filled again, this time with vendors promoting various services to the arriving tourists.

“Come to Dolphin Inn! Enjoy a comfortable holiday for the lowest price on the island! And you’ll love my wife’s cooking!”

“Want to try authentic tropical seafood? Head to our restaurant! We also have carriages ready to take you around!”

“Luggage carrying services here! Strong, reliable porters available now!”

Shirone’s group was quickly overwhelmed by the clamor. No one had directly approached them yet, but they could feel the attention on them. Their youthful appearance made them stand out, and their fine clothes and weapons were eye-catching to the hawkers.

Of course, not all of these vendors were legitimate. Across the dock, in a shady alley, a small group of young miscreants was sizing up potential targets for a different kind of *business*.

“Heh, who should we bleed dry today?” said a boy named Jiese, his eyes glinting as he scanned the crowd. Two friends behind him were also scoping out the area.

These boys were no ordinary street vendors—they didn’t own a shop and made their money solely through their wits and tricks. They were the back-alley “brats” of the island. Island brats were a breed apart from those on the mainland. Living isolated at sea, they had to ignore society’s rules just to secure a crust of bread.

Jiese had been a rebel since he was young, constantly getting into trouble. He’d even been beaten by nobles more than once for his defiance.

Now, those experiences served him well, as they'd taught him how to profit from the same people who'd once looked down on him.

"Wow, so many people because it's vacation season. Jiese, we could make a big haul today, right?"

"Most of them are just flashy on the outside. We need to pick carefully if we want to succeed."

Jiese studied the crowd intently. His friends, anxious to make their daily quota, were growing impatient.

"Jiese, hurry up! Other vendors will snap up the good targets!"

"Fine, just give me a second."

Jiese scanned the harbor until his gaze fixed on Dock 3, where a group of four was talking. One of them, a red-haired girl, immediately caught his eye.

Even from a distance, he could tell she was beautiful, her features so striking that they stood out even in the bustling port.

"Hey, I've got it! Let's go after that group. See them? Two guys, two girls."

"Are you serious? There's a big guy with them. And he's got a sword! Let's just pick someone else."

"Come on, who am I? I'm Jiese, ruler of this harbor! Guys like him are all show. Why else would he be dumb enough to wear a sword at a tourist spot?"

"Ugh, this seems risky... Don't tell me, Jiese, is this your habit of falling for every girl you see acting up again? What if they're mercenaries?"

"Look at them! They're obviously students. And students wouldn't dare lay a finger on us. Just follow my lead, and don't act polite even if they're nobles. With types like these, you've got to establish dominance."

Jiese led his two friends out of the alley. As they approached Dock 3, he kept glancing around nervously, worried another hawker would claim the group first. But the closer they got,

the more the girl's face came into focus, and his anxieties melted away.

'Whoa... this girl's seriously pretty...'

It was common for island boys to fall for tourists, but Jiese felt something almost sacred beyond mere attraction.

He quickly pulled himself together, realizing he couldn't let another hawker reach her first.

Chapter 126: Galliant Island (3)

“Hey, welcome to Galliant! Here on vacation?”

Jiese waved in a casual, overly familiar way. No matter how noble the customer, this was the unspoken rule for dealing with easy marks in his world.

It was a risky way to make money, but even if things got messy, Jiese could always hide out for a month. Rarely would visitors from across the sea make the effort to come back and seek revenge.

“Yes, I came to spend some time with friends.”

Shirone smiled politely. Meanwhile, Amy frowned, her expression openly distrustful. Having once ruled the backstreets herself, she immediately sensed why they’d approached.

“You all look like students. Where do you go to school? A prestigious place, I’m sure.”

“Alpheas Magic Academy.”

“Ah, I know it! Since it’s close by, a lot of students visit.”

Amy inwardly cursed. It was bad enough they’d mentioned they were students, but saying where they were from was practically inviting trouble.

“But you don’t look like typical mages, with that build.”

“What? We’re from Kaizen Swordsmanship Academy! We’re big because we’re swordsmen, genius!”

Tess, annoyed at being grouped with Rian as “big,” snapped back.

“Haha, my bad. I’m not very good with words—I was just trying to compliment you.”

Jiese felt certain that he’d already won. People like him could stand confidently even in front of nobles because they

weren't bound by societal rules. Nobles, however, had standards to uphold, and the strict conduct of Alpheas Magic Academy and Kaizen Swordsmanship Academy was well-known. If they caused trouble here, disciplinary action was a certainty.

"Anyway, glad you're here! I'm Jiese, a local guide. Hire me, and I'll handle everything—sightseeing, lodging, meals."

"We're still deciding, so we'll think about it," Shirone replied, repeating the same line he'd given other pushy vendors.

But Jiese and his gang were different. Having sensed the group's vulnerabilities, they latched on, refusing to let up.

"Aw, come on! You guys have money, right? And we're poor. You're here to spend money anyway, aren't you?"

At last, Shirone realized this wasn't just a persistent vendor. Rian and Tess also picked up on this, and their gazes grew colder.

Seeing the swordsmen's expressions, Jiese's friends flinched, backing off. But Jiese remained unfazed.

'They won't dare try anything against us.'

As a seasoned hustler, Jiese was well-informed about the academy students' restrictions. Alpheas prohibited any use of magic off school grounds, and Kaizen, with its chivalric code, was even stricter.

Sure, he'd been roughed up by hot-headed students before, but sometimes you had to take a beating to make a living.

And those experiences had refined Jiese's skills for walking the fine line between confidence and caution.

"Trust me; I know the best spots on Galliant Island. C'mon, show some guts, will you? It's a vacation! Impress the lovely ladies by throwing some cash around, eh? So, should I carry your bags?"

"Hold on. Let us just have one last word among ourselves."

"Fine, but if you say no, that would be really rude."

Jiese already holding their bags in his hands.

Shirone looked helplessly at his friends. He'd never encountered this type of pushy persistence, and Jiese was

skillful enough to make his behavior just mild enough to avoid outright anger.

“What should we do? Should we just let him guide us?”

“He knows where we’re from, and he’s sure we won’t retaliate.”

After hearing Amy’s words, Tess became upset. Although it was a mean means, it was certainly effective. Normally, he would have been the type to show his fists immediately, but the fact that he was still holding back his anger was proof.

Rian, however, seemed indifferent.

“I’ll go along with whatever Shirone decides. But if he keeps pushing after we say no, then we’ll beat him up.”

For Rian, this wasn’t just a vacation. This was his first excursion with Shirone after their knighthood pact, and it was a chance to gain experience for future missions in the outside world.

“My arms are killing me! Just make a decision already, it’s all about money now.”

“Ugh, this guy!”

Tess moved toward Jiese, but Shirone stopped her, not wanting an unnecessary conflict that could harm the school’s reputation.

“Fine. We’ll hire you. How much?”

“Good choice! For you, a special rate of five gold coins.”

“Five gold?!” Shirone’s eyes widened. Five gold coins for a simple guide service? That was outright extortion, easily ten times the going rate, even for a tourist area.

“That seems a bit high.”

“What are you talking about? Five gold gets you everything—transport, meals, a place to stay, sightseeing! It’s a great deal.”

Amy, who had been quiet to avoid a scene, had reached her limit. She could see they planned to bleed them dry and had no intention of actually guiding them anywhere worth seeing.

‘Ugh, I should’ve shut him down from the start.’

Annoyed, Amy recalled her own past dealings with these types. They only backed down if confronted forcefully; if given an inch, they'd take everything.

"Alright, but five gold is just..."

"Forget it! Here's your five gold. Take it and disappear."

Amy tossed the gold coins at Jiese's feet, the coins bouncing and glinting in the sunlight.

"Whoa! Real gold coins!"

Jiese's friends scrambled to grab the coins off the ground, but Jiese himself stood frozen. Had anyone else tossed money like that, he'd have scooped it up. But her gaze made him feel like a worm, and there was no way he'd grovel.

"...What's this? What do you think we are?"

"You were the one asking. We don't need your 'guide services,' so get lost."

"Oh, you're asking for it now! Think you can just say whatever you want?"

"Hey, wait!"

Shirone interrupted, stepping between them, trying to keep the peace. Amy's blunt approach had caught him off guard, even though he understood her irritation at the extortion.

"Amy, please stop. Let them go. You're only making it worse."

"Worse? They're just scammers who'll charge us for every little thing. They're human trash who can't be reasoned with."

Jiese's friends flinched. They were, in fact, running a scam. Shirone, with a frown, turned back to Amy.

"Amy, please, enough."

Amy clenched her jaw, finally falling silent. As a noble herself, she knew how essential reputation was, and while she didn't like backing down, Shirone had a point.

Jiese, meanwhile, seethed with rage. All he'd ever had was his pride. He'd suffered many slights, but he had never bowed his head to anyone.

"J-Jiese, we got the money. Let's just go."

"Give me that."

"Huh? What?"

"Hand over the coins. You want to live without pride?"

Jiese snatched the gold coins back from his friends, feeling the familiar weight in his hand. But he clenched his fist, holding himself back from pocketing them, and instead tossed the coins at Amy's feet with a sneer.

"Well, well. It must feel great to just toss around gold like that. I wonder what that's like. I'll never know, will I?"

With a defiant lift of his chin, Jiese turned and marched back to the alley, his friends following close behind.

Amy watched him go, her irritation lingering even as her target vanished.

"Ugh, those jerks. Shirone, why did you stop me? People like that need to be put in their place."

"I know, but if you don't want to hire him, you can just refuse. I don't think it had to go that far."

"What are you saying? That I'm looking down on people just because I have money?"

"No, it's just... that's how it came across."

"Oh, so you know what they're like, and you're okay with this? Haven't you dealt with people like that before?"

Shirone bit his lip, unsure. Perhaps Amy was right, but he didn't want her handling things in a way that lowered herself to their level.

"Let's just go. Let's find a carriage and get on with it."

With Shirone silent, Amy turned on her heel, walking ahead. Tess scratched her head awkwardly, sensing the growing tension.

"Oh boy... this just got complicated."

Entering the alley by Dock 3, Jiese squabbled with his friends. The ship had come in, and this was supposed to be their big haul, yet all the customers had already left. All they could do now was argue.

“Jiese! How could you give that money back? Five gold coins would have covered our dues for days!”

“Don’t you guys have any pride? She threw the money in our faces like we were beggars, and you think we should just pick it up?”

“So what? Money’s money, isn’t it?”

“I can’t stand it. That damn girl! Who does she think she is, looking down on me like that!”

Jiese clenched his fists, shaking with anger. His friends didn’t get it—what exactly was he so upset about? Sure, the girl tossing the coins at them was humiliating, but they were used to nobles’ arrogance by now.

“Jiese, be honest. You liked that girl, didn’t you?”

“What? Why would I like someone like her?”

“You always get proud and defensive around girls you’re interested in. But she’s a noble. There’s no chance anyway, and from the way she tossed those coins, she must be from a high-ranking family.”

“So what? Does being a noble make her better than me? I’m Jiese, remember? I’ll be the ruler of this harbor one day!”

Just then, they heard the sound of footsteps from the shadowed end of the alley. The unmistakable sound of metal-studded boots hitting the ground made Jiese’s hair stand on end.

His friends felt the same dread. There was only one person around the harbor who walked like that.

“Well, well, Jiese.”

It was a middle-aged man of average height, with a hard face and piercing, snake-like eyes—Falcoa, the enforcer of the Freeman gang that Jiese’s group belonged to.

Jiese shivered. Falcoa was ruthless, a man who enjoyed violence and had no problem taking a beating himself if things went south. He would charge at ten or even a hundred men if necessary, hitting anyone in his path. They didn’t call him “Galliant’s madman” for nothing.

“Hey, Falcoa, sir. Good to see you.”

Falcoa chomped on something as he threw an arm around Jiese's shoulder. A sickening stench hit Jiese's nose; Falcoa was addicted to a root drug called Loop, and he rarely removed it from his mouth.

"Hand it over. You got the cash, didn't you?"

"Uh, well... it's not here."

"Not here?"

A cold light flashed in Falcoa's eyes. Sensing danger, Jiese's friends immediately dropped to the ground, pleading.

"Please, spare us! Those kids refused to get in our carriage! We stuck with them to the end, but then they started threatening us..."

"Oh, is that so? Then what about the coins I saw you toss away earlier? Were those coins, or was it trash?"

Jiese's heart dropped. Falcoa had pretended not to notice, but he'd clearly been watching everything from start to finish.

Was this what it felt like to be a frog caught by a snake? Jiese could barely breathe from the fear tightening in his chest.

"Well, well, what am I gonna do with you little punks?"

Chapter 127: Galliant Island (4)

Shirone's group rented a carriage at the port and headed to a western resort area. The beach stretched out with a vast expanse of white sand, beautiful even from a distance. Numerous shops lined the shore, and lodging accommodations were built like hillside cottages along the mountain.

The place Rian had chosen was a villa situated midway up the mountain. Built for noble visitors, the property was spacious enough for all four of them to stay comfortably and offered a splendid view of the sea.

Shirone took in the ocean view from the terrace. The blue waves rolled up to the sandy shore, leaving frothy trails behind. Watching the people relaxing on the beach helped him momentarily forget the unpleasant scuffle they had experienced at the port.

Once they'd unpacked, they lit a fire in the fireplace and gathered in the living room to rest and shake off the fatigue of their journey. They were starving since they hadn't eaten much except for a few snacks after setting out that morning. Tess, pondering what kind of meal would best kick off their vacation, suddenly clapped her hands as an idea struck her. "Aha, why don't we cook for ourselves?"

Rian looked at her, surprised.

"What? You know how to cook?"

"Hmph, of course I do! Just because I'm a swordsman doesn't mean I can't cook."

"Oh, I get it now. But if it's military rations, I'll pass."

"Oh, come on! Do you think I'm that bad? I know how to cook properly!"

Only then did Rian's expression change to one of mild surprise. He hadn't expected someone as tough and tomboyish as Tess to be confident in her cooking skills. But this was exactly what Tess wanted: a chance to show Rian a different side of herself. If she could leave an impression on him with this trip, it would be a huge success. "I'll make the best meal you've ever had—just bring back the ingredients. How about it?"

"Hmm, maybe that's a good idea. Honestly, going out to eat right away feels a bit much for the first night. What do you think, Shirone?"

"I'm fine with it too. Food tastes better when you make it yourself on a trip, right?"

Amy spoke up carefully.

"Well... should I cook, too?"

Everyone's eyes turned to Amy. They didn't doubt her ability to cook, but they hadn't expected someone with such a sharp personality to volunteer to cook for the others. With her feminine intuition, Tess sensed what was really going on.

'Oh, this is for Shirone, isn't it? Haha, looks like you've got an unexpectedly sweet side!'

Tess was all for it. If this could help the two of them make up, it was an even better plan.

"Alright then! Let's make it a cooking competition—Rian and Shirone can gather the ingredients, and we'll prepare here. How does that sound?"

Everyone agreed. Shirone and Rian took the ingredient list the girls had prepared and headed to the market.

After the boys left, the atmosphere lightened considerably. Tess, washing the dishes alongside Amy, glanced at her playfully.

"Is this the first time?"

"Huh? First time for what?"

"Oh, come on. It was obvious. That was your first fight with Shirone, right? You seemed so flustered during the

argument.”

Amy quickly averted her eyes back to the dishes.

“We didn’t fight, and even if we did, it’s not the first... and it’s definitely not a lovers’ quarrel!”

The way Amy denied it in a layered, methodical manner made Tess laugh.

They say mages are sneaky and complex, but in this case, Tess found it kind of cute.

“Even so, you made sure to jot down everything carefully in the ingredient list. Oh-ho, looks like someone’s being considerate?”

Amy paused in washing and fell silent, contemplating. They were both girls, after all—there wasn’t much she couldn’t share. Eventually, cornered by Tess’s probing, she gave in and spoke from the heart.

“Sometimes... Shirone just seems to fade away a bit.”

“Oh, fade away? That’s very poetic.”

Amy chuckled at how odd it sounded, even to her.

“But it’s true. It’s like he becomes transparent, as if he could vanish at any moment. I think it’s because Shirone has a perspective that’s different from everyone else.”

“A different perspective? What, like eyes in the back of his head?”

“Maybe, in a way. Most people look at the world from their own point of view, right? But some people can broaden their view to include the perspectives of others. People call that an ‘empathetic person.’”

“Huh, then I’m definitely not one. I can never figure out what others are thinking.”

“Me neither, really. But Shirone’s different. He’s kind, considerate... but I think what really sets him apart is that other perspective.”

Tess smiled, her expression showing understanding.

“Ohhh, so the real issue is that he didn’t stand up for you with those punks, right? Isn’t that it?”

Amy scratched her cheek, looking a bit sheepish.

“Well... that’s part of it. If he were just someone who was annoyingly kind, I’d have brushed it off. But Shirone’s different—he sees things from a perspective unlike anyone else.”

“A different perspective? Is there another type of perspective beyond empathy?”

Amy pointed a finger toward the ceiling.

“An omniscient perspective.”

“Omniscient...?”

“Yes. When Shirone starts viewing the world that way, it’s like he fades away, becoming unlike anyone else—completely detached. It’s as if he’s looking at the world from such a high place that even his own existence is nothing more than a tiny point in that perspective.”

Amy could still vividly remember the moment Shirone had unlocked the Immortal Function to save the entire student body, without hesitation.

How could anyone do that? Giving one’s life for others is infinitely more challenging than choosing death out of personal pain.

“When Shirone fades like that... he loses the boundary between himself and others. He’s just one more person in the crowd. And when he looks down from that perspective, what guides him is probably... balance. If one side of the scale tips, Shirone would step onto the other side without a second thought, even if that side led to death.”

“Oh, come on, that’s impossible. Who could really be like that? That’s practically... enlightenment.”

“But it’s true. I know because I’ve experienced that balance firsthand. All of us at the magic academy owe our lives to him.”

Tess’s mouth hung open, unable to respond. A single student saving the entire student body? How much more could she learn about Shirone and still be surprised?

A hint of melancholy crossed Amy’s face.

"I had this thought when Shirone stopped me earlier... that maybe I was just one small point in his god-like perspective. Shirone's different from me, and different from anyone else. It's what makes him such an extraordinary mage, but it makes me feel a little distant, too."

Tess shook Amy's shoulder gently.

"Hey, don't think that way, Amy. Shirone really cares about you—that's why he asked you along, even knowing it was a couples' trip. You're not just some random person; you're Amy of House Carmis, no less."

Amy managed a smile at Tess's sincere encouragement. But that didn't change her thoughts.

For someone like Shirone, who could give up his own life with such detachment, what value did he truly place on others?

"Amy, just be honest with Shirone. Ask him, 'Why didn't you take my side?' Tell him you're frustrated, that it's keeping you up at night. Why not just say that?"

Amy gave a small, wry smile and shook her head.

"Shirone already knows. He didn't argue back because he agreed with me. Don't worry—it'll all work out soon. Like you said, it's just awkward because it's the first time."

Tess, straightforward as she was, couldn't understand. If feelings were hurt, wasn't it better to bring it up directly and get closure?

Yet Amy's response was that they both already understood each other, so there was no need to talk about it further.

"Sigh, I don't think I'll ever get how mages think."

Shirone and Rian arrived at the alley of general stores. Since the items on their respective lists were different, it seemed like they'd waste the whole evening wandering through the maze of shops if they stuck together.

Shirone thought it'd be better to split up.

"Let's split up here. After we buy everything, we can just head back to the villa."

“Sure, but are you sure you can carry everything by yourself? It might be heavy.”

Shirone shot Rian a perplexed look. Surely he could manage garlic, onions, and pepper on his own. Even though Rian had sworn a knight’s oath, he didn’t need to worry about Shirone carrying a shopping bag.

“Don’t worry! I can handle my part—just make sure you don’t get lost. Remember, this is a cooking competition, so the loser has to do the dishes.”

“Alright! Then I’ll make sure you and Amy end up washing them together. Better hope you lose if you want to make up with her!”

“Make up? We didn’t even fight.”

“Wait, you mean that wasn’t a fight at the port? Aren’t things just a little awkward right now?”

“Amy isn’t that petty. It was just a minor disagreement. It’s natural to have occasional clashes when exchanging opinions.”

“Haha! You’re such a fool—having a disagreement is what we call fighting.”

Shirone decided not to argue any further. He’d heard this from Rian in the past, but for some reason, being called a fool by him always made him feel a bit self-conscious.

“Anyway, enough of that. I’ll go pick up the vegetables first. See you back at the villa.”

“Then I’ll get the meat. See you soon!”

Shirone watched as Rian dashed off toward the butcher shop. Just seeing him run made Shirone imagine the sheer amount of meat he’d probably buy.

He checked the note Amy had given him. He couldn’t guess what she was planning to cook, but there wasn’t anything particularly difficult to find. However, since he had more items to pick up than Rian did, he needed to move quickly to finish in time.

Shirone spent about 30 minutes collecting most of the ingredients, sightseeing as he went. Since this was a resort

area, the shops were unique and fascinating, with many selling rare and exotic items.

Stalls with games attracted crowds, and street performances and parades appeared regularly. For a commercial district to focus so much on entertainment, there must have been a steady stream of tourists to sustain it.

As the streets bustled with people, Shirone marveled at the carefree laughter filling the warm southern sky.

‘Wow, there are so many fun shops. I’ll have to explore here tomorrow.’

With his shopping finished, Shirone started heading back to the villa.

Just then, the door of a nearby shop burst open, and a woman stumbled out, practically pushed to the ground.

“Kyaaa!”

“Kyaa?”

Shirone tilted his head at the strange cry but quickly approached her, snapping back to attention.

She looked to be in her mid-twenties, with short hair cut evenly across her forehead. Despite the cut, her lovely face kept her from looking silly.

“Why, why are you doing this to me? What did I even do wrong?”

The woman had gotten to her feet and clutched her arms across her chest. She wore a low-cut dress, much like a barmaid’s outfit.

Although she had thin eyebrows and sharp eyes, her expression looked soft and defenseless in front of the towering man.

“Keh-heh-heh, what’s wrong? I just want to have some fun.”

“I’m not that kind of woman!”

“Oh, come on. You wouldn’t dress like that at a resort if you didn’t want people to ask. Just come with me.”

The man harassing her was named Gamos, a wealthy figure notorious on Galliant Island.

He was immensely large, though it was mostly from fat rather than muscle, with a particularly pronounced belly. Money brought power, though, and Gamos had two hefty bodyguards standing on either side of him.

“Come along now, unless you really think you have a choice here.”

“Help me! Please, someone help!”

As Gamos grabbed the woman’s wrist and began to drag her away, no one stepped in to help.

Tourists typically wanted to avoid getting caught up in trouble far from home, and the locals feared Gamos’s influence too much to intervene.

Chapter 128: Galliant Island (5)

“Hey! Stop that!”

Shirone took a step forward, shouting out.

Gamos turned to him, surprised. Seeing a boy barely out of his teens holding shopping bags in both hands, he sneered at the audacity.

“What’s this? Where does a little brat like you get the nerve?”

“Let go of her. Everyone can see what you’re doing, and the guards will be here any second.”

“Pfft! Guards? Do you even know who I am?”

“Would it make any difference if I did? If you keep this up, I’ll go get the guards myself.”

“Hmph...”

As Gamos loosened his grip, the woman quickly slipped away and took refuge behind Shirone. Though he was just a young boy, in the midst of the crowd, he was the only one she could cling to for protection.

“Please... help me. That man was going to...”

Gamos frowned as he walked closer.

“Typical. Annoying little vermin. Listen up, kid—I’m a trader on Galliant Island. That woman tried to steal my goods, a fine porcelain piece, and she broke it.”

“Porcelain?”

Shirone blinked in surprise. If what the man said was true, then the woman behind him was guilty of theft.

So she’d tried to steal something and, as a consequence, was being asked to repay with more than just money. It was complicated; it wasn’t clear whose side to take.

“That’s right. And yeah, I asked for her to pay with her... services. But she did break it, so don’t you think I deserve compensation? Call the guards if you want—she’ll be the one getting hauled away.”

When Shirone turned to look at her, the woman glanced away, as if caught.

“Is what he’s saying true?”

“Yes, I’m sorry... but I needed that porcelain, I really did.”

“Haha! No one *needs* porcelain. If you needed anything, it’s money. I was just offering her a way to earn it. Get it now, kid? Don’t get mixed up with someone like her... unless you’re looking for a one-night adventure, of course. Am I right, folks?”

The onlookers burst into laughter, following Gamos’s lead. Though it wasn’t exactly funny, the awkward tension in the air burst all at once, allowing them to join in.

“Looks like you came here with friends, huh? Go back to your cooking or whatever. You try interfering in adults’ business, and this is what you get.”

The woman clung to Shirone’s arm, pleading.

“Please, don’t leave me! I don’t know what he’ll do if you go.”

“How about turning yourself in? If you explain to the guards, they’ll handle it.”

“I can’t! He has this whole island in his pocket! Please, believe me.”

“How much is the porcelain worth?”

“I’m not sure, but probably around 50 silver.”

Shirone thought for a moment. Paying 50 silver to help her wasn’t a big deal. But was it right to bail her out with money? He had no right to judge someone else’s guilt, and likewise, no right to pardon it.

Resolving himself, Shirone approached Gamos.

“I’ll pay for the porcelain on her behalf. So please, let her go.”

Gamos narrowed his eyes, surprised. Fifty silver wasn't much to a noble, but what was this boy's intent, standing up to him just to protect some woman?

"Ohh, so now I get it—you want her for yourself, huh? I suppose a little brat like you wouldn't get a beauty like her any other way."

Shirone's brows furrowed, annoyed by Gamos's vulgar assumption.

"I'm not doing this for that. Do you really think everyone thinks like you?"

"Then why are you getting involved? She's a thief, plain and simple. Hand her over, and that's that."

"Whatever she did, I'm not here to judge. I'm giving you this money because I believe that no one should pay a price beyond what they owe. So if you're thinking of doing anything more to her, take the money and be done."

The woman's eyes lit up, seeming to understand something.

Gamos, however, scoffed. All this over a lousy fifty silver?

"Here, fifty silver. Let her go."

Gamos stared down at the silver coins in Shirone's hand. Frankly, he was not pleased. He hadn't wanted to let the woman go, and Shirone's calm attitude only made it worse. To him, it seemed that this clueless boy was just another fool infatuated with a pretty face.

"Compensation's unnecessary. It's not like I'm short on money. But I'll agree, with one condition."

"A condition? What is it?"

"I get it, you're trying to play the part of the gallant hero. So then, you can apologize on her behalf. Bow your head to me in front of everyone here."

The crowd's attention turned to Shirone. It was rare to see someone willingly submit to such humiliation, but Shirone stepped forward without hesitation.

"Alright. If that will settle things, I'll apologize."

"Not just with words. Bow deeply and sincerely, as if you mean it."

Shirone bent forward, bowing low.

"On behalf of this woman, I apologize for her actions. Please forgive her."

"Hmm."

Gamos smirked, staring down at Shirone. Then he snickered and, without warning, took a step forward and swung an uppercut.

Instinctively, Shirone dodged back, and the giant man's fist whistled past his nose, ruffling the air.

"What... what was that?!"

Gamos chuckled, as if he'd expected it all along, and pointed at Shirone.

"See that, everyone? He dodged! He didn't mean his apology. If he'd really cared about her, he'd have stood there and taken the hit. But he was too scared. Get it now? The world's not so simple. If you're going to keep up this act, then prove me wrong."

The crowd started to murmur in agreement with Gamos. If Shirone had been serious about protecting her, he would have let himself get hit. But he'd dodged, so he must've been putting on a show.

Disapproving mutters spread through the crowd.

"Knew it. Acting all noble, but he's just another poser."

"Typical kids today, thinking they're heroes or something."

Shirone looked around, bewildered by the crowd's reaction.

"What's wrong with dodging?"

"Still don't get it, huh? Everyone here's disappointed in you. You act like some saint, but you're just a fraud!"

Shirone's expression twisted in frustration.

"Why does it even matter? Even if it was an act, isn't it better to pretend to do good than to actually do bad things like you?"

"W-What...?"

Gamos was taken aback, momentarily lost for words. Even those who had joined in mocking Shirone seemed surprised.

The woman standing back and observing the scene felt she'd confirmed her hunch.

'I knew it. This boy... he's a mage.'

Mages don't ask "who's right?" They ask "what's right?"

This boy wasn't justifying himself; he was acknowledging the truth and following it, the way a mage would.

The woman sneered at the bystanders, now ashamed of their pettiness.

'Look at them—didn't lift a finger to help but are quick to tear down someone who does. Pathetic.'

It was time to act. With everyone focused on Shirone and Gamos, her best chance was now.

Slowly moving along the wall, she reached the edge of the crowd, then slipped around the corner and out of sight.

Meanwhile, Gamos's face turned red with rage. This boy, who had frustrated him since the beginning, had now insulted him in front of all these people.

"Kid, I think you've messed with the wrong person."

Gamos's voice dropped, cold and menacing. Gone was any pretense of civility. Sensing the change, his guards drew their swords.

The threat of violence filled the air, and even without a single swing, the crowd shrank back, the steel in the guards' hands enough to conjure images of death.

"What are you waiting for? Beat him up!"

The guards moved in from both sides, looking ready to strike if necessary.

Just then, dust exploded in the face of one of the guards.

Another stone flew and struck the other guard square in the forehead.

Shirone turned to see where the rocks had come from and spotted the woman by the alleyway, holding a handful of stones.

She continued throwing them, forcing the guards back, then ran over and grabbed Shirone's wrist, pulling him into the alley.

“Come on! This way, hurry!”

“Uh... wait...”

Shirone had noticed her slip away earlier, but he hadn't let on, hoping she'd get away safely. Gamos was clearly the kind of person who would punish her far beyond what was deserved.

“So why did you come back?”

“Just run! You don't want to get involved with them!”

Together they ran through the maze-like alleys. Thanks to the woman's knowledge of the area, they soon disappeared from the guards' view.

Behind them, they could hear Gamos's furious voice.

“Get them! I'll teach them both a lesson they'll never forget!”

The warehouse was thick with the heat of violence. Falcoa's relentless kicks pounded into Jiese's side as he lay curled on the floor.

With each blow, he felt as if his heart might stop. Terror had him paralyzed—he couldn't even remember where he'd been hit, only aware of the pain and numbness sweeping through him.

“You piece of trash. Feels good to get what you deserve, huh? Oh, I'm sure you like it, so here's more!”

In the corner of the warehouse, Jiese's friends knelt, trembling. Their eyes were swollen from crying, yet the tears wouldn't stop.

“Please, just forgive us! We'll go out and make up for it! He's going to die if you keep this up!”

“Oh, really? Then maybe you'd like to take his place?”

The friends froze, their bodies stiff with fear. Falcoa's face, his one crooked eye glaring, looked demonic.

They knew he could kill Jiese without a second thought. Yet he never hit him in the face—something that only made Falcoa more terrifying.

Falcoa grabbed Jiese's hair and lifted him up with all his might. Even though his strength had been lost, Jiese jumped up.

Even though he hadn't been hit in the head, his pupils were dilated. It felt like as his brain was paralyzed just from the mental shock.

"S-Save me... I'm sorry..."

"Does it hurt? Huh? Answer me! It hurts, doesn't it?"

Falcoa slapped Jiese's cheeks repeatedly, not hard but just enough to make him twitch and jerk with each slap. Seeing this, his friends broke into fresh sobs.

'This crazy bastard... he really might kill him.'

With a snarl, Falcoa threw Jiese down on the ground. He didn't need a reason—he just felt the effect of the Loop drug he'd chewed on earlier starting to wear off.

"You say you gave back the 5 gold because your pride was hurt? Aren't you something. Real impressive, Jiese."

"I'm sorry! I'll never do it again!"

Jiese felt nothing but agony and humiliation. He wanted to fight back, but fear left him utterly helpless. Falcoa's madness made his own pride useless. All he could think was that if he could escape, he'd do anything.

Chapter 129: Galliant Island (6)

“Lost 5 gold coins, I did. Taking back something you gave is the worst thing in the world. That woman needs to pay damages.”

Falcoa lifted Jiese’s face. With his head pulled back so far that his spine could snap, Jiese couldn’t even breathe. If he bent back any further, his spine might actually break.

“Does it hurt? Oh, it should hurt. I’m super strong, you know.”

“Please... spare me.”

“Want me to stop the pain? Try chewing on this. Then you won’t feel anything at all.”

Despite his difficulty, Jiese turned his gaze. Falcoa held a tree root in his hand.

Growing up on the island, he knew it well. It was called Loop, a stimulant used by the natives. The drug was used for rituals, and its addictive qualities were incomparable to any other drug. Wasn’t there a theory that even Kergoin fell due to overuse of Loop?

“I’m begging you, please... not that.”

Jiese pleaded desperately. Once addicted to Loop, a person’s life was essentially over.

He would descend into a life of filth, and his only family, his younger sister, would eventually be driven out onto the streets.

Falcoa, as if expecting it, put the Loop he’d offered to Jiese into his own mouth.

So what if it was addictive? If you couldn’t live without Loop, then you could just use it for life.

“What a coward. This is the god’s stimulant. Anyway, what are you going to do now? You going to bring her?”

“What? Bring who?”

“The red-haired girl. She’s a fine piece. Could probably fetch a high price. Of course, we’d have to list her as second-hand, haha.”

Jiese was horrified. Kidnapping a noble, no less. Yet with Falcoa, high on Loop, such things were not beyond him.

‘He’s lost it. Completely insane.’

Falcoa was the field commander of the Freeman organization, the highest-ranking member that a lowly hanger-on like Jiese could hope to meet.

Though Jiese had never seen the boss, Freeman, himself, one of his decrees strictly prohibited human trafficking.

“But... doing something like that would get you expelled from the organization. There’s a code of conduct... Ahk!”

A boot with iron studs hit Jiese’s jaw, spinning his head. His mind reeled, and he couldn’t think of anything.

Falcoa grabbed Jiese’s head and lifted him. At the sound of Falcoa’s cold voice, Jiese’s focus returned.

“Or else what? Do I need to bring your little sister?”

“T-That’s...”

Jiese’s body trembled. Emotions he couldn’t even begin to define, a mix of rage and terror, bubbled within him.

His sister was precious beyond all else. He wanted her to remain untouched by this filthy world.

“Oh, didn’t I mention? I actually like your sister. Introduce her to me, won’t you?”

The rotten smell of Loop wafted from Falcoa’s mouth.

After running for 30 minutes, Shirone and the woman finally lost Gamos’s guards in the alleyways.

Their speed was impressive, as one would expect from trained individuals, but using blind spots in a game of psychological tag proved effective.

The two leaned against a wall to catch their breath. They had run so far their mouths tasted of blood, and their legs wobbled.

The woman glanced at the panting Shirone and chuckled.

“Haha, you have better stamina than I thought. I expected you to give up while running, looking so delicate.”

“If I gave up, we’d get caught. I’m exhausted. But... are you alright?”

“My name’s Marsha. I’m used to running away, so this is nothing. Let’s find somewhere to rest. I’m so thirsty, I need a beer. I’ll buy you one as thanks.”

Shirone was puzzled. Despite being on the run, Marsha showed no sign of tension.

And the fact that she wanted a beer meant she had money, so why had she resorted to theft?

“Oh, but I really should be going.”

“You won’t be able to walk around just yet. Let’s wait at a place I know. Gamos is ferocious but stupid; he’ll give up soon. After an hour, he’ll be so focused on partying he’ll forget all about us. And really... it’s just that I’m scared. Can’t you stay with me a little longer?”

Marsha stuck out her tongue and winked. Shirone, though not exactly charmed, eventually agreed. More than anything, if he were to get caught by Gamos, it would be a disaster.

“Alright. But I can’t stay too long. My friends are waiting.”

“Of course. Let’s wait only until his men give up. Follow me.”

Marsha led Shirone through winding alleyways to a secluded tavern. He wondered who would come all the way here to drink, but surprisingly, the place was packed.

“Hmm, some things never change, even after all these years.”

“You used to come here often? You mentioned knowing this tavern...”

“Yeah, I used to frequent it. It’s been three years since I’ve been back to the Galliant Island. I have a friend who lives

here.”

“Really? You knew the place so well, I thought you were a local.”

“Hehe, I never forget a path once I’ve been down it. Running is part of my life.”

As Marsha led Shirone to sit at the bar, a group of rough-looking men turned to stare. The sight of a beautiful woman with a young boy created an unusual contrast.

“They’re staring.”

“Ignore it. This is a tavern for the island’s misfits. Any news here reaches us first, so we’ll know when Gamos gives up the chase.”

“Isn’t that risky, though? His men could barge in here.”

“Gamos may rule the island, but he’s not reckless. This place... it’s like a resistance. Men with a shared fate, if you will.”

Shirone didn’t fully believe her. With so many people coming and going, keeping a lid on information seemed impossible.

“This couldn’t be done with just a system. It would require an agreement or code. But why? What could they stand to gain?”

As Shirone stared at her, Marsha gave a sheepish smile.

“Ah, you’re sharp. Yes, the tavern is in cahoots with the Galliant Island’s self-governing authority. Things that happen here are overlooked, even by officials.”

“So I was right. But why would the government allow such a thing?”

“Money. Money laundering, slush funds, lobbying money. It’s called the Island Gate. It’s a system unique to this isolated island. An agreement was made—criminals get safety in exchange for secretly funneling funds. A mutually beneficial arrangement. That’s just how the world works, haha!”

Marsha chewed on a twig in her mouth, her eyes curving into a gull-like smile tinged with sadness.

“Funny, isn’t it? They all talk about purging criminals, but in the end, it’s the criminals who fatten their coffers. Breaking

big money into digestible bits, like microorganisms for society. Life wouldn't survive without microorganisms."

Shirone couldn't respond. A social system defying human nature was too complex for an 18-year-old to grasp.

"Wow, I'm getting way too serious. Your name was Shirone, right? What brings you to the island?"

"I came with friends. We wanted to swim and explore the ruins."

"The Kergo Ruins? I went there years ago. Ah, I was young back then, and now I'm already twenty-seven. I might die an old maid at this rate. How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Oh! You're older than I thought. You look so young."

"You also look young for your age. Can I call you sister?"

"Of course. Everything starts with sister, you know. Later, if you become my lover, you can call me anything you want, haha!"

Shirone raised an eyebrow. For an 18-year-old boy, a 27-year-old woman was far out of reach.

Still, aside from that, Marsha was much more intelligent and rational than he had expected.

Their conversation was enjoyable, and as Shirone's guard eased, he opened up about what happened at the port. Marsha, seemingly having some inkling, nodded as she listened.

"Ah, one of those street hustlers got you. They're vicious, but 5 gold is too much."

"Yeah. In the end, I argued with a friend over it, and now I feel bad. He's probably waiting for me. I'm going to get scolded when I go back."

Marsha checked the time and asked the bartender.

"How's the situation with Gamos?"

When the bartender only polished a glass in response, Marsha slid a silver coin across the counter.

The bartender then responded as if nothing had happened.

“Last word, ten minutes ago, says his men have spread out along the main road. Looks like they’re blocking all the streets with around 40 men.”

“Ugh, still at it? That guy’s persistent.”

“Gamos’ alerts usually die down quickly. Guess he’s really lost it today.

Marsha looked back at Shirone with a grin. Shirone, however, couldn’t say anything. After all, he was the one who’d made Gamos blow his top in the first place.

Marsha returned to her original topic.

“Anyway, it’s best to avoid street hawkers as much as possible. They’re part of an organization. Once you’re entangled, it’s hard to get away.”

“I see. I honestly didn’t think of that.”

“Well, who would? It’s all supposed to be for fun, right? But there’s always danger hiding within tourists’ enjoyment.

This island is small and closed-off. With limited resources to go around, competition is fierce—worse than the mainland.”

Shirone took note. He planned to stay on the island for ten days, so he knew he’d encounter more hawkers in the days to come.

It was lucky he’d heard Marsha’s advice; otherwise, things could’ve turned bad if he’d treated them like he had today. Shirone suddenly looked over at Marsha.

From what he’d observed during their conversation, she was truly a good person. Kind, witty, and careful not to jump to conclusions about what others said.

Why would someone like her be involved in petty theft? She didn’t seem to be lacking money, given the way she casually tipped the bartender.

“Um, I hope it’s okay to ask, but I can’t help being curious.”

Marsha leaned back in her chair, gazing up at the ceiling.

“Heh, I was wondering when you’d ask. But Shirone, a woman’s measurements are something to imagine, not hear.”

"No! That's not it! I wanted to ask why you stole that porcelain?"

"Huh?"

"I don't think someone like you would be a petty thief. And you weren't really out of money, either. I just wondered why you'd steal something like porcelain when it wasn't even valuable..."

"Hmm."

Marsha rested her chin on her hand, thinking.

"I don't know. Maybe I just wanted to steal it?"

"What? Is that even possible?"

"It is. It's called kleptomania. Though I wasn't always like this. I was an orphan, you see. My parents abandoned me when I was four. A mercenary picked me up and raised me. He became my adoptive father."

The unexpected story struck Shirone, stirring him. Marsha, like him, had also been abandoned by her birth parents.

"But life was far from comfortable. The mercenary group was full of terrible people. When I was eleven, one particularly violent guy tried to hurt me. Thankfully, my adoptive father found out first and beat him up."

"Of course he did! Anyone would if their daughter was in that situation."

"Would they, though?"

"Huh?"

Marsha looked down at the bar with sad eyes. Her gaze seemed faintly misty.

"All I got each day was a piece of bread and a cup of water. My adoptive father gave me nothing else—no clothes, no snacks, no toys. He was essentially keeping me like livestock. That's when I started stealing from others. One day, I got caught stealing an apple, but he covered for me and paid the fine. But as soon as we got home, he changed and beat me until I passed out. Without saying a word."

"That's horrible! If he could pay the fine, why didn't he just buy it for you in the first place? And why didn't you just ask

him to buy it for you?"

"Because that's exactly what he wanted—submission. My only form of rebellion was stealing from him every day. Of course, whenever I got caught, he'd beat me mercilessly. It was a terrible life. Eventually, one day, I gave up everything and said something to him."

Marsha leaned her chin on her hand, recalling the memory.

"'You can kill me.'"

Chapter 130: Galliant Island (7)

Shirone felt his chest tighten. How badly must a child have been beaten to say something like that?

"After that day, those words became a kind of spell. Every time my adoptive father would hit me, I'd say, 'Go ahead, kill me.' And then, with an angry look, he would stop and leave the room. Heh, and I just kept living that way. When I was twelve, thirteen, all the way until I left home at seventeen."

"That's about the age I am now."

"Yes, the age when you start to open your eyes to the world. And one day, I finally realized the meaning behind everything my adoptive father had done to me. No, maybe I'd known it all along. That's probably why I never asked him for anything."

By now, Shirone could guess. Marsha's adoptive father had harbored some terrible, forbidden thoughts.

"The fool. If he wanted to, he should have just done it and ended it quickly. Then we wouldn't have been tangled up in this mess for seventeen long years. In the end, he was just a pitiful coward who couldn't bring himself to act. That's when I started carrying a knife. One day, I looked into my adoptive father's eyes while he was hitting me, and I couldn't bear it. So I just told him."

Marsha spoke in a restrained, calm tone.

"'If you want to, go ahead and hold me.'"

"...Did he?"

"Ha, strangely enough, there's no twist in this story. That man pounced on me as if he'd been waiting, and I stabbed him in the neck with the knife. Honestly, I didn't feel a thing.

After that, I left the house and wandered around the world, eventually ending up here.”

Shirone felt his heart clench. Hearing this kind of story directly from someone, rather than in a book or a rumor, filled him with a deep, unfamiliar anger.

“Um... I don’t really know what to say...”

“It’s okay! I’m doing fine now. My adoptive father is dead, but the kleptomania didn’t disappear so easily. It’s gotten me into trouble more than a few times. Ha.”

Marsha laughed brightly, and Shirone couldn’t help but feel uplifted. He admired her, someone who could still care about others despite everything she’d been through.

“If it’s a pain you can’t forget, sometimes embracing it is the best way. You’re doing your best to overcome it. I think the kleptomania will disappear soon, too.”

“Thanks for understanding. If you had any thoughts of trying something with me tonight, you definitely would’ve succeeded.”

“No! I really...!”

“I know, no need to blush like that. I wouldn’t mind having a younger brother like you.”

“I feel the same way. Actually, I even thought Marsha felt like a real older sister.”

“Hehe! Thanks for that.”

Shirone meant it. Watching the relationship between Rian and Reina had made him wish for siblings of his own.

If he had a sister, would it feel like this? Her words and actions somehow put his heart at ease.

Just then, the bartender returned from the back room.

While Shirone didn’t know the exact layout, he guessed that the room was where various information was collected.

“Alert for Gamos is lifted. Apparently, he found a woman he likes, so he’s heading back to his mansion to throw a party.”

“Phew, good thing it didn’t take too long,” Marsha said, glancing at Shirone with a teasing look.

"Oh? So you didn't like spending time with me that much? Just a little while ago, you were all, 'Marsha, please, be my big sister!' in that babyish voice."

"...I didn't say it like that."

Shirone felt the same way. As someone unfamiliar with women, it was the first time he'd spent so long in conversation without noticing the time pass.

But for the sake of those waiting at the villa, clutching their stomachs in hunger, he knew he had to leave.

"I should probably head back. Will I see you again?"

"Of course. Think I'd run away in the middle of the sea? Come by if you're bored. I'll be staying around here."

"Ha ha! Alright, see you."

As Shirone hurriedly left the bar, Marsha ordered a strong drink with a relaxed expression.

Just as she expected, two men who had been waiting for a chance approached her.

"Hey, hot stuff. Seems like I spent more than usual tonight—guess I'm a little drunk on you."

"Getting a room? This is no place for a woman to be alone. How about we join you?"

Marsha didn't even turn her head.

"Get lost. Before I kill you."

"What did you say? You got a big mouth. You want to see what happens?"

One of the men grabbed a bottle from the table, turning it upside down. The tense atmosphere made everyone in the bar turn to look.

As all eyes focused on her, Marsha let out a nearly inaudible sigh. Then, suddenly, she shifted her attitude, letting out a coquettish laugh.

"Hahaha! Alright, let's go to a room. But think you can handle it with just the two of you? Why not bring some friends, too?"

"What?"

“Go on, bring them. Ten? No, twenty—doesn’t matter to me. I hate it when things get interrupted in the middle of the fun.”

The men looked annoyed for no reason they could identify. But Marsha knew all too well. When male competition intensified, their natural weakness often revealed itself.

“Whatever, let’s get out of here. She’s crazy.”

“Ugh, what bad luck.”

As the men retreated, Marsha watched them go with disdain before turning back around.

The drink she ordered had already arrived. Taking it all in one gulp, she felt a surge of heat rise through her throat, clearing her mind.

“Phew, that’s what I call a drink. Bartender, another.”

Instead of pouring her another drink, the bartender approached to fill her glass directly.

“...Are you that Marsha?”

“Heh, is there another Marsha?”

“I heard the Magic Association has a bounty on you. You’ve done well avoiding them until now. Are you settling here?”

“No, I’ll be leaving soon. Just here to wrap up a few things.”

“I’d prefer it if you kept things quiet. If someone like you causes trouble, it’ll unsettle the island. We don’t want any broken pacts. If you promise cooperation, you can stay a while.”

“No thanks. I never intended to stay here long.”

The bartender polished a beer mug until it gleamed, then spoke indifferently after a long silence.

“The boy will be disappointed.”

“Hehe. That’s alright. Boys his age get their hearts broken every now and then.”

“I thought you liked him.”

“He was fun. Hah, to be honest, it was a little dangerous.”

Marsha hugged her shoulders, gazing up at the ceiling.

“How can someone be so repulsive?”

Priority (1)

The villa was eerily quiet, as if no one was there.

Amy sat on the sofa next to the fireplace, and Rian and Tess were so cautious of her mood that they couldn't even start a conversation.

Shirone still hadn't returned. It had already been two hours since he left to buy groceries. Unless he'd gone out to the sea to catch fish, he should have been back by now.

"Sh-Shirone is running late, huh?"

Tess, trying to break the icy atmosphere, was startled by her own voice, which sounded louder than usual.

Still, Amy remained motionless, staring into the darkness.

'This is like walking on thin ice.'

Tess shivered. Amy's mood was so intense, it felt like it was bringing a chill to the room.

Of course, as a fellow woman, Tess understood Amy's feelings well. It wasn't just about being on a couple's trip.

For both of them, this was an exciting first holiday.

'Shirone, that was too thoughtless of you. Even I'm disappointed this time. Hmph!'

As a fellow woman, Tess sided with Amy.

She knew how much Amy had conceded to Shirone. Despite the argument they had at the harbor, Amy had offered to cook for everyone. For women, that was a straightforward way to show the feeling of "I want to make up with you."

Yet, Shirone was an hour later than Rian. If he had gotten lost, it might be understandable, but Amy was hoping he'd be responsible even with something as trivial as this.

"Oh, I'm starving. What's taking him so long? Should I go look for him?"

Rian, obviously clutching his stomach, muttered aloud.

Considering he wasn't someone who ate at set times, waiting an extra hour was a long time for him.

"Forget it. You'd just end up missing each other."

"Really? Then can I have some of the potatoes I bought?"

Tess shot him a fierce glare.

"Don't you have any consideration for Amy?"

“What’s the big deal? Shirone had more to buy than I did. He could be running late, that’s all.”

Tess felt a pang of frustration. Although Shirone wasn’t her partner, she was already feeling in sync with Amy’s emotions and found herself resenting Rian too.

“Even if Shirone had more to buy, he’s smart enough that he should have been back by now. So, yeah, it’s serious! Go sit in the corner and munch on potatoes if you want.”

“Why are you so upset? What did I do?”

Rian scratched his head, seemingly unbothered by Tess’s scolding, though his obliviousness couldn’t exactly be called selfish.

Amy finally spoke up. Perhaps feeling guilty for dampening the mood, she forced a small smile.

“I’m sorry, it’s because of me. Why don’t you two go ahead and start cooking? I’ll eat with Shirone when he arrives.”

“But it was supposed to be a cooking competition.”

“But Rian’s hungry. Besides, it’s Shirone’s fault for being late. Let’s just say we lost.”

Tess, with a hint of a pout, tried to console her.

“It’s fine, Amy. I’m actually not hungry at all. We just need to figure out how to keep this guy from starving.”

Rian, in a corner, was already gnawing on a raw potato.

Though he couldn’t use advanced spells, he had the strength of someone who could. To maintain such raw power, his caloric needs were likely several times that of a normal person, which was kind of pitiful in its own way.

Unable to reach a conclusion, they sat in silence, while Amy lifted her legs onto the chair and rested her cheek on her knee.

‘Why hasn’t he come back? Did something really happen?’

Shirone wasn’t the type to break a promise, nor was he absent-minded enough to delay over simple mistakes.

There was probably a reason beyond his control.

But no matter how much she tried to calm herself, she couldn’t shake the feeling of disappointment.

'You're the one who invited me. Everyone else here is someone I'm meeting for the first time.'

She felt a pang of loneliness. Though she had grown close to Rian and Tess, they were connected as partners, sharing an unspoken bond. For Amy, there was no room to squeeze between them.

Knock, knock. Knock, knock.

Someone was knocking at the door. Tess's face brightened, and Rian clenched his fists, excited by the prospect of finally eating.

"Shirone? Just a moment...!"

Before Tess could finish speaking, Amy was already at the door, throwing it open in a fit of impatience.

"Hey! Where on earth have you been all this... huh?"

Amy blinked, standing at the open door.

It wasn't Shirone. Nor was it a stranger. But it was definitely someone who shouldn't be here.

Standing at the door was Jiese, the guy they'd argued with at the harbor.

"What's this? Why are you here?"

Jiese's face flushed red. Of all people, the one to open the door had to be this woman.

Remembering their confrontation earlier made him grind his teeth, but the sight of her now, dressed comfortably, stirred something in him again.

Steeling himself, Jiese took a bold look around the villa's interior. His gut, bruised from Falcoa's punch, ached, but his face showed no sign of pain.

"Wow, this place is nice. Nobles really do have it different, don't they?"

"I asked what you're doing here. How did you even know we were here?"

"I asked around. If someone like Jiese, the ruler of the harbor, sets his mind to something, this is nothing. Now you get it, right? Just how well I know this island?"

“And? Did you come here just to show off that impressive skill?”

Chapter 131: Priority (2)

“Ha-ha! No, really. Thinking it over, I realized I was wrong earlier. To be honest, I did overcharge you. Normally, I wouldn’t charge so much, but I got greedy. Give me a chance to redeem myself. I’ll show you a place that’s actually fun!”

Tess put her hands on her hips and said, “No thanks. I’m already in a foul mood. Amy, just send him away.”

“Goodbye, then.”

As Amy began to close the door, Jiese hastily stuck his hand in, looking desperate.

Though there was no set plan, he had honed his craft in situations like this, so he quickly blurted out, “W-Wait a second! If your friends don’t want to come, you could just come alone.”

“Why should I? This all sounds a bit fishy.”

“Alright! Fine! I’ll be honest. The truth is... I got in huge trouble.”

“By who?”

“There’s an association for street vendors, you know? My antics must have reached the higher-ups. So, they ordered me to show you around the island as an apology for my rudeness. They said that if word got out, tourists wouldn’t trust the vendors. Could you just stop by, even briefly? If you don’t, I might lose my entire livelihood. I might actually end up begging on the streets.”

“Hmm.”

Amy looked at him skeptically. Jiese, growing more anxious by the second, awaited her verdict.

“Fine, I’ll go get some air for a bit. I’ll change, so wait here.”

Jiese raised his head in excitement. He hadn’t expected her to agree so easily, though it was exactly what he’d hoped

for.

On the other hand, Tess was baffled. She hadn't expected Amy to fall for such a cheap ploy. Assuming Amy was upset due to Shirone's absence, she quickly followed Amy.

"Amy! Why are you even thinking about going with him? Can you really trust that guy?"

"It's fine. If it feels unsafe, I'll just come back."

"Don't do this. Think about it a little longer. What about Shirone?"

"Forget him. Let him do what he wants. Rian's hungry; how long are you going to keep him waiting? This actually works out. I'll eat out, so you can have a cozy evening with Rian." Having changed clothes and tidied her hair, Amy went down to the entrance. Tess tried to talk her out of it until the last minute, but Amy was resolute.

"Are you really sure you want to go? Then come back quickly, alright? Just get some fresh air and come back. If you're late, we'll come look for you."

"Yeah, yeah. Rian, I'm going out for a bit. If Shirone comes back, leave him starving."

Rian looked serious, as if he were reconsidering the whole situation. The usual hunger-driven expression was gone, replaced by a cautious look as he weighed his options. Was letting her go the right thing? If she was being dragged off, that'd be one thing, but if she wanted to go, it felt odd to stand in her way.

"Jiese, was it? Let's go."

"Huh? Oh, yeah!"

Jiese was awestruck. Since he had seen her descend the stairs in that chic black dress, he'd been utterly dazed. Once Amy left, the villa felt oddly empty. Tess sighed, shaking her head in frustration.

"How did things turn out like this? Just a bit ago, the atmosphere was great."

"Wouldn't it have been better if I'd gone with her?"

“Oh, you really don’t get women, do you? If someone else’s partner escorted her, how do you think Amy would feel? Besides, where on earth is Shirone?”

Rian moved to the window, watching as Amy boarded the carriage.

Stars gleamed brightly in the sky over the coast.

Jiese sat across from Amy in the carriage. Getting her inside felt like securing 80% of his plan.

“Well, well! Let’s get moving! Hey, let’s go!”

The coachman nodded and flicked the reins, and the two-headed horses surged forward, shaking the carriage.

Jiese kept talking non-stop. True to his local expertise, he even shared irrelevant tidbits, like how the vegetable vendor was having an affair with a widow—things no one wanted to know.

Amy remained silent, staring out the window at the night view. Lost in thought, she barely registered his chatter. Eventually, Jiese realized she wasn’t listening and fell silent. Honestly, just looking at her calm, serene face was the most satisfying part. Her expression now was so different from the anger she’d shown earlier.

Was Falcoa really planning to sell this beautiful girl? Initially, he had dismissed the idea, but now, watching her in the carriage, a chill of fear crept over him.

“It’s taking a while. Where are we going?”

Amy’s voice broke the silence, piercing straight to the heart of the matter. Jiese flinched, fumbling for an excuse.

“Well, um... it’s a bit far. But it’s the best spot in Galliant, really! You’ll see when we get there.”

“Really? The boss who set his sights on me told you to bring me there?”

Jiese’s heart skipped a beat.

Since when had she known? From the beginning, maybe? If she knew, why had she gotten in the carriage, and why hadn’t she said a word about it until now?

Jiese's face froze, mind blank as he struggled to think up a lie.

"It's, uh... well..."

"No need to lie. I can tell just by looking at you. You're trembling as you plead, so pretending I didn't notice would be ridiculous. Just do what you have to. I'll only go along with it this once."

"You're... going along with it?"

"Yes. I don't know what situation you're in, but after this is done, quit. I'm helping you because you're pathetic."

Jiese's face flushed red with embarrassment.

"What! You think I'm pathetic?"

"What, would you rather I admired you?"

"D-Damn...!"

Before he could burst out in anger, Amy asked, "You threw gold coins at me, didn't you?"

"Well... yeah..."

Jiese looked away, flinching. Just remembering it made him wince, especially because Falcoa had beaten him senseless over it. That experience left a scar that wouldn't heal anytime soon.

"People like you can't last long in this business. Anyone with so many things they want to protect will just be used and then tossed aside."

"Tch, what would you know? You're just a noble who grew up spoiled and sheltered."

"At least I know more than you. Once, I did stick around this kind of world for a while. Of course, I was in a much higher position than you."

Jiese bit his lip. It was true, after all. No matter how much he tried to boost his own pride, he couldn't meet her on equal footing.

"Are you pitying me?"

"Yes."

"I don't want your pity. Never."

"Then get out while you can. This might be your last chance."

Jiese lowered his head, defeated. She was right. Without her sympathy, he and his sister would be suffering now.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue, and Amy turned to the window. It felt like a cool sea breeze was blowing, gently lowering her eyelids.

"Guys like you... you're not all that bad."

"What?"

"The coins you threw at me. If you're a man, you should have at least that much grit. If you'd been just some regular thug, I wouldn't have gotten in this carriage."

Jiese's face turned beet red.

"Damn it. Are you trying to toy with me now? This is why I can't stand nobles. It's the same with Shirone—one minute mocking, the next, sympathizing. They're all so unpredictable."

Amy smiled slightly, resting her chin on her hand.

"Oh, Shirone? He's a commoner, actually. That's probably why he showed you compassion."

"What? A commoner? You mean, he's not a noble?"

Jiese's eyes widened. He thought it was a joke. Why would someone as beautiful as Amy be with a commoner if not for some noble connection?

"Yeah, a commoner. Why does it matter? Actually, I suppose it might."

"But wasn't he your partner? You looked like you were on a couples' trip."

"Yes, he's my partner. He's the one who brought me to this remote island and then vanished... my partner."

Amy gave a soft, melancholic smile, her expression bittersweet. Gazing into her wistful eyes, Jiese's mind grew clouded.

Had he misunderstood from the start? Maybe he should have just picked up the coins. Then, even if his pride had

been hurt, none of this would have happened.

'Damn it! This is insane. She's taking a risk out of pity for me? Does she even know the danger she's in?'

This girl was thinking way too lightly about the situation.

Falcoa was an enforcer for the Freeman Organization. And what was the Freeman Organization? They were Galliant's rulers, backed by elite forces.

When Jiese was young, the island's marketplace was controlled by several groups. Occasionally, they fought for power, but the balance was never broken.

Then, five years ago, when the Freeman Organization arrived, everything changed.

They expanded rapidly, disbanding the existing groups without resistance. In the end, an alliance tried to stand against them, but the Freeman Organization easily crushed it.

The war only took three months to end.

'It's not just Falcoa. All the thugs above me are scary. I'm taking this girl to that place right now.'

Jiese clenched his fist. He wanted to stop her, but his mouth wouldn't open.

She might be able to run away since she was a student at the magic school. But she wasn't his sister. If Falcoa wanted to, he could get rid of the younger sister of a street vendor without anyone noticing.

'I have to protect her. At least my sister... I have to!'

After parting ways with Marsha, Shirone arrived at the beach. His legs trembled from running without rest, but the real challenge lay ahead. Since the villa was halfway up the mountain, he'd have to climb.

"Phew, what's with my luck today? All I'm doing is running."

Since the sun had set, Rian and Tess were likely cooking by now.

If Amy was still waiting, he needed to deliver the bad news as quickly as possible. The bad news that he'd forgotten the

shopping bag.

‘Either way, I’m as good as dead.’

Gritting his teeth, Shirone sprinted up the slope. By the time he arrived at the villa, he was completely out of breath.

Shirone, nearly collapsing, staggered toward the entrance and knocked on the door while bending over.

“Rian, Amy, Tess. I’m here. Could you open the door? Agh!”

The door suddenly opened, and Shirone stumbled forward.

Their response had been much quicker than he’d expected.

“Shirone! Where on earth were you? Do you have any idea how long Amy’s been waiting?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I had a good reason. Let’s talk inside. My legs are shaking.”

There was no smell of food in the villa. Shirone, who had hoped they’d started eating without him, felt even more guilty.

“I made you all wait, didn’t I? But where’s Amy?”

Tess didn’t know how to explain. Should she say Amy got tired of waiting and went out? Or that she’d gone off with Jiese out of disappointment in Shirone?

“What’s wrong? You don’t look too happy. Did something happen?”

“Well... Ah, this is awkward.”

The reason Tess couldn’t speak was that she didn’t want to stir up unnecessary misunderstandings about the feelings between the two of them.

But Rian had already grasped the heart of the matter.

“She went out with that guy Jiese—the one we met at the port.”

“What? Jiese? The guy who overcharged us? Why would Amy go with him?”

“I don’t know. While she was waiting for you, he suddenly showed up. Said he wanted to make it up to her for what happened earlier. So, she went off with him in a carriage.”

“She went willingly? Without any reason?”

Tess chimed in.

“Yeah! This is all because you were late. Amy was feeling so lonely waiting by herself. Come on, tell us—what happened?”

Shirone delayed his answer. Now wasn't the time for explanations.

“Let's go find her. Do you know where they went?”

“Of course not. Why are you so anxious? If you're that worried, you should've done better in the first place.”

“She didn't leave because of me.”

“What are you talking about? You have no idea how upset Amy was!”

“Amy has a temper, but she's not impulsive. Even if she were angry at someone, she wouldn't do something to make them worry. If anything, she'd have waited to give me a piece of her mind.”

Tess's face went blank. Shirone knew Amy well, so he was probably right.

Besides, now that she thought about it, it made sense. Amy was quick to anger but had a gentle heart. She might appear prickly, but she was thoughtful and considerate.

“Well, still, what could possibly go wrong? He's just a tout, right? And isn't Amy one of the top students at the magic school?”

Chapter 132: Priority (3)

Of course, there was no doubt about Amy's skill. However, Shirone thought differently. Just 30 minutes earlier, he had heard from Marsha about how dangerous the island was. The touts at the port were part of a certain power structure. Particularly, the street touts were said to be the underlings of a powerful organization.

"Marsha told me to be careful of people like Jiese. Even if that weren't the case, the island is a closed and dangerous place. Here, things you can't even imagine on the mainland can be taken care of with ease. There are plenty of nobles who go missing on the island. We can't just assume Amy is safe."

Rian fastened a straight sword into a leather sheath.

"No need for long explanations. Let's go, Shirone. Lead the way, and I'll handle anyone who gets in our way."

"Thanks. It's actually my fault for being late."

"You must have had your reasons. For now, confirming Amy's safety comes first."

Tess watched the two boys. This was the kind of exchange shared by those bound by a knightly oath. Although they were only imitating it, it was an enviable sight for her, who dreamed of becoming a knight herself.

"Wait a moment. I'm coming too. It's not like you two are the only ones worried about Amy."

The three of them left the villa and headed down to the beach. But when they got there, they had no idea where to start searching.

Standing in front of the vast sandy beach, Tess's confidence wavered.

"Where do we even start looking for Amy? This time of day, the only place that Jiese guy might take her would be the

commercial district. Should we split up and head that way?"

"That doesn't sound like a good idea. The three of us can't search the entire commercial district anyway. Besides, we're not familiar with the area."

"Then what? We have no way of finding her! It'd be easier to find a needle in this beach."

Shirone propped his chin and pondered.

"Let's head to the port instead. Marsha said there's an organization. If that's true, we might be able to find out where Amy is by asking one of the members."

"The port? That's south, isn't it? Wouldn't it be quicker to search here rather than take the time to get to the port? Besides, Amy wouldn't be at the port—it's not even a tourist spot."

"No, going to the port is the right choice. If we break down Amy's situation simply, there are two possibilities. One, Amy is safe. Two, Amy is not safe. If she's safe, going to the port won't hurt. But if she's not safe, we must go to the port. The only way Amy wouldn't be safe is if there's a conflict with Jiese's organization. So, regardless of the situation, we need to head to the port and make contact with the members."

"R-Right. That makes sense."

Tess, as if hypnotized, nodded. It was the first time someone's reasoning had seemed faster than her own thoughts.

Rian didn't think twice. The moment Shirone suggested going to the port, he was already arranging for a carriage. After paying the driver, Rian motioned for Shirone and Tess to get on. They ran over and threw themselves into the carriage as it took off at a gallop.

The coachman, letting out a hearty laugh, picked up the pace.

"Ah, youth! Something urgent happening at this hour?"

"Yes. Please go as fast as you can!"

"Got it! Let's see if my horses still have it in them! Yah!"

Since it was nighttime, the road was mostly clear. Fueled by the promise of a gold coin, the coachman drove the carriage at breakneck speed.

In just 20 minutes, they arrived at the port, with the coachman boasting it was his best time in five years.

The three of them hurried toward the docks.

Most of the ships were docked, with light shining through the windows, suggesting sailors were likely playing cards inside.

Though they were suspicious of the ships anchored nearby, it was too late to go searching every nook and cranny.

Shirone focused on searching the port's taverns. Most of the people there looked like members of the organization, but many of them were simply sailors.

"What should we do? Can we really find her like this?"

"We'll find her. At least one person here must know something."

With persistence, Shirone questioned people in the taverns. Finally, in a small pub, they found a lead.

At first, Shirone didn't recognize them because of their swollen eyes, but he soon realized the people drinking were indeed the touts who had been with Jiese earlier in the day.

"Over there, those two! They were with Jiese, weren't they?"

"Alright. Leave this to me."

Rian cracked his knuckles and walked over. He knew that in situations like this, appearances spoke louder than skill.

"Hey, you two remember me?"

"What's this? You picking a fight? We're not in the mood right now... Huh!"

The boy, slurring his words from drink, froze as he recognized Rian and scrambled to his feet.

Rian's build was intimidating enough, but the real reason for the boy's fear lay elsewhere. He knew exactly what Jiese had been up to, restrained by Falcoa.

"Uh, um... So, you see..."

"I know all about it. Let's go somewhere quiet and talk. I tend to get violent around crowds but gentle in solitude. What'll it be?"

The tout glanced nervously at his friend. In the brief exchange of looks, both boys bolted for the door without saying a word.

"Damn it! Run!"

They ran desperately, but no matter how they sprinted, the door didn't seem to get any closer.

'What... what's going on? Is this a dream?'

Only after the tension of escape left them did they realize their feet were suspended in the air.

"I'm giving you one last chance. Are you coming quietly, or shall I plant you both in the ground here and now?"

Rian held each boy in one hand, stretching out his arms to emphasize his strength.

The boys panicked. Holding two grown boys like that was not just strength; it was almost monstrous.

"We'll go! Just don't use your strength, please."

Things went smoothly from there. Rian took the touts to the breakwater, where they were able to get a rough understanding of the situation.

"So, this guy named Falcoa ordered you to bring Amy to him?"

"Yes. Jiese got beaten up badly. We almost died ourselves. You don't want to mess with Falcoa—he's completely insane."

"That's not a problem. No one has ever stayed crazy after meeting my fist. Now, where did he take Amy? You know the place, right?"

"I swear, we don't know exactly! Please believe us!"

"Really? Then maybe your friend knows. Looks like one of you has chosen survival for the other."

The two boys looked at each other in terror. Honestly, they didn't have the mental toughness to endure torture. But Rian was intimidating them solely with words, thanks to the

interrogation techniques he'd learned at swordsmanship school.

"We really don't know. But we can make a guess."

Shirone and Tess stepped closer. Rian stopped pretending to be an investigator and shook the collar of one of the touts.

"Where is it? Tell us now!"

"Th-The Palace."

"The Palace? What nonsense is that?"

"It's the name of a tavern. The biggest one in Galliant! You can get there in any carriage! Just, please, don't let them know we told you! We'll be dead if you do!"

Without a word, Rian turned away. Shirone and Tess were already prepared to start running.

As they left the port, they spotted a carriage waiting.

Coincidentally, it was the same one that had brought them here.

"Driver! Sir!"

The coachman, sitting in the cargo area with a pipe in his mouth, turned around. The guests who'd enjoyed a thrilling ride with him earlier were now running toward him.

"Well, done sightseeing already? Fast runners, fast sightseers too, huh? Hahaha!"

"Sir, we need to go now! It's urgent!"

"Of course, it's urgent. Youth is always in a hurry! Get on in!"

With fiery enthusiasm, the coachman jumped down from the cargo area.

He got the horses moving first, then turned around and shouted over the sound of the wind.

"So, where to this time?"

Simultaneously, Shirone, Rian, and Tess shouted:

"The Palace!"

The Royal Palace Tavern.

A tavern so grand that the name *Royal Palace* on the sign seemed fully justified; it was the island's most dazzling

place.

The four-story building was a lavish display of wasted wealth. Adorned with glittering treasures of gold and silver and illuminated by magical crystal lamps that commoners could only dream of seeing, the tavern radiated opulence. Shirone and his companions were overwhelmed by the building's wealth. It felt like they had arrived at a place where they did not belong.

As Shirone approached the entrance, a guard stationed at the door stepped in his way, as expected.

"Hey, you can't bring weapons in here...!"

Without listening to a word, Rian pushed the guard's neck aside. Though the guard was about the same size as Rian, he was no match for his strength.

By the time the guard, gasping for air, regained his senses, Shirone and the others had already entered.

Inside, the tavern buzzed with voices. Nearly naked women roamed around dancing, obscenities and insults flew through the air, and filthy jokes crossed the room.

Tess grimaced. While Galliant might appear to be a peaceful resort on the surface, it became a whirlpool of raw desires after dark.

"Is Amy really here? There are so many people, and what's with these women? Aren't they embarrassed?"

"Yeah, definitely not the type of place Amy would like. But given that she willingly followed them, she might have accepted the situation. And be careful. No matter what happens here, security won't intervene."

Having heard about the island's situation from Marsha, Shirone was certain: this place was likely one of the locations where shady deals with the government occurred, albeit for different purposes.

When they couldn't find Amy on the first floor, they headed up to the second, where a fierce gambling scene was in progress.

On the third floor, rooms lined the cross-shaped hallway, each door reinforced with metal, and the fourth floor housed VIP rooms for high-ranking nobles.

Having searched every floor, Rian sighed in frustration.

“It’ll be tough to find her this way. She’s not in the main hall or the gambling area. We’d have to check each room on the third floor, and the fourth floor is swarming with guards.”

It was time to make a decision. They could either politely request to search every room or cause a scene to get the job done.

The three had no intentions of playing it safe. Knowing that Amy had been taken through malicious means, they didn’t plan on leaving quietly.

“There they are! Those brats!”

The guard who had been shoved aside at the entrance pointed them out. A man rolled up his sleeves and approached them.

Rian had to tilt his head back to meet the man’s eyes—a giant of a man who almost brushed the ceiling.

“So, they hired a fixer?”

Dodgy places like this typically screened their clientele.

While guards usually stopped most troublemakers, some stubborn ones still forced their way in, and it was the fixer’s job to deal with them.

“What’s this? Just some snot-nosed kids? Well, now, this girl isn’t just any kid, is she?”

The fixer flared his nostrils, looking Tess over. From his elevated perspective, he could see more of Tess than most, and her mature features didn’t escape his notice.

“Heh heh, you look like the perfect kind of guest for this place. Let’s have a look—I’ll give you a personal evaluation.”

The fixer reached out a hand toward Tess. With just his open palm, it felt like he cast a net right before her eyes.

Tess, unfazed, grabbed his middle finger and twisted it upward with all her strength.

“Aaagh!”

The huge man’s body contorted in a comically awkward way. His arm was fully extended, with his middle finger bent so far back it touched the back of his hand.

“It hurts! Stop!”

“Hmph! You should’ve been more careful. Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I’m weaker than your finger strength. If you act up just because of your size, this is what happens.”

“Ahh! You little...!”

Unable to bear the pain, the fixer swung his other fist at her. But Tess, as quick as lightning, released his finger and spun, swinging her elbow in a sharp jab.

Her swift strike landed perfectly on the man’s chin. The timing was so flawless it almost felt like he’d walked right into her hit.

The fixer’s brain rattled, and he lost consciousness. As Tess stepped aside, his massive body collapsed to the ground with a thunderous crash like a falling tree.

Chapter 133: Priority (4)

“Th-This can’t be...!”

The guard was stunned. He had never expected the largest, most feared fixer on Galliant Island to be taken down with a single blow from a woman.

Rian looked at Tess, who was brushing off her hands, and shook his head. With her around, what chance was there for a man to shine?

Elzaine swordsmanship was famous for its precise strikes. Trained to hit vital points in any situation, Tess’s skill rendered differences in size or strength meaningless in an instant.

“Reaching his chin with such minimal movement—it’s impossible without murderous focus. He should consider himself lucky. If Tess had drawn her sword, he’d already be dead.”

Shirone stared blankly at the immobilized fixer. Was this the power of a swordsman on par with a mage?

If Rian’s strength was raw power, then Tess’s strike was like watching a perfectly crafted work of art.

“Wow, that was amazing, Tess.”

“Hehe! You thought so? I knew Shirone had an eye for these things—unlike someone else here.”

Rian, ignoring the banter, approached the guard.

The guard was trembling with fear. When Rian grabbed him by the neck and lifted him, he made a final attempt at defiance.

“Damn it! Do you even know where you are?”

“If we didn’t, we wouldn’t have come. Does this look like a game of hide-and-seek? Where’s Amy right now?”

“Damn it! Who’s Amy? How should I know?”

“Want me to stop your heart instead of killing you?”

“Hell, I really don’t know! If you’re so desperate, find her yourself!”

“This punk!”

Rian’s anger flared. Already on edge, his patience was wearing thin. If they had time to search everywhere, they wouldn’t be doing this.

He was about to intimidate the guard further when Shirone approached.

“Rian, let it go. What’s the point of asking someone who doesn’t know?”

“Then what do we do? Are we really going to search room by room?”

“No, we just need to ask him about something he *does* know.”

“Something he knows? Like what?”

The guard flinched when Shirone looked at him.

It was a different kind of anger from Rian’s—a cold rage that sent chills down his spine and made his bones feel frozen.

“Ask him where Falcoa is.”

The Royal Palace Tavern, Basement Level 1.

Those in the know called this place The Temple. Not because any gods resided there, of course, though people sometimes claimed to see gods—thanks to the hallucinatory effects of Loop.

The fourth-floor VIP rooms were just for tourists who’d heard the rumors, while the real action was all underground.

The Temple was a space for the drug trade and the unrestrained use of Loop, a stimulant. It was, in essence, a haven for those lost to hedonistic excess.

The Temple was divided into 17 sections, covering an area 1.5 times the size of the first floor.

It was always packed, but Room 4 remained off-limits to guests as it belonged to Falcoa, the chief enforcer of the Freeman organization and owner of the Royal Palace.

“So, I asked him, ‘Do you want to be buried alive, or die first and then get buried?’ Want to know what he said?”

“Haha, what did he say, Boss? What did he say?”

Falcoa mimicked a desperate plea.

“Please—please spare me!”

“Ahahaha! You’re killing me! Please, spare me!”

“Hahaha! I’m laughing so hard it hurts! Please, spare me!”

Falcoa’s men pounded on the tables, howling with laughter, though Jiese couldn’t understand any of it.

‘Crazy bastards. What’s so funny about this? They’re all out of their minds.’

“Oh, honey. Why aren’t you drinking?”

Without even glancing at his partner, Jiese shook his head. If he drank here, he feared he might never see the sunrise again.

Jiese sneaked a glance over at Falcoa’s partner. Sitting beside him was Amy, whom he’d brought here himself.

Naturally, she didn’t understand Falcoa’s humor either, and she stared forward with a detached expression.

‘Amazing. She’s not showing a single hint of fear, even though I’m terrified.’

Any ordinary girl, especially a young one, would typically be trembling in such a situation, surrounded by these hardened criminals. Yet there was not a trace of tension on Amy’s face.

‘Sigh. So noisy. This is so dull. I want to go back.’

Amy sipped from the glass in front of her. As a noble, she’d learned proper drinking etiquette, though she wasn’t fond of alcohol and usually avoided it altogether. Even after a few sips, she’d barely touched the bottom of the bottle.

Yet, being alcohol, it had made her feel a bit floaty, stirring some introspective thoughts.

‘What am I even doing here?’

Sure, she’d come along out of pity for Jiese. But now that she thought about it, maybe that wasn’t the only reason.

‘By now, he must have come back.’

Why was Shirone so late? Maybe he'd gotten caught up in yet another pointless commotion.

With the way Shirone looked at the world, wasn't there always someone in need?

'Heh, did I just want to imitate him, maybe?'

When she thought about it, her own reasons for being here weren't much different.

All she'd heard was the screams of the brat at the harbor—a brat who, while not completely hopeless, was crying out for mercy.

The atmosphere at the table grew rowdier, and Amy grew even more irritated. If they tried to force her into anything, she'd simply handle it with her skills and leave. But contrary to her expectations, Falcoa had been nothing but polite.

'What is he thinking? Should I make the first move?'

While Amy pondered this, Falcoa glanced over at her with a sinister smile.

'I can practically hear her wheels turning.'

Amy was clearly a high-ranking noble. She exuded the unique nobility that couldn't be masked by appearances alone.

But Falcoa remained confident. He held the ultimate weapon against even the noblest of nobles.

No, with it, he could make even a king kneel before him.

It was Loop.

Even now, countless high-ranking nobles in the Temple were slaves to Loop.

Once he started introducing it to her, bit by bit, she'd be powerless to resist, no matter how prideful.

"Alright, everyone, cheers! A toast!"

At that moment, they heard a loud crash from beyond the partition. It was followed by the shouts of the staff.

"You—what do you think you're doing? Urgh!"

"Hey! Stop them! That's the boss's room!"

The door burst open, and three people entered.

Seeing the intruders' faces, Jiese jumped up as if he'd seen a ghost. It was Amy's friends from the harbor.

Falcoa's face twisted in anger. He could overlook troublesome guests as long as they paid extra, but for his precious Temple to be invaded—it was a matter of pride.

"What's going on? What's the meaning of this?"

Falcoa spoke in a humorless tone, and his direct subordinates immediately stood up, causing the women nearby, who knew the nature of these men, to quietly slip away from their seats.

"Shirone? How did you know to come here?"

Amy asked, her eyes wide.

But Shirone delayed his answer. A piercing sensation crawled up his spine. The man sitting arrogantly in the seat of honor, legs crossed, must be Falcoa. He didn't look monstrous, but something about him felt distinctly abnormal.

'He's strong... this man...'

Revealing an intent to kill was simple. Anyone who seriously meant to kill could intimidate an average person. But emitting such subtle and pervasive malice was no easy feat—it was a skill only professional killers could possess.

'Amy...'

Why was she sitting beside a man like that?

In front of her was not a teacup but a glass of alcohol. The floor was filthy, and the smell was foul. Nothing from her room could be found here.

So... it wasn't by her own will that she was in this place.

"Let's go, Amy."

Amy felt a surge of frustration. After all this time, he only said, "Let's go, Amy." What was with this confident attitude after making her wait so long?

She grew angry at herself for feeling relieved to see Shirone. From what vantage point was he seeing her now? Was it from a human's perspective or somewhere high above?

This wasn't what she wanted. For that reason, she didn't want Shirone's help either. If she put her mind to it, she could walk out of here at any time.

"H-Hey! Do you even know where you are?"

The tavern's employees came rushing in but stopped short, unable to enter Falcoa's ominous room.

Shirone was bewildered. The boss was so fearsome that even his own subordinates feared him. Just how deep and dense was this man's evil?

Falcoa lowered his voice as if irritated.

"Who are you people? Do you know what happens when you enter my room without permission?"

"We've come to take Amy. Let her go."

"Heh. Listening to you, someone might think she's been kidnapped. Even nobles need to watch their step here, especially in a place like this."

Shirone realized he was right. This place was a lawless zone protected by the island's government.

"What are you waiting for? Get these brats out of here."

"Where shall we send them, boss?"

Falcoa let out a sigh.

"Send them to hell."

The direct subordinates in room 4 stretched and approached. These were in a different league than the employees they had passed earlier.

Tess, readying her stance, called out, "Shirone, be careful. They're all Schema users."

Shirone's eyes glinted. If Tess, with her sharp perception, was saying so, it was likely true.

Most students at the swordsmanship school could open their Schemas. But for a gang of thugs on an island to all be Schema users was highly unusual.

'Who is this guy? How does a mere tavern boss have men of this caliber under his command?'

Shirone stared straight at the approaching subordinates. In that moment, an overwhelming feeling struck his heart.

“Ugh!”

“Shirone, be careful! It’s Pressure!”

Among the many abilities related to the ‘eye technique’ in Schema knowledge, Pressure was one of the most popular skills. It was effective in real combat, and once one knew how to project emotions outward, it was relatively easy to master.

But Shirone wasn’t flustered. As the hostility crushed down on him, he realized this was the same technique that Adell, the butler of the House Carmis, had used against him.

Yet, there was a stark difference in quality. While Adell’s Pressing aimed to simply overwhelm his opponent, these men’s Pressing had only one intent: to take his life.

Rian gripped the handle of his straight sword and took a step forward.

“You dare—!”

“Rian! Wait!”

Shirone shouted, surprising Falcoa’s subordinates, who raised their eyebrows in disbelief. It was a Pressure with the killing intent of ten men. Under normal circumstances, his heart should have stopped by now, let alone for him to speak.

But Shirone still stood, even with a faint smile on his lips.

Amy was the only one who understood the situation.

‘Vajrapani. In a sense, it’s on par with my Crimson Eye.’

Pressure wouldn’t faze Shirone. Or maybe it could—but not at the level of these men.

Shirone took a step forward. The subordinates stepped back in unison, as if an unseen force was pushing them away.

Of course, it wasn’t easy for Shirone to withstand their pressure. These were ten seasoned veterans, all pressing their killing intent onto him.

Though it was impossible to quantify the value of emotions, it felt as though his hands and feet were bound to the ground, waiting for a distant carriage to bear down on him.

More precisely, it was like the moment when that carriage finally reached him, its massive wheels filling his vision in a paralyzing flash of fear.

In reality, fear of death would limit this sensation to 0.1 seconds, but Shirone was feeling this same terror for over twenty seconds.

Chapter 134: Priority (5)

It was, simply put, an intensity of emotion that couldn't exist in reality. Even if Shirone's nerves were shaken by just 1%, his heart might stop from the shock to his nervous system. But Amy wasn't worried. After all, the reason Shirone could be called Vajrapani was because not even that 1% would waver.

At last, Shirone pushed his way through his subordinates to the table. Falcoa watched him and twisted his face in fury.

"What are you standing around for? Slit his throat right now!"

The subordinates unsheathed their long swords in unison and rushed forward.

"Damn it! Now I've been pushed to the point of drawing a sword against a kid!"

At that moment, a flash of light exploded from Shirone's body. The blinding light in the enclosed space blinded the subordinates.

"Ugh! What the hell?"

Those who had trained their sight recovered their vision beyond human limits in no time. But they didn't move. Neither the subordinates nor Falcoa could do anything but stare blankly at Shirone.

"What is this? What do you think you'll accomplish with some light?"

Shirone flipped his palm, forming an orb of light. Golden particles condensed at an incredible speed, fading to a pale, spectral hue.

"Shirone, don't tell me..."

Faced with the violent pressure of particles trembling at an immeasurable frequency, Amy finally realized.

The magic that accelerates mass to nearly the speed of light to generate a shockwave—the Photon Cannon.

“Shirone! That’s...!”

Dodging a Photon Cannon in a confined space was nearly impossible. Someone would be hit directly, and if that happened, casualties were inevitable.

Before Amy could finish her sentence, Shirone lifted the white orb and, with all his might, slammed it into the ground.

The moment the flash hit, thunder seemed to erupt, and a tremendous roar spread out, shaking the room.

“Ugh! Wh-What is this!”

Everyone in the room covered their ears. The shockwave spread along the floor, causing the underground structure to tremble, with clouds of dust cascading from the ceiling.

The subordinates looked dazed, as if they had barely survived a natural disaster. The deafening echo lingered in their ears, trapped in the underground space.

It took a while before they looked back at the place Shirone’s magic had hit. Surprisingly, the floor wasn’t deeply dented. But the flattened area was over four meters in diameter.

“What the... isn’t this place... underground?”

Even seeing it with their own eyes, the subordinates couldn’t believe it.

This was a sanctuary, supposedly the most fortified structure in Galliant. To create an underground space here required a design that prioritized durability. Thick steel plates lined the floor of the sanctuary.

For those plates to have been crushed like this made it understandable why the whole underground had shaken. Simply put, it was not a force that a human could withstand. Though veterans, the subordinates didn’t break down in fear. But they instinctively kept a greater distance, wary of Shirone.

Falcoa’s face twisted with rage again as he watched.

It was one thing for Shirone to overcome the strength of ten men, but this magic was of a type that even he, with all his experience on the battlefield, had never seen before.

“Who... are you, really? Which faction are you from?”

The great network of mages spanning the continent was known as the faction. But Shirone didn't know the terms commonly used in the magic society. He only boldly declared his affiliation.

“I am Shirone of the Alpheas Magic Academy.”

Jiese turned abruptly to Shirone in shock. For nobles, lineage was like a golden chain but could also become shackles in certain situations.

He knew Shirone couldn't be unaware of the harsh treatment he'd faced at the port. So why was he revealing his background now?

“A student? Are you joking? So you're causing trouble as just a mere student? Hey, do you understand? If I report this to the academy, you're finished. You'll probably be expelled.”

“Report me if you want.”

Falcoa's eyebrows twitched at the unexpected response.

“Disciplinary action or expulsion doesn't matter to me. That kind of thing won't control my life. Of course, the academy is important to me. But there are things in this world even more important than that. And Amy...”

Shirone continued, glaring at Falcoa.

“She takes priority in every thing I have.”

Amy blinked. The increasing frequency of her blinks seemed to reflect her heart rate.

“I'm fine with any disciplinary action. Report me if you want. But Amy won't stay here for even one more second. If you drag my friend into a filthy place like this again, I'll destroy it for good.”

With a soft scraping sound, Rian drew his longsword, the blade cutting through the air with an intimidating presence.

“That's right, Shirone. I knew my judgment was right.”

Rian now understood why he had hesitated to draw his sword until now. A minor obstacle like disciplinary action had disturbed his resolve, cracking his foundation like a small fissure collapsing an iceberg.

"You're right, Shirone. Would I let my friend be put at risk because I was scared of disciplinary action? That's a joke. I, Ogent Rian, have never lived that way for a moment."

Following Rian's lead, Tess drew her rapier.

"Haha! I'm with you! No way am I leaving Alpheas' mascot like Amy in this den of thugs!"

Rian looked at Tess in exasperation.

"Since when are we part of 'Shirone's faction'?"

"Oh, just let it go this once. Can't you read the mood?"

Tess then looked at Amy. Though still deep in thought, her cheeks were flushed.

A gentle smile crept onto Tess's face.

'I'm happy for you, Amy.'

As a woman herself, Tess could imagine how Amy felt.

To Shirone, Amy was not some small dot he looked down on from an omniscient perspective. She was an irreplaceable friend. Perhaps, she was even more than that.

Shirone, who had brushed off the subordinates with sheer force, walked over to Amy. Extending his hand, he repeated his original words.

"Let's go home, Amy."

Amy, her thoughts complete, looked up and spoke.

"...Yes."

As Amy stood up, Falcoa's face flushed red with anger.

These young bloods had made a ruckus and were now leaving as they pleased.

'Has the great Falcoa really fallen this low?'

It had been almost five years since he and his organization had hidden on this island, evading the continent's pursuers. He had been through many things, but everything felt tiresome to him now.

As a result, his brain was clouded by drugs, and his mind, once focused solely on blood, had grown dull. Yet five years ago, Falcoa had been one to strike down anyone who stood in his way, crossing the continent in a blood-soaked path. Back then, he existed only to kill. Even the boss couldn't ignore Falcoa's prowess, which was why he hadn't been expelled all this time.

"Hey, you don't actually think you're getting out of here unscathed, do you?"

Amy stopped in her tracks and looked back at Falcoa.

"If you make a scene here, you'll have problems too. The patrons in this basement are drug addicts, and they're probably your top source of income. Report us if you want. But don't think we'll just sit back and take it. This place will likely get shut down."

"So you were relying on that? I'm sorry, but on this island, no one can touch me."

"But it's a different story on the mainland."

Falcoa narrowed his eyes, staring at Amy, whose gaze was blazing red.

"Crimson Eyes. House Carmis, eh?"

Even Falcoa knew of the famous House Carmis on the continent—their ability to store a momentary state and restore it at any time.

They were immune to any form of addiction or substance. The House Carmis was rightly known as the unbreakable mind.

"Was she out of reach from the beginning? That woman came here knowing everything."

Falcoa gritted his teeth with a blank expression.

The House Carmis ranked at the very top among the nobility, so if she pulled any strings, the fortress he had spent five years building could come crashing down.

The money he earned from distributing Loop root was immense. Even in his haze, Falcoa was sensitive to money—without it, he couldn't buy more of the drug.

“Heh heh! You arrogant little brat. I’ll make sure you pay for this humiliation!”

“Go ahead and try. But be careful the next time we meet. Now that things have come to this, I’m not going to hold back and worry about the academy rules anymore.”

Having made herself clear, Amy returned to Shirone and the others.

“Sorry to have worried you. Let’s go.”

They didn’t want to linger here a moment longer and quickly headed to the surface. Staff were stationed at every corner, but none of them dared to stop them.

The air felt noticeably different as they exited the tavern.

Tess stretched out her arms and inhaled the night air.

“Ahh, feels good. Thanks to Amy, we got a full tour. We went from the basement to the top of the most famous place on Galliant Island.”

“Haha! That’s true! And we also went to the beach, the harbor, and even the shopping district, so I guess we saw everything but the historical sites.”

Hearing Rian’s words, Amy was startled.

“What? You guys went all the way to the harbor?”

“Yeah. Shirone thought it’d be faster to get answers by questioning one of their people. We rushed over. If it weren’t for the coachman’s high spirit, we wouldn’t have made it on time.”

Amy glanced at Shirone. When their eyes met, she quickly looked away. She still didn’t have the courage to look him in the face.

Shirone’s words in the basement echoed in her mind. He was just talking about the value of friendship, nothing more—but that was enough.

Why hadn’t she realized it before? When she’d been falling off that cliff, Shirone had been the only one to call her name and reach out his hand.

Realizing what that meant was enough for her.

“Amy, sorry I’m late. I’ll explain everything when we get back. There were some... unique circumstances.”

“Hmph, not that I care! Why would I want to hear about that?”

“You’re still mad?”

Her anger had already subsided. But Amy thought it was probably better to keep acting angry.

“Just to be clear, you’re not getting any weird ideas about what happened today, are you? Like, thinking of yourself as some prince on a white horse rescuing a princess, or something?”

“Huh? Not at all.”

“I’m grateful you came to help, but I wasn’t *captured*—I went with them for my own reasons. Even if you hadn’t helped, I could’ve handled those guys myself.”

“Haha! I know. I’m a freshman and you’re a senior—who would be worried about who?”

When Shirone easily agreed, Amy felt strangely deflated.

“Hmph, well... as long as you know. That’s all.”

Tess clutched her stomach, laughing. It felt like Amy was finally back to her usual self.

Rian turned toward the shopping district and shouted.

“I’m starving! Let’s grab some snacks on the way back!”

“Snacks? Sounds great! I’m in!”

Jiese finally made it home after midnight, having had to clean up the tavern.

After taking a beating, feeling tense, and doing manual labor, his body felt twice as heavy.

Still, he could endure it, thanks to the relief that the worst-case scenario hadn’t happened.

Amy had escaped from Falcoa’s clutches unscathed, and Jiese himself had come to no real harm either.

He had done his job well, so even Falcoa had no reason to give him a beating.

“If it hadn’t been for her, I might not have made it out alive.”

Amy’s face appeared in his mind, vivid as if she were right in front of him.

Of all the women Jiese had ever met, none were as strong and beautiful as her. Why had someone so remarkable gone out of her way to help him?

‘Shirone? He’s a commoner too, isn’t he?’

Jiese remembered every word Shirone had spoken at the tavern.

Chapter 135: Priority (6)

Back then, Jiese had been too frightened to step in, but his heart was just like Shirone's.

However, when Shirone reached out his hand to Amy, and when Amy responded to him, Jiese felt as though he'd been jolted from a dream.

He could never be like Shirone.

"Damn, he's a commoner too, but he acts so damn cool."

If Shirone were just another guy flaunting a bit of magic, Jiese wouldn't even feel jealous. There were times, dealing with arrogant nobles, when he'd felt lucky to have been born a commoner.

But Shirone was also a commoner, and he had the courage to give up something precious for a friend.

Jiese recalled the sad smile Amy had shown in the carriage. Did Shirone understand the meaning of that smile? No, he could never know. It was something she had only shown to him, someone who meant nothing to her.

The thought brought a renewed bitterness.

"Damn it! Why does he have to be a commoner? Now I can't even make up an excuse! How is a guy like that even possible!"

At the door of his home, Jiese let out his frustration, then opened the door and went inside. A candle was still lit deep in the living room, meaning his little sister had waited up for him.

"Brother, why are you so late? I was worried something had happened."

"Yuna, why didn't you go to bed? How are you going to work tomorrow?"

"As if I could sleep when you weren't home! Did something happen?"

“No, it’s nothing. Just got busy, and time flew by.”

Jiese knelt down in front of Yuna. It wasn’t just because she was his sister; she was someone who could hold her own anywhere. She might not have much education, but she was wise and kind-hearted.

Yuna was Jiese’s pride. He couldn’t let her live the same humble life he did. He didn’t care about success for himself, but he wanted her to meet a good man and live a happy life.

“Why do you look so worn out? Be honest. You might fool others, but you can’t fool me. Or I’m not making breakfast tomorrow.”

“Haha! Oh no, how scary! I just had my pride hurt a bit. But it’s okay now.”

“Ugh, that pride of yours always gets hurt. It’s so stale you can’t even eat it. Anyway, go wash up; you smell like sweat.”

Jiese’s gaze softened. Just being with her brought him peace. Did it really matter if he couldn’t be as impressive as others? With Yuna by his side, he had no reason to envy anyone.

He hugged Yuna tightly. The familiar scent of family soothed away the fears and exhaustion of the day.

“Ew, you stink! What’s gotten into you? Go wash up already!”

“Just wait for me, Yuna. I’m going to become the ruler of the harbor.”

“Pfft! You’re still saying that? Who’s even going to notice if you do?”

“Haha! True enough.”

Yuna chuckled and rested in his embrace. Truthfully, she didn’t mind the smell of sweat. Every drop must have been shed for her.

“I really hope that day comes. I know you can do it, Brother.”

“Yeah...”

Jiese looked out the window at the moonlight pouring in. It was the perfect night for watching the stars.

Ancient Ruins (1)

Shirone and his group were busy from dawn. While the women washed, the men cleaned up the house, and as soon as the men headed to the bath, the women sat in front of mirrors, drying and grooming their hair.

When Shirone and Rian returned from their bath, they peeked into the women's room and felt as if time had frozen. Amy and Tess were still at the mirror, fussing over something.

Left with no choice, the men ate breakfast first. As dawn broke, they finished a simple meal with food purchased from town the previous night.

Only then did the women start choosing their outfits, and every time they entered and exited their room, their clothes seemed to change.

Rian began to feel as though Tess and Amy were testing him.

Changing into different clothes because they didn't like the first choice—that he could let slide. After all, they were girls. But changing into something else, only to come back to the same choice a few minutes later—what was that all about? Were they actually testing his memory? It felt like a blatant challenge.

"Just pick something already. Are you going to slay a dragon? Why put so much thought into some flimsy fabric that doesn't even offer any protection?"

Tess shot him a horrified look.

"Ugh, you pig! We only bother dressing up because you guys don't pay attention to how you look! We do it for your sake, so keep your mouth shut."

Amy came out wearing a light blue dress.

"Shirone, does this look strange on me?"

"No, it looks great! I think you'd look good in anything."

"Really? Hmm..."

Amy took his words in stride and went back to her room. Tess envied her.

"For once, take a lesson from Shirone! Ugh, you're impossible."

When Tess shut the door behind her, Rian pursed his lips. What had he done to deserve this? Speaking one's mind honestly was the virtue and pride of a swordsman.

"Shirone, how do you come up with those lines on the spot? Teach me sometime."

"Huh? It's simple. I just can't say anything looks bad on her."

"Hahaha!"

Rian clutched his stomach and nearly fell over from laughter.

By 11 AM, the women had finished changing and were checking their backpacks. They carefully packed emergency food, a knife, a compass, and a rope to prepare for any unexpected situations.

Satisfied with her appearance in the mirror, Tess clenched her fist and exclaimed, "Alright! We're ready for the ruins expedition!"

"So, should we just go to bed and leave tomorrow morning?" Rian teased, causing Tess to blush.

"What? It wasn't that late! And Amy was getting ready too!"

"Why bring up Amy all of a sudden? Is she some kind of hostage?"

"Well, look at you, thinking that bulky greatsword and shabby outfit look good together. From a distance, you look like a complete caveman! Know your place."

Amy fulfilled her role as the hostage with grace.

"Sorry, Rian. It was actually my fault we're late. Tess was ready before me."

"Haha, it's fine. It's obvious you spent extra time preparing."

Tess's eyes narrowed dangerously, like an axe about to fall.

“What’s that supposed to mean? So, I’m not pretty at all, huh?”

“Hmmm, let’s see...”

Rian looked Tess over.

Honestly, he’d always thought she was pretty. Even without any embellishments, she was beautiful.

But it seemed she’d really gone all out today. She’d even put on perfume, which made her efforts obvious even to Rian, who usually wasn’t so perceptive.

“Sure, I’d say you’re pretty enough for me to admit it.”

“Huh?”

The countless retorts Tess had been preparing in her mind suddenly crumbled.

She never would’ve guessed Rian would say she looked pretty. Her face turned red, and the thought of her own blushing made her flush even more.

“D-Don’t think I dressed up to hear that from you, you fool! You caveman!”

“Alright, alright, let’s go already. If we wait any longer, we’ll miss the sights.”

Rian pushed his friends out the door, and thus, five hours after waking up, Shirone and his friends finally set out on their journey.

Initially, Shirone had planned to investigate the ruins alone with Amy. But as his friends grew closer, moving separately became impossible.

They hailed a random carriage from those lined up along the beach and headed east.

Since they had to travel from the western edge to the eastern edge of the island, it was a tiring journey. But the four of them passed the time chatting away, unaware of how fast the hours flew by.

“Hey, guys, look over there!” Shirone shouted, pointing out the window. About two kilometers away, a mountain dense with forest came into view.

The mountain range stretched like a camel's humps, and he'd heard that the Kergo Ruins were located at the far end of that range.

"That's Mount Toa. My brother told me that Galliant Island used to be a volcanic island. Lava spewed up from under the sea and solidified into the island. There was an eruption 500 years ago, and though it's dormant now, it could still become active."

"Really? I heard the Kergo Ruins are half-buried under volcanic ash."

"Exactly. The Galliant government once proposed restoring the ruins, but the indigenous people opposed it. When we reach the ruins, you'll see just how much is buried."

"Why would they oppose it? Wouldn't restoring the ruins benefit the natives?"

"I don't know either, but they must have their reasons. Maybe there are secrets they don't want revealed. The Galliant government's only been on the island for less than a century, after all."

"Wow, so there are a lot of mysteries here. It's definitely not just another tourist spot."

"It's true. It's rare for indigenous people to directly manage any of the remaining ruins. The Kergo Ruins hold significant historical value."

Shirone examined the mountain again, picturing what Amy had described.

The jungle on Mount Toa belonged solely to the Kergo people. Even the Galliant government didn't interfere in their autonomous zone.

Shirone felt an eerie sensation, as though a wild gaze was fixed on him from deep within the mountain. Was it just his imagination?

The carriage stopped a kilometer away from the Kergo Ruins. The driver informed them that carriages couldn't go any further.

Shirone stepped out and looked around. He saw numerous shops. It seemed that the racetrack and local merchants had some exclusive arrangement.

“What? I paid for this ride, so why can’t it go any further? And what am I supposed to do with all this luggage?” A middle-aged man with a large belly who had just arrived in another carriage complained to the driver. His wife and two daughters, who had also disembarked, wore equally disgruntled expressions.

“It’s just the transportation company’s policy. There’s a paid storage facility if you need to leave your luggage.”

“Robbers! The road’s right there, so why can’t we go? Don’t think I’ll spend another penny here!”

Unfazed, the driver maintained a professional tone, as if this was a common complaint, and quickly drove off.

Eventually, the middle-aged man hoisted his luggage and headed for the storage facility. When his daughters pointed to a snack stand, he set down the bags to buy them treats. Shirone felt he could relate to the man.

“If we’d known earlier, we could’ve packed less.”

“But maybe it’s better this way. Even if there aren’t any dangers here, it’s good to be prepared since we’re here for an adventure,” Rian said, glancing at the man in the distance. His spirits seemed lifted by his daughters’ antics, and he was now laughing heartily as he headed toward the ruins.

“Clever, though a bit opportunistic. It’d be hard not to spend money as a tourist here.”

“But it’s not entirely just a money-grab. If the tourist industry doesn’t thrive, the indigenous people won’t be able to manage it either.”

Convinced by Amy’s words, Shirone and his friends began walking toward the ruins.

The site was packed with tourists, as expected for a historically important place. The closer they got, the more people gathered, and by the time they reached the

entrance, it was so crowded that it had created a bottleneck.

“Wow, look! There are people here from other countries too.”

“Of course—it’s famous worldwide. Do you see that man standing under the archway? I think he might be a native.” Shirone looked over at the spot Amy pointed to. A man of medium height stood at the entrance. Although his clothes were modern, the fierce look in his eyes was undeniably wild.

Tess’s expression turned fearful.

“Ugh, he looks scary. And he even has tattoos on his face!”

Chapter 136: Ancient Ruins (2)

“Yeah. He actually looks strong.”

“Yeah.”

Shirone and Amy agreed. It wasn't just because of the tattoos. Their keen senses could feel the latent power in the man's appearance.

But Rian thought differently.

“Tch, just because you're glaring doesn't mean you have more strength. There's no need to be scared.”

Rian's senses were inferior to others. That's why he couldn't open his Schema, but Shirone actually found comfort in seeing him that way. No matter how dangerous the situation, Rian would stubbornly remain the shield for his friends.

“Alright! Let the exploration begin!”

After passing through the toll booth, the serious investigation started.

The Kergo ruins were a temple dedicated to the gods, laid out in a square shape, measuring 2 kilometers from east to west and 2 kilometers from north to south.

After crossing a 200-meter-wide moat via a pedestrian bridge, a long corridor appeared, and after walking another 500 meters along the pilgrimage path, they reached the central temple.

“Wow, this is really huge. Are you telling me this building was built thousands of years ago?”

“I heard from some people earlier that it's only this big because it was buried in volcanic ash. In reality, it's supposed to be several times larger.”

Shirone looked down at his feet. Since the volcanic eruption happened 500 years ago, the volcanic ash must have formed beneath the surface layers.

Amy, who had been walking ahead, turned around and shouted at Shirone.

“Shirone, what are you doing? We need to check out the central temple too.”

Shirone didn’t respond. He was just quietly smiling and focusing on something.

Confused, Amy approached Shirone.

“What’s wrong? Is something up?”

“Amy, try entering the Spirit Zone.”

“The Spirit Zone? Why so sudden?”

At that moment, Amy realized something and slapped her palm.

“Ah, I see!”

Mages could expand their senses into the Spirit Zone. If something was hidden beneath the ruins, it wouldn’t escape the reach of their synesthesia.

“Got it. I’ll try.”

Amy entered the Spirit Zone. As she explored underground with her synesthesia, her brow began to furrow. After about five seconds, she released the zone as if she’d realized something.

“Shirone, this...”

“Yeah. I couldn’t find anything. There should at least be bedrock, but nothing is showing up.”

“Maybe it’s because the volcanic ash layer is thick? How about trying to go deeper?”

That was the problem—they couldn’t go any deeper. But after thinking for a moment, Shirone realized and shouted.

“Ah, there’s a way!”

Amy could do it. Her specialty was the far-reaching Target Type.

The Target Type, also known as the Cross Zone, was a configuration where the mage stood at the intersection of

two lines, quickly rotating the zone to target something precisely.

But it didn't end there.

As a senior, Amy had developed her Target Type into Sniper Mode during her specialization.

The Sniper Mode had a perfectly linear Spirit Zone, designed to extend range by placing the mage at the end of the zone, which was its distinctive feature.

This type of zone was known as a Directional Zone.

Although the rotation was slower than the Target Type, it could achieve a range at least four times longer.

By extending the zone's radius to a 500-meter diameter, the Target Type would cover over 1 kilometer, and with Sniper Mode, it could hit targets 4 kilometers away.

Currently, Amy's base radius was 68 meters in diameter.

When converted to Target Type, it increased to 143 meters, and when entering Sniper Mode, it surpassed 500 meters.

"Alright, I'll give it a try."

Amy shifted into the zone at high speed, and the transformation of the Cross Zone into the 90-degree angle was completed instantly.

'Sniper Mode!'

Amy's zone began to dig downwards, as if it were collapsing from above. A groan escaped between her clenched teeth.

As the zone grew longer, its durability naturally weakened.

There wouldn't have been a problem if there were no obstructions, but the ground beneath was not cooperating, causing the zone to twist and veer off track.

Amy desperately pushed deeper.

And just as she thought she had reached something, the zone shattered, and her consciousness wavered.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

"Amy! Are you okay?"

Shirone rushed to support Amy, beads of cold sweat forming on her forehead.

“I’m fine. But this is really tough. I managed to get through 300 meters, but below that, it’s impossible. From there, it’s like throwing a line into the sea—it just floats around.”

Shirone could imagine how strong the force was. Amy’s zone wasn’t fragile at all. For her to describe her zone as a weak thread was quite alarming.

“Still, at least we discovered there’s something down there. That’s already impressive.”

“Yeah, it’s an achievement. But that’s not enough. To explore with the Spirit Zone while maintaining durability... Only a top-tier Zoner could do it. Without that level, Spirit Zone exploration is impossible.”

Shirone felt that without such a level of skill, it would be impossible to explore the underground of the ruins.

“If only I had thought of asking Brother Ares. With his exploration team, we might have a Zoner capable of this kind of exploration.”

“Or we could ask Professor Ethella.”

Ethella, being a monk, was specialized in durability, making her the perfect person for exploring this kind of terrain.

“Professor Ethella might be able to do it. I’m not sure how deep it goes, but she could easily penetrate the area I reached.”

Rian interjected.

“Well, if it’s something like that, we don’t really need to do the investigation, right? I heard the headmaster gave us a hint. Perhaps the real message was for us to figure it out ourselves?”

Shirone and Amy glanced at each other, both closing their mouths. Sometimes, in the pursuit of efficiency, they forgot about the deeper meaning.

Amy honestly admitted,

“Rian’s right. But still, it’s such a waste. If we can just break through here, we won’t even need to explore the ruins. How about we focus more on this angle?”

Shirone understood Amy's feelings. The journey was meant to uncover clues about Miro, not just to have fun exploring ruins.

"Let's brainstorm for now. It's not something we can do right away. Now, I'm more curious than ever. I think I need to see it with my own eyes to be satisfied."

Leaving behind vague imaginations about the underground, Shirone and his group continued their exploration.

But the Kergo ruins were just another typical tourist spot. As they seriously conducted their investigation, older men were chatting and children ran around with windmills.

"Amy, are we really doing this right?"

"Don't ask me. I'm feeling pretty ashamed of myself right now."

After finishing their tour of the final route, the central temple, they stopped the investigation. They found nothing particularly unusual at the surface ruins.

"I don't get it. The headmaster said we would understand once we came here. But what does a ruin from thousands of years ago have to do with Miro?"

"Either way, there's definitely something underground. We have no choice but to explore it using the Spirit Zone, don't we?"

Rian seemed to have an idea and his eyes lit up.

"I've got a great idea. If we can't penetrate with the Spirit Zone, why not just dig into the ground and go in?"

Something's bound to come out, right?"

Shirone and Amy looked at Rian as though he were crazy, but then continued their conversation.

"How about contacting the locals? Since we're living with them, there might be people who speak the local language."

"Hmm, that's true. But I don't think those people will know anything important. Maybe we should just get a translator..."

Rian yelled in frustration.

"Hey! Why is no one listening to me? I said we should dig!"

Tess interrupted.

"Idiot, how are you going to stick a shovel in a site the local government can't even touch? If you do that, you'll be charged with cultural heritage destruction and face a heavy sentence."

After scolding Rian, she turned to Shirone.

"What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know. Inquiries would be the best, but I don't think that's possible for now. We need to find a translator and also get permission to enter the indigenous people's territory."

"Is that so? Well, I have a way you can try right away. Want to hear it?"

"Oh, really? Tell me! What is it?"

Rian, as if not wanting to be the only one embarrassed, made a face.

"You're not suggesting we secretly dig, are you?"

Tess desperately suppressed her anger and continued.

"...Anyway, here's what I thought. While you guys were focused on the ruins, I took a look around the area. And I noticed something unusual."

"Unusual? What is it?"

Tess scanned the surroundings with her eyes.

"Look closely at the people. Most are tourists, but some aren't. They're in groups, armed, and don't seem to care much about the ruins."

The three of them looked around. Indeed, there were a few armed individuals moving about.

"Aha! I see!"

"Right, those are mercenaries. Why are mercenaries wandering around a tourist spot? Some of them look quite strong. It means there's something in these ruins."

"And the mercenaries know about it?"

"Exactly. Contacting the locals would take time, and they might not even tell us anything. But the mercenaries are different. The fact that they're here means they know something."

Shirone admired Tess's sharp observation. While others were focused on the ruins, she was looking into the situation outside.

If one knew Tess's background, this wouldn't be surprising. The Elzaine family, from which she came, had produced numerous commanders and diplomats throughout history. But their true strength lay elsewhere.

It was the spies.

To enemy nations, they were spies, but the information they gathered and sent out greatly contributed to the foreign policy strategies of the Tormia Kingdom.

'This is definitely a good idea. No, at this point, it's the only idea we have.'

Shirone decided to go with Tess's plan.

"Alright, so now we just follow the mercenaries?"

"Follow? Hmm, honestly, I'm not sure. If we get caught by a top-tier mercenary, it could get troublesome. Especially if they have a sensory Schema, we'll definitely be noticed. I could follow them by myself, but that's about it."

"So that's a problem. I don't even know how to hide my presence. What should we do then?"

"Heh, is it really necessary to go looking for them?"

"Mercenaries are everywhere, you know?"

"Huh? There's such a place? Where?"

Tess winked and pointed to a nearby spot.

"How about having a drink?"

To the southwest of the ruins, along the inner wall, were several makeshift shops built from sheet metal.

There were food stalls, bars, and repair shops in that order. Compared to regular stores, they were rather shabby, but business was booming.

Despite being inside the ruins and the high cost of living, people came here for the convenience it offered.

Shirone and his group entered the bar. They wondered how many people would be drinking in the middle of the day, but

aside from two empty tables, all the others were full. They chose a corner. Amy sat beside Shirone, and across from them sat Rian and Tess.

“Are you going to drink?”

“I guess we should order something, right? It’s a bar after all. But let’s focus on the snacks. It’s better to have lunch here.”

Tess ordered. Along with the traditional drink from Galliant Island, they were served hot noodles and minced meat.

The four of them, having eaten a light breakfast, took a break from talking and focused on eating.

At that moment, they heard snickering from beside them. At first, they tried to ignore it, but when the mocking laughter continued, it was impossible not to feel irritated.

Chapter 137: Ancient Ruins (3)

“Are those bastards really laughing at us right now?”

“Enough. Don’t turn your head. They’re just drunk,” Tess said, tapping Rian’s leg to calm him down. It was common for mercenaries to fight in bars, but given their profession, it almost never ended well.

“They’re still not reacting. They can’t be that deaf. They’re laughing at you, idiots.”

“Look at that guy’s sword. It’s ridiculously big, isn’t it? And that woman next to him, her size is no joke either. I won’t say where, but... ha ha ha!”

Rian clenched his fists. He could endure insults aimed at himself, but mocking his friends was something he couldn’t tolerate.

Tess quickly grabbed Rian’s wrist. If left unchecked, Rian was on the verge of flipping the table.

Shirone, meanwhile, continued eating his noodles while recalling what he had observed.

When they entered, there had been four mercenaries sitting at the other table: three men and one woman. There seemed to be an archer among them, and since the woman didn’t have any visible weapons, she was likely a mage.

‘An archer and a mage. A solid group.’

The mercenaries’ taunts continued relentlessly.

“Look at that blonde guy pretending to eat. Come on, turn around just once. I’m ready to throw my bottle at him. I’m in a really bad mood today, and I need to spill some blood.”

“Ugh, stop it. Is it fun teasing kids like that?” the woman interjected, but her words were empty. She seemed to enjoy it this way more than outright mocking them.

“Hey, little brats. You too afraid to fight back? Don’t you feel embarrassed in front of the ladies? I bet that guy is strutting around, telling everyone how tough he is.”

“Hello? Can you hear me? If you can, answer me. Or should I come over and make you?”

Rian’s anger was nearly uncontrollable. He understood it was part of their plan, but he didn’t want to tolerate these insults.

However, Rian couldn’t act. He locked eyes with Shirone, whose expression remained calm.

‘Shirone...’

As a sworn knight, Shirone was silently observing. If Rian couldn’t handle this small humiliation, it would be like tarnishing Shirone’s face.

‘Right. This is part of the trial. I’m here on this journey as an apprentice knight. This is actually a good opportunity to test myself.’

Once Rian solidified his resolve, enduring the taunts became easier. He realized that the insults were meaningless.

After about ten minutes, the mercenaries began to prepare to leave, confident they had won. The young rookies had been the perfect targets for their drunken fun.

“Heh, I’ve never seen anyone this pathetic in my life.”

“Ugh, whatever. They’re weak, so of course, they were scared. Don’t you feel sorry for them?”

“Hey! You guys are lucky. You didn’t even have to take a beating. Keep living like that. You’ll live long.”

After paying for their drinks, the mercenaries left. The tavern owner, who had been avoiding involvement until now, rushed to their table.

“Are you okay? Those bastards! To abuse innocent kids like that...”

“Do you know them?”

“They come here often. They drink a lot, and then they pick on people like you, who don’t want to fight. I’d like to tell them to leave, but I don’t know what they’d do if I did.”

Anyway, you did well. In situations like this, patience is victory.”

Shirone’s eyes sparkled. If there wasn’t something special at the ruins, there was no way a party with a mage would have come here.

Tess patted Rian on the back. Unlike Shirone, who could deceive even himself, Tess and the others could only endure situations with their sheer determination.

“Good job, Rian. I was really nervous you might do something reckless.”

“It was dangerous, but we’ll see them again, right? I endured it for that.”

“Right. Let’s move out too,” Shirone said, standing up.

They paid the bill and left the tavern. As they exited, they noticed the mercenaries walking toward the central temple. Instead of following them, Shirone’s group opted to observe from a higher vantage point. The mercenaries, especially the archer, likely had enhanced senses, so getting too close would almost certainly lead to detection.

Climbing to the fourth floor of the temple building, Shirone watched the mercenaries. To his surprise, they were all younger than thirty.

The leader appeared to be a well-built swordsman. The sword he carried was a famous iron sword, so recognizable by its design alone that Tess could even name its maker. Next to him stood a heavily built man wielding a blunt weapon, followed by a long-haired man and a woman in robes.

“Two warriors, one of them a swordsman. An archer and a mage. That’s about the gist of it. Even though it’s a tourist spot, they’re marching in formation. This party has real combat experience. Avoiding a tailing mission was the right call.”

The mercenaries headed toward a stairway at the east side of the central temple, and Shirone recognized it. It was the

place he had noted earlier, where the natives were strangely guarding the area.

The mercenaries approached the natives, and the archer began gesturing and speaking, likely fluent in the Kergo language.

The native glanced around, clearly cautious of onlookers. Shirone and the others realized this was the perfect moment, and they quickly descended the stairs.

When the native activated a mechanism, a rectangular crack appeared in the altar, and it slid open, revealing a dark entrance.

"Wait! We're coming too!"

The mercenaries turned around with hardened expressions. However, the tension quickly dissolved into irritation. The same rookies who had mocked them in the tavern were now following them.

"What? When did you guys start following us?"

"Hey, can we come in too?"

"Get lost! Do you even know where this is? We found this place ourselves!"

"Don't be like that...!"

As Shirone begged, the leader unsheathed his sword. The draw was quick, though not as fast as an expert's, but the fluidity and naturalness of it indicated years of practice.

"You want to die? Do we look like pushovers? If you don't leave, I'll take your heads right here."

This time, Shirone didn't step back. Although he had looked away in the tavern, now he met the leader's eyes directly. The leader, clearly irritated, scowled at the challenge.

"You bastards..."

The native guarding the altar spoke up.

"Are you their companions?"

The leader's glare softened as he turned to the archer, the only one who could communicate with the natives.

"What's he saying?"

"He's asking if you're with them."

“Hmph! Companions, huh? We’ll deal with them, so wait here.”

When the archer translated, the native’s eyes widened in anger. As if insulted, he spoke in a commanding tone.

“A warrior does not fight anywhere. Those who would defile the sacred altar with blood can never set foot here again.”

The archer, clicking his tongue, relayed the message.

“You should stop. If you fight here, they won’t let you in.”

“Tch! Lucky brats. Twice now they’ve managed to save their lives.”

The leader seemed to not want to worry anymore and entered the altar with his sword in hand. Then the other group followed behind and entered the dark door.

The rest of his party followed him into the dark door.

Shirone’s group waited for a moment. Had they entered together, there would have been no problem, but now the native’s sharp gaze made them uneasy.

“If you wish to be tested, come inside. The Eye of the Angel will watch over you.”

“What is he saying?”

“Not sure. I think he’s telling us to relax and enjoy our time now that we’re here. If he wanted to kick us out, he would’ve shut the door.”

Shirone cautiously stepped forward, and when he saw no further reaction from the native, he led his group into the dark entrance.

In an instant, all eight of them disappeared, and yet, not a single tourist noticed their presence.

Space-Time Maze (1)

Shirone, who entered the altar, first surveyed the structure. Unlike what he had seen from the outside, the torches were lit, so it was not dark inside.

A square hole descended into the ground, and along the inner walls, stairs spiraled down in a right-angle spiral.

Looking below, he saw that the mercenary group had already made two full rotations of the spiral.

Shirone quickened his pace. It wasn't wise to fall too far behind the mercenaries, as there might be a second gate ahead.

Eventually, the eight of them formed a group and began descending the stairs together.

The leader was annoyed by the rookies who had freeloaded off the information bought for an enormous price.

However, the goal of coming here was more important, so he temporarily put aside any thoughts of fighting.

The archer at the back of the mercenary party asked Shirone, who was following behind.

"Are you guys out of your minds? Why would you young punks be wandering around a place like this?"

"Then why did you come here, huh?"

"What? Did you come here without knowing anything?"

"Yeah. I don't know."

The archer stared at Shirone in disbelief. He thought to himself that it made sense. The existence of a hidden door in the ruins was an open secret after all.

There was something beneath the ruins, but no one knew exactly what it was. That was the limit of what ordinary people who took interest in the ruins could guess.

"Since we're already here, can't you just tell me? Why did you come here?"

The archer hesitated, pondering. He had run around the information market sweating his feet off just to find the hidden door.

Moreover, the encryption was at a high information tier, so he had to pay a hefty sum of 20 gold coins.

But since they had already passed through the door, the value of the information had essentially been nullified.

After thinking that far, the archer's eyes gleamed as he spoke.

"How about this? The fact that you came through this door means you've cracked a high-security encryption. If we convert that into gold, it's probably worth about 100 gold.

So here's the deal, I'll sell you the information. It's 5 gold per question. How about it?"

"That's fine. I'll find out once we go down anyway."

Shirone said it without thinking, as if there was no need to hesitate, which only made the archer angrier. Whether he would make money or not was beside the point—he was being mocked by a kid.

'What a cheeky little brat...!'

At that moment, the leader stopped. When the leader halted, those behind began to slow down in order.

"Actually, now that I think about it, that's a good point. Do you know how much trouble we went through to find this place? You can't just take it for free. If you want to go down here, you'll have to pay us."

Shirone glanced at Amy. When she shrugged her shoulders, he nodded as if to say he understood, and then spoke to the leader.

"Then we won't go down. We'll stay here, so go ahead and take care of your business."

"You little...!"

The leader inadvertently became furious.

He should have realized back at the tavern. The puny ones with nothing but mouths—that's what people meant when they said that.

"But if it's 1 gold per question, then I might be willing to make a deal."

"Eh? 1 gold?"

The leader's mind quickly spun. After all, there was no way to get their money back from these people. So, wouldn't it be better to earn whatever gold he could?

"Alright. 1 gold per question. Pay me 1 gold first."

Shirone rummaged through his coin pouch and took out 1 gold. Though he could investigate separately from the mercenaries, his friends respected Shirone's judgment.

Shirone believed that 1 gold was worth it in this situation.

He had no idea what lay beneath the ground. But if 1 gold

could help prepare for something unexpected, it wouldn't be a loss.

For example, if the mercenaries knew of some danger that Shirone didn't, and they led him into a trap, he would be stuck. But by listening to their explanation, he could at least anticipate the dangers and the difficulty of the exploration below.

"Why did you come here?"

Shirone didn't ask a vague question that would allow them to make up any answer. Instead, he focused on the core issue.

Chapter 138: Space-Time Maze (2)

But the leader was not someone easily outwitted either.

"I came to meet the natives. Is that enough for you?"

"That could be an answer, but you still need to explain. It's a breach of contract. If you keep this up, I won't ask any more questions."

The leader realized his mistake. He had been trying to bait Shirone but ended up closing the deal too soon.

The quick-witted female mage added an explanation.

"We don't know anything else either. The only reason we're here is to meet the natives."

"I see."

Shirone nodded while glancing at his friends. If even they didn't know what lay beneath, then it meant the risk of falling into a trap was gone.

Thinking it was still a decent deal, Shirone pulled out another gold coin.

"Why are you here to meet the natives? Here's 1 gold."

The archer, having received the money, hesitated and smacked his lips. Honestly, it was an embarrassing thing to reveal.

"We're here to get Loops. They're available in the market, but we can get them much cheaper in bulk here. The plan is to sell them and use the money for our next adventure.

There, now I've answered, right?"

Shirone was momentarily stunned. So, this place wasn't connected to the secrets of the ruins, but rather a location for trafficking loops.

But since the mercenaries had also only discovered this place with fragmentary information, it was too early to make

conclusions.

‘How did this happen? This isn’t what I expected at all. A place for selling drugs? No, I shouldn’t think that way. To the common people, it may seem like drugs, but to the natives, it must be a sacred ritual tool. So it’s something they revere. That means...’

Shirone finished his thoughts and asked.

“Could this place be a passage connected to the native autonomous zone?”

“What? How did you... Ah, crap!”

The archer grimaced, realizing his mistake. He had answered without even taking the money.

Shirone then dug into his pouch and retrieved another gold coin. Though he had asked in a rush, he hadn’t planned to use any tricks.

“Ah, here’s 1 gold. Sorry for asking first.”

The archer stared at the hand that Shirone extended.

Of course, 1 gold wasn’t a trivial amount, but for a mercenary with some experience, it wasn’t a sum worth trembling over.

“Tch! Fine. It was my mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake. It’s just how the contract works.”

“I know! It’s just my pride. Damn it, I can’t believe I made such a mistake. I still have a long way to go.”

“Then I’ll consider the last question as a freebie.”

Shirone, without any regrets, placed the coin back into his pouch. He didn’t want to waste money when they weren’t even accepting it.

The archer felt a surge of frustration. For some reason, he felt like he was being led by a kid with a sharp mind.

“Alright, let me ask one question. How did you figure it out? That information is supposed to be top secret.”

“Loops are sacred items to the natives. Also, if the profit margin from selling them is so large, it’s clear that it’s not just loosely traded around. There must be some sort of permission from a person of authority among the natives.

And if there's someone like that, it can only be in an autonomous zone."

The archer had no response. He had been racking his brain for a way to make money, and then he discovered the Kergo ruins.

After staying up for several days and nights, researching the Loops and scouring the information market, he had finally reached the conclusion that Shirone succinctly summarized in just a few words.

"Tch! You sure have a sharp mind. Got any more questions?"

"No, that's it. Let's go down and check it out."

The archer gave a wry smile. He guessed why Shirone had stopped asking questions. Perhaps he realized there was nothing more to say, no matter what else was asked.

Shirone and his group descended for another 20 minutes. Although they were spiraling down, it was still an immense depth.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, a narrow hallway continued ahead. Two natives were standing in front of an iron gate, 10 meters ahead.

Unlike the natives outside, these ones had their upper bodies exposed, and their bare feet were visible beneath their pants.

Tattoos, starting from their navels, spread out like branches, extending up to their faces, and even from a distance, it looked intimidating.

Shirone didn't think this place was part of the autonomous zone. After all, they would need to walk several kilometers to enter the jungle of Mount Toa.

The mercenaries were also visibly tense. The archer, who was the interpreter, moved to stand next to the leader.

After exchanging a few coded words in the Kergo language, the natives lowered a switch.

The iron cart wheels began to turn, and the gate opened, sliding to the sides.

"Wow..."

Shirone's eyes lit up as if he had fallen into a completely unfamiliar world.

It was an octagonal room, crafted from stone walls. On the opposite side of the entrance, there was another iron door guarded by three men.

In the center, there was a flat octagonal altar that matched the room's shape. Above each of its eight corners, spherical objects about 30 centimeters in diameter floated in the air. Shirone's memory clicked. He had definitely seen these spheres before.

"Hey, what's that?"

The archer turned to look at Shirone in confusion. Before coming here, Shirone had no idea what was inside, so the chance of recognizing something was practically nonexistent.

"What? Do you know what that is?"

"That's definitely from Miro's..."

The leader smirked.

"Hah, who do you think you are, acting like you know something? What, did you suddenly think of some damn bead hanging from your pants?"

The leader had never liked Shirone, even from the tavern. He despised people who strutted around pretending to be tough, yet lacked the courage to fight. Especially those who only acted tough around women. He hated them because he had no woman to act tough for.

"Miro? Did you just say Miro?"

The native guarding the entrance asked. Even though Shirone didn't understand the language, he could recognize the word "Miro".

Curious about the situation, the archer added an explanation in a generous tone.

"They're asking if you know about Miro."

"Yes. I've met her once before."

When the archer relayed Shirone's claim, the native's eyes narrowed, his tattoos twisting like the visage of a mythical

goblin.

"You met her? That is impossible. It's a lie."

"No, I really did meet it."

The native fell into deep thought but soon returned to a lighter expression, as if he had quickly reached a conclusion.

"I judge nothing. Only the eyes of the angel will watch over you."

Leaving behind these cryptic words, he closed the iron door, leaving Shirone to set aside his disappointment. He thought to himself that the real challenge was only beginning.

As the mercenaries moved toward the center of the room, one of the three natives guarding the opposite iron door approached them.

It appeared that two of the natives were simply gatekeepers, while the one now approaching held a different role.

This distinction was clear from his tattoos. While the typical Kergo people bore red tattoos, this man's tattoos were white.

"This is the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. The eight eyes of the angel will judge you. To enter Kergo, you must pass through the Space-Time Maze."

Hearing the word "Maze", Shirone quickly turned his head, but the archer remained silent, seemingly uninterested in translating further.

"Maze? Did he just say Maze? What is he saying?"

"Hey, don't get the wrong idea. I'm not your translator. Why should I go out of my way to explain everything to you?"

"You're going to explain it to your comrades anyway. Just hurry up and tell me."

"No. From now on, let's not meddle with each other. We're here to do our own thing."

The man with the white tattoos folded his arms, scrutinizing their interaction. It was clear from their gestures that Shirone was insisting on a translation.

"Does anyone among you understand the ancient language?"

"I can understand a little."

"Then interpret. Opportunity is fair to all. The eyes of the angel watch everything from the Space-Time Maze."

"Why should I? They're not part of our group. I don't know what this judgment entails, but separate us from them."

"No. From the moment you entered the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, you became one. Will you achieve or will you sacrifice? That is the only choice before you."

"Damn it! What bad luck. What the hell are we supposed to do with these rookies?"

As the conversation dragged on, the mage urged him impatiently.

"What's he saying? Hurry up and tell us."

Reluctantly, the archer relayed what he had heard so far. Upon hearing the explanation, the mercenaries became visibly annoyed. If they had known this would happen, they would have tried harder to leave Shirone and his group behind.

"The angel's eyes will judge us? Does that mean we're being evaluated on our abilities? And lumped together with those rookies? This is completely unfair to us!"

The mage voiced her complaints, and Amy's eyes narrowed sharply.

"Excuse me, but you keep calling us rookies. How do you know whether we have abilities or not?"

"Oh, really? Not only did you freeload, but now you're claiming you're not leeching off us? Let me be clear: if anything goes wrong because of you, be ready to pay the price."

"Hmph! Do as you please. We never intended to team up with you anyway."

The mage gave a cold smile. After all, who was she? One of the rising stars among mages in the mercenary world.

She didn't associate with low-tier mercenaries and surrounded herself with comrades of similar skill and status. On the other hand, these naive kids were clearly just students who had learned swordsmanship or magic somewhere.

What they had learned in school was worlds apart from real combat. A mercenary needed to be willing to risk their life, and as one recognized as a rising star, she could confidently claim to rival even licensed mages.

'Hah, just wait, rookies. Once we get through this, I'll make you grovel in tears.'

Thanks to the clash of wills between the women, the small emotional disputes were temporarily buried.

As the eight of them waited for what was to come, the man with the white tattoos began to explain.

"There are two conditions to pass this gate: prove your ability, or sacrifice one person to allow another to pass."

As soon as this was translated, Shirone asked a question.

"What does it mean to prove your ability? Specifically, what must we prove?"

"Hey! Stop butting in! I'm not translating for you anymore!"

"They said we have to work together. Just ask the question quickly."

With no retort, the archer ground his teeth and reluctantly translated. The man with the white tattoos nodded and continued.

"Descendants of warriors, step onto the Altar of Judgment and display your skill on one of the eight spheres. The divine language will answer. A red glow signifies failure. A white glow signifies success."

Shirone continued firing off questions, practically treating the archer as his personal interpreter.

"Is there a limit to how many times someone can attempt? For instance, can one person keep trying repeatedly?"

"You can attempt as many times as your strength allows. If one person succeeds, everyone can enter Kergo. If no one

succeeds, you must leave. This is the will of Miro and the mission of the Kergo people.”

“You mentioned sacrifice earlier. What does sacrifice mean?”

“One person’s blood allows another to pass.”

“Do you mean they must die?”

“Yes.”

Hearing this, Shirone fell into thought. They could attempt as many times as they wished, and if even one person succeeded, everyone could pass.

But if no one succeeded? They would have to rely on the sacrifice of a companion to open the gate—one life per person.

‘Something feels off. Is there really a need to resort to such cruelty just to enter Kergo? Killing a companion simply to obtain Loops doesn’t make sense. There must be something more to this. The mercenaries must also not know the real secret of this underground area.’

Shirone gestured for another translation. Since the information gathered so far had proven useful, the archer grudgingly agreed.

“Are there any restrictions on sacrifice? For example, can someone bring in an outsider from outside the room or use the body of someone already dead?”

“No. From the moment you entered this room, you became one. The door will not open unless all agree. Thus, such questions are meaningless.”

Chapter 139: Space-Time Maze (3)

Shirone grasped the situation. The rules were more restrictive and dangerous than he had anticipated. Uniting everyone's opinions into a single course of action was far harder than it seemed.

Though they didn't know what awaited in Kergo, if it was something worth risking their lives for, there was a high chance internal conflicts would arise.

"What's this? That's all it takes? Here's an idea: let's just get rid of the four rookies and head in ourselves. Can't believe I didn't think of such an easy solution."

The leader turned to Shirone with a twisted grin, clearly expecting him to be frightened. But Shirone only found him pitiful.

Having heard the rules, cooperating from this point onward was the only reasonable choice. A leader who let emotions dictate his actions would not only ruin the group but also endanger his comrades' lives.

'This man isn't fit to be a leader. The others seem at least competent, though.'

As expected, the leader's comrades stepped in to dissuade him. Since they could pass if they achieved success, sacrificing someone should be considered only as a last resort.

"Enough. Let's get started. How long are we going to stand around here?"

"Tch! Consider yourself lucky, kid."

The man with the white tattoos moved to stand beside the altar. He crossed his arms where he could oversee all eight spheres.

“My explanation ends here. Come forward one at a time and prove your abilities.”

Shirone’s group and the mercenaries exchanged glances, calculating who should go first.

The leader drew his iron sword and pointed it at Shirone.

“Hey, you lot go first. I don’t have any expectations, but at least give it your best shot so we can get a sense of it. Who knows? Maybe we’ll take you to Kergo.”

“No thanks. Why should you get to decide that unilaterally?”

“What did you say? I really can’t stand you, kid! Should I just kill you right now and go in?”

“You’re just causing more conflict. Didn’t you hear that from now on, we need unanimous agreement? Even though there’s no limit on attempts, whoever tries might face handicaps or trigger traps like anti-magic mechanisms. Since it’s the first time for everyone, we need to make a careful decision about the order.”

“You insolent little brat...!”

The leader was on the verge of losing his temper. What infuriated him most wasn’t just Shirone’s backtalk but the fact that he couldn’t refute him.

The female mage, however, had a different perspective. While it was possible there were no penalties, it was better to account for every variable in an uncertain situation.

“The boy is right. Let’s decide the order. So, how should we do it?”

Shirone glanced at the Space-Time Maze above the altar. Having experienced the phenomenon of “spot”, he could roughly gauge the current situation.

“Those spheres likely absorb an immense amount of energy, potentially infinite. It would be best to hold back powerful mages and have the warriors go first.”

“Does it have to be so aggressive? Why are you so certain?”

“Because demonstrating physical prowess is the best way for a warrior’s descendant to prove themselves. Moreover, the altar appears structurally designed to receive targeted

impacts. It's reasonable to assume it was made with strikes in mind."

"I see your point. Then let's set the order. Should we start with a swordsman?"

The mage turned to look at the leader, but he shook his head, visibly displeased.

"No, I'll go later. What does that little brat know? This is a simple game—just go up and smash it."

"Fine. That's what our leader says. What about you?"

"Alright, we'll send one of our swordsmen first."

Shirone turned to the swordsmen on his side. Both Rian and Tess were swordsmen, but it was obvious who would step forward.

The first attempt would reveal a great deal of information, making it a critical and dangerous role. Rian would never send Tess first in such a situation.

"I'll go first. Who knows? I might finish it in one go. Haha!"

"You and your baseless confidence. Just be careful, alright? Don't let your guard down."

Encouraged by Tess, Rian stepped onto the altar and surveyed his surroundings.

It felt completely different from looking at it from the outside. The eight spheres seemed to be staring him down.

"Hey! Hurry up! What, are you scared already?"

Rian ignored the leader's taunts. From the moment Shirone had called on him, he had a clear sense of what needed to be done.

'I'm the vanguard. I must gather all the information I can on my turn. Isn't that right, Shirone?'

Rian approached the northern sphere. It wasn't as transparent up close as it had seemed from afar. It looked as though it was filled with a hazy mist.

"Hm, they said there's no limit to attempts, right?"

Rian tapped the sphere with the back of his hand. When there was no reaction, he gradually increased the force.

Eventually, the mist inside the sphere vanished, revealing a clear orb with the number “1” displayed.

“Huh? A number?”

Shirone recalled the explanation from the man with the white tattoos.

“Ah, so the divine language refers to these numbers. Rian, step back just in case.”

Rian calmly took a few steps back. Moments later, the sphere glowed red, illuminating the room.

It signified failure.

While they wondered if something else would happen, that was all. Even after waiting three seconds, no additional threats emerged.

“So, a white glow means success, huh?”

Having grasped the rules, Rian returned to the center of the altar and drew his greatsword.

When the massive weapon, previously hidden by Rian’s bulk, was revealed, the mercenaries were visibly startled. If it was made entirely of steel, only someone with Schema abilities could wield such a weight.

“Rian! Hit it with everything you’ve got!”

Tess, now more relaxed, cheered him on as she rotated her arms. Knowing that there was no harm to the participant was a significant relief.

“Don’t worry. I’ll smash it in one blow.”

Rian gripped his sword with both hands and lowered his stance. His heart was pounding, but he felt no shame.

To him, this was the perfect moment to debut the sword his grandfather had passed down. And with both hands at full strength, he was ready to swing.

“Alright, here I go!”

With a burst of speed, Rian charged and brought the massive sword crashing down. Instead of the deafening sound everyone expected, a low *thoom* echoed.

The Space-Time Maze neither wavered nor retaliated. It had absorbed all the force—a feat that could only occur if it

nullified every ounce of energy.

“Ugh!”

Rian remained in the striking position, feeling the pull of his entire strength being absorbed.

Still, his curiosity about the sphere’s response outweighed the fatigue. Would it show success or failure?

The mist in the sphere cleared, revealing the number “241.” Compared to the earlier “1,” it was a significant improvement.

However, the sphere emitted the same red glow.

“Damn, so close! Shirone, can I try one more time?”

Rian was frustrated. Initially, he had been content with merely probing the mechanism, but now, failing felt like a personal affront.

“Are you okay? Your legs seem shaky.”

“Oh, this? It’s just that it absorbs all your strength. It doesn’t harm your body, so I’ll recover after a bit of rest.”

Shirone nodded, processing the new information.

“Ah, I see. It’s a handicap, but not a severe one. Hmm.”

“Still, this pisses me off. If I could’ve activated Schema, I’m sure I’d have passed.”

At Rian’s remark, the mercenary warrior burst into loud laughter.

“Puhahaha! So you’ve been strutting around all this time without even being able to use Schema? This is ridiculous. Step aside—I’ll handle it this time.”

As the warrior stepped forward, Rian reluctantly left the altar, still mumbling, *just one more try*.

“So the rookie got 241, huh? Then I’ll aim for around 2,000.”

The warrior rolled up his sleeves and began spinning his flail, his main weapon. Although he also had a hand axe at his waist, the flail seemed better suited to deliver a strong impact based on what he’d observed from Rian’s attempt. The warrior took a deep breath, visibly flexing his muscles. While his muscle fibers didn’t grow dramatically, his entire frame swelled significantly.

“Tess, that guy...”

“Yeah, he’s a Schema user. Looks like he’s built for strength enhancement. Not surprising for a warrior, really.”

“Waaaaah! Here I goooo!”

The warrior let out a deafening roar as he charged forward, twirling the flail with increasing speed. Although it wasn’t a two-handed weapon, the rotational force added considerable destructive power.

With all the might of someone facing a mortal enemy, the warrior brought the flail crashing down.

With a low *thoom*, the motion halted abruptly. Like Rian, the overwhelming loss of energy left the warrior temporarily debilitated.

“Phew! Phew! That’s it! I nailed it!”

The warrior staggered back, gasping for air. His technique had been impressive, and the spectators watched with hopeful anticipation.

The number “248” appeared on the sphere.

“What? What the hell? 248? Only seven points higher than that rookie? Is this thing broken?”

Tess, already moving toward the altar, adopted a ready stance with her sword.

“What do you think this is, some kind of cheap toy? Step aside! The red light’s already on!”

“No! I don’t accept this! Just one more try—one more!”

“Fine, but get down first! Recover your stamina before you try again!”

Looking deeply frustrated, the warrior turned away, his face contorted in disbelief. It didn’t make sense to him.

Since childhood, he had never lost in terms of strength. Even with his strength-enhancement build, he had only scored 248?

“Wait a minute.”

The warrior turned to Rian, his expression incredulous. Didn’t this rookie say he couldn’t use Schema?

And yet, the kid had scored 241. That meant Rian's raw physical strength alone had nearly matched his own enhanced power.

"What? No way! You really can't use Schema? You're lying, aren't you?"

"What's there to lie about? If I failed, I'll just quietly watch the next attempt."

Having failed, Rian had no desire to keep arguing. His focus was now on Tess and how well she would perform.

Standing at the center of the altar, Tess unsheathed her sword with a sound as cool and smooth as ice. Her elegant movements captivated everyone watching.

"Hmm. I'll give it a try, but isn't a rapier at a disadvantage here?"

"Not necessarily. The altar absorbs all the force. When I struck with my greatsword, I didn't even feel any recoil. I doubt your rapier will bend, either."

"Really? Then I'll go for a full-power thrust."

"If you're unsure, want to borrow my sword? It's heavy, but you can handle it with Schema."

Tess tapped the blade of her rapier with her finger. The weapon vibrated sharply, like a hummingbird's wingbeat.

"No, I'll use my own sword. Honestly, this is kind of intriguing."

Tess walked to the edge of the altar, positioning herself at an angle to the Space-Time Maze.

Schema-driven focus accelerated her precision. While the spheres likely had no weak points, the speed generated from her compressed body movements would convert fully into force.

With a silent burst of speed more terrifying than any battle cry, Tess dashed forward. Her angle was nearly parallel to the ground, showcasing the perfect balance for which she was known.

As she reached her target, her body seemed to blur, leaving faint afterimages. Her rapier appeared to hover mid-air,

skimming just above the altar before striking the sphere. At the exact moment of impact, a flash of light seemed to erupt from the tip of her sword.

Unlike traditional swordsmanship, which peaks in speed at the midpoint of a swing, Tess's technique, focused on thrusting, achieved its maximum velocity at the very tip of her rapier.

This unique quality, magnified by Schema, created an electrifying optical illusion.

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Tess, too, experienced the energy absorption but smoothly recovered her stance without the slightest hesitation as she sheathed her rapier.

Her precision with distance control and maximum acceleration was flawless. All eyes turned to the sphere. The number appeared: 442. It was the first time someone had surpassed 400.

What would the result be? Tess stared at the sphere without any visible emotion.

Moments later, the number disappeared, and the sphere glowed red.

"Phew, no luck. What a shame."

Without hesitation, Tess turned away. She understood why the previous two had wanted another try but felt that imitating such behavior would be undignified.

"Damn it! Is that thing broken? How does a stab with a saber score higher than a strike from a blunt weapon?"

The warrior shouted furiously. Relying solely on brute strength his entire life, losing to a woman was a blow to his pride. But from Tess's perspective, it was simply pathetic.

"What's the point of arguing when we both failed? Besides, building strength and using strength are completely different! Stop lifting rocks and practice some technique."

"What? Are you mocking my strength? Don't you see these muscles? Do you have anything like this?"

Tess turned her head away, disgusted. She thought it would be easier to talk to a cow than to debate refinement with a macho man.

"Are we done with the swordsmen? Then it's my turn."

The archer stepped forward, pulling the longbow from his back.

Based on the results so far, it seemed unlikely that physical force alone would yield a high score.

While arrows were also a form of physical attack, the archer was confident. Although his chosen method was expensive, he wasn't about to risk ridicule by holding back his trump card.

"So, you're going to use *that*, huh?" the mage remarked. As if confirming her observation, the archer removed the standard arrowhead from one of his arrows. From a sturdy leather pouch at his side, he retrieved a uniquely shaped arrowhead.

The new tip was round and almond-shaped, with a purple hue instead of the usual metallic color.

"Hmm, let's give this a shot."

Amy's eyes sparkled at the sight of the unusual arrowhead. She knew it could deliver a much more powerful impact than a regular arrow.

"Shirone, look at that. It's a magic-powered bullet."

"Huh? That's it?"

Shirone recalled learning about magic-powered bullets during class. They were created by injecting magic into magic stones—materials extracted in minuscule quantities from nature.

The origins of magic stones remained a mystery, but it was widely accepted that they resulted from chemical reactions triggered by unique natural phenomena.

For instance, lightning magic stones were often harvested in dry highlands or tropical rainforests where thunderstorms were frequent.

Once extracted, these minerals exhibited affinities for specific phenomena. Magitech engineers had harnessed these properties to store magic within the stones.

Of course, this was considered rudimentary science compared to modern advancements.

For magic stones to be practical, they required materials engineering to convert energy and mechanical engineering to design devices that consumed it.

The entire process, from mining to industrial application, was an industry involving massive manpower and capital. At the forefront of this industry was the production of magic-powered bullets, primarily used as weapons.

“So that’s the famous, expensive magic bullet. How does it compare to the magic we use?”

“It’s not particularly powerful. The real advantage is that anyone can use magic with it. That’s expensive. One of those is probably worth about 1 gold. The actual magic stone embedded in the arrowhead weighs only 10 grams, but it’s still that expensive.”

Shirone stuck out his tongue. Spending 1 gold just to shoot an arrow seemed absurd. How much would it have cost to unleash the magic-powered arrow bombardments by 3,000 archers mentioned in history books?

“Incredible. If it were me, I’d be too stingy to ever use it.”

“Well, we’re mages, so that’s understandable. But in battle, having magic bullets can make all the difference. They could save your life when you’re cornered.”

“That makes sense. You really know a lot about this. They didn’t teach us any of this in class.”

“I only learned recently. My oldest brother came home to discuss a contract about supplying magic bullets to an archer unit. Apparently, there’s been corruption in the supply chain for over a year, but they can’t figure out where the money is leaking. When I got curious, I asked Nade about it, and he explained everything—from the manufacturing process to the production techniques.”

“Huh? Nade? When did you ask him about that?”

“Remember when you were recovering and school was suspended for a while? Rumor has it Nade made an invisible cloak, which is an incredible feat. If anyone could make magic bullets, it’d be him.”

“What? He can make something that expensive himself?”

“What, you didn’t know? Aren’t you supposed to be his best friend?”

“Haha, well... But Nade always shows me weird stuff, like a wagon that never stops moving or dolls that dance twelve funny jigs.”

“Well, having the skills isn’t enough. Since it’s a state-controlled industry, making them without a license would land you in prison for illegal weapons manufacturing. Still, maybe you could ask him to make one for fun sometime. He’d probably do it if you asked. You can get magic stones cheaply from the alchemy guild.”

As Shirone and Amy continued their conversation, the archer began disabling the control mechanism of the magic bullet.

Impact-reactive magic bullets must always be secured with a safety mechanism unless passing through dangerous areas. If an unintended reaction occurred, such as being struck by a wagon, it could easily take off a leg.

“Hey, I’m using a magic bullet now—a Lightning Arrow, to be exact. You’d better back up; you might get caught in it.”

Shirone’s group moved as far back as possible while still staying within viewing range. They expected the Space-Time Maze to absorb the magical energy, but caution was never a bad idea.

As the archer fully drew his bowstring, the tension in the room seemed to heighten. Moments later, with a *twang*, the arrow shot forward, whistling through the air as it embedded itself in the Space-Time Maze.

The magic bullet reacted, unleashing a powerful lightning bolt.

However, the blue electricity only surged within the confines of the sphere. As expected, the sphere seemed to absorb even magical energy.

The sphere flashed for about three seconds before going still. The observers eagerly waited for the score to appear,

hoping it was worth the cost.

1,020.

Seeing the four-digit score, the archer's lips curled into a smile.

But the result was an undeniable failure. Despite surpassing 1,000 points, he gained no success. Frustrated, the archer stepped down from the altar, feeling the sting of wasted resources.

"Tch! What the hell? That was a total waste of money!"

"I wouldn't say that, your body seems fine—are you okay?"

The archer checked himself. He had seen the swordsmen struggle with weakened legs, but this time, he felt perfectly normal.

"Huh? You're right. Looks like the sphere doesn't drain the strength of archers. It must only measure impact damage."

"That's valuable information. Do you want to try again?"

The archer scrutinized the sphere. Setting the record for the highest score so far had felt satisfying, but he wasn't willing to waste more money.

"No. I doubt any element would make much of a difference. I don't think this can pass either. It's not worth wasting another magic bullet."

Amy nodded in agreement.

"So, it's the mages' turn now. Shirone, who should go first—you or me?"

The mercenaries' mage sneered and pointed at Amy.

"Why don't you go first? I'll go next, so we can compare who's stronger."

Amy accepted the challenge without hesitation. After all, she still had unresolved feelings toward that woman.

"Alright, Shirone, I'll go first, then."

"Sure. Show them what you've got. Good luck!"

Shirone believed Amy had a strong chance. Her specialty was fire-based offensive magic, particularly single-target spells designed for maximum impact.

Magic came in countless varieties, and trends shifted with technological advancements, but fire magic consistently ranked among the most powerful.

Even so, Amy was cautious. Standing at the altar, she carefully calculated which spell to use.

‘This is trickier than I thought. Using sniper mode is risky at this range. Maybe a simple targeted attack would be better? But that might not have enough power.’

Unlike ice-based magic, which has a fixed lower limit at absolute zero, fire magic had no upper limit on temperature. This limitless potential had drawn countless mages to the fire element, but even highly skilled practitioners struggled to exceed 1,000 degrees Celsius.

Yet, fire remained formidable. Most things on the planet—living beings, wood, and even many metals—succumbed to temperatures below 1,000 degrees.

However, like all elements, fire had its drawbacks. The biggest was its lack of weight.

Despite its immense energy, fire lacked the heaviness of impact. Mages often supplemented it with air magic to enhance its striking power, as seen in spells like Flame Strike.

‘But Flame Strike increases power with distance. In this case, pure fire might be a better choice.’

Knowing that the Space-Time Maze measured magical potency as well as physical impact, using a spell that maximized temperature was a sound strategy.

After deliberating, Amy made her decision.

‘Fireball.’

Two flames ignited above Amy’s palms. Though spherical in origin, their fiery nature caused them to take on an upward-droplet shape.

The primary difference between magically conjured fire and natural fire was density. Fire mages could manipulate this density to intensify heat, which in turn expanded the flames’ area of effect.

Amy flicked her wrists, launching the molten fireballs like dripping lava. The fiery projectiles streaked forward, trailing red-hot tails.

As soon as the fire struck, the Space-Time Maze absorbed it. Inside the sphere, a massive vortex of fire swirled incessantly.

When the score finally appeared, gasps echoed around the room.

3,270.

It was the highest score yet. Based on the previous results, surpassing this score seemed nearly impossible.

The archer realized Shirone's group wasn't just a bunch of ordinary students. His Lightning Arrow, powered by a magic bullet, had only reached 1,020, while a basic Fireball had tripled that score. It was a stark testament to Amy's magical prowess.

Yet Amy scowled deeply. The Space-Time Maze emitted its usual ominous red light, signaling failure.

"What the hell? What are we even supposed to do?"

She hadn't thought it would bother her, but the failure stung more than she expected. She was livid.

"Hohoho! Typical rookie behavior. Is it my turn now?"

"Hold on! I'll try again with sniper mode. Let's see exactly how much this thing demands to pass!"

Shirone approached the altar with an awkward smile. Amy's competitiveness was unmatched—if he didn't intervene, she wouldn't step down on her own.

"Calm down first. If you're angry, you'll lose focus, and your score will drop even further."

"Ugh, fine! But I'm doing it again, Shirone. Got it?"

The mercenary mage, now standing on the altar, turned to Amy.

"Looks like we're in the same field. I specialize in fire magic too. To match your level, I'll also use Fireball."

'Hah, how funny. Acting like she just thought of that.'

Amy snorted derisively. She was too irritated to waste words on a failed rival.

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The mage returned with a serious expression. Then, between her palms, she created a sphere of fire.

Unlike Amy, it was a single sphere, so it would be much easier to increase its density.

‘You plan to concentrate the firepower, huh? You really want to win, don’t you?’

As Amy had expected, the mage was nervous. Of course, since she had never calculated the power of her magic in numerical terms, she had no idea what kind of score she would get.

But no matter how she thought about it, she wondered if it wouldn’t be too difficult to surpass three times the power of a Lightning Arrow.

“Ha!”

The mage thrust both her hands forward with force.

In the Spirit Zone under the mage’s control, inertia was ignored, so there was no need for special gestures to cast magic.

Even so, taking a firing stance meant the mage was struggling to focus even a little more.

Amy followed the Fireball with her eyes. The sphere’s fabric, absorbing the fire, spun a whirlpool of flames.

The mage looked at the orb with eyes full of anticipation.

But after a moment, his face turned sour.

The score was 1,330. It was only 310 points higher than the Lightning Arrow.

For a test that purely assessed physical abilities, this would be a huge difference, but in the realm of magic, where phenomena are applied, it could be considered negligible.

“This... this can’t be. No! It’s because the firepower was dispersed. I can definitely push it over 2,000.”

No one responded to the mage’s voice.

The difference was just too large. No matter what he tried, he couldn’t surpass Amy’s score.

The archer already thought there was no chance of passing here. The girl who had scored over 3,000 would likely be the highest-ranking here.

Even the mage, who was considered a holy figure in the mercenary world, scored only 1,330. Yet, someone who displayed more than double that magical power would likely be the strongest talent among those of the same age.

Rian and Tess had similar thoughts.

It wasn’t that they were underestimating Shirone’s abilities, but Amy was Shirone’s senior at school. Since she, the graduate, had failed, they expected that Shirone wouldn’t be able to surpass her.

The only person who wasn’t thinking that this was the end was Amy.

“Shirone, you need to take this seriously. It might be that you couldn’t surpass it by a narrow margin.”

“Got it. I’ll do my best.”

The leader smirked sarcastically.

“Ha! What good is trying your best? The result is what matters. It’s already over. Let’s give up and go back.”

Shirone realized something from the leader’s behavior, as he gave up without even trying. The sphere’s fabric, known as the eyes of an angel—what was it made for?

But the fleeting insight had to be put aside for now. What mattered now was focusing on the task at hand.

Shirone closed his eyes and performed the sequence. A faint light dot appeared before him. Then, countless photons gathered at the center and began to grow in size.

“W-What is that? Photon Output? What kind of impact can that possibly have?”

The mages spoke with a baffled expression. Still, the reason she couldn't take her eyes off Shirone was because of the overwhelming force that was visible—something you wouldn't see with ordinary Photon Output.

When Shirone finished the sequence and opened his eyes, a white orb the size of a fist vibrated as if it were about to explode with rage.

Shirone gritted his teeth and unleashed the Photon Cannon. The beam of light shot out at sub-light speed, smashing into the sphere's fabric as if to tear it apart.

At first, the mercenaries didn't expect much, but they were captivated by the brilliance of the flash, and they waited with trembling hearts for the score.

4,783.

An unexpected number appeared, and everyone's eyes went wide.

The mage and the archer, both with knowledge of magic, were especially stunned. The magic Shirone had cast was none other than Photon Output.

Light itself had no special firepower. It was only defined by the product of speed and mass, determining the shockwave. Yet, it resulted in a score of 4,783. Compared to his teammates, it was on par with the shock a group of 20 warriors, all using strength-enhancing builds, would produce when they struck with all their might.

"Wh-What the heck are those?"

The mercenaries began to grow uneasy. They didn't know the exact principles behind Shirone's magic, but they realized that anyone who took a hit wouldn't be able to withstand it.

However, no one had time to think further. Despite the overwhelming power of the strike, the sphere's fabric emitted red light and delivered a failing grade.

Shirone's strength drained away. What kind of orb was it, anyway?

Maybe 5,000 points was the minimum threshold for passing. But it seemed unlikely that the Photon Cannon could increase its power beyond that.

"I wish I could try one more time."

Amy laughed as though she'd been waiting for this moment.

"Hehe! You understand how I feel, right? I felt the same way. But really, how many points does it take to pass?"

"I'm not sure. I think it might work better if I try it with a laser."

"Ah, right! A laser can accumulate energy!"

Shirone's laser would vibrate the molecules, gradually increasing its destructive power over time. In theory, it could destroy anything, making it perfect for such an evaluation.

"But there's another turn, so I'll try again after going around. What are you doing? Are you not going?"

Shirone said to the leader. But he just stood there with a look of disgust.

Seeing the rising scores, he couldn't bring himself to step forward. As a swordsman, the highest score he could achieve would barely be around 200 points.

"Tch! Forget it. It's already over! There's only going back now."

The leader walked quickly toward the entrance. But no matter how much he turned the doorknob, the iron door didn't budge.

When the group looked back in confusion, the man with the white tattoos spoke.

"You are one. If one person has been evaluated, everyone must be evaluated. You cannot leave before that."

Hearing the archer's translation, the group finally understood. It wasn't just a matter of joining their wills together; they actually had to act in unison according to the rules.

"Ah! How annoying! Why do you keep making us do things that won't work?"

The leader kept grumbling. But to leave this place, he had no choice but to prove his own abilities.

‘I see. This is really a cruel rule.’

Shirone felt a chill.

Why hadn’t he noticed this before? Everything the man with the white tattoos explained was based on one condition.

Trust among companions.

Thinking about it, it really was a strange evaluation method. When it came to firepower, the mage had a huge advantage over the swordsman.

But that didn’t mean that swordsmen were weaker than mages. Even if the mage could break rocks and split the earth, a swordsman was a biological combat specialist who could take down a mage with a single strike.

Moreover, measuring the power of magic was problematic. If Amy, a long-range magic expert, had attempted a sniper mode, she likely would have scored much higher. But this place didn’t take such variables into account.

In the narrow octagonal altar with no room to demonstrate any other means, and with eight orbs...

‘Why eight? Is it just for visual balance? But didn’t we all evaluate just one orb with eight people?’

Most strangely, however, was the divine language. The sphere’s fabric measured the shockwave and displayed the result as a number.

Why? What could that possibly mean?

If the point was just to discern who was worthy to go to Kergo, wouldn’t it suffice to just show pass or fail?

The variation in scores would be massive depending on the major’s specialty. In such a situation, requiring everyone to be evaluated created a structure where...

The emotions that arose from this were one thing.

‘Obsession with scores. If a teammate scores higher than you, it causes anxiety. If they score lower, they are dismissed. Without a perfect understanding of each other’s

roles, conflicts are inevitable. And at the end of that rule waits...'

One person can be sent forward by sacrificing another. Shirone took a deep breath. What was Miro thinking? This evaluation was designed to make them kill each other.

"Shirone, after this person finishes, let's just leave."

Amy whispered. Perhaps having the same thought, there was a visible tension in her eyes.

Rian and Tess also wore serious expressions, sensing that something was off.

Being those who emphasized camaraderie, it was natural for them to be sensitive to such an atmosphere, and since the evaluation was clearly unfavorable to the swordsman, they must have quickly grasped the intent behind the rules.

As expected, the leader didn't know what to do. He could feel the eyes of his mercenary comrades on him, their gazes different from before.

"Huh, huh, Aaaaah!"

The leader rushed forward without even catching his breath. He was charging ahead, but to Shirone's eyes, it looked as though he was running away from something.

Was the Schema properly activated? Where was the sword positioned? How far was the target? With no knowledge, he tripped over his steps.

With a brief gasp, he swung his sword wildly, but its accuracy faltered, and the blade merely grazed the side of the orb, bouncing off.

"Tch! Damn it!"

The leader, trying to break free from the Space-Time Maze and leave the altar, hurriedly regained his balance and looked back.

The number 32 hovered in the air.

But no one laughed. His comrades had frozen in their expressions, as though they had suffered a great humiliation.

“So what? It doesn’t matter! I didn’t pass anyway! I did it, right? Let’s just leave!”

The leader threw a fit, leaving the altar, but his steps were heading away from his comrades.

‘That party is over. They’ll probably disband as soon as they leave here.’

Shirone thought that it was time to back off. It was regrettable that he couldn’t try again, but he couldn’t do anything further with mercenaries whose trust had been broken.

“Excuse me... can you translate for me?”

Shirone asked the archer. Even if they were leaving, there was one thing he wanted to confirm.

The archer, perhaps feeling the same disillusionment with the situation, agreed without hesitation.

“Sure. What would you like me to ask?”

“Has anyone ever passed through this gate?”

The man with the white tattoo nodded firmly.

“It’s a gate for passing through. It’s not a trap.”

“What score is needed to pass through the Space-Time Maze?”

“The eight eyes of the angel will judge you.”

The man repeated what he had said earlier. In the end, it was the Space-Time Maze that decided everything.

After a moment of thought, Shirone asked his final question.

“Among the people who have come here, what percentage actually passed?”

“I don’t know exactly. Sometimes several come, and sometimes only one. From what I’ve observed, it seems that about one in ten passes. Most of the time, those who come alone have a higher pass rate.”

Shirone was taken aback. The rate was much higher than he had expected.

At first, he thought no one would pass. His assumption was that Miro’s purpose wasn’t simply to evaluate skill.

Of course, that assumption still held, but the man with the white tattoo had clearly said that there were passers, and with a remarkable 10% rate.

Shirone's lips trembled as a smile spread across his face. A chill ran down his spine.

"Shirone, what's wrong all of a sudden?"

"The headmaster... he's such a trickster."

"Huh? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Amy asked, puzzled, but Shirone wasn't in the mood to answer. It felt as though Alpheas's voice was echoing in his mind.

You should be able to roughly understand what kind of world Miro lives in.

Not just roughly, but he understood it clearly. If one couldn't pass through such an obstacle, they shouldn't even try to understand Miro.

'I'm sorry, Principal. But I've figured it out.'

Shirone did not give up. He was determined to pass through this place within the travel period.

Amy, looking at the silent Shirone, guessed.

'He hasn't given up, Shirone.'

Then she, too, wouldn't give up. At first, she had only followed to help Shirone, but now she truly wanted to learn about this woman, Miro.

Chapter 142: Space-Time Maze (6)

“Alright, let’s go already! No complaints, right? Hey, open this iron gate!”

The leader slammed on the iron gate. His pride had been crushed, and he could no longer bear the cold stares of his comrades.

“Do you all agree?”

The man asked, but there was no need for translation. The mercenaries nodded without a word and headed toward the door.

Their feelings were miserable. Entering this place had been a grave mistake. They had hoped to make a fortune in the loop but ended up losing their camaraderie, while the money was wasted.

“Hey, guys. Let’s get out of here. Over here.”

The mercenaries’ attitudes had changed. Though disheartened, it was better to keep an eye on things since the children weren’t ordinary.

However, Shirone and his party just stood still, watching the mercenaries.

The mage felt uneasy. The bad premonition was once again proving true when Amy spoke coldly.

“We don’t want to leave yet.”

The mercenaries’ heads all turned in unison. Their eyes were filled with anger, confusion, and fear, among other emotions.

The mage, who was quick to think, suppressed her anger and spoke in a calming tone.

“Why don’t you want to leave? It’s already over, isn’t it? We’re too tired, we don’t want to continue anymore.”

“That’s your situation. Once you enter this place, we are all one. Don’t you understand? If you just leave without asking for our opinion, that’s a problem.”

The mage felt frustrated but had no choice but to appease Amy for now.

“Alright, I didn’t consider that. So, let’s leave.”

“Sorry, but that’s not possible. We need to pass through this place and head to Kergo.”

“But there’s no way to get through! Ah...!”

The woman’s face turned pale. But there was a way.

This was the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. It wasn’t necessary to only prove achievement.

The man with the white tattoos spoke softly.

“Will you leave, or will you stay? If you want to prove your skills, pass through the room. If you wish to prove sacrifice, send four people with four sacrifices.”

“Huh? What is he saying?”

Before Rian could ask, the archer translated. Though it was a distorted and altered version of the words.

“Ah, he’s just saying to hurry up if you’re done here.”

Amy smiled and spoke.

“Wait, that’s strange? I definitely heard something different. ‘Send four with four sacrifices.’”

The archer’s eyes filled with shock.

“You... Do you know the native language?”

“What are you talking about? I heard that when I first arrived. Do you think we’re idiots, unable to remember what we hear just once?”

The archer stood there, dumbfounded. Ah, that was it? But... isn’t it strange to remember words you’ve never heard before?

“Anyway, four sacrifices. One, two, three, four. Exactly four people, right?”

The mercenaries’ faces drained of color. That girl really intended to sacrifice someone.

Rian and Tess also felt the tension, as if it were a real battle. Especially Tess, who was scared as Amy suddenly changed into someone fierce and started pacing nervously.

"Shirone, is this really okay? Eek, Amy's so scary!"

"It's fine. She's doing it on purpose."

"She's doing it on purpose? I don't think so."

"Just wait and see. Amy will take care of it."

The mercenaries exchanged glances. If they fought, they'd lose for sure. Rian and the warrior were evenly matched, and Tess was stronger than the leader.

Moreover, they had been overwhelmed in the mage's battle, and the archer would be useless against Shirone's light magic.

"Come at us. You all don't want to sacrifice anyone, right?"

Well, you'll have to do your best anyway."

"What's going on here? Are you doing this because of what happened at the tavern?"

Amy tilted her head with a teasing expression.

"Huh?"

The archer realized that a simple response wouldn't work to ease the situation. He walked toward Shirone's group, bowing politely and speaking.

"I'm sorry! We underestimated you and made a mistake.

Please forgive us, just this once. Hey, you all come over and apologize too."

The archer bowed his head, and the other three reluctantly followed. But since their lives were on the line, they at least apologized with a proper attitude.

"I'm sorry! I was too rude. Please forgive me."

"We won't do it again. We've learned a lot from this. So, can we just pretend the mistake we made at the tavern never happened?"

Amy furrowed her brows and replied.

"Hmm, I really don't understand. What mistake are you talking about? Wait, the tavern? Were you there? That's weird. How come I didn't see you?"

The mercenaries' faces turned bright red. Their pride was being stomped on, humiliated beyond recognition. This time, even Shirone couldn't help but shudder at Amy's persistence.

'If you make Amy mad, you'll end up like this.'

When they were mocked at the tavern, the ones who received the harshest treatment were Amy and Tess. Because they were women, they endured all kinds of insults and shame. Amy wasn't someone who would forget until she got her revenge, no matter how many years passed. But in a way, it could be said that this was the typical mindset of a mage who obsessed over efficiency. Even if it wasn't necessary, the mage would get frustrated at not utilizing the advantages given to her 100%. That was why mages were often called eccentric. In fact, many mages lacked humanity.

But it was that obsessive drive for efficiency that had allowed magic to develop until now and would continue to push its progress.

'What do they want us to do? Damn.'

The mercenaries had no idea what to do, and all they could do was bow their heads. The sound of their teeth grinding could almost be heard.

Amy, now finally ready to get to the point, spoke.

"I have a proposal. If you accept this, we can leave together."

"What kind of proposal?"

"You said we need to know the password to enter here, right? What's the password?"

The archer realized. The kids were planning to challenge this place again. They had likely done enough research and verified their chances before they would return to enter again.

"Kertia, Ro Hoima. Akrasia, Widmia Benzen. That's the password."

"What does it mean?"

“Knock on my door, and it will open.”

Amy turned to the man with the white tattoos. She then perfectly pronounced the ancient language the archer had just told them.

“Kertia, Ro Hoima. Akrasia, Widmia Benzen?”

The natives guarding the exit nodded as they recognized Amy’s intention.

The archer’s mood soured. Or rather, should he admire her? Her meticulousness was beyond belief.

“Damn it! Trust people a little! Do you think I’d lie in this situation?”

“Who’s saying anything? It’s not a bad thing to make sure, right? Anyway, got it. Thanks.”

Amy smiled, as if nothing had happened, and walked back to her friends. Tess was stunned by how quickly Amy’s emotional tone shifted, like a chameleon.

“So, you were trying to figure out the password? You have no idea how tense I was, thinking we were really going to fight.”

“Heh, it’s better to know it if we’re going to come back anyway. Anyway, let’s leave.”

When both Shirone’s group and the mercenaries expressed their desire to leave, the man with the white tattoos pulled a lever beside the iron gate.

The entrance shook violently and opened, revealing the way out.

Just like when they came in, the mercenaries went up the stairs first.

But the atmosphere was completely different from before.

They all had their heads down like defeated soldiers, and no one said a word.

Shirone’s group was just as silent.

Though they couldn’t enter the autonomous district, that was a problem they could solve with a strategy from here on out.

For now, Shirone's mind was filled with thoughts of the Space-Time Maze experience they had just faced.

'The Space-Time Maze. Why did Miro create such a device? And why did she set such cruel rules? What exactly is in Kergo? What kind of connection is there between Kergo and Miro to begin with? I want to know. Perhaps Miro is...'

While Shirone was analyzing Miro, Amy, walking behind him, was lost in her own thoughts.

'There isn't just one way to investigate the ruins. Let's plan every possible strategy. Shirone seems to have his own ideas, but exploring the underground using the Spirit Zone shouldn't be ruled out. Even if we pass, there's the issue of translation. We'll need to find someone outside who can interpret. We should be able to find a local.'

Tess also found this place equally impressive. The fact that he could quantify his own power was a significant achievement.

'So, the impact force of a rapier can be stronger than that of a blunt weapon. But in the end, it still couldn't match magic. Can a swordsman pass through that gate? If so, how strong would they need to be? Shirone's magic approached 5,000 points, which suggests it's about ten times the force of my strongest strike. If the passing standard is about double that, could my father manage it? Ugh, if only I knew the cut-off score, I could set a goal. Shirone said he'd come back, so I'll have to do more research when he does.'

Lastly, Rian, who was trailing behind, was silent as well. He seemed to be deep in thought, with a furrowed brow.

'What should I eat when we get out?'

After walking for about 30 minutes, Shirone and his group arrived at the altar on the surface.

When they knocked from inside, a native opened the door, but due to the tense atmosphere they had experienced underground, the group couldn't help but remain alert.

Stepping outside, the fresh air cleansed their lungs. Even though it had only been a few hours, the sun in the sky

seemed unfamiliar, as if it weren't the same day.

Shirone's group and the mercenary band split and moved in opposite directions, though they remained within sight.

Shirone's group wanted to savor the lingering emotions, while the mercenary band was on the verge of collapse.

Shirone summed up the day's events.

"What should we do now? We achieved more than expected, so should we wrap up today's exploration?"

Amy wholeheartedly agreed.

"Let's do that. It's been a while since I exerted myself like this, so I'm tired. We should head back early and make some plans."

Rian, as if making a major discovery, spoke up.

"Before that, how about we get a bowl of noodles? That place earlier was pretty good."

Tess's eyes narrowed at Rian.

"You're eating noodles again? At least we should get buckwheat noodles or something more interesting. You're so simple."

"What's that supposed to mean? I put a lot of thought into that choice!"

"So what? You're just going to end up back where you started."

While Rian and Tess were arguing over the menu, the mercenaries approached. Shirone's group paused their conversation and turned to look at them.

There were the warrior, the mage, and the archer, but the leader was nowhere to be seen.

The mercenaries exchanged uneasy glances, unable to speak. Eventually, the mage, deemed the most suitable, was nudged forward.

But she, too, found the situation so awkward that it took a while for her to speak.

"Um... would you guys consider joining our mercenary group?"

"A mercenary group?"

“Yes. You might not realize it, but being a mercenary has its perks. There’s honor, and of course, you can make a lot of money. Especially with your skills, you’d become stars in no time. As you saw, our leader just quit... Oh, and you can even be the new leader if you want. We’ll follow your orders without question, and if anyone else joins, we’ll treat them well. What do you think?”

Shirone stared at the mage’s hopeful eyes. Without even pausing to think, he immediately replied.

“No.”

With that, he turned and started walking away, and his friends followed without hesitation.

“Let’s just get the noodles. They were good, weren’t they?”

“No. You just want to fill your stomach first, don’t you? If we wait a little longer, we can eat something even better.”

The mercenaries watched Shirone’s group retreat with blank expressions.

The mage’s face fell, and a sigh laced with resignation escaped her lips.

“Oh, what a wretched life I have.”

Chapter 143: The Name of the Parrot (1)

There was a secret space in the tavern known as the Royal Palace—accessible only to Falcoa among the Freeman organization.

It was the Loop Manufacturing Plant.

“You insolent brats! Do you think it’ll end like this?”

Standing next to Falcoa, Jiese’s heart pounded nervously. Though he had witnessed Falcoa’s eccentricities for years, today’s situation was far from ordinary.

‘What on earth is he planning? And why did he bring me here out of nowhere?’

Jiese, who had just finished his usual work luring customers at the harbor, was dragged here by Falcoa’s subordinates. Even though it had been a day since Shirone’s group caused chaos at the tavern and left, Falcoa’s fury had not subsided.

“Just you wait. I won’t let this slide,” Falcoa sneered, his lips curling into a grotesque grin. The faces of Shirone’s group flashed vividly in his mind, stoking his anger.

The one he hated most was, of course, Amy.

When she brazenly downed the drink he had spiked with Loop and flaunted her red eyes as if mocking him, Falcoa had nearly drawn his sword on the spot, money and all be damned.

Jiese, paralyzed with fear, glanced warily at Falcoa. Beside him, Falcoa was tinkering with a device used to process Loop into powder.

The process involved compressing Loop roots to extract their juice, then grinding them until all the moisture evaporated, leaving behind a fine powder.

But could this even be called a drug?

Normally, Loop was used by chewing the roots and neutralizing them with saliva. However, the substance Falcoa was creating now was little more than a toxic chemical weapon, refined purely for its potency.

"Jiese, we'll have to make another trip."

"W-Where to?"

"To that girl, Amy. Since it worked the first time, we'll succeed again. Don't even think about saying you can't. You've got eyes, don't you? Then you should know what I'm capable of right now."

Jiese gulped hard. He had expected Falcoa to seek revenge, but not to this extent.

Jiese had a hunch that Amy came from an extraordinary family. If they targeted her, it was only a matter of time before the Galliant government turned the island to ash.

"You're not thinking... of getting her addicted, are you?"

"Addicted? You idiot. That girl will never get addicted. No way. The famed Scarlet Noble of the continent, addicted to some measly Loop? Impossible."

"Then isn't this unnecessary? You'll only stir up trouble for no reason."

Desperate, Jiese clung to a sliver of hope and tried to reason with Falcoa. But it was clear his words weren't reaching him.

"You stupid fool. Can't you think for a second? It's *because* she won't get addicted that this plan will work!"

Falcoa poured the powdered Loop into parchment paper, then dumped it all into a pre-prepared cup of water.

Jiese's breath caught in his throat.

Though he had never used Loop himself, he knew how it worked. Normally, chewing one root was enough for two hours of use. The amount Falcoa had just dissolved in the water was three times that.

And since it was in liquid form, its effects—ordinarily taking six hours to fully manifest—would hit all at once.

"N-No way..."

“That’s right. We’re going to make her drink it again. That arrogant girl will confidently take it, no doubt. But this dose of Loop? She’ll have no chance. She’ll die. You understand what I’m saying?”

“W-Why go so far? If she dies, you can’t sell her!”

“Ha! Doesn’t matter. Bring me the body.”

Falcoa transferred the Loop solution into a glass bottle. Once inside the container, the liquid shimmered like a beautiful jade-green cocktail.

“Here, take it. It’s simple. Lure her out with some excuse, make her drink this, then load her into the carriage and bring her back. Easy enough, right?”

Jiese stared at the glass bottle, his bloodshot eyes filled with dread. His hands trembled uncontrollably.

Amy wouldn’t refuse. If she drank even a sip, it would be over.

“What are you waiting for? Not taking it? Or do you want to drink it yourself?”

Falcoa’s murderous aura bore down on Jiese, as if a hand were physically gripping his throat.

“Stop it, you filthy scum.”

“What?”

Falcoa’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Had the effects of the Loop dulled his senses? That wasn’t it.

He had grown desensitized to the drug’s effects after consuming it so relentlessly.

“What did you just say? Say it again.”

Sometimes, when faced with something utterly shocking, people regain their composure in a twisted way. That was Falcoa now.

Anger could wait. First, he needed to confirm if this brat had truly dared to insult him.

Jiese’s throat tightened, and he couldn’t find the words.

This might be his last chance. If he apologized now, maybe he’d escape with only half his bones broken.

‘But...’

Jiese couldn't bring himself to kneel to Falcoa.

I don't dislike people like you.

That single sentence Amy had said with a smile as they rode in the carriage bound him.

Why? All he had to do was admit his weakness.

Yet the moment he apologized to Falcoa, it felt as though Amy would become a liar. He couldn't take back the words he had spoken, no matter how much he wanted to.

"Stop it, you dirty scumbag. You're not even human! You're so warped by drugs you can't tell right from wrong! Calling you trash is an insult to trash!"

Jiese felt lightheaded. As the rush of adrenaline mixed with terror, his consciousness began to waver.

But he had spoken.

Just like Shirone—like someone who believed there was no future.

Falcoa's fist came crashing into Jiese's face like lightning.

"Ugh!"

As darkness overtook him, Jiese finally realized the grim reality. A hellish future awaited him.

"You lunatic! Did your brain rot away?"

Falcoa, now fully enraged, unleashed his fury on Jiese, beating him savagely.

This wasn't just intimidation—it was a beating with intent to kill. If he had activated his Schema, Jiese's body would have been reduced to a bloody pulp.

"Die! Die! Die!"

Jiese couldn't even scream.

As the sensation of his body shattering faded, he was left numb. Only the impact of the blows registered now.

"Phew... No, killing you outright would be too easy."

Regaining his composure, Falcoa smiled—a far more sinister omen for Jiese.

"Cough... Cough..."

Falcoa grabbed Jiese by the hair and lifted him off the ground. His broken body felt like it would crumble at any

moment.

“Fine, then. I have my own plan.”

Without Jiese’s involvement, it would be impossible to trap Amy. However, Falcoa was growing tired of fussing over trivial matters.

“I’m impressed, Jiese. A coward like you mustered this much courage. Looks like you’re infatuated with that girl. Fine, as you wish, I won’t touch her. How does that sound? Are you happy now?”

“P-Please... Please spare me just this once,” Jis pleaded, tears streaming down his face. He already knew exactly what Falcoa was thinking.

“Yuna, was it? Your little sister’s name. From this moment on, you’ll regret the decision you made today for the rest of your life.”

“No, please... At least spare Yuna—ugh!”

Falcoa grabbed Jiese by the hair and slammed his head into the ground. His face bounced off the floor like a ball, only to crash back down. The single blow rendered Jiese unconscious.

“Ha-ha-ha, this is turning out to be entertaining.”

Of course, just because the target had shifted to Jiese’s little sister didn’t mean Falcoa had any intention of forgiving Amy. He planned to bring Yuna to the hideout, torment her, and use her to threaten Jiese. With Yuna’s life at stake, Jiese would have no choice but to comply.

“Bring that girl Yuna to the hideout immediately!”

Falcoa roared at his subordinates. Seething with fury, Falcoa bit into an entire root of Loop.

By the time Shirone and his group arrived at the villa, it was already close to midnight. The distance had required them to stop along the way for dinner before resuming their journey.

Though they hadn’t achieved their intended goals in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, they had gained many

valuable insights.

The four of them had been engaged in constant conversation, and before they knew it, the discussions had led to each of them sharing thoughts they had kept hidden in their hearts.

“Oh my, you’re planning to become a soldier?”

Tess’s eyes widened in surprise upon hearing Amy’s career aspiration. She hadn’t expected Amy to aim for a military path.

Of course, Amy, being a mage specializing in fire magic and honing her sniper mode, was well-suited for combat roles. However, Tess knew Amy as someone who, despite her outwardly bold demeanor, was tender-hearted and full of compassion. Tess struggled to imagine Amy on the battlefield, striking down countless foes.

“Honestly, I’m worried. I always thought a more feminine job would suit you better, Amy.”

“Hmm? A feminine job for me? I’ve never heard anyone say that at school.”

Tess could infer just how spirited Amy’s school life must have been. But being someone who could read people well, Tess also understood Amy’s true nature.

“Hehe, I have a knack for espionage, you know. The truth is, Amy is actually very delicate and feminine.”

Amy offered a subtle smile. She had never considered herself particularly feminine, but she couldn’t entirely deny the suggestion.

No matter how bold her personality was, she couldn’t shake the uncertainty of whether she could truly adapt to the male-dominated military world.

“To be honest, I’m not sure. My strengths lie in targeting magic, so I chose fire magic. That led me to naturally pick the profession that best aligned with my specialization. But I do think positively about being a soldier. After all, being in the military doesn’t only mean fighting on the front lines.”

"That's true. There are logistics officers, too. And if you work in the operations command, there's a lot of potential for a bright future. Oh! What about this?"

Tess clapped her hands as if an idea had struck her, prompting Amy to look at her with curious eyes.

"Huh? What is it?"

Tess extended her index and middle fingers, mimicking aiming at someone walking along the sandy beach under the moonlight.

"An intelligence agent. With your abilities, Amy, your strategic thinking is exceptional. Plus, you're a sharpshooter, right? Above all, you have the most critical weapon for espionage missions."

"The most critical weapon? What's that?"

Amy's eyes sparkled with curiosity. As someone pondering her future, the idea that she might have another hidden strength excited her.

"A pretty face. Beauty is essential for female spies. No man in the world dislikes a beautiful woman."

Tess grinned mischievously as she spoke, causing Amy to turn her head away with a sulky expression.

"Oh, come on. I got my hopes up for nothing."

"Hehe, sorry. But I wasn't entirely joking. When selecting national intelligence agents, appearance is a priority. In professions that involve dealing with people, your looks would be a significant asset. So, think about it seriously. I'll even recommend you to our family network."

"No, thanks. I'll just rely on my magic skills."

Amy's face flushed red. Though she spoke curtly, it was clear she didn't entirely dislike the compliment about her appearance.

'Ah, how cute. See? You're so feminine.'

To Tess, Amy was an endlessly entertaining friend to tease. As she pondered how to keep pestering Amy, Tess suddenly remembered something she was genuinely curious about.

"By the way, what happens after graduation?"

“Huh? Of course, I’ll take the certification exams and look for a job.”

“No, I meant Shirone.”

“Shirone? What about Shirone?”

Chapter 144: The Name of the Parrot (2)

At first, Amy blinked in confusion, unable to understand. Then, as she realized what Tess was implying, she turned her head away with an embarrassed expression.

"You're saying weird stuff all of a sudden. What does Shirone have to do with my graduation?"

"But think about it. Shirone is still in Class Four, and you're a senior. Plus, with your skills, you'll surely graduate next year. That means you'll leave for the capital, won't you?"

The moment Amy heard the word "capital," her heart suddenly began to race.

She had never thought about that before. But realistically, it wasn't something far off in the future.

"It's none of my business."

"Oh, really?"

Though Amy spoke in a cold tone, Tess didn't sense a shred of sincerity in her voice.

After a moment of silence, just as Tess had expected, Amy began to open up about what was on her mind.

"Well... we made a promise. That he'd definitely catch up to me. That was the condition for him being able to speak casually with me."

Tess raised her eyebrows and let out a curious "Hmm." If they'd gone as far as to make such a promise, their feelings for each other couldn't be entirely insignificant.

"Hmm. Shirone's definitely impressive, but he only advanced to Class Four after half a year, right? No matter how much of a genius he is, could he really graduate so easily?"

Deep down, Amy knew it too. Shirone's achievements so far were beyond what most people could even dream of.

An eighteen-year-old boy who hadn't known magic until recently had climbed to Class Four in just six months.

Expecting any more from him might be asking too much.

Amy gazed at Shirone's back as he walked ahead. Had Shirone ever thought about this? If he really graduated, would he miss her?

Taking the first step ahead of others giving their all was never easy. Yet Shirone had already taken several strides ahead. Perhaps he was burning through all his talent, pushing himself to his very limits.

Though Amy understood this, she couldn't help but feel bitter. Glaring at Shirone's back with a sharp gaze, she sent her thoughts to him.

'Hurry up and catch up, you hear me? If you fall behind, I won't let it slide.'

After finishing their private conversation, the two girls quickened their pace to catch up with Shirone and Rian.

Reunited as a group, the four continued chatting as they climbed the hill toward the villa. But suddenly, Tess stopped and warned in a low voice.

"Shh. Be quiet."

"What's going on...?"

Amy turned to Tess, puzzled. At first, she thought it might be another one of Tess's jokes. However, seeing Tess's serious expression, Amy immediately closed her mouth.

As someone trained in saber swordsmanship, Tess specialized in sensory-based builds within the Schema.

While not on par with an archer, her sensory acuity far exceeded that of ordinary people.

Noticing the shift in the atmosphere, Shirone and Rian moved closer to Tess. She raised a finger to her lips, signaling for silence.

"There's someone in front of the villa. Judging by his lung capacity, it's a man. If he's of average build, his height

should be between 170 and 175 centimeters.”

Rian reached for the handle of the longsword strapped to his back. After the chaos at the royal palace the night before, the possibility of an intruder couldn't be ruled out.

“He doesn't seem hostile, but be prepared just in case.”

Moving silently like a cat, Tess approached. The other three followed her cautiously.

When they reached the villa, they saw someone standing by the front door. The figure, visible only as a silhouette, was motionless, staring off into the distance.

Remaining on high alert, the group advanced. However, before they could take many steps, the figure suddenly collapsed to the ground.

Sharing a glance, Shirone and the others hurried toward the door.

The late-night visitor was Jiese. His face was battered so badly that there wasn't a single uninjured spot.

Shirone rushed to support Jiese by grabbing his side. Even the slightest touch caused Jiese to wince in pain, clenching his face tightly.

“Ugh! Ah, it hurts!”

“Are you okay? Who did this to you?”

“G-Get away from me!”

Jiese shoved Shirone away. If Shirone knew why he was in this state, he wouldn't be able to get angry. At the very least, Jiese didn't want to show his weak side in front of Amy.

Sliding down to the ground with his back against the door, Jiese tried to catch his breath. When Shirone moved to help him again, Jiese smirked bitterly, letting out a strained chuckle.

“Out having fun this late? Must be nice to live so carefree.”

Though Jiese appeared to be in critical condition, Tess didn't let down her guard.

After all, he was the one who had lured Amy into danger the previous night using dubious methods. Injured or not, she

wasn't about to trust him.

Amy, however, approached him without hesitation. It wasn't that she trusted Jiese, but as someone familiar with how things worked in this world, she had a rough idea of what might have happened.

"What the hell happened to you? Tell me. Was it Falcoa?"

Instead of answering, Jiese lifted his head and shot Shirone a piercing glare.

Oddly enough, the thought that he could glare at Shirone so directly made him feel a little better.

Amy's life, which he had protected even at the lowest point of his life, flashed before him. For at least a minute, he felt he deserved to be the main character of this moment, explaining the situation.

"Hey, you. Listen closely. Take better care of your woman."

"What are you talking about?"

When Shirone tilted his head in confusion, Jiese's face twisted in anger. From the moment he had spoken with Amy in the carriage, he had sensed it—there was no clear definition to their relationship.

That made him even angrier. Why did he have to suffer like this for Shirone, who seemed to have everything Jiese lacked?

"Amy, you idiot! If you're going to cause this kind of mess, at least take responsibility and protect her properly!"

"I don't understand what you're talking about. Amy? She's been with us all day."

Jiese recalled Falcoa's orders. Even now, the absurdity of it made him let out a bitter laugh.

Rian's eyes flared like those of a tiger as he clenched his fists. The others who had been listening were no less enraged.

Of course, Amy wasn't foolish enough to be unaware of Falcoa's schemes. However, considering her pride and the potency of her abilities, it was clear that a disastrous situation could have arisen.

Realizing this, Tess shivered with a chill running down her spine.

“He’s insane. I knew he wasn’t normal, but he’s gone completely off the deep end.”

Shirone’s voice trembled more than ever before.

“And the drink...?”

“I threw it in the trash. I told him I couldn’t do it. Do you get it now? I’m the one who protected Amy! Not you—me! I risked my life to keep her safe! Understand, you idiot?!”

Shirone and his group fell silent. They couldn’t argue, and they didn’t want to.

Shirone knelt down, lowering himself to meet Jiese’s gaze.

“Jiese, we...”

“Don’t start!”

Jiese cut him off, shouting with all his might. The effort sent a sharp pain through his ribs, as if they might break further. But the tears streaming from his eyes weren’t from physical pain.

“I said...”

Jiese collapsed flat on the ground, pressing his forehead against the dirt. In a voice choked with sobs, he begged:

“Please help me.”

Shirone and the others could only stare at the prostrate Jiese in silence.

“My sister... My sister seems to have been taken. When I came to, I went to the shop, but they said she had gone home. When I got to the house, she wasn’t there either. So I searched everywhere, but no one would help me. Please, find my sister. I’m begging you.”

Jiese broke into loud sobs, repeating “please” over and over, as if that was all he could say.

Shirone looked at him with a mix of anger and sorrow swelling in his chest.

How long had Jiese wandered the streets in this miserable state? Who would care about the sister of someone from the back alleys? The image of Jiese roaming aimlessly, calling

out her name amidst everyone's indifference, was painfully vivid.

"My sister. My little sister. My everything..."

"Do you have any idea where she might have been taken? Any guesses?"

Jiese raised his head. He had come here because there was no one else to ask for help, but even if they wanted to help, it would mean confronting the island's rulers, the Freeman Organization, directly.

Even for mages, it was a matter of life and death. He hadn't expected them to agree so readily and had steeled himself to beg for their aid, prepared to die.

But Shirone didn't hesitate as he asked where she might have been taken.

"Thank you! Truly, thank you!"

Jiese repeatedly bowed his head. This was all he could do to express his gratitude.

Watching this, Amy frowned in dissatisfaction. Grabbing Jiese by the arm, she pulled him to his feet.

"Enough of that. Just act normal. You're making this more awkward for us. Let's go inside first. We'll talk while treating your wounds."

"But my sister..."

"You idiot! Rushing in without a plan will just get us killed first! If she was kidnapped on her way home, then there's still enough time. If it comes to it, we can even fly there. First, let's treat you."

Amy supported Jiese as she opened the door to the villa.

While she was worried about the girl, Yuna, taking care of Jiese's injuries had to come first.

When Jiese lay on the bed, Tess began removing his clothes. Having learned numerous combat support skills, she could assess his condition at a glance. The shape of the bruises confirmed that his ribs were fractured.

Tess pressed on various parts of Jiese's body.

"Ugh! Ow, that hurts!"

“Of course it hurts. You’ve been beaten to a pulp. They really didn’t hold back. Hang in there. I need to check your internal organs.”

Tess pressed down hard on Jiese’s abdomen. With his organs protected by layers of skin and muscle, a forceful touch was necessary for a thorough examination.

“Aaaargh!”

Though the pain was excruciating, Jiese endured it with everything he had. His only thought was to end the treatment quickly so they could go rescue Yuna.

“Good news. Your ribs are cracked, and the rest are just bruises. No internal injuries. You’re surprisingly sturdy.”

Jiese gave a bitter smile. While he wasn’t good at fighting, he had taken enough beatings from countless nobles to grow resilient to pain.

As Tess wrapped his injuries with a bandage, Jiese explained the situation.

Based on Yuna’s working hours and her usual time of returning home, he estimated the kidnapping had occurred about two hours ago.

“They probably took her to their hideout, so she likely hasn’t arrived yet. But even if we can’t make it on time, I just hope Yuna’s alive...”

Amy interrupted Jiese mid-sentence.

“Don’t worry. They’ll be moving by carriage, so if we borrow horses and ride, we can catch up. Where’s the hideout exactly? It sounds like it’s pretty far from here.”

“I’ve never been there myself, but I heard it’s in the northern part of the island. Even that, I’m not sure about.”

“No, it’s probably there.”

Shirone was confident about the location. The island’s northern region was surrounded by natural cliffs. When they first arrived, they’d had to dock at the southern port for this very reason.

Moreover, the northern area was close to the autonomous district of Kergo, outside government jurisdiction. It was the

perfect location for a hideout.

"Alright, let's head out. Can you stay here by yourself?"

Jiese nodded. Even if his injuries worsened, he had no intention of stopping Shirone.

Still, his expression was dark. He felt a gnawing guilt for pushing these people into danger for his own sake.

"Are you sure about this? It's ridiculous to say this after asking for help, but those guys are really strong."

Amy snorted. Even if it wasn't for Jiese's sister, she had already decided that Falcoa was someone she'd deal with sooner or later.

Chapter 145: The Name of the Parrot (3)

“Hmph, they’re just thugs, after all. Don’t worry about it. Just wait here for us to return.”

Jiese shared everything he knew. He didn’t want to frighten the group heading to save his sister, but letting them go without warning would weigh too heavily on his conscience.

“They appeared out of nowhere and took control of the island in just three months. They’re no ordinary organization. From what I’ve heard from one of Falcoa’s direct subordinates, before coming to this island, they were called the Parrot Bandits.”

“The Parrot Bandits?”

Shirone’s eyes widened in shock. Amy also paused in thought, surprised by this revelation.

The Parrot Bandits were the same group to which Lucas, the man who had attacked the academy alongside Arcane, belonged.

Amy recalled witnessing Lucas’s martial prowess. Her memory, which had resurfaced when the effects of Abyss Nova wore off, reminded her of how even Iruki and Nade’s combined efforts couldn’t handle him.

If it hadn’t been for Siena’s unexpected intervention, the students might not have escaped unharmed.

Still, knowing their identity didn’t change the situation. A helpless girl’s life was at stake, so the most important thing was to move quickly.

“It’s fine. We’ve even fought and defeated the vice-captain of the Parrot Bandits before.”

Jiese bit back his tears, clenching his teeth.

“Thank you. I can’t believe you’re willing to go this far for someone like me.”

Every noble Jiese had encountered before treated people from the slums like him as less than human.

Perhaps that was only natural. Why would the elites, who monopolized wealth and fame, ever spare a glance for the dregs of the underworld?

But these people were different. They were willing to fight for someone like him, who had only ever schemed to swindle them with his smooth talk.

“How could I ever repay this kindness...?”

Amy, feeling awkward from his repeated gratitude, sighed as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Enough of that. If you think about it, you saved me first. If anything, we owe you.”

“But this is so dangerous...”

“Don’t overthink it. We’re not strangers anymore. Besides, you made a manly request, so we’re answering it.”

Jiese looked at Amy in disbelief.

How could she use the word “manly” to describe the current situation? If anything, the opposite was true.

“Ugh, if this is about pity, just stop. What’s so manly about this? No man begs this desperately. My pride is in shambles.”

“What are you talking about? You threw away your pride and begged for your sister’s sake.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

Amy smiled and lightly pushed Jiese’s forehead with her finger.

“That’s what makes it manly, you idiot.”

As Amy walked away, Jiese felt his emotions surge, and tears threatened to spill. But he held them back. Crying now would only dampen the resolve of those heading into danger.

Rian patted Jiese on the shoulder as he followed Amy.

“Don’t worry. You saved my friend, so we’ll save your sister too.”

Tess added with a smirk, “But when we get back, you better give us a proper tour. We’ll make sure we’re well-compensated for our trouble.”

At the door, Shirone turned back to Jiese and spoke firmly.

“Trust us. We’ll bring your sister back safely.”

In the end, Jiese couldn’t hold back his tears. He ran to the door, ignoring the pain of his bandaged wounds, and shouted toward the departing group.

“Be careful! Seriously, be careful! If you don’t come back safe, I’ll never forgive you!”

Shirone and the others didn’t look back. But their increasingly hurried footsteps spoke louder than any words could.

Shirone and his group rented four horses from the western commercial district. Tess had suggested they avoid using a carriage, as its lack of speed would make it impossible to reach their destination in time.

Despite their bold assurances to Jiese, the situation was not in their favor.

The revelation of the Freeman Organization’s true nature weighed heavily on their minds.

Lucas, the vice-captain of the Parrot Bandits, was classified as a B-rank criminal.

In criminal rankings, the classification not only indicated the severity of the crimes committed but also served as a measure of the individual’s combat abilities.

Even a serial killer causing havoc in a city wouldn’t be sent to the Western Inferno Prison unless they were a physically formidable threat.

Shirone had a sinking feeling that he had become involved in something truly dangerous.

Something about the situation felt off. After the Arcane incident, Shirone had heard that the leader of the Parrot

Bandits was an A-rank criminal and was currently wanted. If that was the case, then who was this Freeman leading the Freeman Organization that they were now up against?

“Amy, are you sure these are really the Parrot Bandits? Doesn’t something about this feel strange to you?”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. How could a wanted organization establish a base in a tourist area? Especially since the Arcane incident should have intensified the search for the Parrot Bandits.”

Tess, riding on Amy’s right, joined the conversation.

“They’re not the Parrot Bandits.”

“What? Do you know something?”

“They were probably renamed when they crossed into the Kingdom of Tormia. Their original name was the Parrot Mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries? They were mercenaries? What about Lucas, then?”

“I can’t say for certain, but I do know how they became bandits.”

“Why?”

Shirone asked immediately, but Tess hesitated to answer. The story itself wasn’t particularly rare or shocking. But in their current situation—preparing for a fierce battle—she worried that this information might shake their resolve.

“Tess, if you know something, tell us,” Amy urged, unable to contain her curiosity. Tess reluctantly began to explain.

“There’s an incident connected to the Parrot Mercenaries that caused a stir across the continent. Have you heard about the Vase Incident in the Kingdom of Iron seven years ago?”

“Oh, I’ve heard about it. We learned about it in school.”

Here’s what Shirone knew: At a noble gathering in the Kingdom of Iron, a high-ranking noble named Valtes declared that he would gift his cherished vase to anyone who could prove themselves braver than him.

A lower-ranking noble named Moose took up the challenge by smashing the vase against the wall.

On the surface, it seemed like a drunken prank between nobles, but digging deeper revealed political tensions that had festered for a long time.

“Iron’s noble system is bicameral. The upper house represents the king’s authority, while the lower house represents the common people. Thanks to this, Iron became a prosperous nation, but the conflicts among its nobles were severe.”

Allowing commoners into politics weakened noble authority. Yet as more independent-minded commoners rose, the nation’s wealth and power inevitably grew.

“The upper house’s strength comes from power, while the lower house’s comes from taxes. The clash between the two factions was inevitable. When Moose, a lower noble, acted so audaciously, Valtes was furious. Though the incident was hushed up at the time, the resentment must have lingered.”

“But what does that have to do with the Parrot Bandits—or rather, the Parrot Mercenaries?”

“Three months after the Vase Incident, Moose’s territory fell into civil war. A mysterious army attacked. According to intelligence, the one who orchestrated the conflict was Valtes. Instead of using his own soldiers, he hired mercenaries to attack Moose.”

“So, could the mercenaries involved have been...?”

“Yes, the Parrot Mercenaries. While many mercenary groups participated, the Parrot Mercenaries stood out for their overwhelming strength, breaking through Moose’s defensive walls. However, just as they were on the verge of breaching the inner castle, Valtes’s own troops attacked them from behind, ambushing the mercenaries.”

Shirone could easily imagine the scenario.

Hire mercenaries to attack your enemies, then use your own forces to eliminate the mercenaries. In this way, you could claim victory while maintaining innocence.

“Valtes never intended to destroy Moose completely. The lower house, supported by commoners, was far more powerful than expected. He probably just wanted to teach them a lesson. From the start, the mercenaries were expendable pawns. Attack the territory, then dispose of them—a perfect strategy.”

“But wouldn’t the lower nobles retaliate after something like that?”

“They couldn’t act openly. After all, the upper house nobles were under the king’s protection. There was likely some sort of agreement. The fact that Moose hasn’t mentioned the incident even after seven years suggests that Valtes compensated him in some way.”

Hearing this, Rian frowned in disgust.

“So the mercenaries were the only ones betrayed? I can’t understand the way politicians think. It’s dishonorable.”

“It’s a natural reaction. But I’ve come across far worse intelligence through my family. The world doesn’t always work the way we think it should.”

Tess’s words left the group silent. They knew that one day, they would have to step into the realm where these great powers clashed. While the Vase Incident didn’t directly involve them, it no longer felt like a distant matter.

“Anyway, the mercenaries were abandoned. Those who attacked Moose’s territory were executed for treason, and the Parrot Mercenaries were disbanded.”

Amy spoke up.

“But they survived in the end, didn’t they? That’s why they fled to the Kingdom of Tormia.”

“Exactly. The mercenary group was dissolved, but a handful of skilled members escaped. This part is speculation, but maintaining a mercenary group after being branded as traitors would have been impossible. They likely turned to banditry and, as criminals, ended up here on this island.”

Tess’s reasoning was sound, but Shirone felt uneasy.

For mercenaries fleeing treason charges to retain the name “Parrot,” they would have needed significant resources, influence, and a remarkable leader.

“Couldn’t it just be a coincidence that the name is the same? There are countless guilds in the world, and ‘Parrot’ isn’t exactly unique.”

Tess hesitated. The moment she had feared had arrived.

“Shirone, remember that woman you told us about?”

“Huh? Marsha?”

After rescuing Amy from the palace, Shirone had briefly mentioned Marsha during a late-night snack. However, he had avoided sharing the full details—especially the part about her near-tragic experience with his foster father, which he intended to take to the grave.

“When I first heard Jiese’s story, I thought it was just speculation. But then I remembered something. The leader of the Parrot Mercenaries back then had a name...”

“What name? It wasn’t Freeman?”

“Clay Marsha. That was the leader’s name.”

When Tess finally revealed the name, Shirone’s expression went blank. The image of Marsha, who had been like a kind older sister to him, didn’t align with the idea of a mercenary leader.

“At first, I thought it was just someone with the same name. But when you mentioned she was raised by mercenaries, I began to wonder. Then, after hearing Jiese’s story, I became certain. The people controlling this island are remnants of an A-rank mercenary group betrayed in the Kingdom of Iron seven years ago.”

“That’s impossible. Marsha would never... I told you before; she’s not the kind of person who would do something like this.”

“Are you sure?”

Tess fixed Shirone with a piercing gaze, her eyes sharp and probing like those of a spy reading his mind.

“Do you truly believe that about Marsha?”

Shirone bit his lip. Deep down, he knew the truth. No matter how much he wanted to trust her, his intuition had already begun to doubt.

“I’m sorry... You’re probably right. It does seem that way.”
Piece by piece, everything began to fit together. Even her bitter comments about the collusion between nobles and criminals now made sense.

Chapter 146: The Name of the Parrot (4)

Tess felt uneasy about Shirone's quick shift in perspective. From her experiences with him, she knew how rationally he viewed the world.

Shirone wasn't the type to adapt his stance based on fleeting emotions. However, he wasn't a cold-hearted person either.

He simply knew how to control his emotions, but inside, countless conflicts must have been raging.

Tess worried that Shirone's current state could negatively affect him in the upcoming battle.

"Shirone, there's no need to overthink it. We're not going to fight; we're going to rescue Jiese's sister. Whatever kind of person Marsha might be, you can confirm it for yourself when the time comes."

Shirone forced a smile. He understood what Tess was concerned about, but that only strengthened his resolve. If the woman he confirmed with his own eyes turned out to truly be a villain, he was determined to cast aside his feelings and take her down with all his strength.

"Don't worry. I won't make any mistakes."

With those words, Shirone spurred his horse forward, cutting swiftly through the cool night air.

Forced Breakthrough (1)

There was no direct route from the western district to the northern hideout due to the presence of the indigenous autonomous zone in the center.

Those who kidnapped Yuna had taken a wide detour around Mount Toa to reach the hideout. By the time they arrived at their destination, dawn was already breaking.

Inside a shabby, warehouse-like building, Falcoa sat slumped in a chair. His half-dilated pupils stared blankly as the ground beneath him was littered with chewed-up Loop shells he had spat out.

The subordinates who entered the warehouse bowed their heads to Falcoa before tossing a sack containing Yuna onto the floor.

With a thud, the sack landed heavily, but no scream escaped. Only an intense trembling emanated from within, signaling the terror consuming its occupant.

The violent shudders coming from the sack made it clear just how frightened she was.

At Falcoa's nod, one of his men unsheathed a knife and sliced open the sack. Like a cocoon being split, Yuna emerged, drenched in tears and sweat.

Her terrified eyes darted around, filling with despair. She didn't know where she was, but the hours-long journey told her enough: she was far from home.

In front of her sat a man who appeared deranged, his dilated pupils gazing down at her. At the entrance stood intimidating men who had already blocked any chance of escape.

"P-Please, spare me."

"You lot, get out."

Knowing what defiance would cost them, the subordinates quickly left the warehouse at Falcoa's command.

Left alone with Yuna, Falcoa chewed on another piece of Loop as he stepped closer.

"You're even better than I expected. Do you know why you're here?"

"I-I don't know. Please, just let me go home."

"Sorry, that's not going to happen. My plan is to make you the most miserable person in the world. Why? Because your brother sold you to me."

Yuna froze, stunned by the words. Yet deep in her heart, she still believed in Jiese. How could any brother sell his sister to

a man like this?

"That's not true! My brother loves me more than anyone!"

"Does he? Then why are you here now? I gave Jiese something incredible in exchange for you."

Falcoa didn't think he was lying. After all, sparing Jiese's life was as good as giving him a fortune.

And since he'd also granted Jiese the opportunity to pine for Amy, he considered himself a benefactor.

"There's no way! My brother wouldn't sell me!"

Yuna clutched her chest and screamed, fighting to overcome her fear. The shock of being sold by her brother was greater than the terror of being dragged to an unknown place.

"Take me to him! I'll ask him myself!"

"Hey, little girl. You still don't get it, do you? You're not going home. Not ever. You have two choices: die by my hand or take your own life."

"No! That's not true! Aaaah!"

Falcoa lunged at Yuna and grabbed her wrist. With overwhelming strength, he yanked her forward, pulling her into his arms.

"Let go of me, you bastard!"

Enjoying her feeble resistance for a moment, Falcoa twisted her arm and spun her around. Grabbing her cheeks with both hands, he growled threateningly.

"Don't waste all your energy now. You'll be screaming plenty more from now on."

At that moment, the warehouse door creaked open, and someone stepped inside. A cold voice resonated softly through the room.

"Falcoa. Human trafficking is against the rules."

"Freeman."

Falcoa scowled, displeased. Standing in the doorway was none other than Agado Freeman, the only man in the Parrot Mercenaries who outranked him. Freeman's sunken eyes surveyed the scene with eerie calm.

Standing over 190 centimeters tall, Freeman wore a white long coat that only emphasized his pale, almost ghostly appearance. His eyebrows were shaved clean, and his lips were as colorless as those of a sickly man.

As the former vice-captain of the Parrot Bandits—now the Freeman Organization—Freeman was a master of the Schema and a user of techniques involving enchanted projectiles. However, it was said within the organization that his physical strength alone surpassed even Lucas's.

"What's this all about? You've been nowhere to be seen, and now you show up. Ran out of money?"

Falcoa sneered. Since their days in the Parrot Mercenaries, Freeman had been the undisputed second-in-command. But Falcoa, as the enforcer, had always been granted unparalleled freedom within the organization.

The tension between the vice-captain and the enforcer had only worsened since their descent into banditry. Freeman's insistence on adhering to the mercenaries' old code of conduct clashed with their new reality.

Feeding and supporting dozens of followers branded as traitors required an immense amount of resources. Yet Freeman had never offered any solutions.

It was Falcoa who had led the group for five years, driving out the island's previous rulers with brute force and sustaining the organization through Loop distribution profits.

Freeman tolerated Falcoa's misdeeds for these reasons.

But this time, Falcoa had gone too far. Carrying the name "Parrot" demanded that certain lines never be crossed.

Freeman, though merely a figurehead, adhered firmly to a policy of punishing acts such as human trafficking and violence-based plundering.

"You know the rules of the organization. Human trafficking disgraces the legacy of the Parrot Mercenaries."

"The Parrot Mercenaries? When did we start living in the shadow of past glory? Look at us now. Do you think this

organization would have survived without the money I've been bringing in?"

"You're insane, Falcoa. I'll acknowledge the effort you've put in, regardless of your methods. But let this be clear—the one leading this organization is me."

"I don't care about that. I don't acknowledge you, and we agreed on this from the start. Don't try to act like you're the boss now."

Freeman's expression darkened, and an icy killing intent radiated from him. For weaker beings, even being exposed to it might have been fatal.

Falcoa, however, absorbed the suffocating aura as though driving a blade into himself. It was a painful experience, but he endured it without so much as a twitch of his expression.

"Heh, scary."

Freeman felt conflicted. For someone as combative as Falcoa, pain and anger only served as fuel to worsen the situation.

'Has he become this much of a rabid dog?'

Even without Loop, Falcoa was a man driven entirely by his desires. His fixation on combat and killing had once made him a perfect fit for the mercenaries.

But now, running a bar on the island left him frustrated. Even drowning himself in Loop, alcohol, and women wasn't enough to satisfy his insatiable, violent instincts.

"P-Please, have mercy. I beg you."

Yuna's trembling plea drew Freeman's attention. Turning back to Falcoa, he said:

"Do we really have to stoop this low? Have you discarded the pride of the Parrots entirely?"

"Pride? Let me tell you something. The Parrot Mercenaries are dead. The captain abandoned us, and our men are at their limit. You should stop pretending and join me instead."

Falcoa brazenly buried his face into Yuna's neck. Even so, Freeman didn't move. Now Falcoa's killing intent was

palpable, signaling that any movement would trigger a battle.

If a fight broke out, one of the two pillars holding the organization together would inevitably fall, no matter who emerged victorious.

Although it was impossible to predict the outcome of a serious clash between them, Falcoa knew Freeman wouldn't act rashly. Confident, he smirked.

"Why don't you just leave? I'll tell my men to give you some money. It's time you learned to accept reality and enjoy yourself."

"Well, aren't you just having a grand old time."

A woman's voice cut through the room as the door swung open. The tone struck Falcoa to his core, and he spun around in alarm. But before he could react, a fist slammed into his jaw, whipping his head to the side.

"Urgh!"

A powerful kick followed, driving into his abdomen and sending him sprawling onto the floor. Yuna, too, collapsed to her knees, her legs giving out beneath her.

"Damn it. Just my rotten luck."

Falcoa spat on the ground as he slowly stood. For someone with reflexes as sharp as his, it was surprising he hadn't evaded either blow. Deep down, he had unconsciously restrained himself from counterattacking.

Standing before him was Clay Marsha, the former leader of the Parrot Mercenaries, who had once commanded hundreds of elite fighters.

"The real captain?"

"Is there a fake captain? You mangy dog, a few years off the leash and you've lost your damn mind."

Falcoa didn't get angry. In fact, he didn't even show a hint of hostility.

To the members of the mercenaries, Marsha was an irreplaceable figure.

As the first leader of the Parrot Mercenaries, Marsha had propelled the group to A-rank status in just a few years. Such an accomplishment required more than sheer strength, and Marsha had achieved it through exceptional skill and leadership.

She was also the only member to have been listed as an A-level criminal, a testament to her overwhelming abilities. But Falcoa's respect for Marsha wasn't rooted in these achievements.

To him, Marsha was the Fallen Madonna.

She was kind and gentle, but the people she embraced were rarely "normal."

They were the abandoned, the naturally bloodthirsty, or the societal outcasts whose only stage was the battlefield.

Falcoa had been one of them.

When society sought to push him aside, branding him as mentally unstable and beyond saving, Marsha was the one person who took him in.

To the Parrot Mercenaries, Marsha had been a sister, a mother, and a leader who could be trusted in any situation. Still, even with all this, Falcoa couldn't suppress the frustration bubbling inside him. After years of silence, why had she returned now, only to create chaos?

"Damn it. Where the hell have you been hiding? You're no captain anymore. All this time, we've—"

"I heard you've become an addict."

Falcoa froze. His hardened expression faltered, and his previously clouded eyes sharpened for a moment.

He had likely heard those words countless times over the past five years, but coming from Marsha, it felt as though he were hearing them for the first time.

'An addict.'

Was that truly what he had become? Had the demon of the battlefield sunk so low?

Freeman stepped forward and bowed his head to Marsha.

"It's been a long time, Captain. When did you return?"

“I came as soon as I heard about Lucas. That fool will undoubtedly give up the location of the hideout. We’ll have to clean this place up soon.”

After explaining to Freeman, Marsha approached Falcoa. Seeing her advance, Falcoa instinctively averted his gaze.

“Falcoa, I told you this before. No human trafficking.”

Falcoa’s brows furrowed. On reflection, he realized he felt no shame. If anyone was at fault, it was Marsha, who had abandoned the organization in the first place.

Chapter 147: Forced Breakthrough (2)

"I know the Magic Association is hunting me down. But how could you not send even a single word? If I hadn't taught the subordinates to appreciate the value of money, this organization would have fallen apart by now."

"Stop spewing nonsense! You're not in any position to tell me what to do! We're not the Parrot Mercenaries or even bandits anymore—we're just a gang of thugs stuck on this island!"

"So... you intend to keep acting like a brute to the end?"

"Hah! I'm the one who earned the money! I kept this organization alive! And instead of praise, you blame me? Then what exactly have you been doing all this time?"

"You don't need to concern yourself with that. If you're unwilling to follow the rules I set, then drop the name Parrot immediately."

"Pfft! Is that supposed to be a threat? Fine, we'll drop it! Parrot? We haven't used that name since the day you ran away. We're the Freeman Organization now!"

"Very well. As of this moment, you're no longer Parrots. I don't care how much you've made, but take it all and leave this place."

"Captaaaaaain!"

Falcoa roared in fury. No matter what Marsha said, he couldn't accept her decision to dismiss the Parrot name so easily. That name wasn't just hers—it was part of him, too. The honor of being the strongest mercenary group wasn't something he could exchange for mere money.

"If you can't give up the Parrot name, then follow my rules. I'm not telling you to live like a saint. But if you want

something, fight for it. I won't tolerate preying on the weak."

Falcoa seethed with anger, infuriated by how Marsha was using his inability to let go of the Parrot name against him.

"I always take what I want. And that includes you. One day, you'll belong to me, too."

Instead of getting angry, Marsha responded with a gentle smile, as if soothing a petulant child.

"That's a fresh line—I haven't heard that one in a while.

Anyway, do your best. I'm not the type to block a man from coming, nor to hold one back from leaving."

Falcoa clenched his fists and glared at her, his eyes blazing with rage. He was even channeling his combat prowess into his gaze, but Marsha's expression didn't so much as flinch.

Her mental fortitude was plain to see.

"Tch! You're as insufferable as ever. I'm done here. I'm going out to drink."

"Don't even think about leaving the hideout. We're holding a meeting with all the unit leaders. And starting now, drugs are banned. If I catch anyone using them, you'll wish you were dead."

Falcoa stormed out of the warehouse without a word. Yet Marsha knew he would attend the meeting and abstain from drugs. After all, she was back—the person who could lead him back to the blood-soaked battlefield he longed for.

Once the subordinates were gone, Freeman approached Marsha, shedding his formal role as vice-captain and speaking to her as an old friend from their homeland.

"I'm glad you returned safely. We were worried when we couldn't contact you."

"I was in hiding, so of course I couldn't contact you. Don't you all think? If I were easy to catch, I wouldn't be here now. By the way, what's going on with Falcoa? Can he still be useful like this? He used to be unstoppable with a sword, even if he's crazy."

“We can’t entirely blame Falcoa. We’re the ones who took the battlefield away from him.”

“Haha, or maybe it’s my fault.”

“Even so, we owe him the funds that kept us afloat. I’ve prepared everything so we can leave for another country whenever you’re ready.”

Marsha puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction. She understood all too well how Falcoa had acquired those funds.

So this is what people are reduced to—forced to adapt to reality. The glory of the Parrot Mercenaries, once feared for their fearless exploits, was now a thing of the past.

She had left home at seventeen and built the mercenary group with Freeman, her childhood friend. They had lost their foundation due to the schemes of politicians, but Marsha had tried to preserve the Parrot name’s worth.

Yet now, weren’t they no different from those same corrupt elites? Resorting to any means necessary to make money, bowing to those in power instead of fighting for their ideals.

“When did we end up like this?”

“We were betrayed by our nation. It’s the only way to survive.”

“Yeah, I suppose. But Freeman, you haven’t lost yourself, have you?”

Freeman fell silent. He wasn’t guilty of anything, but it stung to be doubted by the friend he had admired since childhood.

“For me, the organization doesn’t matter. The Parrot name means nothing. All I care about is your safety.”

Marsha shuddered at his words, goosebumps rising. Every mercenary knew Freeman’s feelings—it was no secret. His habit of declaring his devotion annoyed her to no end.

“You only care about my safety? Why?”

“You’re…”

Marsha knew exactly what Freeman would say, but she asked anyway, teasing him. Freeman hesitated, searching for the right words among the many swirling in his mind.

“Our leader.”

Marsha scoffed. Judging by his answer, Freeman hadn’t changed, and she saw no reason to worry. His personality was just as irritating as ever.

“Well, since I’m back, it’s time to reorganize.”

Marsha had decided to lead the organization to another country and start anew. But first, she needed to clean up the mess left behind by her subordinates.

“Sniff... sob...”

Hearing quiet sobbing, Marsha turned her head. Yuna was sitting on the floor, crying uncontrollably, too traumatized to even consider running away.

Though nothing terrible had happened to her, Marsha understood. For a girl, the mere experience of being handled so roughly by an unknown man could leave lasting emotional scars.

“What’s the story with her? Where did she come from?”

“One of Falcoa’s lackeys—a street hustler—brought her in. She’s his sister.”

“Unbelievable. Has Falcoa finally lost it, going after even his subordinates’ sisters?”

“Who knows? He seems completely unhinged.”

“Really? Is there something I don’t know?”

Freeman relayed what he had heard, from the tangled events between Jiese and Amy to the palace incident involving Shirone, all the way to how Yuna had ended up here.

Marsha listened with interest, but her eyes sparkled when Shirone’s name came up.

“Oh? So this story involves someone I know?”

“You know him? How would you know about this?”

Marsha gently brushed her fingers across her lips, smiling.

“As expected, I’m a genius. Life always finds a way to tangle things up like this.”

“What are you talking about? Tell me.”

“Oh, it’s nothing... just a small incident. No need to worry.”

Freeman had no intention of pressing the issue if Marsha didn't want to explain. Stirring up trouble whenever she felt bored was nothing new for her. It was also her way of navigating and surviving in this world—a method she had relied on for a long time.

Marsha received numerous updates from Freeman.

There weren't any particularly troubling issues. The funds Falcoa had amassed were sufficient to start anew in another country, and Freeman's troops were still in reasonably good fighting condition.

"This isn't bad. You've done well. But what about the funds? Should we really just use them without question?"

"Is it Falcoa's money that bothers you?"

"Kind of... doesn't it feel wrong? This is supposed to be the time for the Parrots' resurgence, and starting off with money earned from selling drugs feels tainted."

"That's not like you. Money is money, regardless of how it's made. I don't like how it was earned either, but throwing it away over principles is something only children would do."

"I know... Anyway, let's bring this up during the meeting later. For now—"

At that moment, the door burst open, and one of their subordinates rushed in. Both Marsha and Freeman looked at him curiously.

This was a remote area untouched by government influence. There shouldn't have been anything urgent enough to warrant someone running in, panting for breath. Marsha greeted him with a playful smile.

"What's wrong? Got a stomachache? There's no bathroom here."

"Oh? Captain? You're back?"

The subordinate was momentarily shocked to see Marsha but quickly recovered, realizing there was no time for pleasantries.

"Captain! We're under attack!"

"An attack? Out of nowhere? Is it the government?"

"I don't think so. It seems to be a group of four—two mages and two swordsmen."

Marsha needed to hear no more. She already had a good idea who it was. The notion of that street hustler's sibling being rescued by such a group was strange, but she couldn't dismiss the possibility.

"Heh, well, if it's that annoyingly righteous brat, it makes sense. Tell me, is one of the attackers named Shirone?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch their names..."

Freeman interjected with a more formal tone than usual.

"Captain, perhaps it would be best to return the girl. We're preparing to dissolve the organization anyway. Avoiding unnecessary commotion might be wise."

Marsha analyzed the situation, finding Freeman's approach too rigid.

"Hmph. Giving back the girl? Wouldn't that make us look pathetic? Kidnap someone, then hand her back when they come knocking? Or are you saying they might actually make it here?"

"That won't happen. While you were gone, we fortified this hideout thoroughly. The magic circles and enchanted weaponry are strategically perfect. Unless they're exceptionally skilled, they won't even make it to the first checkpoint."

"Then it's settled. Go kill them. I'll take care of the girl. Honestly, have you all gotten soft after a few years of downtime? You're utterly pathetic."

As soon as Marsha gave her orders, Freeman immediately instructed the subordinate to prepare for deployment. Displaying any lack of discipline in front of the captain was embarrassing. Especially when they believed they had prepared so thoroughly, it was doubly frustrating.

"Everyone to their positions. Treat this as a live combat situation."

"Yes! I'll relay the orders immediately!"

Freeman's men moved with precision. In less than five minutes, they had equipped themselves and formed into units, heading to their designated positions.

Marsha watched with a satisfied smile as she leaned back into her chair.

"Not bad. I thought you'd all been slacking off this whole time."

"They've all been waiting for this day. Now that you're back, they're more motivated than ever."

"Ugh, do I have to keep spoon-feeding and burping them forever? It's about time they learned to fend for themselves. Anyway, what about you? Aren't you going to fight?"

"I'll stay here. My job is to protect you."

Marsha looked up at Freeman with an incredulous expression. As one of the group's original members, he had often acted as her bodyguard. But every time, it gave her the chills.

"Ugh, this is so pathetic I can't stand it. Do you think I'll find this impressive or something?"

Freeman showed no sign of changing his mind, remaining resolute by Marsha's side.

Marsha's face turned red with anger. She had always hated this about him. His inability to express emotion and his stubbornness had driven her crazy countless times since they were kids.

"Hey! Stop standing there like an idiot and get out! What do you think you are, my husband or something?"

Still seated, Marsha lifted her leg and kicked Freeman in the backside.

With the momentum from her kick, Freeman took a step forward and, without a word, quietly left the warehouse.

Once everyone had departed, Marsha stretched, her mood suddenly light and carefree.

While the thought of fighting again after so long excited her, she was even more curious about Shirone.

Shirone was the type Marsha detested the most. In her view, no one in the world could genuinely embrace another's pain.

Even her foster father had eventually revealed his true nature. The kindness he had shown to an orphan like her had been nothing more than a mask for his vile desires. Realizing this had been Marsha's awakening.

Chapter 148: Forced Breakthrough (3)

“Hehe, I do hope they make it here. Don’t you agree, Yuna? I’m dying to see what kind of face that brat will make when he sees me.”

“Please, let me go. Send me home.”

Yuna knelt before Marsha, pleading desperately. From the demeanor of her subordinates, it was clear that Marsha was the leader of the organization.

“It’s okay. Don’t be scared.”

“Does that mean... you’ll send me home?”

“Of course. Things are a bit chaotic outside right now, but once it’s all settled, I’ll let you go. But before that, could I ask you for one little favor?”

“A favor? What kind?”

Marsha approached Yuna and gently patted her head. As she did, Yuna’s eyes began to droop, and her focus wavered.

“Huh? What’s happening?”

Yuna didn’t even realize that her eyelids had closed. A ringing sound filled her ears, and before she knew it, her consciousness faded away.

Catching Yuna as she slumped forward, Marsha gazed at her tenderly before turning her head, a cold smile spreading across her face.

“Hehe, now we’re going to start a very fun little game.”

Falcoa’s subordinates were rough and brutal, as if they didn’t know fear. They shrugged off weak attacks, using their bodies as shields while swinging their swords wildly.

“Lightning Formation! Attack! Charge!”

Their primary strategy was guerilla warfare. They alternated offense and defense in a zigzag pattern, conserving their strength. For Shirone and his group, who had no experience with war, this was nothing short of a nightmare.

But the core of guerilla warfare lay not in ambushes but in retreat. The enemy showed no intention of engaging in a full-scale confrontation.

“Disengage the Lightning Formation! Retreat for now!”

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

Amy quickly unleashed a barrage of Flame Strikes. At that moment, the enemies’ bodies glimmered, turning into flashes of light that shot skyward. A sharp, ear-piercing sound sliced through the air.

“Ugh, how annoying! They got away again.”

Amy stomped her foot in frustration, while Lian placed a hand on her shoulder to console her.

“But they’re not holding back either. Their numbers are increasing, which means Yuna is probably still safe for now. That’s good news for us.”

Shirone glanced at his companions and spoke.

“Let’s assess our condition first. Is anyone injured?”

In life-and-death battles, injuries often went unnoticed.

Unlike casual fights where a nosebleed was obvious, the adrenaline and endorphins from combat could numb pain completely.

The four carefully checked each other’s bodies. Once they confirmed that no one was hurt, they breathed a collective sigh of relief.

But the same couldn’t be said for their enemies. Despite their best efforts, they hadn’t managed to take down even a single foe. Every time they closed in, the enemies would vanish like ghosts.

“We haven’t defeated a single one so far. This could put us at a disadvantage in the battles ahead,” Amy pointed out, analyzing their predicament.

“I’ve been observing them, and I think the secret lies in those bracelets they’re wearing. They’re definitely some kind of magic device for Spatial Movement.”

Shirone frowned skeptically.

“Is that even possible? This isn’t like magic bullets. Spatial Movement is a spell for teleporting mages. Without a Spirit Zone, you can’t designate a destination, let alone activate the spell.”

Amy shared his doubts, but theoretically, it wasn’t entirely impossible.

“Maybe... it’s a linkage with a magic circle.”

A magic circle is a diagram engraved into a space that emits its own magical energy. With its aid, even non-mages could utilize magic.

“Of course, you can’t directly cast Spatial Movement with a magical artifact. But if it’s linked to a pre-engraved circle, it’s theoretically feasible.”

Understanding the concept, Shirone nodded, but Tess seemed more focused on a different aspect.

“Could a fallen mercenary group even manage something like that? From what I know, magic circles require not only immense manpower but also an enormous amount of money. And Spatial Movement is advanced magic, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. It’s likely a mid-level magic circle. Just drawing one requires the effort of at least five mages working an entire day. But for them, it’s doable. Falcoa has a monopoly on Loop. Remember the mercenaries we encountered at the ruins? The profit margins on Loop are insane. They must have used drug money to fortify their base. That explains everything.”

“How much money could they possibly make selling drugs? A single circle wouldn’t be enough to cover this kind of range!”

Tess’s argument was valid. Building on her observation, Shirone reviewed the battles they had fought so far.

The first encounter had been in the valley, where the enemies retreated. Then in the forest, they had pulled back again. And now, they had once more used spatial movement to escape.

“Considering the distance we need to cover, there must be at least hundreds of magic circles scattered around.”

“Hu-Hundreds?”

Tess’s mouth fell open in shock. A mid-level magic circle required five mages working a full day to complete. If there were hundreds, how much gold had been poured into this effort?

“No way they spent that much money. Judging by the distances, a few dozen circles should be enough. If there really are hundreds, we’d never be able to catch them under any circumstances.”

At that moment, Tess realized something and slapped her palm against her forehead.

“Ah! I see!”

“Yes, exactly. Now you understand? Like you said, they’ve set this up so we can’t catch them no matter what. They’ve networked the entire northern forest. If we keep fighting like this, we’ll tire out first since we’re outnumbered. We won’t even make it to the top before we collapse.”

The realization deepened their animosity toward the enemy, who had used drug money to fortify their base. But this wasn’t the time for emotions—they needed to think of a rational solution.

“So, what now? Should we start dismantling the magic circles? If the enemy keeps fleeing regardless of where we fight, rushing in won’t solve anything.”

Amy shook her head. While Tess’s idea was logical, there were complications.

“It’s not that simple. Magic circles are inscribed records imprinted on space itself. To remove them, you’d have to obliterate the area completely, not just erase the markings.

If we try to destroy hundreds of circles that way, who knows how many days it'll take."

Now understanding the situation better, Tess bit her lip. When facing a larger force, reducing their numbers was crucial. But the enemy had preemptively blocked that strategy.

Surprisingly, Shirone supported Tess's idea.

"No, it's worth trying. Let's destroy at least one."

"Destroy one? Out of hundreds? That won't change much."

"Maybe not for us, but the enemy might think differently. If they've gone to such lengths to build this network, losing even one circle might be unacceptable to them. They might even swarm the area to defend it."

"Ah, I see! A psychological strategy!"

Tess quickly grasped Shirone's plan. While war is often a game of resources and power, victory isn't always guaranteed for the side with more money. Human psychology plays a complex role in conflict.

The more there is to protect, the weaker the resolve becomes. For example, even if someone spends 100 gold to train an elite soldier, that investment is wasted if the soldier is never deployed.

Such scenarios often occur in war—resources are hoarded out of fear of loss, leading to devastating consequences.

Amy analyzed Shirone's plan. If they couldn't chase the enemy, they could instead lure the enemy to them. It was a sound strategy, given the circumstances, but it didn't solve the underlying problem.

"This is about efficiency now. Destroying the circles isn't just a choice—it's a challenge. Disabling a circle is much harder than you might think."

Rian stabbed his blade into the ground in frustration.

"Can't I just rip up the ground with my sword until the circle's gone?"

"That won't be enough. What we see as the magic circle is just the representation of a concept."

Shirone understood what Amy was getting at and clarified. "You're saying that unless we destroy the space itself to the point where the concept no longer exists, the circle won't disappear?"

"Exactly. There are two main ways to destroy a circle: using a Clear spell to nullify its concept or smashing it until the concept dissolves. The former is beyond our abilities, and the latter takes too much time."

Tess realized why Amy had been hesitant about this approach.

"So, in the end, it comes down to this: destroying a single circle would take so much effort that it'd be less efficient than simply pushing forward, right?"

"Right. If we can't destroy one within ten minutes, it's better to continue to the destination. The idea of exploiting the enemy's psychology is solid, but it's a gamble."

With all the necessary information shared, the group grew quieter. In such situations, it was best to follow a single leader. Rian turned to Shirone.

"What's the plan, Shirone?"

Shirone couldn't help but hesitate. With a hostage involved, speed was critical, but rushing recklessly could jeopardize the entire mission.

"Let's destroy one of the circles. I'll handle it."

Amy turned to him, surprised by his decision.

"Are you sure about this? None of your spells can guarantee success within the time limit."

Among Shirone's repertoire, the most powerful spell was Photon Cannon. However, even using light with mass wouldn't be enough to break through the weight of the earth.

If he fired repeatedly at high speed, he might be able to destroy one circle within ten minutes. But doing so would deplete his mental energy, putting him at a disadvantage in future battles.

Another possibility was using a laser spell, but Amy was skeptical about that as well.

While lasers could concentrate energy on a small area and destroy matter regardless of durability, the range was inherently limited.

“I’ll do it. I have an idea.”

Amy couldn’t imagine how he would destroy the magic circle, but for now, it was better to follow Shirone’s words. Shirone’s insight, which intuitively calculated various variables, was rarely wrong.

If you wanted to get a more accurate conclusion, there would be someone like Iruki, but in any case, since he wasn’t here, if Shirone’s prediction was wrong, it would be considered an unavoidable circumstance.

Coming to her conclusion, Amy nodded.

“Alright. Tess and I will form one team, and Shirone and Rian will form the other. We’ll keep a 50-meter distance between us and use Teleportation to search for the magic circles.”

“Got it. But be careful. If you focus too much on the spacing, you could crash into obstacles. Teleporting through the forest is risky.”

As a Teleportation specialist, Shirone knew the intense focus required for such maneuvers. But Amy brushed off his concerns with a slightly annoyed tone.

“Who do you think you’re worrying about? Surely you don’t think I’m as reckless as those amateurs, do you?”

Her words were meant to ease Shirone’s worries, and she wasn’t wrong. As a senior about to graduate and a Crimson Eye mage, Amy had mastered techniques that made accidental collisions highly unlikely.

Chapter 149: Forced Breakthrough (4)

Just as they were about to begin the operation, Tess, who had been deep in thought, suddenly spoke up.

“Wait a second. Before we start, there’s something we need to confirm.”

“Confirm? Confirm what?”

“If this operation succeeds, there’s a high chance we’ll end up in a full-scale battle with the enemy. I need to check something with Rian.”

“Me? Is there something wrong with me?”

Rian looked puzzled, and Tess turned to him with an unusually serious expression.

“Rian, have you ever killed someone before?”

The air grew deathly still. Rian, with his sword strapped to his back, blinked but said nothing.

He’d never considered the question before. Was it something he should have thought about?

As a knight, the abstract notion of taking a life was something they all grappled with. A sword is a tool meant to cut. Anyone who chooses to wield one must accept the consequences without dwelling on peripheral issues.

“No, I haven’t. What about you?”

“A few times. When I went with my father to hunt bandits.”

“Really? So what’s the issue here?”

“Rian, the resolve to die and the resolve to kill are completely different. I’m sure it’s the same for mages, but for us, we must use our own hands to cut someone down.”

The enemies they were about to face weren’t common thugs. They were seasoned professionals from the Parrot

Mercenaries, a group with a reputation built on countless battles in foreign lands.

"I trust your courage. It doesn't make sense for a swordsman to go their entire life without staining their blade with blood. But if today's your first time, it might shake you during the fight."

Rian exhaled heavily, considering her words.

Being shaken in battle... Taking a life wasn't exactly a pleasant thought, but at the same time, he found himself strangely indifferent to it.

"Tess, killing is a dangerous and complicated thing. I understand why you're worried, but I promise, I won't falter."

"You fool, I'm telling you it's not that simple. Taking a life is..."

"I've always been killing."

Tess's eyes wavered. Rian stared at his reflection in his sword and continued.

"And... I've died countless times, too."

At that moment, Rian turned his intense gaze to Tess.

"When people told me I lacked talent, when they told me to give up the sword, when I even wanted to give up myself—I kept swinging my blade. I killed countless foes, and I've been killed by countless others."

Rian extended his blade northward. If he had been a statue, the sword's weight would have toppled him forward. Yet he stood firm, as if his legs were rooted deep in the ground.

"Tess, do you understand? Never once in my life have I wielded a sword half-heartedly. Whether there's an enemy before me or not, I've always fought desperately with everything I have."

Everyone could feel the conviction behind Rian's words. As if nothing had happened, Rian smiled and sheathed his blade.

"I'll never waver. I'm Shirone's sword. I'll cut down whatever stands in his way to achieve what he desires. So don't worry."

This was precisely why Tess had chosen Rian over many others more naturally talented with a blade.

Rian was unyielding. He hadn't yet awakened his Schema, but the resolve he carried—the weight of life itself—was something no skill or talent could replicate.

Tess stared at Rian for a moment before breaking into a satisfied smile and addressing the group.

“Alright! Now I've got no more worries. Let's begin!”

Shirone and Amy felt their determination reignite. Rian's words had sparked a fire in their hearts.

“Alright, Amy, Rian and I will go first.”

Shirone cast Photonization magic on himself and Rian. In a flash of light, the two disappeared into the forest, with Amy and Tess following closely behind.

The sight of two streaks of light darting through the dense forest was mesmerizing. Their movements were erratic, shifting between sharp and soft angles as they raced forward, navigating the forest's depths.

Though they didn't know the exact location of the magic circles, calculating the enemy's movements gave them a rough estimate of the distances.

After about ten minutes of searching, they found their first circle.

Since magic circles are manifestations of magical energy, their presence was unmistakable within the range of a Spirit Zone.

If stealth magic had been applied, detecting them would have been far more difficult. However, not even a wealthy mercenary group could afford that level of preparation—it would be prohibitively expensive.

Rian cut through the thick underbrush with his sword, revealing a clearing where a large magic circle was inscribed on the ground.

Seeing a magic circle for the first time, Shirone was stunned by its size, much larger than he had imagined.

Amy surveyed the area before nodding.

“As expected, it’s a mid-level magic circle. They must’ve gone through hell creating it.”

The circle spanned more than five meters in radius, glowing faintly red in response to the Spirit Zone. Its intricate design, with circles of varying sizes rippling outward like waves, was almost artistic in its beauty.

“Wait a moment. Let me examine it.”

Having gained substantial knowledge as a senior student, Amy carefully inspected the circle.

The evaluation of a magic circle is based on three primary factors: the intensity of its magic, its functional density, and the connectivity of its internal designs.

To Amy, this circle seemed somewhat lacking in intensity and density, but its connectivity was exceptional. This suggested it might have been created by a certified organization.

“Sigh... this is going to be a pain. It looks like an officially registered magic company might’ve engraved this. I thought they would’ve hired underground mages with their illicit funds.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“If it’s an official setup, the circle’s design is standard, making its connectivity strong. In short, it’s extremely durable. Can you really destroy this in ten minutes?”

“I’ll give it a try. I’m not entirely sure I’ll succeed, though.”

“What? You’re just saying that now? This whole plan was based on your idea!”

“Sorry. But I have a good feeling about it. And if it works...”

“If it works?”

Shirone paused, calculating in his mind, then shared his estimate.

“It might not take ten minutes. I might be able to destroy it in one.”

“One minute?!”

Amy’s eyes widened in disbelief. A mid-level magic circle like this was incredibly robust. Dismantling it within a

minute was nearly impossible without a specialized team. Magic circles engraved by official organizations were designed for durability. Even if powerful physical magic reduced the ground to rubble, the concept of the circle might remain intact.

From Amy's perspective, the ground would have to be pulverized to pebble-sized fragments, and she didn't think Shirone had any spells capable of delivering that level of power.

"How exactly are you planning to do this? Are you sure you know what you're doing? Half-destroying it could backfire and make things worse."

"I see. I'll give it a shot."

Amy grew increasingly anxious. From Shirone's response, it was clear he hadn't fully considered the risks.

Can he really pull this off? If he failed here, it would only waste precious time.

Shirone positioned himself at the center of the magic circle. Considering the power required, Amy had expected him to launch a vertical strike from the air. His choice to remain grounded puzzled her.

"What are you doing there? Are you saying you can create enough force just standing in place?"

"Yes. But this is my first attempt, so it might be dangerous. Move outside the radius."

Following Shirone's instruction, the others retreated further. Their unease was palpable, but so was their hope. If this worked, they could turn the tide of battle in an instant.

The destruction of the circles would restrict the enemy's operational range. With two mages on their side, they could leverage their superior firepower to end the fight swiftly.

Shirone closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Planting his feet firmly, he bent his knees and aimed his fist at the ground.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. The atmosphere was calm, almost disarmingly peaceful, given the intensity of the

situation.

But Amy noticed something.

Her initial skepticism gave way to shock. Her eyes widened, and her shoulders trembled as if she had seen a monster.

“Shirone, you...”

Tess, noticing Amy’s reaction, looked at her with confusion.

To her eyes, nothing unusual was happening, but Amy’s face had gone pale.

“Amy, what’s wrong? What is Shirone doing right now?”

“I can’t believe he’s using that... No, it makes sense now. I didn’t think of this method before.”

“What method? Tell me what’s going on!”

“We should move back—farther this time. This could get really dangerous.”

Amy retreated even further, prompting Tess and Rian to follow her.

Even the swordsmen were perplexed. The distance Amy put between them and Shirone was more than double what they had moved before.

“Now can you explain? What exactly are you seeing?”

“I’m not seeing it—I’m feeling it. It’s Shirone... His Spirit Zone is changing.”

“Changing? What do you mean?”

“It’s expanding and contracting at an incredible speed.”

Even as she explained, Amy struggled to believe what she was sensing. How could Shirone’s body endure the sheer strength of a Spirit Zone pulsating at such a rapid rate?

‘This is insane. The mental stamina needed... It’s at least on par with Professor Ethella’s level.’

Amy measured Shirone’s mental pulses at over 10 per second.

But for Shirone, this wasn’t enough.

In his Class Five mental pulse test, he had scored 410—sustaining 13.6 pulses per second for 30 seconds.

‘If that was my peak before, I need to go twice as fast now.’

This time, the radius was smaller. While the test had involved a 20-meter diameter, the magic circle was only 5 meters across. With the reduced distance, the pulses had to accelerate accordingly.

The real question was whether his mental fortitude could withstand it.

‘I have no choice but to push through. Let’s fine-tune the control.’

As Shirone furrowed his brow, Amy’s voice trembled with awe.

“This is unreal. It’s getting faster.”

With the radius shrinking, Shirone’s pulse rate surpassed 15 per second.

To grasp how fast that was, consider counting from 1 to 15 in a single second—it was humanly impossible.

A normal mage would have mentally collapsed long before reaching this stage.

But Shirone’s Diamond Mind endurance was unmatched, allowing him to push beyond normal limits.

At last, his Spirit Zone’s maximum radius matched the perimeter of the magic circle. The only task left was to maintain the rhythm while casting his spell.

Balancing the dual pressures of mental pulsation and spellcasting demanded extreme concentration. Gritting his teeth, Shirone began to unleash the spell he had only ever envisioned in his mind.

‘Frenzy!’

He infused the pulsating Spirit Zone with photons imbued with mass.

A stunning phenomenon unfolded.

As the Spirit Zone became suffused with luminous energy, its movements became visible to the naked eye. For the first time, Rian and Tess could see the intricate workings of Shirone’s mind.

A deafening sound erupted.

KWA-KWA-KWA-KWA-KWA!

The glowing sphere expanded and contracted in rhythmic waves, causing cracks to spiderweb across the ground. Suddenly, with a thunderous roar, a massive boulder split apart, shattering into thousands of fragments.

Chapter 150: Forced Breakthrough (5)

Shirone's Frenzy didn't stop there. The photon-infused energy continued to hammer the shattered rocks, grinding them down into gravel no larger than grains of sand.

"Grrraah!"

Shirone was being gradually buried into the collapsing ground beneath him.

Compared to his earlier tests, the Zone's diameter was now a quarter of its size, resulting in an exponential increase in speed. Even Shirone, with his formidable endurance, felt the strain.

It took another 20 seconds for the spell to finally cease. When Shirone scanned the area with his Spirit Zone, he could no longer detect any trace of magical energy from the magic circle.

"Phew. Amy, will this do?"

No one answered.

All three of his companions stood there, utterly dumbfounded. Their expressions were identical—completely lost for words.

Amy broke the silence with a disbelieving laugh.

"Haha. Shirone, could you please use magic that makes sense for once?"

"What? I put a lot of thought into this! Anyway, the magic circle is destroyed, right?"

"Uh... yeah, I think so."

Amy didn't even need her Spirit Zone to confirm it. A glance was enough. The area where the magic circle once stood was obliterated, reduced to a wasteland.

Approaching the crater Shirone had created, Amy inspected the concave terrain. She quickly deduced the nature of Shirone's improvised spell.

'Amplification of photons using mental pulses, I'm sure it's a magic trick you came up with during your training. By the way, isn't this a ridiculously destructive power?'

Although it had the disadvantage of a short range, it was not even on the axis of disadvantages in front of the destructive power that could crush the ground into powder. The synergy between Shirone's mental pulse, the indestructible focus provided by his Diamond Mind, and the precision of Immortal Function Photon Spells created an extraordinary defensive spell.

"What in the world made you think of something like this?"

"Well, I didn't plan to use it in a situation like this. My specialty is defense form based on the Four-Way Formation. I figured I needed to develop another defensive spell, and the idea of mental pulse just came to me. So I combined it with photon magic."

"So you're telling me this is a *defensive* spell?"

"Yeah, it's defensive."

Amy resisted the urge to smack him. To her, this was the most destructive defensive magic she'd ever seen.

Technically, it was a defensive spell: a photon barrier that rebounded any force it encountered by generating extreme kinetic energy.

While its single-shot power might be less than a Photon Cannon, firing it at a rate of 20 pulses per second would leave nothing unscathed.

By classification, Frenzy could indeed be considered a defensive spell. Its rapid, widespread impact blurred the lines between offense and defense, but its primary function of creating a shield-like barrier would likely earn it that designation in the mage associations.

"Shirone, are you okay? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

Tess asked worriedly as she ran up to her. Frenzy was the most domineering and vicious magic she had ever seen. Shirone had been caught in the center of it, and it was a miracle she was still standing.

“I’m fine. It’s not as dangerous as it looks.”

“Not dangerous? I thought you were about to break apart with everything else!”

“Haha! I’m really fine. A defensive spell that harms its caster wouldn’t be much of a defense, would it?”

Shirone was right. Frenzy was designed to protect its user, with its destructive force merely a side effect.

While most defensive spells relied on the thickness of a barrier for durability, Frenzy created a kinetic shield by pulsating between its smallest and largest radius.

As long as Shirone set the minimum radius outside his own body, he would remain untouched—standing in the eye of the storm, so to speak.

“Alright, let’s do this properly now. I’ve got the rhythm down, so I should be able to cast faster. I think I can break a magic circle in 30 seconds.”

Amy, now back to her senses, immediately began revising their strategy.

“With this spell, we can systematically destroy their magic circles. Let’s avoid unnecessary battles and focus on taking out the circles first. That’ll provoke the enemy. When they lose patience, we hit them all at once. How’s that sound?”

There were no objections.

Shirone and his companions paired off—one man and one woman per team—and began teleporting.

Two streaks of light shot through the dense forest, racing to locate the next magic circle to be annihilated.

“Frenzy.”

A radiant explosion burst forth around Shirone. The photon barrier struck the ground with immense force, obliterating the magic circle without a trace.

The group had now destroyed seven magic circles. While the battles had thinned the enemy numbers by seven, the veterans opposing them weren't so easily lured into their strategy. Despite grinding their teeth every time an expensive circle was destroyed, they continued to hold their ground and assess the situation.

However, by the time fifteen circles had been destroyed, a shift in the enemy's stance became apparent. Anxiety began to creep in—if things continued at this rate, all the magic circles in the mountains would soon be decimated.

"Damn it! How long are they going to keep this up?"

"This is getting dangerous. We're down to being able to utilize only about three circles at a time. If this keeps up, our operational range will shrink drastically."

"Captain, what do we do? Those bastards are hell-bent on tearing through everything we've got!"

The leader of the ten-man unit shared their frustration.

The funds poured into fortifying the northern forest were equivalent to half of the wealth the Freeman organization had amassed over five years. If they allowed this to continue, even if they won the battle, it would feel like a defeat.

"Call everyone in. We'll trap them and finish this."

Messengers were dispatched using the remaining magic circles to relay the command to squad leaders stationed across the region. Responses came back swiftly—everyone was on the same page.

The shifting momentum of the battle wasn't lost on Shirone and his team. Not only were the enemies moving differently, but even their gazes carried a newfound intensity.

The most significant change was the switch from guerrilla tactics to coordinated ambushes involving dozens of fighters. They weren't trying to obliterate Shirone's party outright but seemed intent on luring them to a specific location.

Despite their numerical advantage, the enemy wasn't foolish enough to engage head-on against a team with two mages.

Tess couldn't help but admire the tactical adaptability of their opponents. These were seasoned fighters, clearly experienced in handling such scenarios.

"This is a problem. They're herding us somewhere and setting up a trap for the mages. No doubt they've prepared something nasty."

Shirone remained unperturbed. If the enemy was committing all their forces, it was now a race against time. They needed to reach their destination and rescue Yuna as quickly as possible.

"It's fine. We'll take them down there. For now, conserve your strength."

"But if it's a trap, it's dangerous!"

"I'll handle it. Just leave it to me."

With that, Shirone accelerated, taking the lead. Tess, though capable of countering with her Schema, hesitated. The sheer determination Shirone exuded left her unwilling to challenge his decision.

"Wow, Shirone's acting like a real man."

To Tess, this side of Shirone was unfamiliar. She'd always seen him as gentle and kind. Naturally, her biggest concern going into the battle had been him.

Though Tess had questioned Rian earlier about his ability to kill, she had also wondered the same about Shirone.

Yet, in the heat of battle, Shirone had transformed into someone completely unrecognizable. There was no fear, no hesitation—only efficiency and flawless execution.

This wasn't recklessness or rage. Shirone's every move resembled the cold, calculated precision of a machine.

Rian, sensing Tess's thoughts, smiled to himself. He remembered the first time he'd met Shirone, back when they faced each other in a real duel.

Even now, the memory sent chills down his spine. Shirone's insight was so sharp that it seemed even the fear of death couldn't escape his understanding.

"That's Shirone for you, Tess. Once he gets going, no one can stop him."

Unlike Rian, Amy seemed more worried as she watched Shirone.

She understood his extraordinary abilities well, but she sensed that something more was driving him now—variables like Yuna and Marsha were pushing Shirone beyond his usual limits.

"Isn't this too reckless? There's probably a trap waiting, and he's charging straight ahead without analyzing the situation."

"The delays caused by breaking the magic circles are forcing his hand. If Shirone says he can do it, I won't stop him."

Rian said, increasing his speed while agreed on Shirone's side.

But Tess agreed with Amy. Even as they ran, she analyzed their surroundings and spoke with concern.

"Amy, something's off about this terrain. Let's balance things out while the boys burn themselves out."

"Got it. What exactly feels off about the terrain?"

"If this area wasn't artificially altered, we'll end up entering a ravine soon. It's the perfect place for a trap—highly dangerous."

Nature has its patterns. While humans can manipulate the environment to suit their needs, nature itself always adheres to its natural flow.

Looking at the pattern of the mountain range, it was clear the terrain was gradually sloping downward.

What's more, the increased humidity and proliferation of mosses and ferns over shrubs indicated they were heading into a valley.

‘Yet there’s no sound of water. Those bastards must’ve dammed it.’

Blocking the front and flanking from both sides was a classic ambush strategy in warfare.

Tess was torn. Time was of the essence, but blindly following the enemy’s lead could lead to their annihilation.

“Amy, we can’t let this go on. We need to stop Shirone.”

Amy nodded without argument. Tess’s observations were proving accurate. The path was narrowing, the cliffs were becoming too high to bypass, and the number of enemies encircling them was steadily decreasing.

“I’ll talk to him. Shirone! Hold up!”

Amy’s call didn’t reach him in time. Before she could say more, Shirone grabbed Rian and initiated a teleport, unwilling to settle for running.

“Why is he being so impulsive?”

Forced to keep up, she grabbed Tess and teleported after him.

But catching up to Shirone wasn’t easy. When it came to Teleportation, Amy’s skills were almost on par with his, but not enough to overtake him.

As the streaks of light darted through the forest, Shirone and Rian suddenly emerged at the mouth of a ravine. They stopped their Teleportation and continued on foot along a shallow stream.

Rian, who had followed closely behind, asked with a puzzled expression.

“Shirone, why are you in such a rush? This place screams trap.”

“Exactly. That’s why we need to be here. I’ll destroy the trap. Depending on what it is, using Frenzy might focus their attacks on me.”

“What? But if you fail—”

“Then we’ll be trapped for good. If I don’t succeed here, the mission becomes exponentially harder.”

“That’s not the issue! You could die! Let me do it instead.”

“No. I can do it because I know how. If you keep arguing, I’ll have no choice but to leave you behind.”

Rian suddenly understood why Shirone had surged ahead. He didn’t want Tess or Amy stopping him. Shirone was fully aware of the risks, but he was determined to act quickly to save Yuna.

He wasn’t merely rushing—he was betting everything on the one chance he believed could ensure success.

Chapter 151: Forced Breakthrough (6)

“Rian, I’m going ahead. Explain to Tess and Amy for me.”

“Huh? Hey, Shirone!”

Before Rian could stop him, Shirone activated Teleportation and vanished at incredible speed.

Moments later, Amy and Tess caught up to Rian.

“Rian! Where’s Shirone?”

“He went ahead, just a moment ago.”

“What’s he thinking? What did he say before leaving?”

“He said he plans to use Frenzy to preemptively neutralize the trap. Figured you wouldn’t approve, so he went on his own.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t approve! That reckless fool! Frenzy is a kinetic barrier; if the timing’s off, it could get him killed!”

“Yeah. He left precisely to avoid hearing you say that.”

Amy clenched her fists in frustration. It wasn’t just the fact that Shirone had acted independently—it was because his chosen tactic was, by all logic, the most effective. And yet, it was far too dangerous.

Failure didn’t mean a minor setback; it meant death.

“If you fail, you die! You idiot!”

Amy screamed at the empty air where Shirone had once been. Then, turning to Rian and Tess, she placed a hand on each of their waists and spoke decisively.

“We can’t stop him now. Let’s provide backup instead. Stay sharp. We’re moving at full speed.”

She bent forward, activating Teleportation. A brilliant flash of light cut through the creek, propelling them forward.

At the ravine upstream, the path to the hideout was completely blocked by a 20-meter-tall stone wall. Around ten guards were stationed at the barrier, and reinforcements from Falcoa's group began arriving steadily, reinforcing the perimeter.

"They're coming! Ready the traps!"

"They're faster than we expected! We don't have enough time to activate everything."

The squad leader clicked his tongue. Whoever planned this had to be sharp. Knowing there was no way around the trap, the enemy was charging straight through to minimize delays.

"No matter. This trap was designed to annihilate hundreds. Activating even half of it will be enough to bury four."

The leader maintained his composure as he directed the preparations. But when he saw a lone figure sprinting towards them from 200 meters away, his calm wavered.

"What the hell? Why is there only one of them?"

"Maybe he rushed ahead in desperation."

The leader wasn't convinced. That could be true, but something about this lone charge didn't sit right with him. For the first time, he felt reluctant to spring the trap—it almost felt wasteful.

"Clever. Using a single decoy to make us hesitate about deploying a massive-scale trap."

"Then what should we do? Should we engage directly?"

"What else? Activate the trap. Can't you think? It's obvious that's his plan—to gamble his life and make us hesitate. Even if it costs us, capturing just one of the two mages will tip the battle."

"Understood! Everyone, prepare to activate!"

Shirone fixed his gaze on the stone wall and the ten guards perched atop it. They pulled out bows, aiming them high into the air.

'Arrows?'

Shirone frowned. From such a distance, hitting a single target with only ten archers was nearly impossible. But the guards loosed their arrows confidently, and Shirone halted his sprint to observe.

The arrows looked ordinary—except for the varied colors glowing faintly on their tips.

‘Magic bullets!’

Instinctively, Shirone teleported backward. If he hadn’t encountered magic bullets during the Kergo Ruins expedition, he might have been caught off guard.

“Shirone!”

Amy’s voice echoed from behind.

Hearing her, Shirone paused his retreat. Amy’s voice carried urgency; she must have pushed herself to arrive so quickly.

But Shirone didn’t change his plan. With nowhere to advance or retreat, the bullets slammed into the ground.

A deafening explosion rocked the ravine. Smoke and dust billowed thickly, obscuring the area around Shirone.

The enemy’s intent became clear: obscure his vision and finish him off with the trap.

“Amy! Don’t come!”

Amy didn’t need Shirone to tell her to go in. Where the smoke hadn’t spread, she could make out the giant vibrations operating above the valley.

As expected, a terrifying mechanical device resembling a catapult appeared along the cliffside. They were on wheels, but they were still of a size that could only be moved by a few men.

“Now! Launch everything!”

At the boss’s command, Falcoa’s men activated the device. Massive chunks of rock were hurled down the ravine with the force of a crowbar.

The boulders were massive enough to fill a V-shaped valley. Judging by their power, they were not a trap to keep out the few. It was literally a secret weapon to annihilate the enemy in the final battlefield.

“Shirone!”

Amy screamed, but it was too late. The massive stones crashed through the smoke, plunging toward Shirone’s position.

Amy winced as the imagined sound of Shirone’s body being crushed echoed in her mind. But the next moment, a sharp shockwave shattered that nightmare.

As the dust dispersed, it revealed Shirone, standing unscathed, enveloped in a glowing sphere of light.

‘Frenzy!’

A brilliant orb of energy surrounded Shirone, its diameter expanding to 20 meters—larger than the boulders themselves.

The radiant sphere pulsed violently, its sheer force overwhelming to behold. It seemed as if staring too long might sear the onlooker’s vision.

The mass and momentum of the boulders collided with the photon field, which retaliated with ferocious bursts of counterforce.

Some boulders, though slowed, pressed dangerously close to Shirone, threatening to crush him.

But halfway down, the rocks shattered into dozens of pieces. From there, Shirone’s Frenzy overwhelmed them entirely.

The fragments multiplied exponentially, triggering chain reactions of explosions as they collided.

Smaller. Then smaller still.

Shirone unleashed his photon barrage relentlessly until the rocks were reduced to nothing but dust.

By the time the rock-like object reached Shirone’s vicinity, only tiny fragments remained. Even those were swept away by the cycle of light and scattered into the air.

The time it took for the rock to crash into the ground was only two seconds, which perfectly matched the time it took for it to disintegrate into dust.

During that brief span, thousands of events compressed within human perception created the illusion of a massive

explosion.

Dust spread in all directions, softly settling on the ground with a faint *whoosh*.

An eerie wind echoed through the canyon.

Falcoa's subordinates couldn't comprehend what had just happened. There had been a flash of light, and the rock had burst into dust. That was all they could perceive with their own eyes.

Shirone, stepping over the dust-covered stream, stared at the castle wall. He could see the subordinates who had activated the trap gradually returning.

The squad leader realized something was wrong. Despite having spent over a decade on the battlefield, he had never even heard rumors of such magic.

"Damn it! Who the hell is that brat?"

"Captain! What should we do?"

"Prepare the magic bullets! Fire them!"

As the subordinates swiftly detached the arrowheads and assembled the magic bullets, Shirone, who had been staring fiercely at them, focused his mental power.

A sphere of photons burst into existence with a *pop*, absorbing the surrounding light and vibrating intensely.

"Captain! Look over there! That's dangerous!"

One of the men, who had previously witnessed Shirone's technique at the tavern palace, shouted to the captain.

Indeed, even the captain recognized that the compressing light, larger than a human face, was something unnatural.

"Damn it! Hurry up! Fire those magic bullets now!"

The subordinates worked faster, but the magic was quicker.

Between Shirone and the castle wall, a sudden streak of light appeared, as if a line had been drawn in an instant.

Boom!

The Photon Cannon struck the iron gate directly, producing a deafening metallic screech that assaulted their ears.

The subordinates assembling the magic bullets winced and ducked. The impact was so powerful that even the

vibrations were felt atop the castle wall. Even after the magic dissipated, the iron gate hummed with a resonating sound.

“What... what is it? Is it destroyed? Check it!”

A subordinate descended the staircase connected to the ground and inspected the gate. The thick iron plate was significantly bent but not destroyed.

The subordinate, interpreting even this outcome as a success, shouted with a brighter tone.

“The gate is intact!”

“Good! Now it’s our turn to attack.”

As the Photon Cannon’s assault failed, Tess turned to his companions and spoke.

“We can’t destroy the gate with magic. Rian, let’s climb the wall.”

To win a siege, one of two objectives must be achieved.

The first was to destroy the gate with siege weapons or magic and then flood the area with troops.

If the gate couldn’t be destroyed, the alternative was to scale the walls and eliminate the defenders. That was a task meant for swordsmen like Tess and Rian.

“Fine. It’s better for us to climb.”

Rian adjusted the sword slung on his back for easier movement. But as the two bent forward to start their climb, Amy stopped them.

“Wait a second.”

“There’s no time to waste. We need to attack before they reorganize. Now’s our chance.”

Tess’s judgment was correct. Being a flame mage, Amy was vulnerable to concussive force, and Shirone’s Photon Cannon was also ineffective against the thick iron gate.

However, Amy knew that Shirone had one more weapon. And it was a spell that would be highly effective in this situation.

“It’s fine. Shirone will take care of it.”

Tess, confused, looked back at Shirone with a puzzled expression, only for his eyes to widen suddenly.

Shirone's body began emitting a crimson light.

"What... what the hell is that? Isn't it dangerous?"

Humans instinctively felt uneasy at the sight of red, as it reminded them of blood.

Even Tess found the ominous red glow unsettling, so it was no surprise that the enemies' wariness reached an unimaginable level.

"Captain, what is that?!"

Shirone unleashed a crimson flash forward. A streak of laser light traveled in an instant to the gate, heating its surface.

"What the—?!"

The subordinates, already shaken by the Photon Cannon's power, panicked and stumbled back.

But the expected shockwave or loud explosion didn't occur.

The captain, who had been inspecting the gate from below, regained his confidence. This magic seemed to do nothing more than illuminate the gate's surface.

"Good! Now's the time! Prepare the magic bullets!"

With the reinforcements from the trap, their numbers exceeded 40. With this many, they could annihilate the area around Shirone with a magic bullet bombardment.

As soon as everyone finished aiming, the captain lowered his hand and shouted.

"Fire on my—! Huh?"

Rumble... rumble... rumble...

At that moment, the castle wall began to shake violently.

The captain, as well as the subordinates about to release their arrows, exchanged shocked glances.

A subordinate, leaning out to inspect the iron gate, stammered in a trembling voice.

"C-Captain! Look at that...!"

The iron gate was shaking uncontrollably. The vibration, originating from the gate, spread throughout the castle wall, threatening its structural integrity.

Falcoa's subordinates, witnessing this for the first time in their lives, were overwhelmed with terror.

The iron where the laser had struck began to bubble and swell as if boiling.

Then, the castle wall, trembling as though it would be uprooted, finally gave way with a thunderous explosion as the gate burst apart.

Chapter 152: Forced Breakthrough (7)

The captain's eyes nearly popped out of his head. A gate that wouldn't budge against most siege weapons had been breached.

"Damn it! Direct fire!"

It was a desperate order. With the gate already compromised, failing to stop the enemy here would mean the battle would quickly turn in their favor.

The subordinates, well aware of this, aimed directly at Shirone and pulled back their bowstrings.

"Fire!"

Forty magic bullets, fired with all their might, shot toward Shirone.

Even as the rapidly approaching arrows closed in, Shirone didn't move. The radius of a Teleportation spell wouldn't allow him to escape the blast zone.

But Spatial Movement was a different story.

The moment the forty arrows plunged toward their target, Shirone's body transformed into a flash of light and soared into the sky.

Ziiiiing!

As the sound of Spatial Movement echoed, a massive explosion obliterated the area where Shirone had just been standing.

Tess stared at the bombardment, utterly stupefied. Hearing the thunderous roar reverberate through the canyon made him feel as though he were standing at the heart of a warzone.

"Sh-Shirone..."

The sheer scale of the explosion and its deafening noise were overwhelming, leaving everyone convinced that Shirone hadn't survived.

Except for Amy. Archers hear the sound of arrows flying most clearly, and swordsmen recognize the clash of blades above all else.

Similarly, Amy, being a mage, could distinctly hear the unique sound of Spatial Movement even amidst the deafening explosion.

"Shirone is fine. Let's move in."

Amy cut through the lingering smoke as she advanced. As expected, once she passed the blast zone, she spotted Shirone standing in front of the gate.

Spatial Movement bends light, so the flash that seemed to shoot skyward had been an illusion.

In reality, it wasn't Shirone soaring into the sky but a phenomenon caused by the warping of space.

At close range, this effect wasn't noticeable, and it simply seemed as though Shirone had vanished suddenly. That's why mages relied on sound to detect whether Spatial Movement had been used.

"Haha! It's over! Completely over!"

"There's not even a trace left! There's nothing to fear now. Everyone, get ready to charge!"

Falcoa's men set down their bows and picked up their weapons. With the most threatening mage seemingly dead, their fear vanished.

Watching this unfold, Tess tilted his head in confusion.

Shirone was clearly standing by the gate like a grim reaper, yet the enemies were cheering and preparing to attack.

"What's going on? Why are they acting like that?"

"They didn't hear the sound of Spatial Movement, like you. They think Shirone is dead."

It didn't take long for Falcoa's men to realize their mistake. When Shirone stepped back and revealed himself from the blind spot of the wall, they froze as if they'd seen a ghost.

“C-Captain! Over there...!”

The captain’s face flushed red. Shirone, who should have been torn apart by the bombardment, was calmly staring up at the wall.

“You, you bastard!”

Before launching a full-scale siege, Shirone decided to give the enemy one last chance.

“Release Jiese’s sister. If you do, we’ll leave peacefully.”

The captain stared at Shirone in stunned silence. Leave peacefully? After causing all this chaos? What kind of place did he think this was? A theme park charging an entrance fee?

“You think I’ll let you leave alive? The real siege begins once the gate is breached. Do you even know how much the magic circle you destroyed is worth? Your life couldn’t pay for it. I’ll make you beg for death.”

“I don’t want to prolong this meaningless fight. It’s your side that started this. So let’s end it here.”

“Ha! End it? Do you know who we are? We’re the Parrot Mercenaries, born to fight and die on the battlefield! Men, attack! Slaughter them thoroughly!”

“Uoooooh!”

The soldiers roared as they raised their swords boldly.

Seeing that words wouldn’t work, Shirone sighed and walked into the wall’s blind spot.

“Great, he’s walking right into us! Men, get down there and — Huh?”

The captain froze mid-sentence as a memory flashed through his mind: the strange magic that pulverized a falling boulder in the canyon. Could this wall truly be sturdier than that rock?

“W-Wait a minute...!”

The captain ran to the stairs and inspected the gate. Just as he feared, Shirone had slipped through the breach and was lowering his fist.

“Hey, hey, stop joking! You’re not serious, are you...?”

The captain's voice quivered with fear, his mind going blank.

"Don't do it! Do you know how much effort it took to build this wall? Hey!"

Shirone, having finished charging his spell, glanced at the captain standing on the landing.

Their eyes met, and in that moment, the captain understood. The decision had already been made.

"Everyone, evacuate! Jump off the wall!"

As the captain ran up the stairs, shouting, Shirone muttered quietly.

"Frenzy."

Boom boom boom boom boom boom boom!

The 20-meter-wide Frenzy pulsed at a rate of 15 times per second. The vibrations shook the wall as though an earthquake had struck, causing Falcoa's men to lose their footing and collapse.

As a massive structure, the wall had significant durability. But Shirone didn't stop. No matter how strong a material was, it had its limits. Physics dictated that repeated strikes would eventually lead to destruction.

The iron gate groaned under the relentless pounding, while cracks spread like lightning across the wall.

The fractures multiplied and snaked their way through the entire structure. Eventually, the foundation began to shake, signaling the wall's imminent collapse.

The captain was utterly overwhelmed.

He was a veteran with considerable siege experience, but while gates being breached wasn't uncommon, this was the first time he'd encountered someone who could bring down an entire fortress.

"Ahhh! I surrender! We've lost! Stop it!"

The captain screamed, but the photon-charged pulses turned the fortress into a giant drum, drowning his voice.

'Damn it! This can't be happening!'

The situation was dire.

If the fortress collapsed completely, the fate of the 40 men inside would be left to the whims of the gods.

“Ughhh!”

Shirone furrowed his brow, focusing intently on Frenzy. Its unrelenting rhythm continued to repel everything in the vicinity.

From a vantage point overlooking the wall, Tess watched the scene in stunned silence.

First, the wall’s central section began to crumble. Hysterical cracks then spread along its length. The left side slumped slightly, followed by the right, which collapsed as if to balance the destruction.

And finally...

Rumble... CRASH!

The entire fortress came tumbling down.

“My god... He’s like a human weapon.”

Rian agreed with Tess’s assessment. Until now, Shirone had primarily used his magic to protect others.

But when he resolved to truly destroy something, the difference in the outcome was staggering.

“It’s incredible. Even I didn’t fully grasp Shirone’s potential.”

Amy smiled in agreement. Combat wasn’t everything to a mage, but it was undeniably a source of pride.

“Shirone rarely escalates things. But if he sets his mind to it, his combat ability is exceptional. He could easily rank among the top of our graduating class.”

Tess chuckled softly, understanding Amy’s sentiment.

‘He’s full of surprises, isn’t he?’

Amy genuinely felt proud of Shirone’s growth. At this rate, the dream of graduating alongside him might not be far off.

‘You’ve come so far, Shirone.’

By the time Frenzy ended, the fortress wall was completely destroyed. The portion facing the canyon retained some shape, but the center had collapsed as if crushed by a massive boulder.

“Ughhh...”

Soldiers buried under the rubble groaned and squirmed. Not a single one was unscathed. Even the captain, who had tried to stop Shirone, hadn't escaped the collapse, his arm now broken.

But he was too shocked to feel pain.

Memories of the five years spent fortifying this northern base flashed through his mind like a fleeting dream.

"This is absurd. Completely destroyed by a single man? The Parrot Mercenaries?"

Hearing footsteps approaching, the captain flinched and turned his head. Meeting Shirone's piercing gaze, an uncontrollable fear washed over him.

"Bring me Jiese's sister right now! Or else I won't let this slide!"

"Ahhh!"

The captain instinctively raised his hands to shield himself, causing his broken arm to dangle limply like a pendulum.

"Ughhh...!"

Realizing the grotesque state of his own arm, the captain's eyes rolled back, and he fainted on the spot.

Shirone and his companions.

First gate: cleared.

"Wow. That's impressive, Shirone."

Marsha was observing Shirone's battle from a spot 200 meters away from the fortress wall.

Sitting on a neatly spread handkerchief on the ground, her appearance was as carefree as that of a girl on a picnic.

The subordinates' plight was indeed unfortunate. However, isn't it the nature of mercenaries to live on while bearing such sorrow? After all, she herself had lost hundreds of people, deceived by the machinations of politicians.

"So, he's that strong and still managed to deceive everyone. Or perhaps, he was so composed because of his strength?"

She had known Shirone had a talent for magic but hadn't anticipated he'd perform to this extent.

What stood out the most was how all of Shirone's spells were derived from an original energy source of his own creation.

'An Unlocker...'

Marsha felt delighted.

She liked that Shirone was a strong individual, and she appreciated that he was a seemingly pretentious person who tried to embrace the pain of others.

But what thrilled her the most was the thought that, before long, that pure and beautiful boy would be utterly crushed in her hands.

"It'll take at least ten years before you can catch me, rookie."

Marsha stretched her arms as she stood. Her bracelet glowed fiercely, and in an instant, it hurled her body toward the northern cliffs.

Second Encounter (1)

Shirone and his companions continued heading north. Since most of Falcoa's subordinates had been injured during the first gate encounter, no further battles occurred.

"This way."

Finding the path through the forest was Amy's responsibility. Losing focus while navigating the natural maze could easily result in disorientation.

But such common limitations didn't apply to Amy. Following behind her, Tess realized that Amy had an exceptional talent for reconnaissance.

'I see... So this is how she can use her Crimson Eyes.'

Amy's photographic memory allowed her to perfectly restore the state of a specific moment. As long as she didn't lose consciousness, she could accurately determine her bearings no matter where she was.

"Amy, there's a mountain path over there."

As soon as she heard him, Amy adjusted her direction and exited the forest.

The winding mountain path led upward toward the summit of the terrain.

Tess inspected the ground. Though some time had passed, wagon tracks were still visible.

“From here on, we’re entering their living area. In terms of a siege, it’s like breaching the inner castle.”

For the group, tired from running through the forest, it was welcome news.

However, they couldn’t afford to let their guard down just yet. While they had dealt with most of the forces, none of the officers had made an appearance.

“If we keep following this path, we’ll reach their hideout. Just a little further, everyone.”

Amy said firmly. Her tone was resolute, but in truth, she wasn’t entirely certain. She spoke with conviction out of a sense of duty as the guide to boost her friends’ morale.

According to her photographic memory, which had recorded the movements and curving distances of the battles so far, they had traveled approximately 12 kilometers from where the conflict began. When converted to a straight line, they had advanced over 7 kilometers on the map.

Chapter 153: Second Encounter (2)

“It’s true, we’re close. About one more kilometer, and...”

Just as Amy was explaining, a fiery projectile burst out of the forest with a ferocious noise.

“It’s an ambush! Scatter!”

Shirone’s group split in different directions. The flames crashed into the ground, devouring the air around them, expanding in size before dissipating into heat.

“Fireball?”

“Amy! Watch out!”

The second and third attacks came simultaneously.

But Amy didn’t evade. Instead, she took a combat stance, fixed her gaze on the incoming fireballs, and countered them with an equal number of Flame Strikes, piercing through the flames.

“Come out! Stop hiding and ambushing us!”

“You’re skilled. It seems getting this far wasn’t sheer luck.”

Shirone’s group turned toward the mountain path. A man stepped out of the forest. He was about the same height as Rian but had a lean, agile frame.

Though he lacked eyebrows, his slicked-back hair and pale, snake-like face exuded confidence.

“Who are you?”

“The vice-captain of the Parrot Mercenaries, Agado Freeman.”

At the mention of “vice-captain”, tension rose among Shirone’s group. However, it also confirmed that their destination was near.

“Shirone, leave this to me. When I give the signal, take Lian and Tess and head for the cliff.”

"I can't. It's too dangerous."

"And what about you? Have you forgotten how you charged into a trap alone? Are you going to keep treating me like I can't handle myself?"

"I'm not underestimating you. He's not alone. About 20 people are lying in ambush in the forest."

Amy, too, had already confirmed this using her Spirit Zone. That was precisely why she wanted Shirone to move ahead. If they got bogged down here, they would only buy time for reinforcements to arrive from the first gate.

Determined to convince Shirone, Amy raised her hand and pointed at Freeman.

"Shirone, look at his weapon. It's a gun."

Shirone turned to examine it closely. Freeman was indeed holding a weapon identical to the ones Shirone had read about in books.

Unlike magic bullets fired from bows, which required switching arrowheads, guns were specially designed to use magic bullets exclusively.

The weapon appeared to be a revolver, capable of rapid fire through the rotation of its cylinder, loaded with a small number of magic bullets for mid to long-range combat.

"You understand, don't you? Guns reload faster than arrows and fire directly. Unlike arrows that explode upon impact, guns fire already-manifested magic bullets, making them specialized for mid to long-range combat. And I'm sure everyone hiding in the forest has the same weapon."

Shirone understood Amy's reasoning.

"Fine. I'll leave this to you."

Rian and Tess gave Shirone puzzled looks. Although the explanation about guns made sense, it also emphasized the danger. Why, then, was Shirone agreeing to leave Amy alone?

"I'll cast Fire Wall to delay their pursuit. Use that time to break through."

"Understood. Rian, Tess, get ready."

If Shirone had decided, Rian would follow. Though the idea of leaving a companion behind didn't sit well with him, there was no time to argue. Tess, swallowing hard, prepared to charge forward.

"Now! Go!"

Having finished her mental preparations, Amy shouted with a fierce glare. Shirone led the way, with Rian and Tess flanking him as they sprinted forward.

As expected, flames fired from guns shot out from all directions in the forest.

Amy cast Fire Wall in the form of a massive circle.

The ground bubbled like molten sludge, and flames erupted from beneath her feet, rushing outward with incredible force until they reached the forest.

Amplifying her mental power, Amy intensified the wall of fire, which burned ferociously, obstructing the enemies' view.

At the same time, Shirone grabbed Rian and Tess and used Spatial Movement. Though its range was shorter compared to high-ranking mages, it was sufficient to vanish from the enemies' sight.

Hearing the distinctive sound of Spatial Movement, Amy finally stopped maintaining the Fire Wall and panted heavily.

Fire Wall, often called a "mana-consuming parasite", required continuous mental power to sustain the barrier.

Despite its immense power, it wasn't considered overpowered due to the high cost of casting it.

But Freeman was genuinely impressed. The girl standing before him was barely in her teens.

To his knowledge, it was extremely rare for someone her age to cast a Fire Wall of this scale.

"How admirable. Sacrificing yourself for your comrades."

"Hah! Don't call it sacrifice. I sent them ahead because I can handle this on my own."

"Is that so? You seem quite fatigued, though. Sorry, but we don't have the luxury to wait for you to recover."

As Freeman finished speaking, his subordinates emerged. The flames in the forest remained unchecked, suggesting none of them were mages. However, all of them were Schema users, wielding guns just like Freeman. This combination of Schema and magic-based combatants was commonly referred to as “gunners” on the battlefield. Although Amy had never faced gunners in combat, she could anticipate their tactics since she herself used a combination of long-range magic and Schema. Freeman’s subordinates opened their revolvers’ cylinders and began loading magic bullets. Each cylinder seemed capable of holding at least six rounds. With twelve rounds collectively loaded and twenty enemies present, their firepower cycle could unleash up to 240 magic bullets before reloading.

“Sorry, but your reckless adventure ends here.”

At Freeman’s command, his subordinates raised their guns. It seemed the subordinates were a reflection of their leader. Unlike Falcoa’s troops, they showed no signs of carelessness or bravado, focusing solely on eliminating their target. Amy let out a small laugh. While she understood this was likely due to Shirone’s dominant role in earlier battles, she hadn’t expected such a dismissive view of her own abilities.

“You think 20 of you can take me on in a shootout?”

Amy tightened her stance, bracing her core as she began to cast another spell. A whirlwind erupted around her, and fist-sized stones floated into the air, catching fire with a roar.

“This time, you’ve picked the wrong opponent.”

Amy’s eyes blazed crimson as she prepared to unleash her magic.

Even while running, Tess kept glancing back. Though he followed Shirone’s decision, he couldn’t shake the feeling that their plan was reckless.

Gunners might lack the firepower of mages, but their physical abilities were comparable to swordsmen. The thought of Amy fighting amidst such opponents made his stomach churn.

“Shirone, shouldn’t we go back? I’m worried about Amy.”

“She’ll be fine. The longer we delay, the worse it’ll get. The survivors from the first gate might be pursuing us. Reaching the hideout as quickly as possible is our priority.”

“I get that, but what about Amy? Wouldn’t it have been better for you to deal with the enemies instead?”

Shirone, catching the intent behind Tess’s words, gave a bittersweet smile.

“It’s not that simple. A mage’s skill isn’t just measured by raw power. It depends on the situation and the magic type. Against gunners, Amy is far more effective than I am.”

Tess looked unconvinced.

Sure, he knew Amy was in the graduating class, but Shirone’s feats so far had been extraordinary. Could there really be a scenario where Amy was several times stronger than Shirone?

“Is that even possible? No matter how skilled someone is, numbers still matter, don’t they?”

As a swordsman, Tess instinctively valued physical force and numerical strength.

While sheer physical power often determined battles, magic operated differently.

Mages, who combined creativity and versatility, often rendered numerical superiority irrelevant. What mattered more was their ability to manipulate the situation to maximize the efficiency of their abilities.

“The properties of photons and flames are different, and their tactical applications vary too. Amy specializes in long-range combat, which complements her Crimson Eyes perfectly. No matter how strong the enemies are, if Amy fights them on her terms...”

Shirone spoke with unwavering confidence.

“They can’t beat her, no matter how many of them there are.”

Tess swallowed hard. Normally, Shirone and Amy felt like stubborn younger siblings he had to watch over. But in battle, they turned ice-cold and unshakably logical.

“You two are something else. How do you make decisions so quickly and decisively?”

“You misunderstand, Tess. I actually think you’re the amazing one.”

“Tch. Me? I didn’t even help destroy the fortress—it was all you.”

Shirone didn’t see it that way. After all, swordsmen and mages had inherently different growth paths.

In mental disciplines, age didn’t always correlate with ability. But for swordsmen, whose power depended on physical development, maturity often came later.

Tess and Rian would only continue to grow stronger. They would each forge their own paths, imbuing their swords with personal conviction.

“Shirone, we’ve arrived.”

As they emerged from the forest, they were greeted by the sight of a cliff overlooking the vast, blue sea.

To the east of the cliff stood a brick building, likely the hideout. However, one final obstacle lay ahead.

Standing in their path was Falcoa, the operations leader, waiting for them.

Tess furrowed his brows in confusion. Based on her personality, she should’ve already been armed and charging into battle.

“What? That guy’s still here?”

“Haha, smashing you early on would’ve been more fun, but... I’ve got my own orders to follow.”

Falcoa had received instructions from Marsha. Though it wasn’t his style, he obeyed willingly. After all, Marsha was the one who had turned him, once considered a societal scourge, into a battlefield hero.

“Well, you made it this far. The boss was right. The woman you’re looking for is in that building. Go ahead and get her.” Falcoa stepped aside as if opening the way. But Shirone’s group remained frozen. The murderous aura emanating from Falcoa was nothing like what they’d felt in the royal palace—it blocked their path like an impenetrable wall. Tess understood Amy’s feelings. To fight an opponent of this caliber, they would need to take significant risks.

“He’s trying to throw us off. Rian and I will handle her. Shirone, go get Yuna.”

Shirone nodded without hesitation. Tess suddenly understood why Amy had smiled earlier. Instead of feeling slighted, Tess found himself oddly comforted.

‘So the world isn’t entirely cold, after all. Is this what trust feels like?’

With Shirone’s abilities, escaping alone wouldn’t be a problem. After briefly assessing the situation, Shirone activated Spatial Movement, his body vanishing in a flash of light.

But Falcoa didn’t even glance at him.

From this, Tess realized the truth: Falcoa had intended to let Shirone go from the start.

“Why?”

“Well, orders from the boss. Plus, I’d rather keep the company of women.”

Drawing his sword, Falcoa pointed it at Tess. His rough demeanor made it clear he wasn’t an honorable type. But the drugged, staggering state he’d been in earlier was gone. Never taking his eyes off Falcoa, Tess whispered to Rian, laying out their strategy.

“He’s a Schema user. I’ll hold him off while you attack.”

Just from the aura he exuded, it was clear Falcoa was exceptionally skilled. As a fellow Schema user, Tess was best suited to defending against him, giving them the highest chance of survival.

“No, I’ll defend while you attack.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t handle him alone. I hate to say it, but it’d be impossible for you to hold him off.”

“If it’s impossible, then I’ll just have to die trying.”

“What?”

Tess stared at Rian in disbelief, but Rian’s expression was dead serious. He hadn’t given up on the fight; he was simply approaching it his own way.

“We’re staying here to defeat him, not just to protect our lives.”

Tess couldn’t argue with that.

“If you defend, we might buy some time. But you know as well as I do that we wouldn’t win. We’d both end up dead. That’s why I’ll defend, and you’ll focus on attacking.”

Rian’s logic was sound. Blunting the sword and fortifying the shield might prolong the fight, but it wouldn’t lead to victory. In the end, even if it cost his life, the only way forward was to sharpen the blade and strike true.

Chapter 154: Second Encounter (3)

“Do you think you can hold out? His Schema isn’t at a student’s level.”

“Even if it’s not, what choice do I have? I’ll just have to try.” Rian lowered the massive greatsword, the symbol of Ogent, letting its weight drag on the ground as he slowly advanced. Tess moved sideways, slipping out of Falcoa’s line of sight. Their positioning was textbook two-person combat strategy, but Falcoa didn’t care.

To be swayed by a couple of rookies? How could someone like him, once called the battlefield’s demon, face the ridicule of those he had killed with his blade?

Rian boldly pointed his greatsword forward.

“Come at me. I’ll take you on.”

But before he even finished speaking, Falcoa had already closed the distance. Her acceleration defied belief.

“Kahaha!”

The downward slash of his longsword clashed against Rian’s weapon, forcing a grimace out of him. It didn’t feel like two blades colliding—it was as if he were struck by a hammer.

“What’s this? Giving up already?”

Falcoa mercilessly pounded on Rian’s greatsword. Each strike bent his knees further until he eventually dropped to the ground.

“Urgh!”

His muscles trembled under the strain of holding his weapon. Then, Falcoa’s kick slammed into his solar plexus. Rian’s body tumbled across the ground like a ragdoll.

“Rian!”

Tess cried out in distress. It looked like the fight was over.

But defying all expectations, Rian rose to his feet, his body upright and steady.

His raw strength was remarkable, but his resilience was equally extraordinary—a trait that set him apart.

“Hah... I see now. So, that’s your level?”

Falcoa’s eyebrow twitched. Rian, unfazed, raised his greatsword and taunted him further.

“Good. Let’s start for real. Come at me as much as you like.”

“Kekeke, I’ll kill you.”

Falcoa’s grin stretched unnaturally wide, exposing his teeth. It was the same terrifying expression he had worn when he was known as the demon of the battlefield.

Shirone entered the building. Surprisingly, the interior was pristine and orderly, unlike what one would expect from a mercenary hideout. Sunlight poured in through the windows, illuminating rows of neatly arranged potted plants.

“Where is Jiese’s sister?”

Shirone searched the rooms one by one. When he opened the third door, his hand froze on the doorknob.

A pleasant fragrance filled the air. The room was lined with a red carpet, and the furniture—a bed and a desk—was arranged meticulously.

Shirone’s eyes landed on a woman sitting on the bed.

Until this moment, Shirone had only vaguely imagined what she might look like. But facing her in person struck him with a profound sense of shock.

“Oh my, you’re here, Shirone. How have you been?”

“Marsha...?”

Marsha was undoubtedly the leader of the organization that had kidnapped Yuna. Yet her gentle smile and soft demeanor made it hard to reconcile this fact.

“Did you make it home safely that day? Did you make up with your friend?”

Shirone swallowed the reply that rose to his throat. It seemed Marsha had anticipated his arrival, yet she still

hadn't released Yuna.

"You already know, don't you? You must have heard everything."

"Oh my, why so harsh, Shirone? Are you angry at me? I'm sorry for deceiving you back then."

Marsha stepped closer with a playful expression, but Shirone instinctively backed away to maintain the same distance.

"Ah, so you are upset. How can I make it up to you? Should I get on my knees and beg for forgiveness? If that's what you want, I'll do it."

"Just return Jiese's sister. That's all I want."

"Aha! That's all it was? Oh dear, I misunderstood—I thought you came here to fight me. But of course, kind-hearted Shirone would never do such a thing. I'm so relieved."

Shirone felt bewildered. Who was this woman? Her behavior made him feel as if they were in entirely different worlds, experiencing entirely different realities.

"Where is Yuna?"

"She's on the second floor. You can take her if you want."

Shirone turned away, unwilling to dwell on Marsha any longer. All he wanted was to leave this place as quickly as possible.

"Oh, wait. Don't you think you should bring something to cover her with?"

Shirone stopped dead in his tracks. When he turned back, Marsha was smiling mischievously.

"It'd be awkward to see a stranger naked, wouldn't it? So I'm warning you in advance—don't be too shocked. She might not be in her right mind. My subordinates were... rough with her."

As Shirone's gaze grew colder, Marsha's words came faster, almost gleeful.

"I was there, too. The screams were something else. Even I wouldn't have been able to endure that. Thinking back, maybe we went a bit too far. But you know, Shirone, I

ordered all of it. And I think you'll understand. Because you're such a kind boy. Right?"

Shirone's jaw tightened as he remained silent, which only seemed to heighten Marsha's pleasure.

"How does it feel, Shirone?"

"What are you talking about? What do you want me to say?"

Shirone no longer saw any reason to show Marsha respect. But for her, that was exactly what made this moment delightful.

"Hahaha! You're really angry, aren't you? Why? You told me once that my kleptomania would improve someday. But now your opinion has changed, hasn't it? What if you'd scolded me properly back then? Maybe I wouldn't have kidnapped Yuna. Honestly, you've always been insufferable."

Shirone turned to face her fully. Yuna was no longer the issue. Marsha had crossed a line she should never have approached.

"What's wrong? Answer me! How does it feel? Are you losing your mind? Is it unbearable to see a sisterly figure like me acting like this? Does it make you feel like there's nothing left in the world you can trust?"

"Do you really have to hear it? Other people's pain—do you have to hear it out loud to feel at ease?"

Shirone's question cut off Marsha's laughter entirely.

"If that's really what you wanted, you could've just done it. So why are you so concerned about my emotions? Are you afraid I'll be disappointed?"

"Don't spout nonsense! I'm mocking you!"

"Is that so? Then should I tell you what I think of you right now?"

Marsha's face hardened. It was as though she had lost her ability to speak and could only wait for Shirone's answer.

"I don't hate you. In my memory, you're still a good person."

Marsha's expression changed before his eyes. The surprise on her face shifted to disappointment, then finally twisted

into anger.

“Don’t give me that nonsense. If that’s really how you feel, could you forgive me? Could you still smile at me the way you used to, even after what I did to Jiese’s sister?”

“No. You’ve done something unforgivable. If you really did those things, I could never forgive you.”

“Hah! So you think I’m lying? Well, too bad—I’m not. Go upstairs and see for yourself.”

“Even if it’s true, I don’t hate you. But...”

Shirone bit his lip as he looked at her.

“It just pains me... that someone like you, who must understand this kind of suffering better than anyone, could do something so cruel.”

Sparks seemed to ignite in Marsha’s eyes. Her face twisted into a fierce scowl, and her clenched teeth ground audibly. If she had truly harmed Yuna, she might have been able to accept his words without regret. But this? She couldn’t bear it. Shirone’s presumption, his tone as if he understood her completely, made her seethe.

“You! You’re seriously infuriating!”

Shirone stepped back hastily. Marsha’s Zone, sharp enough to prickle at his synesthesia, pierced through him like a physical attack.

Her Zone was shaped like a star.

It was a unique attribute among offensive type of Four-Way Formation.

As Marsha prepared to attack, Shirone shifted to a defensive stance. Yet his mind kept drifting to Yuna, who was still on the second floor.

Urban environments were challenging for mages. The problem wasn’t simply about shrinking the range of a Spirit Zone.

It felt akin to a swordsman being forced to abandon their longsword and fight with a dagger instead.

‘What type of mage is she...?’

Observing Marsha closely, Shirone simultaneously activated photon transformation magic, preparing to dodge any incoming attack.

But Marsha's magic surpassed his expectations. Her eyes narrowed as she let out a piercing scream, and the deafening sound exploded into Shirone's eardrums.

"Urgh!"

The mental shock made Shirone stagger. It felt like needles piercing one ear and exiting the other, leaving behind a sharp, searing pain.

'Sound Cannon. She's a sound mage. This is dangerous.'

Sound mages study the manipulation of sound waves.

Whether through their voice or by vibrating air, they create various sonic attacks. The Sound Cannon Marsha had unleashed was a prime example of their destructive spells. The cannon's sound pressure exceeded 150 decibels. At close range, it was powerful enough to rupture eardrums and cause deafness.

Because it was a directional spell that amplified sound waves, it didn't spread across a wide area like conventional magic. But its invisibility made it one of the hardest types of magic to counter.

'I'm at a disadvantage here.'

Just as Shirone and Amy had strengths and weaknesses depending on their environment, Marsha's sound-based abilities gave her a significant edge in the confined space.

Desperate to find a way out, Shirone racked his brain.

Finally, he decided on a strategy: rapid short-range

Teleportation within the narrow space.

Combining Patrol with Rainbow Drop, he darted around the room, creating a chaotic pattern of flashing lights to disorient Marsha.

The moment he maneuvered behind her, Shirone unleashed a Photon Cannon. But Marsha twisted her body gracefully, dodging the attack with ease.

'How...?'

There was no way she could've sensed an attack from her blind spot without eyes in the back of her head.

No, even if she had eyes back there, dodging a Photon Cannon at that distance should've been impossible.

"Haha, you're surprised, aren't you? Surely, that's not all you've got?"

"Don't tell me... sonar?"

"Oh my, someone's been studying hard. As expected of a magic school student."

Sonar is the ability to interpret sound waves. While it's most effective underwater, mages can use their universal skills to amplify their Zone and adapt it for other mediums.

A master of sonar possesses detection capabilities that surpass even a Zone in density and precision.

It was no surprise that Marsha could react to Shirone's Photon Cannon the moment he cast it.

"Amplification magic is such a bore. It's so unrefined."

Shirone tilted his head, puzzled. It wasn't an issue to overlook, but something felt strange. It was unheard of for a mage to disparage their own magic.

"But this, I quite like."

If Marsha had mastered sonar, she wouldn't even need to amplify sound waves. She spread her arms wide, and the air in front of her began to vibrate. Two Sound Cannons shot toward Shirone from either side.

Shirone hastily teleported again, but sound was faster than his reflexes.

The high-decibel sound waves scrambled his thoughts, disrupting his magic mid-cast. For a mage, whose abilities depended on concentration, sound-based magic was a particularly perilous threat.

Marsha used a spell called Side-Looking to encompass the entire building.

Like a dolphin emitting sound waves and reading the echoes, this spell allowed her to detect objects, their

direction, and distance with pinpoint accuracy, even through barriers.

Shirone found himself cornered. Sound Cannons couldn't be blocked, and her instantaneous detection through Side-Looking rendered his Photon Cannon ineffective.

'This doesn't make sense. Sound-based magic is an extremely specialized field. How could someone like Marsha, a former mercenary, have mastered it?'

Sound mages typically dedicate their entire lives to studying and collecting data on sound.

Even if Marsha had stumbled upon some stroke of fortune, she wouldn't have the scholarly foundation required to manipulate sound-based magic so precisely.

"You're making quite the face, Shirone. I can practically see it in your eyes—you're wondering, 'How can someone like her...?'"

Chapter 155: Second Encounter (4)

When Marsha fired another Sound Cannon, Shirone pressed his palms tightly against his ears. At this moment, no magic could shield him as effectively as simply blocking the sound. "Ahhhh!"

But Shirone's assumption was shattered.

The Sound Cannon this time was on an entirely different level of power, penetrating even his hands and striking his eardrums. If he hadn't covered his ears, his eardrums would have ruptured.

"Hah, you underestimate me. I may not have gone to school, but I know my way around sequences."

By the classification of magic societies, Marsha wasn't a trained mage, but she was a veteran who had defeated numerous mages. Theoretical knowledge crucial in combat had been learned through experience.

"Banshee's Scream."

Marsha vibrated her Spirit Zone, filling the room with a warped, elongated sound.

Shirone leapt to his feet in terror. His vision had gone completely dark, as though ink had been poured over his retinas.

'What is this? What kind of magic is this?'

Sound mages are wanderers, collecting sounds from across the world. The banshee was a winged humanoid monster found in mountainous regions, characterized by its female upper body.

Banshees emit high-frequency waves to blind their prey before devouring them. Marsha had perfectly replicated that sound using sound magic.

Shirone felt his anxiety mounting. He couldn't pinpoint Marsha's location using his Spirit Zone.

The room's confined space was chaotic with sound reverberations, and Marsha herself, as the source of the sound waves, was only detectable through sound.

As Shirone's senses dulled, Marsha had already crept beside him. She raised her palm toward his ear. At this range, a direct hit from an Sound Cannon would shut down his brain functions entirely.

'Goodbye, Shirone.'

But at that moment, Shirone's Zone vibrated violently. Detecting the threat with her sonar-like sensitivity, Marsha immediately retreated.

Simultaneously, a photon pulse erupted, pushing aside everything in the room.

Shirone, keeping his eyes shut, surrounded himself with lasers in every direction.

While rapidly spinning lasers might not cause significant damage, Marsha, having seen their power at the first gate, dove under a desk for cover.

From her hiding spot, Marsha couldn't visually monitor Shirone. But using her sonar detection, she could sense his every move with precision.

'What...?'

Marsha's heart skipped a beat. Shirone was aiming a fully charged Photon Cannon directly at her location.

The banshee's screams echoed in the small room, unable to fade away.

Marsha recalled the lasers that had sliced through the room earlier.

'What? What am I hearing?'

Sound vibrations aren't easily disrupted by most magic.

However, the high-efficiency energy amplification of lasers could indeed slice through sound waves.

Marsha didn't understand the principles behind lasers, but Shirone had a firm grasp of sounds. This difference in

knowledge was critical. It was why magic schools taught a wide array of disciplines beyond one's specialty.

"Damn it..."

Shirone's eyes snapped open as he unleashed the Photon Cannon at Marsha's position. She sprang away like a flying squirrel, rolling to the side.

BOOM!

The heavy sphere of light tore through the building's wall.

Meanwhile, the battle in the forest raged like a full-blown war.

Freeman's subordinates seemed to have no concept of the cost of magic bullets. Their reckless use of their guns had left the forest completely devastated.

Yet it was they who were being driven into a corner. Their original group of 20 had dwindled to just 7, and they still hadn't located Amy.

"Damn it! Where is she?!"

"There! She just passed that way!"

From the depths of the forest, a blazing stone came flying and struck a gunner in the back of the head. Despite his activated Schema, the impact knocked him unconscious.

"Damn it! She's deliberately using fire-based spells!"

"She's like a ghost! Even with all that speed, her accuracy is terrifying."

For a gunner, mobility and precision were key. Amy outclassed them in both.

Her ability to cast Fly steadily and her near-perfect targeting accuracy were thanks to her Crimson Eyes.

"Hah... Only six left now. No, including Freeman, that's seven."

Amy levitated another set of stones into the air. They glowed red-hot before igniting like molten lava.

If the photon magic had photonization theory, then the fire magic had ignition theory, or Ignite. It was the fundamental magic of flame mages.

There were five different types of flames that could be created with Ignite.

They were Heat, which generates heat; Flare, which starts fires; Burn, which ignites objects; Blaze, which burns a large area; and Buster, which causes explosions.

Using Burn-type flames, Amy heated the stones until they ignited into molten projectiles, employing a spell called Fire Call. This allowed her to launch flaming rocks like lava at her enemies.

For flame mages, the Burn property was vital because it compensated for fire's inherent lightness. This made it particularly effective against gunners who relied on Schema. "Shall we go again?"

Ascending into the sky, Amy mercilessly dropped Fire Calls. Though it couldn't compare to meteor-based bombardments like Meteor, the sight of flaming rocks raining down was terrifying from the enemy's perspective.

"She's above us! Shoot her down!"

The gunners aimed their guns skyward and fired magic bullets. But Amy, using her magnetic memory to adjust for discrepancies, easily dodged their attacks while landing her own.

Although Fly was a simple spell to learn, maintaining balance in ever-changing air currents was another matter. Yet Amy hovered effortlessly, as though suspended in midair. Her eyes glowed a rapid crimson, signaling her photographic memory's relentless backup.

With each exchange of attacks, the enemy's numbers dwindled one by one.

When only two of Freeman's subordinates remained, Amy unleashed her remaining Fire Calls all at once.

This time, precision wasn't necessary. Flaming rocks slammed into the heads and backs of the retreating enemies, felling them with ease.

Finally, Amy canceled her Fly spell and landed in the clearing.

The 20 gunners had been wiped out in the blink of an eye. Only Freeman remained.

“Your men are dead, and you don’t even flinch. Too cold, don’t you think? Or are you just a coward?”

“If disliking combat makes me a coward, then so be it.”

Amy frowned. If this was a psychological ploy, it was an advanced one.

Freeman, however, seemed unfazed, regardless of what Amy thought.

Freeman is coming. The coward Freeman is coming.

If Freeman cries, Marsha will show up. What a fool, needing a woman to bail him out.

Freeman, recalling memories from the past, suddenly spoke surprising words.

“Let’s stop this.”

“What? What did you just say?”

Amy was baffled. With victory within reach, stopping now was unthinkable. It would also dishonor the subordinates who had fought and died for him.

“I’m worried about the captain. I think I need to check on her. I don’t want her to fall.”

“Hah, nobody wants to lose. That’s why you should’ve lived honorably from the start.”

“That’s not what I mean. She cannot lose—under any circumstances. Even if it means dying.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Freeman ignored Amy’s question and continued talking to himself, as though lost in his own world.

“The captain is strong. Your friends might die.”

“Hah! Shirone is stronger. He would never lose to someone like her.”

“You’re naive. Trusting your man is fine, but you’ll regret it.”

Amy, annoyed by Freeman’s insinuation of romantic feelings, raised her fist and shouted.

“Shut up! And for the record, I’m stronger than Shirone, you idiot! There’s no way I’m letting you leave here. You’ll have

to fall right here, right now!”

“I see.”

Realizing negotiations had failed, Freeman gripped a gun in each hand and activated his Schema.

His figure, still locked onto Amy, blurred like an afterimage before vanishing completely.

Amy barely had time to react. But through her Zone, she sensed movement behind her and twisted her body instinctively.

Freeman’s kick barely grazed her chin as she narrowly avoided it. She clenched her teeth in frustration.

‘Damn it... I messed up!’

She had assumed Freeman would attack from a distance as a gunner, but instead, he engaged in close-quarters combat. His mindset was clearly different from his subordinates, who had relied solely on magic bullets.

“Hah! Fine, I’ll take you on properly!”

Amy steadied her stance, but Freeman leapt into the air, firing a barrage of magic bullets. The fiery projectiles exploded like dotted lines aimed at Amy.

Amy countered by firing a rapid series of Flame Strikes, neutralizing every round.

Matching points and lines in an infinitely variable space was exceedingly difficult, yet the precision of both fighters was nearly equal.

As they clashed again on the ground, they engaged in an intense close-range battle of firepower. But at this range, the gunner held the advantage.

“In that case...!”

Amy deployed the defensive spell Fire Mist. A wave of heat surged around her, creating reddish smoke that billowed like a mass of gas.

Freeman retreated out of the mist’s range, but Amy seized the moment to unleash a relentless barrage of Flame Strikes. Over ten blazing spears surged forward, consuming the air in flames.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

But she wasn't done. Using rapid Teleportation, Amy moved around Freeman, firing spell after spell with unrelenting force.

As dozens of Flame Strikes converged on him from all sides, Freeman activated his Schema.

One of his eye techniques, Compound Eye, came into play. The scenery before Freeman fragmented like the multi-lensed vision of an insect.

As each piece of information was analyzed, Freeman's movements became impossibly fluid, his body weaving through the chain of Flame Strikes without even grazing his clothing.

Amy instantly realized this was no ordinary skill. Though it wasn't comparable to her Crimson Eyes, it was undoubtedly a technique specialized for gunners.

Recognizing she was at a disadvantage in close combat against such a high-level gunner, Amy retreated into the forest.

If close combat was off the table, she still had another specialty: sniping. From a distance of 300 meters, she observed Freeman, who was calmly opening his cylinder to reload his magic bullet.

'Hah, let's see how long you can stay that composed.'

Amy adjusted her Spirit Zone into sniper mode, narrowing it into a cone that focused directly on Freeman's face.

The nature of Flame Strike meant its power amplified with distance. The air pressure from an Air Tunnel—a characteristic of wind magic—would accelerate the projectile the longer it traveled.

A Flame Strike fired from 300 meters would hit with nearly four times the power of a close-range attack.

As Amy cast her spell, the flaming spear was drawn into the Air Tunnel, racing toward Freeman.

At the 200-meter mark, Amy was certain the attack would land. Given its current acceleration, it would cover the

remaining 100 meters at over four times the speed it had traveled so far.

There was no way Freeman could react.

As expected, Freeman didn't move. But to Amy's shock, the Flame Strike slammed into the ground far short of its target.

'Did I miss?'

At that moment, Amy realized the strange sensation invading her mind.

"Anti-Magic..."

Freeman's guns were clearly imbued with Anti-Magic properties.

Though the interference was slight—about 3% by her estimate—over a distance of 300 meters, the deviation had become massive.

Anti-Magic was dangerous for Amy. Because it directly affected her Zone, it was a technique even her Crimson Eyes couldn't fully counter.

Chapter 156: Second Encounter (5)

Amy realized that Freeman was more tactical than she had anticipated.

With mastery of Schema, Compound Eye, and even 3% Anti-Magic that rendered sniping ineffective, Freeman could fight in close, mid, and long range with equal proficiency.

“Were you hiding there all along?”

Freeman took to the air, holding a gun loaded with magic bullets. His swift movements, leaping from tree to tree to control the battlefield, were so fast they seemed almost discontinuous.

What followed was a relentless chase.

Amy kept attempting to snipe him, but hitting Freeman was nearly impossible. Even with Crimson Eyes, there was no escaping the 3% margin of error that always crept in.

Approaching mid-range might have allowed her to put up a fight, but that was essentially stepping into Freeman’s domain.

‘This is the only way.’

Amy didn’t give up and stuck to sniping. But Freeman, who had no need to dodge, was so unconcerned that he felt like yawning.

No matter what strategy she tried, it didn’t matter. Sniping would never land a hit, and if she approached, his Compound Eye would let him evade easily.

“I heard even a mage’s mental stamina has its limits...”

In the early stages of battle, mages who didn’t need to reload their spells held the advantage. But as time passed and magic wasn’t infinite, the tide inevitably shifted in favor of gunners.

As the speed of Amy's Flame Strikes slowed, Freeman began to move in for the kill.

Amy had no mental energy left to cast another spell. Her mind felt like it was being bleached white. Her omniscience and omnipotence seemed out of reach.

"Hah... hah..."

Still, Amy squeezed out the last remnants of her mental strength. Finally, she cast her final Flame Strike.

Freeman calmly observed the surging magic. As a ballistics expert, he had already noticed that the strike would miss its target by a full 10 meters.

Freeman raised his dual guns and placed his fingers on the triggers. He figured she wouldn't even be able to maintain her Fly spell. At this point, she was just an ordinary girl.

Bang!

At that moment, a powerful impact struck Freeman's temple. For the first time, his face revealed emotion.

Confusion and awe.

The Flame Strike had clearly veered off course by 10 meters. How, then, had it managed to hit him?

That was as far as he got in his thoughts. Struck at a vital point, Freeman crashed to the ground with a resounding thud. Lying spread-eagle, his face began to glow with fiery embers.

'Marsha...'

Amy, who had been clinging weakly to a tree as she descended to the ground, finally lost her strength and fell flat onto her backside.

The exhaustion was overwhelming. She was more mentally drained than an ordinary person pulling four consecutive all-nighters.

But the thrill of success in what had felt like a gamble wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"Hah... hah... I did it. I won."

Amy's final attack had a sniper mode range of less than 100 meters.

Had Freeman not approached, the Flame Strike would have dissipated before even reaching its target.

But Freeman had charged forward, and that had been his fatal mistake. With her remaining strength, Amy had gambled on an area-deflection strategy.

Using a zone to trap the Flame Strike and redirect its trajectory, she managed to land a blow on Freeman.

With such a method, even Freeman's 3% Anti-Magic was powerless to evade.

It was the equivalent of throwing a rock before but now using her hand to strike directly.

"Well, at least I won. If I'd died, it would've been too embarrassing to face the afterlife."

There was no time to rest. Amy knew her friends were still locked in battle. Dragging her fatigued body, she trudged toward the cliff, bent over and struggling to move.

Freeman's face was burning, but he didn't make a sound. Since regaining consciousness amidst the pain of his burns, only one thought filled his mind.

'I need to get to Marsha.'

Amy's flames relentlessly scorched his skin, but Freeman's body was healing its cells just as quickly.

Caught between the agony of life and the stillness of death, Freeman's mind drifted back to the memories of his childhood with Marsha.

"Oh? It's Freeman. Scaredy-cat Freeman."

"Freeman with the droopy eyebrows! Aren't you going to cry? Go ahead and cry for us!"

Freeman was always the target of teasing because he was a coward.

Of course, no one is born a coward. Freeman believed that his severely droopy eyebrows were the root of all his problems.

"S-Stop it. It hurts."

“Come on, cry already. If you cry, Marsha will come. Pretty Marsha.”

“Don’t bother Marsha!”

“You idiot. Who would bother Marsha, the boss of the neighborhood? Besides, Marsha is fun! Anyway, hurry up and cry. Hey, hey.”

“Waaah! Marsha!”

Unable to hold back his tears, Freeman ran away.

The children were determined to make him cry. Poking his face with sticks was the least of it—sometimes, they even threw stones at him.

“Hey! Tell Marsha to come here! We’re going to play war games with her.”

The children bullied Freeman just so they could hang out with Marsha. Yet Freeman always ran to Marsha’s house. As someone constantly bullied, her house was the only place he could go.

Every time he came, the same impression struck him—the house felt lonely. Her father, a mercenary, hadn’t even furnished it. He was often away on overnight missions, and when he came home, he would always beat Marsha at least once.

When Freeman opened Marsha’s door, she was sitting in the corner of her empty room.

There was no bed, no desk, not even a blanket—only a half-eaten piece of bread and a cup of milk.

“Marsha, sniffle, the kids hit me.”

Marsha, who always kept her hair in a bob cut, greeted Freeman with a kind smile. Despite her tough circumstances, she had a beautiful face.

“Sigh, you’re always getting picked on. Don’t you ever get tired of it? Why do you even hang out with those kids?”

“I don’t! They always find me and bully me.”

“Alright, I’ll go talk to them. Where are they?”

Freeman wiped his nose and replied.

"Don't go. If your dad comes back while you're out, he'll hit you."

"It's the same whether I'm here or not. I'll just tell them that if they bully you again, I won't hang out with them anymore."

"No! You don't even like hanging out with those jerks. You're just doing it because of me, and I hate seeing you smile at them!"

"Oh, thanks for caring. Then why don't you try getting stronger? Big words for someone who always needs help." Marsha playfully poked Freeman's forehead. Annoyed, Freeman ran to the door, spread his arms wide, and shouted.

"I still hate it! Don't go!"

"What's gotten into you today? Why don't you talk to the other kids like this? Oh, wait... Do you like me? Is that why you're jealous of me hanging out with them?"

Freeman's face turned bright red. His heart pounded so hard that he could hear it in his ears, and he felt like he might throw up from the tension.

Marsha, amused by his reaction, waved her hand dismissively.

"Hey, I'm just joking. Geez, you're such a scaredy-cat."

"Fine! I like you! What are you going to do about it, huh, girl?"

Marsha stared at Freeman blankly.

"Am I not allowed to like you? Did I ever ask you to like me back? Liking someone is my choice, so why are you telling me what I can or can't do? Is it because I'm a coward? Am I not allowed to like anyone because of that?"

Freeman, awkward at expressing his feelings, shouted angrily. Marsha, sensing things were escalating, raised her hands to calm him down.

"Alright, alright. I get it. I'm sorry. Of course, liking someone is your choice."

“Darn it! Really! Even you’re treating me like I’m some idiot!”

Marsha chuckled at his outburst, then gently grabbed his wrist and pulled him over to sit at her usual spot.

“I wasn’t treating you like an idiot. Calm down, okay?”

Marsha wrapped herself in her ragged cloak, preparing to leave.

Freeman, embarrassed by his earlier shouting, sat quietly for a moment before looking up hesitantly.

“Are you really going to hang out with them?”

“No, I’m just going to scold them and come back. Then we can play together later.”

Freeman’s face lit up at her words.

“Really? You have to come back soon!”

“Sure. If you’re hungry, eat the bread and milk. I’ve already had enough.”

Once Marsha left, silence filled the house again. Freeman’s expression grew sullen as the atmosphere of the shabby room sank into him.

‘Man, I was going to give this to her when I told her...’

Freeman pulled a small hand mirror out of his pocket. He had spent three months running errands and saving up spare change to buy it.

Marsha had nothing but a single set of clothes. Her stepfather took everything else from her.

“She’s still a girl, so she should have at least a mirror. Her dad is so weird. How could he treat such a pretty daughter like that?”

Imagining how happy Marsha would be, Freeman smiled.

But the face reflected in the mirror wasn’t smiling at all.

His eyebrows drooped severely.

These eyebrows had earned him the nickname “Crybaby” as a child. After living with that label for ten years, it felt like he had truly become one.

“Is it really that bad? I think it’s fine.”

Time passed, and Marsha and Freeman both turned seventeen.

Freeman was still regarded as the neighborhood coward, but he had earned a good reputation for being diligent in his work.

Even so, the only person he truly connected with was Marsha.

The reason he saved money after covering his living expenses was to buy gifts for Marsha.

Though her stepfather took everything he gave her, Marsha was always genuinely happy to receive his gifts.

For Freeman, seeing Marsha smile was worth any expense.

At some point, however, her smiles had started to disappear. Freeman had a vague idea of why. Her stepfather had begun tormenting her more severely.

Of course, many of the children in their area grew up in similar circumstances.

Freeman himself lived every day being called a “useless idiot” by his drunkard father.

One day, Freeman came to learn the truth: the abuse Marsha endured went far beyond what a parent might inflict on their child.

“Marsha, Marsha?”

That night, Freeman’s visit to Marsha’s house seemed fated. He couldn’t shake the unease he’d felt after seeing her earlier in the day—her face looked more despondent than usual.

The more he knocked on her door without a response, the stronger his sense of foreboding grew.

With no other option, Freeman climbed through the window. Since there was nothing valuable to steal, the windows were often left open during the summer.

“Huh? Marsha? You were here? Then why didn’t you answer...?”

Freeman froze at the sight illuminated by the moonlight in her room. Marsha was kneeling on the floor, staring blankly

ahead.

In her hand was a knife, and blood dripped from its blade, pooling on the floor and flowing toward a lifeless body.

“M-M-M-M-Marsha...”

Snapping back to his senses, Freeman rushed to her side. He didn’t know where his sudden courage came from, but seeing Marsha in such a state made him feel he had to do something.

“Get up. What happened here?”

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her several times before she finally came back to herself.

Looking up at Freeman with vacant eyes, she spoke words that shocked him to his core.

“...My father... tried to assault me.”

Freeman was at a loss for words.

He had always thought her stepfather’s taciturn nature and dark, lecherous eyes were unsettling, but he was still her parent, wasn’t he?

The realization that his worst suspicions were true made Freeman feel sick to his stomach.

“Let’s run away. He’s a mercenary, right? If his comrades find out, they’ll come looking for revenge.”

Freeman’s suggestion was spot on. Marsha, quick-witted as ever, regained her composure the moment she heard his words. They needed to leave the house immediately.

Then, out of nowhere, Marsha let out a bitter laugh. She realized there was nothing she needed to pack—she had never owned anything to begin with.

Freeman grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the house. They ran without stopping until they reached the edge of the village.

“Hah... hah... We’re safe now. I think we can relax for a bit.”

“Yeah. He probably won’t chase us beyond the village.”

Catching her breath, Marsha tried to calm her pounding heart. Though the thought of her stepfather’s comrades

frightened her, she was determined to flee to the ends of the earth if necessary.

Chapter 157: Second Encounter (6)

“Freeman, thank you.”

“Hehe, what’s this all about? Let’s just get out of this wretched place already. Wherever we go, I can at least take care of you.”

Marsha was taken aback by the unexpected words. Then, realizing it was time, she spoke in a sorrowful voice.

“Freeman, I’m sorry. I’m leaving alone. I won’t take you with me.”

“What? Why not? What’s a girl planning to do all by herself? The world out there is dangerous!”

“I’ll be fine. I feel like I can handle anything now.”

“No! I won’t let you! I’m coming too! There’s no way I’ll let you go alone.”

Marsha paused for a final moment of consideration. But no matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t bring him along.

Freeman had a family.

Even if his father was no better than her stepfather, he was still Freeman’s real, biological parent.

“Freeman, I don’t love you.”

Her blunt words made Freeman’s face flush red.

“W-What? Where did that come from?”

“You’re a really good friend, but I’ll never see you as a man. Coming with me will only make you miserable. I might even marry someone else.”

Freeman felt like his heart was being torn apart. Cruel.

Marsha was so cruel.

How could she say something like that at a moment like this? This could very well be the last time they ever saw

each other.

Freeman clenched his fists and grit his teeth.

If Marsha said so, then that was how it had to be. Sticking around her would only end with him being hurt.

"I don't care. I'm coming with you anyway. I'm tired of being called a worthless idiot by my drunkard father. This is my choice."

Marsha's frustration boiled over. Freeman's stubbornness was maddening.

"You idiot! Why can't you just listen to me? I'm telling you, I don't like you!"

"So what? You don't have to like me! I'll still like you! I don't care if you marry someone else or have kids—I'll just keep liking you! You don't have the right to tell me how I feel!"

Marsha, exasperated, shouted back.

"Oh, really? Fine! Spend your whole life staring at me and die a lonely old man! Want the truth? You following me is a burden! How long do I have to take care of a coward who can't even kill a bug? All it does is make my life harder!"

"I'm not a coward! I'll protect you!"

"And how exactly are you going to protect me? What can you even do?"

"Arrrgh!"

Freeman screamed into the ground, then grabbed a sharp stone nearby and began scraping it against his eyebrows.

Marsha, shocked, rushed to stop him.

"What are you doing, you idiot?!"

"Let go! I said let go!"

Freeman was relentless.

The sound of skin being scraped off sent chills down Marsha's spine. She stood frozen, horrified, as the scene unfolded before her.

Freeman kept scraping until his eyebrows were completely gone. Then, he threw the stone to the ground and stood up. His face, covered in blood, looked almost demonic.

“How about now? Do I look scary now? It was all because of these eyebrows that I was a coward. No one will mess with me now. I won’t be a burden to you anymore.”

“You... Are you insane?”

Marsha was so taken aback that she was at a loss for words. But Freeman was completely serious.

Without his eyebrows, his expression was indeed intimidating, but his face bore the saddest look in the world.

“I’ll get stronger. No matter what it takes, I’ll get stronger. So please, just let me stay by your side. I’ll never ask you to love me—just let me come with you.”

“You... Sigh, you idiot.”

Marsha let out a heavy sigh. She knew this wasn’t how it should be, but even that thought seemed to dissolve with her exhale.

“Marsha.”

Freeman’s eyes snapped open. The burns that had disfigured his face were now completely healed.

How much time had passed? It might already be too late. But he had to go. He had made a promise. Until Marsha’s dying breath, his life didn’t belong to him.

“I’m coming. Wait for me.”

The energy it took to return from the brink of death was immense. His body felt heavy, and his legs were weak.

But Freeman kept walking.

Toward where Marsha was.

Clay Marsha (1)

Amy gritted her teeth as she sprinted along the mountain path. While her mental strength had recovered enough for coherent thought, it was still too weak for casting magic. But she couldn’t afford to slow down. The battle wasn’t over yet. Freeman had been dealt with, but there was still one formidable enemy left—Falcoa.

“Just a little further!”

As her destination came into view, Amy pushed herself to run even faster. When she finally reached the top of the hill,

she was greeted by an unexpected scene that made her eyes widen.

A battered Rian was holding Falcoa in a grapple from behind.

But what shocked Amy wasn't that sight.

It was Tess, charging at full speed, her saber aimed at Falcoa.

Tess's eyes burned with an intensity Amy had never seen before. At this rate, Rian would be impaled along with Falcoa. Yet neither of them hesitated, as if they had silently agreed on their course of action.

Finally, Tess's saber pierced through Falcoa. Rian's eyes widened, and his shoulders trembled violently.

Moments later, blood gushed from Rian's mouth.

Twenty minutes earlier.

Falcoa's attacks were the pinnacle of ferocity. They weren't a display of finesse but raw, beastly violence that emanated from his very presence.

Rian couldn't focus on technique. Simply enduring the blows had already drained him to the brink of collapse.

Spotting an opening, Falcoa slashed Rian's thigh.

"Rian!" Tess's shout rang out. While Rian had held on admirably, the wound to his leg had effectively halved his strength.

Fueled by anger at seeing her friend injured, Tess attempted an attack. But Falcoa truly lived up to his reputation as a demon of the battlefield.

As long as he didn't die, he seemed indifferent to any injury, directing all his movements toward offense.

This relentless onslaught made Tess's attacks falter. It was a stark reminder of the adage, the best defense is a strong offense.

As the battle dragged on, Rian and Tess's bodies became increasingly battered. While they avoided fatal wounds, the

accumulation of injuries over the next ten minutes left their bodies in tatters.

“Hahaha! Is that all you’ve got? This was fun while it lasted.”

Ignoring Falcoa’s taunts, Tess glanced back at the struggling Rian.

“Rian, are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m hanging in there. What about you?”

Tess couldn’t speak as her eyes welled with tears. What does he mean, hanging in there? Falcoa’s blade had left clear marks all over Rian’s body.

She had never felt so frustrated in her life. How could someone as vile as Falcoa inflict such pain on Rian?

Tess gripped the hilt of her saber tightly. She was prepared to risk her life to end Falcoa’s.

“Yaaahhh!”

Tess charged forward, drawing her saber close in the signature lunging stance of the Elzaine family.

But the gap in their strength couldn’t be bridged, even with a masterstroke.

Though Tess’s speed was impressive, Falcoa retreated even faster, widening the distance between them. His intentions became clear. With a wicked grin, he launched himself forward and deftly deflected Tess’s saber.

“Ugh!”

Falcoa spun past Tess and struck her ribs with his knee. Her breath caught as her lungs compressed.

“Not bad. But you’re still just a greenhorn.”

Falcoa raised his longsword, preparing to bring it down on Tess.

Time seemed to slow for her. She could clearly see the trajectory of the sword aimed at her neck.

But she couldn’t move. Just as time seemed to crawl, so too did her body.

‘I’m sorry... Rian. I wanted to at least repay the blow you took.’

At that moment, Rian barreled into Falcoa like an enraged bull.

“Uraaahhh!”

Falcoa’s legs were swept off the ground. But Rian’s tackle failed to bring him down entirely. Even mid-air, Falcoa managed to stabilize himself with terrifying balance, landing on his feet and slamming his knee into Rian’s neck.

“Gah!”

The impact tore through Rian’s stomach, seemingly exploding out of his back.

Is this the strength of a demon consumed by war? It seemed there was no way to rattle Falcoa.

“Pathetic. Don’t worry—I’ll take good care of your girl for you.”

Rian’s fading consciousness snapped back. Despite their bickering, Tess was a treasured friend—a swordsman he respected and admired.

“Someone like you...”

Rian gripped Falcoa’s collar, his body trembling with effort.

“...won’t take my friend, you bastard!”

“Urgh!”

Even as Falcoa was dragged toward Rian, he was bewildered. He knew Rian was strong, but not enough to rival his own strength—certainly not enough to match his Schema.

Where was this sudden power coming from?

Rian moved behind Falcoa and locked him in a wrestling hold. Hooking Falcoa’s arms under his own, Rian immobilized him completely.

“You bastard!”

Falcoa flexed his back muscles, straining to break free.

Rian’s body screamed in agony, as if he were a rope being pulled apart by two horses.

“Grrrrrr!”

But Falcoa couldn’t escape.

It defied reason. No opponent in this battle had proven stronger than him. How was Rian doing this?

“Damn it! Let me go, you bastard!”

“Heh... Try to break free. This is what we call an Imaginary Schema, you idiot.”

Mages train the mind, swordsmen train the body. But even for a swordsman, whose primary goal is physical strength, there is one organ that is closely related to the mind.

The brain.

Could it be that thoughts influenced the body?

A few rare Schema users devoted their lives to reconstructing the diagrams of the brain.

Without knowing it, Rian had stumbled into what they called the Imaginary Schema.

Does the thought of not releasing Falcoa have a physical effect, and if so, does it vary depending on the intensity of the thought?

If all of this is possible, are thoughts without limits, and if so, how much can their effects be amplified by taking them to the extreme?

Rian realized he shouldn't move. He had given his body specific instructions and locked it into that state.

A kind of mental lock.

It was orthodox that an Imaginary Schema was not a Schema, but there was no other explanation for Rian's current immense power.

“Let me go, you bastard!”

Falcoa shook himself frantically. He couldn't believe he was being held by a creature. Rian's body was motionless, as if petrified.

“Tess! Stab him!”

“B-but...”

Tess understood what Rian meant. It was a rational decision. They wouldn't get another chance to defeat Falcoa.

But she hesitated. Stabbing Rian? She couldn't do it. If it meant dying together, so be it—but not this.

“Rian...”

“Do it now! I can’t hold him much longer!”

Every part of Rian’s body was sending danger signals. Her body was carrying out her mind’s instructions one hundred percent, but its limits were clear. Perhaps if Falcoa escaped, it would be after Rian’s body had been shattered to pieces.

“Tess! Hurry!”

“Yaaahhhh!”

Tess charged forward, tears streaming down her face. Rian was staking his life on his mission. Hesitating now would only make his sacrifice meaningless.

It was at this moment that Amy arrived.

“Tess! Don’t!”

Chapter 158: Clay Marsha (2)

As soon as Amy let out a cry, Tess's rapier pierced Falcoa's heart. At the same moment, Rian's eyes widened in shock, and blood gushed from his mouth.

Tess's swordsmanship was flawless. The saber had precisely penetrated Falcoa's heart, ensuring his imminent death.

Falcoa sensed his end. Surprisingly, he felt no fear. Perhaps death was the ultimate pleasure, the closest thing to an intoxicating drug in this world.

"Marsha."

Falcoa's final words, spoken just before death, were unexpectedly the name of the captain. A faint smile curled his lips, as if he was reliving fleeting memories.

'Take me to the battlefield.'

When Tess withdrew her rapier, Falcoa's body fell backward. With a thud, he collapsed to the ground, and shortly after, Rian, unable to withstand the pain, dropped to his knees.

"Rian! Are you okay?"

Amy ran to him in a panic. Rian forced a smile and turned to her.

"Hey, Amy. Did you finish them all off?"

"Tell me—how are you hurt? And Tess! How could you strike both of them like that?"

Amy shouted at Tess, her voice tinged with frustration. But Tess simply flicked the blood off her blade and smiled, winking playfully.

"Haha, what are you talking about? Do you think I'm careless? I pride myself on my control. I only stabbed Falcoa's body. Rian's fine."

Amy stared at Tess in disbelief.

“Um... Rian’s chest is bleeding, though.”

“What?!”

Tess’s eyes widened in shock as she examined Rian. Just as Amy had said, thin streams of blood were trickling from his chest.

“Rian! Rian! Are you okay? Stay with me!”

Tess, her face now pale, hovered anxiously near Rian. Regaining consciousness briefly, Rian waved his hand dismissively, as if annoyed, and sat up.

“Don’t make such a fuss. It’s just a scratch.”

“I’m sorry, Rian. This is my fault... my lack of skill...”

“Don’t say that. If it had been any shallower, Falcoa wouldn’t have gone down. If that happened, we’d both be in danger. Your decision was the right one.”

“But still...”

Rian genuinely believed this. No matter how concerned one might be for a friend’s safety, it was better to strike decisively than to hesitate. That resolve allowed Tess to focus with unmatched precision.

“Ugh, this is nothing. Let’s move. I’m worried about Shirone.”

Even during the heat of battle, strange noises and explosions had echoed from within the building. It was clear that Shirone was engaged in a dangerous fight with the captain—likely a far graver threat than Falcoa had posed. Just then, the building wall burst apart with a loud crash, and Shirone came flying out.

“Shirone!”

Before hitting the ground, Shirone activated Teleportation, retreating 10 meters. As the photon state dissipated, he steadied himself upon landing but skidded along the ground.

“Shirone, are you okay?”

“Stay back!”

Shirone’s urgent shout startled them. It was rare to see Shirone, usually so composed, reacting with such intensity.

His friends froze, as if nailed to the ground.

“It’s not over yet. It’s a sound-based magic—approaching is dangerous.”

Marsha’s sonar magic allowed her to seamlessly switch between targeted and area attacks. The exhausted trio would undoubtedly get caught in her powerful sound spells if they intervened.

“Impressive. You’ve held out quite well against me.”

Marsha stepped out of the ruined building, bending at the waist as she approached with a smile. However, her smile faded the moment she saw Falcoa’s body.

Falcoa was dead.

Though eccentric, Falcoa had been a comrade. They had run wild together as outcasts, leaving their mark on the continent under the banner of the Parrot Mercenaries.

Falcoa’s blood had been an integral part of that legacy.

‘You wouldn’t regret this end, Falcoa.’

Marsha understood without looking. A man like Falcoa, who lived with reckless abandon, would have preferred to die in combat rather than waste away from drug addiction.

But sentiment ended there.

That he had fallen to mere students was unexpected, but considering Falcoa’s deteriorated condition after five years of drug addiction, it wasn’t entirely surprising.

Turning her focus back to Shirone, Marsha analyzed the balance in his spell combinations. She had suspected as much after witnessing him break through the first barrier, but facing him directly confirmed it.

His Teleportation skills were top-notch, and his primary offensive spell, Photon Cannon, was remarkably potent.

The laser was perfect for siege attacks, and while his defensive magic, Frenzy, had a timing weakness, its versatility as both offense and defense was an asset.

This was the result of a lone mage’s painstaking refinement—a balance reached through deep thought and evolution.

What intrigued Marsha most was that Shirone's magic was entirely unique. It was something no other mage could replicate.

'The magic of Unlocker. Fascinating. I want it.'

While Marsha mused, Shirone was also analyzing the variables of their new, open battlefield.

The penalties he'd endured inside the building no longer applied. With no hostages to worry about, he could unleash his full power.

"From now on, it will be different. I'll never forgive you."

"Haha, Shirone, you *will* forgive me."

"On what grounds? Your actions are beyond human decency."

"Well, you see... actually..."

Marsha stuck out her tongue playfully and yelled, "I was lying!"

Shirone's group stared at her in confusion. Then Marsha turned toward the building and shouted.

"Yuna! You can come out now!"

Her amplified voice echoed like a bell across the battlefield. Moments later, the building door creaked open, and a young girl with a delicate appearance stepped out.

"Wait... is that Yuna?"

"That's right, Yuna. As you can see, she's perfectly fine and comfortable here. So, Shirone, are you still mad?"

Shirone didn't respond. Even with his sharp insight, he couldn't fathom Marsha's intentions.

"Oh my, you still don't get it? A little prank between siblings shouldn't make you this angry. Everything I said was a lie. So forgive me, will you?"

Yuna bowed toward Shirone's group and spoke softly.

"Sister did nothing wrong. In fact, Marsha saved me."

Lian, frustrated, muttered.

"What's going on? Someone explain it to stupid me."

But neither Amy nor Tess spoke.

It was clearly mockery. That much was evident. But the motive remained a mystery. What was Marsha's goal in orchestrating all this?

Shirone grappled with the same question.

This was no mere prank. The Parrot Mercenaries had been decimated. Falcoa was dead. The notion that this was all just a lie was inconceivable.

"If that's truly the case... send Yuna to us."

Rescuing Yuna, Jiese's sister, was the immediate priority.

However, Marsha shook her head with a teasing smile.

"Yuna, go back inside. I'll send you to your brother later."

Yuna nodded and retreated into the building.

Shirone felt his anger boil over. What was Marsha trying to achieve in this situation?

There was no discernible purpose or meaning. She seemed intent on stirring chaos like a mischievous child.

"What's your game? What do you want from this?"

"Haha, what's wrong? Yuna's safe. Isn't that enough? Or are you upset because you wanted to personally play the hero?"

"That's not it, but—"

"Then you understand. I've done nothing wrong. The bad one here is you, Shirone. You disgust me. That's why I'll never let Yuna go to you."

Shirone stepped into Spirit Zone. Marsha's sharp, blade-like offensive zone was already aimed squarely at him.

"Hah! This time, I won't lose."

Though he spoke confidently, Shirone's mind churned with turmoil. Marsha had stripped away the justification for their fight, yet her hostility lingered, ready to strike.

'Calm down. She's targeting me. That's reason enough to fight.'

If deception was her tactic, Shirone wouldn't let himself be outmaneuvered. With the hostage safe, the open field ensured he wouldn't face the same disadvantages as before.

But Marsha shattered his expectations by releasing her Spirit Zone. She opened her arms, as if surrendering, and said.

“You can kill me.”

Shirone’s heart sank. He understood the weight of her words.

They were the same incantations she claimed to have memorized while enduring beatings from her foster father. Marsha was sincere. She truly wanted Shirone to end her life.

‘What are you, Marsha? Who are you, really?’

The Magic Association’s Investigation Room.

Sakiri, an officially recognized 5th-class mage and investigator, wiped the sweat from his brow. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and more than half the buttons on his shirt were undone.

He certainly looked like a man who had been pushed to his limits. Yet, the bulging muscles of the arm gripping the iron club still exuded strength.

“Whew, let’s get back to it after the break.”

“Ughhh...”

Lying on the floor, Lucas groaned.

He was the deputy leader of the Parrot Bandits, who had raided the magic society under Arcane’s orders. However, he’d been caught by Siena’s freezing spell, Absolute Zero, during the operation, resulting in the loss of both his legs. He had no idea how long he’d been beaten.

If not for the protective Schema, his body wouldn’t have survived this ordeal.

“Here we go. Grit your teeth.”

Sakiri swung the iron club again. As the relentless blows rained down, Lucas crawled across the floor on his arms, only to collapse in exhaustion.

“Aargh! Please, stop! At least ask me something before beating me! I already said I’d tell you everything!”

“Hold on. I need to get to a thousand hits, don’t I?”

“You lunatic!”

Sakiri counted in his head. Five strikes left. Then four. Three. Finally, after delivering the last blow to Lucas’s side, Sakiri threw the iron club away with satisfaction.

The club clattered and rolled across the floor, echoing in the room.

“Phew, that feels good. I got my workout in for today.”

“Ughhh... Why are you doing this to me...”

Lucas clutched his aching stomach and shed tears.

He had been recruited into the Parrot Mercenaries when they fell into banditry, and his exceptional skill had quickly elevated him to deputy leader. Even when facing Arcane, Lucas hadn’t flinched—a notorious villain through and through.

But in front of Sakiri, he was reduced to nothing more than gum stuck to the pavement.

Sakiri grabbed Lucas by the hair and hurled him toward a chair.

Lucas hit the chair roughly and hung on to it for dear life.

Sitting on the opposite side of the desk, Sakiri spoke.

“Sit properly. Unless you want me to cut off your remaining arms too.”

Struggling, Lucas propped himself up with his arms and barely managed to sit in the chair. Sakiri, silent for a long time, meticulously examined the files prepared by the investigators.

“Investigator, please, just send me back to prison. I’ll tell you where Marsha is.”

“I don’t need it. Do you honestly think that woman would still be there?”

“Damn it! Then why the hell did you beat me up?”

Sakiri slammed the desk in frustration as he flipped to the last page of the file.

“Do you know what kind of criminal I hate the most?

Murderers? Homewreckers? No. Escapees. Do you think the

state is a joke? Even audacity has its limits! A second-rate criminal like you managed to break out of prison? Your life is over. You'll never see the sun again."

Lucas swallowed hard. Sakiri's words weren't a threat—they were reality.

The investigator had said he'd beat him a thousand times, and then he actually did it. Lucas could see what kind of man Sakiri was.

"Let's get started. It's in your best interest to cooperate. My daughter is four years old, you know? She's at the age where she loves to play around in front of her dad. But I haven't been home in days! Let a guy live his life, alright?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't care about anything else. That woman, Marsha. Tell me everything you know about her."

The only information Sakiri wanted was about Marsha.

Clay Marsha. A political fugitive and a high-ranking criminal, classified as A-rank. Though she hadn't caused any major public disturbances, that very trait made her incredibly elusive.

The biggest problem was the conflicting intelligence about her. Sometimes she was reported to be a fire mage, and other times, a practitioner of freezing magic.

That suggested she was meticulous and highly resourceful. Even with the investigators fully mobilized, her movements were impossible to track down.

That's why Sakiri had summoned Lucas. From the start, he suspected the plan had been flawed.

What he truly needed wasn't Marsha's location—it was understanding Marsha herself.

Chapter 159: Clay Marsha (3)

“Anything is fine. If you tell me everything you know, I’ll send you back to prison quietly.”

Lucas remained silent, his mind racing.

Having joined the Parrot Bandit—not when it was a mercenary group but during its descent into banditry—Lucas had no real loyalty to Marsha. Confessing what he knew should have been an easy choice.

But confessing here would mean spending the rest of his life rotting in a deep underground prison. A place he would never leave until his death.

“How about we strike a deal?”

“A deal? What kind of deal?”

“I’ll tell you everything I know about Marsha. In exchange, reduce my sentence. If you make it so I can get out before I die, I’ll give you the information you want.”

“Hah...”

Sakiri looked at Lucas with an expression of disbelief. Then he suddenly burst out laughing, stomping his feet.

“Hahaha!”

With a loud crash, the desk toppled over. Standing abruptly, Sakiri screamed as he marched toward Lucas.

“You crazy bastard! Do you even know where you are?”

With a kick, he knocked Lucas and his chair over. Still not satisfied, Sakiri stomped on Lucas, who had fallen to the ground.

But this time, Lucas was desperate.

It was the same whether he died now or later. If he didn’t achieve something here, his life was as good as over.

“Hit me! Hit me as much as you want! I’m never going to talk unless we strike a deal!”

Sakiri’s foot froze mid-stomp.

Why were criminals always so shameless? If he didn’t want to go to prison, he shouldn’t have committed crimes in the first place.

“Ah, this is driving me insane.”

Sakiri took a deep breath to calm himself and turned away. Even while trembling with fear, Lucas carefully observed him. The fact that Sakiri had stopped kicking meant he was conflicted. If he endured just a little longer, the window for negotiation might open.

But contrary to Lucas’s expectations, Sakiri opened the door to the interrogation room and gave a terrifying order.

“Hey, deactivate the magic suppression device.”

The magic suppression device was different from anti-magic systems. It prevented the activation of magic itself.

Of course, it was still a form of magic, but there weren’t many thieves in the world capable of breaking through a magic circle designed by 1st-class archmages.

Lucas gulped nervously. He couldn’t afford to be scared now. This had to be Sakiri’s last desperate move. If he got through this moment, he could one day return to the world outside.

Sakiri waited calmly. Moments later, a low hum filled the air as the device was deactivated.

Lucas couldn’t tell what had changed, but Sakiri, tilting his head lightly, approached him with a newfound ease.

“Tell me everything you know about Marsha. If you withhold the truth or lie, you’ll be overwhelmed by an unbearable terror.”

“I-I won’t talk. I’ll never talk.”

Sakiri paid no attention and extended his hand toward Lucas. Then, closing his eyes, he recited words like a spell.

“As the arbiter, I command: The word must answer the word. The Scales of Truth weigh only upon you.”

Lucas's face turned deathly pale.

He had thought Sakiri was just an ordinary investigator. It was a mistake. Sakiri was one of those people you should never cross.

"D-Damn it all!"

Ten minutes passed.

"AAAAARGH!"

A bloodcurdling scream echoed through the interrogation room.

Lucas was barely coherent. Even when his legs had been amputated, it hadn't been this painful.

"Alright! I'll talk! I'll tell you everything! Just please, make it stop!"

The moment he screamed, the pain vanished as if it had been a lie.

Huddled in a corner of the room, Lucas curled up in fear, looking up at Sakiri.

"It's your choice. If you want peace, spill everything."

Lucas gave up. Neither silence nor lies would work.

In the face of Sakiri's magic, Scales of Truth, no criminal could keep their secrets.

"Marsha is clever. She doesn't make mistakes. At first, she acts as though she's retreating, forcing her opponents to reveal all their strengths. But she always lays traps to ensure no one ends up hating her."

"Classic con artist tactics."

"Ha, a con artist? No, she's no con artist. Do you know why she's truly terrifying? It's not because she lies to deceive others. Her entire life is a lie. Ordinary means won't be enough to catch her."

"Hm, I see her tendencies now. But even so, that alone wouldn't explain why the intelligence reports are so chaotic."

Sakiri rested his chin on his hand, deep in thought. Suddenly, a possibility struck him.

Anyone else might have dismissed it, but Sakiri was certain. He now understood why the intelligence on Marsha had been so inconsistent.

“Could it be... Is she...?”

“Yes. She’s the same kind of person as you.”

Finally relieved that the pain was over, Lucas summoned strength in his voice as he delivered the truth.

“Marsha... is a Rulebreaker.”

Shirone analyzed her by any means necessary. But he couldn’t understand her. She was completely different from anyone he had encountered in his life.

“You... don’t mind if I kill you?”

“Hehe, that’s right. You hate me, don’t you? So feel free to kill me if you want.”

Shirone stopped thinking. If there was no answer to be found, all he could do was stick to his convictions.

“If Yuna is safe, I have no reason to fight you.”

A faint, cracked smile appeared on Marsha’s lips.

As her offensive Spirit Zone pressed in, Shirone instantly cast a Teleportation spell.

‘Huh?’

Shirone was startled. The Spirit Zone had vanished suddenly, causing his Teleportation to fail.

In that moment, the deafening roar of a Sound Cannon passed by, scorching his eardrums as if they were on fire.

Unable to endure the shock, Shirone tumbled to the ground.

Rian, watching with a look of alarm, exclaimed.

“What’s going on? Why did Shirone suddenly collapse?”

The Sound Cannon compressed sound waves, preventing them from spreading indiscriminately. Thus, their friends, who were at a distance, only heard the sharp wail of high-pitched noise.

“That’s a Sound Cannon—a type of sound magic. But that’s not the real problem.”

Tess interrupted Amy.

“Yeah, the problem is that Shirone got hit.”

A dark shadow fell over Amy’s face. Shirone had clearly tried to evade using Teleportation, but his magic had been undone just before activation, as if the photonic energy had been drained.

“This isn’t just getting hit—something was taken from him.”

“Taken? What was taken?”

Amy, relying on her synesthetic perception, could sense it. The moment Marsha seemed to absorb Shirone’s Spirit Zone like dew evaporating in sunlight.

“Probably... his mental energy.”

“That’s impossible. How could anyone steal another person’s mental energy?”

Amy quickly strode toward Shirone.

A-rank criminal Clay Marsha.

If Amy’s suspicion was correct, this woman was an extremely dangerous individual.

“Shirone! Be careful! That woman is a Rulebreaker!”

Shirone jerked his head up. From the sonic cannon’s impact, his ears felt wet, as if they were bleeding, but his indomitable spirit remained unbroken.

“This is... a Rulebreaker?”

“Oh my, you even know about Rulebreakers? You’re quite educated. I guess having a long education pays off.”

Mages constantly invented countless spells, which the Association would register as regulated magic.

But there were spells that could never be registered—these were called Rulebreaking Magic.

The essence of Rulebreaking Magic was unique.

Instead of being grounded in universal facts, it was based entirely on the caster’s blind faith or ideology.

In short, they were mages who created their own rules and imposed them on others.

Shirone recalled what Siena had once said during a lecture about Rulebreakers.

“Omnipotence is belief. The reason photons can be divided into four types, flames can change temperature, or plasma can form in intermediate conditions is that a mage’s omnipotence supports the laws they define.”

Siena explained, writing Rulebreaking Magic on the board. The unfamiliar term caused murmurs among the students, but Siena continued undeterred.

“However, there are those in the world who use omnipotence for personal gain. Instead of supporting existing laws, they twist the laws themselves. We call the magic used by such people Rulebreaking Magic.”

“Professor, I don’t quite understand.”

“I’ll explain. What is my occupation?”

“You’re a teacher, of course.”

“Correct. I am a teacher. Now, let’s begin. Is there anyone here who does not believe I’m a teacher? Raise your hand.”

Naturally, no one raised their hand. Denying an obvious fact like that was impossible.

“This is the nature of the mind. Unlike the body, the mind doesn’t reject concepts that enter it. Instead, it absorbs them and reshapes itself into something new.”

Siena raised a finger for emphasis.

“In other words, one person’s thoughts can influence another, and all the thoughts that shape us originally come from others. Now, let me demonstrate an example of Rulebreaking Magic.”

Siena descended from the podium and scanned the students with a piercing gaze.

“Anyone who believes I am a teacher will die.”

The classroom erupted in whispers. Although some students tried to dismiss her words, her tone was too serious, and they ultimately found it impossible.

The mind does not reject—it only transforms.

“Professor, is this... real?”

“Don’t worry, it’s just an explanation. I’m not a Rulebreaker.”

The students' sighs of relief could be heard all around the room.

Siena adjusted her glasses and returned to the podium.

"Of course, in reality, it's not this simple. No Rulebreaker can instill such fundamental concepts to directly cause death. Rulebreaking Magic is still magic and must abide by the principle of equivalent exchange."

A male student raised his hand.

"But isn't it possible that someone might believe such a rule? A crazy person who thinks it satisfies the principle of exchange?"

"It's possible. But magic is a product of rationality. Someone that unhinged wouldn't be able to handle magic in the first place. And even if they existed, it wouldn't work on you."

"Because it wouldn't penetrate our minds?"

"Exactly. That's why Rulebreaking Magic comes with significant restrictions and costs. For example, a Rulebreaker could create a rule like this: anyone who thinks I'm a teacher must address me respectfully."

"Come on, that's just common sense."

"Exactly. And that's the frightening part of Rulebreaking Magic. Just like how you see that as natural, Rulebreakers can force their rules on others and make them seem equally natural. What about this: anyone who thinks I'm a teacher must fall in love with me."

"Haha! That's still kind of expected."

The students burst into laughter, but Siena pressed on.

"Anyone who falls in love with me must obey my every word."

The laughter began to subside.

"And anyone who obeys me must die in my presence."

The classroom fell silent.

"This is one of the techniques of Rulebreaking Magic, called Restrictions. By layering restrictions, they expand their rules. Any logical gaps are bridged by omnipotence."

Because they truly believe in these rules, they become real. Once caught, there's no escaping."

The sound of students swallowing nervously filled the air.

The existence of such magic was terrifying. If it were real, they never wanted to encounter such a mage.

"But the truly troublesome aspect of Rulebreaking Magic isn't the restrictions—it's the costs. Earlier, I said fundamental concepts can't kill, but when costs come into play, the situation changes. Let me demonstrate: anyone who doesn't believe I'm a teacher will die."

Chapter 160: Clay Marsha (4)

The students had grown serious now. All eyes were fixed on Siena.

“But for that person to die, they’d have to spend a night with me.”

The male students’ faces turned red.

“P-Professor, isn’t that example a bit too much...?”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. I would never do such a thing. The point is, you gain powerful abilities by staking something you absolutely do not want to do. That is equivalent exchange. Even revealing the cost itself can become a cost. What’s important is that Rulebreakers genuinely believe in their rules, using their personal dogma to impose their omnipotence on others.”

The students finally understood.

Rulebreakers were a kind of person whose way of thinking was completely distorted compared to ordinary people.

“This isn’t something you can learn. It’s a unique trait of the mind born from obsession and bias. Rulebreakers are arguably the most feared individuals among mages.”

This was everything Shirone knew about Rulebreakers. At the time, he thought he had understood, but now that he was experiencing it firsthand, it was pure chaos.

Above all, he couldn’t figure out why his Spirit Zone had vanished so suddenly. When had it started? Even if it activated through restrictions and costs, Shirone hadn’t done anything to her.

‘No... I did! I... definitely...’

Shirone suddenly recalled the critical moment from earlier. You can kill me if you want.

It had happened right then. A magical invocation that only Marsha and he knew.

The moment he uttered those words, Marsha's omnipotence had infiltrated his mind and triggered her rules.

His heart raced. He had fallen into the clutches of a Rulebreaker. What was going to happen to him now? He couldn't predict anything.

'Stay calm. It's only my Spirit Zone that's gone. If I stay focused, I can escape this crisis.'

Rulebreaking Magic was like weighing the value of possibility and impossibility on scales. Because of that, the costs of their strange powers were proportionally severe. If the rule was, "You can kill me if you want", then Marsha would have had to endure a long period of defenselessness. If Shirone had attacked then, Marsha would have died. But why hadn't he attacked? Was it because of Yuna? No, Yuna was safe.

His thoughts were disconnected. What was happening to him?

'From the beginning... I was already caught in her trap the moment I met her.'

The realization sent chills down Shirone's spine. Every event had been orchestrated according to Marsha's script.

Leading him to the bar, provoking him through Yuna, and even leaving Yuna unharmed...

"All of it was for this moment?"

Marsha laughed heartily, as if she had read Shirone's thoughts. Seeing his bewildered expression seemed to delight her immensely.

"Hahaha! Of course! Oh, meeting you was purely coincidental, though. But I'm the kind of person who turns coincidences into inevitabilities. It never hurts to lay groundwork in advance, right? That kind of meticulousness is my charm."

Shirone couldn't deny it.

She hadn't specifically targeted him. Instead, she had laid traps for everyone she encountered, operating under the small assumption that she might meet them again someday. This extraordinary foresight was why Marsha had evaded the Magic Association's siege.

"Well then, shall we begin? I'm not sure what I'll do yet, but..."

Marsha smiled confidently as she approached Shirone. Meanwhile, Shirone couldn't help but feel intimidated. He tried casting Teleportation again, but it still wouldn't activate.

This wouldn't last forever, he told himself. But the concept of stealing someone's mental energy was an utterly alien rule to Shirone.

'This doesn't make any sense. How can magic like this even exist?'

Shirone felt himself in the greatest crisis of his life. Marsha's Rulebreaking Magic was undeniably dangerous. It had even sealed Immortal Function, his last line of defense.

"Hehe! Thanks for the mental energy."

The mental energy Shirone had intended to use for Teleportation flowed into Marsha instead. Using that power, she fired the Sound Cannon again.

"Ugh!"

Shirone turned and ran. A mage resorting to running physically was a shocking sight, but with magic unusable, getting hit by the sonic cannon could be fatal.

"Hmm, I'll give you credit for discarding your pride. But the fight's already over. As long as you're under my Theft."

Rulebreaking Magic: Theft.

Her ability allowed her to steal the possessions of others.

The magic she had cast on Shirone, known as Theft, specifically targeted and absorbed the mental energy of his Spirit Zone.

Shirone fled as far as he could, trying to buy time.

If merely refusing to follow the rule “You can kill me if you want” meant losing his mental energy, then by the logic of equivalent exchange, there must be a time limit.

‘It’s back!’

As expected, the Theft ended, and his mental energy returned. Unable to assess the situation behind him, Shirone immediately turned and cast Frenzy.

Just like lightning crashed repeatedly, filling the area with blinding flashes.

When Shirone cast Frenzy in the open field, the sheer spectacle of the effect far exceeded expectations, even if its power was secondary.

“Wow, that’s impressive. Really incredible.”

Shirone glared at her. The fact that she didn’t even bother to approach him made it clear she wasn’t taking him seriously.

Still, if there were time constraints on her Theft, he no longer had to fear losing anything further. He wouldn’t fall for the same trick twice.

“I’m coming for you!”

Shirone cast Teleportation and charged at Marsha. However, she remained as composed as ever. As soon as Shirone entered her Spirit Zone, she raised her hand and murmured: “Rulebreaking Magic: Seize.”

In an instant, Shirone’s Teleportation unraveled. He tumbled to the ground, skidding several meters across the dirt.

“Argh! What the...?”

Once again, his magic had failed. Had his mental energy been stolen again? But no—his Spirit Zone was still intact.

“What? What’s happening?”

Shirone couldn’t believe it. Such magic shouldn’t exist. He struggled to accept that what was happening was real.

Watching Shirone’s confusion, Tess turned to Amy and asked.

“What’s going on? Did something happen to Shirone?”

"I'm not sure. His Spirit Zone is still active. But if his Teleportation failed..."

Amy's face suddenly paled as realization struck her. She trembled.

No, it couldn't be. It shouldn't be. It was far too cruel.

Shirone had worked so hard to reach this level.

Her ominous suspicion became reality as Shirone, disbelieving, checked his own body and muttered:

"I can't cast magic..."

"Hoho, exactly. Seize only activates after Theft. Of course, there are restrictions, like needing to witness the target's magic directly."

Marsha explained smugly, though she never revealed more than necessary—always keeping an air of mockery.

Shirone shook his head in denial. It didn't make sense. Even with those restrictions, the ability to steal someone's magic outright was impossible under the principle of equivalent exchange.

"Wow, I love this new magic. I was getting tired of sound magic. Thanks, Shirone, you're such a good little brother."

A sphere of light formed in front of Marsha—a Photon Cannon, a spell that imbued light with mass.

Shirone dove to the side as a heavy beam of light smashed into where he had been standing moments before.

Shards of debris stung his face. To suffer at the hands of his own magic—it was a horrifying experience.

"Wow, this really drains mental energy. How did you manage this before? You're amazing, Shirone."

Shirone leapt to his feet, glaring at Marsha. This time, his anger boiled over. No, it was deeper than that—he was seething with frustration. Having all his magic stolen left him trembling with indignation.

"But I must say, you're extraordinary. To think you're an Unlocker."

She flaunted her dominance by demonstrating another spell—laser beams scratching across the ground toward Shirone.

Yet he remained frozen. Even Teleportation had been taken from him.

At that moment, Amy ran to Shirone, grabbed him, and cast Teleportation. Her mental energy was almost spent, so they didn't move far. Rian and Tess rushed in to shield them.

Marsha watched them with mockery in her eyes.

The swordsmen were battered, and Amy was struggling to even cast Teleportation. Worst of all, Shirone—their only hope—had lost his magic and was now as ordinary as any other boy.

"See? I told you, you can't beat me."

It was a pitiful situation. Shirone's psychological shock was immense. An ordinary person would have broken down by now, cursing Marsha and sobbing uncontrollably.

"Shirone, get a grip! The battle's not over yet!"

"But my magic... my magic..."

Shirone's voice trembled.

Amy understood. If she had been in his place, she might have collapsed from the emotional strain.

For a mage, magic was everything. The idea of losing it all to someone else was terrifying even to imagine.

"Shirone! Get up! We have to keep fighting!"

Shirone staggered but forced himself to stand.

His indomitable will urged him not to give up, even as the emotional wounds weighed heavily on him.

"But how? How am I supposed to fight?"

"Think logically! There's no way such powerful magic can exist without major risks. Equivalent exchange means she must have significant limitations!"

Shirone's mind cleared. Amy was right. He'd been too consumed by the fact that his magic had been stolen to consider the mechanics of Marsha's Seize. It couldn't work without severe drawbacks.

To activate it, Theft must have already occurred, and she had to witness the target's magic directly. Even with those

strict conditions, Marsha's Rulebreaking Magic was overwhelmingly powerful.

Amy spoke urgently, trying to reignite his confidence.

"Because she stole it so easily, you can reclaim it just as easily—probably even faster. That's how equivalent exchange works. So don't give up!"

"All right. I'll try."

Shirone regained his composure. He still didn't have a clear plan, but he couldn't just sit there and despair.

"I don't really get it, but..."

Rian, who had been silent until now, chimed in.

"If she has to see it to steal it, doesn't that mean she can't take magic she hasn't seen? Like your Wind Cutter spell."

"Oh, that's right."

At that moment, an idea struck Shirone like lightning. Rian was correct—being targeted by Seize was better than Theft because it still left his Spirit Zone operational.

"Yeah, the only way is to face her head-on. Thanks, Rian."

Amy wrapped her arm around Shirone's waist and whispered.

"I'll teleport us in close. From there, use Wind Cutter to do what you can."

Mustering all her strength, Amy cast Teleportation again. As the two of them flashed through the air toward Marsha, she responded by teleporting away.

Magic stolen through Seize could only replicate the target's original form of casting, without room for adaptation. Thus, even though Marsha had stolen Shirone's Teleportation, she couldn't use more advanced techniques like Patrol or Rainbow Drop.

Amy exploited this weakness. Moving with dazzling precision, she hurled Shirone toward Marsha.

As Shirone extended his hand midair, he cast Wind Cutter.

Since it wasn't one of his main spells, hitting from a distance was difficult.

But this apparent disadvantage turned out to work in his favor. Marsha retreated much farther than expected.

‘What’s this?’

Her movements were strange. Despite being able to counter with Photon Cannon or Rage Burst, she instead chose to pull back—far out of reach.

“Could it be... the restriction on Seize?”

A new possibility surfaced in Shirone’s mind.

Chapter 161: Clay Marsha (5)

“Does touching the person whose magic was stolen dispel Seize?”

Even without a response from Marsha, Shirone was certain he’d hit the mark.

And yet, something still felt off. If Seize could be undone simply through contact, Marsha’s tendency to maintain distance made sense.

But the problem was that Marsha held all the advantage. She had stolen numerous spells, including ones that harnessed god particles, while Shirone had to rely solely on Wind Cutter.

Shouldn’t that be enough for her to press the attack? Yet she kept retreating, as if terrified, pulling back dozens of meters.

‘Rulebreaking Magic...’

Shirone’s eyes lit up. At last, everything became clear in his mind.

‘I’ve found it! Her mental vulnerability. Marsha isn’t perfect.’ In hindsight, it was a simple problem. Touching her would break Seize. If that restriction alone allowed her to steal magic, who could ever hope to defeat her? There had to be an additional cost.

Shirone didn’t know the exact price, but it had to be tied closely to the trauma that had shaped her Rulebreaking Magic.

‘Rulebreakers are beings with extreme mental bias. To possess such immense power, their abilities must stem from an origin of profound trauma.’

Because of that, she couldn't allow anyone to approach her. The moment Shirone discovered how to break Seize, the likelihood of triggering the cost skyrocketed.

Marsha's true fear wasn't losing the magic she had stolen. What terrified her was the horrible price that would manifest the instant Seize was undone.

'But she's stolen so much magic. How did she endure it back then?'

The answer came quickly. As soon as Shirone realized it, he lunged at Marsha.

There was no time to think. Marsha had only been stalling for reinforcements to arrive.

Her power of Seize had been obtained by staking her most horrifying pain. If Shirone triggered that cost, Marsha would never dare fight him.

And conversely, if she wasn't overwhelmed by such fear, Seize couldn't have been activated in the first place.

Shirone was no longer afraid. There was still time. He just had to catch her before the reinforcements arrived.

"Ugh!"

Marsha groaned and retreated further. Even closing the distance by a little made her face turn pale. Her playful tone and teasing expressions had completely vanished.

'I can do this! I can get my magic back!'

Seeing a glimmer of hope, Shirone continued chasing her. Of course, chasing a mage on foot while she teleported was almost impossible, but he couldn't just stop—not when the thief who had stolen his entire life was right in front of him.

"Shirone! Watch out!"

Tess's voice cut through the air. Shirone looked up to see over a dozen streaks of light roaring down from the sky.

Marsha's expression lit up with relief. Meanwhile, Shirone's legs nearly gave out in despair.

He thought there was still time, but he had miscalculated.

Marsha's surviving subordinates had arrived instantly through a magic circle.

“Hahaha! Finally, they’re here. It’s over now!”

Around twenty Schema users surged forward, forming a protective ring around Marsha. There was no way for Shirone to break through and reach her.

“Sh-Shirone...”

Amy bit her lip, swallowing her tears.

Was this really the end? Would Shirone have to abandon his dream of being a mage?

‘No. It can’t end like this. I love magic. I worked so hard for it...’

Shirone stared at Marsha, his face devoid of hope. It was the emptiest expression a person could have.

“My, my, Shirone. Why are you looking at me like that? Ah, is it because of your magic? Don’t worry. You’re still young. You can just start learning again from scratch. Of course, the magic I’ve taken from you is something you’ll never use again, no matter how hard you try.”

“Your sound magic... you stole that from someone else too, didn’t you?”

“Hehe, of course. You know I have a knack for stealing. Why are you acting so petty all of a sudden? You didn’t mind giving me 50 silver for a broken vase, but your magic is too precious to share? Why? You pretend to be so kind, but now you’re being selfish about magic?”

Amy, overcome with rage, shouted.

“Shut up! How can you say something like that? What did Shirone ever do to you?”

How could anyone be so cruel? Not only had Marsha stolen Shirone’s magic, but she seemed intent on crushing his entire life.

“Hahaha! That’s what hypocrisy is! There are no good people in this world. Everyone pretends to be nice while secretly harboring the most vile thoughts. It’s disgusting!” Marsha’s words were directed at the world, but to Shirone’s ears, they sounded like she was cursing a single person. Her father.

He had adopted Marsha, an orphan, and raised her until she was seventeen. But when she realized that all those years were driven by his vile desires, how deep must her despair have been?

That's why Rulebreaking Magic was terrifying—its power stemmed directly from a person's trauma.

For a normal mage, omnipotence reinforced their cognition. But for Rulebreakers, omnipotence twisted their cognition instead.

'Because their pain is so overwhelming, their very ideology becomes warped. That's what makes Rulebreakers.'

This distorted humanity was realized in the world through magic power. Shirone finally understood why the Magic Association refused to acknowledge Rulebreaking Magic as true magic.

"You're just a pitiful person."

Marsha's eyes flashed dangerously. Who did he think he was, calling her pitiful?

For someone like Shirone, who had pretended to be noble and then had his magic stolen, he was the real pitiful one.

"Hmph! Trying to negotiate now? After coming at me to kill me? Do you think I'll let you off?"

"To be honest, I don't even know anymore. I don't know how much pain you've lived through."

"Haha! Finally admitting it, are you? Now you see? No one understands the pain of others. That's human nature. The world is full of bad people!"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I was pretending. But even so, I believe there's a way to share someone's pain—if they show it sincerely. So, please, show me your real pain. The truth, not lies."

"Shut up! Who do you think I am to need your pity?"

"I'll break through the shell you're trapped in and see for myself how deep your wounds go."

"Don't come any closer! Stay away!"

Marsha screamed, her face twisted in horror. Her trauma was like an open wound, so sensitive that even the brush of a feather could make her cry out. Yet Shirone was saying he would pry it open with his bare hands?

"In exchange, I promise I'll never give up on you. No matter how much it hurts, I'll take all your pain."

The moment Shirone finished speaking, Marsha's subordinates drew their swords and blocked his path.

"Don't let him get near her! Cut him down!"

Shirone glanced at the line of enemies before turning to Lian.

"Rian, guard my side."

Despite being the most injured of the group, Rian got up and hefted his greatsword without hesitation.

Tess ran up behind him.

"Wait! Let me do it. I'm less hurt than Rian."

"It's fine, Tess. This is an order my master has given me."

"But in your condition..."

Shirone turned to Tess and shook his head.

"Tess, the one guarding my side must be Rian. I can't ask anyone else to shed blood."

"B-Bloodshed?"

As Shirone stepped forward, he addressed Rian.

"Rian, cut down anyone who comes at me."

Rian couldn't make sense of Shirone's command. Shirone had lost his magic, and Rian could barely walk. Charging into enemy lines like this was nothing short of suicide.

"Understood. Leave it to me."

But Rian obediently followed Shirone's lead. A sword doesn't reason; if its master commands, it simply acts—even at the cost of its life.

Marsha was trembling with rage.

To confirm her wounds? To share her pain? Utter nonsense. Ridiculous lies.

Shirone was just spewing words to manipulate her, desperate to reclaim his magic by any means necessary.

That's humanity. No matter how much they feign kindness, at their core, people only act to satisfy their own greed.

"Kill him! Kill that brat right now!"

At Marsha's shout, twenty subordinates charged forward simultaneously. Enhanced by the physical amplification of Schema, they closed the gap in an instant, raising their fearsome blades.

Rian gripped the hilt of his longsword tightly. He didn't know how long he could hold out, but even if he was decapitated, he intended to keep moving forward.

The leading swordsman leapt into the air, slashing his longsword down at Shirone's head. At the same moment, Rian prepared to swing his own blade with clenched teeth. But suddenly, the swordsman's body turned into light and shot skyward.

The sharp sound of Spatial Movement ripped through the air.

Marsha stared at the sight in disbelief. Amy and Tess, watching anxiously from the other side, were equally stunned.

"What are you waiting for? Attack! We have the numbers—there's no way we can lose!"

Following their captain's orders, three more swordsmen attacked in unison. But before they could swing at Shirone, they too transformed into light and vanished into the sky.

Marsha's lips trembled.

Shirone was advancing. With every step he took, her subordinates were hurled away by a deafening sound and disappeared.

'What's happening? What in the world is going on?'

The only one who understood the situation was Amy, though even her voice quivered.

"Amazing... I knew Shirone had exceptional insights, but I never imagined it was to this extent."

How far back had Shirone anticipated this moment?

Since Marsha's reinforcements arrived? Since he realized the restriction on Seize? No—probably since Rian mentioned using Wind Cutter.

"What is it, Amy? What's Shirone doing?"

"It's magic. A Slow spell that decelerates time."

To turn a theoretical concept into a practical omnipotence-linked spell—no one but Shirone could achieve that. Even Amy hadn't thought he could pull this off.

Naturally, Marsha hadn't expected it either. Shirone, who had been swept up in lies and conspiracies and seemingly stripped of all power, was now overturning Marsha's calculations with stunning clarity.

"Slow? That's Slow?"

Tess glanced forward again. From an outside perspective, there didn't appear to be any change. All they saw was that any enemy who got close to Shirone was launched into the air with a loud noise.

But inside Shirone's Spirit Zone, Rian saw a completely different scene.

The moment anyone stepped into Shirone's Spirit Zone, their body began to glow and move agonizingly slowly.

Those who reach the near-light speed threshold can warp the flow of time within their zone. While Shirone couldn't slow time as drastically as Alpheas, he could easily double the temporal disparity within his current level.

'What's this? Should I just cut them down?'

Rian prepared to swing at the enemy creeping toward him.

Their eyes were wide with terror, knowing they couldn't escape death. In the end, the swordsman activated a Spatial Movement spell on his bracelet and teleported away.

As the enemy fled before a fight could even begin, Rian exhaled sharply, unimpressed, and resumed following Shirone.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

The distinctive sound of Spatial Movement echoed non-stop. Only three subordinates remained between Marsha and

Shirone. Yet even they fled as soon as Shirone approached. Marsha, left alone again, trembled with a pale face. The same horrifying thought replayed in her mind.

“Stay back! If you come closer, I’ll die! If I die, you’ll never get your magic back!”

Chapter 162: Clay Marsha (6)

"I don't even know anymore. Who are you, really? Why is everything about you a lie? What can you possibly gain from deceiving everyone?"

"Why should I tell you? You're just trying to use me, aren't you? If you truly care about me, just leave! Then I'll believe you! Really! So please, just go!"

"I'm asking, what's real?"

At Shirone's outburst, Marsha's shoulders flinched.

"Don't just say you're hurting—tell me where and how you're hurting! That's the only way I'll know whether to leave or stay! With all your lies painting the world around you..."

Shirone stepped closer, raising his fist.

"...I can't see how much pain you're really in!"

At that moment, a sharp shout came from behind.

"Marsha! No!"

Amy and Tess turned to see Freeman charging toward Shirone at breakneck speed, his eyes wild with fury.

"This makes no sense! He took a direct hit to the face!"

Amy was as stunned as if she'd seen a ghost. The sheer force of the Flame Strike was already overwhelming, and yet Freeman, with his face burned, had returned.

"As if I'd let anyone get past me...!"

When Tess tried to block him, Freeman leapt into the air with incredible power, soaring over Tess's head and drawing his blade as he flew toward Shirone.

Rian turned, swinging his greatsword toward Freeman. His muscles screamed in agony, but he knew that letting Freeman through would render all their efforts meaningless.

“Arghhhh!”

But even Freeman couldn't escape Shirone's Slow spell. It was inevitable that Rian's blade would cleave Freeman in two.

Yet Freeman didn't falter. He had to protect Marsha. He had to do whatever it took to keep her away from Shirone.

In that instant, both Rian and Freeman froze in shock. Rian's sword stopped short of striking Freeman, and Freeman's momentum failed to carry him to Shirone.

Shirone had abruptly deactivated Slow.

The unique advantage of time magic was its ability to achieve the same outcome regardless of being activated or deactivated.

Meanwhile, Shirone's fist arced through the air, tracing a massive trajectory.

Marsha could only watch, helpless, as the fist of this relentless boy, intent on breaking her completely, came crashing down.

Shirone's punch landed squarely on Marsha's face. Her head snapped to the side, and she collapsed to the ground as if struck by an immense force.

“Ma... Marsha...”

Freeman's face turned pale. Marsha herself couldn't comprehend what had just happened. Staring blankly at the ground, she looked as lifeless as a corpse.

Shirone realized his magic had returned. In contrast, Marsha's spirit was now devoid of any magic.

“Marsha...”

Freeman approached her with a heavy expression.

Reinforcements from the Spatial Movement magic circle appeared behind the building, but none dared to come closer.

They all understood what it meant for Marsha to be down.

“Are you okay?”

Freeman asked in a subdued voice, his clenched jaw trembling.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Marsha forcing a smile. Was it human nature to find tranquility in the face of unchangeable truths?

Though she smiled, her emotions were almost entirely extinguished. It was as if her soul had fled, leaving behind an empty shell.

Amy felt no sympathy. Marsha was the one who had tried to destroy Shirone’s life entirely.

“It’s her own fault! Surely this isn’t the end of it. A power like hers—stealing magic—must come with a price.”

Marsha didn’t protest. Equivalent exchange was the way of things. If she hadn’t accepted the consequences, she couldn’t have activated her magic in the first place.

“Yes, the condition to break Seize is for someone to touch my body. That returns the stolen magic. But the price I must pay... is to say these words to that person.”

Marsha turned toward Shirone, her expression filled with fear. Then, trembling, she spoke.

“You can... hold me.”

Tess frowned in disbelief.

“What? What is this?”

To stake something so trivial as the cost—what kind of woman would be this shameless?

But Shirone understood. Seize was a power that could only be gained by offering a price equivalent to death.

The words Marsha uttered that night, when she had to kill her adoptive father, were nothing short of a memory she dreaded more than death itself—a haunting echo of her deepest trauma.

Finally piecing things together, Rian spoke with distaste.

“What kind of price is that? Shirone would never do such a thing. What happens if Shirone refuses?”

Freeman answered.

“Then Marsha dies. According to her own rules, if Shirone refuses, she’ll lose her life.”

Hearing the word “die,” Tess flailed, stammering in panic.

“S-Still! That’s impossible! Where’s the justice in this? Amy, say something! This is absurd, isn’t it?”

“Don’t ask me. This is Shirone’s decision to make.”

Amy’s heart was in turmoil. Shirone wasn’t the type to hurt someone this way. But it was impossible to know what responsibility he felt, holding Marsha’s life in his hands.

“Fine. I think living is better than dying. I’ll pay the price myself.”

Having made up his mind, Shirone walked toward Marsha. Even Amy couldn’t help but feel her heart pound nervously. Freeman suddenly stepped in front of Shirone. His body moved instinctively, driven by his pure devotion to Marsha. But in the end, Freeman had to step aside.

“Please... save Marsha.”

Marsha closed her eyes, waiting. Her body trembled like someone facing surgery for the first time. Yet part of her felt this might be the right thing.

Her loathsome trauma—memories she couldn’t cut away because they were hers—felt like they could finally be burned out, bringing some relief.

“Freeman... I’m sorry.”

Marsha murmured for the first time. Knowing the weight of her words, Freeman lowered his head and stepped back. Shirone approached Marsha’s side.

Trauma is dangerous because it ties both the present and future to the events of the past. Perhaps since that night, she had never truly lived in the present.

“Could we go somewhere private?”

“There’s no need. Here is fine.”

Marsha opened her eyes watching Shirone’s calm expression.

What was he thinking? Maybe he intended to string her along with false hope before ending her life.

‘I suppose... it’s only fair.’

She had stolen his magic and mocked him endlessly. Shirone had seen the worst of life, and she could understand if he

wanted revenge.

Shirone placed his hand on Marsha's back, supporting her, and pulled her upper body toward him. She complied, knowing that refusing would only lead to harsher consequences.

With her face resting against his chest, Shirone leaned close to her ear and whispered softly.

"I held you."

Marsha blinked in surprise. Then, realizing what Shirone meant, her face twisted into a scowl.

What kind of childish game was this?

"What are you doing?"

"You asked me to hold you. So I did."

"Don't mock me. Do you think this is over because of something like that? Are you ridiculing me?"

"I told you, I won't give up."

"Let go of me! I don't want your cheap pity! Do you think this makes you look noble? Just hold me properly! You're angry, aren't you? Take your revenge already!"

Bound by the rules of the cost she had set, Marsha couldn't harm Shirone. Yet even as she struggled, Shirone showed no intention of letting go.

"You're a scumbag! A hypocrite! You're nothing but trash!"

"You're a good person."

Shirone gently stroking Marsha's hair.

"You're not like Arcane. You can tell from the way so many people follow you. Even if it's all a lie, that doesn't matter. Nobody truly knows what others are thinking, not even you. Not even me. We just believe and keep living because even if we can't trust anyone else, we can trust ourselves. And if you genuinely love someone, there's someone out there who will genuinely love you back."

"No! That's impossible! What do you know? What gives you the right to say that?"

Marsha, consumed by anger, rejected his words. But when she realized tears were streaming down her cheeks, her

voice caught, and she fell silent.

She didn't feel sad at all. So why were tears falling?

"What? Why is this happening? Why am I crying...?"

Her emotions were locked away so tightly that her tears flowed before she could even acknowledge them.

But not anymore. As the memories she had sealed away surfaced, Marsha finally confronted her trauma for the first time.

It was a day when she was seventeen.

Lying on the floor, staring blankly at the ceiling, Marsha smelled alcohol as her adoptive father approached.

The same situation as always. The same violence as always.

Her hand brushed against the dagger hidden behind her back. Its cold steel sent chills through her skin.

"You can hold me."

Her adoptive father's eyes widened in shock.

Marsha still vividly remembered the monstrous emotions reflected in his pupils.

She gripped the dagger tightly. He came closer. She had no choice but to strike.

But this time, in her mind's eye, the father she imagined was different.

He lifted her trembling body, held her close, and gently patted her back.

"I'm sorry, Marsha. You're my daughter."

It was the one thing she had most longed to hear.

As the memory of those words resurfaced, the door to her heart swung open. Emotions suppressed for ten years flooded out, and she couldn't hold back the torrent of tears.

"Huhuk! HUUUUK!"

Clinging to Shirone, Marsha began to sob uncontrollably.

"Aaaaaah! Dad! Daaaaad!"

Shirone said nothing. He simply patted her back gently.

"Dad! Why did you do that? I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Dad!"

What she had wanted all along was to be held like this. No matter how cruel he had been, she had wished for the man

who had taken her in as an orphan to remain her father to the end.

"It's okay now, Marsha. It's all okay," Shirone reassured her. The fragments of her past shattered, reshaping into memories solid enough to serve as hope for living into the future.

"Aaaaaah! Dad! Daaaaad..."

Freeman checked the time.

By now, the rule she had set should have activated. But Marsha was still alive.

"What's going on? What's happening?"

Only Shirone and Marsha could understand the emotions exchanged between them. The others remained on edge. Freeman explained quietly.

"Seize is undone. Shirone broke her magic."

"No way. You're saying just holding her was enough to end it? What kind of cost is that?"

Freeman hesitated. From an outsider's perspective, her reaction was understandable.

But this wasn't about the words spoken.

Shirone had opened the locked door to Marsha's heart. He had shattered the shell of trauma encasing her Rulebreaking Magic and offered her a new path forward.

"Shirone didn't just undo Seize. He invalidated the very condition for its activation, severing Marsha's authority entirely. Her Theft no longer exists in this world."

Freeman gave a bitter smile. Perhaps for Shirone, understanding Marsha's true pain hadn't even mattered. He had intended to accept everything from the start.

'I couldn't do that... This is our complete defeat'

"Aaahhhh! Aaahhhh!"

Marsha's tears showed no sign of stopping. She knew, too, that this was her only chance. If the door closed again, it might never open.

Countless memories from her past, buried for ten years, were sinking into the depths once more.

Late Lunch (1)

Twenty minutes had passed since the battle ended.

The subordinates of the Parrot Mercenaries had collapsed, taking a moment to rest. Rian was also having his wounds treated under Tess's emergency care.

Even so, Marsha remained in Shirone's arms.

Her tears had long since dried up, yet she continued to tremble intermittently, savoring the lingering emotions.

Chapter 163: Late Lunch

(2)

“Huff... huff...”

Amy, who had been watching for a while, finally couldn't hold back and shouted in frustration.

“Hey! Can't you move already? This is too much! If someone saw this, they'd think we're the bad guys, and you're the victim!”

Marsha turned to glance at Amy, pouting her lips mockingly, then burrowed even deeper into Shirone's chest.

Amy felt her patience snap like a taut string breaking.

“This woman is really pushing it!”

Freeman stepped between them and pleaded.

“Let her be. She's probably exhausted from crying.”

Amy stared at Freeman in disbelief.

“Do you have any idea what you're saying? Do you even realize how much we suffered because of you? Shirone's entire life nearly fell apart, you know!”

What truly enraged Amy was that everything had been left to luck. Sure, the outcome was good, but what if Shirone hadn't been able to overcome the day's crisis? The thought of what might have happened was too horrifying to bear. It wasn't just about Shirone's feelings after losing his magic; Amy herself had felt like she'd escaped from hell, having had to watch it all unfold.

“I'm sorry. Every crime committed under the Parrot Bandit was carried out under my orders. Marsha only fought against the Association's pursuers. But if even that is a crime...”

Amy crossed her arms and asked coldly.

“And if it is?”

“Then I will take responsibility for her life.”

Marsha, who was still nestled against Shirone, shot to her feet. She stormed over to Freeman, kicking him hard in the rear.

“Don’t make me laugh! Who said I need you interfering in my life? You’re the last thing I need!”

Freeman staggered slightly, but like an ancient tree, he stood firm. He was used to Marsha’s tantrums from a young age.

“Marsha.”

Marsha flinched at Shirone’s voice, her shoulders trembling. She didn’t dare turn around. The only reason she had vented her frustration on Freeman was because she was too afraid to face Shirone. Even so, she spoke with her back still turned.

“Um... I’m sorry about what happened. I know it’s not something you can forgive.”

“That’s right. I can’t forgive you.”

Marsha spun around in shock. Shirone’s gaze was cold, completely devoid of the warmth he’d shown earlier when he comforted her.

“No matter the reason, you kidnapped and used a child. That’s something you should never have done.”

Marsha couldn’t argue and lowered her head. She had never bullied the weak before, but there was no excuse this time. Shirone, having suffered the most, deserved her silence.

“You’re right. I must be a villain.”

“You are. You’re the worst kind of villain.”

Shirone’s words were blunt, but his tone carried no malice. He wasn’t one to lie or deceive; his honesty came from his fundamentally kind nature.

“I’m leaving. I hope you manage to move on. And... I hope I never see you again.”

Without hesitation, Shirone turned and walked away.

Offering sympathy and understanding was all he could do for her.

“I was wrong!”

Marsha mustered her courage and shouted after him.

Shirone hadn't passed judgment on her actions.

Just like when she had stolen the vase at the market, he had left the choice up to her. That was why she had no choice but to approach him first.

“How can you just leave like that? For me, this is only the beginning! At least give me a chance to see you again!”

Shirone, who had been standing still, slowly turned around. His gaze was as sharp as ever, and Marsha felt as anxious as a prisoner awaiting sentencing.

“If you truly regret it, then apologize to Yuna. Say sorry to her brother, Jiese, as well. And you need to fully compensate for the harm they've suffered.”

“Of course! I hated doing this from the start! I won't make excuses, and I'll personally ask for their forgiveness.”

“Even so, that doesn't erase what you've done. I will never forgive you for what you've put others through.”

Marsha's shoulders slumped. Her teary eyes shimmered, the drops threatening to fall at any moment.

“But if you're really determined to live a new life, I can try to forget the past.”

Marsha's head snapped up, and she ran to Shirone, clinging to him like a child and bursting into tears.

“I'm sorry! I was so wrong!”

Shirone couldn't bring himself to comfort her. This was the first time he had ever made such a choice.

Some people live lives harder than anyone could imagine.

Not everyone has the strength to fight for their beliefs.

And so, Shirone decided to forgive her.

If he was the one who marked the beginning of her transformation, then he felt a responsibility to watch over it.

‘Clay Marsha...’

Maybe that was why Shirone suddenly realized something.

The Marsha he once saw as strong and terrifying was, in reality, a woman small enough to be held in his arms.

Marsha led Shirone and his group into a building. It was the same place where the duel between the two mages had taken place, and not a single piece of furniture remained intact.

The friends could guess how fiercely Shirone must have fought.

“Let’s go to the second floor. After all that fighting, I’m starving. I’ll cook something for you. I’m not a great cook, though.”

The second floor was at least in a livable state. A few potted plants lay shattered on the floor, but otherwise, it was relatively intact.

Shirone and the others waited for the food to be prepared. Yuna was seated with them. Having calmed down, her complexion was much improved compared to earlier.

Having not eaten a single meal since setting out at dawn and continuing through the day, they were famished.

Understanding this, Marsha quickly served soup and bread that could be eaten immediately.

As soon as the food arrived, they ate ravenously. Despite his injuries making eating difficult, Rian seemed to have eaten more than anyone else.

“Does this mean you can’t use Rulebreaking Magic anymore?”

Shirone, still reflecting on the battle, was most intrigued by Rulebreaking Magic. While not on the level of the Unlocker, it was undeniably a rare phenomenon in the magic world.

“No, not exactly. While Seize is no longer possible, wounds carved into the heart don’t heal so easily. They may transform in some way.”

“I see... Hmm.”

Shirone trailed off, prompting Marsha to flash a bright smile.

“Don’t worry. I won’t create any more malicious magic like that. Rules can be adjusted to some extent.”

Shirone nodded, surprised. This was practical knowledge he couldn't have learned in school.

"Do you have any new rules in mind?"

"Not yet. Let's see... Maybe I'll go to a magic academy and develop a spell to charm handsome blond men?"

Shirone's uneasy smile betrayed his inability to dismiss her comment as mere jest, especially after his experience with her eccentricities.

Marsha, noticing Amy's sharp glare, quickly waved her hands in reassurance.

"Don't worry, Shirone isn't one of them."

"Oh? Then who is it?"

"There's someone. He's at the academy, has blond hair, and is quite handsome."

Amy rolled her eyes, deciding not to argue. Debating with someone like a Rulebreaker, who viewed the world through their unique perspective, was pointless.

Freeman put down his spoon and spoke with mock seriousness.

"How about creating a spell to charm men without eyebrows?"

"Pfft!"

Marsha spat her soup back into the bowl. She hadn't expected such audacity in a setting like this.

"What nonsense are you spouting? Are you drunk?"

"What's wrong? I never said it was me."

"Who else in the world besides you and a monkey doesn't have eyebrows?"

"Monkeys aren't human."

"No! I'm saying *you're* the monkey! You know, this is why I told you not to follow reverse technique trees! How many times do I have to say it, huh? Huh?"

Marsha jabbed Freeman's temple repeatedly with her fork. Watching the exchange, Amy suddenly recalled something odd. It had struck her as strange that Freeman was still unharmed despite taking a direct Flame Strike to the face.

‘Reverse technique tree?’

Those who trained in Schema layered their builds in tiers. The foundational build formed the base, with additional builds stacked as optional layers.

A reverse build upended this order in an emergency, prioritizing defensive over offensive traits. It was often referred to as a “reversal” and was typically employed only in life-threatening situations.

Gunners like Freeman usually based their builds on sensory or nervous system enhancements for mobility and precision. Defensive abilities like regeneration or cellular activation were secondary.

Judging from Marsha’s remarks, Freeman had been fighting with a defensive-oriented build from the outset.

This explained how he had survived the Flame Strike without any visible damage.

‘Now that I think about it... his speed when saving Marsha at the end was incredible.’

Amy felt a surge of irritation. Freeman seemed to notice and offered an explanation.

“If I hadn’t used the reversal, my opponent would have adjusted their strategy. Strength and weakness don’t matter; you just adapt to the situation. Courage is a part of skill too. You were stronger than me, Amy. That’s all there is to it.”

Marsha rested her chin on her hand, smirking. Eyebrowless Freeman, once a coward, was starting to sound almost manly.

Receiving unexpected praise from her enemy, Amy felt embarrassed.

“Well, I mean... you weren’t bad either, old man.”

“Thanks. But I’m not old. I’m the same age as Marsha.”

“So? You’re still an old man to me.”

Freeman sulked, focusing on tearing his bread. He wanted to ask why Shirone called Marsha “big sister,” but his shy nature held him back.

After the lighthearted exchange, Marsha straightened up and turned serious.

“Anyway, Shirone, if you’re aiming to become a mage, you should be cautious of Rulebreakers. It’s funny coming from me, I know.”

“No, I want to know more. Please, tell me.”

“Hmm. Honestly, the Seize magic I used isn’t very efficient. Sure, stealing someone else’s magic is overpowered, but it’s more about pushing boundaries than being practical in battle.”

Shirone nodded in agreement. If gaining power meant staking your life on a cost, he wouldn’t have chosen Seize. The numerous restrictions on stealing someone else’s abilities made it too impractical.

“I’m an unusual case. Most Rulebreakers are, but the magic they create usually isn’t meant for direct combat. Other Rulebreakers use far more effective and versatile magic than mine.”

“I see. To be honest, fighting you was terrifying. I never imagined there could be a way to seal Immortal Function.”

“Heh, sorry about that. But you’re right. In the magic world, nothing is impossible. There are no absolutes. You beat me because you exploited my weakness, didn’t you?”

“Yes. If Rulebreaking Magic stems from trauma, I figured targeting that trauma could create an opening.”

“Exactly. It’s a battle of logic between restrictions and costs. When fighting Rulebreakers, understanding how their magic works is more important than raw power. But I think you’ll handle it just fine.”

“No, I still have a lot to learn.”

Shirone spoke sincerely. This battle had taught him just how vast the world was and how many incredible individuals it contained.

Chapter 164: Late Lunch

(3)

“Hah, I never thought a day like this would come. Maybe now I can live a slightly different life.”

While her wounds weren't fully healed, Marsha had undoubtedly broken free of her shell. All that remained was to face the lingering pain of her past and carve a new path forward.

“What will you do from here? I've heard there are pursuers after you.”

Freeman asked.

“We'll leave. We started as mercenaries, so we'll live as mercenaries. My subordinates would prefer it that way. Of course, here in this country, we were absurdly branded as a bandit group.”

Marsha's eyes filled with sadness. Mercenaries were fighters, and she, too, had always been prepared to die. It was that readiness that allowed her to bury the deaths of her comrades in her heart and still smile.

She had never fought for a grand cause or shallow notions of justice. But she had always stood her ground, never running from those who challenged her.

At the very least, Marsha wanted her comrades to be remembered as brave warriors. They didn't deserve to be buried under the disgraceful label of bandits.

Understanding her feelings, Tess offered words of comfort.

“In truth, the difference between mercenaries and bandits is just a sliver. In some ways, the same could be said for knights and mercenaries. They all fight for their beliefs and end up buried. Politically, the losing side becomes the villains, but tides can always turn.”

Rian nodded in agreement. While Shirone and Amy, as scholars, might not fully grasp the weight of such matters, those aspiring to knighthood had to confront these truths. "There was a time when our family faced threats just for maintaining neutrality. Come to think of it, Tess, your father must have it tough too."

"Of course. Here, he's a hero, but in the colonies, he's seen as an invader. That's how it goes—it's just politics."

Marsha smiled, knowing that Rian and Tess were sharing these stories to console her.

Though she still harbored doubts about the world, she found herself starting to believe that sincere people did exist.

'Such warm-hearted kids. They're Shirone's friends, after all.'

Marsha rested her chin lazily on the table like a cat, basking in the rare peace. She raised a finger and pointed at Shirone.

"So, what about you? Are you planning to go sightseeing?"

"Oh, we're heading to the Kergo ruins."

"Kergo? What would a group of young men and women do there?"

"Well, the truth is..."

Shirone explained why they had come to the island. Marsha listened with interest, nodding in surprise when she understood.

"Oh, so the ruins hold that kind of secret. Honestly, I wasn't around the island much, so I didn't know the details.

Freeman, did you know about this?"

"To some extent. I heard bits from the natives."

"I see. So you want to enter the Kergo autonomous zone?"

"Yes. But the difficulty of the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice seems so high that I'm not sure we'll make it."

"And if you can't enter, then what?"

"Then we'll have no choice but to give up. I have one idea, but I'm not sure it'll work."

Hearing this, Freeman spoke up.

"If that's the case, we can help."

"What? Help with the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice?"

"No, not necessarily. Even without going through there, you can enter the autonomous zone. Falcoa seemed to have established a trade route with them. If you show one of our group's travel permits, they'll let you in. He was skilled at these things, at least."

Shirone and his group stared blankly. They hadn't known it was possible to access the autonomous zone without passing the trial.

Amy tilted her head in confusion.

"Wouldn't that mean there are two different paths? If that's the case, why bother having the trial?"

"I'm not sure. What's clear is that both routes lead to the same place. I confirmed this with someone who entered through the trial."

Shirone furrowed his brow. He had assumed passing the trial would lead to a different area.

"If both routes lead to the same location, why insist on one requiring a trial? What's the purpose?"

"It's hard to say. It could be a matter of tradition. Older cultures often have such remnants. Or, it could be to avoid suspicion."

"And how does that help?"

"It downplays expectations. If nothing significant seems to exist in the autonomous zone, people might lose interest. Honestly, even we feel less intrigued by the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice now."

Freeman concluded.

"Either way, you'll find out for yourselves. If you need it, we can provide you with a travel permit. We can arrange it right away."

"Yes, please."

Shirone decided to take it for now. Though they hadn't decided which route to take, it was best to have as many options as possible to approach the autonomous zone.

Freeman called in a subordinate to arrange for the permit. Then he turned back to Shirone's group.

"Getting in won't be an issue, but you'll need someone who can speak the native language. None of us can."

"Huh? Then how did Falcoa manage his trade?"

"After arriving on the island, Falcoa built his own network. The existing mercenary group didn't suit him. Although his faction is likely disbanded now that he's dead, he seemed to have relied on interpreters among the smugglers he associated with."

"I see. Then we'll need to find an interpreter."

Yuna raised her hand hesitantly.

"Um, I'm not sure if I should say this, but..."

"It's okay. Say whatever's on your mind."

"My brother knows a little of the Kergo language."

Amy's eyes lit up.

"Oh, Jiese does? How did he learn it?"

"He worked a lot to take care of me when we were younger. Before becoming a dockhand, he did some tourism jobs. I think he picked it up then."

Freeman smiled.

"Perfect. Then we'll ask Jiese for help. We'd assist you ourselves, but now that Marsha has returned, staying on the island is too dangerous. The Magic Association is still after us."

Shirone nodded. He didn't want to burden Marsha further, knowing she was already being pursued on a national level. With the plans settled, Shirone's group left the building before sunset.

Marsha handed them bracelets capable of Spatial Movement. The usage was simple: the bracelets had their own Spirit Zone, so one only needed to visualize the coordinates as if casting a spell.

Shirone examined the bracelet Marsha had given him. While people used it without much thought, the concept of linking magic devices with arrays was truly extraordinary.

Connecting two separate Spirit Zones in different spaces was a complex and groundbreaking technique.

It reminded him of how Marsha's Spot magic worked, offering a new perspective on her abilities.

The person in the spot would only see a single hole in space, but from the outside, they would see two spots: an entrance and an exit.

'Miro of Space-Time... Perhaps this world already exists within a vast secret.'

At first, he thought it was an unusual event that happened to him. But it turns out she was an apprentice of Alpheas. Further investigation revealed that she had a connection to the Kergo Ruins.

Furthermore, the space-time magic was still somewhere in the world, being grafted onto magic weapons and spreading around the world.

Shirone suddenly felt a sense of dread; perhaps the headmaster was right, and he was about to find something he should never know.

While Shirone was lost in thought, Marsha approached him and asked him one last time.

"A carriage will be waiting at the base of the mountain. We might see each other again before you leave, but either way, take care. And make sure to see a healing mage when you return."

"Understood. Thank you for everything."

"Come on! No need to thank me—what are friends for?"

Marsha said, laughing as she playfully smacked Shirone's arm. Though she no longer felt the need to hide herself, she didn't seem much different from when they first met.

Perhaps she had always used her lies as a shield to express her true self.

"I'll be going now. If we don't see each other here, contact me at the magic academy."

"Don't worry. Clay Marsha can find you anywhere, anytime."

Marsha folded her arms and said cheerfully. As usual, she knew how to make things cheerful.

Beside her, Freeman stood guard. Though their dynamic seemed lopsided, it somehow suited them.

As Shirone disappeared into the forest, Marsha, who had been watching for a long time, asked softly.

“Do you think they’ll be okay at the Kergo ruins?”

“Probably not.”

Marsha frowned but looked to Freeman, who continued with his usual composure.

“But they’ll overcome it. They’re strong kids.”

Marsha gave a bittersweet smile and glanced up at the sky.

From the depths of the forest, the sound of Spatial

Movement echoed through the heavens.

Risky Deal (1)

By the time Shirone and his group returned to the villa by carriage, evening had already fallen.

Jiese, pacing the living room with his injured body, turned immediately as the door opened.

“Ah...”

Tears welled up in Jiese’s eyes. His one and only sister, Yuna, was walking into the villa unharmed, without a single scratch.

“Brother!”

“Yuna!”

Jiese burst into tears as he embraced Yuna tightly. The siblings clung to each other, sobbing uncontrollably.

It had been an unimaginably difficult ordeal for them. Even Shirone, whose mental resilience was second to none, had moments where he felt like giving up against such formidable adversaries. The trials Yuna and Zis had endured must have been overwhelming.

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt anywhere?”

“Yes, I’m fine. The brothers and sisters saved me. But what about you, Brother? What happened to you? Why are you wrapped in bandages?”

“I’m fine. As long as you’re back, it doesn’t hurt at all.”
In truth, Jiese could barely walk. But he couldn’t let Yuna see his pain. Whatever suffering he endured was nothing compared to the fear Yuna must have felt.

Jiese turned to Shirone and his group, his eyes filled with gratitude. Bowing deeply, his heartfelt thanks spilled over.
“Thank you! Truly, thank you! I will never forget this debt of gratitude.”

Tess patted Jiese’s shoulder reassuringly, understanding his feelings. Knowing what they had been through, Tess chose not to make light of the situation.

“Hoho! You can forget all about this if you want—just remember what I told you before we left. If you’re really grateful, you’ll show it through your actions, right?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

Confused, Jiese blinked at Tess, unable to comprehend. Shirone and the others, including Yuna, all smiled warmly at him.

After putting the exhausted Yuna to bed, Jiese returned to the table. Sipping on herbal tea, he resumed the interrupted conversation.

“So, you’re planning to use the Kergo ruins to enter the autonomous zone? And that’s why you need an interpreter.”

“Yeah. From what Yuna told us, it sounds like you can help. I wanted to see how fluent you are.”

“If it’s just daily conversation, there shouldn’t be any problem. I can guide you. Hmm... but entering the native autonomous zone...”

Jiese’s expression turned pensive as he stroked his chin.

“What’s wrong? You don’t look too happy—do you have any concerns?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll guide you as much as you need. It’s just... whatever your reason for going, you should know that place is special. Not because it’s a secret or anything, but because

the Galliant government strictly controls access to it. Are you sure about this?"

Chapter 165: Risky Deal

(2)

“Huh? The government restricts access? But isn’t the Galliant government separate from the administrative body of the native autonomous zone? If we insist on entering, they can’t really stop us, can they?”

“That’s true—it’s more of a nominal restriction. Still, there must be a reason they go to such lengths to regulate access. If I’m rambling unnecessarily, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. We didn’t know about it either. But it doesn’t change our decision to go. Of course, that’s assuming you’ll act as our guide.”

“Of course! Who else but Jiese to guide you?”

Jiese thumped his chest confidently—only to wince and gasp in pain. After a long moment to recover, he continued.

“B-But with my body like this, I’m not sure I can move around properly.”

“Don’t worry about that. Tomorrow, we’ll visit the recovery mage that Mr. Freeman recommended. They should be able to heal most of your injuries.”

“Wow, a recovery mage? But that must cost a fortune!”

Jiese’s eyes widened in surprise. Amy gave him a narrow look and retorted dryly.

“It’ll probably be cheaper than the guide fee you were planning to charge us.”

Jiese scratched his head sheepishly, realizing just how much he’d been overcharging them.

“Haha, come on, why bring up old news?”

Shirone sank into the plush sofa with a sigh.

“Anyway, we should rest today. Mental strength may recover after sleep, but until Rian and Tess get healing magic, they’ll

be uncomfortable.”

“Huh? I’m fine, actually. All my injuries are already healed.” Everyone turned to Tess in surprise. The cuts and scratches on her face and arms had completely healed.

“Wow! How did you do that? Was it something like what Mr. Freeman did?”

“Yeah. I set my second Schema to mitochondria.”

“Mitochondria?”

“They’re cell organelles that produce energy. A mitochondrial Schema significantly boosts basic physical abilities like reflexes, regeneration, and stamina. That’s why it’s a common choice for warriors without exceptional talent. Kingdom soldiers and mercenaries often use mitochondrial builds.”

“I see. But what’s this about first and second builds?”

After their fight with the Parrot Mercenaries, where Shirone had been overwhelmed by the warriors’ techniques, he wanted to learn more about Schemas. The combat style was clearly different from magic battles. With unknown dangers ahead in the ruins, gathering as much information as possible about fighting styles seemed prudent.

“A build refers to a technical tree. Schemas are often explained as being like a virtual body, but the sensation when mastering them is different. It’s more like your cells awaken, and their clarity expands. Now, here’s a question: How do warriors layer multiple builds?”

Amy and Rian knew the answer but stayed silent, letting Tess explain since she was the most knowledgeable about Schemas.

“Hmm. If it’s like a virtual schematic, maybe they develop it in sections—like arms and legs separately?”

“That’s a common assumption. It’s not impossible, but it’s not practical. Balancing the body that way is extremely difficult. For instance, focusing only on the nervous system might cause your muscles to tear apart. On the other hand,

focusing only on strength might lead to your fists breaking when you punch.”

“Ah, so that’s an issue. I’d always wondered about that—how they balance physical enhancements.”

“It’s similar to magic. I bet you have systematic ways to manage mental disciplines, right? Like special patterns?”

“Yes, we have things like directional arrays and sequence patterns.”

“Warriors are no different. That’s what builds are about.

Think of it as stacking layers of virtual schematics. For example, you might start with a mitochondrial Schema as the base, add a strength enhancement Schema on top, and then layer a vision enhancement Schema above that. By building on a completed base, you reduce the risk of imbalance and physical damage.”

“Ah, I see! So that’s how it works.”

“The base Schema is the most efficient. If its output is 100%, the second layer operates at 50%, the third at 25%, and so on. You can rearrange the order, but applying it in real combat is challenging unless you’re a technical tree expert. Of course, there are exceptions, like a technique called reversal.”

“That’s what Amy mentioned Mr. Freeman using, right? How does that work? Is it like setting up specific patterns, like directional arrays?”

“No, Schemas don’t work like that. To put it simply, reversal is possible because you can change your point of perception within the Schema.”

Tess laid her hand on the table, picking up sheets of paper to illustrate.

“Imagine stacking three transparent sheets of paper.

Looking down, you see them in order—let’s say 1, 2, 3.

Reversal flips the perspective so you see them from the bottom up—3, 2, 1. Beyond that, there are techniques like divergence, overlap, folding, and crossing—all part of building a technical tree.”

Shirone was impressed. He had thought warriors simply trained their physical abilities, but this was as technical as magic.

“So Tess, your second technical tree uses the mitochondrial Schema, meaning its efficiency is half that of the first?”

“Exactly. Mitochondrial builds are common, but focusing the most efficient Schema slot on physical activity can feel wasteful—unless it’s purely a battle of physical bodies. True swordmasters pick Schemas suited to their technique. In my case, I chose a nervous system build because precision is key to wielding a rapier.”

Shirone nodded, beginning to understand. If two fencers with similar builds fought, the one with a nervous system build would have the advantage over a mitochondrial build.

“The mercenaries we faced in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice were impressive. They didn’t use mitochondrial builds. The warrior likely had a strength enhancement Schema, while the archer seemed to use a sensory Schema.”

“Wait, nervous systems and sensory systems are different?”

“They’re similar, but the areas of enhancement are different. To simplify, think of it as the difference between internal and external senses. A nervous system build like mine focuses on internal senses, allowing for precise control over physical movements. On the other hand, a sensory system build enhances external senses—like vision, hearing, and smell, or closer senses like touch and taste. It’s natural for an archer to hone external senses, which is why their sight, smell, and hearing are several times more acute than average. By the way, my third build is also sensory.”

“Ah, so that’s why having an archer makes it so hard to tail someone.”

“Exactly. The important thing is to find the build that suits you best. Of course, refining each Schema through practice is essential. Even if someone chooses a mitochondrial build,

poor training can leave them weaker than a warrior who chose mitochondria as their third technical tree.”

“I see now. I understand what Schemas are as a concept—and why people call it a bodily schematic.”

“In the end, think of it as another version of yourself. For example, there’s the phenomenon of hollow pain, where someone who has lost an arm feels pain in the space where the arm used to be. That’s the essence of a Schema.”

Listening to Tess, both Shirone and Amy realized just how much there was to learn. Initially, Amy had thought a warrior’s explanation would be simpler, but as the discussion deepened, even she encountered things she hadn’t known.

“So, Tess, how many layers of Schemas has your dad stacked? I remember him being incredibly skilled. If each layer loses efficiency, isn’t it pointless to go beyond the fourth?”

“You’re right. Usually, it’s not worth it. But there is a way to make the second technical tree 100% efficient.”

Shirone, now completely fascinated by schemas, leaned forward eagerly.

“Really? What is it?”

“Warriors call it ‘mastery.’ As I said earlier, imagine your body as a shadowed schematic. Unlocking a Schema is like making the black parts transparent. But who can completely understand their body? It’s incredibly rare for someone to remove every shadow from a single Schema layer.”

“Yeah, that sounds impossible.”

“It takes immense training and genius-level talent. But some people manage it. When they fully master a Schema, it becomes one with their body—essentially non-existent. For someone who’s mastered five layers, the sixth Schema’s efficiency will be at 100%. Of course, this takes time and effort, even if talent shortens the process.”

“Wow.”

Shirone exhaled deeply, impressed. He had dreamed of becoming a mage since childhood, but his duel with Rian had opened his eyes to the limitless potential of swordsmanship.

Mages and warriors. Spirit Zones and Schemas. These were the forces that divided the world's power structure, and for good reason.

"That's incredible, Tess."

Tess blushed at Shirone's heartfelt praise.

"Oh, come on. This isn't much. I only know it because I've been learning since I was little. Honestly, I got a bit carried away because I thought it might help you as a mage."

"It really did. I think I'll be able to respond better if something like today happens again. So Tess has already healed, and tomorrow it's just Jiese and Rian who need healing magic."

Shirone said it lightly, but Tess suddenly froze, realizing something. Despite a lengthy discussion about warriors and Schemas, Rian hadn't contributed a single word.

Tess glanced at Rian cautiously. He sat there silently, his gaze fixed on his own body.

It was, quite frankly, in shambles.

Though he had overwhelmed Falcoa in the end with a Imaginary Schema, his lack of mastery over any proper Schema was a glaring weakness. Even now, it felt as if his injuries were worsening rather than healing.

'Damn it! Why am I like this...?'

Tess looked at Rian sympathetically, her heart aching as she realized how hurt he must feel. She regretted unintentionally wounding his pride.

'You must be so frustrated, Rian. No one feels worse about this than you.'

Noticing his friends' gazes, Rian quickly masked his expression. He pounded his chest with a bright smile as if to dispel any worries.

“Haha! Don’t worry about me. I don’t need healing magic. I’m tough enough.”

Despite his cheerful act, everyone knew the truth. His endurance was remarkable, but without proper treatment, his combat capability would diminish significantly.

Even so, no one pressed him to seek healing. They understood the humiliation of revealing weakness.

But Shirone was different. Rian had committed fully to protecting the group during this journey, fulfilling his role as a guardian knight with utmost seriousness. Shirone believed it was only right to show him the same sincerity.

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(3)

“Rian, stop being stubborn and get healing magic tomorrow.”

“I told you, I’m fine! There are no critical injuries. Well, except for the spot Tess stabbed—that does feel a little strange. Hahaha!”

“Rian, the moment you collapse is the moment I die.”

Rian’s laughter abruptly stopped. The room fell into a tense silence as everyone exchanged uneasy glances between Shirone and Rian.

“Shirone, I...”

“I know. You’d protect me until your last breath. But a single decision in a fleeting moment could determine whether we succeed or fail. I’d prefer it if you could take even more hits for me. If you insist on being this stubborn, I might have to reconsider entrusting my back to you.”

To some, it might have sounded selfish or cold. Asking a friend to take blows on his behalf was undeniably harsh.

But Shirone understood Rian better than anyone.

Rian was fire, and the only way to fan that flame was not through shallow flattery but by confronting him with harsh, unvarnished reality.

A smirk slowly crept onto Rian’s face. The heat of determination surged within him, burning away all other distractions.

“Don’t worry, Shirone! I’ll do whatever it takes to restore this body to perfection. As long as I’m standing, no one will lay a hand on you.”

Rian looked as though he was ready to march off for healing magic that very moment. Tess, now freed from her silent

distress, discreetly exhaled a sigh of relief as she glanced at the ceiling.

‘Phew. Thank you, Shirone. Seriously, thank you.’

Tess was confident Rian would one day become the greatest swordsman. But she also understood that no matter how fiercely he burned, the only person capable of wielding that blazing sword was Shirone.

Early the next morning, Shirone and his companions left the villa.

In the residential district, there was a mage guild. Though its influence had diminished due to Freeman’s control over the island, it maintained its presence thanks to the services of a healing mage.

The nature of the resort meant that injuries from carelessness were common.

While commoners relied on home remedies or local doctors, nobles would visit a healing mage for even minor injuries.

The cost ranged from 1 to 10 gold depending on the severity of the wounds, but Freeman’s connections ensured fair prices for the group’s treatments.

Healing magic worked by accelerating cellular activity to naturally heal injuries. Unlike physicians, who diagnosed ailments and prescribed treatments, mages followed the natural order rather than artificial intervention.

While higher-tier magic involved complex theories, even simple cellular activation was highly effective. The human body, after all, instinctively knew how to heal itself.

The healing mage’s skills weren’t particularly exceptional, and since both Jiese and Rian’s wounds were extensive, it took two hours to complete their treatments.

When Shirone saw Rian’s fully healed wounds, he once again marveled at the power of magic.

Of course, two hours wasn’t practical for use in the middle of battle. But in the long run, having a healing mage in the

group made an enormous difference in combat effectiveness.

After returning to the villa and organizing their gear, the group set out once more.

While healing magic could only regenerate wounds and didn't restore overall condition, Rian's natural toughness made him appear vibrant and energetic.

Jiese, confident in his resilience, carried his pack without complaint.

Rian noticed Jiese's backpack and raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? What's in that bag?"

"Oh, it's a lunchbox. Yuna made it while we were being treated. Believe it or not, she's an amazing cook. She works at a restaurant, after all."

"Whoa, a pro? Great! Let's eat now."

As Rian reached for the food, drooling, Tess pinched his side and scolded him.

"You just ate. What do you need another meal for? Let's get to the ruins first. It'll be a problem if it gets dark."

Having already visited the ruins once, everyone understood the importance of setting out quickly. Even the girls finished their preparations earlier than usual.

When they reached a point about a kilometer from the ruins, the coachman, as before, refused to proceed further.

Familiar with the routine, Shirone's group disembarked and continued on foot.

Nothing had changed since their last visit.

The bustling crowds, the expressionless natives guarding the area, and the tavern where they had encountered mercenaries were all as they remembered.

The group decided to stop for lunch at a park near the ruins. Yuna's lunchbox contained rice balls mixed with minced leftovers. The dish was unusual but reportedly popular on the island.

When Shirone took a bite, he found the taste refreshing. The combination of various ingredients created a savory, slightly

salty flavor.

Though he worried the portions might not be enough, the rice balls were surprisingly filling, leaving a heavier feeling than bread.

Meanwhile, Jiese reviewed the instructions on the note Freeman had provided. Though brief, his experience in Freeman's organization allowed him to quickly grasp the nature of the arrangements.

He led them to the opposite side of the entrance to the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. There, a native in formal attire stood guard.

"Hello."

"Who are you?"

"We're with Freeman's organization. When can we depart?"

The native scrutinized Jiese but, after seeing the pass, immediately provided the information.

After exchanging a few words in the native language, Jiese turned to Shirone and explained.

"The transportation will take about an hour to arrive."

"Huh? Transportation?"

"It seems we'll be taking a mine cart. That's what the note says. Anyway, we're supposed to come back when it's ready."

Tess looked around at everyone and asked.

"What should we do? Wait here for an hour, or explore a bit?"

Shirone remained deep in thought. Would entering the autonomous zone like this really be okay? If so, why did the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice even exist?

While it could indeed be a matter of tradition, Shirone suspected there was more to it. After all, the chamber bore the distinct presence of the Breath of the Maze.

"I want to challenge the trial's gate again."

When Shirone suddenly spoke up, his friends turned to him, surprised. They couldn't understand why he would choose

to endure such a grueling test when there was an easier way to reach the autonomous zone.

However, Amy shared a similar sentiment. She suspected that the underground ruins hid something no one was meant to uncover. If two routes led to the same destination, there had to be a deeper reason for their existence.

The issue, though, was whether passing the trial was even possible. Attempting the impossible might waste time they couldn't afford to lose.

"Do you think you can pass? Are you planning to try using the laser this time?"

"Yeah. If it's possible, I'd like to give it a shot."

"And if it doesn't work? The mine cart might not wait for us, and passing through the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice will take time."

"Honestly, I don't think it'll matter much if I fail."

Shirone said nonchalantly, and Amy looked at him in confusion.

"What do you mean it won't matter?"

"I have a hunch, though I can't be certain yet. So here's an idea: I'll enter the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice while the rest of you wait here and take the mine cart. That way, we can experience both routes and synchronize our timing."

Amy considered his reasoning and found it logical. Shirone had already achieved the highest score in the trial; no one else needed to accompany him. Moreover, if he went alone, it wouldn't take as much time.

"Alright, let's head to the trial route first."

With Amy's agreement, the group made their way toward the eastern altar. A different native was guarding the area this time compared to their previous visit with the mercenaries.

"Shirone, you remember the codeword, right?"

"Yes. You all stay back. Last time, we were mistaken for a group because everyone stood too close. I'll handle this alone."

“Okay. Nothing should happen, but... still, be careful.”

Shirone walked toward the altar. But before he could take three steps, he stopped abruptly. From within the altar, there was a loud banging on the door.

The native guarding the altar turned toward the source of the noise and activated the mechanism to open the stone wall.

‘Someone must have tried the trial. Are there more challengers than I thought’

Shirone thought, his curiosity piqued. He waited eagerly to see who had just emerged. But when he recognized the figures stepping out, his breath caught in shock.

“Huh? What?”

Amy, standing behind him, flinched and shouted in surprise.

“What the—? How are *they* here?”

“What’s wrong, Amy? Do you know them? Friends of yours?”

“Friends? Ha! They’re my enemies!”

Amy’s reaction made it clear the relationship was far from amicable. Rian and Tess, intrigued, studied the pair exiting the altar closely.

They looked so alike that one might mistake them for siblings. With their black hair, dark eyes, and pale skin, they exuded a somber, distinct aura.

Shirone stared blankly at them. It was Canis and Arin, disciples of Arcane.

‘How are they here?’

While they had every right to travel wherever they wished, seeing them emerge from a place tied to the mysteries of the Maze of Space-Time gave him an ominous feeling.

Canis and Arin seemed just as startled to see Shirone’s group. However, they quickly regained their composure, as though they had half-expected to encounter them.

“So, you’re here too.”

Canis said with a mocking grin as he approached.

Meanwhile, Arin lowered her head shyly, clearly uneasy in social situations after a lifetime spent isolated in Radum.

Though they had once been adversaries, the fact that they'd soon be classmates made her feel it was only proper to offer a greeting.

"H-Hello, Shirone."

Arin stammered, summoning all her courage to lift a hand in a timid wave. Canis shot her a sharp glare, causing Arin to hastily lower her hand. Yet, to her surprise, Shirone greeted her warmly.

"Hello, Arin. How have you been?"

"Oh, um... fine, I guess..."

Arin replied hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper as she glanced nervously at Canis. Despite her reservations, Shirone's genuine friendliness made her question the need for hostility.

When she tentatively raised her gaze and met Shirone's clear eyes, she froze in astonishment.

'Even more incredible than before. He's such a fascinating person.'

Meanwhile, Shirone's thoughts were racing. The fact that Canis and Arin had emerged from the altar suggested that they had failed the trial—the Eye of the Angel had deemed them unworthy.

'The Maze of Space-Time... it really is no easy feat.'

Canis and Arin were strong, trained by an archmage, with more real-world experience than most at the magic academy. While Shirone had once bested Canis, it had been a grueling fight, even with elemental advantages on his side.

Yet even they had failed to proceed in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. It was a stark reminder of just how formidable the Miro's trials truly were.

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(4)

Amy approached them, seemingly sharing Shirone's thoughts as she covered her mouth and mocked Canis.

"Hohoho! Don't tell me you failed? Well, that figures. It's just like you two."

Shirone might have let bygones be bygones after winning their previous battle, but Amy wasn't so forgiving. She had suffered too much at their hands.

True to her principle of always paying back what she endured, she seized this chance to strike back.

Canis, however, wasn't fazed by her provocation.

"Hmph. Aren't you in the same boat? Turns out even the senior class isn't all that impressive."

"Don't be ridiculous! How do you even know if I failed?"

"Because you know I failed, which means you also took the trial. If you'd succeeded, you wouldn't still be loitering around here. Or are you just that dim?"

"You little punk! Acting high and mighty for some junior!"

"And yet, wasn't it you who couldn't do a thing without following a junior's lead? You should thank me. If I hadn't stopped Lucas, you might not even be alive."

Amy's eyes flared with fury. The memory of nearly becoming a victim of Abyss Nova under Lucas's targeting returned, flooding her with rage.

"You bastard...!"

Before Shirone could intervene, Amy raised her fist to strike Canis.

But just as she powered her Schema to deliver a blow, a shadow loomed behind Canis, and sharp black claws slid protectively over his shoulder.

Amy instinctively leaped back. Clinging to Canis as if to shield him, Harvest grinned with its twisted, jagged mouth. “Kekeke! Long time no see, sister. Still the same fiery temper, I see.”

“Eek! What *is* that thing!?”

Tourists screamed and scattered at the sight of Harvest. Shirone could hardly blame them.

For nobles, magic phenomena weren’t uncommon, but witnessing a humanoid shadow rise up with such grotesque realism was an entirely different level of eerie.

Even Tess was momentarily speechless as she gawked at Harvest.

“Oh my... the shadow... is talking. Rian, have you ever seen anything like that?”

The creature’s build was unsettling—its small head contrasted with massive shoulders and a whip-thin waist. While humanoid in shape, its arms were unnaturally long and thin, twice the length of a human’s, with shield-sized palms and blade-like claws.

“No, this is my first time. But it seems like Shirone has seen it before.”

Harvest had spread its enormous hands wide, covering much of Canis’s body in a defensive stance. Specialized in absorbing impacts, Harvest made Amy hesitate.

“Keke, let’s not get too close to each other now. I’d hate to spill blood in a place like this.”

“That thing...”

Amy prepared to charge again, but Shirone raised a finger. At its tip, a crimson light compressed into a dense particle, trembling and emitting a radiant afterimage, ready to fire. This time, Harvest froze. It remembered the laser—the technique that had nearly destroyed it before.

“Apologize to Amy. Digging up someone’s wounds isn’t something you should do.”

“Wounds? That’s what you call that? And besides, I saved her. Typical noble mindset.”

“Only the person hurt gets to decide whether it’s a wound. If you’ve reopened someone’s painful memory, apologizing is the least you can do. When will you stop looking at the world so cynically?”

“Hmph. I don’t need a lecture from some greenhouse flower.”

As Canis sneered, Harvest’s torso swelled menacingly, threatening everyone. In response, Shirone’s laser grew even brighter.

Arin, sensing the danger escalating, extended her Spirit Zone in the form of tendrils, hoping to disrupt Shirone’s focus and dissipate the laser. But before her Zone could even reach him, Amy stepped in front of Shirone, making Arin frown. Against Amy’s Crimson Eyes, most mental interference spells were useless.

Magic creature, lasers, psychic magic, self-image retention—each conflicting force clashed and intertwined, creating a tense standoff where no one dared to make the first move. Even Tess, gripping Rian’s arm, feigned a teary panic at the palpable tension.

“What’s with these guys? They’re terrifying.”

Rian, however, saw things differently. To him, magic users often seemed otherworldly, even monstrous. He thought it only fitting that Shirone, too, was becoming one of those enigmatic and extraordinary figures.

“Well done, Shirone.”

“What?!”

Tess looked at him as though he’d gone mad.

Rian ignored her and stepped forward, drawing his sword with a flourish.

“Hey, whoever you are—!”

Before he could finish, Tess leaped onto his back, slapping a hand over his mouth.

“Have some tact, will you? The last thing we need is you making things worse!”

“Mmmpf! Let me go! Shirone—mmph!”

Shirone, Amy, Canis, and even Harvest stared in dumbfounded silence at the ridiculous scene.

The absurdity broke the tension, and Harvest deflated its swollen form. Shirone's laser dimmed, and Arin retracted her Spirit Zone, while Amy's Crimson Eyes returned to their normal hue.

In truth, the entire confrontation had been petty. Amy had provoked Canis, and Canis had retaliated with a sharper barb.

"Let's stop wasting energy on pointless fights. We didn't come all this way just to bicker with you."

Canis said as he absorbed Harvest back into his shadow. Seeing him offer a truce, Amy also calmed herself.

With the tension dissipated, Canis turned to Shirone, finally voicing the question that had been on his mind since seeing him.

"So, did you find a way into the Kergo Autonomous Zone? Staying here after failing the trial suggests you've figured something out."

Shirone opened his mouth to reply, but Amy interrupted.

"Why should we tell you?"

This time, her refusal wasn't out of spite. The information had been hard-earned and potentially dangerous; it wasn't something to share lightly.

"There's no need to be so cautious. We know how to get in, too. You're probably thinking of taking the Loop smuggling route, right?"

Amy was taken aback but hid her surprise. Canis seemed aware of the Freeman organization's dealings. If he knew of the smuggling network, why had they bothered with the trial in the first place?

As Amy pondered, Canis smirked.

"I can hear the gears turning. Want me to enlighten you?"

"Who said I'm curious? We already know all about it!"

"Oh, really? Arin, what do you think?"

Caught off guard, Arin stammered.

“Uh, um... she’s lying. She’s really curious. Her thoughts are practically jumping up and down.”

“Ugh...”

Amy clenched her teeth in frustration. Arin’s keen perception of emotions made hiding anything impossible.

Just then, a loud growl echoed from Arin’s stomach.

All eyes turned to her as her face turned crimson with embarrassment.

Canis, uncharacteristically worried, asked.

“Arin, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. This is nothing. It’s not like I haven’t been through worse.”

Canis bit his lip. They had been traveling for days without money, and neither of them had eaten in three days. While Canis could endure it, he couldn’t bear seeing Arin suffer. Swallowing his pride, he turned to Shirone.

“Do you... have any food? Arin hasn’t eaten. I’m fine, but could you spare something for her?”

Shirone took a closer look at Canis. His worn clothes and dirt-streaked appearance told the story of long, harsh travel. ‘Arcane stripped them of everything...’

After the heartbeat test, Canis didn’t come to school. In retrospect, with no connections, making a living was probably their biggest problem.

It’s hard to find work for a mage who is skilled enough but doesn’t have a license. Clients are reluctant. There are some who want them, of course, but most of them are involved in criminal endeavors.

But Canis didn’t want to stay in the shadows any longer. He realized that he would never get to the top by fighting society.

Amy sighed and said.

“Let’s just get some food. There’s a tavern nearby that serves great noodles.”

“No! I’m really fine!”

Arin waved her hand. She was actually starving, but Canis's pride wouldn't allow her to go along.

Amy grabbed Arin's wrist and dragged her away.

"What's okay, I've got thunder in my stomach, and I'm not going to fight if I don't have the stamina. Canis, you come with me."

"I'm fine, just take Arin."

"Quiet down and just follow me. It's only natural for a senior to treat their juniors to a meal when they're hungry."

Shirone said, pushing Canis's back lightly.

"Come on, Canis. Let's just go. Besides, I have some things I want to talk about with you."

Unable to argue further, Canis reluctantly followed, while Amy led the group to the tavern where they had previously encountered the mercenaries.

Once all six of them had settled around a table, Shirone introduced Canis and Arin to Rian. Upon learning they were disciples of an archmage, Rian was momentarily impressed but felt a sense of relief when Amy gleefully pointed out that Shirone had defeated them in battle.

The priority, however, was filling their stomachs. Canis and Arin were clearly famished, devouring two bowls of noodles each in record time.

Having already eaten Yuna's packed lunch earlier, Shirone and his group watched the pair eat with quiet amusement, feeling oddly full just from observing their enthusiasm.

As they slurped down the last of their soup, Shirone couldn't help but smile. Despite their backgrounds and temperaments, in moments like these, it was clear—they were just human, like everyone else.

Once their hunger was sated and they began to look more alive, Shirone broached the topic gently.

"We've all got a lot on our minds, but let's be honest with each other to some extent. Why are you two here?"

"Canis has always been interested in ruins. We're here for some exploration."

“Oh, so Canis wants to be an archaeologist?”

“Tch, stop talking nonsense.”

Canis grumbled, clearly uncomfortable discussing himself. Yet, he didn’t stop Arin from answering, indicating a reluctant tolerance.

While she might have lacked social grace, Arin wasn’t someone who easily revealed more than necessary. Her response was calculated to disclose just enough without revealing their true purpose.

The truth was that they weren’t here for simple exploration. They had a specific goal, one that required Shirone’s involvement.

Canis redirected the conversation with a pointed question.

“What about you guys? Why are you here?”

He gestured toward Amy, though it was clear Shirone was the leader. Still, Canis had no intention of showing his hand just yet.

Amy, skilled enough in psychological games to conceal the truth from Arin, quickly countered.

“Why else? We’re heading to the Kergo Autonomous Zone—same as you guys.”

“Hmph. Do you even know what’s there?”

“Oh? And you’re speaking like someone who does?”

“Maybe I do. Maybe I don’t.”

Amy forced a polite smile, but inwardly, she was seething.

‘He knows. He definitely knows.’

The fact that Canis had chosen the trial route instead of the smuggling route meant he had a compelling reason to pursue that path.

‘Damn it. How do I get information out of these two?’

Canis and Arin were a different breed from the mercenaries they’d dealt with earlier. And with Arin’s ability to read emotions, psychological tricks were a losing strategy.

Shirone, however, took a straightforward approach.

“Canis, could you share what you know? Honestly, we don’t know much.”

Amy understood Shirone's reasoning. Their position was clearly weaker. Rather than beating around the bush, opening up might prompt an exchange of information. Surprisingly, Canis was receptive. While he couldn't let Shirone's group know how crucial Shirone was to their plans, he saw no harm in throwing them a bone.

"Fine. But I need to confirm something first."

"Ask anything. If I know the answer, I'll tell you."

"Are you heading to the Autonomous Zone because you want to learn about Miro of Space-Time?"

Shirone's eyes widened in shock. Miro of Space-Time was a secret known only to a select few—his closest friends and the headmaster.

"How do you know about that? Do you know about Miro? No, how much do you know about the Kergo Ruins?"

Shirone asked urgently. Rather than answering directly, Canis leaned back and rested his chin on his hand, a smug look on his face.

"Let's just say I know more than you do."

Shirone frowned, deep in thought. Where could Canis have gathered such information in such a short time?

Then it hit him—the shadow at Canis's feet, the faint presence lingering within it. A magical creature, ominous and intelligent.

"The knowledge of Arcane."

Chapter 168: Risky Deal

(5)

“Ah...”

Hearing Shirone's words, Amy also realized it. Why hadn't she thought of it earlier? Harvest was an arcane creature that had inherited all of Arcane's memories.

The world-renowned archmage, Viltor Arcane.

If anyone could possess secrets about the Kergo Ruins that no one else knew, it would be him.

Amy and Shirone exchanged a look, their eyes now filled with certainty, as they turned to Canis. However, his expression remained ambiguous.

“Hmph, let me put it this way: you're half right and half wrong.”

“Half? What do you mean by that?”

Canis avoided a direct answer. Now wasn't the time to reveal everything. The secrets tied to the Kergo Ruins were far graver than Shirone and his companions realized.

Amy leaned in closer, her voice dripping with impatience.

“Are you going to keep dodging like this? If you're going to spill it eventually, why not now?”

“I fail to see why I should. Surely, you're not going to bring up the cost of the meal, are you?”

“Of course, that's part of it. But there's another reason: you need us. Otherwise, you wouldn't even be trying to negotiate.”

Canis fell silent, exhaling a long breath. He had expected this turn of events but needed to time his next move carefully.

“Fine. To be honest, I do need something from you. In that sense, we both have something the other wants.”

“What is it you want from us? Are you talking about the travel pass?”

“That’s trivial. With mental magic, I could get through with a mere piece of paper. Arin’s empathy skills extend to the realm of language itself.”

“Oh, so that’s how you entered without a translator.”

Shirone now understood how they had managed to bypass the trial gate without assistance.

“Even so, we didn’t take the smuggling route because someone must pass through the trial gate. As you know, we failed. That’s why we want your help. That’s the essence of the deal I’m proposing.”

Amy analyzed Canis’s words, her thoughts spinning before she suddenly veered off on an odd tangent.

“By the way, what score did you get?”

Caught off guard, Canis blinked. He then averted his gaze, clearly dodging the question.

“I’d rather not say.”

“Oh, come on. What was it? Tell me!”

“Why should I? If you’re so curious, why don’t you share yours first?”

“No, you first. Then I’ll tell you mine.”

“Not happening. You go first.”

Shirone sighed and stepped in before they wasted any more time.

“Enough. Let’s get back to the real issue.”

Both Amy and Canis reluctantly closed their mouths, unwilling to back down but recognizing the need to move on.

After a moment, Canis spoke again, his eyes slightly more tired than before.

“Anyway, here’s my proposal: If you pass the trial gate—the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice—then we’ll talk again.”

Amy frowned.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“You couldn’t pass the trial, right? If Shirone succeeds, there’s no reason to bring you along. For a deal to work, you need to offer us something tangible in return.”

“That might be true for now. But trust me, this deal won’t leave you at a loss.”

“Then prove it. Even if you can’t reveal the core details, you can still provide proof. Otherwise, this negotiation is meaningless. We’re not going to let you use us without understanding your motives.”

Canis turned to Arin, his gaze conflicted. This wasn’t a decision he could make alone.

When Arin gave a small nod of approval, Canis sighed and finally spoke.

“Fine. Here’s the deal: You said you’re going to the Autonomous Zone to learn about Miro, right? Are you absolutely determined to go, no matter what?”

“Yes. We want to understand Miro in detail.”

“In that case... the information I have might just save your lives.”

A tense silence filled the air as Shirone’s heart raced. Saving lives? The claim didn’t make sense. What could possibly be in the Autonomous Zone to warrant such a statement?

“To be clear, if you approach the Maze of Space-Time without my information, you’re almost certain to die. But if you work with me, there’s a chance you’ll survive. In essence, your lives are the stakes of this deal.”

“Wha—!”

Amy shot to her feet, shouting.

“Do you really think you can scare us into this? That’s not proof—it’s just a threat! Even the Freeman Organization has been through there. It’s dangerous, sure, but it’s not like it’s life or death.”

“That’s why I said the Autonomous Zone itself isn’t the problem. The real danger lies in using the trial route. And Shirone...”

Canis turned to face him directly.

"I already know what you're planning to do in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. You're thinking of unlocking the Immortal Function within the Maze of Space-Time, aren't you?"

All eyes fell on Shirone. After a long silence, he finally spoke.

"Yes. When I first saw the chamber, its structure felt... unique. If it's meant to test a warrior's strength, there's no reason to rotate the Maze in eight directions. The atmosphere was too serious for mere decoration. So I wondered if the Angel's Eye was observing something other than physical strength."

Canis nodded as if Shirone's reasoning aligned with his own thoughts.

"Right now, we can only hope that method works."

"Huh? Don't you already know?"

"I told you—half and half. I suspect it's connected to the Immortal Function, but I could be wrong."

"Then, Canis, what exactly do you want?"

"That conversation can wait until after you pass the trial gate. I've already shared this much because you're an Unlocker. I'm betting on that potential."

"Hmm. What do you think?"

Amy and Shirone exchanged a glance before she nodded. They had planned to challenge the trial gate before meeting Canis, so there was no additional loss in agreeing to the deal.

"Fine. Shirone will enter the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. Meanwhile, we'll take the smuggling route to the Autonomous Zone. Is that acceptable?"

Amy's tone was firm. The weight of Canis's offer was undeniable, but she needed confirmation.

"No problem. The smuggling route is just a convenient alternative. Only one person needs to pass the trial gate to proceed."

Amy sighed, her head throbbing from the uncertainty.

"Fine. Let's move. If we start now, we can make it in time."

As they left the tavern, the group split into two teams. Amy and her companions merged with Canis and Arin, while Shirone prepared to head to the trial gate alone.

"Good luck, Shirone. Don't push yourself too hard."

"I won't. If it doesn't work, I'll stop. Take care of yourselves too. Who knows what might happen?"

He couldn't help but feel a little old-fashioned after all that talk of life and death. Amy turned her head and scanned the spectrum of the party. Rian was strong and muscular, Tess was agile, and they were joined by Canis, who specialized in defense, and Arin, who was psychic.

They were two mages she would have hated to have as enemies, but who would do their part in a crisis. The thought gave her a comforting feeling.

"I don't think we have anything... to worry about."

"Haha! You're right. I'm glad we have more power."

Amy couldn't help but laugh. Shirone seemed to be getting the sense that this was going to be a lot more dangerous than she expected.

As Shirone left and headed for the altar, Amy turned to lead her friends westward.

"Arin, let's go."

As Amy's group walked away, Canis glanced at Arin.

"Arin? What's wrong?"

She hadn't moved, her eyes fixed on Shirone as if seeing something extraordinary.

"Arin? What is it?"

"Hey, Canis... is Shirone blond?"

Canis frowned at the odd question but answered.

"Yes, he is. Why?"

"I see... Let's go."

As they walked away, Arin stole one last glance at Shirone, a faint realization dawning in her mind.

'Ah... so that's what he is.'

Shirone arrived at the western altar and approached the native who was glaring at him with an intense gaze. Calmly, he recited the password:

“Kertia, Lo Hoima. Akrasia, Widmia Benzen.”

The native nodded, operating the mechanism to open the door. As Shirone stepped into the darkened entrance, a spiral staircase illuminated by torches stretched downward. He descended slowly, the familiar surroundings feeling utterly different now that he was alone.

At the bottom of the stairs, a corridor awaited, where natives gestured and spoke to him.

While he didn't understand their words, Shirone grasped their meaning through context. It seemed to be part of a ceremonial protocol, requiring no additional exchange.

Beyond a sturdy iron door at the corridor's end lay a sight Shirone recognized—a wide altar surrounded by eight floating, octagonal orbs. Known as the Eyes of the Angel, these represented Miro of Space-Time, awaiting his challenge.

Although the gatekeeper had changed, the man with white tattoos on his face looked familiar. Then again, Shirone couldn't confidently distinguish the faces of the Kergo people.

“May I take the trial?”

“This is the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. The eight eyes of the angel will judge you. To enter Kergo, you must pass through the Maze of Space-Time.”

After waiting for the explanation to finish, Shirone ascended the altar. He intended to test his theory about the Immortal Function but first wanted to strike the Maze with a laser.

Resolving to give it everything he had, Shirone focused his energy, creating a concentrated laser. The ominous red beam caused even the expressionless white-tattooed man to flinch.

Shirone unleashed the laser with full force. The numbers on the Maze of Space-Time took longer than usual to appear,

likely due to the constant impact of his attack.

Finally, a number flashed—200.

Then it began changing by the second: 400, 782, 1,311, 2,643, climbing higher and higher until it reached 6,822.

For a brief moment, hope surged within Shirone.

But then, the numbers abruptly reset, starting again at 72 and climbing anew.

It seemed the Maze was designed with a time limit, resetting after each cycle. The final number, 6,822, displayed momentarily before the Maze emitted a red glow, signaling Shirone's failure.

"Phew."

He exhaled heavily, a mix of frustration and exhaustion. The laser had worked to an extent, but the Maze anticipated and countered such attempts to exploit its energy accumulation.

The most bitter part was that even though that was Shirone's personal best score, it still wasn't enough to pass.

He couldn't shake Canis's ominous warning about the risks to his life. How much had the headmaster foreseen when granting permission for this exploration?

As Shirone stood lost in thought, the white-tattooed man spoke solemnly.

"Will you leave or remain? To prove your worth, you must pass through the Maze of Space-Time."

Shirone shook his head, trying to dispel his fear. There was no turning back now—not when his friends had already entered the Autonomous Zone.

"I'll try one more time."

The man crossed his arms and waited silently. Taking this as permission, Shirone positioned himself at the center of the altar.

Immortal Function.

If it failed, he would concede. Whatever Canis knew, Shirone would walk away if this didn't work.

"Whoa."

Shirone steadied his breathing and expanded his Spirit Zone, engulfing the eight orbs of the Maze. Carefully inspecting the edges of his zone, he prepared to activate the Immortal Function.

“Huff!”

The moment he unlocked it, something extraordinary occurred.

Mental energy surged uncontrollably, pouring into the Maze and being absorbed at a staggering rate.

‘What is this?!’

The pull was immense. Under normal circumstances, his zone would have shrunk immediately. But just as quickly as his energy was drawn in, new power surged from the infinite realm, keeping the balance on a precarious edge.

Shirone was terrified. He felt as though his entire being had been reduced to a mere doorway, linking one overwhelming force to another.

‘No! I can’t lose control!’

If this continued, his consciousness would shatter again, with no guarantee of reassembly by Miro.

“Ughhhhh!”

Desperately, Shirone reinforced his Spirit Zone’s defensive framework and anchored it tightly. The resistance was palpable, yet the force pulling him apart remained relentless.

From there, he slipped back into Vajra, desperately holding on.

He clung to the Immortal Function like a lifeline, praying for the ordeal to end without breaking apart.

Then, the eight orbs of the Maze lit up brilliantly. Beams of light shot toward Shirone, converging into a radiant white sphere that enveloped the entire altar.

“Ahhhhh!”

Shirone shuddered with an overwhelming sense of deprivation. It felt almost identical to the moment he first unlocked the Immortal Function.

“Oh... ohhh!”

The natives exclaimed in amazement as they looked at Shirone, who was engulfed in light.

Shirone’s body floated up to the ceiling.

His eyes trembled, unfocused, as though seeing something far beyond this realm.

The Maze, having absorbed an infinite amount of his mental energy, began transmitting information back to him.

It was as if the eight orbs had reached their full potential, revealing something only they could unlock.

The natives shouted fervently.

“Ra! Anke! Ra!”

The room filled with blinding light, an explosion of radiance so intense happened that moment.

The natives turned away, shielding their eyes.

When the light faded, Shirone found himself back on the altar, gasping for breath.

“Hah... hah!”

He couldn’t make sense of anything. Where was he? What had he just witnessed?

Was it real or an illusion? What was Miro’s purpose in showing me that? And how does this connect to the Immortal Function?

As questions flooded his mind, Shirone noticed the natives.

They had all fallen to one knee, bowing with their heads lowered in reverence.

“W-What’s going on?”

The white-tattooed man raised his gaze to Shirone, his voice filled with awe.

“Convey the will of Ra, messenger of God.”

Chapter 169: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (1)

Amy's group, having sent Shirone to the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, arrived at the eastern altar. When Jiese presented the transit pass, the native opened the stone gate.

Jiese translated for the group, explaining that the railcar had arrived.

While Amy's party nodded in acknowledgment, Canis and Arin appeared uninterested.

Thanks to Arin's telepathic abilities—a subset of her mental sensory skills—she had already understood what the native had said.

The underground area wasn't deep, as it was built primarily for operating the rail system.

The tracks, laid on earth covered in volcanic ash, stretched forward, where a native stood near the waiting railcar, chewing gum and welcoming them.

Though his expression was mild, his piercing eyes bore the distinct intensity characteristic of the Kergo people—so alien it seemed as if they belonged to another person.

Jiese also felt a chill but approached with the professional demeanor of a seasoned negotiator.

Smiling, he extended his hand for a handshake, which the native accepted.

"The Loop manager has changed. I'm Jiese, the new liaison."

"Jiese? You don't seem like the type for this work."

Kergo natives had an uncanny ability to read personalities. Smuggling Loop was a serious crime, sometimes punishable by death. Yet Jiese appeared too soft to be involved in such a high-risk operation.

“Where’s Falcoa? He always came to collect things himself.”

“Ah, he’s dead.”

“Dead? Really?”

The native mimed a slicing motion across his throat, and Jiese nodded.

The native’s expression showed disbelief. Falcoa had been a strong man, someone whose nature aligned with the Kergo temperament. That this unassuming newcomer had taken his place was hard to accept.

“You have the transit pass, right?”

“Of course. Here, take a look.”

The native’s smile vanished as he snatched the pass from Jiese’s hand.

Amy’s group instinctively tensed. They had assumed the pass would suffice, but the native’s wariness was more intense than expected.

Moreover, their group wasn’t here to purchase Loop.

Falcoa was dead, and no more Loop transactions would take place. If the native discovered this, the consequences would be dire.

Fortunately, the transit pass was genuine.

Confronted with authentic documentation, the native’s suspicion subsided.

He guided the group to the railcar.

It was large enough to fit six people comfortably. A seesaw-like lever was installed to propel the railcar forward.

The native grasped the lever and began moving the car.

Rian offered to assist. However, the native glared at him, forcing Rian to sheepishly step back.

The strength the native used to push the car was impressive, but the journey to Mount Toa was over 20 kilometers. It was evident that exerting such effort the entire way would lead to exhaustion.

As the tracks sloped downward, the railcar picked up speed.

The air in their stomachs seemed to plummet, creating a thrilling sensation.

As the incline eased, the track leveled out, but the speed didn't slow down. The railroad was designed to counteract gravity by adjusting the incline slightly.

Surely this principle would allow us to reach the Autonomous Zone faster than a horse-drawn carriage.

"This thing's insanely fast!"

"Yeah, better hold on tight."

The railcar rattled violently. At this speed, a derailment would be fatal.

Amy's group cautiously crouched down, and the native muttered something under his breath, his lips curling slightly.

Though the noise drowned out his words, it was clear his remarks weren't complimentary.

As the railcar rounded a curve, the group felt it tilt to one side. Though the bend wasn't particularly sharp, the speed made it feel precarious.

Arin clung to the edge of the railcar with one hand and pulled at Canis's collar with the other. When the track straightened out, she turned to Jiese.

"How much farther?"

"I'm not sure. Probably another 20 minutes. It's my first time here too."

"But you must've heard something about this route?"

"Not at all. Like I said earlier, this route was exclusively used by Falcoa. It's so secretive that even mid-level operatives in the organization didn't know much about it."

Arin estimated the remaining time and realized she needed to brief the group on her abilities before they reached Mount Toa.

Her telepathic magic operated on a fine line between eavesdropping and extracting confessions.

She could infiltrate someone's thoughts entirely, though this came with the risk of being detected.

The moment her abilities were revealed, the target would become wary, reducing the effectiveness of her magic.

For this reason, Arin usually opted for subtlety, sending out faint mental waves to glean surface thoughts without the subject noticing.

She extended her Spirit Zone, embedding it into the native's shadow, then branched out five additional tendrils to connect with everyone in the group except Jiese.

Arin, having finished her preparations, asked the native guide.

"How much longer from here?"

Hearing Kergo language, the native turned to look at Arin. If they had been face-to-face, the difference in lip movements and pronunciation might have been noticeable, but Arin was not one to make such mistakes. The noise of the railcar and its rapid speed also contributed to scattering focus.

"About 10 minutes. But we'll need to go farther from there. The autonomous zone has steep slopes, so the railcar can't take us that far."

Amy's group was startled when the native language was translated. However, no one showed it on their faces; they were not naive enough to let their emotions surface.

From listening to Jiese's translation, they realized his skill wasn't particularly exceptional. Perhaps it was Arin's telepathic abilities that stood out instead.

Arin, was that you?

Amy pointed out Arin because the manifestation of the Crimson Eye had occurred involuntarily just moments ago. Expressing the feeling of Spirit Zone's penetration was akin to sensing a gentle breeze—barely perceptible.

If it hadn't been for photographic memory, their thoughts might have been overheard without even realizing it.

Yes, I linked the mental channel.

Don't tell me you're reading my mind?

The thought of Arin being able to read even the most private of inner thoughts was horrifying.

Thankfully, Arin shook his head.

For a master of mental magic, dominating a senior-year student's level would be easy, but even then, photographic memories would still be detectable.

One of the reasons Arin found Amy challenging was that she was the owner of the Crimson Eye.

You don't need to worry. It's like a kind of tunnel. In the field of mental magic, human consciousness is categorized into 12 levels of depth. This corresponds to the 11th layer, the surface psyche. Only thoughts filtered through the final stage are conveyed, so I can't know your innermost thoughts.

Then what's the 12th layer?

That's the realm of reason, higher than the surface. Things like forced smiles or pretense fall into that category.

Anyway, if you resist strongly, the channel will break. Of course, if you don't like it, I'll disconnect it myself.

No, if it only reads the surface psyche, that's an incredibly convenient ability. Let's keep it this way.

Thanks. I've excluded Jiese. Right now, I've blocked the transmission channels of everyone else. I'll open them now, but don't let it show.

As Arin opened the transmission channel, the thoughts of Rian and Tess flowed in.

...I keep saying I want to talk! Why can't I say anything...!

Oh? I can hear now.

Me too. Tess, can you hear my voice?

Yeah, I can hear it. Wow, this is amazing.

Amy realized how convenient Arin's ability was. They might all be looking in different directions, but countless conversations were happening simultaneously within the mental channel.

It was also fascinating to experience magic they hadn't encountered at the academy.

Dark magic was unconventional. Despite its versatility, it had a fatal weakness.

Darkness was vulnerable to light.

Moreover, mental magic was tricky to use against someone with stronger willpower.

However, things were different at the Arcane level. Both Canis and Arin were direct disciples of Arcane, who had ascended to archmage status in dark magic.

‘Impressive. This is incredibly useful. Oops!’

Amy glanced at Arin cautiously. Her emotional excitement had inadvertently surfaced to the conscious level.

Arin responded with a smile. Even her calculating thoughts made him happy.

People’s minds leaned far more toward desire and selfishness than what appeared on the surface.

To Arin, who had lived his life reading such emotions, a benevolent undercurrent of thought was nothing significant.

In any case, telepathic magic would prove immensely effective in emergencies or even during battle. The addition of Canis and Arin made their group feel even more secure.

Haha! This is so much fun! Amy, doesn’t that native annoy you? I saw him sneak a glance at my cleavage earlier!

Did he? I thought he seemed dismissive of us.

I’m getting hungry. Do you think there’ll be food when we arrive?

The mental channel became filled with chatter, complaints, and gossip.

Unfamiliar with magic, Rian and Tess tried squeezing out unnecessary thoughts just to use the channel somehow.

These weren’t thoughts in the strictest sense—proof of how the environment governed the mind.

This noise is driving me crazy. Arin, lower the volume or just shut it off.

At Canis’s command, the voices on the mental channel became quieter, like whispers in the ear. Without concentration, it was hard to hear, and the chatter gradually subsided.

Tess, who had been enjoying the conversation, protested.

What's this? Why'd you lower the volume? I can barely hear. Turn it back up.

Unless it's strategic talk, don't use the mental channel. Do you think this is some girls' gossip room? Besides, this is Arin's ability. Who are you to tell him to adjust it?

Tess clicked his tongue but didn't let his composure slip, suggesting he still maintained his focus.

As the chatter subsided, Arin explained why he had demonstrated his ability.

As you know, it's called telepathic magic. I didn't include Jiese. Since he's an outsider, I didn't want my ability to be exposed, and even if he's trustworthy, any reaction to my ability could reveal it to the enemy.

Since Jiese could understand the natives' language, things could proceed quietly as long as no one drew attention to it. Still, this is seriously convenient.

Hmph, consider it one of the perks of the alliance. I'm not sure if Shirone passed the trial yet, but if we form a party, using Arin's ability will be essential.

Though Canis's pride in his partner annoyed her, Amy couldn't deny how impressive the ability was.

And one more thing. Arin had another reason for using telepathy, something we haven't disclosed yet.

Something undisclosed? What's that supposed to mean?

Amy's eyes sharpened. While Shirone's success in the trial was still uncertain, introducing new variables to their temporary alliance wasn't a welcome development.

It's nothing major. We didn't hide it on purpose; we just didn't think it necessary to mention. Anyway, here's the thing. There's another reason Arin and I aimed to pass the trial. Contrary to your expectations, the Kergo natives aren't friendly to outsiders. They're actually hostile.

This was no surprise; no one expected them to be welcomed with applause.

Still, there didn't seem to be any reason for hostility, either.

The autonomous government and the Kergo tribe had chosen a symbiotic relationship, and there were quite a few natives influenced by civilization at the ruins.

Their hostility toward outsiders stems from a mistake made by the Galliant government. A hundred years ago, when they arrived on the island, they promised significant rewards. The natives, realizing they couldn't resist the tides of time, negotiated. This led to the start of the tourism business. Did you know the native autonomous zones were initially open to outsiders? But now, all exchanges have been cut off.

Hmm, I see. In a way, it makes sense. When my father first entered a colony, there was significant pushback. I think it's inevitable.

There's some truth to that. But the Galliant government went way too far—so far that it became excessive.

Chapter 170: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (2)

What exactly happened?

The Galliant government, flush with profits from the tourism business, became greedier. They came up with a new venture: human tourism.

A heavy silence settled over the mental channel.

The term “human tourism” led everyone to the same conclusion.

Especially Tess, whose understanding went beyond mere guesses. With her background in political science, she was grasping the gravity of what had transpired between the Galliant government and the Kergo people.

The worst choice humanity could make.

Exactly. The Galliant government didn't just treat Kergo ruins and culture as commodities; they turned the Kergo people themselves into tourism attractions. Of course, this didn't surface until much later. Initially, they had natives stand along the paths for viewing from passing carriages. Then greed took over. It escalated to human hunting. Mercenaries captured boys and girls, selling them at exorbitant prices to the nobility.

It's a miracle a war didn't break out.

The fate of those lagging behind in civilization. Not that Kergo lacked military strength—they were at least on par with the Galliant government. But politically, they didn't stand a chance. Children were being taken, and while it was clear that the Galliant government was responsible, there was no evidence. They likely spent a fortune erasing those traces, but the human hunting was so rampant that it remained profitable. The Kergo were helpless. To fight back

based on suspicions alone would have left the natives relying on tourism revenue destitute in an instant. Ultimately, they had no choice but to compromise. They agreed to open the ruins in exchange for sealing off the autonomous zone. That's how they shut their doors, and it's why things are the way they are today.

Amy could deeply empathize with the plight of the Kergo, forced to open their ruins despite knowing their children were being sold to nobility.

But no matter their perspective, the situation had turned dangerous—that alone mattered.

This was also why Canis had raised the topic.

But that's not the main point. Even among the natives, there are villains—those who enable the trafficking of loops. The natives in the autonomous zone won't see us in a favorable light. While physical conflict is unlikely, we can't afford to let our guard down.

Doesn't that make Shirone unsafe too?

No, that's unlikely. While the primary reason Kergo opened the ruins is monetary, it's not the only one. The significance of the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice to them is extraordinary. Kergo has been waiting for someone for a long time.

Waiting for whom?

Who knows? An angel... maybe?

An angel?

Amy asked again, but Canis didn't respond.

Arin, having checked the time, announced on the mental channel.

Sorry. I want to conserve mental energy, so I'll be closing the channel. Even if we reconnect later, you won't be caught off guard anymore.

Telepathy, being a form of magic, consumed mental energy. The method of exchanging real-time information through the channel drained stamina continuously, much like a firewall.

When the mental channel closed, Amy looked ahead. With her hearing restored, the screeching sound of the rails filled her ears.

The railcar disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel.

The destination was an underground city.

Though lacking aesthetic grandeur, the network of ant-nest-like tunnels and expanded plazas at their intersections showcased remarkable achievements in coexistence with nature.

Amy, momentarily assuming the role of a tourist, looked around. But her initial excitement quickly gave way to dismay as her eyes betrayed her shock.

The lives of the Kergo people were starkly at odds with their surroundings. Everyone was gaunt and starving. This was far worse than what she had imagined upon hearing they were hostile to outsiders.

Elderly men, resembling war refugees, shuffled along the tunnels. Those who couldn't walk leaned against earthen walls, cradling their grandchildren with closed eyes.

It was as though she could hear the silent screams of despair emanating from this bleak landscape. This was an ant nest, and they were the ants.

Elderly men burdened with heavy loads pushed forward, defying the impossible, while hunched grandmothers wove baskets from tree bark in shadowy corners.

"Is this really the Kergo Autonomous Zone?"

No one answered Amy's question. The notion that this tribe owned the expensive real estate of the ruins was completely off the mark.

Canis gripped Arin's trembling shoulders with an unspoken fury. Her shoulders trembled too, recalling memories of life in Radum, a place infamous as a hellish city.

Both of them knew that starvation was the most excruciating pain imaginable. These people were, therefore, the most tormented souls in the world.

"Hey, this way!"

The native who had been driving the railcar gestured for them to follow, his expression clearly showing he didn't want outsiders seeing this scene.

After winding through sharp turns like a raging current, they arrived at a blocked tunnel. A single torch on the wall illuminated the surroundings.

Amy glanced back at the path they had taken. They had made such a long detour that any commotion here would likely go unnoticed outside.

The native led them to a man standing ahead.

The man stood with arms crossed and lips sealed tightly. His appearance, which perfectly matched the stereotype, seemed to assert that he was a true Kergo.

His upper body muscles were more developed than Rian's, his face bore dark tattoos, and he wore earrings made from the fangs of predators.

When Jiese spoke to him, he introduced himself as Mahatu.

The name jogged Amy's memory of hearing about a warrior's lineage, where Mahatu's name had been mentioned.

Mahatu, whose name meant "warrior", was a warrior in reality too.

"Uh, so this man's name is Mahatu. He raises loops and delivers them to the shrine."

Amy guessed that the black tattoos represented those who handled loops. If white symbolized those who conducted rituals, then black likely indicated those who prepared for them.

Since Arin hadn't attempted telepathy, Amy's group had to wait for Jiese to translate.

Tess believed this was the right call. Judging from Mahatu's temperament, he was no ordinary warrior. If he had Schema's sensory capabilities, there was a risk he might detect telepathy.

As they pondered this, they suddenly began to understand Mahatu's words.

When Amy turned around, Arin was smiling.

So, you ended up trying it? That guy seems pretty strong.

You've got more guts than I thought.

No, I didn't cast telepathy on Mahatu.

Huh? Then how is the translation happening?

Arin subtly pointed to Jiese.

Only then did Amy realize—Arin had cast telepathy on Jiese, who was conversing with Mahatu.

If the goal was simply to eavesdrop on the surface psyche's language, there was no need to directly connect with the speaker. This was another powerful aspect of Arin's ability.

"Falcoa is dead?"

"Yes. The Freeman Organization won't be purchasing loops anymore. They plan to leave the island soon."

Jiese was straightforward. Having met the leader, there was no way to hide the truth.

As expected, Mahatu's expression darkened. He glared at Amy's group with sharp eyes before asking, his voice tense.

"Then who are they?"

"Oh, they're not here to buy Loops. They came here for other business."

"Business? Don't you know that outsiders can't enter this place unless it's for Loop transactions?"

"Well, yes, but we still had to inform you about canceling the deal. Besides, we even have a pass—whoa!"

Mahatu shoved Jiese aside and walked forward. His clenched jaw twitched, and his eyes seemed ready to ignite with fury. Scanning the group, his gaze settled on Amy—not because he thought she was the leader but because she alone met his fiery stare with defiance.

"Sent by the Freeman Organization? Then are you part of the group?"

Jiese rushed over to translate, demonstrating an exceptional sense of duty despite the tense situation.

Amy, who had already understood via Arin's telepathy, delayed her response deliberately to avoid revealing the

truth.

“No. But we are on good terms with the Freemans.”

“How good? Enough to stake your life on it?”

“Of course. We've actually done so before.”

The lie came easily. It wasn't entirely false—they had risked their lives fighting alongside the Freemans before.

“In that case, you can settle the outstanding balance.”

“Balance? What balance?”

“Falcoa recently took 8 kilograms of Loops, paying only the deposit. He hasn't settled the rest.”

Recalling Falcoa's boastful nature, Amy sneered. He had flaunted his wealth only to leave unpaid debts.

Still, hearing there was unpaid money piqued her interest.

“We might risk our lives, but lending money? Not a chance.

Anyway, how much is owed?”

“Ten thousand gold.”

“What? Ten thousand!?”

Amy's eyes widened in shock. Even Jiese, who was translating, looked confused, as though he had misheard.

However, Arin's telepathy confirmed the amount: ten thousand gold.

For what Amy had assumed to be merely 8 kilograms of tree roots, the price seemed exorbitant. And since a deposit had been paid, the total value was even higher.

She suddenly felt suspicious.

Falcoa must have been buying Loops for years, paying significant sums. So why were the Kergo people living in such poverty?

Just 8 kilograms of Loops could feed the people in the square for a year. The situation defied common sense.

Jiese tried to reason with Mahatu.

“We'll report the outstanding balance to the organization when we return. They'll decide whether to return the Loops or settle the debt.”

Uncertain, Jiese looked to his companions for agreement.

Tess nodded. Given the Freeman group's reputation for valuing honor, they would surely pay the debt.

Bolstered by her support, Jiese declared confidently:

"There, it's settled. We'll handle the balance later. For now, let us stay here."

"I don't understand. Then what's your purpose here?"

Amy answered.

"We're waiting for a friend. He entered the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. He should be coming here soon."

Her tone was sharper than before. Witnessing Mahatu's indifference to his starving people, despite the immense wealth from loop sales, she saw him as no better than Falcoa.

"The Room of Achievement and Sacrifice?"

Mahatu scrutinized the group closely, not for their appearance but their demeanor. He smirked mockingly.

"Dream big. Just give up and go back. Your friend is probably waiting for you outside."

"Hah! And how would you know?"

"Isn't it obvious? That altar wasn't built to summon brats like you. So many half-wits come to the Kergo ruins—some to buy Loops, others to chase gold. You send your friend into the altar, and now you think showing up here will get you permission? With shallow tricks like that, you'll never pass."

"And what makes you think you're any better? Have you ever considered how many people outside have been poisoned by the Loops you smuggle?"

"Loops are sacred items. It's you who abuse them as drugs. And frankly, I don't care about the foolish problems of outsiders. You people have always been the same—judging and stealing what's ours. But here, things won't go your way."

"We're not leaving until we know whether our friend passed the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice."

“With your skills, there’s no way he passed. Now, tell me the real reason you’re here.”

The native who had driven the railcar interjected.

“Maybe they’re thieves. Here to steal gold.”

The native’s expression had shed all pretense of friendliness. If they weren’t here for Loop trading, then Amy’s group were nothing but despised outsiders, likely nobles, to him.

“That could be it. All the more reason not to let them through.”

“How about we investigate their bodies? If they’ve smuggled in weapons, the villagers could get hurt.”

Though Mahatu detested the idea of touching a woman’s body—it was disgraceful for a warrior—he remained silent. He knew what his companion’s suggestion implied.

Chapter 171: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (3)

Outsiders trampled on Kergo under countless excuses and justifications. Many women lost their purity under the guise of so-called inspections. No matter how much resentment they felt toward their comrades, siding with the outsiders was impossible.

"We'll begin the inspection now. You first—step forward and raise your arms."

Amy stood her ground, rejecting the command with both refusal and wariness.

If the man hadn't been highly skilled, she might have driven her fist into his gut the moment he insulted her. However, his murderous intent was anything but ordinary. If a fight broke out, chaos would ensue, and this was far from the right place to risk it.

"This is going too far."

Rian stepped in front of Amy, shielding her. While Amy was better at assessing the situation, if the man intended to humiliate a woman, it was only right for Riann to step up.

"Even if Falcoa is dead, Freeman's organization still stands. If you treat us like this, you won't get away unscathed."

Rian's strategy of leveraging Freeman's influence was clever, and Amy thought it was a good approach.

But the Kergoans were far more combative than expected.

As if Rian had struck a nerve, Mahatu's face flushed red with rage.

"Is that a challenge? Come at me, then. Kergoans never run away."

Everyone, stand back. Mahatu is focusing his energy.

Arin's voice echoed through their mental channel.

By the time Arin's message ended, everyone could feel it. Even the usually oblivious Rian sensed the overwhelming pressure.

Amy aimed her Spirit Zone at Mahatu. The way his energy surged would determine how the battle unfolded.

Bwoooooon!

A horn blast echoed from the far side of the cave.

Its deafening sound reached deep into the twisting tunnels, making its volume and urgency evident.

As the horn's sound reverberated throughout the cave, Mahatu turned toward the entrance with a startled expression.

His companions' reactions were even more severe. They trembled as if they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Mahatu, that's the Horn of Truth! What in the world...?"

Before the companion could finish, Mahatu leapt into action.

"Damn it! Why is the Horn of Truth sounding? Has a war broken out?"

The Horn of Truth was the highest-level alarm set by the Kergoan tribe. Upon hearing it, all tribe members were required to converge at the sound's source. No one, regardless of status, was exempt, and failure to respond would result in punishment.

When the natives disappeared, Amy and her party were left in confusion.

"What's going on? Something must be happening outside."

"Let's check it out. Staying here could be dangerous."

Amy's group exited the cave and followed the sound to its source.

They arrived at a massive plaza where seven tunnels converged.

The natives were gathering in large numbers, making it difficult to discern what was happening.

The combined noise of murmuring voices drowned out any meaningful communication. Amy tried to use the mental channel, but Arin was just staring at the platform ahead.

“Kneel and give praise! The messenger of the gods has arrived to save us!”

An elder on the platform shouted. Instantly, more than a thousand people dropped to their knees in unison and responded in one voice.

“We welcome the messenger of the gods.”

The crowd sank as if the ground itself was collapsing. The view opened up, revealing Shirone standing before the elder.

Shirone’s eyes scanned the crowd and met Amy’s. Though they had only been apart for two hours, the overwhelming events had made the separation feel far longer. He couldn’t contain the surge of emotion.

“Amy.”

The people chanting for the messenger fell silent. A ripple of quiet spread outward, and some turned their eyes toward Amy.

Mahatu was among them. Amy felt she would never forget the look of shock and confusion that painted his face.

“Shirone.”

The natives’ attention shifted back to Shirone. Their intense focus made it clear they wouldn’t miss a single word from his mouth.

Shirone’s expression twisted into distress.

“Amy, what’s wrong with these people? I can’t understand a word they’re saying.”

Looking at Shirone, who seemed ready to cry, Amy scratched her brow and thought to herself.

How should I know?

As Shirone took a step forward, the crowd parted like a bamboo stalk splitting. Their synchronized, reverent movements suggested a deep tension.

Shirone’s face was haggard. After two hours of exposure to an incomprehensible language, his exhaustion was understandable.

Usually, when communication failed, people gave up trying to talk. But the altar's overseers hadn't left Shirone alone for a single moment.

"I thought I was going to lose it. Every time I said anything, they'd start bowing, so I didn't say a word. Why are they acting like this toward me?"

"I don't know. We just got here. Did you pass the test?"

"Well, I think I did, but there's a problem."

"A problem? What kind of problem?"

Explaining what he saw in the Maze of Space-Time would require a long story. But now wasn't the time, nor was the situation favorable.

The elder who had blown the horn approached Shirone.

Mahatu followed closely behind him, his mind racing. If Shirone was truly the messenger of the gods, it meant he had unlocked all eight facets of the Maze of Space-Time. Yet contrary to Mahatu's expectations, the supposed divine messenger was a soft-looking boy, leaving him stunned.

"Absolute obedience to the messenger of the gods."

This was a phrase Mahatu had heard so many times as a child that it had become ingrained in him.

Unlike the religious beliefs of outsiders, Kergoans' faith was of a different nature. Just as subjects obey their king, the gods for Kergoan were an actual, tangible force.

Mahatu quickened his steps and approached Shirone. If Shirone truly was the messenger of the gods, then Mahatu needed to atone for the offense he had committed against Amy's party before facing the elder.

"Revered messenger of the gods, if I may ask, are these people your companions?"

When Jiese stepped forward to translate, Mahatu raised his hand to stop him.

"No. Someone among them appears to have used a mental-type spell. If they are here, please allow them to facilitate communication with the messenger."

Mahatu had noticed this when Amy raised her voice earlier.

Normally, conversations through an interpreter are simplified and shortened, but he sensed a strange precision in certain parts of their communication, as if the Kergoan language had been fully understood.

Arin's Spirit Zone seeped into Mahatu's shadow.

Shirone, startled by the voice resonating in his mind, quickly grasped what was happening and nodded.

Taking this as a sign that everything was prepared, Mahatu repeated his earlier question.

"Revered messenger of the gods, are these people indeed your companions?"

"Yes, they're my friends."

Mahatu nodded solemnly. While he feared death little, his offense against Shirone's companions had put the fate of his tribe at risk.

Kergo's downfall had not been due to the Loop, internal strife, or volcanic eruptions as officially recorded. Beneath the surface, there was an unknown truth.

The Kergoans had angered an angel.

And the boy standing before them was a descendant of that angel.

The story, passed down for 500 years, had become a deep-rooted fear in the collective unconscious of the Kergoans.

Mahatu's expression shifted from frustration to terror, then settled into a grim resolve. Kneeling so forcefully that it seemed his knees would break, he cried out:

"Forgive me! Please kill me! I have gravely offended your companions!"

"Offended? What offense? You didn't use violence, did you?"

Shirone, wary of their fanatical behavior, immediately lashed out. If they had laid a hand on his friends, he had no intention of forgiving them.

"Oh, it's nothing serious. Just some bickering. You know, the usual things we do."

Amy's response was nearly in code. She acknowledged there had been conflict but hoped to gloss over it, given the

complicated circumstances.

Mahatu looked at Amy with gratitude, relieved that his actions hadn't endangered his tribe. He then yielded his place to the elder.

The elder introduced himself as Hasid, a Kergoan elder, and posed a meaningful question to Shirone.

"Have you come bearing a message from Lord Miro?"

Shirone recalled the scenes he had witnessed in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice. The images had flashed by too quickly, fragmented yet vivid.

When Shirone nodded, Hasid leaned on his staff and turned away.

The natives gathered in the plaza waited for his words.

"At last, the messenger of the gods has descended upon Kergo!"

Shirone's group covered their ears as Hasid's proclamation was met with the deafening roar of the crowd's warrior cries.

The cave filled with noise so intense it seemed as if it would burst through the ceiling.

Amid the jubilant shouts, occasional cries of anguish were heard. Among the crowd, ragged individuals crawled forward, kneeling before Shirone.

"Messenger of the gods, my child is ill. Please heal him."

Through her channel with Mahatu, Arin understood the woman's words. But Shirone lacked the ability to heal a sick child.

An old man crawled forward beside the woman, clasping his hands in desperate prayer.

"Please give us food! My family is starving!"

That marked the beginning. More and more people approached, each with their own desperate pleas.

"Grant me immortality!"

"Please spare my daughter Atore! She has a fiancé!"

"Turn me into a woman!"

Arin not only covered her ears but also shut her eyes. The flood of emotions transmitted through her psychic channel appeared blood-red, like seething lava. She felt her mind would collapse if she absorbed any more of their fervent desires.

“Canis! The voices of their hearts are too loud!”

“Close the channel. You might get hurt.”

Shirone was trapped in the crowd, unable to move a step. Even though Arin had canceled her telepathy, the emotional ripples pressed on his chest endlessly, like a collective hypnosis. The keyword was madness.

Desperate for help, Shirone turned to Hasid and Mahatu. But they only watched their people with sorrowful eyes.

“Silence, all of you!”

A thunderous voice cut through the commotion, bringing instant quiet.

A young man, flanked by two robust warriors, emerged from the northern tunnel. Though not large in stature, his bulging muscles overshadowed even his guards. His hair was long and swept back, and his face bore golden tattoos.

Arin finally opened her eyes.

Through her psychic perception, she felt the emotions of the natives—reverence, but also fear.

They were afraid, as if facing a tyrannical ruler. The man was undoubtedly the chieftain of Kergo.

The man approached Shirone and introduced himself.

“I am Kadum, chieftain of Kergo. From now on, I will escort you.”

Shirone glanced at his friends to gauge their thoughts.

None of them objected. If they were to gain anything from the autonomous zone, meeting Kadum was inevitable.

And this marked the end of Jiese’s role.

Shirone expressed his gratitude with a hint of regret.

“We’ll handle things from here. It might get dangerous.”

Jiese nodded without any sign of offense. His lack of unnecessary pride was one of the reasons Shirone and his

friends trusted him.

As they shook hands, Jiese spoke with concern.

“Be careful. The autonomous zone feels very different from the Kergo I know.”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine. Thanks for translating.”

“I’m glad I could help. When this is over, drop by my house. Yuna and I will have plenty of good food ready.”

Shirone asked Kadum to escort Jiese back to the ruins.

Immediately, many volunteered to take on the task, eager to follow Shirone’s orders. Arin selected a trustworthy escort.

Jiese left the autonomous district, guided by a burly warrior. Kadum led Shirone’s group into the cave.

Even after walking for 20 minutes, there was no destination in sight. If this path led to a dead end, any traveler would have been overwhelmed with despair.

The maze wasn’t just about intricate design. The labyrinth of the autonomous zone was overwhelming in scale.

Chapter 172: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (4)

Fortunately, there was an exit. As the air's quality shifted, they emerged onto a mid-tier step of a terraced altar. Below them stretched a jungle, a sea of green covering Mount Toa.

The vast forest spread out below their vantage point at an altitude of 20 meters, dotted here and there with Kergoan villages.

As they circled to the other side of the altar, a golden palace came into view. This was the residence of the Kergoan chieftain. Inside, a long hall lined with two rows of tables awaited them.

Shirone sat at the head of the table, flanked on the right by Amy, Rian, Tess, Canis, and Arin in that order.

On the left sat Chieftain Kadum and the tribal elders. Elder Hasid, who had blown the horn, was absent. Seated near the lower end of the table was Mahatu, suggesting his rank within the tribe wasn't low.

Traditional Kergoroan music played, and their local cuisine was brought in. Before anyone could taste it, pairs of warriors entered, carrying large chests.

The warriors opened the lids, revealing an astounding treasure of gold coins and jewels piled high.

"What is this?"

"It is a humble gift from Kergo. Please accept it."

The sheer quantity went beyond estimation by counting. It was so abundant it needed to be weighed. Combined, the five chests likely weighed at least a ton.

Amy placed her food back on the table, her expression displeased.

This was not income from the ruins; it was wealth accumulated from smuggling loops. With such riches, the entire tribe could be well-fed for years.

“Shirone, you’re not seriously thinking of accepting this, are you?”

“No. I can’t accept such an enormous sum without understanding the reason behind it. There must be a catch.” When Shirone demanded an explanation, Kadum’s eyes changed.

Most people, when faced with over a ton of gold coins, would at least react with awe. Shirone, however, responded as if the gold were no more than a pile of rocks.

It wasn’t that Shirone was indifferent to material wealth. He simply wasn’t foolish enough to cling to something that wasn’t his.

Kadum, unfazed, clapped his hands, signaling the arrival of a second offering.

He was confident this would leave Shirone with no choice. Individuals with white tattoos on their faces, resembling the man Shirone had seen in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, entered. Shirone surmised they were priests.

As they stepped aside, a group of young, beautiful Kergoan women entered.

The boys, including Shirone, gawked in astonishment. Such a sight was unusual for their age.

The women, barely dressed, danced sensuously as they approached.

From a distance, the dance appeared elegant, but up close, it was outright lascivious. The women’s glazed expressions suggested they were in a trance.

“What do you think? These are the most beautiful priestesses of Kergo, a second offering to the messenger of the gods. We hope you find them to your liking.”

Shirone could feel the heat radiating from the seat beside him. Without even turning his head, he could tell what kind of expression Amy was wearing.

Kadum's gesture had backfired.

Though the priestesses' dance was enchanting, Shirone could only see it as the intoxicated writhing of women under the influence of the loop.

Unmotivated generosity often feels like a threat, and Shirone's mind grew colder as he analyzed Kadum's intentions.

Seeing Shirone's firm reaction, Kadum began to feel uneasy. The mind of an Unlocker was higher than that of ordinary men, but it didn't make them saints. The Immortal Function was a path toward enlightenment, not enlightenment itself. If Shirone had been free of the five desires and seven emotions, he wouldn't have ventured into the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice in the first place. Kadum couldn't discern what Shirone truly wanted.

"I see I have made a mistake. I thought this would bring you joy. In truth, this is my first time welcoming a messenger of the gods, so I merely followed tradition."

Shirone found the explanation even more distasteful. How reckless had previous Unlockers been for such behavior to become a tradition?

"Did they enjoy this sort of thing?"

"According to the records, they didn't dislike it. But please don't misunderstand. There are no ulterior motives; it's simply tradition. Though Kergo is a tribal society, the priests hold great power. Among the priests, the women become priestesses. According to our laws, priestesses must be beautiful and remain pure for life, except for one occasion: to bear the child of an angel. They are prepared to offer everything to you, a descendant of the angels."

"If I were to accept these women, what would be expected of me?"

No leader would bear such losses without expecting something in return. Traditions often arise out of necessity. The amount of gold could feed the entire tribe, and the women, dancing to gain Shirone's favor, represented the

future mothers of Kergo's population. Essentially, Kadum was offering the tribe's wealth and future to Shirone.

"Kergoans are the children of the great Ra. And you, a descendant of the angels, are the only one who can connect our tribe to the gods. Please deliver our faith to the divine."

"By gods, do you mean Anke Ra?"

"Anke, Ra—the Eternal Ra. He has existed since the beginning of time, created us, and continues to watch over us with his great power."

Stripped of its religious veneer, it was a simple transaction. Take the gold and women, and in return, relay the tribe's intentions to the gods. While the method remained unclear, it was evidently connected to the Immortal Function.

A debate ensued in the mental channel about whether to accept.

Tess was firmly against it. The money was one thing, but the idea of Shirone being with another woman while Amy was there was unthinkable.

But contrary to expectations, Amy supported accepting the offering, as did Shirone.

Shirone! How could you? I trusted you, even if men are beasts, but you...

Calm down. Shirone must have his reasons. Even Amy agreed, didn't she?

Don't be ridiculous, Rian! You're just siding with him because you're a man too! I absolutely oppose this. Amy, say something. Doesn't this make you angry?

Of course, it does. It's disgusting to throw a feast while their people starve. But Shirone can control that. Right now, the priority is gathering information, so let's agree for now.

While Shirone's party exchanged thoughts, Elder Hasid, the one who had blown the horn, entered. His eyes burned with anger as he looked at the elders who were engrossed in food and entertainment.

Mahatu, sensing the mood, stood to pay his respects.

"You've arrived, Elder."

“Disgraceful. What kind of madness is this?”

The music stopped, and the dancing girls collapsed from exhaustion.

Using his staff like a third leg, Hasid approached Shirone.

Kadum, in a commanding tone, moved to block him.

“What are you doing, Father? Ruining a sacred feast like this?”

“A sacred feast? Outside, our people are starving to death daily. If we waste any more money on meaningless things, the tribe will truly collapse!”

“It’s surprising to hear such outrageous words from a former chieftain and elder of noble standing. May I bring up your remarks at the next council meeting?”

“That must not happen. The tribe is filled with hope due to the appearance of the messenger of the gods. But that’s as far as it goes. What the people want is happiness, not the messenger of the gods. Why don’t you see that?”

“I have heard the opinion of a mere elder. But let me remind you, I am the chieftain. Kergo will be resurrected by the grace of the gods! We will not cower in the mountains, watching outsiders’ every move. We will restore the glorious civilization of our past!”

Hasid twitched his beard and clicked his tongue before turning away.

After all, Kadum was the chieftain. Open conflict in front of the elders risked reigniting the civil war from 500 years ago. As the tension eased, the elders discreetly left, and the feast came to an end.

Kadum then led Shirone’s group to the summit of the altar.

The rooftop was expansive, dominated by a 7-meter-tall statue to the north. Under the moonlight, the figure radiated an imposing presence.

Kadum stood before the statue, gazing up at the night sky. Countless stars sparkled above.

But Kadum’s eyes focused on one specific star.

“Do you see that cluster of stars in the northern sky? Connect them into the shape of an eight. Then find the brightest star at the intersection of the two circles they form.”

Shirone’s group, expecting something significant, found themselves receiving a lecture on constellations. Though unenthusiastic, they spent time locating the star Kadum indicated.

What Kadum said next shocked them.

“That star is the homeland of Kergo.”

“What? Homeland?”

To Shirone, a homeland was the place where one was born—a nostalgic locale cherished by city-bound youths. It was not, by any stretch, a distant point in the night sky.

“The people of Kergo know that the god who created us resides there. We are born and die on this earth, but our souls ascend to that star. It is the celestial kingdom. Thus, we call that star ‘Heaven’.”

Shirone was perplexed.

Heaven was a conceptual place, not a physical destination described as if it were a tourist attraction.

“I don’t understand. Why do you call that star Heaven?”

“Shirone, you do not believe in the gods, do you?”

Shirone neither believed nor disbelieved in gods.

A mage’s mindset refrains from drawing conclusions about things that cannot be analyzed.

To Shirone, gods were beings whose existence was uncertain.

“The Kergo creation story speaks of this. It is a myth predating history. In the beginning, there were giants, and humanity was born from their blood and flesh. The first human, Garok, lived for 782 years. His child, Deris, lived 982 years, and his son, Tessus, lived 1,320 years.”

The creation myth of Ra was no different from other religious myths.

Some scholars argue that the lifespans in such stories don't represent literal years but rather the duration of a family's rule.

For example, in a lineage where monarchs are named Elzaine I, II, and so on, a prosperous dynasty of 13 generations might lead myths to speak of a single Elzaine who lived 1,000 years.

It was a plausible theory.

Even in the Kingdom of Tormia, royal names were inherited over generations. The current king was Adolf XII.

Kadum, as if reciting from memory, listed the lifespans of figures Shirone had never heard of.

After covering the mythical era, Kadum transitioned to historical times.

"Two thousand years ago, the pioneer Hannes established civilization here. From then on, we have lived under Ra's protection. You might have wondered why we do not restore the ruins of Kergo buried under volcanic ash."

Shirone recalled the impenetrable barrier cutting through the middle layer of the ruins—thick enough that even Amy's sniper mode couldn't pierce it.

"There are countless ancient ruins across the world, and this place is just one of them. But there's a hidden truth about ruins that ordinary people don't know. Long ago, our ancestors seemed to travel freely to and from Heaven. The underground structures of the ruins are proof of that."

"What exactly is down there?"

By now, Shirone couldn't resist asking.

Kadum stared deeply into Shirone's curious eyes and spoke.

"Underground in the ruins, there is a gate that leads to Heaven."

Shirone's head buzzed as if struck by a hammer. Heaven?

Could he possibly mean the star in the northern sky?

That place was in space.

A distance utterly unreachable by human capabilities.

"Are you saying there's a way to reach the gods?"

“Yes. That is correct.”

A thought crossed Shirone’s mind. Is Kadum insane? Or is he telling the truth?

Chapter 173: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (5)

The expressions on Shirone's friends' faces were anything but ordinary. The only ones unaffected were Canis and Arin. "This is why the Kergo Autonomous Zone cannot be opened. The door beneath the ruins can only be unlocked by someone who has inherited the power of the angels. That is why we have been waiting for you."

A door to Heaven. It wasn't an absurd claim. Shirone had experienced the Immortal Function and reached the Maze of Space-Time.

However, this was on a different scale. A world created by a mage was entirely different from Heaven. Kadum wasn't merely talking about a mythical realm—he was claiming access to the dwelling of gods.

"Long ago, angels served as intermediaries between gods and humans. They transcended time and space to convey the will of the gods. Unlockers are believed to inherit the power of angels. Please, help restore the glory of Kergo. For that, we are prepared to make any sacrifice."

Shirone couldn't respond. To meet a god? What could he possibly do upon reaching the stars in the sky?

"Kergo has endured countless crises over the years. Volcanic eruptions, civil wars, and humiliation at the hands of outsiders have brought the tribe to the brink of extinction. The people are starving. But they believe the descendant of the angels will restore Kergo."

Amy pointed a finger and questioned sharply.

"Why don't you buy food? Depending on faith in such desperate circumstances is like gambling with lives. We know how much profit you make smuggling loops."

“Kergo’s situation is far worse than you think. The revenue we split with the Galliant government from the ruins is not enough to feed 20,000 people. Even by selling loops, we risk being overrun by outsiders as we were 100 years ago. As chieftain, I have hoarded wealth, praying for divine blessings to save us.”

“Even so, offering money and women? Did you think that would persuade the messenger of the gods?”

“I cannot say. I was merely following records of past attempts. According to Kergo’s history, one messenger demanded 100 million gold as the price for ascending to Heaven.”

Shirone was stunned to hear that someone had already gone to Heaven. And to demand 100 million gold—something only someone who valued money more than life could say.

Or perhaps it was the audacity of someone so powerful that even going to Heaven didn’t frighten them.

“What happened to that person? Did they return safely?”

“Of course. Two hundred years ago, a messenger of the gods departed for Heaven with his companions. He returned with the will of the great Ra.”

“How did he return? Did he come back through the entrance?”

“That is impossible. As you might suspect, the door to Heaven operates on the Immortal Function. The existence of the door enables the Immortal Function. But there is no medium in Heaven to power the Immortal Function for a return trip. They must have used another method.”

“What method?”

“We don’t know. Records only state that their return was not a profitable endeavor.”

Silence fell.

For someone capable of crossing into the unknown realm of the gods to describe it as “not profitable” suggested that returning on one’s own was impossible.

Canis's earlier words now made sense. Being unable to return wasn't just a problem—it was worse than death. This wasn't about boarding a ship to a distant land. It was about transcending space and time to reach a star somewhere far beyond.

"I am being honest with you. I know this is dangerous. But this is a matter of life and death for our tribe. If you help Kergo, we will do anything you ask. If you desire gold, it is yours. If you desire Kergoan women..."

"No. I don't want anything. I can't accept any rewards."

Shirone had agreed during the feast to hear them out, but now the situation had changed.

Even for vast wealth, his decision wouldn't change. Yet the intense curiosity rivaling the fear of death lingered.

After considering his best response, Shirone spoke without consulting his friends.

"I'll think about it."

Kadum remained alone at the altar, gazing at the stars.

The servile demeanor he had shown to Shirone's group was gone. Standing tall as the ruler of Mount Toa, he turned when he sensed someone's presence.

An elderly man coughed as he approached from the altar entrance. It was Elder Hasid.

"Are you truly going to send them?"

Kadum's expression twisted at the deference.

"Father, there's no need to speak to me like that."

"Father? You know my son no longer exists in this world."

It was a strange dynamic, with each addressing the other as "father". Of course, it was stranger still for the elderly Hasid to call the robust Kadum "father".

Kadum's true nature emerged, his sharp gaze betraying the wisdom of over 200 years of life.

"Hmph, are you still misunderstanding? Kadum's death was an accident. I didn't kill him."

"Of course, you'd say that. But if my son hadn't died, you—a man named Kang—wouldn't have borrowed Kadum's name

to become chieftain again.”

Kadum turned fully to Hasid.

“What is it you want to say?”

“Father, they will fail. Even if that boy is the messenger of the gods, he will not bring back what our tribe desires.”

“Even so, it doesn’t matter. The wealth will remain here regardless. If they bring back what they want, I’ll pay any price. If they fail, they’ll be disposed of. Everything is for Kergo.”

“Is it really? Two hundred years ago, you gained 300 years of life through a messenger of the gods. That had nothing to do with Kergo, did it?”

Hasid glared at Kadum with contempt.

While Hasid was frail and struggling to walk, Kadum’s youthful physique, with its firm muscles, radiated vitality. After gaining 300 years of life, Kadum had become reckless. He sought Unlockers across the world, spending vast sums of money. When tribal resources dwindled, he even sold loops to outsiders.

Part of Hasid understood.

Immortality. Eternal youth. What wouldn’t one sacrifice for such things?

“Isn’t it enough by now? Since that day, countless Unlockers have ventured forth, yet none have returned. Obsessing over eternal life erodes one’s humanity. Lord Miro realized this long ago and warned us.”

“Silence! No one can lead this tribe as strongly as I can. Have you forgotten how miserable Kergo was under your leadership? You’re nothing but a failed ruler. Kergo needs me. I *am* Kergo!”

As Kadum roared at the sky, Hasid could only watch in silence.

Kadum was strong. He possessed the cunning of over two centuries and unparalleled physical might. Perhaps he would indeed restore Kergo.

But perhaps he would also be the last, and with him, Kergo would vanish from the world forever.

Shirone and his party headed to their lodging.

The northwest cave stretching from the plaza was intricate, but to Shirone, who had navigated Istas countless times, it was just an area with annoying forks in the path.

The lodging was a large room, unexpectedly equipped with beds and even wardrobes beside them.

This was a space designated for outsiders. How many people had stayed here before? Did they successfully journey to Heaven? Or had they vanished from the world entirely?

Kadum's words were so shocking that the group remained silent even after reaching their lodging.

After unpacking and arranging their belongings in the wardrobes, they turned to Canis. Discussions of the messenger of the gods, Heaven, and the state of Kergo were over. It was time for him to reveal what he knew.

"I've kept my promise. Now explain."

"I meant what I said. You all heard it."

Amy sat beside Shirone, fixing Canis with a sharp glare.

"Heaven, really? Are you telling me such a place actually exists? How long have you known about this?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely certain myself. And you might get a clearer answer by asking Shirone. Hasid asked him directly, didn't he? What did you see in the Maze of Space-Time?"

Amy turned to Shirone.

"That's right. Shirone, tell us. What did you see?"

"Not what, but *where*."

Shirone nodded, agreeing with Canis's observation, and began to explain.

"Yes, it was a place."

There was a sea, and he saw a forest. At the center of a city surrounded by circular walls stood a towering spire.

Shirone had been drawn into the light at the top of the spire. When he came to his senses, he was back at the altar.

“That’s all I saw. If that place is Heaven, then Kadum’s story isn’t entirely far-fetched. That’s why I wanted to hear what you know, Canis. How much do you truly understand?”

Harvest, who had been standing guard at the door, turned to Canis. Normally brash and vulgar, Harvest remained uncharacteristically silent.

“My master, Arcane... I think he might have been to Heaven once.”

Shirone sat up from the bed.

Arcane had been to Heaven. After being betrayed by Alpheas, Arcane had secluded himself in a dungeon for 50 years, meaning this event must have occurred long before then.

“Are you saying Arcane came to the Kergo ruins?”

“No. It must have been another location. According to Kadum, ancient ruins across the world seem to connect to Heaven in some way. Though most are under strict national control, it seems they weren’t even known to exist 80 years ago. In that sense, the Kergo ruins are unique.”

Eighty years ago, Arcane would have been just 60 years old. While not young by human standards, considering his incredible strength at 149 years of age, his magical prowess at the time would likely have been in its prime.

“What’s in Heaven? What kind of place is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Shirone narrowed his eyes.

That answer didn’t add up. If Arcane had experienced Heaven, Canis should have known about it—especially since Harvest carried Arcane’s legacy.

Harvest stepped in to clarify.

“What Canis says is true. Arcane erased his memories of Heaven. All we know is that he went there.”

“Erased his own memories?”

“Yes. Completely wiped them. That’s why we don’t know what he did there. I think he didn’t want the world to know anything about Heaven.”

Knowing Arcane’s character, Shirone found this hard to believe. What kind of secret could be so significant that a mage of Arcane’s caliber—recognized worldwide as a 3rd-class archmage—would erase his memories to keep it hidden?

“Canis, what is Heaven? Is it truly where gods reside?”

“There’s nothing I can say for certain. That’s why I need to go. I have to see it with my own eyes. So take me there.”

“No. I’ve changed my mind. You were right—it’s too dangerous. It’s not a place to visit out of curiosity.”

“I don’t care what you think. The deal I proposed was for you to take me and Arin there. No matter what happens, we’re going to Heaven.”

“Honestly, I don’t want to send you either. Once you enter, you can’t come back through the original door, remember? And if I don’t go with you, they won’t let you use the gate to Heaven. The chieftain looked desperate.”

Chapter 174: 1. Kergo Autonomous Zone (6)

Shirone's point was valid. Judging by the difficulty of the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, it was clear that the Kergoans weren't looking for just anyone.

Only those capable of proving their power in the Maze of Space-Time or unlocking all eight facets simultaneously could qualify. Without that level of skill, not only was entry to the gate of Heaven impossible, but even access to the Autonomous Zone would be denied.

Canis, I think it's time to bring it up. If Shirone doesn't go, neither will we.

Surprising, isn't it? I didn't expect him to be this cautious. If you look at it positively, it could be his insight. He seems to be acting on an instinct born from the information he's gathered. Either way, it's time to proceed.

After considering Harvest's input, Canis turned to the group. Extending his hand, he cautiously spoke.

"What if I told you... that I have a way to come back from there?"

Goffin's Gate (1)

The atmosphere in the room felt charged as though electricity crackled through it, and a glimmer of light flashed in the eyes of Shirone's group. A new phase had begun.

The reason Shirone perceived Heaven as perilous was the extraordinarily slim chance of returning. However, if there was an escape route, the situation would be entirely different.

"Explain in detail. What do you mean by a way to come back?"

“As you know, we were stripped of the inheritance our master left us by the Magic Association. We were left penniless, practically cast out onto the streets. But we didn’t want to rely on Alpheas for help. While brainstorming whatever we could do, Harvey recalled something from long ago. Back when you were still attending school, Arin and I traveled together. We discovered a secret place that Archmage Viltor Arcane was adamant about keeping hidden. Because he erased the memory, not even the Magic Association could locate it.”

“Are you saying there was a way to return from there?”

“No, it’s much more than that. I’ll show you directly.”

Arin pulled a small cubic box from her robes.

The surface was engraved with intricate patterns, both embossed and recessed. Its color leaned towards black, but depending on the angle of light, it shimmered with a rainbow-like glow. Like a puzzle cube, its seams hinted at movement if manipulated.

Tess had never seen the object Arin was holding. Yet, she had heard countless tales about such iridescent hues and intricate designs that could never be imitated.

“That’s an ancient artifact. It’s made of metal that doesn’t exist in this world, and the surface is engraved with magical patterns imbued with power. I’ve heard that it can’t be used unless its powerful lock is undone. Am I right?”

“Correct. And let me add, this one is unlocked. It’s ready to use right now.”

Tess’s eyes sparkled with interest.

The Elzaine family collected information on ancient weapons because they possessed enough power to destabilize national foundations.

As far as Tess knew, unlocking the seal on an ancient artifact was considered internationally taboo. Any nation that unsealed an artifact was effectively declaring its readiness to wage war against the entire world.

“Can I take a look?”

When Shirone spoke, Arin handed over the ancient artifact. The friends crowded around Shirone's bed to see.

Shirone rubbed the surface and examined the seams. As he turned it around, something shifted, and the cube split open along its central axis, revealing a glass chamber inside.

Startled, Shirone pressed the cube, but it appeared to have locked into place and wouldn't close again.

Within the glass chamber, indecipherable characters floated. Not knowing what it was meant for, Shirone couldn't rule out the possibility of an explosion.

"Wow, it's beautiful."

In contrast, Tess's eyes shone with excitement. Having grown up hearing stories about artifacts instead of fairy tales, she felt her heart swell.

After Shirone handed the cube to her, Tess asked Canis.

"So, what's it for? No matter how I look at it, I can't figure out how to use it."

"I don't know all the details either. Arin was the one who found it. Here, toss it over."

Tess carefully supported the cube and handed it over. But Canis, seemingly confident from prior testing, tossed it casually to Arin without hesitation.

Watching how Arin handled the cube, Shirone realized that she hadn't simply stumbled upon its functionality by chance.

Most people, when encountering an ancient artifact for the first time, would try to reason based on objects they were familiar with. Shirone had initially thought of a puzzle cube or even a bomb. However, with her lack of bias toward the object's form, Arin could identify its unique properties.

Shirone, having grasped the artifact's immense potential, attentively listened to Arin's explanation.

"I'm not entirely sure of the reason, but when I press certain parts, it activates. If I do this here... and then press this part, it seems to work."

From the glass chamber, a red light burst forth, painting the room a blood-like crimson. As Arin placed it on the floor, Amy yelled while covering her face with a pillow.

“What’s going on? Is it going to explode?”

How effective the pillow would be against an explosion was unclear, but she peeked over it, her eyes wide, braced for the result.

The beeping sounds accelerated before morphing into a continuous tone, and then the red light disappeared.

Arin picked up the ancient artifact and pointed to the floor where the cube had been placed as he continued explaining.

“This is the coordinate input stage. The cube remembers the location where it’s placed. Now, let me try again.”

Manipulating the cube, the glass chamber emitted a blue light this time.

Arin glanced around for an appropriate spot and placed the ancient artifact near Shirone.

The glass chamber shifted to a bright white glow, and in the air above the cube, a massive black sphere appeared. A similar sphere materialized in the exact location Arin had pointed to earlier.

“What is that?”

Shirone was startled.

It was a black hole, like the one he had seen in the Maze of Space-Time—a mechanism that compressed and pierced through space. Its purpose was obvious.

“Now I understand. This is a portal. A portal that pierces through space-time.”

“Exactly right. It’s a device called the Metagate. This will be our trump card. Let me demonstrate it with Harvey.”

Canis knew no one would willingly volunteer to leap into the black sphere. For such experiments, the lifeless Harvest was the perfect candidate.

When Harvest extended his hand into the black hole, it emerged from the opposite black hole.

Amy and Tess jumped onto the bed in surprise.

The portals were three meters apart, yet Harvest was stretched across both ends. Had a human been used for the demonstration, the scene would have been even more bizarre.

“Heh heh heh, it’s amusing, isn’t it?”

“Harvey, be careful. Get out of there now.”

Arin spoke with concern. According to their experiments, the portal lasted only one minute.

Once Harvest retracted himself and the portal disappeared, Canis confidently picked up the cube and declared.

“Well? It’s a warp device that connects space-time by memorizing specific locations. Once we’ve registered this place, we can use it in Heaven to return anytime we want.”

The shift from an impossible scenario to a viable one stirred emotions within Shirone’s group.

Tess spoke in a trembling voice, overwhelmed with awe.

“This... this is incredible, right?”

The fact that archmage Arcane had possessed such an artifact, likely obtained during a perilous journey to Heaven, made it worthy of being a top-tier national secret.

Even more astonishing was that the seal on the artifact had been undone.

If the existence of this artifact were to become known, it would undoubtedly spark diplomatic turmoil.

This was no mere magic circle like the ones employed by the Parrot Mercenaries.

What would happen if a single spy infiltrated a royal palace and activated the Metagate? An army could flood through, plunging the kingdom into chaos. Such was the power of an ancient artifact.

Amy arrived at a similar conclusion. Beyond its functionality, its monetary value alone was unfathomable.

While the extent of Arcane’s inheritance left to Canis was unknown, this single artifact likely surpassed it many times over.

“Do you think... this could be sold?”

She knew how absurd the idea was, but the curiosity was real.

The thought nagged at her. A hundred billion? A trillion? If it could be sold, her 12th-generation granddaughters would bow to her portrait every night in gratitude. Now she understood why Canis had kept the artifact a secret.

Tess, thinking deeply like an appraiser, rested her chin on her hand as she examined the Metagate. Finally, she shook her head.

“Honestly, there’s no one who could buy it. At the very least, it would need to be a nation. Beyond the cost, the implications would be immense. Other than nations, the only plausible buyer might be the Ivory Tower.”

For any mage residing in the Kingdom of Tormia, the Magic Association was an inescapable authority. Other countries had similar associations.

However, the Ivory Tower wasn’t bound by such structures. It was an organization of mages who pursued magic without regard for world politics. A supranational entity, their power rivaled that of entire nations.

“The Ivory Tower is said to be the pinnacle of the world. Even for an ancient artifact, I doubt they’d act.”

“From a mage’s perspective, that makes sense. But there’s enough potential. Take the Exmachina incident 70 years ago as an example.”

“Exmachina?”

“It’s the name of an ancient weapon possessed by the nation of Kotria. My father told me that Kotria once attempted to strengthen Exmachina’s security by relocating it. They moved it just 30 meters to a new bunker, but the international community went into an uproar. It felt as though a world war could break out at any moment. Understand what that means? Simply moving an ancient weapon 30 meters caused such a reaction.”

“That’s terrifying. What kind of weapon is it?”

“The House of Elzaine participated in intelligence efforts but uncovered nothing. Its form, size, and even its activation mechanism remain unknown. But judging by the reactions of nearby nations, it’s likely a map weapon.”

“A map weapon?”

“A weapon not deployed in the field. It’s called that because decisions are made at the highest levels of leadership while consulting a map. Supposedly, it’s still sealed, but who knows? Seventy years have passed since then.”

Map weapons lack humanity. Maps don’t indicate who lives in a given area, what culture they enjoy, or what must be preserved. Decisions are reduced to calculations with rulers, compasses, and pencils.

Canis silently listened as the group debated the merits and dangers of the artifact.

Selling his master’s artifact was never an option. Keeping it secret had been a testament to his resolve, proof of his determination to reach Heaven, even at great personal cost.

“Hmm, Exmachina... and this is the Metagate.”

Shirone muttered, then turned to Canis.

“Wait a second—how do you even know its name? Didn’t Arcane erase the memory?”

“It was written on a note. Just a string of words, really.

Probably to prevent anyone from deducing its purpose, even if they found the location. Typical of our master’s meticulousness.”

“What else was on the note?”

“Nothing significant. It didn’t contain any explanation about Heaven. He must have wanted to keep it utterly secret. But we can explore it ourselves, thanks to the Metagate. So, do you think this is enough to negotiate for the Immortal Function?”

It was worth considering. Heaven, once a source of pure dread, now carried a hint of excitement.

With Canis, their chances of survival would increase dramatically. But still... what did he stand to gain?

“Why do you want to go to Heaven? Just because Arcane went doesn’t seem like enough of a reason. You don’t have detailed information, either. I need to hear your motivation before making a decision.”

Shirone’s cautious probing for potential traps only deepened Canis’s trust. If he had to venture into a dangerous place, traveling with someone as sharp as Shirone was far more effective than going with a reckless mage.

Chapter 175: 2. Goffin's Gate (2)

"Master ventured into Heaven approximately 80 years ago. Do you know what that means?"

"No, I don't."

"Before going to Heaven, Master's rank, as designated by the Magic Association, was entirely different. In other words, he became an archmage by realizing something in Heaven. Every mage dreams of reaching that level. Knowing this, does it make sense not to go?"

Shirone couldn't refute it. If Arcane returned from Heaven as a 3rd-class mage, then something in that place had clearly awakened him.

Seeing Shirone's hesitation, Canis decided to reveal the last piece of information he had withheld.

"Most of what was written on Master's note was just isolated words, but the last part contained a single sentence."

"What did it say?"

"It went like this, 'That place is the origin of everything. The source of Schema and...'"

Rian's eyes lit up.

"Schema?"

Ignoring him, Canis continued.

"'...Forgotten ancient magic...'"

Amy asked.

"Ancient magic?"

"'...And the silent ancient weapons.'"

Tess exclaimed.

"Ancient weapons!"

Irritated, Canis furrowed his brow.

"Are you all doing this on purpose?"

“Ha ha ha! Sorry. Keep going.”

Annoyed by Tess’s antics, Canis nonetheless finished reciting the sentence.

“‘I leave this Metagate here and depart.’”

It was a note crafted so that only someone aware of Heaven could decipher its significance.

Harvest, even with Arcane’s memories, had scoured the continent to uncover the secret location. The lengths Arcane went to obscure the truth showed how determined he was to keep it hidden.

And yet, leaving such a record might have stemmed from a mischievous streak he couldn’t suppress.

Despite being a single sentence, the note carried significant implications. First, it confirmed that Heavem contained Schema and magic, suggesting a high likelihood of human presence. Additionally, ancient artifacts must be abundant there.

Arcane’s message was clear: To the warriors and mages of the world, mountains of ancient artifacts lie beyond the Metagate.

But what exactly were these ancient artifacts? No historical texts contained records of them.

Shirone began to grasp what Heaven might be.

“Ancient magic. Ancient artifacts. The origin of everything.”

“Exactly. Master must have known. When did humanity first learn Schema and magic? If it were purely biological, Schema should have appeared in animals too. But no matter how far back we trace history, there’s no account of the birth of Schema or Spirit Zones. Do you understand what that implies?”

“That humanity always knew them. It sounds paradoxical, but that’s what you’re getting at, right?”

“Exactly. More precisely, Schema and magic existed even before humanity. Kadum called Heaven his homeland. It’s just a myth, but now we must use myths as our compass.”

A prehistorical world awaited them, a world that no scholar had ever unraveled—perhaps the true origin of humanity, hidden among unreachable stars.

“I’ve shared everything I know. The conclusion is, I’m going there. Not just to uphold Master’s legacy but to advance my magic. Arin and I have agreed on this, and no matter what happens, we won’t have regrets.”

“I... I want to go too!”

Amy declared her intention to join.

Opportunities to advance one’s magic rarely came by, and knowing that Canis and Arin, rivals from the same school, would also be involved fueled her resolve. Whatever dangers awaited, the Metagate was a means of return—ignoring such an opportunity would be foolish.

“If Amy’s going, so am I! Shirone, let’s go!”

Tess sided with Amy. If unclaimed ancient weapons awaited, there was no reason not to go.

Even the Metagate alone was invaluable. Ancient weapons were crafted from materials not found in this world. Even picking up a random stone from Heaven would make the trip worthwhile.

“No. I won’t take anyone. I’m not going either. It’s too dangerous. I don’t think going to Heaven is the right choice.”

Everyone stared at Shirone, dumbfounded.

Giving up now seemed unthinkable. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that even the greatest mages in history had never encountered. Hadn’t Arcane himself become an archmage after gaining enlightenment in Heaven?

“I understand it’s dangerous. But Canis has a way for us to return, doesn’t he?”

“That’s not the issue. Whether or not there’s a way out doesn’t matter. The fact that we can open Heaven’s gate doesn’t justify putting all of you in danger.”

Canis clenched his teeth in frustration.

Shirone's altruism had been evident since the moment he metaphorically leaped off the cliff into the abyss of impossible ideals. That was why Canis had strategized so extensively to push the situation this far. Yet even now, it wasn't enough to break through Shirone's ironclad resolve. "If you're that scared, then don't go. But we had a deal—you need to let Arin and me through the gate."

"No. I won't let you go either."

"You bastard! Are you turning your back on us now?"

"Think what you want, but I can't do it. Now that you've enrolled in our academy, you're one of us. I won't be the one to open the gate and send you to your death."

"Who asked you to care about my life? I can take care of myself! Besides, we can come back anytime, can't we?"

Amy, who usually respected Shirone's decisions, sided with Canis this time.

"Shirone, this is an incredible opportunity. From the start, didn't we all agree to face some level of danger? You came here to uncover the truth about Miro."

Shirone raised his voice.

"Put yourself in my shoes. Could you ask someone to enter the gate? Could you tell us to go to that star we just saw?"

'No, not even if I died.'

That was the real issue. It wasn't just about danger.

If Shirone were alone and the circumstances aligned as they did now, he would step into Heaven without hesitation.

But as an Unlocker, taking responsibility for his friends' lives would be reckless. Shirone bore the burden of being the most mature and rational among them.

Amy, deep in thought, flicked Shirone's forehead. When he clutched his stinging forehead and looked at her in surprise, she said:

"Of course, I'd tell you to go to Heaven. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Amy was lying.

Her concern for her friends' safety could cloud her judgment. By downplaying it, she hoped to ease the burden on Shirone.

But Shirone saw right through her.

"Don't lie. This is truly dangerous. Even with the Metagate, do you even know where that place leads? It's not as if we'll come right back. The more eager you are to go, the higher the risk—why can't you understand that?"

"Then why did you bring me here in the first place?"

"What? That's because..."

"You told me I could feel reassured if you were there. Isn't that why you came to my house to bring me along? Or was it just to take a girl sightseeing?"

Amy's sharp words hit their mark, leaving Shirone momentarily speechless. After all, he had taken a final-year student to this island, costing her valuable time—he bore responsibility for that.

Tess, clutching her chest as if rallying courage, added her support to Amy's stance.

"I feel the same way. Even if you're the one opening the gate, whether I go through it or not is my decision. You don't need to worry about that. Besides, if we're going, Rian and I will be valuable additions to the team."

In any party, having a swordsman was crucial. They brought bravery and animal instincts that mages lacked. The single second they created could determine life or death for a mage.

While Shirone wrestled with his thoughts, there was a knock at the door.

Canis quickly hid the Metagate. However, the person knocking didn't open the door without permission.

When Shirone allowed entry, Mahatu stepped in. Though unexpected, his presence wasn't entirely unwelcome.

Mahatu hesitated briefly before speaking.

"My apologies for earlier today. I came to offer a formal apology."

"It's fine. I've already forgotten about it."

Of course, Amy hadn't forgotten. However, suspecting Mahatu's visit wasn't solely for an apology, she let it slide. As expected, Mahatu quickly moved to the main topic.

"Are you planning to go to Heaven?"

Shirone didn't answer. Although his friends' strong persuasion had swayed him, his mind was still uncertain.

"Don't go."

His friends frowned at the unsolicited advice.

According to the chief, Shirone held the key to the fate of the Kergo tribe. Mahatu, who knew this better than anyone, advising against the journey was unexpected.

Canis, who thought Shirone was on the verge of agreeing, found Mahatu's interference infuriating.

"What are you talking about? Why shouldn't we go?"

"One moment, please."

Mahatu crossed his arms. As he inhaled deeply, his muscles bulged, and an overwhelming aura radiated from his eyes. The sheer pressure was staggering.

Shirone's group felt as though their bodies were being pushed back. Perhaps they really were. If Mahatu had channeled killing intent into his aura, they might not have been able to breathe.

Mahatu soon withdrew the pressure, though the air remained heavy.

"My apologies. It was presumptuous of me to display my crude skills."

No one truly believed his apology was sincere.

While no strength is absolute, the boundary between expert and novice is clear. At Mahatu's level, he was undoubtedly aware of his power.

"I cannot go to Heaven. I failed to prove my ability in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice."

Shirone understood Mahatu's intent: he was using his own strength as a benchmark to convey the difficulty of Heaven.

While comparing warriors and mages wasn't entirely fair, the argument carried weight.

"Do Kergoans take the trial too?"

"Of course. Those who prove their strength in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice earn the right to enter Heaven, even among Kergo warriors."

"But to go there..."

"Yes. An Unlocker is required. When the gate buried in volcanic ash was restored, many people ventured into Heaven. But few returned. That's why Miro created the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice—to ensure only the capable proceed. While Unlockers are exempt from the trial, anyone who can't pass on their own shouldn't go."

Not only was the rarity of returns alarming, but hearing Miro's name from Mahatu was equally shocking.

"How do you know Miro? Have you met her?"

"No, I haven't. But most of our leaders are aware of her."

"Could you tell us more? We came here to learn about Miro."

"Ah, I see..."

Mahatu now understood why Shirone hadn't been swayed by gold or charm. Someone tied to Miro would indeed be different from the reckless Unlockers he had encountered before.

"500 years ago, a civil war broke out among the Kergoans. It was a conflict between those who followed the angel and those who opposed her. The anti-angel faction won.

However, a sudden volcanic eruption pushed the tribe to the brink of extinction. The pro-angel faction interpreted the eruption as divine punishment from the angel."

Scholars' theories that the war was caused by loop trade were wrong. The mere mention of an angel signified that this was a top-level secret known only to Kergo leaders.

"250 years later, an outsider arrived. His name was Maclaïne Goffin, an Unlocker like you, Shirone. He restored the ruins buried in volcanic ash and opened gate. We call that gate as Goffin's Gate. But in the end, this event caused

another upheaval. The conflicts of 250 years ago reignited, and this time, the pro-angel faction emerged victorious. The government changed hands. That's the Kergo we know today."

Chapter 176: 2. Goffin's Gate (3)

"The current leader of that faction is Chief Kadum, isn't it?" Shirone recalled the two contrasting gazes he had sensed during the banquet. The elders who had warmly welcomed the Unlocker were likely pro-angel, while those who glared coldly must have been anti-angel.

Based on that distinction, Kadum's father, Hasid, had belonged to the anti-angel faction—and so did Mahatu.

"Chief Kadum is leading Kergo to ruin. It may sound strange coming from someone like me, who's involved in loop smuggling, but entrusting the tribe's fate to a divine messenger is something that should never happen. In truth, I come from anti-angel bloodlines and was originally destined to become a slave. You must have heard about the human tourism initiated by the Galliant autonomous government. Most of its victims were anti-angelists. My mother was among those abducted by outsiders."

Amy decided to set aside her lingering resentment toward Mahatu. Knowing that his parents had suffered such horrors made his hostility toward outsiders more understandable.

"A hundred years ago, the Kergo tribe was shaken by the encroachment of civilization. When the Galliant government began its human hunts, the anti-angelists' fury intensified. A third civil war seemed imminent, and extinction appeared inevitable. But someone changed everything—a person who designed the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice to prevent reckless journeys to the Heavenly Realm and ended the civil strife. That person was none other than Miro."

Shirone pictured Miro. Her eyes had often seemed unsettling, betraying intense emotional shifts. Yet, before

entering her dimension of space-time, she had appeared profoundly human.

“There’s still conflict, of course, but compared to back then, it’s much better—all thanks to Miro. Without her, I too would have been nothing more than a common slave.”

“Where is Miro now?”

Shirone knew she resided in the intermediate dimension of Istas, yet part of him wondered if she might exist everywhere simultaneously.

“After designing the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, Miro entered Goffin’s Gate. Though I wasn’t present, I heard she said she was going to meet Goffin.”

Amy frowned in confusion.

“Wait a second. Wasn’t Guffin from 250 years ago? How could she meet him?”

“I don’t know. But the records clearly state that’s what she intended.”

To Shirone, it seemed plausible.

The creation of Goffin’s Gate implied mastery scale magic, a hallmark of an Unlocker. If Miro specialized in spatial manipulation, perhaps Goffin’s expertise lay in temporal magic.

Shirone thought of Armin, the Eternal Reflector, who had meditated for over a century using Stop magic. If Goffin were alive through similar means, it wouldn’t be surprising. Even archmage Arcane, with only life-support systems, had endured for 150 years.

Canis wasn’t particularly interested in Miro herself but was deeply intrigued by the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice she had designed, which seemed critical to determining access to Heaven.

“Where are the people who passed through the Maze of Space-Time trial? Shouldn’t they go along with Shirone if they’re still here?”

Now that Canis mentioned it, Shirone was curious as well.

The people who had proven their strength in the Maze's of Space-Time trial—if they were still present, they might offer invaluable insights.

“Whether they go or not is a decision for the divine messenger, but currently, there's no one. The last group left for Heaven two years ago and never returned.”

Two years ago? That revelation was startling. People had been venturing into Heaven far more frequently than expected.

The reason Kadum hid this fact was his allegiance to the pro-angel faction. He wanted more people to attempt the journey.

Amy posed another question.

“All Kergo people believe in Ra, right? So how did an anti-angel faction emerge in the first place?”

“I'm an anti-angelist myself, but I don't know how the first conflict began. Most of the records were lost in the volcanic eruption 500 years ago. We call those the Lost Records. To be honest, we can't even say for sure whether the volcanic eruption was the work of the angel—it's merely a story that's been passed down.”

Mahatu's account gave Shirone's group much to ponder. Even with a way back, the journey was fraught with uncertainty. They still had no clear sense of what awaited in Heaven.

“Even so, if you choose to go, I won't stop you—I can't. But you should know this: every person who has passed through Miro's trial was stronger than I am.”

Though Mahatu didn't state it outright, the implication was clear: those individuals had been stronger than Shirone's group, and even they had failed to return.

In the heavy silence that followed, Shirone and his friends fell into deep thought. Sensing that his sincerity had been conveyed, Mahatu bowed slightly.

“I respect your resolve, Shirone, to remain unmoved by tributes and instead pursue a higher purpose. It's why I felt

compelled to share the truth with you. While I have no say in your choice, I urge you to decide with care.”

“Thank you. The information you’ve provided is invaluable.”

After Mahatu left the room, silence descended once again. Going to Heaven still held an irresistible allure, but none of them pressed Shirone further.

Shirone’s judgment was sound. Only he could decide, and the others could only follow his lead.

“How much did the headmaster... know about all this?”

As his thoughts wandered, Alpheas came to mind. Shirone wondered why the headmaster, knowing Shirone was an Unlocker, had told him about the Kergo ruins in the first place.

“I’d guess he knows at least as much as we do. Didn’t he say Miro was his student? He must be aware of her exploits.”

“Then why would he permit this? What if the reality we’re facing is something he hadn’t anticipated? What choice should I make then?”

“That’s another problem. We don’t know how far ahead he foresaw things, but maybe he thought you wouldn’t go to Heaven. I would’ve thought the same in his position. In the end, though...”

Canis tossed the Metagate into the air and caught it.

“I was the wild card, wasn’t I?”

Alpheas hadn’t foreseen Canis’s presence. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have imagined Canis would discover a return route.

Now, all that remained was the decision.

The existence of an exit was reassuring. As long as the world they entered wasn’t immediately fatal—filled with toxic gas, for instance—they wouldn’t die instantly.

By that logic, refusing to even try seemed foolish. Yet the possibility of unforeseen psychological factors leading to a missed opportunity to return couldn’t be dismissed.

Shirone lay awake until dawn, unable to sleep.

The next morning, Shirone's group descended to the underground level of the temple. Chief Kadum led the way, followed by Hasid and Mahatu.

Amy suspected that this was the secret area of the ruins, the space inaccessible even to Spirit Zone exploration.

Upon reaching the lowest level, they found a straight passage marked by signs of a volcanic eruption. Jewels embedded in the walls guided the way.

At the end of the corridor, a massive iron door was opened, revealing a cavernous chamber. Priests lined the walls, while at the center stood a solitary stone gate, unconnected to anything else. Its solitary presence made it impossible to deny the existence of Heaven.

Shirone approached the gate.

This was Goffin's Gate, the entrance to Heaven, recreated 250 years ago by the Unlocker, Maclaine Goffin. A red orb was embedded in its center, with a vertical groove etched around it.

Before arriving here, Shirone had finalized a contract with Kadum. The chief's request was simple: deliver Kadum's message to the Angel's Library, Inglis.

The Angel's Library. Kadum claimed it wasn't a divine mission and wouldn't be difficult, but the mere mention of gods and angels made the task seem impossible.

Shirone exchanged glances with his friends. *We'll be able to return. Maybe.* Having made the decision to proceed, he could only try to think positively.

When Amy nodded, Shirone reached for the orb at the center of the gate.

Taking a deep breath, he activated the Immortal Function. A burst of white light erupted from the orb.

"Oh... Ohhh!"

Awe-filled voices echoed. Even Mahatu, an anti-angelist, fell to his knees, chanting Anke Ra.

Shirone focused more intensely.

Contrary to his initial impression, this was no ordinary stone wall. The scratches on the gate, previously assumed to be marks of time, glowed red, revealing indecipherable magical runes.

As the magic took effect, the stone wall began to disassemble into small cubic fragments, each about the size of a die.

These fragments broke apart further, defying gravity, until they turned to dust and were absorbed by the light.

A blinding white radiance poured forth from the gate, engulfing Shirone.

“Goffin’s Gate has opened! Praise the angel!”

The priests fell prostrate, chanting Anke Ra.

Shirone could no longer hear their voices. Enveloped in the light, the only sound he could perceive was his own heartbeat.

For the first time, he felt fear. Though it was just a single step, it stretched into an infinite chasm. He didn’t want to move.

A firm, warm hand rested on his shoulder. It was Rian.

Right, I’m not alone. Rian would never give up, no matter the circumstances.

Tess’s precision, Amy’s brilliance, Canis’s resilience, Arin’s mental fortitude, and Harvest’s steadfastness—they all made for a formidable team.

This is a great party, Shirone thought, easing his tension slightly.

He stepped through the gate.

As Shirone’s group left the altar, the white radiance coalesced into gray particles, beginning to reassemble the stone wall.

The floating cubes found their places, completing their reconstruction as the magic runes faded.

When the stone gate resealed itself, no one remained.

The cavern was silent.

Shirone gritted his teeth as multicolored light streaked around him.

What waits at the end of this? Or perhaps, is there even an end? The chaotic dance of lights persisted even when he closed his eyes.

It felt as if he had become a cannonball shot from a barrel, his surroundings suddenly expanding into an open view.

His party members shared the same silent hope—that this wouldn't be a world consumed by sulfurous flames.

Their first impression wasn't bad. The air was clear and cool. But the realization of their location soon provoked gasps of terror.

Having entered Goffin's Gate on the ground, they had naively assumed they would exit onto solid ground.

Instead, they were suspended high above the clouds. From their vantage point, they could see the edges of the ocean meeting the horizon.

The mages tried to cast Teleportation spells, but to no avail. Whether due to Goffin's Gate's lingering effects or some other force, they plummeted toward the ground faster than freefall.

The ocean receded beneath them, revealing a dense forest. Shirone spotted a city at the forest's heart, one identical to the vision he had seen in the Maze of Space-Time trial.

A castle surrounded by two concentric rings, like ripples, with six pie-slice divisions radiating from the inner circle.

Hovering above the city were beetle-shaped machines, eerily reminiscent of a human brain.

As their altitude dropped further, the city vanished from view, and they plunged toward the forest.

Breaking through the canopy, they glimpsed the ground below. Impact at this speed would mean certain death.

Attempts at magic proved futile. Just as the earth's rocky surface loomed close enough to make out individual pebbles, Goffin's Gate released them.

3. The Forest of the Fallen (1)

Outskirts of Heaven. Purgatory.

Shirone barely had time to gather his bearings before instinctively checking his head. Considering he had fallen face-first, it would have made sense for his skull to be shattered.

For a fleeting moment, it felt like he had lost consciousness. Yet when his senses returned, he found himself standing upright, both feet firmly on the ground, without a single injury.

Tess, inspecting her body anxiously, muttered.

“Are we alive? Or... are we dead?”

“We’re alive, I think. I feel hungry, after all.”

Rian’s response, delivered in his usual bold tone, was intended to calm Tess. In truth, it was an effort to reassure her amidst the unsettling circumstances.

“Maybe... maybe we didn’t actually fall from the sky.”

Shirone used his expertise to offer an explanation.

“It’s probably something like Spatial Movement. Essentially, we moved here through a tunnel, and the folded space created those disorienting visuals we saw.”

In the end, it was Teleportation, albeit on a scale far beyond conventional understanding. The unusual phenomena they experienced were simply the result of the immense distance they had traveled.

Chapter 177: 3. The Forest of the Fallen (2)

The group scanned their surroundings. Tall trees with long leaves formed a dense canopy overhead.

From above, the foliage appeared impenetrable, yet tiny slivers of light forced their way through, illuminating the forest floor. Moss and mushrooms grew in the shadows, and the soil felt damp, heavy with moisture.

Despite these familiar details, the place didn't feel like the world they knew.

It was the size of the rocks that gave the forest its eerie, timeless quality.

The age of a space could often be deduced from the weathering of its stones. Here, however, the rocks varied wildly in size. Small pebbles lay scattered alongside enormous boulders, some as large as houses. Such an arrangement was impossible unless someone had deliberately placed them.

"The rocks here might be made of a different material. Maybe they're so durable that they don't erode, even over time."

His explanation had merit.

Ancient artifacts were often crafted from minerals not found in the known world. Their mere existence hinted at a history predating recorded time. If these stones belonged to Heaven, their survival across eons was living proof of its otherworldly nature.

"So... does that mean this is Heaven?"

"Let's confirm with Spirit Zone first."

At Amy's words, everyone tested their ability to cast magic. While Spirit Zone was supposedly all-powerful, they were

uneasy about whether it would function correctly in such an alien environment.

Fortunately, the magic seemed to work as usual.

“So, this really is Heaven? Great. We’ve seen the sights—let’s head back now.”

The others turned to stare at Tess. Startled by the attention, she awkwardly waved her hands and laughed nervously.

“Ahaha, just kidding!”

“No, I’m seriously considering it.”

The fact that even Rian, usually unfazed, was entertaining the idea of retreat showed how tense everyone was.

As if to underscore this tension, the group had yet to move a single step from where they had landed.

Taking a small but decisive step forward, Shirone said.

“Let’s move. Whether we fell from the sky or folded through space, we saw a city, didn’t we? Let’s head there. At least there’s some form of civilization.”

Where there was civilization, there were rules. While it was unclear if those rules would align with their understanding of order, wandering aimlessly in the forest—and risking an overnight stay—seemed far less practical.

“But how do we find the city? We don’t even know the direction.”

“I can handle that.”

Amy’s eyes turned crimson as she activated her photographic memory. Drawing upon the information stored in her mind, she pointed toward where Rian was standing.

“Based on my recall, the city should be in that direction.”

Amy’s ability allowed her to perfectly reconstruct specific moments, unaffected by the astronomical distances they had traveled.

Her skill wasn’t mathematical in nature but instead resembled a compass. Just as a compass always finds north regardless of location, Amy’s sense of direction remained stable despite environmental changes.

Following Amy's lead, the group began their trek, attuning themselves to the sounds of the forest. They heard the chirping of insects and the calls of birds, but strangely, they saw no signs of either.

The unsettling absence didn't go unnoticed. They stopped when they heard the sound of something brushing against the vegetation.

Tess, ever vigilant, unsheathed her saber and turned toward the source of the noise. Rian, gripping the handle of his greatsword, positioned himself by her side.

"What's wrong, Tess?"

"I'm not sure. It feels like someone—or something—is approaching."

Amy, her expression tense, asked.

"Are you certain it's someone? Not... something else?"

Tess couldn't confirm. The sound resembled human breathing but wasn't definitive enough to draw conclusions. After all, there was no guarantee that humans inhabited this place.

The group's tension rose to its peak, knowing that anything could emerge from the forest.

Rustle. Rustle.

The sound of foliage being pushed aside grew louder and faster. Tess became convinced that whatever it was, it was headed straight for them.

The mages activated Spirit Zone, while Rian drew his greatsword and held it ready. Whatever emerged from the forest, he intended to strike the moment it showed itself.

As Rian steadied his breathing and prepared for confrontation, he began to frown.

Based on the frequency of the sound, it should have arrived already. Yet, they heard nothing but rustling—still no sign of the source.

"Rian, step back."

Tess urged, her voice trembling.

In her mind, there was only one explanation. The sound originated much farther away than they had assumed. Just as Rian began to retreat, maintaining his poised stance, the ground trembled with a thud.

Finally, something pushed through the underbrush.

“What... what is that?”

Shirone craned his neck to look up, tilting his head back as far as it would go.

It was a giant.

Standing nearly eight meters tall, the creature wore tattered scraps of fabric draped over its otherwise bare body.

Its beard reached down to its chest, and its face was deeply lined with wrinkles, making it appear aged. Yet, its body was as muscular and youthful as that of a young man.

Tess instinctively looked toward its groin, assessing it for weaknesses. To her surprise, it was smooth. The face appeared masculine, and the chest lacked any feminine traits, yet it bore no reproductive organs.

“Um... we might have a problem.”

Arin said. Tess, who had left the giant’s navigation to Rian, turned to Arin and asked.

“What do you mean? How could things get worse than this?”

“I’m not sure which situation is worse, but I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Shirone turned to Arin as well. He wondered how her psychic perception abilities were perceiving the giant.

“I can’t read its emotions. I can’t tell if it’s angry, happy, or sad. Everything feels jumbled.”

The most startled member of the group was Canis. Even Harvest, the materialized construct standing beside him, tilted its head as if puzzled by the giant.

“Arin... can’t read its emotions?”

It shouldn’t have been possible. In theory, such a thing was inconceivable.

Arin’s ability pulled all emotional characteristics into a single plane of understanding.

Even if someone shielded their emotions, like Sakiri from the Magic Association, there should have been at least some readable residue of mental state.

The inability to read the giant's emotions was unquestionably strange.

"Those who enter Purgatory... those who deny the gods..."

The giant's words were unintelligible, and there seemed to be no way to decipher them. The only person the group could rely on was Arin.

But once again, she shook her head.

"I don't know. I can't make sense of it."

Her precognitive ability, as well as her telepathy, were useless. Arin felt as helpless as a blind person. Unable to even interpret the giant's expression, she sought Canis's perspective instead.

"Canis, does it look like the giant is hostile?"

"It sure seems like it."

Could it be that even Arin, who specialized in psychic perception, couldn't sense any killing intent? The group had stepped into the unknown, trusting Arin's unparalleled abilities to mitigate the dangers they might face.

Without Arin, this journey is impossible. That same thought crossed Amy's mind, leaving her to defer to Arin's judgment.

"Arin, what should we do now?"

"What do you think? Run, of course!"

As Arin bolted, Amy was left dumbfounded.

Canis followed quickly, prompting the rest of the group to retreat as well.

Amy, the slowest to react, glanced back at the giant. It had uprooted a sapling nearly two meters tall and was pursuing them with alarming speed.

"Graaaaahhh!"

The giant's roar boomed like a sonic cannon, leaving Amy dazed for a moment before she managed to hurl herself to safety.

The roots of the sapling barely grazed her sleeve as the giant swung it like a club.

“He’s huge! He won’t be able to keep up—just keep running!”

“Then you should’ve said that earlier!”

Using her Schema to catch up to Arin, Amy shouted, her voice tinged with irritation. Though she had narrowly avoided injury, a slower reaction would have left her with a nasty wound on her back.

“Sorry! I didn’t think it would come to this!”

Arin didn’t try to excuse herself.

In Heaven, they were a team. Though she wasn’t a combat mage, her role was to identify threats, analyze situations objectively, and relay that information to the leader. With her abilities neutralized, all she could do now was apologize. No one blamed her—it was clear they were all in this together. But the implications were troubling.

Arin’s mental abilities were a critical advantage. Though it was too early to say her power was entirely ineffective, the fact that their journey had gone awry from the very start was undeniable.

Hearing the rumble of the ground behind them, Shirone turned to look back. Assuming the giant would be slow simply because of its size was a grave miscalculation. It was already closing in on them.

Through Arin’s mental channel, Tess’s voice reached Shirone.

Shirone, give us some orders. Can’t we just teleport away? That’s too dangerous. We don’t even know where we are. What if we teleport into an even worse situation? We’d be wiped out.

But we can’t keep running forever, either. Honestly, I can’t even focus on what’s around us right now.

...Fair point. Then let’s fight. Taking down the giant comes first.

With Shirone's decision, Rian and Tess pivoted and charged at the giant.

Amy and Canis positioned themselves on either side of Shirone, while Arin provided support from the rear.

Rian, as the frontline fighter, initiated the attack.

Fighting an opponent eight meters tall introduced countless unpredictable variables. Attacks from above were nearly impossible to anticipate, while the team's range of viable targets was limited to areas below the knees.

Rian aimed for the Achilles tendon.

As he swung his greatsword, the giant retaliated with its sapling. The two weapons collided midair, and the sapling shattered.

But it wasn't a clean strike. The sheer force of the giant's swing caused Rian's weapon to break apart, unable to withstand the impact.

The clash sent Rian flying three meters backward. Though he managed to land on his feet, his legs dragged along the ground.

Feeling a spasm in his right arm, Rian steadied his grip on the greatsword with his left hand, resuming a combat stance.

The giant's strength was overwhelming, but its speed was even more alarming.

"How can this be? It defies the laws of physics!"

For a creature eight meters tall to support its own weight, it would need muscle strength hundreds of times that of a human.

Even standing should've been remarkable. Yet, its movements were agile enough to rival a predator's.

"The heretic... must be purged!"

The giant shouted incomprehensibly, hurling the broken sapling toward Tess.

As the sapling struck the ground, Tess leaped into the air, using the momentum to launch herself higher.

The giant, following through with its throwing motion, immediately swung a massive fist toward her midair form. Avoiding the attack seemed impossible.

But Tess defied expectations. Her body shot forward as if ignoring inertia, landing atop the giant's fist.

External gravity manipulation.

Charging up the giant's forearm, Tess slashed her saber across its left eye before leaping off. As the giant reared back, clutching its injured eye, she shouted to the others.

"Now's our chance!"

Shirone unleashed a Photon Cannon. Considering the giant's size, he saw no reason to hold back his mental energy.

The beam of light, as large as a cannonball, struck the giant square in the abdomen.

The blast bent the giant's massive frame, lifting its feet off the ground.

Seeing the giant being blown backward was nearly impossible to believe. Even Canis, who had previously faced this attack, felt a surreal sense of déjà vu as he winced at the memory.

The group thought it was over. But just as the giant's legs aligned horizontally with the ground, it stomped down with immense force, halting its backward momentum.

No one could find words to speak.

The giant had taken the Photon Cannon head-on. That spell, capable of delivering nearly 5,000 units of destructive power in the Room of Achievement and Sacrifice, should have been enough to obliterate any living creature.

"How... how can it still be standing after that?"

The giant's face twisted with rage, its wrinkles deepening into a monstrous grimace.

At that moment, a Fireball launched by Amy engulfed the giant's face in flames.

Her quick judgment proved effective. Fire was a natural enemy of living cells, and no amount of strength could prevent something from burning.

The giant reeled, clutching its flaming face, its beard smoldering.

But what the group saw next sent chills down their spines. Beneath the melting, dripping skin, new layers were regenerating almost instantaneously.

Tess muttered in disbelief.

“That’s... Schema. How can a giant use Schema?”

Chapter 178: 3. The Forest of the Fallen (3)

Arin cast Power of Darkness, seizing the opportunity to test her ability while the giant was injured.

Her spell manifested as shadowy tendrils that extended like vines. These crept through the giant's shadow, climbing up like creeping plants, and wrapped tightly around its ankles. Arin followed up with Mental Shock, a psychic assault spell. If telepathy was akin to a thief, then Mental Shock was like an armed robber. While it couldn't inflict the deep scars of trauma, it could induce phobia-level terror.

Mental Shock's true strength lay in its potential to chain into Mind Control.

A spell that allowed the caster to manipulate the target's physical body, Arcane's favorite spell. However, it's tricky to pull off

It required mental focus equivalent to 20 times the target's own psychic strength to get near a 100% chance.

In essence, it was impossible to dominate a stronger opponent.

Yet, through strategy and precise execution, such a feat was occasionally achievable—especially when Mental Shock succeeded.

If Arin could subjugate the giant with Mind Control, the forest would hold no more threats for them. Canis, knowing this, stayed his hand and observed the results.

The Mental Shock failed.

The giant, its face still aflame, roared in rage and charged more aggressively at the group.

Arin bit her lip in frustration. Telepathy, Mental Shock, Mind Control—none of these three psychic abilities that formed

the cornerstone of her power worked on the giant. For the first time, she felt truly powerless. Her frustration blazed within her fragile heart.

‘Why? Why isn’t it working? It’s just a large human, isn’t it?’
“Arin! Get back!”

Canis stepped in front of her and conjured Shadow Wall. As the wall of shadows rose, the giant’s fist slammed into it, scattering the Shadow Wall like dust. The force had exceeded the spell’s absorption capacity.

The giant, however, appeared drained from the effort, unable to press forward.

Harvest climbed the giant’s arm, targeting a spot near what resembled veins, and raked his claws across it.

If the giant’s anatomy mirrored a human’s after mastering Schema, Harvest’s calculation was right.

Blood spurted in a fountain from a severed vein at the crook of the giant’s elbow, but the wound healed almost immediately. Worse, the pain seemed to drive the giant into a berserk frenzy.

‘It’s incredibly strong. How can such a creature exist?’

Shirone teleported to bait the giant, allowing Rian to slash at its Achilles tendon like a cannonball.

Canis unleashed Power of Darkness, the jagged shadows specialized in striking, yet even as they coiled around the giant’s ankles, they failed to slice through its muscles.

All it did was immobilize the giant, and Canis shouted.

“This thing is ridiculously strong! Do something, quickly!”

Amy bombarded the giant’s face with Flame Strike, but adding fire to a burning enemy had little effect. Despite the added wind force, it lacked the raw power of Shirone’s Photon Cannon.

Shirone compressed photons into a new attack. Unlike the usual Photon Cannon, this took longer to cast, much to the group’s confusion.

As the light warped into an unusual shape, Canis snapped in irritation.

“Damn it! What are you doing? Focus!”

“No, that’s not it.”

Arin interjected.

“He’s altering the photon’s shape.”

If raw force couldn’t fell the giant, then sharpness might. When neither heat nor impact worked, precision was the solution.

It was the right decision for the situation.

But Canis doubted its feasibility. Manipulating light into a different shape was beyond conventional understanding. Shirone felt the strain as well. Suppressing the photons’ natural output was taxing. He thought varying the compression force on the photons might work, but the mental energy required was immense.

Through gritted teeth, he pushed his focus to its limits. The photon began to flatten, taking the shape of a disc.

The disk-like Photon Cannon shot toward the giant.

The giant, having torn free of the shadowy restraints, twisted its torso. The blade of light slashed across its side, leaving a deep gash that gushed blood like a waterfall.

It was a critical hit.

Recognizing the opportunity, the group surged forward—both mages and swordsmen alike.

They stabbed with sabers, pounded with greatswords, scorched with flames, and sawed with shadow tendrils. Their relentless assault finally brought the giant to its knees.

Even with their combined efforts, it felt like trying to carve up a dragon using pocket knives. The giant’s muscle fibers were as strong as steel.

Panting heavily, Amy gasped.

“Haah... haah... It’s dead, right? It has to be dead. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Should we hit it again, just to be sure?”

Tess shuddered.

“No way. I can’t take any more of this. There’s a limit to how much carnage I can stomach.”

"I tried using Power of Darkness to sever its neck, but it wouldn't cut. Should we just start peeling its flesh?"

Canis's macabre idea drained the color from everyone's faces. Fortunately, the giant showed no signs of movement, and the massive wound Shirone inflicted wasn't regenerating. Leaving it as-is seemed the safest choice.

Tess gave Shirone a thumbs-up.

"Great job, Shirone. That was another new spell, wasn't it?"

"I got lucky. If the giant had dodged, I wouldn't have had a second chance. Even thinking about it makes me shudder."

Canis remained disgruntled. Photon Cannon was supposed to be a spell centered on impact. Changing it into a cutting tool was impressive, but as a dark mage, he couldn't help feeling like his thunder had been stolen.

"Hmph. It worked out, but it was still a gamble. When we're operating as a team, individual mental strength is collective strength. If you'd failed, it could've incapacitated you, and we can't afford to lose anyone from the front lines."

"I know. It was less efficient than I expected, and even I was surprised by how draining it was."

Canis snorted and turned away. Despite his criticism, he couldn't deny that Shirone's quick thinking had made the difference.

Arin seemed to share the sentiment. Watching Shirone recover through her psychic perception, she remarked.

"I've noticed this before—he's incredibly free-spirited in his thinking."

It had been a risky gamble, but a calculated one.

Shirone's insight to discern what to abandon and what to pursue led them to victory. If even one or two choices had gone differently, the outcome might have been disastrous.

"Tch. He's always been quick on his feet."

Canis muttered. Though they were a team now, denying Shirone's talents outright would only reveal his insecurities.

"Graaaaah..."

The giant let out a low groan, freezing the group in terror. Though it showed no signs of rising, its fingers twitched slightly.

Without needing to exchange words, the group bolted into the forest.

Whatever Heaven might be, one thing was certain: none of them wanted to fight a giant like that again.

Amy, Tess' keen senses, and Arin's ability to distinguish between the natural and the unnatural combined to guide the group without any significant missteps.

They arrived at a rocky terrain.

The abundance of shadows immediately pleased both Canis and Arin. While Shirone's magic remained unaffected by the environment, dark magic reached its peak potential in the presence of darkness.

"This spot is safe enough. Worst-case scenario, I can use Dark Port to relocate."

"But Dark Port can't move everyone, can it?"

Dark magic lacked the theoretical framework to transfer its effects to others, unlike photon-based spells. Thus, only a dark mage could travel through shadows.

Canis shrugged nonchalantly.

"At the very least, it'll help tactically. I can lure enemies away by myself here."

Tess, passing the water flask as they took turns drinking, spoke up.

"Giants that use Schema... Isn't this place way too dangerous? And the fact that Arin's mental magic doesn't work is really unsettling."

"I'm sorry... I wasn't much help."

Arin said, lowering her head, and Tess waved her hands in a flustered manner.

"No, no, it's not your fault. The giant was overwhelming for all of us. The important thing is that we won—together."

Come to think of it, this Heaven isn't so scary after all, huh? Hahaha!"

Tess tried to lift the mood, but the mages remained somber. Unlike warriors accustomed to improvisation, mages hated unforeseen circumstances. Their peace of mind came from controlling all variables and mastering situations through meticulous planning.

The spell Shirone had used—reshaping photons—wasn't part of any pre-planned strategy for their party.

Adding unpredictable variables upon existing ones was a sure path to disaster. Relying on spontaneous ingenuity to secure victory didn't fill them with much confidence.

"In our last battle, we didn't have complete control over the situation. It might be early to bring this up, but perhaps we should consider returning while we still can. What do the rest of you think?"

Amy replied first as Shirone rhymed.

"For a first encounter, I think we did well. Let's not overlook the fact that we won. Shirone came up with a solution, and that solution could be adapted to future situations. We can avoid repeating the same mistakes."

Amy's point was valid.

Naturally, Canis leaned toward continuing the expedition, but he wasn't reckless enough to lie about his perspective out of greed.

"It's not that simple. Shirone isn't likely to use the same strategy again, am I right?"

"Right. It's too dangerous." The time needed to compress photons and the inefficiency make it impractical for repeated use."

"The concept was sound. You thought that if photons could be given mass, light could behave more like matter, allowing it to be reshaped, didn't you?"

Canis understood Shirone's reasoning because the approach mirrored aspects of dark magic.

“But it’s flawed. Sculpting with mental force is completely at odds with your abilities—that’s the domain of dark magic. Dark magic sacrifices impact force for the ability to manipulate form and apply mechanical strength. In my case, I use serrated shapes; Arin prefers vine-like structures.”

Arin demonstrated by summoning Power of Darkness, creating a shadow that rose into the shape of an intricately detailed apple tree. The branches adjusted in size, adding a lifelike three-dimensional quality.

As Shirone marveled, Arin smiled and explained.

“Mages use structured formulas, but dark magic specializes in shaping through mental force, so we don’t need those formulas. We call it modeling. Elements like ice or shadow, which are stable, are easier to shape, while volatile elements like fire or light are much harder to work with.”

Amy nodded in agreement.

“That makes sense. I can’t manipulate the shape of flames either. That’s why I incorporate wind-based attributes into my spells.”

“Exactly. But light is even harder than fire—impossible to model, theoretically. You can enhance other attributes with light, but you can’t enhance light with other attributes. Shirone managed to pull it off with divine particles, but that’s an exception. While some degree of modeling was achieved, it’s not practical for regular use in battle.”

Shirone sighed.

“Then how should we fight giants going forward? Maybe lasers could work, but considering their speed, it won’t be easy.”

Lasers could destroy material regardless of its durability, but their charge time made them ineffective against fast-moving targets.

Though it wasn’t a spell yet known in the world, if Harvest had understood laser mechanics earlier, the group wouldn’t have been able to take him down as easily in the past.

“The real issue is that the only enemy we’ve encountered so far is a single giant. How strong are giants in this world? And wouldn’t it help our exploration if we can figure that out?”

Chapter 179: 3. The Forest of the Fallen (4)

Rian's observation sparked a moment of realization in Shirone, who snapped his fingers.

"Right, let's think about this. If there are living creatures, it means there's a food chain, and ecosystems usually form a pyramid structure. Extracting only the predators and analyzing their distribution, we'd get something like this."

Shirone drew a pyramid with contours reminiscent of a woman's body, its layers depicting a hierarchy of predators. At the bottom were lower predators, followed by middle predators, then apex predators, with a few outliers categorized as mutant predators scattered throughout. Only carnivores were represented, so the lower and middle tiers showed equal distribution.

"What's this 'mutant predator' you've marked here?"

"Predators that don't rely on direct hunting to feed. They might use traps or display intelligence to procure food—like monkeys in our world."

"I see. Then where would giants fit into this?"

"Considering the gravity and breathable atmosphere here, they probably share biological traits with creatures from our world. Assuming that's true, they might fit here, between middle predators and apex predators."

"Mutant predators? Giants? They're that strong!"

"Well, they could be apex predators. That would give us some hope, but their combat style is... primitive. Look at cats—their hunting methods are efficient and refined.

Tearing trees out of the ground to use as weapons doesn't seem particularly helpful for hunting. That's why I classified them as mutant predators."

Tess tilted her head, puzzled.

“But couldn’t they be mutant predators between lower and middle predators? Wouldn’t that mean most of the predators in this forest are stronger than the giants?”

“I don’t think so. They seemed capable of speech. Even a hint of intelligence places them above the middle predator.” Canis nodded thoughtfully.

“Okay, so the first giant we encountered was in the top 30 percent or so, although it’s not impossible that it could be in a different distribution.”

“Statistically, no. There aren’t going to be many of them anyway, and by my math, the odds of encountering an enemy stronger than a giant are less than 10 percent.”

Amy summarized their discussion.

“Then we’re fine, aren’t we? The six of us together can handle it. No one even got hurt.”

Shirone carefully analyzed the situation.

On the positive side, Amy was correct—they had managed to defeat the giant. However, survival wasn’t something that could be left to probability; luck was a mirage when life was at stake.

The fact that only an hour had passed since their arrival in the Heavenly Realm weighed heavily on them, preventing a retreat. Though this reasoning might seem unfounded, everyone understood it intuitively.

In truth, none of them wanted to turn back yet, even if greater dangers awaited.

“Alright, let’s at least make it to the city walls. I don’t want to give up here either.”

As they prepared to move, a loud explosion echoed through the forest.

Tess’s sharp hearing picked up a woman’s voice.

A surge of unease swept through them—it could be a situation more dangerous than the giant’s attack. But if it truly was a woman, it meant a sentient being. The information she might offer was invaluable.

Exchanging glances, the group wordlessly agreed and dashed into the forest.

A piercing sound filled the air, accompanied by screeches and clattering.

A hexapod-like creature with a single eye let out guttural cries.

Resembling a crustacean, the creature moved by stabbing the ground with its six pointed, triangular legs. Its pale lavender body was encased in a hard exoskeleton, and a single, oversized eye was embedded in the center of its face. A long, sharp horn protruded from its forehead, sturdier and more imposing than that of a unicorn.

“Rena! Drive it this way!”

“Got it! Be careful, Sis!”

Kanya and Rena had the creature surrounded front and back.

Kanya, a woman with long black hair cascading down her back, was the elder sister, while Rena, with large eyes and a cute appearance, was her younger sibling.

Both were members of the Mecca race, citizens of Heaven. Their slender jawlines, small noses, and crescent-moon-thin lips gave them a youthful appearance compared to other races.

Though they were 17 and 14 years old respectively, their faces were so youthful that it was hard to tell who was older.

Rena, who had positioned herself behind the one-eyed creature, struck at its blind spot with her sword. The blade, intricately designed with countless perpendicular lines, was a sophisticated weapon with tremendous power.

As the blade struck the creature’s back, a shockwave erupted with a bang, scattering fragments of its carapace. The creature, now hit for the third time, let out a guttural shriek and shifted sideways. Rena leapt in tandem with its movement.

While the creature's single eye allowed it to observe a 330-degree range, Rena stayed firmly within the 30-degree blind spot, striking its carapace again.

Enraged, the One-Eyed charged, but this time Rena raised her wrist-mounted kite shield.

Though small like a toy, when its horn collided with the shield, an enormous phantom shield appeared, forcing the creature backward.

The creature flipped over, its legs flailing like a beetle's. It struggled to right itself, but even when it did, it staggered to the right, still reeling from the impact.

Kanya aimed her Arc at it.

The weapon resembled a bow, but it was made of metal and lacked a bowstring. Instead, it had a handle that, when pulled, emitted red light from both ends, targeting the creature.

The Arc allowed for triangulation-based precision targeting. Once the aim was set, the projectile wouldn't miss. Kanya focused the red beam onto the creature's face.

Sensing danger, the creature tried to move erratically even in its dizzy state. Kanya adjusted her stance to match its movements.

When Rena disappeared into the blind spot again, the frightened One-Eyed creature lunged at Kanya.

Kanya released the handle, and a small sphere shot from the Arc's center.

The sphere piercing the creature's eye before detonating inside. The one-eyed creature quivered violently before collapsing to the ground.

Its insides had likely liquefied, yet it continued to emit chilling screams.

Rena reversed her grip on her sword and plunged it into the gap in its carapace. With a loud pop, the creature's body convulsed as though sprinkled with salt, then fell still.

Lowering her Arc, Kanya wiped the sweat from her brow.

“Whew, that was tough. This one was a bit more durable, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Are you okay, Sis?”

“As you can see, I’m fine. But it’s strange. Why did a One-Eyed appear here? It’s far from its habitat.”

“Could we be lost?”

“No way. The drone is still pointing in the right direction. Maybe the forest’s laws have changed. We should get out of here quickly.”

“But we should check for Elixirs. There might be some inside.”

Rena climbed onto the creature’s dead body. As she pried open its carapace and reached inside, the melted innards felt like warm porridge.

Though the sensation was revolting, Rena stuck out her tongue playfully and rummaged around until she found something.

After searching for a while, her eyes lit up with excitement.

“Oh? I found it! Sis, it’s here!”

A glowing red orb emerged from the body of the creature.

“Yay! It’s a Red Elixir. Thanks, little buddy!”

Watching her younger sister jump around excitedly, Kanya gave a satisfied smile.

In the majority of creatures in Purgatory, elixirs are grown internally. While they weren’t particularly necessary for the divine beings under the protection of the gods, elixirs were among the most essential substances in Purgatory.

“Looks like we’re lucky. Alright, let’s hurry and move.”

As Kanya resumed her stern older sister demeanor and urged her sibling forward, she suddenly felt an eerie chill crawl up her spine and turned around.

Her gaze met the glowing, predatory eyes peering at them from the forest.

Moments later, creatures emerged, their sharp legs striking the rocky terrain.

More one-eyed creature. Seven of them.

“Rena! Over here!”

Kanya pulled her younger sister to her side and assumed a battle stance, her mind racing with questions.

It was unheard of for One-Eyed to appear in packs, especially so far from their natural habitat.

‘Damn it. I let my guard down. I should have kept monitoring the drone.’

Though called the Purgatory, it still operated under the laws of the gods. The instincts of its monsters adhered to these laws as if they were a part of their nature. If such instincts had shifted, it could only mean some significant event had occurred nearby.

“Of all times...”

It was rare for the laws of the forest to change, and it was even rarer for the divine beings to venture out of Heaven into Purgatory. The overlap of these improbabilities only heightened her unease.

“Sis, what do we do? There are too many of them...”

One of the One-Eyed could be handled by a single member of the Mecca tribe. However, two would require a group of at least five.

By law, the strength of the Mecca tribe lay in collective combat, grounded in their technological prowess.

Though they were the weakest physically among Heaven natives, their coordination made them formidable, even against the powerful Kergoans or Norians.

Kanya trembled with fear for a reason. Even with her Arc, defeating seven One-Eyed was impossible.

What in the world was happening in this forest?

After spending a year carefully mapping routes to avoid monsters, all their efforts were now futile.

Kiiiiing! Keek! Keek!

The One-Eyed swung their horns menacingly. The sisters stood back to back, protecting each other.

A One-Eyed suddenly lunged at Rena.

She thrust out her Meccan shield, the Exd, which deflected the creature with powerful rebound.

Kanya quickly switched places with her sister and fired her Arc. Without the luxury of precise aiming, the projectile struck the One-Eyed's shell and exploded, sending it tumbling.

But as soon as one fell, the remaining monsters charged. "Sis! Get behind me!"

Rena swapped places again, brandishing her Exd. Each time a horn collided with the shield, the impact echoed like thunder.

Though she swung her Signa, a weapon that emitted shockwaves, One-Eyed were difficult to hit unless approached from their blind spots.

The time they could hold out with the Exd was running out. Once its recoil limit was exceeded, the shield ceased functioning, becoming little more than a toy.

As the seven One-Eyed closed in from all sides, the sisters embraced each other, closing their eyes.

It wasn't death itself that terrified them—it was the pain that preceded it.

One-Eyed would stab their prey with their mouths and suck out their innards while still alive. Kanya briefly considered taking her sister's Signa and ending Rena's life herself to spare her the agony.

As the One-Eyed's horns lunged to skewer the sisters, a brilliant light erupted from above, descending like a flash of lightning.

In the next instant, the sisters saw the back of a boy standing before them. He had golden hair and wore strange clothing unlike anything they had seen in this world.

Shirone landed and immediately cast Frenzy.

A barrier of light rippled outward, repelling the One-Eyed within a 3-to-5-meter radius.

The ground beneath them sank into a perfect circle, and the sisters collapsed to their knees. Yet their gazes were fixed

on Shirone. They had never heard of humans living in the Forest of the Fallen.

“Are you alright?”

Shirone asked, turning his head with a warm smile.

In a world where returning home was impossible, seeing another person brought an indescribable joy that far surpassed mere homesickness. Whatever these women’s identities might have been, the grotesque monsters felt like enemies, and the boy, an ally.

Kanya’s wariness only grew at Shirone’s appearance, while Rena, a young girl in the throes of adolescence, blushed furiously.

‘He’s so handsome. Could he be a Norian?’

While the sisters harbored vastly different thoughts, Shirone and his companions were engaged in fierce combat with the One-Eyed.

Rian and Tess each took on one of the creatures.

After an initial clash, Rian felt a sense of relief. They weren’t easy opponents, but their level of strength wasn’t unfamiliar to someone from his own world, who had faced many monsters before.

Grabbing a One-Eyed’s horn, Rian overpowered it and flipped its precarious six legs into the air. Then, he drove his sword into its abdomen, pinning it to the ground.

Chapter 180: 3. The Forest of the Fallen (5)

Tess's battle was nearing its conclusion.

Her sabre, though lacking in weight to shatter the exoskeleton of the One-Horned Fiend, was perfectly suited for targeting its weak spots.

Tess jabbed at the gaps in the exoskeleton, gradually impairing its mobility. Finally, she drove her sabre into the creature's single eye, twisting the blade to subdue it completely beneath her feet.

As the battle dragged on, Amy erected a Fire Wall around the group.

Being mindless beasts, the ideal outcome would have been for them to retreat. Instead, one charged straight through the fiery barrier.

Harvest, now enlarged, seized the creature's body and snapped its spine.

Arin let out a sigh of relief upon realizing that psychic perception worked on the creatures. Casting Mind Control on four One-Eyed, two of them began trembling under her control.

The controlled creature turned on their own kind, attacking their comrades with lethal precision.

With the creatures fighting among themselves, the group no longer needed to engage.

With the creatures dead, Rian and Tess secured their weapons, and returned to Shirone.

Amy dispelled her Fire Wall, revealing the carnage among the One-Eyed. The controlled fiends used their horns, legs, and jaws to stab, crush, and trample their own kind.

They were outnumbered two to one, so Arin's skill at controlling the creatures was key. At first, the creatures were unfamiliar to her, but she quickly learned to recognize them and used their long-range horns to engage in carnage tactics.

The group observed the horrific scene, shuddering. For Kanya and Lena, the sight was especially shocking. Creatures bound by the laws of the forest were now violating those very laws by killing their kin. Truly, this was an unprecedented day in the Forest of the Fallen.

Arin exhaled deeply, victorious in battle. Sustaining Mind Control consumed significant mental strength, but making the fiends fight each other also caused her to absorb their fading fighting spirits, leaving her mentally exhausted.

The remaining fiends under Arin's control turned to face Shirone. Kanya and Lena stepped back in alarm, but the creatures merely knelt submissively.

Arin hesitated, unsure of what to do with them.

The exceptional success rate of her Mind Control was both her strength and weakness. The higher her synchronization rate with a target's mind, the clearer their emotions resonated with her.

For a mental mage who controlled all the minds in the world, it was a fateful pain.

Arin hesitated as expected. No matter how much of a monster it was, it was painful to cruelly end the life of a being that fought for her.

Tess, who prided herself on having a "soft heart", voiced her thoughts.

"Can't we just keep them? Even having two would be a huge help."

"No. We can't afford to waste Arin's energy on low-tier creatures like these. Now that we know Mind Control works, she should focus on refining her technique. Keeping them also requires maintaining a constant mental channel."

"Then, how about letting them go?"

“They’ll just come back and attack us—or worse, bring reinforcements.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll have to kill them. Can’t we just make them fight each other to the death again?”

Tess’s suggestion, though logical, only deepened Arin’s conflict.

Unlike earlier, when she’d manipulated the fiends to attack their own kind, this time she would have to command them to slaughter one another after fighting alongside her. The added emotional resonance from their shared battle made the task even harder.

Rian stepped forward, gripping the hilt of his greatsword.

“I’ll take care of it. Just hold them still.”

Canis shook his head.

“No. This is something Arin needs to do herself. To reach a higher level as a mental mage, she can’t remain fragile forever.”

Relying solely on Mind Control would eventually limit her growth. To achieve her goals, she needed to overcome challenges like this.

Canis, who wished to stay by Arin’s side for as long as possible, spoke firmly.

“Arin, remember the promise we made when the Mage’s Association captured us. Master is no longer here. We need to grow stronger. This isn’t a world where you can afford to show mercy.”

Arin closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. Canis’ words were true. She had to master her powers, not let them control her. It was a painful task but one she couldn’t avoid. Arin commanded the remaining fiends to walk to the edge of the forest. There, she ordered them to use their horns to stab each other’s eyes.

The fiends collapsed, their heads touching as they fell. Though still alive, they were rendered incapable of movement.

Arin forced herself to smile.

Watching her, Harvest was reminded of their first meeting, separated by a glass chamber.

Although some still labeled her as fragile, Arin was no longer the fearful girl she had been.

“Arin’s strength and weakness are one and the same. Her ability to resonate with others makes her exceptional, but it also stops her from becoming ruthless. Master Arcane always lamented this.”

“But she’s changing now. She’ll succeed.”

Hearing their conversation, Shirone felt reassured. Although Arin had chosen a difficult path, she had loyal companions to walk it with her.

“Anyway...”

Shirone began, and with his friends turned to Kanya and Rena.

The two sisters flinched. Despite the situation, the six newcomers looked inexplicably moved.

“They’re human.”

“Yes, humans. And they have swords and shields.”

“Swords and shields... I thought I’d go mad, seeing giants uproot trees and swing them around.”

Their strange chatter made Kanya shield her sister protectively. She shouted at the strangers.

“Who are you? What are you saying?”

Arin used Spirit Zone to establish telepathic communication, converting Kanya’s thoughts into words the group could understand. Shirone spoke as amicably as possible.

“Well, we came from somewhere else, and...”

Kanya’s sharp gaze silenced him.

Now understanding their language, Kanya grew more cautious. What unsettled her most was that their speech and lip movements didn’t match.

“What did you do? Is this magic? Are you Norians?”

“Norians? What’s that?”

Instead of answering, Kanya raised her arm, summoning a drone from above. The beetle-like device descended onto

her wrist, transforming into a gauntlet.

“Language decryption.”

The gauntlet’s display lit up.

“You, say it again.”

That was enough. Kanya flexed her arm and checked the gauntlet.

No data. Decryption failed.

Realizing the drone couldn’t analyze their language, Kanya drew her Arc. A red dot appeared between Shirone’s eyebrows.

“W-What’s this all of a sudden?”

Shirone knew from observing the forest that Kanya’s Arc was extremely powerful.

“Rena! They aren’t citizens Heaven! Fight them!”

“But, Sister... They saved our lives.”

“Now it’s clear why the One-Eyed are here. They’ve disrupted the laws of the forest!”

Rena hesitated but reluctantly took up her weapons, preparing for battle.

“Tell the truth if you don’t want your head blown off. What have you done in this forest? Who are you?”

Frustrated by the language barrier, Shirone shouted.

“We’re human too!”

“How can I believe that? You don’t speak the our language! Nor are you heretics!”

“At least we can communicate, can’t we? Isn’t that enough?”

Kanya frowned. Strangely, Shirone’s words made sense.

“Let’s talk this out. If we can understand each other, we can resolve this without violence.”

“Peace? In the Forest of the Fallen? You’re suspicious.”

“The Forest of the Fallen?”

“Must be the name of the forest.”

There was silence after Arin’s explanation.

The standoff continued.

It was no problem for Shirone to subdue her if he set his mind to it, but he hated fighting.

Human. We can talk. If only she would let go of her hostility, she could explain more about this world.

At that moment, Rena looked skyward. Her drone projected a scene onto her retina: over twenty One-Eyed approaching from 500 meters away.

“Sister, trouble! More fiends!”

Kanya snapped to attention. Laws of the forest has broken, staying longer was suicidal.

The unknown strangers didn't seem intent on fighting. It was impossible to tell, but the skill with which they had defeated the One-Eyed should have been enough to subdue them.

“Follow me for now. We’ll talk after we’re safe.”

Kanya turned the gauntlet on her arm back into its bug form and sent it flying into the air. Once she had confirmed the location of the solitary eagle, she decided on a defense and entered the forest.

The Shirone followed her without a murmur. Amy pointed them in a direction away from the city.

4. Reversal of the Law (1)

Kanya led them into a valley where the jungle merged with rocky terrain.

The surroundings were blocked off by cliffs, leaving only the sky visible above. As Shirone walked along the base of the V-shaped valley, he could sense just how ancient this world was.

As they walked, they exchanged introductions with Kanya and her group.

Though Kanya still couldn't fully trust them, it seemed she had at least accepted that they had no intention of fighting.

“This is the Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent. The laws here are different, so there shouldn't be any major trouble.”

“The greatest danger would probably be Shirone getting hit by that weird weapon again.”

At Rian's joking remark, Kanya's eyes narrowed slightly. She still seemed to be fuming over the events in the forest, though it was evident that, if anyone had reason to be upset, it was her.

Assuming Shirone was the leader, she pointed at him accusingly.

"What's your true identity? Are you seriously expecting me to believe that nonsense about coming from another world?"

"But it's true. Whether you believe it or not, that's the reality. Now you explain—what kind of world is this? And about that giant we fought earlier, too."

"Giant? Did you just call it a giant?"

"Yeah, a giant."

"You mean to tell me you killed a giant?"

"No, we didn't kill it. What happened was—"

Before Shirone could finish, Kanya grabbed him by the collar and yelled.

"How could you kill a giant, you idiot? Giants are the guardians of the law! So it really *was* you! Killing the giant is why the One-Eyed have been running amok!"

Amy shoved Kanya's hand off of Shirone. She'd been holding back for the sake of gathering information, but she couldn't tolerate anyone manhandling her friend.

"I said we didn't kill it! And it attacked us first!"

"Of course it did! We're the ones breaking the law here! The Forest of the Fallen isn't a place humans are allowed to enter!"

The two women glared at each other, their tempers flaring, but Shirone stepped between them.

"No matter how many times you say it, we don't understand what you're talking about. Got it? We really are from somewhere else."

Kanya froze, her mind reeling. None of what Shirone said made sense to her, but precisely because of that, she began to realize it might actually be the truth.

“Are you telling me... you really are from another place?”

“I’ve been saying that all along, haven’t I?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean...”

Kanya’s expression grew grave.

She vaguely remembered hearing a story as a child—an old tale, but one she now recalled with vivid clarity.

There was talk of humans from a land under the dominion of Heaven.

These people, descendants of the divine subjects, were pitiable beings who could no longer feel the presence of the gods. Because of this, they could not enjoy eternal life and instead floundered in the agonies of mortality until their short lifespans came to an end.

Chapter 181: 4. Reversal of the Law (2)

“Fine, I’ll explain. This place is called the Hell. It’s also known as Purgatory.”

“Purgatory? This place?”

“Yes, it’s the prison of the earth. Heretics who defy the law live here. Now I understand. You must have denied the existence of the gods in the land of the earth. That’s why you’ve fallen here.”

Shirone didn’t bother to correct her misconception. Even if he explained, she wouldn’t understand, and besides, she wasn’t entirely wrong—none of his group believed in Anke Ra.

“You use magic, so you must be descendants of the Norians. How unfortunate for you. Now that you’ve fallen into Purgatory, the only thing awaiting you is death. You’ll die in the end.”

“That’s right; we’ll die eventually. But so will you.”

Kanya lifted her chin slightly, looking a bit smug.

“Not at all. I am a chosen subject of the gods. That guarantees me eternal life.”

Shirone thought of the myths of Kergo. If someone could truly grant immortality, they could indeed be considered divine.

But it didn’t feel real.

All living beings aged and eventually died. Even magic couldn’t prevent death.

Now that Kanya had realized Shirone’s group’s true nature, she seemed more at ease. While she despised heretics, these people were pitiable souls who hadn’t even been given the chance to embrace divine blessing.

“Well, it can’t be helped. You’re lucky today. Follow me, and I’ll show you a place to stay.”

“Why the sudden kindness? If you’re a subject of the gods and we’re heretics, shouldn’t you be treating us badly instead?”

Kanya turned back, realizing no one was following her.

“Typical mistrust from descendants of the Norians. In Heaven, you’d have been cast out. But here, it’s fine. No laws in Purgatory can protect even the subjects of the gods. You and I are in the same situation here. Anyway, let’s move quickly. It gets dangerous after sunset.”

As they moved deeper into the valley, the cliffs grew taller. The place was desolate, without even a single insect. A faint dampness filled the air, and the only sound was their footsteps echoing through the immense natural surroundings.

“This isn’t gonna be another weird one, is it?”

“Don’t worry. The Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent operates under a powerful law, so dangerous monsters like the fiends before don’t live here.”

“What kind of law is it?”

“The Whirlwind Serpent. It’s said to have lived here for over ten thousand years. But it should be asleep now. It doesn’t roam during the day. That’s why we need to hurry and reach the Nor’s Shelter before nightfall.”

“You said earlier we’re descendants of the Nor. So, are the Norians not subjects of the gods?”

“Of course, they’re subjects of the gods.”

“Then why is there a Nor’s Shelter in Purgatory?”

Kanya sighed, frustrated, but she added an explanation, remembering where they claimed to be from.

“There are three tribes of subjects residing in Heaven, and Norians are one of them. Subjects of the gods are born with fixed lifespans, and when their time is up, they gain eternal life. But some Norians apparently couldn’t accept that. So they fled to Purgatory and formed an independent society.”

Shirone didn't fully understand what it meant to have a fixed lifespan from birth but let it go. It wasn't as fascinating as the claim of gaining eternal life, at least.

What he appreciated more was Kanya's consideration.

Because she believed him to be a descendant of the Norians, she was guiding them to the Nor's society.

"Thank you, Kanya. That's kind of you."

"What are you talking about? No subject of the gods is kind to heretics. We're only going because we need something, so don't misunderstand. Once we reach the Nor's Shelter, don't even acknowledge me."

Despite her cold words, Kanya avoided meeting Shirone's eyes.

Rena, puffing out her cheeks, chimed in with a playful tone.

"She's right. My sister is only coming because she has something she needs. But I genuinely want to help you."

"Haha! Well, thank you, Rena. You're very kind."

At Shirone's compliment, Rena's cheeks turned red.

Kanya stopped walking. Though she understood that Rena, at her sensitive age, might feel drawn to outsiders, such thoughts were forbidden for a subject bound by the law.

She grabbed Rena's wrist and dragged her to a spot by the cliff, away from the others. While Shirone's group watched in confusion, Kanya whispered harshly to her.

"Rena, what's gotten into you? You know we can never be involved with heretics. Even harboring such feelings is blasphemy."

"I know that. But that big brother..."

"No! Absolutely not! Even if you're immature, you can't let yourself be swayed just because someone's handsome. Choosing men that way will get you into trouble."

"And how would you know? You don't even have a boyfriend."

"You'll understand when you grow up. Just listen to me, okay? From now on, treat him coldly."

"I don't like him because he's handsome. I like him because he's kind."

"Kind? That guy?"

Kanya looked at Rena in disbelief. How was she supposed to process this?

Sure, Shirone was unique, but that was likely because he was a heretic. Unrestrained behavior bred corruption, making someone like Shirone a dangerous influence.

"Tell me honestly. Do you like handsome people, or do you like kind people?"

Rena, being fourteen, was at the age to feel such emotions. As her older sister, Kanya felt responsible for guiding her.

"Both, of course. He has to be handsome *and* kind."

"Hah, I don't understand you at all."

"It's fine, sister. I'm not going to fall in love with someone I've only known for a day. Besides... we're not so different from them right now anyway."

It was true. Entering Purgatory without permission was a violation of the law, even for subjects of the gods. They might face punishment, but some things couldn't be given up.

Still, she regretted bringing Rena along.

Even if Rena had a longer lifespan than her, Kanya felt she had been irresponsible as an older sister.

"I'm sorry, Rena. I..."

"I know, sis. And I insisted on coming too, didn't I? You don't have to take all the risks by yourself. I want to give a gift to Mom too."

Kanya stroked Rena's hair. The little girl who used to cry for milk had grown so much. Kanya prayed that she would receive the gods' grace and enjoy eternal life.

She was a precious child, and surely Larke would grant her that.

"Alright, let's go quickly."

The valley was becoming increasingly labyrinthine. Narrow paths crisscrossed, with shallow streams flowing through,

making the air damp and heavy.

Amy, using her keen intuition, realized Kanya's movements were aimless.

It was the typical wandering of someone lost.

"This is taking a while. Is the Nor's Shelter far from here?"

"We're not heading there directly. We don't even know exactly where it is."

"What? You said we were going to the Nor's Shelter."

"It's the destination. But there's no way we, as subjects of the gods, could know the exact location of a place made by Norians who fled from Heaven."

Feeling Amy's incredulous gaze, Kanya added further explanation.

"Don't worry. There's a way."

"What kind of way?"

"Using drones. The Nor's Shelter is an open market where anyone can go. A guide dispatched from the market waits in the Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent. We just need to find that person. That's why we're using drones to search for a place where people might be staying."

Shirone looked up at the two drones flying through the sky. Those flying machines would likely be categorized as ancient relics in his original world. But despite being labeled as "ancient", their technology was incomparably advanced. He suddenly wondered what kind of expression Nade would have if he saw them.

"I understand the drones are scouting, but how do we see what they find?"

Kanya prodded her temple with a finger.

"They're connected to my head. It's called a frequency."

"Frequency?"

"Well, it's like an invisible signal. Think of it as similar to sound. It's a technology called retinal vision. The drone sends a signal to my frequency, which creates an image on my retina. Look closely at my left eye."

A faint electric field flickered in Kanya's pupil, and then a bird's-eye view of the valley unfolded rapidly. Though the image in her pupil was tiny, it had high resolution, making it possible to see the landscapes clearly.

"This is the valley as seen from the drone's perspective. It may not look clear to you, but it takes up half of my vision. The display is directly projected onto my retina."

"That's amazing technology."

Tess couldn't hide her envy. She had always been fascinated by ancient relics, and the drone, in particular, was a game-changer in espionage.

"Where can you get something like this?"

"You can't buy it; it's issued. These are provided exclusively to the Meccans. When you turn twelve, you're given a drone."

"So, can you sneak one out and give it to me?"

"No. They're strictly monitored. If you're caught smuggling one out, you'll face severe punishment."

"I see. I really want one, though..."

"Drones are something even other tribes envy. But even if you had one, you couldn't use it. They're secured with personal encryption. If the owner changes, it shuts down immediately with an alarm."

The fact that the drones were strictly for individual use made Tess feel even more dejected. She wanted one desperately, but since it was a state-issued item, buying it was out of the question.

Frustrated, Tess stopped talking.

"I've found a spot where the Nor might be staying. It's not far from here."

Kanya suddenly took off running, heading to a cave.

The drone landed on Kanya's hand and transformed into a gauntlet.

An image of the final detection point appeared on its surface. Comparing it to the view in front of her, Kanya confirmed this was the place and approached the cave.

At that moment, Tess raised her hand to stop her.

"Hold on. I smell blood."

"Blood? I don't smell anything."

"Heh, of course you wouldn't. I've been trained for this since I was a kid. Even your fancy machine can't smell, can it?"

"What are you talking about? Meccan technology can distinguish 140,000 different scents. The drone just doesn't have that function."

The group realized there had been a subtle rivalry between Tess and the drone all along.

Admittedly, the drone's reconnaissance capabilities were impressive even by their standards. However, Rian found Tess's jealousy toward a mere piece of metal ridiculous.

"Just get on with it. Stop feeling inferior to something weird like that."

Relieved by Rian's comment calling it "weird", Tess focused her sensory Schema on tracing the lingering scent of blood. She stepped cautiously into the cave, scanning its interior for a while before turning back outside to examine the area. After completing her analysis, she addressed the group.

"The scent of blood is coming from deeper inside the cave. Someone is definitely there, but it doesn't seem like they've come outside."

"Why? There's no scent of blood outside?"

"Not exactly. The scent inside is much stronger, which suggests they haven't left the cave."

"But you spent more time checking the outside."

"It's part of the procedure. If there was blood outside too, it would mean the cave could be a trap."

"So, it's not a trap for now. Let's go in."

Shirone cast the Shining spell, summoning a luminous sphere in his palm.

As the orb of light floated upward, Kanya and Rena recoiled in surprise. Although Norians were known to wield magic, they'd never seen such magic in Heaven.

"Sister, do you see that? He created light from his body."

“Yes. People of the Land seem to use strange magic.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that... look like... you know...?”

“Rena! That thought is blasphemous. Quickly, apologize in your heart for thinking such a thing.”

Rena pouted. It was obvious that her sister had thought the same thing since she recognized it so easily.

Still, blasphemy was a sin, so she quietly prayed for Ra’s forgiveness.

Chapter 182: 4. Reversal of the Law (3)

As they advanced another ten meters, the scent of blood grew stronger.

Tess, her tension mounting, was just about to suggest that Shirone slow down.

Suddenly, the cave trembled, and blunt pillars jutted out from the walls. Their speed and size were enough to crush a human instantly.

Instinctively, Shirone and his group retreated.

From a distance, the scene appeared even more grotesque. Dozens of pillars had emerged from the cave walls, crisscrossing with one another.

"Is everyone okay? Anyone hurt?"

Shirone called out, replied by Amy's voice.

"Yeah, I think we're fine. What about you, Shirone?"

"I'm fine too. Was this a trap?"

"No. There's no sign of the cave being artificially modified. Besides, if it were a trap, it triggered way too early."

Tess's observation made sense. If the intent was truly to kill, the trap would have been triggered at a point where escape was impossible. Instead, the pillars seemed designed to block their path rather than harm them.

"If it's not a trap, then what is it?"

From deeper within the cave, a boy's voice rang out.

"Identify yourselves! I won't miss this time!"

Shirone raised his Shining spell to illuminate the interior.

A boy, seemingly of a similar age to Shirone, crouched on the ground with his hands pressed against it. Behind him sat a bearded man with a rugged expression, his legs

outstretched. Blood trickled between the man's fingers, which were clutching his abdomen.

It was Gardrak, the guide from Nor's Shelter.

As Gardrak studied Shirone's group, he spoke to his pupil.

"Clove, didn't I tell you not to use earth magic in the cave? If the ceiling collapses, we'll all die."

At his master's words, Clove stood slowly, though his wary gaze did not waver.

Shirone felt an odd familiarity from their exchange, almost as if he had returned to his own world. Although he didn't understand the Norian language, their pronunciation and intonation were similar to the common language of the continent.

Kanya stepped forward and spoke to them in the Nor's tongue.

"You're Norian, aren't you? We've been searching for you."

"Oh? Now that I get a better look, you're those proud citizens. So, what brings Meccans, who detest exploration and adventure, all the way here?"

"Of course the Nor's Shelter..."

Kanya began but trailed off as her eyes fell on Gardrak's condition.

Though he was smiling, his face was pale. Blood was flowing from his abdomen.

It was strange. In the Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent, where a single law reigned supreme, what could have caused such an injury?

"You're hurt? Could it be the Whirlwind Serpent...?"

"No, it wasn't the law. It was Kergoans."

The word "Kergoan" struck Shirone and his companions.

Initially, they thought they had misheard, but as Kanya drew the Norian language to the surface, their conversation became comprehensible.

"Kergoans? Are you saying they came all the way here to hunt?"

"This isn't a place where heretics live, so it's not exactly a hunt. They were deliberately targeting us. Thankfully, I avoided a fatal wound, but if the bleeding doesn't stop, I won't last long."

Shirone interjected their conversation.

"Did you just say Kergoan? What did they do?"

"Kergoan are another tribe of the citizens. The Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent is safe from monsters, making it a common route for heretics heading to Nor's Shelter. And where heretics gather, there are always other hunters."

"So, the Kergoans are hunting heretics, then."

"They'll probably catch up soon. They're excellent trackers. Plus, they use the Giant's skill. Finding this place through scent, like Tess, is no problem for them."

Shirone guessed that the Giant's skill referred to Schemas. If that were the case, they didn't have time to linger here.

Arin reached out telepathically to the Norian.

"Can you guide us to Nor's Shelter?"

Gardrak and Clove's faces twisted in astonishment. The language was foreign, yet they understood its meaning as if by instinct.

"Who are these kids? Is that the power of a fairy?"

"No, they're from the Land of Earth. They use magic, just like you. Though it might be a little different, they seem to be descendants of the Norians."

Kanya framed Shirone's group in a way that might make the Nor perceive them more favorably. To survive longer in Purgatory, gaining entry to the Nor's community was crucial.

"What's this? Are you saying they're mocklings?"

Clove's gaze turned hostile as he looked at Shirone's group. Norian were a curious people and thus the most law-abiding in Heaven. They knew far more forbidden truths than the Meccan, including secrets about the Land of Earth.

The Land of Earth was said to be a shadow imitating the perfect world of Heaven. Therefore, its inhabitants were

merely imperfect replicas of Heaven's humans—mocklings. To Clove, Shirone and his companions were lesser beings, inferior to anything in Heaven. The gap between Norian and the mocklings was as vast as that between a creator and a creation.

"We're mocklings? What's that supposed to mean?"

Clove ignored him, pointing at the backpacks lined against the cave wall.

"Hey, you lot. Come carry these bags. Each of you, grab one."

There was no need to interpret his tone. It was dripping with disdain. With his chin arrogantly raised, Clove's attitude was infuriating enough to make Amy snap.

"Why should we carry your stuff?"

"Isn't it obvious? We need to escape."

"Then why should we carry it?"

"Because you're mocklings. Without us, you wouldn't even exist. You should be grateful and obey."

Clove seemed to take it for granted that Shirone's group would follow his orders.

He even arrogantly reached out, brushing Amy's hair as if inspecting her.

"Not bad for a mockling. How about coming to my place? Wouldn't you like to live safely in Purgatory?"

Amy's eyes turned sharp.

Citizen, mockling—she could tolerate such labels as part of their worldview. But touching a woman without permission? That was sheer rudeness, no matter where in the Heaven or Earth it occurred.

"Take your hand off me, or you'll regret it."

"Haha! You'll make me regret it? Sure, you mocklings might know a bit of magic, but it won't work on me."

"Enough, Clove."

Clove, sensing the anger in her Master's voice, stepped back.

It was then that Shirone's group's hostility became clear. They were glaring at Clove, their eyes filled with a deadly sharpness.

"What's the matter? What are you going to do by just glaring at me?"

"Clove, we don't have time for this. Do you intend to let me die here?"

Realizing the gravity of his master's injury, Clove hurriedly supported Gardrak. Leaning on his disciple's shoulder to stand, Gardrak took it upon himself to apologize on Clove's behalf.

"My apologies. This is my first time encountering 'replicas', so our response may have been inappropriate. In any case, you're still humans, aren't you? I am Gardrak. It seems we must leave this place now, so could you assist us? Judging by your presence, you've come here seeking the Nor's Shelter. We'll guide you there."

Gardrak's demeanor was more fitting of a mage.

Apologizing in front of his disciple wasn't easy, but he understood the importance of cooperation, even if it involved supposed 'replicas'.

Shirone's group also realized it was too dangerous to linger and silently took on the burden of carrying the packs.

They arrived at the place where the pillars conjured by Clove intersected.

Supporting Gardrak, Clove struggled to navigate through the tangled pillars, sweating profusely.

Amy let out a scoff. She found it amusing that Clove had fallen victim to his own spell. To her, it also hinted that Clove might not be as bright as he thought, given his failure to anticipate such consequences.

Shirone, however, paid no attention to Clove himself but focused on analyzing the spell he had cast.

The magic that caused pillars to emerge from the walls was both aggressive and dynamic. However, from what Shirone

understood about magic, the method used seemed incredibly inefficient.

It led Shirone to wonder if ancient magic functioned on different principles. With this thought, he asked Gardrak about the spell.

“What kind of magic is this?”

Clove interrupted with a derisive laugh, answering in his master’s stead.

“Haha! What’s this? You can’t even do something like this? That’s ridiculous. Earth magic is one of the basics.”

As he said this, Clove shot a playful wink at Amy.

“If it were you, I might even consider teaching it.”

“No thanks. I don’t want my friends to suffer because of me.”

Clove’s face turned red with embarrassment.

Gardrak, too, seemed curious about Shirone’s magic. While Shirone and his group were ‘replicas’, they wielded peculiar forms of magic.

The sphere of light Shirone held in his hand intrigued Gardrak the most. Such magic was deemed impossible in this place, as the cave was considered a realm of darkness. If Shirone had a pact with a spirit of light, that might explain it, but the lack of movement in the light suggested otherwise.

“Hmm, it’s difficult to explain. You don’t use magic like this?”

“We use magic that manipulates the properties of earth, but nothing like conjuring pillars within caves.”

“Perhaps the principles differ. We draw upon the forces embedded in nature to perform our spells. Where there’s fire, we use fire magic; where there’s water, water magic. Clove used earth magic here for the same reason. Of course, it seems he failed to account for the risk of collapse.”

“That’s not fair, Master! It was an emergency at the time!”

Clove's protestations fell on deaf ears, as Shirone's group was busy conversing through their mental channel. Magic that draws upon natural forces... That's quite unusual. It also seemed powerful. The spell Clove cast would have been considered highly advanced in our world, yet he executed it with ease. Even someone like him.

Amy chimed in.

The advantage isn't just power. Using nature's forces allows one person to handle multiple elements. It's different from us, where we specialize in a single discipline.

Arin pointed out a drawback.

But it also seems to limit adaptability. They're constrained by the environment. Without the desired element nearby, they can't cast spells.

Summarizing the characteristics of ancient magic, it was expansive, powerful, and versatile across elements.

However, it was heavily dependent on the surroundings and could even be entirely nullified in certain conditions.

Heaven's magic and Earth's magic—deciding which was superior remained inconclusive.

Emerging from the cave, Kanya turned to Gardrak and asked.

"So where is Nor's Shelter?"

"I can't tell a Meccan that. Just know that it's not here. It requires magic to reach, but that's impossible from this location. Follow me."

At that moment, Rena, having received a signal from her drone, checked her retinal vision and shouted.

"Sister! We've got a problem!"

Kanya closed one eye to receive the drone's transmission. In a nearby canyon, a group of figures was rapidly approaching.

"Damn it, it's the Kergoans! We need to hurry!"

Gardrak's expression turned grim with resignation.

"It's too late. They'll catch us. Their sense of smell is extraordinary; they've caught the scent of blood."

The group remained silent, listening intently. No sounds of pursuit reached them yet, but the fact that their scent had been detected suggested at least one skilled tracker among their pursuers.

“What do we do? Master, what should we do?”

Clove asked, stomping his feet anxiously.

Gardrak had no miraculous solution.

According to Rena, there were about twenty pursuers. With Gardrak injured and Clove inexperienced in combat, a direct confrontation would be disastrous. Shirone broke the tension.

“What if we try this?”

All eyes turned to Shirone.

The Kergoan, clad in crimson armor that gleamed under the sunlight, galloped swiftly across the stream on their dark steeds.

Their eyes shone with the sharpness of freshly forged blades.

As they neared the cave, the leader raised a hand, signaling for the group to halt.

“Stop! They’re inside the cave!”

At the leader’s signal, the twenty followers came to a stop.

A woman with her hair tied back in a ponytail rode her horse to the leader’s side.

Chapter 183: 4. Reversal of the Law (4)

“Shall I go in?”

“No. Norian uses nature’s harmony abilities. In confined spaces, they are at a disadvantage. They know that, which is why they’re trying to lure us in.”

The captain utilized Schema’s ability, shouting in a voice that reverberated through the cave.

“If you don’t come out right now, you’ll face serious consequences! I’ll count to three!”

The subordinates drew their bows and notched arrows. Though these weren’t explosive arrows like Arc’s, arrows propelled by Schema’s strength could pierce even rock. Inside the cave, there would be no chance to dodge—they would be riddled with holes.

“One!”

The cave remained silent.

“Two!”

The captain’s expression twisted. Were they resolved to die? The only option Norian could attempt was to use earth magic to seal the cave. But such a temporary measure wouldn’t hold for long, and it would only cut off their own escape route.

“Three!”

A red dot appeared between the captain’s brows. Something shot out of the cave, and the captain instinctively drew his sword to shield his face with superhuman reflexes.

But by the time he realized what he had deflected, the projectile had already exploded.

“Damn it...!”

A deafening roar echoed as a fiery blast engulfed the captain.

The blast's impact reached the subordinates, startling their horses into chaos.

At that moment, Shirone's group emerged from the cave.

The captain, who had been thrown from his horse, glared at them with a smoldering, soot-covered body. Planting his sword into the ground, he stood and surveyed the chaotic scene, shouted.

"They're with the Meccans! Don't let them escape!"

Pursuing Norian, he had never imagined the Meccan would be involved.

Shirone exploited that gap.

Their plan had worked. Kanya and Rena had monitored the approaching pursuers with their drones and fired Arc at the perfect moment to create an opening for escape.

"There are too many of them! Find us a narrow path!"

At his command, Kanya checked the terrain with her drone and adjusted their course.

The pursuers launched arrows.

Despite being fired from 100 meters away, the arrows maintained their velocity, whizzing past Shirone's group with deadly precision.

Clove turned back in frustration.

"I'll hold them off!"

"No! Just keep running!"

"I can't let this slide—Nor's pride is at stake!"

Clove dipped his hands into the shallow stream and began casting an ancient spell, Shaving.

The water began freezing, turning pale white as it solidified. Crack! Crack!

The sound of freezing water echoed through the canyon as pillars, similar to those seen in the cave, began rising from the frozen surface.

Even while running, Shirone observed the spectacle.

The scale of the ancient magic, which borrowed nature's power, was far greater than he had anticipated. The stream froze solid, and countless pillars obstructed the path, making it impossible for the mounted pursuers to advance. The sound of shattering ice rang out.

The group's faces grew pale.

The pursuers had abandoned their horses and were smashing through the ice pillars with swords and brute force.

"Has Nor allied with Mecca? How fitting for wretched heretics!"

Kanya shouted back, aiming her Arc.

"We are subjects of the God! You, as fellow subjects, have no right to interfere with our laws!"

As soon as she released her grip, Arc's projectiles rained down.

A warrior wielding a longsword cleaved the projectiles in two, but moments later, two fiery blasts erupted behind him.

"Anyone who violates the law will be executed! We are the First Chosen, blessed by the God!"

The Kergoan pursuers roared, raising their weapons high.

Their appearance was nothing like the Kergo civilization Shirone had seen in the original world. Their luxurious armor and extravagant accessories marked them as nobles among the God's subjects.

Running alongside Kanya, Shirone asked.

"Why are they acting like this? Why are they fighting so fiercely when you're all supposed to be subjects of the God?"

"It's heretic hunting. They're the most devout among the subjects, which makes them arrogant and aggressive toward others. There's no good in getting involved with them."

Shirone fell silent. They were already deeply entangled.

"Annoying as they are, they're strong because they use the power of giants. And in this lawless zone of Purgatory,

they'll stop at nothing. If they catch us, they won't give us an easy death."

The distance between the group and the pursuers was closing.

This was partly because every Kergoan warrior used Schema and partly because Shirone's group had to account for the injured Gardrak.

Gadrak shouted at Clove.

"Clove! Cast Aeos!"

"It's too dangerous, Master! You're injured!"

"We're all dead if we keep this up! We're going first!"

Gadrak cast Aeos, a wind magic spell. He floated into the air, and Clove followed suit.

As they ascended, Shirone thought of the Fly spell. If the mechanics were similar, it would be difficult to maintain balance in the narrow canyon.

Just as expected, the two began to wobble the higher they climbed, looking as if they might crash into the cliffs at any moment.

Without them, reaching Nor's Shelter would be impossible. Shirone's resolve solidified, and he transmitted a message to his friends.

Each of you grab someone! We'll use Teleportation!

Canis wanted to use Dark Port, but moving four mages, two Meccans, and two swordsmen left no choice but to employ photonization magic.

Amy grabbed Tess, and Shirone took Rian. Canis and Arin each seized Kanya and Rena.

By then, the pursuers were nearly upon them.

The lead Kergoan warrior raised his sword from horseback, the silvery blade descending like a thunderbolt toward Shirone's head.

At that moment, Shirone's group transformed into beams of light and shot upward.

Gadrak and Clove nearly lost control of their spells.

Not only had they conjured light, but they had become light itself. Transporting the Meccan simultaneously was something inconceivable in Heaven.

At least, it was impossible by human standards.

“How... how can they use light magic without drawing from nature’s power?”

Ancient magic required the use of elemental power. Among all elements, light was the most challenging.

Light was a weak, diffuse force. Even ancient magic, which harnessed nature’s power, struggled to concentrate it.

The only time Norians could cast light magic was when a Shining Spot—a place where light converged—was present. Clove was deeply unsettled.

Watching Shirone’s group effortlessly catch up in altitude through Teleportation, Clove realized they were nothing like the inferior, incompetent mimics he had imagined.

He had assumed Shirone’s Shining magic drew light from a Shining Spot somewhere. But they generated light directly from their own bodies.

As far as Clove knew, in Heaven, the only beings who wielded light were Ra and one other entity.

Perceiving Norian’s unease, Arin communicated through the mental channel.

Looks like Norian doesn’t know about Teleportation magic. Amy smirked.

Hah! Of course not. Photonization theory is one of the greatest discoveries in the history of magic, even in our world. Underestimate the geniuses of the Land of Earth, and you’ll regret it.

Amy felt proud of her homeland.

But the Kergoans were no less formidable. Utilizing external gravity, they raced vertically up the cliffs.

Amy fired a Fire Strike while lying flat.

The descending spears of flame forced the pursuers to split into two groups, but they circled widely around the cliffs and closed the gap even faster.

Damn it! They're relentless!

Let me handle this.

Extending her tendrils, Arin attempted mind control.

Most of the pursuers resisted, but one fell under her influence. Controlled by Arin, the warrior turned on his comrades, disrupting their formation.

"You incompetent fools!"

The captain, watching from below the cliffs, clenched his teeth in frustration. He took a deep breath and unleashed a thunderous howl toward the cliffs.

It was Schema's Howl technique.

"Awoooooooooooooo!"

The reverberating howl from the cliff smashed through the mages' minds, causing the Norian's Aeos spell to unravel. Shirone endured it with intense focus. It was a technique that shook one's very spirit, much like the Parma's monk technique from Ethella.

He immediately cast Teleportation on the falling Gardrak, grabbing hold of him just as Amy swooped in to seize Clove by the ankle.

With photonization magic, they reset their momentum.

Shirone descended to the ground with Rian and Gardrak, followed shortly by the rest of the group landing one by one.

"Damn it! That howl is always the problem. Norians are just incompatible with Kergoans."

Gadrak muttered, trying to save face. It seemed like the teacher and his student weren't entirely different after all. But then, a thought struck him. How had Shirone's group been unscathed by the same Howl?

"Hey, why are you all fine?"

Sometimes, asking something so innocently can be even more irritating. Canis snapped curtly, expressing that annoyance.

"Fine? Are you kidding? My head's pounding like crazy."

"Then how did you cast spells through it?"

“You just grit your teeth and do it. If this is enough to shake you, don’t even bother calling yourself a mage.”

Unlike the Norian, who borrowed the power of nature, the magic of the Land of Earth manifested by combining omniscience and omnipotence. It was undeniably a more demanding method than ancient magic.

But that painstakingly inefficient focus also served to fortify their mental strength.

Additionally, Shirone’s group had many with specialized abilities.

Arin, with her expertise in mental fortitude, could naturally defend against such effects, and Amy, immune thanks to her Crimson Eyes ability, was entirely unaffected. Shirone himself possessed a resilience that rivaled the Crimson Eyes in durability, often called Diamond Mind.

Meanwhile, Clove had landed face-first in the stream. Rising with a furious expression, he turned to Amy.

“You! How dare you slam me down like that?”

Though Clove had a foul temper, it was part of his charm, and he’d tolerated it so far. But now, this mere imitation human had pushed him to his limit.

“I’ll never let this slide...!”

But Clove froze mid-sentence, a chill running down his spine.

Amy’s Crimson Eyes glowed ominously. Even without turning to face him, her expression toward the pursuing enemies radiated an icy menace.

“Don’t mess with me during battle. If you want to whine, I’ll indulge you later.”

Clove slowly turned his head. The Kergoans pursuers were closing in, their predatory eyes glinting with ferocity.

His face twisted in despair.

“It’s over. We’re doomed. They’ll catch us and torture us until we die...”

“Stop interrupting and whining. If you’re not fighting, stay out of the way.”

Amy grabbed Clove by the back of his collar and yanked him upright. He collapsed weakly onto the ground.

Even Gardrak, who normally would've defended his apprentice, ignored him and turned to Amy.

"Do you have a plan?"

"I'm not completely sure, but we seem to have timed it just right. Shirone, are you ready?"

"Yeah, barely made it."

"What do you mean? What's ready?"

Shirone glanced up at the sky. His Spirit Zone was extended in a warped formation, reaching high into the heavens. It had taken significant time to reshape into this unique configuration.

Without touching anyone, Shirone cast photonization magic over the entire group. It was a spell he had mastered by risking his life in the valley—a Mass Teleportation spell.

"Catch them! They're trying to escape again!"

The leader of the pursuers barked, urging his men forward while drawing in a deep breath for another Howl.

The thunderous roar swept over Shirone's group. Gardrak and Clove winced, but Shirone's Diamond Mind held firm.

Compared to Marsha's sonic cannons, this was nothing.

Shirone maintained a calm demeanor, meeting the Kergoans leader's gaze as he unleashed his Mass Teleportation spell.

A blinding flash of light engulfed the group, sweeping them up to the cliff's peak where Shirone's Spirit Zone reached.

"Damn it! The Howl doesn't work on them!"

The Kergoans leader gritted his teeth in frustration, seething with rage.

Chapter 184: 4. Reversal of the Law (5)

Now that he thought about it, Howl wasn't the real problem. He had never seen magic that transformed into a giant flash of light and soared into the sky.

"What in the world did they do? Who are they?"

Two specialists in pursuit began tracking Shirone's group.

One sniffed the air like a dog, while the other tilted his head back and stuck out his tongue.

The man relying on his sense of smell declared his defeat.

"Captain, the wind is blocked. I can't track them."

The man using his sense of taste held out a little longer, his tongue stretched out to his chin. Finally, he rolled his bloodshot eyes back to normal.

"I can catch them with taste. They went this way."

The captain mounted his horse as the reinforcements arrived. Turning in the direction indicated by the tracker, he barked an order.

"They've only crossed one wall! They can't have gone far! Pursue them!"

"Hiyaaaah!"

The pursuers let out wild cries as they retraced their path. One minute later...

Shirone's group reappeared in a flash of light, returning to their original location.

It had been Shirone's idea to exploit the Kergoan's tracking abilities.

Since their scent was already imprinted here, tracking would be impossible. The pursuers would only return to this spot after thoroughly searching every other location.

Gardrak, still leaning on Clove for support, pointed to a deep crevice in the valley and said.

"We're safe for now. They won't run into us for a while. Let's head this way—there should be a path."

Amy, still doubtful, asked.

"Where exactly is this Nor's Shelter? How much farther is it?"

"That's what I'd like to ask you. How can you manipulate light magic so freely? Do you extract it from the air?"

"We don't do anything like that. Why do you ask?"

"To reach Nor's Shelter, you need a place where light gathers. It's similar to the magic you used, but it can take you much farther. Anyway, trust me. If we go a bit further, there's a Shining Spot."

The magic Gardrak described seemed to be a form of Spatial Movement, using concentrated light to travel directly to Nor's Shelter.

It was a wise choice. Even if the pursuers killed their guide, the location of Nor's Shelter wouldn't be revealed.

The mindset of the Norian was undeniably that of mages. A gathering place for such individuals—what kind of place could Nor's Shelter be?

With a mix of curiosity and excitement, Shirone led the group through the crevice to the other side.

"Where on earth are they hiding?"

The leader of the pursuers was grim. Twenty minutes of searching had yielded no trace of them.

A group of scouts rode in, their expressions betraying failure.

"They're not there. We found no signs of entry at either Maru Valley or Fan Stream."

"Damn it! We almost had them!"

"But Captain, isn't it strange? How did they escape during the fight? That place wasn't even one of the light-converging regions that the Norians talk about."

The captain was already pondering this.

As far as he knew, no Norian mage could use such a spell.

They might be an Outlander Species, but their resemblance to humans was striking.

Having hunted heretics for 400 years, the captain drew upon ancient history for a clue.

“Could it be... humans of the earth?”

His eyes sharpened. If they were humans of the earth, this was no mere pursuit.

While the Meccan sought knowledge, and the Norian pursued the unknown, the Kergoan worshipped the divine, believing themselves to be the sole subjects privy to all truths.

Earth humans weren't mere imitation beings. To the Kergoan, they were a severe anomaly, capable of disrupting divine law itself.

“Cease pursuit. Return to Shamain. The report comes first.”

The leader's men turned their horses around.

At that moment, a vibration rippled through the ground.

What began as a faint tremor grew stronger, and the group's eyes widened in alarm.

“Could it be...?”

The reason Norians used this valley as a midpoint was that it was a lawless zone, free from harm if one adhered to a single law.

Thus, this tremor was an impossible event. The emergence of the Whirlwind Serpent during daylight had never been recorded in history.

“The law... is being broken.”

A fierce wind howled, and darkness descended, blinding the 20 men.

What followed was a cacophony of screams and cries of terror.

As time passed, the sounds of their agony faded into silence.

The darkness lifted, and sunlight returned, illuminating the cold valley. On the blood-red stream, thousands of pieces of flesh floated aimlessly.

“Shamain?”

Shirone’s expression turned puzzled, prompting Kanya to realize her explanation was too brief. Since she rarely interacted with people from outside Heaven, she sometimes forgot they hailed from the land below.

“It’s a territory where the citizens of Heaven reside. It’s also known as the First Heaven.”

“The First Heaven, huh? Does that mean the first sky?”

This time, Gardrak answered the question. As a heretic, he felt less constrained than Kanya in explaining Heaven.

“Heaven is divided into seven territories, from the First Heaven to the Seventh Heaven. The place where the citizens live is called Shamain.”

Shirone recalled the view he had seen from above: the massive circular wall enclosing six pie-shaped sections, with another central area at the heart of it all.

The seven heavens Gardrak spoke of referred to this structure.

“Do all the races live together in Shamain?”

“Yes. Although they live in separate areas, they all reside in the First Heaven. Even the Kergoans behave themselves there. The citizens are fundamentally protected by the Law. But Purgatory operates outside of divine jurisdiction. That’s why surviving here isn’t easy.”

“How many races live here, anyway?”

“If you include Purgatory, it’s countless. There are many beings whose origins are unknown—outsiders, like that one-horned demon you fought. But among those who observe the Law of God, there are still only three races. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and together they form the foundation of Heaven. Norians love exploration, and Meccans are fond of research.”

“And what about the Kergoans? What do they like?”

Gardrak smirked faintly.

“They like God.”

“Gardrak! How dare you say such blasphemous things!”

Kanya snapped at him, but Gardrak wasn’t fazed. From the moment he chose heresy, no law held sway over him. He had paid for abandoning God with a life of suffering, but it was a decision born of his own will.

“Kergoans enjoy conflict. Their role is to hunt. That’s why they’re the only race permitted to enter Purgatory. Of course, they seem to interpret that privilege in their own peculiar way.”

This time, even Kanya couldn’t argue.

“They’re a truly detestable race. Just because they borrow the power of giants doesn’t mean they *are* giants. Seeing them mimic those who abide by the Law is infuriating.”

“What exactly is this Law?”

Initially, he had interpreted the term based on his own understanding, but as time passed, it seemed to carry a different meaning in this world.

Kanya, looking incredulous, responded with a question of her own.

“You don’t know what the Law is? Does the land below not have a Law?”

“No, we do, but... do you absolutely have to follow it?”

“Of course! The Law is the will of the great Ra. Those who defy that will cannot exist. That’s why it’s called the Law.”

Shirone spread his hands, looking exasperated.

“But we’re defying the Law right now, aren’t we?”

Kanya, equally frustrated, shot back with irritation.

“That’s why we’re stuck in Purgatory like this! Why can’t you understand? Would you want to live here for the rest of your life?”

Kanya’s disdain for Purgatory sparked a retort from Clove.

“Hah, what’s so bad about it? It’s a lot better than spending an eternity in some cramped place.”

“Oh, really? Then go ahead and live here. Spend your life being hunted by the Kergoans as a heretic.”

Just as Clove was about to snap back, Gardrak intervened.

“That could very well be. Regardless, we are those who defied the Law. We were cast into Purgatory, but so what? At least we gained freedom.”

“And how is that freedom? It’s just fear—fear of not knowing when you’ll die.”

“You’re right. I don’t know when I’ll die. But the right to die is mine alone. Isn’t that enough?”

Kanya’s expression hardened.

Though it was said that the citizens of Heaven gained eternal life, death was still a sensitive subject. For a heretic to speak of the “right to die” was an outright mockery of Heaven.

Kanya, unable to contain her anger, retorted.

“As a citizen, isn’t it only natural to follow the Law? After running away like cowards, you now spout nonsense about freedom and the right to die. Do you think dressing up your pathetic lives with fancy words makes them any better? This is why I can’t stand the Norian!”

Rena intervened, trying to deescalate the situation.

“Enough, Sister. Fighting with a heretic won’t change anything.”

Kanya knew this too. Dialogue with those who stood diametrically opposed to the Law was futile.

However, Gardrak, having already entered the fray, decided to see it through to the end. His long years in Purgatory had left him with pent-up frustrations.

“Do you really think that? That you’re in the right?”

“Of course! We’re different! We left Purgatory because we refuse to use things like elixirs in Heaven. Once we obtain the items, we’ll return to Shamain, live under God’s protection, and spend the rest of our lives in happiness!”

“There’s no need to sugarcoat it. You’re just another creation desperate for eternal life.”

Murderous intent flashed in Kanya's eyes.

Though she had tolerated the blasphemous discussion thus far, Gardrak had crossed a line she could not forgive.

"No matter how much of a heretic you are, I can't let that slide. I'll kill you right here."

"Sister, stop."

Ignoring her sister's plea, Kanya unsheathed her Arc. But Gardrak only gazed at her calmly, with a hint of pity.

"In that case, why did you seek me out? No, more importantly, what do you hope to gain from the Nor's Shelter?"

Kanya flinched, her Arc trembling.

"It goes without saying. Someone in your family will soon undergo the Rite of the Liquor of Anecdote. That's why you've come here to buy medicine from the Norian."

Her weapon wavered. At this range, there was no way to stop a projectile if she released it. But in the end, Kanya couldn't fire. Tears streamed down her face uncontrollably.

"What's so wrong? What's wrong with caring about my parents? This has nothing to do with the Law! I just... I just want to save my mother!"

Gardrak's hardened expression softened slightly. He, too, had once been a citizen. He understood Kanya's pain better than anyone.

Rena hugged her sister, turning to Gardrak.

"I'm sorry. My sister..."

"I understand. There's no need to apologize to a heretic.

The Meccan value familial bonds deeply. It seems she's not acting like herself. Perhaps it's because of this injury."

Gardrak awkwardly checked the wound on his abdomen.

Though his muscles were slashed, his organs were unharmed. The issue was blood loss—manageable, but ongoing.

He turned away, speaking as he did.

"Don't worry. The Norian won't imbue their goods with emotions. You'll get what you need. But you'll need plenty of

elixirs; Norian are shrewd merchants.”

Kanya wiped her tears, her voice resolute.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve saved enough over the past year.”

A sad smile appeared on Gardrak’s face as he walked away.

Watching their exchange, Shirone felt an unshakable heaviness in his heart. Many of the terms were unfamiliar, and the reasons for the emotional outbursts were unclear, but one thing was certain: this world was not ruled by absolute values either.

What was the Liquor of Anecdote? Was Ra truly a god? Was this place Heaven or merely another world?

When this journey ends, will he return home with answers to all his questions?

Chapter 185: 4. Reversal of the Law (6)

Gardrak found the desired location not far away.

It was a place where the valley had sunken, causing cracks to form. A narrow crevice, just wide enough for a person to squeeze through, had a single beam of light streaming down through it.

“Look here.”

Gardrak said, pointing to the center of the radiance. In that spot, the light seemed to cluster unnaturally. It was soft and fluffy like snowflakes, but upon closer inspection, tiny particles of light could be seen swirling within.

Shirone stared at it, scratching his head. How could this be explained? By its nature, light particles shouldn’t naturally gather in such a way.

Of course, the Norian wouldn’t think differently.

Gardrak, emphasizing the peculiarity of the phenomenon, cupped the particles of light with his hands and spoke.

“You see how the light is uniquely concentrated here?”

“Yes. But how is that even possible?”

“It’s the essence. The essence of light resides here.”

“So... you’re saying this ‘essence’ is what gathers the light?”

“No. It’s that light has lingered here for such a long time that the Essence has come to dwell in it. Essence can reside in anything—wind, water, even thoughts. But only if that thought remains unchanging for an immensely long time.”

Shirone thought it resembled the concept of magic stones—when a particular property accumulates over a very long period, it materializes into a tangible phenomenon.

“If an essence resides in one place for a long time, it becomes a spirit. Spirits are, in fact, an active essence. They

can even form contracts with humans. If you were to contract with a light spirit, you'd be able to draw upon the power of light anytime, anywhere. But acquiring one is as difficult as plucking a star from the heavens."

Shirone gestured toward the light and asked.

"Then, will this light eventually become a spirit as well?"

"Ha, probably. It'll take about a thousand years, give or take—assuming it doesn't dissipate in the meantime."

A thousand years—far beyond the time allotted to humans. The duration required for an essence to form must be similar. Shirone now understood why finding spirits was nearly impossible.

"In any case, this place will lead us to the Nor's Shelter. Everyone, gather over here."

"The space is tight. Shouldn't some of us move to the other side?"

"It's fine. Now that I think about it, magic in the land below seems to have limited range. With light essence, though, we can expand the scale as much as we want. Like this."

Gardrak grasped the cluster of light. His hand glowed with a golden hue that climbed up his arm, reaching his shoulder. It seemed like the light would soon envelop his entire body. The limitless power of nature allowed humans to amplify its strength.

But the process appeared to take time.

Even after a while, the light hadn't moved beyond Gardrak's shoulder. A flicker of doubt crossed his eyes.

"That's strange. Why is this taking so long? It usually takes only five minutes."

"Master, could it be that the light essence has weakened?"

"Impossible. I did this just three days ago without any issues. For the essence to change, it would take centuries at least—unless something is actively weakening it."

"But that doesn't make sense, does it? This place operates under a single law, which is why we use it as a base."

At Clove's words, Gardrak had a realization. It might have been a wild assumption, but looking for other causes while ignoring the only plausible answer would have been even more foolish.

"Could it be...! But why?"

The light essence began to waver. Then the ground shook, and finally, the entire valley quaked as though an earthquake had struck.

"What's wrong? What's happening?"

"Get out of here quickly! It's the Whirlwind Serpent of the Law! The essence is collapsing!"

Fearing the cliffs would crumble and crush them, Shirone and his group hurriedly escaped the crevice in the valley. From outside, they saw the surrounding area shaking violently. Whatever was causing it had to be nearby, given the magnitude.

Yet, no serpent-like figure was in sight despite scanning the surroundings.

"Damn it! Where is it? Where is it coming from?"

Rian unsheathed his greatsword and stepped protectively in front of Shirone.

The mages formed a defensive formation, preparing for battle.

Tess sharpened his senses, scanning the area. The vibrations from the left were different from those on the right—the creature was circling from the right-hand corner. But as the ground trembled so violently that standing upright became difficult, Tess sensed something amiss. The intensity of the tremors didn't match what was visible. At this level of shaking, the creature should have already appeared.

"There! Look over there!"

Shirone pointed with a startled expression.

About three meters away, a small, white creature crouched on a rock, its four legs tucked under its body.

Could it even be called a creature?

It had no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Its shape resembled a salamander, but its surface was smooth as if carved from jade.

Shirone had never seen anything so white in his entire life.

“What is that? Is *that* the Whirlpool Serpent?”

“No, not that one!”

At Gardrak’s shout, Shirone instinctively stepped back. His field of view expanded, allowing him to finally see it.

The shadow of the Whirlwind Serpent loomed over the valley. It was unimaginably massive, large enough to encompass the entire cliff.

Shirone glanced back at the rock. The salamander-like creature’s body was glowing intensely.

It was using its light to project and magnify the shadow.

By the time Shirone realized this, the serpent’s enormous shadow had already lunged, its gaping maw tearing through the air.

A shroud of darkness engulfed their vision. The creature’s size was so overwhelming that they didn’t even register it as an attack.

As Shirone and the group found themselves trapped in total darkness, Gardrak shouted from the crevice.

“Watch out!”

Shirone unleashed a burst of light.

The light scattered, revealing how close the razor-sharp shadow claws had come to them. If they’d been even a moment slower, they would have been torn apart.

Kiiiiaaaaaaa!

The Whirlpool Serpent screeched as the light ripped through it.

It was likely similar to the Harvest. A creature without a mouth couldn’t possibly have vocal cords.

When they came to their senses, they saw the serpent’s shadow retreating like storm clouds dissipating.

Surviving the first attack was fortunate.

Most prey didn't live past the Whirlwind Serpent's initial assault. Its ability to trap its victims in darkness meant they couldn't even see the attack coming.

Amy wiped cold sweat from her brow and asked.

"What the hell is that? Is it alive or not? Is that salamander-like thing controlling it?"

Emerging from the crevice, Gardrak replied.

"No, the true form of the Whirlwind Serpent is a shadow. It doesn't have a physical body. The thing standing on the rock is nothing more than an 'avatar' created by the shadow of the Whirlwind Serpent."

"How can that even be possible? Shadows exist only if there's a body to cast them!"

"I don't know either. We call such phenomena a 'reversal of the laws.' That thing is an alien species. I don't know where it came from, but it's definitely not from a world we can comprehend."

The Whirlwind Serpent hesitated to approach. It had never encountered a being that emitted light among the humans it had killed before, so its wariness was understandable.

As the avatar's body radiated light, the shadow grew even larger, much like how a wild animal would display dominance before its adversary.

Shirone grasped the implications of this behavior. Perhaps this place wasn't destined to be his grave after all.

"It seems similar to a wild animal. In its original world, it probably wasn't an uncommon predator—like a cat or a rat. If it were a top-tier predator, it wouldn't act this defensively."

"A cat? A rat? Are you seriously joking right now?"

Kanya voiced what everyone else was thinking. Yet Shirone wasn't the only one to realize the truth.

Canis, too, had recognized something. He observed the Whirlwind Serpent's every move with awe.

'So it really exists—a world where darkness dominates light.'

A reversal of the laws. The information in Arcane's note was true.

"Shirone's right. If this really is a world where the rules are reversed, all living beings might exist as shadows. The Whirlwind Serpent probably wasn't particularly strong in its original world. Of course, the situation here is different."

Gardrak examined the crevice in the valley.

As expected, the law of the Whirlwind Serpent had weakened the light essence present there.

In this state, escape was impossible.

But it wasn't time to give up. The light wave Shirone had unleashed earlier was strong enough to push back the Whirlwind Serpent.

"Hey, we may have avoided immediate danger, but stay alert. Its weakness is light. That's why it doesn't move during the day. I don't know why the laws have been disrupted, but as long as we use light magic, we have a chance to win."

Shirone recalled his battle with the Harvest. From that fight, he learned one crucial fact: against darkness, impact didn't matter. The key was the total energy output.

As Shirone cast Photon Cannon, eight photons materialized around him in irregular positions.

All eight flashes of light struck the Whirlwind Serpent. A terrifying scream erupted.

Amy unleashed a barrage of fireballs. Since flames also emitted light, they were effective.

The shadow of the Whirlwind Serpent ignited.

However, it was barely more than a mosquito bite on an elephant. The shadow was unimaginably massive, almost unfairly so.

Canis couldn't even attempt magic. His attempts to use dark power only resulted in the shadow absorbing the energy instead.

In battles between forces of the same nature, the larger force always dominated.

If Canis couldn't wield darkness greater than the Whirlwind Serpent's, he'd only end up being devoured.

Shirone broke away from his group. If the creature enveloped them in its shadowy veil again, they would face even greater danger.

True to its name, the Whirlwind Serpent moved in large spiraling motions. Shirone struck its side with another Photon Cannon, causing the serpent to writhe in pain before turning to pursue him.

As the serpent abruptly shifted direction, its enormous tail swung toward Amy's group.

Clove clutched his head and screamed.

"Ahhhh! It's coming!"

Amy cast Fire Mist, creating a fiery screen to protect them, though it wasn't enough to burn the tail.

Just as the tail threatened to sweep the group away, Amy added a Fire Wall spell.

The tail caught fire, but its trajectory remained unchanged. Amy gritted her teeth and intensified the flames, prepared to hold her ground even if it cost her life.

At the last moment, the tail, which had been hurtling toward Amy's body, suddenly veered away, narrowly grazing her face. The Whirlwind Serpent couldn't endure the pain from the flames and withdrew.

"Shirone!"

Without even a moment to catch her breath, Amy cried out. The Whirlwind Serpent lunged forward, jaws wide open, attempting to swallow Shirone whole. At the same time, an explosive burst of light erupted, tearing apart the serpent's face.

Shirone's Photon Cannon fired in rapid succession.

Amy estimated that the rate of fire must have exceeded 200 shots per minute. For someone like Shirone, who had set a school record in speed casting, such a feat was entirely possible.

The rate of fire grew faster still. Eventually, the photons formed a continuous beam, pushing the shadow all the way to the far wall.

The photons were stripped of mass, converting purely into energy.

With no physical force behind them, the beam couldn't tear the shadow apart but instead slowly began to erode it.

"What kind of magic is that? That's insane! There's no way that's possible!"

Although it was a relief to see their ally winning, Clove couldn't accept the surreal sight unfolding before him.

Kanya and Rena were equally astonished.

Unlike the Meccan, the Norian were capable of immense power even on their own. But none of them had ever witnessed anything like this, not even in Heaven.

The sight of Shirone single-handedly fighting the feared Whirlwind Serpent was awe-inspiring.

And most importantly—he was winning.

Seeing the Whirlwind Serpent writhing against the wall sent shivers through everyone present.

Shirone's beam of light turned red.

From Photon Cannon to pure Photon Output, Shirone elevated the energy level further, compressing it into a single-wavelength laser.

The Whirlwind Serpent tried to resist by reclaiming its shadowed domain, but the resulting explosions only scattered its power further.

"Kyaaaargh!"

A feral roar.

The Whirlwind Serpent was afraid.

In its original world, it was a low-level predator. Then, 10,000 years ago, it passed through a strange tunnel and emerged in this Heaven.

Without natural enemies here, it had no reason to evolve and lived a life of comfort.

But now, that comfort was being shattered—by the very humans it had once torn apart for fun.

Chapter 186: 4. Reversal of the Law (7)

The Whirlwind Serpent split its shadow into dozens of strands to attack Shirone.

Caught off guard by the tentacle attacks flying at him from all directions, Shirone was left vulnerable.

In that instant, his laser scattered and spread into multiple beams.

Dispersing energy to destroy each strand individually was an excellent strategy, but it inevitably reduced the damage dealt per second.

Shadows as thick as a giant's thigh surged toward Shirone, barely missing him.

The onlookers screamed, convinced they were about to witness Shirone's body being torn apart.

One of the tendrils failed to withstand the buildup of energy and exploded. One after another, all the tendrils detonated in a chain reaction, reaching the serpent's main body.

The Whirlwind Serpent extended new tendrils, but by now, Shirone had realized the truth: it took less time for the energy to reach a saturation point than it did for the tendrils to reach him.

For as much as Shirone's energy was dispersed, so too was the serpent's durability.

The ensuing battle was a clash between light and darkness.

Like two warships exchanging relentless bombardments from a distance, dozens of shadowy tendrils left afterimages in the air, only for Shirone's beams of light to follow and explode them one by one.

The pace of attack and defense was so fast that the shadows' movements were impossible to track with the

naked eye.

Relying on his Spirit Zone to handle 70% of his sensory input, Shirone unleashed a barrage of lasers.

The launch points numbered in the dozens, creating a three-dimensional lattice of light that dominated the space.

Now it was a matter of who would tire first.

Shirone felt defeat looming over him. The tension almost brought him to tears, but his focus on the battle was so absolute that his mind wouldn't allow even a change in his expression.

As Shirone's mind blurred with fatigue, the Whirlwind Serpent let out a harrowing cry. It too was fighting with all its might.

Seeing this, Shirone felt a strange sense of kinship.

The serpent, sensing its impending death, thrashed wildly, but there was no space left in its shadows to absorb more energy.

The laser's energy surged through the serpent, shaking its entire being.

A tremendous explosion blew apart the main body, scattering fragments of shadow into the air.

The gradually narrowing laser faded into droplets and vanished right in front of Shirone.

The spectators stood motionless, observing the aftermath in silence.

Shirone, too, fought the urge to collapse as he focused on the Whirlwind Serpent's avatar.

The salamander-like form lost its light, reverting to its original alabaster material. Its saturation faded, and then it dissolved into the air as if merging with it.

"Is it... dead?"

No one could answer Tess's question.

The creature that had lived in this place for 10,000 years had been studied by countless citizens and heretics, but its death had always been an unknown phenomenon. No one had ever managed to corner it, let alone kill it.

Rian swung his sword through the spot where the salamander had been.

Gardrak examined the fissures in the canyon. The light energy, now unshackled, was reviving with a radiant glow.

“It’s definitely dead. Or at least, it’s no longer here.”

At last, Shirone sank to the ground. The others could only look at him in stunned silence.

A mortal had erased a law.

Kanya, Rena, Gardrak, and Clove all understood the implications of this outcome.

This boy was dangerous.

A law is a law because it cannot be destroyed. Only a god’s will can alter it. Shirone had trespassed into an inviolable domain forbidden to all other beings.

“What are you... exactly? And that magic... How in the world did you learn such a thing?”

The group remained silent.

The truth was, even they didn’t know. The principles of Shirone’s magic were the same as theirs, but his unique techniques were impossible to replicate.

Magic derived from divine particles carried inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Lasers could overpower strong enemies but were less effective against fast-moving targets. Wide-area attacks like Photon Cannon consumed tremendous mental energy, and pinpoint strikes like Frenzy required perfect timing.

But Shirone compensated for these weaknesses with an extraordinary balance of light scattering, indestructible resilience, and limitless mental stamina drawn from Immortal Function.

Shirone now stood in a league of his own, unclassifiable by any conventional magical archetype.

Canis understood why unique individuals in the magic society were called Unlockers—the term didn’t merely refer to those who unlock the Immortal Function. What mattered

was how harmoniously they could balance their unique traits.

In this sense, Shirone was becoming a true Unique.

Clove watched Shirone with a complicated expression.

Thanks to Shirone, they had managed to survive, so Clove didn't want to harbor ill feelings toward him. However, the real issue was what might happen if Shirone entered the society of Nor.

Being dominated by an outsider, especially by an *imitation*, could not be allowed under any circumstances.

But there was no way to overpower him through sheer strength, so the only choice was to intimidate him early on.

"There's no need to brag over something like this. If Master hadn't been injured, he would've been able to handle it on his own. Removing the Laws recklessly, even for a heretic, is dangerous. Now that the Whirlwind Serpent is gone, a new Law will take its place, and we've lost our guide to this place. It was risky this time, so we can let it slide, but you need to be more cautious in the future."

Shirone wasn't listening. He was staring intently at something that had fallen from the sky.

It was a jewel, transparent and glimmering like a droplet of water.

"Hey! Are you ignoring me? Can't you hear what I'm saying?"

Only then did Shirone turn his head. Pointing at the three jewels that had fallen in front of him, he asked.

"What are these? They seem to have dropped after the Whirlwind Serpent exploded."

"What? Those are...!"

Clove's eyes widened in disbelief when he saw the jewels. They were White Elixirs.

The first time Clove had encountered a White Elixir was in a major community on the mainland, at the Norian Market.

Back then, during an auction for rare items from the marketplace, an independent Norian faction had purchased

the essence of a Water Droplet Spirit using 23 White Elixirs. Unlike ordinary Water Spirits, Water Droplet Spirits were incredibly rare. While oceans and rivers could produce spirits frequently due to their constant existence, water droplets were not naturally or continuously formed. Even so, the Water Droplet Spirit was weaker than the Water Spirit in terms of magic capability.

However, contracts with Water Droplet Spirits offered benefits such as smooth skin, prevention of aging, and minor healing abilities, making them highly desirable among women.

From what Clove recalled, the value of a Water Droplet Spirit was approximately 4,600 Red Elixirs or 670 Green Elixirs. This meant obtaining it was akin to hunting 7,000 One-Horned monsters. Yet, the faction had managed to acquire it with just 23 White Elixirs—a testament to their immense worth.

“White! It’s a White Elixir!”

Clove leaped like a flying squirrel, reaching for the treasure. Just as his hands were about to grasp it, Shirone swept it off the ground with a quick motion.

Clove turned to Shirone with a dejected expression as if he’d been robbed of his fortune.

Of course, the items Shirone had collected belonged to him. Yet human greed often made others’ possessions appear more valuable. What irked Clove most was that Shirone didn’t even seem to grasp the value of the White Elixirs.

“Cough, cough... Why are you staring at me like that? I just wanted a closer look.”

“What is this?”

“Well, it’s, uh... nothing much. It’s an Elixir—a currency used by heretics for trading. You’d need a closer inspection to determine its value. Mind if I take a quick look?”

“Sure, here you go.”

Without hesitation, Shirone handed over the Elixir. Clove, fearing he might change his mind, snatched it up quickly.

Kanya, realizing what was happening, stormed over with a fiery glare.

“Hey! Why are you taking that? Even heretics have rules, don’t they? The person who hunts it gets to keep the Elixir. Return it!”

“W-What did I even do? And besides, we hunted it together!”

“What did you even contribute? The only one here deserving of those Elixirs is Shirone. Hand it over now!”

“Tsk! You were all hostile to him a moment ago, and now you’re acting all friendly? Guess even a subject like you will drop their pride in front of an Elixir. You think I don’t see through your attempts to curry favor?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Subjects don’t need Elixirs! Shirone, you should know this: if you plan to live among the Norian, remember that Elixirs are everything—food, water, air, and life. Especially White Elixirs. Their value is astronomical! Don’t just hand them over carelessly.”

“It’s fine. He just wanted to take a look.”

“And what if he runs off with them? What then?”

Shirone leaned back casually and placed his hand on the ground.

“Haha! How exactly would he run off?”

“How would he...?”

Kanya faltered mid-sentence.

Now that she thought about it, where would Clove even go with a White Elixir? And what would he do with it?

The rest of Shirone’s group stood nearby, watching Gardrak intently. However, they showed no signs of alarm.

It was clear they all understood Shirone could subdue Clove in less than a second if he so desired.

Realizing this, Clove began to look visibly flustered. Greed had clouded his judgment, and he was now fully aware of how foolish he’d been. Thankfully, he hadn’t acted on his worst impulses.

Gardrak regarded Clove with a disapproving look.

“Clove, give it back. It’s not something you can handle.”

Blushing with embarrassment, Clove reluctantly handed the Elixir back.

“I was just curious. Here, take it back. Thanks for letting me see it.”

Shirone took the Elixir and tossed it lightly in his palm, watching how it reflected the sunlight. Then, he asked Gardrak.

“What’s this used for, anyway? You said it’s called an Elixir?”

Gadrak checked on the recovery of the light essence.

Judging by its rapid strengthening, they could depart in about five minutes.

“To survive in Purgatory, human strength alone isn’t enough. The environment is harsh, and resources are scarce. Some areas are plagued with disease, while others have eternal sulfur flames that burn the air, making it impossible to breathe. Elixirs enable humans to survive in such conditions. They come in five colors, with no real hierarchy among them since all are essential. However, their rarity determines their grade. White Elixirs are the second rarest. With properties of regeneration and purification, they’re used in devices that produce breathable air and medicines for healing wounds.”

“Got it. Can they be used to buy things?”

“Of course. The Nor’s Shelter we’re heading to has merchants. If there’s something you want, you can trade for it. But for something like a White Elixir, you’d need to go to the Nor Market on the mainland—it’s the most active marketplace.”

Shirone pondered this.

The three Elixirs they’d acquired from the Whirlwind Serpent.

If such rare items were being traded, it implied that others were hunting creatures on par with the Whirlwind Serpent. When Shirone voiced this thought, Gardrak nodded.

“Purgatory is vast. Incredibly vast. The Norians have built their society here, but countless other communities existed

before them. The place we're heading to is just the nearest point to Heaven. Beyond it lies a realm so immense that no one dares to traverse it. White Elixirs come from beyond that boundary, brought by those who can journey farther than we can imagine."

Thinking about the merchants at the Nor's Shelter, Shirone carefully tucked the Elixir into his belongings.

Even in his original world, goods had to be exchangeable to hold value. Gold coins, after all, were just a shiny metal if they couldn't be traded. No matter how precious the White Elixir might be, if it wasn't something he could use directly, it was better to trade it for essential items.

As the group gathered near the crevice, Gardrak grasped the light essence. As his body began to glow, the ancient magic Elizer activated, sending beams of white light cascading down the crevice.

The blinding brilliance gradually faded, revealing the landscape's original form.

Silence settled over the area, broken only by the faint sound of wind.

5. Nor's Shelter (1)

The field was strewn with the remnants of ancient ruins. A shallow stream flowed gently, and wildflowers bloomed abundantly along its banks.

The ruins, aged and weathered by time, exuded a sense of comfort rather than desolation. Butterflies flitted between the leaning arches, and two or three people were resting nearby.

Upon arriving at the Nor's Shelter, Shirone scanned the area where they had landed.

Light was streaming down like a spotlight. On closer inspection, beams of light formed a pillar, within which the Light Spirit darted around.

It seemed that the ancient magic Elizer was a spell enabling movement from one source of light to another.

Chapter 187: 5. Nor's Shelter (2)

"Is this the Nor's Shelter?"

"Yes. This place is particularly imbued with the light essence's energy. It can transport hundreds of Norians. I've heard there used to be an altar of light here a long time ago, and its effects still linger."

"It's more peaceful than I expected. Is this place safe from attacks by celestial outsiders or heretic hunters?"

"It's not that far from danger. However, we've concealed it with a light veil. From outside the Nor's Shelter, it just looks like an open field."

It worked on principles similar to invisibility magic.

Invisibility bent light using electrical energy to render objects transparent. However, the light veil here reflected 100% of light, blending seamlessly into the surroundings like a mirror.

Anyone with keen eyes might notice repeating patterns, but finding such patterns on this vast land would be nearly impossible for most.

"Of course, if the high ones of Heaven wanted to, they could find it. But no one cares about life in Purgatory. The only ones who concern themselves here are the Kergoans and starving celestial outsiders."

Near the forest, a makeshift tent village had formed. Some merchants had laid out their wares on the ground. Though there were no customers, they didn't seem to mind, chatting idly among themselves.

Gardrak explained that these merchants were en route to the shops in the mainland. This was merely a rest stop, and to find proper goods, one had to go to the Nor Markets.

Even so, he mentioned that sometimes commoners would come here in search of Nor goods, much like Kanya and Rena.

From the moment they arrived, Kanya seemed tense. While Purgatory might be a neutral zone, this place was firmly within heretic territory.

Avoiding even eye contact with Shirone's group, Kanya asked Gardrak.

"Where can I find Nor medicine?"

"Hmm, I wonder if the herbalist is here. Try looking over there."

As Kanya walked off, Gardrak called after her.

"Remember one thing: never fight in the Nor's Shelter. You know that, right?"

No reply came. Instead, Rena turned to Shirone and gave him a cheerful smile. It was a sweet gesture meant to smooth over her sister's rudeness, though it also carried a hint of personal fondness.

"See you later, big brother."

"Alright. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Though the Nor's Shelter wasn't particularly large, it was easy to lose contact if one stepped beyond Arin's Spirit Zone radius. In a sense, their parting was as good as a farewell.

Shirone watched Kanya's retreating figure.

She seemed anxious.

What could have driven her to leave Heaven in search of something here?

As Shirone pondered, Gardrak checked his abdominal wound. The bleeding had stopped, but the injury was in terrible condition. Without proper treatment, it could prove dangerous.

"I'm going to rest for a while. The blood loss has left me exhausted. Ask Clove about how to trade goods. You'll need to know if you plan to live in Purgatory."

Gardrak's face was so pale that Clove couldn't bring himself to refuse. Leading Shirone's group to the stalls, Clove quickly realized there were more merchants than usual, and his eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Hey, about that White Elixir—are you planning to use it now?"

"Not sure. I was thinking of checking out the goods first and buying something if I need it. Why?"

"If you're willing to pay a brokerage fee, I could handle the negotiations for you. It's your first time here, so you probably don't know what's worth buying."

There weren't many items one could buy with a White Elixir at the Nor's Shelter. It was akin to using gold coins to buy an apple.

However, since Shirone wasn't familiar with what was valuable, there was a good chance of getting something useful if the negotiations went well.

Shirone checked on his companions. They were scattered, browsing the stalls. Thanks to their mental connection, there was no need to call them back.

Clove's asking for a brokerage fee. What should I do?

Hmm, we probably do need an intermediary. Honestly, I can't tell what's valuable here apart from clothes and food. But can we trust him?

At Amy's comment, Arin responded.

I can figure that out.

Shirone made up his mind.

Using psychic perception, he could tell if Clove was attempting to cheat. He just hoped it wouldn't come to that. Paying a brokerage fee was fine, but wasting time on pointless arguments would be a loss for everyone.

"Alright, let's go look around together. Show me what's available."

As Clove led the way, Shirone's companions gathered around him.

Perhaps because many mainland merchants were present, the range of goods was diverse.

The initial offerings were basic necessities: food, clothing, bedding, and blankets—items that might seem mundane but were vital for heretics living in Purgatory.

Clove pointed to a white, pebble-like loaf of bread.

“This is Kalla, a travel essential for heretics. It’s food made with Elixir, so just one piece will keep you full all day.”

Amy crouched down to inspect it.

The loaves came in various colors, but beyond that, there were no distinguishing features to suggest their taste.

If one piece of Kalla could suffice for an entire day’s meal, it seemed like a practical item. But whether it was worth being a priority purchase was another matter.

“Hmm, they’re cute and round. Should I try one?”

Amy dangled bait, and Clove immediately took it. His response would reveal just how earnest he was about his brokerage role.

“This is an amazing item! Even if you’re stranded in the wilderness, having these means you can survive for a month. You should buy as many as you can while you have the chance.”

As he spoke, Clove winked at the merchant.

Arin scratched her head awkwardly. The blatant exchange made it clear there was no need for an analysis—it was obvious what was happening.

Assuming that her friends already understood the context, she skipped over detailed explanations and got straight to the point.

Should we just handle this ourselves? I don’t think this guy has any real intention of doing his job properly.

Amy also clicked her tongue at his shamelessness.

That seems to be the case. But let’s keep him around for now. Who could’ve guessed that these pebbles were supposed to be food? We still need someone to show us the goods. He’s not lying, is he?

No, he's not lying. He's just fixated on making some elixirs. Must really want something badly. Honestly, I kind of feel sorry for him.

Canis sneered.

Figures. Forget his magic for a second—his situational awareness and reaction time are appalling. Think he could actually pull off a proper hunt? Of course, that's why he's so desperate.

While magic power varied greatly based on skill, it wasn't a definitive measure of superiority. The efficiency of magic depended heavily on the environment and situation, as well as compatibility between different techniques.

It was the same logic behind why, despite the overwhelming power of the Whirlwind Serpent, Shirone had managed to defeat it.

To gauge the level of a mage, one had to assess how quickly and accurately they made magical decisions.

Of course, developing such abilities often took far longer than mastering spells themselves. This was one reason why mercenaries who hired mages based solely on visible skills often ended up wiped out by their lack of judgment.

Having traveled the continent searching for the Arcane's legacy, Canis had experienced such tragedies more often than anyone else.

Reflecting on the three battles that had unfolded since their arrival in Heaven, the quick thinking of Shirone and Amy had proven instrumental every time. Compared to them, Clove's skill as a mage was almost embarrassing.

The next stall Clove introduced was a place selling medicines.

Shirone recalled overhearing Kanya arguing with this apothecary earlier, but their mental channel had been disconnected, so he couldn't make out the details.

Clove began introducing the group to various remedies.

Small flasks contained liquids of different colors, all of which were said to be made using elixirs.

The red potion healed wounds, while the blue potion sharpened the mind. These two types were the most common.

Other colors had unique effects as well.

The pink potion amplified feelings of love, while the brown one allowed the drinker to permanently retain memories of a specific moment.

Shirone pointed to a white potion he had seen earlier when Kanya was arguing with the apothecary.

“What’s this one for?”

Clove narrowed his eyes as if surprised and picked up the vial.

“Oh? Didn’t notice this one. This stuff is pretty rare.”

“What’s it used for?”

“This is a stimulant, called Ephines. Anyone who drinks this won’t need sleep for an entire week and will remain completely alert. It’s especially useful for mages. For instance, if your mind’s been shaken by something like a Howl, drinking this can help you withstand it.”

Shirone mentally organized Clove’s explanation. If the blue potion enhanced magic power, the white potion seemed to boost endurance.

“It’s perfect for you guys. It’s pricey, but I can talk the price down for you. How about buying this?”

Shirone wasn’t interested in purchasing Ephines. While its effects were undoubtedly excellent, being able to go a week without sleep, bringing such consumables back to their original world seemed wasteful.

Unique items like this often became difficult to use at the right moment. While in Purgatory, one might gulp them down in emergencies, but for a mage in the other world, such items could instead become a source of reliance.

He briefly imagined how useful it might be to drink it the night before a practical exam, only to dismiss the idea. The thought of being expelled for using banned substances quickly killed that line of thinking.

His idle musings gave way to a more pressing thought—Kanya.

A stimulant.

What could she possibly intend to do with this drug?

By the time Shirone snapped out of his thoughts, the group had moved on to the next stall.

There were seeds that grew into vines several meters tall within ten minutes, essential for traveling in cliff-filled regions. There was also “flame powder,” which could boil water instantly when sprinkled on it—fascinating items.

Listening to Clove’s explanations, Shirone noticed Amy wandering off on her own. She stood still, staring intently at something without even blinking. Curious, Shirone approached her.

Inside what looked like a birdcage was something moving. A ball of fire.

A living flame?

When Clove came over, Shirone pointed to the cage and asked.

“What is this?”

Clove, seeing it, widened his eyes in surprise, as if even he was unfamiliar with the item.

“Whoa! It’s a spirit! Sir, where’d you find this? You’ve hit the jackpot!”

“Haha! It’s a long story. I had a good dream for the first time in ages, so I went hunting outside the community. Sulfur worms sometimes drop green elixirs, you see. But I caught a few, and every one of them was red. Damn bad luck, right? I figured I’d call it quits when I ran into a Fire Claw. Thought I was done for and bolted for my life, rolling down a cliff. And wouldn’t you know it, I landed in a fire spot—an area where sulfur gas leaks had kept flames alive for years. I was about to take a brown potion to commit the memory when the flames started bouncing toward me. Scared me to death! Whipped out my spirit cage in a panic and trapped it. That’s how I ended up with this, haha!”

Clove didn't laugh. He couldn't help but feel bitter about his own lack of such fortune.

Sulfur worms were common in volcanic regions and in the Fire Country of Muspel, a meter-long creature that spat lava but was slow-moving enough even for someone like Clove to catch.

The real issue was the Fire Claw. To escape such a powerful celestial beast alive, and to top it off, capture a fire spirit—surely, this merchant was born under an extraordinary star. Shirone turned to Amy. She looked back at him with longing in her eyes.

He understood the feeling well.

If it had been a spirit of light inside that cage, Shirone wasn't sure how he would've reacted either.

For the first time, Shirone asked about the value of something with genuine curiosity.

"Sir, how much for this?"

The merchant blinked in surprise at the telepathic question but quickly regained his composure.

While one could chalk it up to the adaptability of merchants, Shirone inferred another possibility from the man's calm response.

Perhaps they weren't the only ones in this world who didn't use the language of the citizens.

Chapter 188: 5. Nor's Shelter (3)

Shirone's prediction was spot-on, and the merchant even deduced that they hadn't been in Purgatory for long.

"Hmm, we could negotiate, but I doubt you'd be able to afford it. Spirits are incredibly rare to find in Purgatory. I'm actually planning to take this one back to the mainland. I only stopped by the shelter for a while."

While Shirone had anticipated that the spirit wouldn't come cheap, the outright refusal to negotiate left him feeling uneasy.

Could he buy it with three White Elixirs? If he attempted to bargain confidently and failed, Amy's disappointment would deepen.

Needing a clear basis for judgment, Shirone set the idea of bargaining aside for the moment and asked a question.

"I heard you can make a contract with spirits. Is it possible to do that with this one?"

"A contract? Oh, a contract. Of course, it's possible. But why would you want to contract with a fire spirit?"

"If you contract with a fire spirit, you can use fire magic, right?"

"That's true, but... people usually don't waste precious spirits on contracts. Do you know how much easier life becomes in a village when there's a spirit around? That's why, usually, communities pool their Elixirs to keep a spirit. Sure, people living on the outskirts of communities sometimes buy spirits with the intention of contracting them, but those folks are essentially gambling with their lives. You don't seem like the type to live like that."

"Still, a contract is possible, right?"

When Shirone asked again, the merchant reluctantly nodded.

This reaction was common on the mainland as well. Drifters without the means to pay would often talk a big game, sometimes even infiltrating markets in groups to devalue the goods through strategic plays. If someone from a community's outskirts joined in, the auction would end there. But most people in such situations had no interest in unique spirits unless they were extremely rare.

Amy fidgeted with her fingers. Negotiation was her forte, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything now.

If this were a world where gold coins were currency, she would have emptied her savings to buy it. But in Purgatory, only items directly tied to survival held any value.

She didn't want to show her desire for the spirit and risk making things harder for Shirone.

Shirone already knew. For a mage, enhancing magic power was nearly everything, and he wanted to get it for her if possible.

Sensing the moment of decision, Shirone asked again.

"So how many Elixirs would it take to buy the spirit?"

The merchant smirked as if to mock him, but when he saw Shirone staring at him intently, he grew serious and thought for a moment.

"Hmm. If I were to sell it here, at the very least..."

Shirone's heart pounded. Whatever price the merchant named, he hoped he could afford it with what he had.

The merchant hesitated, likely because the price was significant, and then continued.

"A White Elixir..."

Disappointment flickered in both Shirone's and Amy's eyes. The unit of currency being White Elixirs made their chances seem slim.

Finally, the merchant lifted his head and gave a price.

"At least one."

"Huh? Just one?"

Shirone doubted his hearing, which had never failed him before.

One? He could afford that.

Realizing the same, Amy nervously shook her knees as though afraid someone else might snatch the spirit away.

Shirone considered the situation. At first, he'd only hoped to be able to pay. But as he let go of fleeting thoughts, his determination as a mage solidified.

Looking at Amy, he couldn't help but laugh. She bit her lower lip and muttered softly.

"I want it."

As the sole daughter of the Carmis family, Amy had grown up so privileged she barely knew the concept of material desire. Yet when it came to magic, she was just like any other mage.

The merchant misinterpreted Amy's words as resignation. White Elixirs were hard to come by even for merchants on the mainland, so it was only natural for someone new to Purgatory to feel despair.

Thinking of his own daughter, the merchant tried to console Amy.

"White Elixirs are hard to come by. To be honest, I've already discounted this heavily. On the mainland, keeping a spirit causes all kinds of hassle. It's risky, too. My decision to sell it here in Nor's Shelter was based on the assumption that I could just go home afterward. You seem sincere, so I gave you an accurate price. Don't be too disheartened. Someday, with luck, you might be able to obtain a fire spirit."

"I'll take it."

"Huh?"

"I said I'll buy it."

When Shirone reached into his inner pocket, the merchant blinked as if he couldn't comprehend the situation. He was sure this must be some kind of prank but couldn't decide whether to get angry or laugh it off.

But when three Elixirs rolled out of Shirone's hand, the merchant tumbled off his chair in shock.

Even the shimmering rainbow spectrum confirmed they were genuine White Elixirs.

"Here you go. I can take it now, right?"

The merchant could only nod, speechless. Shirone placed the Elixirs directly into his hand.

At the same time, Amy clutched the spirit cage to her chest, feeling its warmth.

The warmth of fire.

This was her life as a mage.

"Hey, are you all right? Isn't it hot?"

The merchant asked, snapping back to his senses after verifying the Elixirs were genuine.

The Fire Spirit was distinct from inanimate objects because it could be activated, yet until a contract was formed, it was essentially just fire. Normally, touching a heated iron cage would result in burns.

"Hmm? No, it just feels warm."

"That's odd. Would you mind if I took another look? It's my product, but I feel a little guilty. It might be defective."

"No, it's fine. I'm sure this is a genuine Fire Spirit."

Amy replied with confidence, gazing affectionately at the little Fire Spirit bouncing in the air. Using her mental channel, she communicated with Shirone.

Shirone, it's a Spirit Zone.

A Spirit Zone?

Yeah. It's incredible. It's real fire, but it's also connected to the mind. I'm constantly feeling its presence.

A mage wouldn't be burned by flames they created because those flames were a direct product of their magic.

Amy's explanation suggested that a Spirit wasn't merely a fixed entity—it was like a manifestation of mental sublimation.

"By the way, how did you come across a White Elixir?"

"It came from a Whirlwind Serpent."

“A Whirlwind Serpent? Are you saying you destroyed the law of the valley?”

“It sort of happened.”

If they were a mage powerful enough to defeat a Whirlwind Serpent, it wasn’t surprising for them to possess a White Elixir.

While uncommon, such individuals were undeniably present in Purgatory. Merchants often referred to them as “Borderlanders” or “people on the outskirts of the community”.

“But how do you make a contract?”

“Ah, I don’t know the details, but I’ve seen Borderlanders do it. They held the Spirit in their hand and muttered something. Then, it just disappeared into them.”

Since Spirits lack rational thought, activation likely wasn’t tied to specific keywords. That left language-based magic as the plausible method.

Spoken words resonating with the essence of fire—this was crucial.

Amy unlocked the cage with the key provided by the merchant, carefully cradling the Spirit in her hands. She improvised a chant.

“Spirit of Fire, dwell within me.”

As the Fire Spirit entered Amy, a warm sensation spread through her body.

Forming a contract with a Spirit was akin to discovering a new source of energy. Separate from the ignition energy used for spells like Ignite, Amy now had access to a new reserve of firepower.

When Amy summoned the Spirit, a flame ignited, swirling around her. Watching it with satisfaction, she recalled the name of a mythical flame from ancient times.

“Jack-o’-Lantern.”

Often referred to as Will-o’-the-Wisp, this phenomenon had remained unproven despite countless hypotheses by

scholars, relegated to the realm of legend. But no longer. Jack-o'-Lantern existed as ancient magic in Heaven.

The Fire Spirit held strategic value.

It could be activated independently of Ignite, moved along desired trajectories, and even split into multiple illusions.

Amy imagined countless tactics—guidance, deception, and rapid multi-casting among them.

Sensing Shirone's gaze, Amy dismissed the Spirit. She wanted to express her gratitude, but the words caught in her throat. Anything she said would feel awkward.

This wasn't like receiving an expensive gift—it felt as though she had been given Shirone's heart.

Shirone smiled knowingly, as if he'd anticipated her silence, and turned away without a word.

Amy began to regret her hesitation. Why hadn't she spoken up? Did Shirone already know her feelings? Or had the gift held no special meaning from the start?

Though straightforward by nature, Shirone sometimes had moments like this, where his thoughts remained elusive.

As Amy bonded with the Fire Spirit, Shirone scoured the merchant stalls with meticulous focus.

Observing Amy's contract had sparked a realization. The idea of bringing items back to their world was too simplistic. Heaven was a perilous place, where life and death balanced precariously. Enhancing their capabilities with immediately usable tools was essential for survival. Whatever the cost, acquiring such items would be the best investment.

Nor's Shelter, where exiles and outcasts gathered, mainly sold necessities. However, some merchants possessed extraordinary goods, though they rarely displayed them due to exorbitant prices.

Noticing the White Elixir Shirone carried, a merchant discreetly placed an item on his stall.

Tess rushed over, pointing excitedly at the object.

"Oh my! Isn't this that thing?"

The device resembled a mechanical beetle.

It was a drone crafted by the Meccan.

Clove hurriedly joined them, enthusiastically explaining the item, realizing Shirone was a serious buyer.

Beyond its scouting and language translation capabilities, the drone featured radio communication, map displays, and more.

“What do you think? How about trading it for your White Elixir? You must know that drones aren’t just purchasable with Elixirs. They’re reserved for the citizens.”

Shirone was intrigued. Having experienced the reconnaissance abilities of drones through Kanya, he knew their potential. If Tess could use it, it would be an invaluable support tool.

Just then, Arin quietly suggested they might be able to negotiate a discount. The merchant’s demeanor suggested he was inflating the price.

However, the relatively low asking price raised suspicions. If the Fire Spirit was a commodity, the drone was a rarity. A citizen artifact leaking into the market should command an astronomical price.

Arin, could there be a defect? Otherwise...

I thought the same, but I can’t be sure. What I do know is that he’s overcharging a little. The rest is up to you to discern.

Tess’s eyes were glued to the drone. A fan of ancient relics, she would undoubtedly accept it regardless of its flaws if Shirone purchased it.

Taking her place, Shirone inquired further.

“Where did you get this? I heard drones are only issued to the Meccans.”

“That’s true. But even among the Meccan, there are defectors. This one likely stole it before escaping to Purgatory. A single sale could sustain them for a while. See this strip along the drone’s edges? That proves it’s unused—straight from the factory. Its original owner probably worked in a Meccan tech facility.”

“And where is that person now?”

“Who knows? They might have fled or died. Most likely the latter. Items from Heaven usually surface when someone dies stealing them. The tools outlive the thieves.”

Chapter 189: 5. Nor's Shelter (4)

Such a situation was indeed possible. Just because it was an item belonging to the citizens didn't mean it couldn't be purchased.

Still, the merit of it being a limited edition item was maintained.

Most importantly, the merchant knew that the customer's spending limit was two White Elixirs. For him to aim for a price of just one Elixir suggested the item was actually much cheaper.

"Can anyone use it?"

"As long as it's equipped, anyone can use it. Unlike hunting weapons like Signa, Exd, and Arc, drones have personal encryption devices. Even if someone else takes it, they can't use it. But this one is brand new, unused, and has no owner. That's why it's up for sale."

Shirone wasn't sure. If it was new, there shouldn't be any defects.

Was it simply a misunderstanding from his lack of understanding of this world? Or was the Fire Spirit such a rare item to obtain?

Unable to decide, Shirone turned to Tess for advice.

"Tess, do you want this?"

"Yes! Shirone, I really want it. Please buy it for me. The other items are cheap anyway; we can get them later anytime."

Shirone chuckled softly. Even when making a request, Tess's straightforward personality was noticeably different from Amy's.

Since the Elixirs would ultimately benefit everyone, buying it seemed the right choice. However, without knowing if there were any defects, bargaining was impossible.

Asking directly would only give the merchant the upper hand, and Clove wouldn't be of any help either.

"Why won't you sell it?! I've brought exactly what you asked for!"

At that moment, a voice interrupted Shirone's thoughts—it was Kanya.

Everyone turned toward her. Unlike Kanya, the merchant wore a leisurely smile.

"Hey, young lady. Where in Purgatory have you seen a fixed-price sale? It's an auction. Prices rise with demand. You can't just lower the price as you please."

"You said a month ago that I could get Ephines with just one Green Elixir! Now I'm even adding 30 Red Elixirs on top of that, so why won't you sell it?!"

Ephines.

Shirone recalled the white potion the herbalist had recommended.

But Kanya's reaction was far too intense for something described as merely a stimulant. Why would one need to stay awake in Heaven?

"That was a month ago. Prices have gone up since then."

"No! Even two or three months ago, you never mentioned this! This is extortion!"

"Young lady, auction prices are determined by the buyer's desire. The more someone wants something, the higher the price goes. Isn't that the basic principle? Surely you don't have much time left before Liquor of Anecdote runs out?"

"You... you wretched—!"

Kanya's face turned pale. No matter how shrewd a merchant was, how could he say such a thing?

Even the usually ill-mannered Clove frowned this time.

The merchant remained unfazed. He had never intended to sell to the citizens in the first place.

“Seeking Ephines today likely means someone in your family will die within a few days. So, of course, you’ll have to buy it no matter what. Isn’t that why I’m charging such a high price?”

“You! I won’t let you get away with this!”

Kanya drew her Arc, and Rena screamed, grabbing her to stop her.

Violence was strictly forbidden at Nor’s Shelter. Anyone instigating violence would face expulsion, and worse.

Maintaining the community relied on the agreement of a rational majority. Once rules were broken, the community would collapse.

“Sister! Please, calm down! Fighting here will get us all killed!”

Rena tugged at Kanya’s waist. Even as she was dragged away, Kanya continued her tirade of curses.

The merchant ignored the troublesome customer and exchanged a look with the herbalist across the way.

A silent agreement not to sell Ephines under any circumstances.

A monopoly.

Three months ago, when Kanya first came to buy Ephines, the merchant set an unreasonably high price, far beyond her means.

In reality, the item could have been exchanged for about 40 Red Elixirs. However, he demanded a Green Elixir instead. Elixirs were not equivalent to currency. While exchanges were possible, if the other party insisted on a Green Elixir, no amount of Red Elixirs could secure the item.

In the end, Kanya had to purchase a Green Elixir at an inflated value. Now, returning to buy Ephines again, the merchant was refusing to sell even at that price.

“Why is she so desperate? What’s this Liquor of Anecdote?”

“It’s a life-renewing potion.”

Gardrak’s voice answered. He had emerged, having been disturbed by the commotion outside.

From Kanya's fierce expression, Gardrak could easily infer the situation. Though he had met her as a guide for the first time, he was well aware of the rumors among merchants.

"As you know, the citizens have a predetermined lifespan. When their time comes, they undergo the Rite of Liquor of Anecdote to be reborn. Apparently, that girl's mother is the next one to undergo it."

"What exactly does the rite involve?"

Gardrak squinted one eye, a reluctant expression crossing his face.

"I'd rather not explain. As you can see, it's a sensitive issue. Citizens call the rite as a blessing. Meanwhile, most heretics detest Liquor of Anecdote—that's why they escaped Heaven. The merchant over there is no different. He's not tormenting her just because of the Elixir."

"But Kanya said her mother is running out of time. What role does the stimulant play? Can it save her?"

"No. The law never bends. In heretics' terms, Kanya's mother will die soon. Even so, she's trying to buy Ephines because..."

Gardrak trailed off.

He sighed, his expression conflicted.

He, too, had once been a citizen. Knowing what Kanya wanted to do—even at the cost of her life—evoked his sympathy.

"It's nothing. Just a glimmer of hope in utter despair. Like giving a dying patient morphine to ease their pain."

Shirone felt a lump in his chest. While he didn't fully understand the differences between the citizens' and heretics' perspectives, he believed the sincerity of wanting to ease a parent's pain was universal.

Yet even that was subject to laws and distinctions.

Kanya resumed negotiations. It was clear she was swallowing her rage to buy Ephines at any cost.

Two stalls were selling Ephines, and today might be her last chance.

Shirone glanced at the other herbalist, who averted his gaze as if guilty.

What if Shirone purchased Ephines from the other merchant and gave it to Kanya? Wouldn't that solve everything?

The merchant seemed to read Shirone's mind and quickly hid Ephines from sight. Contracts were sacred among the Norians, and he was avoiding any unnecessary commotion. Kanya offered a final compromise.

"Fine! I'll take it on credit. No matter what, I'll gather the Elixirs and pay you back. Just give me Ephines now."

"And what will you bring?"

"Anything! I'll hunt for the rest of my life to get it for you!"

"Then tell me. What exactly will you bring?"

The merchant finally dropped his mask, letting his emotions show.

He despised the citizens with a passion and loathed Heaven. No matter how effective a remedy was, the memories of living in Heaven could never be erased. Such was the power of Ra's law.

"You say you'll give me anything. Fine. I'll tell you what I want. Hmm... let's see..."

The merchant pretended to think before turning to Shirone.

"All the Elixirs that boy has. That should suffice."

Shirone realized the merchant's strategy had changed.

From the moment Kanya brought Shirone along, the merchant had likely recalculated everything.

It was a ruthless but effective strategy. Yet, it revealed the merchant's true nature—far from honorable.

Kanya was speechless, unable to believe the depths of the merchant's cruelty. The more things unraveled, the more she felt manipulated by a con artist.

"So, this was your plan all along. You never intended to sell it. You've been enjoying the thought of me dying in Purgatory for three months! What did I ever do to you?"

Shirone pitied her. Emotional responses like Kanya's wouldn't work against someone like this merchant. He was

adept at exploiting emotions to turn situations in his favor. If one wanted to infuriate a mage like him, they would have to fight using the same tactics.

“You make me out to be the villain. But this only makes things harder for you, young lady. I didn’t ask for anything impossible. Hunting for the rest of your life would be harder than taking the boy’s Elixirs, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That’s theft! Robbery! And we can’t even fight here! How could I possibly take someone else’s Elixirs when they have nothing to do with me?”

“There are always ways, aren’t there? You’re a woman; he’s a man. Use your charm.”

Kanya’s lips trembled. She wanted to shoot the merchant in the face with her Arc, but she forced herself to stay calm, knowing this was her last chance.

What would Shirone say if she asked him for the Elixirs? A heretic’s Elixirs, as precious as life itself.

And yet... perhaps he might help. Rena, despite her immaturity, had a knack for judging people.

“It’s not because brother Shirone is handsome; it’s because he’s kind that I like him.”

At the time, she had scoffed at the notion, but now she understood. He truly was different from the average heretic. Perhaps—just perhaps—he might give up his Elixir? That priceless White Elixir. Maybe. Just maybe!

It was all speculation. Yet, the reality that she could only rely on speculation was miserable.

She would do anything for her mother. She couldn’t just let her mother, who had lived only half as long as an ordinary citizen, leave her like this.

Leaving behind the merchant’s sinister grin, Kanya walked toward Shirone. Shirone’s expression was as calm as ever, fully aware of the situation through their prior conversation. Kanya felt a chill. What was he thinking? Whatever it was, it couldn’t be anything good. He would probably ask why she was walking toward him. Why him? Why now?

Even so, she was prepared to plead. She was ready to throw away everything.

When she finally approached Shirone, Kanya spoke with a voice that betrayed her miserable state.

“Um...”

“Here.”

Shirone extended his hand. Resting on it was the White Elixir.

Kanya was overwhelmed. The surge of emotion felt almost like anger, though it didn't hurt at all.

What is this man doing? Shouldn't he at least give me a chance to kneel? Isn't the point of charity to make the recipient pay with gratitude? What meaning does such effortless kindness hold?

She felt she had to ask, though she wasn't sure the words would come out properly.

“Why...?”

“Go buy the Ephines. It's something precious to you, isn't it?”

“But...”

It's not something precious to you, though.

She wanted to retort, but her throat tightened, and no sound emerged.

This boy was different. Neither human nor otherworldly. Not even like Ra.

As a blasphemous thought crossed her mind, Kanya felt a thrill—an electric jolt. Could this be the beginning of her fall?

“Thank you.”

Kanya managed to force out those words before turning back toward the merchant.

Perhaps this Purgatory was truly unlike Heaven. Strange emotions she had never felt in her life swirled within her. She trudged back to the merchant and handed him the Elixir.

“Here. Now give me the Ephines.”

“No, I can't. I can't sell it for just this.”

“Why... why not?”

Kanya didn't even have the strength to shout. The single determination to hold back her tears was the only thing keeping her on her feet.

“I said I wanted *all* the Elixirs the boy possesses. By my calculations, it seems like there's still one more left.”

“No. I have no Elixirs left.”

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Shirone threw the Elixir at the merchant who owned the drone.

The merchant caught it with both hands, his body trembling. He was so overcome with emotion that he could barely hold it properly.

It wasn't Red, Green, or Yellow—it was a White Elixir.

Flipping his palm over, Shirone spoke.

"Well, that's it, right? Now give Kanya what she needs."

"This won't do. That Elixir also has to be mine for the deal to be complete."

"Then take it by force from him."

The merchant's eyes twitched. He realized Shirone's actions weren't just a provocation.

As if to prove his point, Shirone glanced back at the merchant, who was fiddling with the Elixir, and asked.

"So, what now? Are you going to give it back? Can you?"

"N-No! Canceling the deal is absolutely not an option!"

The merchant waved his hands in panic.

Of course, a drone from Meccan was valuable—but only if it was functional.

The drone he had sold was, in truth, only worth a Yellow Elixir at best. Trading it for a White Elixir was a once-in-a-lifetime profit.

"So, what's it going to be? Are you going to have a friendly little fight between heretics? That seems to be your specialty."

The merchant's face hardened.

This situation was undeniably tricky. While he could shamelessly haggle with customers, conflict between

merchants brought no benefits. This was especially true for merchants dealing with basic necessities in a lower-tier community.

Finally, the merchant carefully scrutinized Shirone.

The way he pressured others—it was clear he was a Norian.

And not just any Norian, but a formidable one.

Should he settle for just this? Exchanging Ephines for a White Elixir would go down in history as a remarkable trade.

But it wasn't just about the profit—it was also a matter of pride. He didn't want to accept that things had gone the way the civilian intended.

"Fine, I won't sell it. Be satisfied with your toy. Did you know? You've just cruelly trampled on this young lady's hope."

The merchant declared a stalemate. He abandoned the money and chose the thrill of victory instead.

For a merchant, it was a terrible deal, but he didn't care if it meant seeing a civilian in despair.

Shirone realized the merchant had lost the game.

"No, you have to sell the medicine. Otherwise, it's a breach of contract."

"What? What breach of contract?"

"You said it yourself—if I brought all the Elixirs I had, you'd sell the medicine. Kanya did exactly that. If you suddenly cancel the deal now, that's a breach of contract. You know what happens when a merchant loses their credibility, don't you?"

It wasn't just a threat—it was a death sentence. Losing credibility meant being ousted from the community.

The merchant felt wronged. Shirone was the one twisting things, after all.

"Get your facts straight. When I made the deal, you had two Elixirs. After the deal was struck, you used one to buy the drone. So I didn't breach anything."

"How would you know when I bought the drone?"

The merchant's pupils shook with shock. He was flustered, but his years of experience as a merchant gave him an intuition.

He was at a disadvantage.

"I had already made a deal to buy the drone. I just hadn't handed over the Elixir yet. And as a merchant, you should've verified that before making a deal. Seems like you're still inexperienced. If you doubt me, feel free to check."

The merchant ground his teeth. His instincts told him the situation was playing out as Shirone intended.

The merchant who sold the drone would undoubtedly side with Shirone. Proving their prior agreement would transfer ownership of the White Elixir.

This kind of thing happened all the time in the homeland. The merchant himself had exploited monopolies for huge profits, so he had no right to complain.

'Why am I on the losing end here? Isn't it supposed to be the opposite?'

As he reflected, the merchant realized the truth. Shirone must have known the drone's value was lower than expected.

How Shirone found out, the merchant didn't know. But if his logic was flawed, this situation wouldn't exist.

The drone merchant sided with Shirone because he had made an incredible profit.

A sigh of admiration escaped the merchant's lips. Shirone had a deep understanding of human greed. Even among the merchants of the homeland, his skills would be formidable.

"What do you think, sir? We made the deal first, right?"

"Of course we did. Before that young lady started yelling, the verbal agreement to exchange the White Elixir for the drone was already settled."

Without even being prompted, the drone merchant confirmed Shirone's claim.

Now, the herbalist merchant was cornered. If another deal had been made, the fault lay with him for not verifying the customer's limits.

Should he retreat here? Even one White Elixir was a massive gain, but his pride was at stake.

As a merchant, he resorted to his most despicable card.

He decided to bare his soul.

"My mother was a citizen of Heaven. But she didn't accept the Liquor of Anecdote. Do you know why?"

When no one answered, the merchant tapped his forehead and continued.

"She went insane. My father was murdered in Heaven by some lunatic who was obsessed with her. Do you know what punishment he received? A forty-year reduction in his lifespan. And yet, he still had forty years left. My father was dead. My mother spent her whole life cursing that man, hah. And then, absurdly, the day for the Liquor of Anecdote was set—for her and the man who killed my father."

Kanya's eyes wavered.

Shirone didn't fully grasp the weight of the revelation, but everyone else was struck with shock.

"So my mother took her own life. With one less target for the ritual, the remaining penalty fell on me. That's why I ran away, defying the law. Now do you understand? I hate citizens of Heaven. Just looking at them makes me want to puke! And you think I'd sell you medicine?"

In short, he had lost his temper and was ready to drag everyone down with him.

Shirone scoffed.

Someone truly ready to self-destruct wouldn't explain themselves. In a do-or-die situation, the process doesn't matter.

What the merchant wanted was an emotional victory.

Shirone had no intention of granting it.

"So, are you going to sell the medicine or not?"

"I won't sell it. I'm not giving back the Elixir, either. Do whatever you want."

"Then I'll just take it by force."

"Go ahead. But are you sure? If you resort to violence, you won't be able to stay in the community. You'll be a wanderer for the rest of your life."

Shirone extended his hand. As photons compressed, a vibrating white sphere began to form.

The apothecary panicked. Such a spell was impossible. If there were anyone capable of it, it would only be those who had contracts with the light spirit and lived on the outskirts of the community.

"You... Are you a Borderlander?"

"The Whirlwind Serpent was quite strong. Thanks to that, I managed to get three White Elixirs."

Shirone remained expressionless.

The herbalist knew this well—mages were most brutal and cold-hearted when their emotions were severed.

"What kind of Elixir do you think resides in your body?"

Everyone understood that the herbalist's survival hinged on his answer.

The herbalist hesitated for a long time. He had reached the end of the line, and realizing he couldn't win, he let out a bitter smile and raised his hands.

"There's nothing. My body doesn't contain any Elixir. So please, spare me."

Shirone fired the Photon Cannon. A beam of light grazed the herbalist's nose and slammed into one of the ruins' pillars.

A deafening boom erupted, and the pillar shattered into pieces.

The herbalist turned to look at Shirone with his smile wiped clean off his face.

"Don't laugh. You might think it's bluffing, but I'm dead serious. I don't care about the laws or the community. Try anything sneaky one more time, and I won't forgive you."

"Fine, fine. Got it. Calm down."

The herbalist realized the severity of the situation. Shirone had displayed the maximum hostility he could without resorting to violence. If this were a sword fight, it was akin to drawing his blade; if it were a beast, baring its fangs.

Understanding there would be no more concessions, the herbalist threw the Ephines to Kanya.

“There. Satisfied? The deal is done.”

“One more thing remains. Apologize to Kanya.”

“Why should I? You have no right to interfere in my personal feelings.”

“But you’ve also had a painful past, haven’t you?”

“What does that have to do with an apology?”

“I’m not saying you must apologize. Words without sincerity are meaningless. But didn’t you want someone to understand? The wounds of your past?”

Did he? Had he not yet moved on?

The herbalist looked at Kanya’s face, which wore a look of pity. She had said the person waiting for the Liquor of Anecdote was her mother.

Back then, his own mother had been far from sane. She screamed every day, inflicted harm upon herself. Her terror only amplified his own as a child.

“Tch, who said I’d apologize?”

The herbalist snorted and began packing up his stall. He stuffed his medicine bottles into a bag, rolled up his blanket, and secured it onto his pack. Standing up, he tossed a violet potion to Kanya.

“This is called Korphin. It’s a neuro-enhancement potion. I made enough profit, so consider this a bonus. Use it with the Ephines—it’ll be effective. Though it’ll all feel pointless in the end.”

As he walked toward the tent village, the apothecary turned back to Shirone.

“And kid, everything I said was made up. You beat me, sure, but if you can’t even spot a lie, you’ll get chewed up badly

on the mainland.”

Arin spoke to Shirone through a mental channel.

Shirone, want me to verify if it was a lie?

No, it's fine.

Shirone quietly watched the herbalist's retreating figure.

The Shelter of Nor.

A place where wanderers of purgatory took refuge.

Perhaps what they left behind here, even briefly, wasn't their weary bodies, but the wounds in their hearts.

The extravagant shopping spree had come to an end.

Shirone comforted Kanya, who couldn't stop crying. Beside them, Rena puffed out her cheeks as she silently watched.

Meanwhile, Amy's group held a meeting without Shirone.

The items purchased with three White Elixirs were the Fire Spirit, a drone, and Ephines.

Though it had been the best decision given the circumstances, the lingering feeling of loss was unavoidable.

Tess, in particular, struggled to hide his guilt.

“I don't have much room to talk since I begged for the purchase, but are we really okay with this? There must have been other things that could've helped us in battle. And Ephines was ridiculously overpriced.”

“What does it matter? If we need more, we'll just hunt for it. No point in stressing over what's already done.”

“Rian's right. And financial losses aren't the only kind of loss. Shirone used the Elixirs in the most efficient way possible, and as long as he's satisfied, that's what matters.”

With Amy's reassurance, Tess managed a strained smile.

“Even so, how could things have gone so badly? I support Shirone's choices, but if the herbalist hadn't tried to pull those tricks, we could've bought the drone for half the price.”

Canis chuckled derisively.

“That's not what Amy meant. In truth, Shirone didn't suffer any loss. Even if he'd given up all the White Elixirs, he bought something priceless.”

“What? The Fire Spirit is that valuable?”

“No. The most expensive item was Ephines.”

Tess thought Canis was joking, even though they weren’t particularly close.

If they were to think rationally, paying with a White Elixir for something you could get with a Red Elixir was infuriating enough to make you lose sleep.

Rian asked in confusion.

“Why is Ephines the most expensive? It’s a common drug.”

“It is, but today, its value was immeasurable. Most importantly, consider the owner of the item—Kanya and Rena. In other words, citizens of Heaven.”

“Ah...”

“Now do you get it? It wasn’t Ephines. Shirone used a single White Elixir to buy a ticket to the Heaven.”

Indeed.

Considering how difficult it had been to find a way into Heaven, they now had a foothold. With Kanya’s help, they could gain entry.

Chapter 191: 5. Nor's Shelter (6)

Nonetheless, the discomfort stemmed from the idea that Shirone was somehow using her.

"Shirone isn't that kind of person! Even if Kanya weren't a Heaven's subject, he would have helped her just the same! Shirone is kind and also..."

"I know what kind of person he is. That's exactly the type of guy he is."

Canis admitted calmly, left Tess at a loss for words.

"Giving up the White Elixirs must have been sincere. What I'm saying is, Shirone's actions were driven by goodwill, but he's not so naïve that he didn't consider the implications of his choices. Am I wrong?"

No one could argue against Canis's assessment.

If it was Shirone, there was no way he hadn't considered what Canis was pointing out. If that were the case, he must have been devising some kind of strategy. At that moment, Shirone appeared, walking toward them with Kanya in tow. Kanya bowed her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry for causing you to suffer losses because of me. I won't forget this kindness."

Amy looked over her shoulder at Shirone and gestured with her eyes, silently asking if he had anticipated this. Shirone gave a small shake of his head, confirming her suspicion. Sometimes, acts of goodwill can be perceived as calculated. Shirone was aware of this but wanted to avoid hurting Kanya's feelings. He decided to let things play out for now. Through their mental communication channel, opinions were exchanged. Canis volunteered to explain, but the

group decided by majority vote to leave the matter to Shirone.

After the discussion ended, Amy and Kanya immersed themselves in examining the Fire Spirit and the drone. Shirone noticed that Arin was the only woman in the party who hadn't received anything.

"Sorry about that. I used up all the elixirs."

Canis spoke up, sounding indifferent.

"I don't need anything. We didn't come here just to pick up stuff like this."

Tess, who had been admiring the drone, flared up at the comment.

"What? Say that again."

"I said, I don't need anything. We didn't come here just to pick up stuff like this."

Grinding her teeth, Tess turned her full attention to Canis, who elaborated.

"We came here risking our lives—not to linger in Purgatory or to collect trinkets. Keep in mind, that drone you're clutching? It's just standard gear in Heaven."

Canis was right.

If Purgatory was a marketplace for selling goods, Heaven was the factory where they were made. The very laws governing this world originated from Heaven, making its influence undeniable.

Tess pouted, turning away.

Still, the drone was hers. No matter what amazing items Heaven might have, they'd be useless unless acquired. With this thought, she regained her cheerful mood and resumed stroking the drone. But her curiosity about how to use it soon surfaced.

Afraid of damaging it, she hadn't handled it roughly, but shaking or tapping it produced no signs of life.

"Kanya, how do you use this thing? It's supposed to be brand new, but it doesn't work."

"Let me see. I'll take a look."

Receiving the drone, Kanya examined it carefully. When she noticed a steel band inscribed with intricate markings attached to the flight mechanism, her expression darkened. She, too, was aware that the drone had been purchased with a White Elixir. However, she hadn't expected it to be such a problematic item. Equipment with unbroken seals from the Meccan was utterly useless.

"Um... This can't be used."

"What? Why? Is it broken?"

"No, quite the opposite. It's brand new. See the pattern etched on this steel band? It's called a henna. You need to break this seal to activate it. But the seal can only be undone at the factory. That's why it's unusable."

Tess looked on the verge of tears. The item she had paid a White Elixir for was nothing more than a useless hunk of metal.

Listening to their conversation, Shirone realized why the merchant had been so eager to offload the item: he had neglected to mention the seal.

Amy snatched the drone from Kanya.

"Give it to me. I'll get a refund. Selling defective goods without disclosure is fraud!"

"Yes, I suppose I did scam you."

Admitted the merchant, who suddenly appeared, accompanied by Clove.

Amy was so taken aback by the merchant's straightforward acknowledgment that she momentarily lost steam.

The group calmed themselves and waited for the merchant to speak. But he said nothing further, merely pulling out three Yellow Elixirs from his pocket.

"What's this?"

"The drone's original value. Of course, I've taken my profit, but this is the lowest price you'd find at any auction. All Meccan equipment comes with a lock. I apologize for not being upfront about it."

Arin confirmed through mental communication that the merchant was telling the truth.

Amy guessed why the merchant had come forward. His scam was evident, and seeing Shirone's capabilities, he must have realized that trouble would follow. Thus, he was trying to resolve the matter while salvaging his share. He wasn't exactly bold for a merchant.

"Don't look at me like that. I have no ulterior motives."

"Then why return it at all?"

"As a gesture of apology. It's a miserable state of affairs. I left Heaven for Purgatory, clinging to the belief that there was still hope. But I don't want to lose my pride as a merchant."

Shirone nodded and accepted the Yellow Elixirs. While Arin indicated the merchant was half-lying, half-sincere, Shirone was tired of haggling over elixirs.

The merchant offered a parting consolation.

"In any case, you haven't lost much. Normally, it takes ten Yellow Elixirs to exchange for one White Elixir. The drone's value here in Purgatory is that high."

Tess retorted sharply.

"What's the point? We still can't use it!"

The merchant had no counter. He didn't specialize in Meccan equipment and knew little about it, having acquired the drone by chance.

However, Amy picked up on a hint from his words.

"If the value is so high, doesn't that mean there's a way to break the seal?"

Tess looked at the merchant hopefully, but he simply shrugged, indicating he didn't know.

Canis let out a sigh as he watched.

He was annoyed at their cluelessness despite having the key to the lock right in front of them. After some deliberation, he decided to speak up out of a sense of camaraderie.

"Do you all really not get it?"

“Huh? Get what?”

“Think about how we got here in the first place. Use your heads.”

Tess racked her brain. They had come here through Goffin’s Gate. Goffin’s Gate? Wait a minute, what had they done at Goffin’s Gate?

Tess turned to Shirone and shouted.

“Shirone! Quickly, quickly unlock this thing!”

Shirone understood immediately.

The Goffin’s Gate was also a type of ancient weapon. While it appeared to be nothing more than a stone wall, when its Immortal Function was activated, it transformed into a dimensional gateway. Perhaps that was why it earned the nickname “Unlocker”.

Holding the drone in both hands, Shirone focused his mind. Will this work? He doubted it but was about 90% sure it would.

When Shirone activated the Immortal Function, the drone began to glow. The merchant, who had been observing, widened his eyes in shock.

Following the patterns of the lock mechanism known as henna, red markings appeared. Although the form differed, the phenomenon was identical to what they had seen with the Goffin’s Gate.

With a soft “ping”, the henna detached, and light seeped out through the gaps in the drone’s structure.

Shirone smiled brightly, lifting the drone.

“Wow, it kinda works?”

Still smiling, Shirone froze.

A crowd of Norians was staring at him. Kanya and Rena, along with Gardrak and Clove, were visibly stunned, their expressions vacant.

At first, Shirone thought the reaction was merely due to him unlocking the device, but then faint murmurs reached his ears.

When Arin attempted telepathy with some of them, their voices flowed into his mind.

Nephilim.

Many words were exchanged, but the common thread in their speech was the term Nephilim.

As the murmurs grew louder, Shirone's anxiety increased. He had no idea whether Nephilim carried a positive or negative meaning.

Arin conveyed that their emotions were a mix of awe and fear.

Kanya flinched when her eyes met Shirone's, then, as though recalling that even such a gesture could be considered irreverent, she knelt down.

"Subject of Ra pays respects to the Nephilim."

Shirone was utterly bewildered by the situation.

At that moment, Gardrak approached, looking even graver than when he had been pursued during the heresy hunt.

"So, you're not just those who fell into Purgatory. You're ones who came through the Gate."

"I don't understand. What is a Nephilim?"

"In this world, only angels can freely travel between Heaven and Earth. They have various missions, one of which includes fostering individuals to reform the earthly nations. For this, they require virgins, as only a virgin can conceive their child—a phenomenon known as virgin conception. A Nephilim refers to the offspring born from the union of an angel and a virgin. In Heaven, they are called this: 'Those Who are Free from the Law'."

Shirone recalled the priestesses that the chief of the Kergoans had brought to the banquet. They had said only virgins could bear the child of an angel's descendant.

Still, he couldn't understand. He wasn't a Nephilim. If he truly were a descendant of an angel, why would his mother have abandoned him?

Moreover, claiming he was a Nephilim solely because of his ability to activate the Immortal Function seemed

unreasonable.

If all Unlockers shared the same lineage, scholars would have long uncovered the truth.

“A Nephilim exists outside the will of Ra. Yet the faithful still follow them because they are considered to be in the highest position a human can achieve.”

Shirone didn't like the sound of that. Just because one's ancestors were extraordinary, why should others feel obligated to follow them?

Also, the Immortal Function was something he had mastered through effort and challenge. Dismissing his unique achievement as a mere product of lineage felt absurd.

“Enough. Knowing these things doesn't change anything, does it?”

“That's true. After all, this is the land of heresy. By the way, why did you come to Purgatory? Are you here on an angelic mission?”

Shirone had an inkling of what the angels valued. They served as a conduit connecting the divine and the faithful.

“Yes. We came to enter Heaven. We have something to deliver.”

“I see. But why come to the Nor's Shelter?”

“That... just happened by chance.”

When Shirone turned, Kanya averted her gaze, her face flushed.

Her heart was racing. Shirone was neither a heretic nor a false being to be shunned. He was the great Nephilim who had defeated the Horned One and retrieved the Ephines. Shirone tried to calm her down.

“You don't need to be so tense. Honestly, I didn't even know I was a Nephilim. Just treat me normally.”

“But... how could I...”

Amy stepped forward to support Shirone, though her tone carried a subtle discomfort.

“Yeah, treat him normally. Even if Shirone's a Nephilim, the rest of us are heretics. We get along fine with him, so why

wouldn't you?"

Kanya didn't see it that way.

Anyone accompanying a Nephilim couldn't be classified as a heretic. They were connected to the Nephilim, and the Nephilim were connected to the angels.

Ultimately, Kanya decided to comply with Shirone's wishes and act casually. However, deep inside, an overwhelming reverence remained.

Tess, for her part, couldn't care less about titles like Nephilim. To her, Shirone was Shirone.

Grinning, she examined the drone. Just hearing the hum of its mechanisms excited her.

Kanya approached and held out her hand.

"Let me see it. I'll teach you how to use it."

The drone was a remotely operated device that used the human brain as its control tower. Employing cutting-edge retinal vision technology, it directly relayed information to the user's eyes. Depending on atmospheric conditions, it could fly within a 10-kilometer radius of its control center.

"To use the drone, you need to set a personal code. It utilizes a unique frequency, but only Meccan engineers know the underlying principles. Anyway, to use it, press here, and then..."

As Kanya's hand moved to the initialization button, the hemispherical drone split into several components.

When she placed it on Tess's head, the drone emitted a mechanical hum, tightening slightly as it began to read her brainwaves.

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After 30 seconds, a signal appeared, indicating that the data had been saved.

The drone scanned Tess's eyes and sent a signal to her left retina.

Tess was astonished, as if her breath had stopped. The scenery she saw through her eyes now overlapped with the view from the drone.

This capability alone was worth an entire Schema.

After removing the drone and attaching it to her gauntlet, Tess nodded repeatedly while listening to the explanation.

Kanya explained additional features, such as a language decoding function and the ability to save specific brainwaves to automatically track and locate a target via signals.

While Shirone and his companions were thrilled with the enhancement to their combat abilities, Clove looked uneasy, his eyes darting about.

Even among heretics, the term Nephilim carried immense weight.

It was not the fear one felt toward a strong enemy but rather an unexplainable dread of the unknown that transcended strength.

Reflecting on how they had treated Shirone so far, Clove silently hoped that Shirone wouldn't cast some strange curse upon them.

As expected, Shirone approached.

Contrary to Clove's assumption that he would be helplessly reprimanded, Shirone handed him a vial of yellow elixir.

It was a commission fee.

Clove hesitated for a long moment before slipping it into his pocket.

"Th-Thanks. You really didn't have to give me so much."

"It's fine. It's not like you can split an elixir anyway."

"Are you... really a Nephilim?"

"I don't know. I'm just a magic school student. Whatever people call me here doesn't change that fact."

"Sorry for being so harsh earlier. I thought you were one of the imitation..."

"Even if I were, you shouldn't treat anyone that way."

"Y-You're right. I'm sorry."

Shirone didn't feel like continuing the conversation.

Lecturing someone who had succumbed to fear was meaningless. You could demand a cockroach bow before you, and it would comply.

Leaving Clove behind, Shirone headed to where the Norians were gathered. This place was also part of their community, so he thought it would be worth asking a question.

"Excuse me, but... do any of you know a woman named Miro?"

The Norians exchanged puzzled looks.

Just as Shirone was about to give up and turn away, an old man leaning on a staff approached.

"Did you say Miro?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I heard of her when my parents were alive. Isn't she also a Nephilim?"

"Yes? Oh, yes, that's right."

The people of this world equated Unlockers with Nephilim. While Shirone didn't know Miro's exact origins, the fact that she was an Unlocker made it a reasonable claim.

"She rejected the law of Ra."

"What does that... mean?"

"I don't know. That's all I heard. But my mother didn't hate her, even though she was a devout follower of Ra. That was shocking to me as a child."

A woman who defied the law of Ra. The information was simple, yet its implications were profound. For one, it was clear that Miro had once been in Heaven. She must have understood far more about this world than Shirone did when she returned.

And yet, she had rejected Ra.

When this journey ended, what decision would Shirone make? Would he come to understand Miro, or would he reject her?

As he pondered, Amy approached.

"Shirone, the sun is about to set. We've decided to spend the night here. What do you think?"

"Huh? I'm fine with it. I'm tired from the fight earlier today. Let's rest now."

"Um..."

Kanya came over hesitantly. Amy could tell just from her expression what was on her mind. Watching Kanya tail Shirone and herself earlier, it was clear she was concerned about their relationship.

"What's the matter? Do you have something to say to me?"

"I taught Tess how to use the drone."

"Oh, right. Thanks."

"Rena and I are staying here tonight, too. The guides take their break at this time, so we'll probably leave tomorrow morning."

"Oh... I see."

Shirone's response trailed off.

If Kanya was leaving tomorrow morning, then he and his group would also have to leave at that time. The problem was that nothing had been firmly decided yet.

After glancing at Amy for a moment, Kanya spoke again.

"You said you were going to Heaven, right? If it's okay... would you visit my home for a day?"

Though he was planning to go to Heaven, spending time at Kanya's house would be an entirely different event.

Perhaps it was because of her mother, who didn't have much time left. Or maybe it was her desire to introduce the Nephilim to her devout parents.

Regardless, Shirone saw no reason to refuse. He was simply grateful for her goodwill.

When Shirone agreed, Kanya's face flushed.

Amy didn't like that, but she couldn't criticize her openly, so she snorted and walked off to Tess.

While they were wrapping up their day, commotion broke out at the outskirts of the Nor's Shelter. A group of people came running, shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Patrol! Hide! Get down on the ground!"

There was no time to ask what was happening. The Norians scattered in all directions.

Shirone grabbed Kanya's hand and ran toward where Gardrak was. His friends seemed to have made the same decision, as they converged in that direction.

Lying flat in the underbrush, Shirone listened as Gardrak explained the situation.

On the night when the moon reached its fullest, it was said that angels would patrol the perimeter of Purgatory.

The reasons and purpose were unclear, but this had been a revelation passed down among heretics for thousands of years.

A sound resonated from the sky, shaking the world. The surrounding air vibrated as if a swarm of tens of thousands of locusts had gathered.

As the layers of sound stacked upon each other, the dissonance faded, leaving a single melody that pierced through the ears.

Was this the most beautiful sound a string instrument could produce?

Shirone found himself lost in a trance, overwhelmed by the imagination.

Gardrak snapped him out of his daze.

“Get a grip! Don’t get lost in the sound! We can endure it because we’re mages, but other races would have already collapsed.”

Shirone looked at Tess and Rena. They were kneeling on the ground, tears streaming down their faces. While they hadn’t lost consciousness, their minds had already drifted elsewhere.

What on earth was this sound? Could a single tone truly shake someone’s very mind?

“Where is this sound coming from?”

“Every angel has its unique vibration. It’s a resonance that emanates from their very existence.”

“A resonance of existence itself? How is that even possible?”

“In Heaven, angels are called the Harmonizers of Law. As the primary entities of causality, they take precedence over all laws. Their vibrations are proof of their unique domain.”

Shirone gazed up at the sky. Judging from the frequency of the vibrations, it seemed that the angel would soon pass over the Nor’s Shelter.

Even though they had cast a veil of light for concealment, Shirone couldn’t shake his unease.

“Can the angel see us?”

“It’s possible, but not guaranteed.”

“What do you mean? Can they or can’t they?”

“Have you checked your fingerprints today?”

“No.”

“It’s a similar situation. If the angel chooses, it can easily pierce through the veil of light. But they don’t wander around Purgatory doing that indiscriminately. As long as it doesn’t act on a whim today, we should be fine.”

Someone hiding in the bushes on the outskirts shouted, “It’s coming!”

Shirone lifted his head. Four silhouettes streaked rapidly across the sky.

He couldn’t even blink.

At the forefront flew an angel clad in a white robe, spreading enormous wings of light that were ten times larger than its body and wielding a golden staff. Most striking of all was the radiant circle floating above its head.

Forming a triangular formation around the angel were beings Shirone had never seen before.

The figures guarding the left and right resembled humans but had red and blue skin, respectively.

Trailing behind them was a grotesque creature, as if a mishmash of countless living beings.

Above the creatures' heads floated long, red triangular structures resembling horns, varying in number from one to three. Despite not being cones, they maintained the same shape regardless of the viewing angle.

"What are those creatures at the back? I see tentacle-like limbs and even snake-like faces."

"Those are Mara. The secondary entities of causality.

They're also called the Enforcers of Law."

"The Enforcers of Law?"

"Yes. If angels are the Harmonizers of Law, Mara are the executors. Angels, as the first unique creations of God, have the authority to freely interpret God's will. Do you know what that means? It means they can manipulate the laws as they see fit. They're on an entirely different level from giants. When an angel harmonizes the laws, Mara carry them out. That's why they're called Enforcers of Law."

Shirone realized he was witnessing the highest hierarchy of this world.

If God was the law itself, then angels were its judges.

In that sense, Mara could be seen as the assistants who executed the judges' orders.

"There was something floating above their heads. For the angel, it was an orb, and for the Mara, it was horn-like..."

"You're right. Those are horns. But they're not actual horns; they're thought-forms. The more horns they have, the

higher their rank. Each Mara is born with unique abilities, and those horns are the source of their power.”

“What about the orb above the angel’s head?”

“That’s called a Halo. It’s no exaggeration to say that the angel’s power resides in it. I don’t know the specifics of how it works. Even when I was a devout follower, I could count the times I saw an angel on one hand.”

Clove, trembling, spoke up.

“Honestly, you see them more often here than anywhere else.”

Shirone felt a strange unease.

If angels truly existed, did that mean Unlockers were genuinely Nephilim? The ability to traverse dimensions, Miro’s scale magic—were these the powers of angels?

His head began to ache.

Since arriving in Heaven, he had gained a wealth of information, but the scope of the puzzle was so vast that he couldn’t begin to see the full picture.

Shortly after the angel left, the moon rose.

It was massive, so large it felt as though one could touch it from the peak of a mountain. It was eerie.

As the angel’s patrol ended, the Norians settled down for the night.

Shirone rented a 12-person tent in the camp and lay down alongside his friends.

Perhaps due to exhaustion, the sound of soft breathing echoed around him. Though he wanted to think more, he could feel his body shutting down.

Unconsciously, Shirone drifted into sleep, where he encountered Miro in his dreams. It wasn’t a nightmare.

6. Liquor of Anecdote (1)

Shirone and his group followed Gardrak to the Valley of the Whirlwind Serpent.

Although the laws that once defined it had been broken, making it no longer deserving of the name, a title preserved for tens of thousands of years would not disappear so easily.

Gardrak explained that no guides would be found in this place anymore.

With the Whirlwind Serpent gone, there was a possibility that new laws would emerge. Regardless of what they might be, they were unlikely to be favorable to the group.

“Someday, you’ll understand. Laws are finite, but humans are infinite. Even if Heaven were to fall, the Nor’s Shelter would never vanish.”

With those words, Gardrak disappeared.

The idea of humanity being infinite struck a chord with Shirone. Even in this place, tens of thousands of light-years away, humans continued to exist.

The group launched three drones into the sky.

Having experienced Kergoan’s heretic hunting, they now valued reconnaissance more than ever.

When Shirone asked about Heaven, Kanya, unlike during their first meeting, kindly explained.

“Heaven is divided into seven levels, from the Seventh Heaven, Araboth, down to the First Heaven, Shamain. The First Heaven, Shamain, is where the followers reside. Mecca, Nor, and Kergo—these three races uphold the laws and fulfill their designated roles. Kergoan produces, Meccan processes, and Norian supplies.”

“But isn’t that unreasonable? You’re saying your roles are determined from birth.”

“We’ve been living like this for hundreds of thousands of years. We’re merely acting in accordance with the laws of Lord Anke Ra.”

From what Shirone knew, civilization in his original world had only existed for, at most, about ten thousand years. If Heaven had existed for hundreds of thousands of years, one would expect severe societal issues or at least overpopulation by now.

When Shirone voiced this inner thought, Kanya tilted her head, appearing puzzled.

“To question such things is blasphemous. Anke Ra governs this world. The population of Shamain has never increased or decreased—not even once. The population remains constant.”

“How is that even possible? Is it some kind of birth control policy?”

“Those who obey and follow the laws are granted eternal life. They ascend to the Third Heaven, Shehakim, where they can live forever.”

“Then what happens to those who don’t attain eternal life? Do they die?”

Chapter 193: 6. Liquor of Anecdote (2)

“No. Even if their lifespan ends, the citizens of Heaven do not die. Through the Liquor of Anecdote, they are reborn into new life.”

“Then that doesn’t add up mathematically. If everyone can live forever, how does the population remain unchanged?”

“The lifespan of the citizens is governed by Ra. A strict law calculates the total lifespan of the population, ensuring the number remains constant.”

Eternal life and population limitation seemed contradictory. The key lay in the Liquor of Anecdote.

However, just like Gardrak, Kanya avoided explaining it in detail. Regardless of whether they were citizens or heretics, it seemed no one was willing to elaborate on this topic.

A paradox.

To Shirone, the Liquor of Anecdote embodied a vast contradiction.

The group passed through the Forest of the Fallen on their way from the Whirlwind Serpent’s Valley and finally arrived at Heaven.

They tilted their heads upward, gazing at the towering walls. Compared to the sheer size of the fortress, they were mere specks of dust. It was a scale beyond anything humans could ever construct.

Kanya introduced the area as Zone 73 and added that there were 820 such zones within the First Heaven.

Shirone, abandoning attempts to comprehend the scale, reached out to touch the wall. What he thought was stone turned out to be metal.

Heaven's technological capabilities far exceeded the group's understanding.

"Do you think it's safe for us to go in?"

"It should be fine since you're Nephilim. But I can't guarantee anything."

"Then wouldn't it be better to scale the wall instead?"

Though it seemed impossible to scale a wall that reached the sky, there appeared to be no other options.

But even that suggestion was dismissed by Kanya.

"Only drones with flight authorization are allowed to navigate Heaven's airspace. Anything else would be shot down. It's never happened before, but my grandfather once told me about it. Besides, sneaking in is impossible anyway."

"Why not? I don't see anyone guarding the gate."

"They don't restrict entry. It's a matter of the law. All information within Heaven is managed in the Sixth Heaven, Zebul, where the angels reside. They can measure everything from changes in mass within each zone to the chemical composition of the air. Even if you tried to sneak in, it would be futile. Don't worry too much; there's no real danger here. This isn't Purgatory."

As a citizen of Heaven, Kanya seemed intent on reassuring Shirone, as though to prevent him from developing a negative impression prematurely.

Approaching the gate, Kanya held out her gauntlet. A red beam shot out from a lens and scanned its surface.

The gate opened with a sound that shook the world.

Covering their ears made no difference.

As the entrance to Zone 73 opened, Shirone and his group followed Kanya inside.

When the gate closed, the lens flickered, and new information about Zone 73 was transmitted to the Sixth Heaven, Zebul.

Total mass: 49,739,498,847.3423 kilograms.

Increase in CO₂ emissions: 0.0000024%.

The first impression of Shamain was alien.

Residences were divided along the roads, with architectural styles varying drastically depending on the race.

The Norian buildings were practical, while the Kergoan structures were luxurious. When they encountered the Meccan buildings, Shirone and Amy stopped in their tracks, speechless.

It was the magic warehouse Istas.

Stacks of square containers moved freely, crossing into and out of adjacent buildings.

It was hard to believe Meccans had visited magic schools in the original world. Instead, it seemed evidence that Meccan technology had somehow made its way into their world.

Kanya led them through the Meccan district and into a plaza.

The plaza, a melting pot of cultures, felt like an international market in a neutral country. Various races mingled there.

“Shirone, look over there.”

Amy pointed at a statue of a giant.

The feeling was different from when they had seen the altar at the Kergoan sanctuary. Here, actual giants resided—and had even fought battles.

Why would giants, revered by the citizens, wander Purgatory?

Kanya’s home was the same size as other Meccan residences.

If Kergoan represented ostentation and Norian represented practicality, Meccans seemed to prioritize uniformity.

As they entered Kanya’s home, the building rose four stories high.

Despite its inhuman exterior, the interior was cozy.

Kanya’s parents, seated at the dining table, sprang to their feet.

Shirone had heard that the Liquor of Anecdote was used for those nearing the end of their lives, but Kanya’s parents

appeared much younger than he expected.

Kanya's mother hugged her two daughters tightly, exclaimed.

"Where on earth have you been? Do you have any idea how worried I was?"

"Sorry, we had our reasons."

"And who are these people? They look like Norian."

"We went to the Nor's Shelter. To get this."

When Kanya held out a vial, her mother's eyes widened with shock.

He had never spoken about it to anyone. Then how could his daughter possibly know about this?

"You... this is..."

"It's a stimulant, made with Nor's magic. Drink it before the Liquor of Anecdote."

"Rena! Why did you do such a thing? I never wanted this!"

"Then are you telling me just to stand by and watch? You went to Purgatory once yourself to get medicine for Grandpa!"

"Who told you such a thing...!"

"Grandpa told me! That's why he was able to enter the Liquor of Anecdote smiling until the very end! Isn't that enough? Isn't that what family is for?"

"Why are you doing this? Then you must also know that by getting the medicine, Mom's lifespan was shortened! How do you think I feel seeing my daughter repeat the same thing?"

Their father, who had been listening with a grave expression, intervened.

"Both of you, stop it. What's done is done. At least they've returned safely."

After calming his wife, he turned to Shirone and the group.

"Then, are you outsiders? From Nor's Shelter?"

Kanya introduced Shirone and his companions.

"No, they're from the Land of Earth. They saved Rena's and my life and helped us obtain this medicine. Without them,

we might have died.”

No parent could remain cold to those who had saved their child.

Kanya’s father invited Shirone and his companions into the house.

While their mother prepared a meal, Kanya recounted what had happened in Purgatory.

When it was revealed that Shirone was a Nephilim, both parents knelt, causing a commotion in the living room.

After much pleading from the group, the parents agreed to treat them more casually.

“I see. Thank you for helping Kanya and Rena. But you should leave this place quickly. Even if you’re a Nephilim, those from the Land of Earth won’t be welcomed here.”

“No. We intend to go to the Seventh Heaven.”

The Divine Sanctuary, Araboth, was so sacred that merely speaking of going there was blasphemy. But Shirone, as someone free from the Law, spoke his mind freely.

“Even so... there’s no way to reach the Seventh Heaven.”

“We’ll have to figure that out. For now, I’m more curious about the Law here. What do you mean by shortened lifespans?”

“It’s as I said. Citizens are assigned lifespans according to the Law from the moment they are born. Kanya’s lifespan is 62 years. Lena’s is 73 years.”

“Huh? Rena’s the younger one, but she has a longer lifespan?”

“Lifespans can change at any time. Rena was granted an additional 10 years because she sang a beautiful hymn as a child. It’s a blessing, but the problem is with my wife. Her lifespan is 43 years and 247 days. She has only one day left.”

Shirone’s heart sank.

Who in this world could know their lifespan down to the last day? If it were him, the thought alone would be horrifying.

And yet, Kanya's mother was smiling, confident in the grace of Ra that would descend upon her.

"My wife lost 20 years of her lifespan for the sin of going to Purgatory when she was young. That's why she'll enter the Liquor of Anecdote tomorrow."

Changing someone's lifespan was cruel—no, it was unthinkable.

If Ra governed lifespans, how old was he?

The history of Heaven spanned hundreds of thousands of years. Perhaps Ra truly was a god.

"What is this Liquor of Anecdote?"

"Hmm, I suppose no one has told you. That makes sense. It's not something you'd want to know. Besides, as a Nephilim, you are free from the Law. It has nothing to do with you."

"Even so, I want to know. If I understand what it is, I might come up with a good solution."

"Hmm, if you insist..."

Just as their father was about to speak, a clear, high-pitched voice rang out from outside the window.

"Bow before me! I am Peophe, overseer of the Meccans."

Shirone and his companions leaped to their feet.

The voice, amplified like magic, reached them effortlessly. More astonishing was the fact that the language was automatically translated.

A mental resonance skill that conveyed words without channels.

If it was magic, it was advanced.

"So, the time has come. It's a fairy."

"A fairy? Do you mean the kind of fairy I know?"

Shirone asked, recalling the fairy folk from his world.

Kanya's father, thinking Shirone referred to this world's fairies, nodded.

"Yes. They are enforcers of the Law. If giants uphold the Law, fairies execute it. You could call them administrators. She must be here because of Kanya and Rena's situation."

“What should we do?”

“If you’re a Nephilim, you don’t need to worry. You’re free from the Law. But... I don’t know if she’ll take that into consideration. She has an unusual personality.”

“What are you doing? Citizens of this house, open the door at once!”

The fairy’s voice came from beyond the door.

This was the fourth floor, and the fairies Shirone knew couldn’t fly.

When Kanya’s father opened the door, Shirone’s expectations were shattered as a tiny figure flew in.

She was a girl, no larger than the palm of a hand.

Her blonde curls framed a small face with strikingly clear features. She wore green boots that reached her ankles, and her transparent wings fluttered so fast they were nearly invisible.

As Kanya’s family knelt, Shirone and his companions followed suit.

Hovering in midair, Peophe tilted her chin upward.

“I am Peophe, Fairy of the Spiral. I have personally come to carry out citizen judgment.”

Fairies were not born of nature but of abstract concepts, like Jack-o’-Lanterns emerging from myth.

They were singular conceptual entities.

Thus, they embodying and governing the concept they originated from.

“Now, I will enforce the Law. Kanya and Rena, have you been to Purgatory?”

“Yes, we have.”

Her parents squeezed their eyes shut.

Kanya, however, remained composed. She had been prepared for this since leaving Heaven.

Her only concern was Rena.

“I apologize. I went to the Forest of the Fallen to hunt game to serve a good meal to my mother, who is about to enter the Liquor of Anecdote.”

Knowing that giants could freely traverse Purgatory, she thought using hunting as an excuse might lessen her guilt. But Peophe, indifferent to the circumstances of the citizens, pressed her mercilessly.

“Ha, how dare you lie. What use is a meal for a citizen who will die tomorrow?”

Kanya’s mother finally broke into tears.

Even if the Liquor of Anecdote was a blessing, what living being wouldn’t fear death? Peophe’s ruthless words had stirred up that precarious emotion.

Shirone felt anger boiling inside him.

The citizens referred to the Liquor of Anecdote as rebirth.

But the words from this fairy, an administrator of the Law, were a clear death sentence.

It wasn’t just a threat. Peophe’s tone lacked malice, making it clear that her words were simply unvarnished truth.

Like an innocent child expressing their emotions without restraint.

“Regardless, the judgment is final. Kanya and Rena, your lifespans are reduced by 40 years each.”

Kanya looked stunned. A reduction of 40 years meant she had less than ten years left to live. Rena’s situation was slightly better, but even she would die at the age of 33.

A 40-year reduction for unauthorized departure—this was the harshest punishment she had ever heard of.

A year ago, her peer Sael had been penalized five years.

Uncle Kai of the Nor had received seven. Even her mother, considered the unluckiest case, had only lost 20 years.

But 40 years? What was she supposed to do about Rena’s life now?

Chapter 194: 6. Liquor of Anecdote (3)

“Lady Peophe! Please forgive us! If you combine my lifespan and Rena’s, it amounts to a reduction of 80 years. I forced my younger sister into this. So, please, at least lessen her punishment!”

“What’s wrong with 40 years? You wouldn’t have lived more than 60 years anyway, would you? Five years should be plenty to do what you wish.”

Lifespan is what determines the biological characteristics of a being. Fairies, while possessing rationality akin to humans, have an entirely different mindset due to their seemingly endless lifespans.

Fairies have ample time in their lives to rectify mistakes. For this reason, they are free from stubbornness and are candid, but they cannot possibly grasp the feelings of humans with finite lifespans.

It is much like how no human truly comprehends how precious an hour is to a mayfly.

Especially for Peophe, who was born only a year ago, death was merely a word that might be relevant a thousand years from now.

Kanya’s mother prostrated herself flat on the ground. She had known that the newly appointed governor was inexperienced, but never in her wildest dreams did she imagine such a disastrous judgment.

“Lady Peophe, you are an executor of the law. However, no one in the fairy realm has ever imposed such a severe punishment. Even in my case, it was only 20 years. Please reconsider.”

“What? Are you looking down on me because I’m only a year old? I know everything I need to know! An executor of the law has the authority to sentence up to 50 years of lifespan reduction. Are you challenging my rightful authority?”

“If you truly have made this ruling, please provide a reason we can understand.”

“Hmph, very well! I’ll explain it this way, then! Kanya and Rena’s unauthorized departure from Paradise incurs a 20-year reduction of lifespan! The remaining 20 years are for the sin of bringing heretics! Does this explanation satisfy you?”

Peophe pointed toward Shirone and his companions as she spoke. Although there had been no prior report of heretics entering, she had confirmed their presence with her own eyes, so there was no issue in passing judgment.

“Lady Peophe! These people are not heretics! The boy here is a Nephilim.”

“A Nephilim?”

Peophe stared intently at Shirone.

Could he really be a Nephilim?

The descendant of an angel. One free from the law. The innate knowledge granted at birth flickered through her mind.

As fairies were not mediators of the law, they could only enforce pre-established laws. Consequently, it was true that no punishment could be imposed upon a Nephilim.

Even so, Peophe refused to back down.

Being the youngest among the 72 ranks of fairies—48,000 in total—she constantly endured verbal harassment from her senior sisters. If she failed to establish her authority here, she would become the butt of jokes until the next youngest fairy was born.

“Even so, it doesn’t change the crime! I’ll let the Nephilim off! But not everyone here is a Nephilim, are they?”

Therefore, I will uphold the punishment for bringing heretics!"

Kanya's mother raised her head and retorted.

"They may not be Nephilim, but they are companions of one. Accusing them of being heretics violates the law."

"Silence! How dare a mere citizen lecture an executor of the law about the law! I carry out the will of Ra. Opposing me is tantamount to opposing the divine!"

"Hold on a moment."

When Shirone, who had been kneeling, stood up, Peophe crossed her arms and turned toward him.

It wasn't ideal to clash with a Nephilim, but even they had no authority to interfere with the execution of the law.

"What? If you're trying to obstruct justice, I won't forgive you."

"No, I'm just here to correct a misunderstanding. We didn't come here because that girl brought us. We merely followed her. Doesn't that mean she isn't guilty of anything?"

"What are you talking about? Followed her?"

"I happened to encounter her outside of Heaven. We entered because the gate was open. As I am free from the law, I can go anywhere I please. I came into this house for dinner, that's all. Therefore, these two sisters have committed no wrongdoing."

"Do you think I'll fall for such lies?"

"Then prove it. Show evidence that my words are false."

The Meccan system within Heaven could detect even the smallest variables, but emotions were beyond its grasp.

While it could verify countless facts about how Shirone's group entered Heaven with Kanya, determining their relationship was impossible. This situation arose solely because Shirone was a Nephilim.

Peophe darted her eyes around.

She had to find another way. If rumors spread that she had been outwitted by a human, she would be mocked for a thousand years.

“Fine. I will restore 20 years of Kanya and Rena’s lifespans. And I’ll permit the Nephilim’s entry. But the rest of you are undoubtedly heretics denying the law, so their lifespans will still be reduced. You there, state your name.”

Peophe pointed at Arin.

Of course, Arin did not respond.

While the exact mechanism was unclear, it seemed that knowing someone’s name was necessary to grant or reduce lifespan. Arin wasn’t foolish enough to offer her name for the record.

“No, why should I tell you my name?”

“You insolent creatures! Do you not know to fear the wrath of fairies?”

Shirone frowned and spoke in a disapproving tone.

“What do you think human life is worth? You’ll die someday too, won’t you?”

“I am a fairy. My life is incomparable to a human’s! Besides, I’ve only lived for a year! I still have an unimaginably long time ahead of me!”

Shirone scoffed.

The future, after all, inevitably comes, and it is the very reason the past is honored and the departed are mourned. Peophe seemed oblivious to the immutable nature of the concept of the future.

Or perhaps, as someone just a year old, she had never even contemplated it.

Peophe placed her hands on her hips and declared.

“Fine, so this is how it’s going to be? For the crime of withholding your names, you’ll face judgment from those far above me. And for concealing irreverent heretics, Kanya and Rena will each have an additional 30 years of their lifespans reduced, totaling 50 years!”

Kanya’s family was devastated.

Fifty years. That would mean Kanya would die as soon as the judgment was executed.

While the actual reduction would be carried out by the highest ranks of the 72 fairies, and not immediately, it was clear that once the report was filed, it would be processed within hours.

Peophe, seemingly satisfied with her own ruling, turned her body as if concluding another difficult day of work.

“With this, the judgment is complete. Now then, I shall take my leave.”

However, Peophe’s flight toward the door abruptly stopped. Rian and Tess were blocking the door, while Shirone and Amy flanked Peophe on either side.

“So, you plan to subdue me by force? A fairy like me?”

“It’s not impossible. I’ll just think of it as catching a sparrow.”

“Oh, really? Then go ahead and try.”

Peophe’s eyes flared.

Rian, who had gripped the hilt of her greatsword, suddenly frowned in discomfort. A strange force twisted his arm unnaturally. When Tess placed her hand on Rian’s shoulder, she too felt the same pain.

“Hoho! If you don’t move, your arms might snap.”

Fairies, as singular conceptual entities, possessed abilities akin to those of Rulebreakers, manipulating concepts in a manner resembling magic.

Peophe, born of the Spiral, could dominate anything related to twisting. Even Rian, with strength comparable to that of Schema users, struggled to resist.

But as Rian’s body began to fully execute his mind’s commands, he managed to move incrementally. Swinging his greatsword, he disrupted Peophe’s spiral force, causing her to stagger.

Tess seized the opening and thrust her saber.

Peophe narrowly avoided the attack by soaring into the air, looking down at Tess in disbelief.

Schema—the techniques of the Giants.

Fairies and Giants formed the twin pillars that sustained the world. Despite their equality under the law, both races held a deep-seated belief in their own superiority. Losing to a Giant's technique wounded Peophe's pride deeply.

"You little brats!"

Peophe moved so swiftly that her afterimages painted the air.

As Rian and Tess's movements intersected, a gap appeared in their coordination.

Exploiting the opportunity, Peophe unleashed her spiral force on the door. The metal twisted clockwise at its center, shattering the latch and causing the door to fall away.

"Hohoho! Fools! Farewell!"

Peophe surged toward the exit but felt something strange—her speed was diminishing.

When Shirone approached directly from the front, Peophe instinctively flew upward, yet even that felt sluggish.

Realizing time was slowing, Peophe panicked. Before she could react further, Shirone grabbed her out of midair.

As Shirone released the Slow spell and brought Peophe close, her face was a mix of shock and confusion.

"How are you manipulating time?"

Time manipulation required light magic. However, there was no light in the room that could be amplified by magic.

A fragment of primordial knowledge crossed Peophe's mind.

The Nephilim were descendants of angels—and angels, she knew, were masters of light.

'This is ridiculous...!'

Peophe is furious. He struggled to escape, but Sirone was stronger.

No, the fairy's strength was weak.

Specializing in mental strength, fairy strength was the lowest of the laws.

"Let go! Let me go!"

Her flailing wasn't even an annoyance to Shirone.

In a last-ditch effort, Peophe gritted her teeth and invoked her magic. As the spiral force surged through her, Shirone tightened his grip.

Peophe's eyes widened, and the air in her lungs was forced out in a gasp.

"Gahhh! Stop! My stomach's going to burst!"

"Restore their lifespans to what they were."

Peophe's tear-streaked face hardened with defiance.

"Hah! Trying to threaten me? It won't work. I might report this to the higher-ups, but I'm not the one who enforces it. Attacking the enforcer of the law, even if you're a Nephilim, won't let you escape punishment. You'd better release me while you still can."

"Threats? I could just kill you instead."

If he failed to change Peophe's mind, Kanya would die.

Shirone couldn't claim innocence if that happened.

As he applied more pressure, Peophe's face turned pale, but her pride as an enforcer of the law refused to falter.

"G-Go ahead! I'm not scared at all!"

Despite her bold words, Peophe's trembling body betrayed her. She was terrified.

"You're not scared? Then why are you shaking?"

Insulted, Peophe glared at him fiercely.

"The destruction of existence is frightening to everyone! You think I don't know that? Don't compare me to lowly humans like you!"

"Then die."

"Kill me! Go ahead, kill me! I'm ready for it!"

Shirone raised Peophe higher. If he slammed her to the ground, she would surely die.

Peophe's trembling grew more violent. Even imagining the sight of her shattered, lifeless body was nauseating.

Finally, Peophe broke into bitter sobs.

One year of life, gone just like that. Her dreams of becoming the leader of the 72-class hierarchy of fairies were ending today.

As her tears rolled down Shirone's hand, he frowned. How was he supposed to accept a world where even fundamental values were dictated?

"You're scared and still choosing death? Why? Why can't you think differently?"

"Hah! A human like you could never understand! But I won't say anything! As an enforcer of the law, I won't submit to a human!"

"Fine. If you've given up on life, then you're as good as dead already. Killing you will be easy for me."

Peophe's tear-streaked face was twisted in despair.

She wanted to live. But how could she admit that to someone holding her life in their hands?

Was she supposed to kneel and beg? For an enforcer of the law to bow to mere subjects was unthinkable.

"Fine! Kill me! Just get it over with already!"

"But if you ask me to spare you, I will."

Chapter 195: 6. Liquor of Anecdote (4)

Peophe's face froze at Shirone's words.

She couldn't understand the phenomenon unfolding in her heart. The powerful emotions that had dominated her began to dissipate like bubbles once the hope of survival emerged.

"Are you mocking me? What do you gain by humiliating me?"

"Mocking you? Don't be ridiculous. Saving someone who asks for their life to be spared is only natural. Because I, too, want to live. Knowing how precious my life is makes me understand how precious someone else's life is."

Shirone had not yet decided to release Peophe. The judgment she would make in the final moment remained uncertain.

However, he thought of Kanya and Rena. He couldn't let them die like this.

"I'll count to three. One."

The grip on Peophe tightened.

"Two."

"Sp-Spare me."

Shirone didn't relax his stance, as though he hadn't heard.

But just as he was about to shout "Three," Peophe clenched her eyes shut and screamed.

"Save me! Please, I don't want to die!"

Shirone let her go.

Regaining her freedom, Peophe trembled as she flew into the air, her face as red as the setting sun. She glared and spat angrily.

"Do you think you'll get away with this?"

"What did I do?"

“You tried to kill me!”

“That’s right. And that’s exactly what you did to Kanya and Rena.”

Peophe couldn’t argue back.

As someone born into the role of law enforcer, she had never deeply pondered the lifespans of her subjects.

But now that her own life had been at the mercy of someone else’s hands, it was a complicated matter.

Death was terrifying, and life was sweet. Even for a fairy with a lifespan of 10,000 years, this truth remained the same.

“I also think what happened to Kanya’s mother was wrong. Return her lifespan as well.”

Peophe grew irritated as she was pressed for answers before she could even gather her thoughts.

“I already told you! Only the higher ranks of the 72 fairy classes can tamper with the Lifespan Records. A decision that’s already been made can’t be overturned.”

“Then revisit Kanya and Rena’s judgment first. You can at least do that, right?”

Resting her chin in her hand, Peophe pondered.

“Well... fine. I’ll reduce their penalty to a one-year reduction.”

Shirone let out a hollow laugh.

While it was good that Kanya and Rena’s punishment had been lessened, the inconsistency of the judgments was baffling. He couldn’t help but feel there were no clear standards from the beginning.

“Are you some kind of junk dealer? How can you just hand out judgments so arbitrarily?”

“You’re complaining even when I’m reducing it? Fine, should I just increase it to 20 years instead?”

“That’s not the point. Isn’t it strange? There should be some criteria for applying punishments.”

“That’s why I am the criterion! I’m the law enforcer! Are you really that ignorant?”

Shirone fell silent. He had no choice but to accept that fairies were a fundamentally different species from humans. Fairy reasoning was broader than human logic. While humans could divide love into countless concepts, to a fairy, love was simply love.

As a law enforcer, Peophe did not doubt her thoughts. Now that she understood how terrifying death was, one year seemed like an appropriate reduction.

It made sense that she couldn't make more detailed judgments like reducing 2 years and 3 months or 7 years and 6 months.

Given enough millennia, her reasoning might deepen, but for now, she was only a year old.

"Are we done here? I'm leaving. Fairies are busy creatures, you know."

"Where do you think you're going? You still need to fix Kanya's mother's case."

Peophe turned back to glare at Shirone with fiery eyes.

"How am I supposed to fix that? I wasn't even born back then. Besides, as the youngest of the 72 fairy classes, I don't have the authority to edit the Lifespan Records."

"Then at least tell me how to resolve it. You're a fairy; you must know something. I won't let you leave until you do."

Peophe, despite her contrarian nature as the Spirit of Spirals, wasn't difficult to handle, perhaps because of her young age. Shirone felt that extracting information from her might reveal a way to save Kanya's mother.

"Hmph. Do you think you can stop me from leaving? And no one can interfere with fairy matters. That's written in the law."

"I don't know what that law says, but even you know it's unfair, don't you? Life is precious. How can you casually reduce someone's lifespan by 20 years?"

Tears welled up in Peophe's eyes.

The truth was, she didn't know. To judge the law's fairness by personal standards, she would need to live at least 600

years.

“Why do you keep pestering me? I’m just following orders!”

“Weren’t you boasting about being a law enforcer? And now you’re running away?”

“Ugh, seriously! What do you want from me? What do you even want to know?”

“First, tell me what the Liquor of Anecdote is.”

“The Rite of Liquor? It’s a sacred magic. It purifies the laws of the subjects and reincarnates them into new life.”

For once, Peophe answered without hesitation, as if she was happy to know something.

But to Shirone, her words conveyed nothing beyond the veneer of righteousness.

“How am I supposed to understand that? Explain it specifically—its purpose, the process, the mechanisms of the magic, the text of the law, things like that.”

“Ugh, how annoying...”

Peophe clutched her head in both hands.

The Liquor of Anecdote was simply the Liquor of Anecdote. She had never reflected on the knowledge she inherently possessed.

Only one method remained.

Recalling the concept of memory transference, Peophe’s eyes gleamed.

“If you really want to know, I can explain it clearly. Using mental resonance, I can transfer my memories to you. I’ll show you my experiences with the Liquor of Anecdote. Will that do?”

Mental resonance was dangerous. While Peophe didn’t seem likely to do anything malicious, she wasn’t exactly an ally either.

Arin spoke through the mental channel.

It’s okay. I can handle Peophe.

Are you sure? Even if your defenses are strong, what about unregulated techniques?

Peophe is emotionally immature, so I can detect any irregularities early with my perception. If that happens, I'll knock her out with a mental shock before she can act.

It seemed Canis and the others had experienced unregulated techniques before.

Reassured by Arin's confidence, Shirone agreed to Peophe's proposal.

"All right. Show me your memories of the Liquor of Anecdote."

"Fine. Let's begin."

Peophe cast the spell for memory transference.

Shirone and his companions' consciousnesses were drawn into the memory. The scene that emerged was from one year ago, in a plaza where a giant statue stood, and the subjects watched in breathless silence.

Calling out to her friends scattered across the memory, Shirone watched as they moved toward him, passing through the subjects like ghosts.

Though it was someone else's memory, it was vivid as reality.

As a memory projection, Shirone could observe anything he wished. Even when he leaned close to someone's face, they remained unaware.

The group made their way to the statue.

As the wall of people parted, a shocking sight unfolded.

Several hoses were connected to the giant statue, linking it to eight large glass spheres stationed around it, each big enough to hold a person.

The subjects were silent, though a few were weeping. The atmosphere—a mix of reverence and despair—was deeply unsettling.

A Kergoan bustled around the statue, preparing the magic.

Eight subjects stepped out from the crowd. Most were in their fifties or sixties, though one was a young woman.

From their smiles, Shirone saw tears.

Trembling pupils, quivering lips, sweat beading on their foreheads.

They were clearly thinking about death.

The participants entered the glass spheres, wearing nothing. As black liquid filled the spheres, their families rushed forward, wailing. Other subjects prostrated themselves on the ground, chanting Anke Ra.

Mothers, fathers, and grandparents were pulled away by the Kergoan as they pounded on the glass.

Those submerged in the rising liquid smiled.

Are they drowning?

The thought was horrifying.

Peering into the spheres, Shirone recoiled in horror.

It wasn't drowning. Their bodies were dissolving in the liquid.

It was the most grotesque scene he had ever witnessed.

He wondered about the liquid's composition and the reason for its black color. If the families had seen this process, they might have lost their minds.

The liquid in the spheres was siphoned through the hoses with a sickening sound, like waste being discharged.

The chants of Ra grew louder.

As the liquid level dropped, the inside of the spheres became clear again, revealing nothing but emptiness.

The people who had smiled moments ago had disappeared, siphoned away through the hoses.

Shirone's gaze shifted to where the hoses connected—to the base of the giant statue.

His body trembled, but he had to see it with his own eyes.

The giant statue.

Beneath it, the remains of the eight people were pouring out.

So what, then, was this substance now filling the statue?

The eternal and immortal Ra.

The chants of Anke Ra pierced the sky.

Suddenly, the giant statue began to tremble violently.

At that moment, the subjects fell silent.

The spheres were completely empty, their contents now fully transferred to the statue.

Like a mold.

Shirone shook his head. It couldn't be. Yet, once the thought surfaced, it couldn't be stopped.

A mold into which humans were melted and poured. If that was the case, then what was being created inside...?

The giant statue split open, revealing a cross-section.

A colossal foot emerged, shaking the ground.

Shirone shuddered at the sight of the giant drenched in a gelatinous coating. Its expression was far removed from anything that could be called human.

Through the mental channel, Arin muttered. The reason they couldn't resonate with the giant was because multiple minds were mixed within a single body.

Then, what state were the minds contained within the body in?

Were there eight individual minds, or had they fused into something entirely different?

The citizens begged for mercy.

The one born of law and the upholder of law. The giant.

Thus, the giant had the right to punish those who broke the law.

Even if someone were crushed under the giant's foot at this moment, it would not be considered the giant's fault.

Those who met the giant's gaze foamed at the mouth and collapsed. It was a technique called Pressure that emanated from its eyes.

Ah.

Shirone shuddered.

The origin of Schema. The primordial Schema was the phenomenon of overlapping human diagrams mixed through the Liquor of Anecdote.

He followed the giant, listening to the murmurs of the citizens.

The giant would leave Heaven and enter Purgatory. There, it would eradicate heresies threatening Heaven and return to the Fifth Heaven, Matei, at the call of Ra.

Families cried out with tears streaming down their faces.

“Mother! Father! Grandfather!”

The giant flinched, as if reacting to their voices. However, it did not turn around and continued walking toward the gate as if nothing had happened.

The scenery within Peophe’s memory burned away like paper in flames, giving way to the familiar sight of their home.

Shirone and his companions looked around.

Peophe was nowhere to be seen. It seemed she had fled while the memory was playing out.

But having discovered what the Liquor of Anecdote truly was, they couldn’t afford to worry about her.

The subjects of the Rite of Liquor were dissolved in liquid.

Then, they were placed into a mold, undergoing a special transformation process to be reborn as giants. Their minds mingled, and in that process, Schema emerged.

This was the meaning behind the stimulant that Kanya had procured.

A desperate wish to retain even a fragment of consciousness within the unknown darkness.

Gardrak had been correct. It was no different from administering anesthetic to a patient dying in pain.

“This is unbelievable...”

Tess’s face was pale as a sheet.

The Schema of the giants. And her own Schema.

Realizing this, Tess rushed to the corner and retched, expelling the food he had just eaten.

No one reproached Tess.

Everyone felt nauseous.

When Rian approached, Tess raised her hand to stop him.

Of course, Peophe's memory was not more horrific than the scenes of battle. But there was an overwhelming sense of mental nausea.

Schema was the technique of the giants. But why, then, could he, a human, access Schema? Did he possess a lineage like the Nephilim? Yet, the giants had no reproductive organs.

"Now you understand why I didn't tell you, don't you?"

Kanya muttered, her expression mournful.

Some called it a blessing, others a curse.

Regarding this event, which divided opinions even among the citizens and heretics, no one wished to speak of it.

"According to the law, humans were born from giants.

Therefore, returning to giants is the essence of the Liquor of Anecdote."

Even if Kanya's words were true, it was impossible to accept. The Liquor of Anecdote that Shirone witnessed was a monstrosity that no façade could conceal.

He finally realized.

The Rite of Liquor, conducted in Heaven, was a ritual that used human flesh and organs as raw materials to produce giants.

Chapter 196: 1. God's Mercy (1)

The Rite of Liquor.

The magic of melting humans to create giants.

The concept of combining multiple entities into one left no room for the sanctity of life.

Living beings propagate offspring, but the sorcery of Heaven defied such a biological structure.

The Lifespan Records regulated the lifespans of citizens, and when the population grew, individuals were unified into giants to maintain the population balance.

If this was Ra's will, then Liquor's magic could be called the core system that sustained Heaven.

Shirone and his companions gathered around the table to begin their meeting. Having encountered the cruel ideology of Heaven, the tension among them had escalated further. Their first concern was Peophe's actions.

If she reported to the higher-ups after slipping away during the memory transfer, Kanya's household wouldn't be safe.

"We need to leave immediately. Peophe will return with reinforcements."

Canis was in favor of taking action.

Although Peophe's abilities weren't extraordinary, it was also true that she was only a year old.

Considering the unknown capabilities of other fairies, avoiding battle seemed prudent.

"You don't have to worry too much. Shirone is a Nephilim. According to the law, Nephilim are not affected by its authority. No fairy will dare harm Shirone."

Kanya, a citizen of Heaven, had unshakable faith in the law. But no one responded to her assertion.

One thing they had learned since coming here was that being a Nephilim didn't make someone omnipotent. While free from the laws of Heaven, Shirone's exemption only made him more vulnerable to the repercussions of meddling with those laws.

"Shirone, you decide. We'll follow your lead."

Amy handed the choice over to Shirone. From Heaven's perspective, heretics were like foreign substances. If there was any hope of making a difference, Shirone had to serve as their figurehead.

"It's better to stay here tonight. I don't think Peophe will report us. She has no reason to. Besides, with the Metagate, we can escape if the worst comes to pass."

Shirone trusted Peophe. Though her personality was eccentric, she had reduced Kanya and Rena's lifespan deduction to just one year.

With her high intellect, capable of self-reflection, Peophe was unlikely to act impulsively out of emotion.

What worried Shirone more was Kanya. Tomorrow, Kanya's mother would undergo the Rite of Liquor.

For a human who had devoted her entire existence to indulging her own identity, becoming one with other humans was a terrifying prospect.

"I understand now why you hesitated to speak about Liquor's magic. But Kanya, is that truly how you feel? From what I've seen, Liquor's magic is..."

"I know it's unreasonable. I know that too."

Kanya admitted it without resistance.

Her words were strikingly blunt for someone who had just described Liquor's magic as sacred.

But Shirone didn't find it strange. Faith and emotions occupy separate realms.

"I'm not an idiot. I'd be lying if I said I'd never doubted it. But what difference would it make? If you don't believe in God, you die. If you believe, you gain eternal life. There's no choice."

For the first time, Kanya uttered the word “die”. She knew death existed in Heaven.

“If you’re staying, I’ll prepare a place for you to rest. Follow me.”

When she pressed a button on the control panel, the side of her house opened, and a new structure flew in, attaching itself to Kanya’s home.

Seeing Shirone and the others look on in amazement, Kanya explained that most homes in Heaven owned multiple compartments.

“Ha-ha, the Meccan tribe loves inviting guests.”

Kanya’s smile tugged at Shirone’s heart.

That night, Kanya and Rena lay in the same bed.

Their hearts raced as if they were running, making it impossible to sleep.

The sisters didn’t cry. They were waiting, silently hoping the other would cry first.

As they restlessly tossed and turned, Rena rolled over and spoke.

“Sis, by tomorrow, Mom won’t be here anymore, right?”

Kanya looked at her younger sister, who was about to lose their mother at such a young age, with pity.

As she gently stroked Rena’s head, her sister suddenly said something unexpected.

“If it’s brother Shirone... I wouldn’t mind letting you have him.”

Kanya’s brows furrowed slightly. Her astonished expression hid a subtle sense of vulnerability at the pointed remark.

“What are you talking about? Shirone is a Nephilim. How could someone like me ever share a life with him?”

“But you’d never date a heretic. And you’ll never meet someone like brother Shirone again. So this is your chance. Don’t miss it.”

Kanya struggled to hold back her tears. Rena’s sincerity came through loud and clear.

By tomorrow, their mother would no longer be with them. Rena, seeking to fill the void of emptiness, hoped for a new family.

“Haha, but you like Shirone too. If Shirone became your brother-in-law, you wouldn’t be able to handle it with your personality. You’d be jealous of me every day.”

“No, I’m serious! I’d be fine if it were you, Sis!”

Kanya laughed. Both she and Rena knew Shirone was beyond their reach.

It was nothing more than a late-night conversation between sisters.

As Rena snuggled closer like a kitten caught in the rain, Kanya embraced her sister, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Don’t worry, Rena. You’re all I have.”

Rena’s eyes fluttered shut.

And so, their final night was coming to an end.

Shirone and his companions rested in the room Kanya had provided.

A lot had happened in just one day.

Shirone and his friends each became absorbed in their own thoughts, and for a while, no one spoke.

Tess feigned crying as he broke the silence.

“Should we go back now? Too much has happened in one day. Honestly, being here is exhausting. Seriously.”

The others felt the same. How many battles had they fought in the span of twelve hours?

Moreover, every opponent they faced was overwhelmingly powerful—something beyond imagination in the world they had come from.

The fatigue was bad enough, but the endless secrets of Heaven weighed on them even more. With so much information coming at once, their heads were spinning.

Canis spoke up.

“We can’t do that. Not after coming all this way. Arin and I have to reach the 7th Heaven, Araboth.”

If all they intended was sightseeing in Shamain, they wouldn't have attempted this journey in the first place. Now that they were in Heaven, there was no way to recover the Metagate. In essence, they had paid for their ticket with an ancient artifact.

Amy hugged her pillow and rolled over.

"But Araboth is where God lives, isn't it? It must be the most difficult place to access in all of Heaven. How do you even plan to get there?"

"That's my problem to solve. You don't need to worry about it. If you're too scared to go, then stay here and wait."

"Oh? Look who's being all dismissive now. Should we just go back without you, then?"

"That's even worse. If you activate the Metagate here, your memories will reset. Memories can only be used once. If you leave us behind, there won't be any way for you to return."

Amy sat up, slamming her pillow against the floor.

"What? So that's how it works? You're telling me we can't go back without you?"

"Exactly. You didn't realize that until now, you pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin? Have you ever seen such a beautiful pumpkin in your life?"

"Sure, I have. It's hanging right there on your neck."

Amy ground her teeth. Whether it was a compliment or an insult, she couldn't tell, but it was clear Canis had shut her down.

Shirone, sitting on the floor with a pillow in his arms, finally spoke.

"I'm not thinking about going back yet either. But, Canis, the timing for using the Metagate has to be reasonable. If we let anything other than survival cloud our minds, we might hesitate when it matters most."

"Hmph, I know that much. I'm leaving that to Arin. If things really get dangerous, we'll abandon Heaven and everything else and just leave."

"Well..."

Tess turned onto her side, propping her head up with his hand. Her body's curves, from head to toe, were overwhelming.

'An adult... he's an adult.'

'Tess, you're an adult.'

The children's gazes all converged on him, but Tess, accustomed to such attention, didn't mind.

"How do they regulate lifespans here? Are you telling me a real god exists and manipulates people's lifespans at will?"

The group fell silent, lost in thought.

"I think it's something like magic. It felt the same when I fought Marsha. Magic seems capable of anything."

Clay Marsha's powers had indeed been beyond imagination. However, Amy, who had fought alongside him, was more skeptical.

"Hm, Rulebreaker magic, maybe. Reducing a lifespan might be possible depending on the cost and conditions. But what about eternal life? No magic can extend a lifespan. It's beyond human limits."

"Is that so? I think there might be a way. Hmm..."

Arin interjected.

"Why is everyone so critical? What if Ra really is a god? Even if he didn't create the world, couldn't he be a being close to divinity?"

"That's odd too. If Ra is really a god, why does he need names to regulate lifespans?"

Amy's point was logical. Names were nothing more than designations given by humans. The idea of a divine being relying on human language was hard to reconcile with godhood.

Shirone added.

"And isn't Liquor's magic inherently evil? For whatever reason, it treats human life like a commodity. Ra might be adjusting lifespans just to manage Heaven. The very idea of a god controlling the world doesn't make sense."

The group realized Shirone had a negative view of Heaven. Concepts of good and evil were human constructs, fluid and shaped by circumstances. Making value judgments required utmost caution.

Tess offered his perspective.

"But there's nothing we can do about it. This is the life they've chosen, their culture. Religion, in particular, holds an absolute position in any cultural framework."

"No, it's not religion. Didn't we just say Ra isn't a god?"

"That doesn't matter. Even if he's not a god but a dictator, it's the same. Ra has the power to control lifespans. What's more important in a religion than that?"

Shirone seemed like he had more to say, but he held his tongue.

Amy, watching him closely, realized that Shirone was still searching for a way to save Kanya's mother.

She admired his determination but knew that now was the time for pragmatism.

"What are you going to do, Shirone? Rite of Liquor will proceed tomorrow. Like Tess said, it's the citizens' choice. It's not something we can interfere with just because we think it's unreasonable."

"But Miro rejected the laws, didn't she?"

"Shirone, that's..."

"I know. I'm not trying to justify myself by her beliefs. It's just... I think I'm starting to understand how she felt."

Shirone thought back to the story of Miro, told at Nor's Shelter. Despite rejecting the laws, Miro wasn't hated by the elder's mother.

If the citizens were nothing more than subservient to Ra, how should he interpret those words? What had Miro seen and felt in Heaven?

One thing was clear: when tomorrow came, Shirone would have no choice but to make a decision.

Perhaps Miro... wasn't wrong.

1st Heaven, Shamain.

Fairy Administration Bureau, Branch 73.

The Fairy Department where Peophe worked was located on the outskirts of Shamain, bordering Purgatory. A massive tree known as the World Tree housed hundreds of homes, with small fairies flitting around like larks.

Peophe delved deeper into the World Tree.

The head of the Fairy Department lived in quarters far smaller than a human house but quaint and ornate in design.

When Peophe entered, the Fairy Chief, Igrin, sat with her wings folded on a chair. Her dark eye makeup and golden vine patterns etched on her cheeks made her presence commanding.

Though a fairy born of authority, Igrin was also someone Peophe could never approach lightly, if only due to the sheer age difference. Her beauty, in particular, inspired awe among her peers.

Chapter 197: 1. God's Mercy (2)

"Chief, I've returned."

"Ah, the Fairy of Spiral, Peophe."

"Yes, you remember me."

"Of course. No other fairy has been born since your emergence a year ago."

Peophe's expression darkened. She was the youngest among the 72 ranks of fairies. That was the only reason Igrin remembered her.

Fairies, being female in form, couldn't reproduce. To sustain their race, they had no choice but to await the birth of a new fairy, and Peophe was the first to be born in a decade.

"How did the matter of the fugitives go? Kanya and Rena, was it?"

"Yes. They confessed and cooperated with the investigation."

"And the verdict?"

"I sentenced both to a one-year reduction in lifespan."

"One year?"

When Igrin's expression grew displeased, Peophe swallowed nervously. She had no doubts about her decision, but as a novice, she couldn't be certain her ruling was the right one.

"Though you are still young, you are a law enforcer. Your decision must be respected. But I must ask—was there any external pressure?"

"No, it was my own decision."

Although Shirone had threatened her life, it hadn't risen to the level of external pressure. Realizing that a harsher punishment would be unjust, she decided on a one-year sentence.

Igrin scrutinized Peophe with a skeptical gaze.

A one-year reduction in lifespan had never been handed down for escaping Purgatory. For a fairy who had lived only a year, the judgment was certainly unconventional.

“Was there anything else unusual? I heard rumors that heretics followed the citizens into Heaven.”

Peophe hesitated. Strictly speaking, those accompanying Kanya weren’t heretics—they were Nephilim.

But if she disclosed everything, the information might be misinterpreted, leading to unintended consequences. That wasn’t what Peophe wanted.

“I did not see any heretics.”

Igrin waited for more, Such a situations that required further explanation.

But Peophe offered no additional comment.

With a sigh, Igrin waved her off.

“Very well. You’ve done your duty. You may go.”

“Yes, rest well, Chief.”

Peophe bowed and left.

Once the door closed, Igrin stared into the air above her, then addressed the Fairy of Truth, Mer, who stood nearby.

“What do you think?”

“Peophe spoke the truth. However, I don’t believe she told the whole story.”

“That’s likely the case. What could have happened? She’s still in her early stages, yet her strong convictions at such a young age are worrisome.”

Igrin rested her chin on her hand, deep in thought.

“Find out more about the humans who entered Heaven with the citizens. The Meccan Command Center should have detailed records.”

“As you wish.”

With that, Mer exited through a hole in the ceiling.

Crossing her legs, Igrin rubbed her temples.

The 73rd sector was known for its tranquility, a region free from incidents. Yet now, humans—neither heretics nor

citizens—had entered the area.

Her intuition, honed over three millennia, brought a single name to mind.

“Adrias Miro...”

“Whew, I thought I was going to die from the nerves.”

Dragging her exhausted body, Peophe headed home.

She had lived for a year now, but her body still tensed up whenever she met Igrin.

Especially on days like today, when she had to make decisions based on her own judgment, the pressure was almost unbearable.

“Sigh, being a law enforcer is tough.”

“Hahaha! What’s so tough about dealing with citizens?

You’re just bad at it.”

Hearing the mocking voice from behind, Peophe frowned.

Turning around, she saw the usual three fairies sneering at her.

Before Peophe’s birth, they had been the youngest. Fairies, born from concepts rather than bloodlines, had no familial ties, but these three, born around the same time, were often referred to as the “fairy sisters”.

“Hello, seniors.”

Peophe forced a smile. The fairy sisters’ expressions grew even harsher.

It wasn’t that their faces had always been this way.

Fairies born from emotions easily reflected their inner changes on their faces.

After spending around ten years as the youngest, it was inevitable for any fairy to develop such a sharp demeanor.

“We heard about it. You handed down a one-year sentence?

You let yourself get pushed around by humans, didn’t you?

We can tell without even seeing it.”

“That’s not true! That’s honestly what I thought was fair.”

“Oh, really? Then that’s an incredibly foolish decision. You’re officially a pushover now. Don’t expect the citizens to

respect you anymore!”

The fairy sisters burst into laughter, covering their mouths. Peophe was angry but couldn't show it. If you got on the bad side of your direct seniors, you'd be harassed for life—and in the case of fairies, “life” meant at least ten thousand years. Her only option was to endure. Once the next youngest fairy was born, they would leave her alone.

“Just do your job properly. Back in the day, someone like you wouldn't have even been made an enforcer. They're only letting it slide now because fairies are born less often.

Squeeze the citizens harder, will you?”

“I'm doing my best.”

“Your best? What does a one-year-old like you know about anything?”

Peophe clamped her mouth shut.

It was absurd for them to give advice when they'd barely crossed the ten-year mark themselves, but in the rigid hierarchy of fairy society, a one-year-old had no way to speak up.

“Got it? You have to make them fear you. That's how you earn the citizens' obedience. Make sure nothing like this happens again.”

When the fairy sisters finished their scolding and left, Peophe felt as if she had aged ten years.

At this rate, she thought she might actually be able to take them on.

Of course, that was only in her imagination.

“Ugh, I'm so tired. I just want to go home.”

Peophe's body sagged, and her flight wobbled as she dragged herself onward.

The Next Morning.

The central square of Shamain's 73rd district was bustling from the early morning in preparation for Rite of Liquor.

The Mecca tribe inspected the devices, while the Nor tribe verified the spells that would be incorporated into the ritual.

As the Kergo tribe guided the participants through the rehearsal, Shirone clutched his chest, feeling as though it might burst.

A rehearsal for an event where people would die? How insignificant must human life seem in the eyes of Heaven's god?

When the preparations were complete, the participants exchanged farewells with their families. Among them were Kanya and Rena.

"Mom! Mom!"

Rena couldn't stop crying. Even the brave Kanya was nothing more than a helpless daughter sending her mother off.

As the time for the ritual drew closer, Kanya took out two items from her pouch: Ephine and Corphine.

"Take these. They'll help."

Shirone recognized what Kanya was offering.

After learning what Rite of Liquor truly was, the sight weighed even heavier on his heart.

What use were stimulants and tranquilizers in this situation? Then again, he wasn't sure. With the brain destined to dissolve as the body fused into a giant, there was no way of knowing how their minds would transform.

Perhaps it was better than nothing.

For a parent, nothing could be more reassuring than the medicine offered by their child.

As the ritual began, the citizens formed a circle around the central statue.

The scene was no different from the one Shirone had seen in Peophe's memory—except this time, there were ten participants.

According to Kanya, the executor of Rite of Liquor was always the oldest person in the district. Being the oldest meant they had repeatedly been granted extensions to their lifespan, marking them as the most loyal citizen.

This time, the executor was a Kergoan—a robust young man who was, in reality, 187 years old.

He belonged to the noble class of the Kergoans and was rumored to soon gain eternal life and ascend to the Third Heaven, Shehakim.

“The Rite of Liquor will now commence! Participants, step forward!”

The ten participants approached the glass orb.

To say they weren’t afraid would have been a lie. Being dissolved by strange chemicals and merged into a single entity was a death more horrifying and unsettling than any other.

“Mom! Mom!”

Kanya tried to run forward, but her father held her back. Even though she cried out, her mother didn’t turn around. Everyone acted the same way.

The participants smiled for their families, while the families hid their sorrow for the participants’ sake.

Shirone didn’t see this as beautiful.

He didn’t know the value Rite of Liquor held for the citizens, but the mere act of accepting such sorcery was wrong.

The participants undressed and entered the glass orb.

Sitting on the cold glass floor, they closed their eyes and began to pray.

Shirone felt a surge of rage.

What were they praying for? How could they praise a god that had led them to their deaths?

“This is murder. It’s unacceptable.”

Shirone finally voiced what he had been thinking all night.

After agonizing over it, he had come to a single conclusion.

The Rite of Liquor must be stopped.

Anyone who understood that this was murder would do the same.

Shirone walked toward the statue, intending to halt the ritual before the participants died.

Tess grabbed his wrist.

“Shirone, wait. I’m angry too, but this isn’t our world. You’ve heard the saying, ‘When in another country, do as the people do.’”

“I don’t care who said that—it’s a human idea. Kanya’s mother hasn’t committed any crime. There’s no justification for her to be killed like this under any circumstances.”

“But what can we even do? Even if we stop Rite of Liquor, Kanya’s mother’s lifespan ends today. Saving her will only put us in danger.”

“No, that’s not true. Kanya’s mother might not have to die today.”

“What? What do you mean?”

The reason Rite of Liquor continued despite the doubts of the citizens was because Ra controlled their lifespans. Knowing they would die today compelled them to follow the law.

But Shirone had declared that the law was flawed. If the Rite of Liquor contained a fundamental error, then the citizens were being deceived. It was a blatant fraud, which meant there was a chance to change the situation.

“Infuse the life fuel! The ritual begins now!”

As the executor shouted, the Kergoan moved swiftly. Once the water began to fill, there would be no turning back. The point of death—whether from dissolution or drowning—was unclear, but the latter always came first.

As the Kergoan approached the device, Shirone shouted.

“Wait! The Rite of Liquor cannot be allowed!”

The citizens turned their attention to Shirone.

It wasn’t hard to spot him standing alone in the clearing, but they didn’t understand his words due to the language barrier.

Shirone glanced at Arin, silently asking her to translate. With a sigh, Arin stepped forward.

She knew Shirone’s cautious nature better than anyone. The fact that he had made a decision meant he wouldn’t back down under any circumstances.

Arin expanded her Spirit Zone. Though mental magic was specialized for tentacle-like precision, expanding the zone was effective for addressing a crowd.

Shirone repeated his words.

The language penetrated the citizens' minds. Since the ability was similar to that of fairies, they weren't surprised.

However, the meaning of the words couldn't be ignored.

Hostility filled the citizens' eyes. Declaring a ritual that worshiped Ra to be evil was an obvious act of heresy.

The executor, unable to hide his anger, retorted sharply.

"What authority do you have to deem this ritual unacceptable? Are you not a citizen? Do you wish to face death without the chance of resurrection?"

"I am Nephilim."

The square fell silent in an instant.

Even in the mortal world, Immortal Function was a realm few could reach.

For the citizens of the 73rd district, seeing a Nephilim was a first in their lifetimes.

The executor was equally unsettled.

He had faithfully carried out Ra's will to rise to his position.

At 187 years old, his age was a badge of honor.

But even his accomplishments paled in comparison to a Nephilim.

Nephilim—the descendants of angels.

Though they couldn't interfere with the law, their very existence set them apart from ordinary citizens.

"Why does a Nephilim oppose Rite of Liquor? This ritual is a law decreed by God."

Chapter 198: 1. God's Mercy (3)

"The Law? Does your law include prohibitions against murder?"

"Of course. No citizen can harm another. If someone commits murder, they are severely punished according to the rulings of the Ministry of Internal Affairs."

"Then what is this action you're taking now? If your law prohibits murder, how can you proceed with Rite of Liquor?"

"I don't understand what you're saying. Are you truly Nephilim? You sound like a heretic."

"Whether I'm Nephilim or not doesn't matter. I am someone who does not know the length of my lifespan. That's why I can live each day to the fullest. But look at them—alive but not truly living. How is this any different from murder?"

The citizens remained silent—neither condemning nor agreeing with him. However, the atmosphere grew increasingly tense.

Every citizen had, at some point, felt the contradiction. Rite of Liquor was clearly irrational, but no one rejected it because of the inertia of hundreds of thousands of years. Countless people had become giants through Rite of Liquor. Everyone had done it before, and everyone would continue to do so. That unshakable tradition clouded the citizens' judgment.

"You who deny Ra's law, we were born from giants. Rite of Liquor is God's arrangement to revive our lives. Do you desire for your very existence to vanish forever? If there is anyone among the citizens who wishes for this, step forward, and I will personally ask God to grant it."

No one stepped forward. According to the ancient traditions passed down by the citizens, the giants created through Rite of Liquor traveled through Purgatory and returned, eventually dissolving back into individual beings.

Living forever was better than dying. If death was inevitable, they wanted at least a chance to return.

That was life.

And Ra ruled life in such a way.

Satisfied with the citizens' silence, the executor pointed a finger at Shirone and shouted.

"You are a heretic! No, even if you are Nephilim, you have no authority to interfere with the law! Seize him at once!

Make him pay for his blasphemy against Ra's sanctity!"

"Shirone, things have escalated! We need to leave now!"

Amy grabbed Shirone's hand, but he shook her off and stood his ground.

"No, I'm not leaving. I have to save Kanya's mother. I can't just walk away."

Ten Kergoan warriors drew their swords and charged. Using their giant-enhanced techniques, their speed rivaled that of cheetahs.

Shirone plunged into their formation. The leading Kergoin raised his sword, while the others surrounded Shirone and swung their blades.

At that moment, Shirone's Frenzy erupted.

A veil of light struck the Kergoan warriors. While the photons carried negligible mass, the repeated impacts—hitting twenty times per second—sent reverberating force through their bodies as if they were being torn apart.

The Kergoan surrounding Shirone were all blown away.

Sliding across the ground, they looked at Shirone with expressions of pure shock.

"Ne... Nephilim? He's really a Nephilim?"

The magic of light had a profound psychological impact. It was an ability only angels could manifest, and it affirmed Shirone's identity as Nephilim.

Seizing the moment, Shirone focused his Photon Cannon. Sensing the impending danger, the executor moved to block the giant statue. But before he could act, a blinding flash erupted from Shirone.

The executor twisted his body with inhuman reflexes. The flash grazed his side, and a crushing pain spread through his organs.

But the pain was secondary.

When the Photon Cannon struck the giant statue, a resounding boom echoed like the tolling of a massive bell. The sound waves shook the square, forcing the citizens to cover their ears and retreat.

They shouted something amidst the chaos, but the ringing in their ears drowned out their words.

Nevertheless, the giant statue remained unscathed.

The power of the Photon Cannon was enough to crush even an iron door, but there was not a single trace of a crumpled statue.

The citizens' eyes filled with awe and fervor.

"O Anke Ra! Save us!"

"Do not abandon us! Grant us eternal life! Eternal life!"

As the situation grew dire, Amy stepped forward. She had to find a way to drag Shirone out of there and escape before it was too late.

At that moment, Rian grabbed Amy by the shoulder and turned her around.

"Wait. Shirone isn't finished yet."

"That's not the issue. If we don't run now, we'll have to fight them!"

"Then we fight, don't we?"

Amy finally turned to face him. Their friendship up until now didn't matter—Rian, at this moment, was solely Shirone's knight.

"Why are you acting like this, Rian? Do you have something to say?"

“Yes, I do. You’re all acting strangely. What do you think you’re accomplishing by stopping Shirone?”

“Obviously, we need to escape. If we make enemies here in Heaven, no one will help us.”

“And what about Kanya’s mother?”

Amy’s heart sank. She realized she hadn’t been truly acknowledging the reality of someone else’s death.

“Shirone is trying to save Kanya’s mother. Just like he did for Marsha, who was once our enemy. Just like he did for the students at the magic school. So why aren’t you helping him? Don’t tell me you think that because this isn’t the world we come from, you have no responsibility for the lives of the people here.”

“Ah...”

Rian’s assessment was accurate. Amy had justified her reluctance to act by rationalizing that this was a different world, with different rules and laws, and that they bore no responsibility for the choices these people made.

“Amy, whether this is Heaven or anywhere else, what’s happening is right in front of us. Shirone said he can save Kanya’s mother. That’s why I’m going to fight alongside him.”

Amy glanced around the square. Shirone was surrounded by Meccans wielding Signa and Exd, as well as Norians skilled in ancient magic.

Human willpower wasn’t a trivial thing. Even if this was Heaven, the fundamental truth of life couldn’t change.

The hesitation disappeared from Amy’s face.

“I believe in Shirone too. Let’s go, Rian.”

Amy launched herself into action, and the rest of the group followed close behind.

A flash of light erupted where Shirone was surrounded, scattering a dozen people outward. As Shirone who had cast Frenzy reappeared, Amy leaned against him and asked.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Signas and Exds are weak at long range, and most of their ancient magic seems to be wind-based. It’s not that strong—it’s weaker than Clove.”

To Heaven, Purgatory was akin to Hell.

Even if Clove’s abilities weren’t extraordinary, he was still a mage who had survived the harshness of Purgatory. His skills surpassed those of Heaven’s inhabitants.

Shirone and his group held off the citizens’ attacks from their respective positions.

The problem was that counterattacking wasn’t an option.

Killing a citizen would escalate the situation further, making it harder to resolve.

“Ugh, this is annoying.”

Canis placed his hand on the ground and cast Shadow Wall. The wall of shadows rose like a fortress, its surface bristling with sharp spikes.

The Meccans formed a barrier with their Exd to block the attack, but even they couldn’t find a way to counter it effectively.

Shirone, we can’t hold out forever. You need to make a decision soon.

Shirone’s thoughts raced. There was one way to end the fight without further combat: Shining.

If he unleashed an intense burst of light to temporarily blind the enemy, it could de-escalate the conflict.

‘But will Shining be enough?’

The biggest issue was that it was broad daylight. No matter how intense the light, it would be hard to outshine the sun.

Creating light stronger than the sun was difficult due to the oscillating nature of light. Increasing the photon density in a single area was inherently limited by this oscillation.

‘How can I amplify the light’s intensity?’

Shirone’s eyes lit up with an idea.

It wasn’t possible to stop light’s oscillation, but it might be possible to create light stronger than the sun.

Close your eyes! I’m casting Shining!

Shirone halted his movements and entered Spirit Zone.

Photons began gathering rapidly around him.

Although his companions closed their eyes, Canis, who was maintaining his barrier, glanced back at Shirone.

‘What’s happening? Why does the light look like that?’

The light gathering around Shirone was much dimmer than the usual Shining. The reduced brightness meant the light’s luminescence had been suppressed—suggesting that its oscillation was being restrained in some way.

‘He’s aligning the polarization.’

Photons usually oscillate in random directions, some vertically, others horizontally. Shirone used gravity to align the photons’ oscillation, unifying their direction.

The result was extraordinary.

An impossible number of photons, now stabilized, converged into a single point. The light was so dense it appeared gray rather than white. By the time the Shining emitted its typical brilliance, its density was tens of times higher than normal.

Casting now!

Shirone tightly shut his eyes and released his control over the photons. The particles burst outward like an untamed flood.

The brilliance that engulfed the square reached an intensity of 300,000 lumens, more than twice as bright as staring directly at the midday sun.

Shirone didn’t need to see to know his magic had worked.

The light was so strong that even with their eyes closed, the faint shadows cast across their lids were still visible.

‘It worked! It actually worked!’

Divine Particle was the fundamental principle of Shirone’s magic.

From the mass-based Photon Cannon to the energy-based Laser, and now to the Shining Impact that compressed the photons to cause a flash explosion.

By surpassing the intensity of natural light, this non-lethal magic could incapacitate any living being regardless of time or location.

Even after the light faded, the citizens kept their eyes shut. Many leaned back, shielding their faces with their arms, afraid of further attacks.

A tense silence filled the square.

Shirone and his companions opened their eyes first, followed by the hesitant citizens, who slowly peeked around.

“Ne... Nephilim. A Nephilim...”

One of them muttered, and the Meccans began dropping their weapons one by one.

The Shining Impact had done more than stop the battle—it had shaken the citizens to their core.

Even with a contract with a light spirit, creating light brighter than the sun was impossible.

If anyone could achieve such a feat, it could only be someone wielding the power of angels.

Tess wiped the sweat dripping down his chin.

“Phew... Shirone, what kind of magic was that? I thought I was going blind.”

Although she spoke jokingly, she was being sincere. She had never experienced such intense light in his life.

Rian sheathed his greatsword and approached.

“Well, we’ve neutralized the enemy. Now we just need to stop Rite of Liquor, right?”

“It won’t be that simple, Unlike the other citizens, the Kergoan is unwavering”

As Amy said, the mages—including the executor—remained steadfast, glaring at Shirone with sharp eyes.

Although they had been intimidated by the power of Shining Impact, their devotion to Ra gave them no reason to waver mentally.

“You dare commit such an act and expect to escape unscathed, Nephilim? You have disrupted the sacred law of

Ra. When the Ministry of Internal Affairs moves, even your lifespan will end today.”

“Try if you can. You can’t manipulate a lifespan even I don’t know.”

The executor’s nose twitched with suppressed rage.

Though he wanted to strike Shirone down immediately, he hesitated.

His 187 years of life were the result of absolute loyalty. With eternal life so close, he couldn’t afford to risk it all here.

A faint red glow appeared in Shirone’s palm.

With the citizens already cowed, this was his final opportunity. Instead of provoking them further with the Photon Cannon, Shirone prepared to obliterate the statue with a decisive Laser.

As the crimson beam extended toward the giant statue, the citizens panicked and retreated.

But no one dared approach Shirone. If he was truly Nephilim, he was beyond their power to oppose.

Chapter 199: 1. God's Mercy (4)

The spot struck by the laser began to smolder, and the statue started to tremble as though it might explode at any moment.

"This... this can't be! How is this possible?"

The executor ground his teeth. He couldn't attack Shirone, nor could he prevent the destruction of the statue.

At that moment, a thunderous crack echoed from the sky. Blue lightning bolts cascaded down in a cluster, heating the air around Shirone.

The ground exploded, raising a cloud of dirt and dust.

The executor quickly looked toward the source of the lightning. A group of fairies was flying in from the square's entrance.

Even from a distance, Shirone immediately spotted the fairy at the center of the group.

She stood out, glowing with a golden light, her face adorned with elaborate makeup. Her beauty was striking.

It was Igrin, the Chief of the Fairy Administration Bureau.

Shirone's companions formed up around him. The tension they felt now was far greater than when they had been fighting the citizens; the weight of the moment surged through their veins.

What puzzled them was that the initial attack had been lightning.

Electricity was a near-spiritual element, not something a fairy could typically wield.

Who cast the lightning?

It's hard to say right now. But there must be a fairy in their group capable of manipulating friction.

If a fairy could charge atmospheric particles through friction, they could theoretically create lightning. The poor accuracy of the strike made sense in that context.

Rian unsheathed his greatsword and stepped forward.

“A full-scale deployment of the fairy brigade, huh? Guess this was inevitable.”

Shirone had expected this too. Violating Heaven’s laws meant it was only a matter of time before the Internal Affairs acted.

The citizens parted to make way for Igrin, who advanced with a confident, regal demeanor.

Hovering with authority, the fairies stopped just ten meters away from Shirone and his group.

Among them, Shirone spotted Peophe standing at the back of the formation.

Unlike the other fairies, she stared blankly ahead, her expression confused, as if unsure why she was even there.

Igrin pointed at Shirone and his companions.

“So, you are the ones who entered Heaven while falsely claiming to be Nephilim. That alone is a grave crime, yet now you dare to disrupt the sacred Rite of Liquor?”

The executor’s expression shifted to one of surprise. Falsely claiming to be Nephilim?

But just moments ago, the boy had demonstrated abilities unmistakably divine—those of an angel. How could he wield the power of light if he wasn’t Nephilim?

“Igrin, are you saying they’re heretics? But that boy clearly used the power of light!”

“Do not be deceived. The lands below possess techniques for wielding light-based magic. As for the others, they are unworthy of even being examined—they are clearly heretics. Their plan was to fool the fairies as well.”

Canis’s eyes sharpened.

Judging by Igrin’s words, they had been thoroughly investigated. The fact that the comparatively weak Peophe

was present strongly suggested that she had revealed everything.

“Damn it, I told you we needed to leave! That fairy betrayed us. She was never trustworthy from the start.”

Peophe frowned.

Betrayed? She had simply followed Igrin’s orders without understanding what was happening. Until they arrived, she hadn’t even known Shirone’s group would be here.

“Hmph! Fine! I ratted you out! You’re as good as dead now! This is what you get for not knowing when to stop!”

Peophe scoffed, escalating her antagonism. She had no intention of pleading innocence to humans.

“You didn’t betray us.”

Shirone’s voice cut through the tension.

“Peophe made the right judgment. A fairy who upheld her beliefs wouldn’t suddenly compromise them now.”

Peophe turned her head away with a huff. His words, though unexpected, did little to comfort her wounded pride.

But her mind buzzed with thoughts.

The right judgment... Beliefs...

These were values she had never been acknowledged for by her seniors.

Igrin, however, paid no attention. Having lived for over 3,000 years, her understanding of concepts was far more intricate than any human’s.

If humans could define love in a hundred ways, Igrin could categorize it into ten thousand.

At that level of discernment, every event became independent of the next.

Peering into someone else’s home didn’t make you a thief.

Breaking a lock didn’t necessarily make you a thief.

Even entering the house or picking up an object didn’t automatically define you as one.

It was only when you carried the object out that the concept of theft became complete.

This level of cognition, unattainable for humans who often extrapolate the whole from its parts, allowed Igrin to see Shirone and Peophe's conversation as entirely separate from the current situation.

"I am Igrin, Chief of the Fairy Administration Bureau and Fairy of Authority. You, heretics, entered Heaven while falsely claiming to be Nephilim and have disrupted the sacred Rite of Liquor. For these crimes, I hereby sentence you to the complete removal of your lifespans."

A crease formed on Shirone's brow.

"Is that how it always is? You kill people just because they don't align with your ideals? It's the same with Rite of Liquor. Why do you push your citizens to their deaths?"

"You were born from the giants. Why is returning to them such an unbearable fate?"

"That's nonsense. No parent ever asks their child to return their flesh."

"Seeds are sown to be harvested. Living beings die to provide sustenance for others. You are also bound by this law."

"Seeds are sown to produce new seeds. Living beings die to give opportunities to others. That's how humanity thrives. A life without meaning is no different from being dead."

Igrin sighed deeply, a hint of frustration escaping her. Why was her intuition never wrong? Seeing Miro's face in Shirone wasn't a coincidence.

"You speak like a heretic. A human not worth engaging with. What are you all waiting for? Begin Rite of Liquor immediately!"

At Igrin's command, the executor sprang into action.

When he pulled the lever, black liquid began to rise in the ten glass orbs.

"Damn it! There's no time! We have to stop this now!"

Rian and Tess dashed toward the statue, intent on destroying it.

Igrin raised her hand, signaling the fairies.

“Attack! Don’t let them get close!”

Shirone and his companions entered combat formation. Arin closed off her mental connection to all but the group’s communication channel. Since Igrin’s mental resonance was spreading across everyone, translation wasn’t necessary anymore.

The Fairy of Impulse struck first. When she extended her hand, the air burst forth as if a hole had been punched through the atmosphere.

Small, dense projectiles of compressed air pelted Shirone’s group.

While the attacks weren’t powerful enough to penetrate their bodies, the sheer number and their invisibility made them impossible to counter directly.

“Fall back!”

Canis raised his Shadow Wall. The air projectiles struck the barrier with the sound of hail pounding against a rooftop.

Suddenly, a sharp crackling noise erupted from above.

The Fairy of Friction generated static electricity, unleashing a bolt of lightning that struck directly at Harvest.

Even as the lightning crackled and sparked repeatedly, it had no effect on the magic creature.

“Ha! Feels nice! Is this some kind of new massage technique?”

Meanwhile, Amy, leaning against the Shadow Wall, conjured Jack-o’-Lantern above her palm.

The fiery orb floated into the sky, multiplying into dozens of identical flames before raining down in a chaotic bombardment.

Since they were fake fireballs, which were Jack-o’-Lantern’s unique ability, there were only three actual fireballs.

However, since they didn’t know which one was real, the target couldn’t help but feel fear.

With the fairies momentarily dispersed from Amy’s bombardment, Canis lowered the Shadow Wall.

In the now-open field, Arin quickly spotted the fairies' positions and proposed a strategy through the mental channel.

If fairies are mental beings, I have an idea. I can incapacitate them with a Mental Shock.

Shirone found the suggestion promising.

In magic combat, matchups often depended on elemental affinities, but nothing could counter a direct mental assault. Can you manage it? There are a lot of them.

I'll cast a wide-area Mental Shock. It'll drain a lot of my energy, but I can manage one attempt. Just lure the fairies into a 20-meter radius around me.

It wouldn't be easy to herd all the fairies into the target zone, but even trapping half of them could shift the tide of battle.

"Alright! Let's split up and draw them in!"

The group scattered, beginning their individual skirmishes. The fairies' abilities were formidable—most of them seemed to have prepared for combat, specializing in offensive concepts.

Ironically, the stronger their abilities, the easier it became for Shirone's group to bait them into the trap.

"Wait, huh?"

Among the chaos of raging magic, Peophe was the only one floundering, unsure of what to do.

Having never experienced real combat, she couldn't process the overwhelming power of the spells flying around her.

Suddenly, a flash of light streaked toward her.

Startled, Peophe raised her hands, preparing to use her spiral abilities.

At the same time, Shirone reflexively activated his Photon Cannon.

Their gazes met as they identified each other, and their eyes wavered.

Peophe bit her lip, unable to make a decision. Sensing her hesitation, Shirone canceled the Photon Cannon and turned

away.

Peophe watched him run off toward another fairy, her face etched with confusion.

Her shoulders slumped, and her head drooped dejectedly.

Arin! I can't do it anymore! This is my limit!

The fairies' ability to fly made it nearly impossible to corral them into a single location.

However, the Shirone party's mages were exceptionally skilled in movement, and they managed to lure more than half of the fairies into the designated area.

That's enough!

Movement is a combination of time and space.

The brief instant a fairy entered the zone was Arin's only opportunity to cast her magic.

She crouched down, placing both hands on the ground. As her shadow expanded like a sinkhole, five fairies sensed the danger and leapt into the air.

But it was already too late.

With a loud *bang*, a mental wave surged upward, scattering dirt in all directions.

The fairies, disoriented and unable to regain their balance, fluttered briefly before their wings stopped, and they plummeted to the ground as though struck by pesticide.

With half of their forces incapacitated, the remaining fairies, their morale shattered, screamed and fled.

While Harvest lashed out with his claws to drive them away, Rian and Tess broke through the Kergoan warriors' defensive line and successfully reset the switch to its original position.

The black liquid, which had risen to about a third of the glass orbs, was drained back into the tanks, lowering the levels inside the orbs.

The participants let out sighs of relief.

But even this was its own kind of torment—hope, when so fragile, was nearly synonymous with absolute despair.

"Shirone! Now's your chance! Destroy it with your laser!"

Shirone was already prepared.

If the statue was destroyed, Rite of Liquor would be stopped. With the fairies now in disarray, no one could interfere with him.

As Shirone's laser began to emit its crimson light, Igrin's voice resonated across the battlefield.

"By the authority of the servants of God, I command you: those without the power of this world, kneel before me."

The moment the command ended, something extraordinary happened.

As if the world itself had collapsed, every human present fell to their knees. Shirone's party was no exception.

Shirone, his knees pressed into the ground, was bewildered. He tried to stand, straining his legs, but his body felt as heavy as an elephant.

The mental channel filled with panicked voices.

What's going on? I can't get up!

She's called the Fairy of Authority, but what does this have to do with authority?

This isn't ordinary magic. This is Rulebreaker magic.

Shirone agreed. If it wasn't Rulebreaker magic, such an outcome couldn't have been possible.

But how was it activated?

It wasn't simply an incantation. Bringing hundreds of people to their knees with mere words was impossible.

Unlike Shirone's group, the citizens showed no resistance.

They simply gazed up at Igrin with reverent eyes.

Igrin walked leisurely among the citizens, passing through them as she approached the statue. When she reached it, she personally pulled the lever.

The black liquid began to fill the glass orbs once again. The participants squeezed their eyes shut, their faces twisted with dread.

Somewhere in the crowd, the sound of families weeping quietly echoed.

Chapter 200: 1. God's Mercy (5)

Shirone clenched his teeth. There was nothing else he could do.

It felt as though he might be able to cast magic, but using Teleportation in his current state would tear his body apart.

'Damn it! I have to move somehow.'

If things continued as they were, Kanya's mother would die. No, everyone would die. The only thing left in the end would be a grotesque giant whose name no one would know.

"Resign yourselves, foolish humans. No one can defy Ra's law."

Igrin gazed with satisfaction at the humans all kneeling before her.

This was authority. Obedience wasn't something to be forced; it was something achieved voluntarily.

"Damn it, why is my body so heavy?"

The voice from behind the statue made Igrin's face stiffen. Then came the sound of deliberate, heavy footsteps—*thud, thud*. It was as if a ghost was emerging, and everyone turned to look.

Tess's face lit up as he shouted.

"Rian!"

Rian was walking forward, his face twisted into a grimace. It looked as though he weighed a ton.

The only reason he wasn't collapsing under his own weight was that the pressure was distributed evenly across his entire body.

"What the hell did you do to me? My body feels ridiculously heavy!"

"How... How are you able to move...?"

This wasn't a spell that could be overcome with brute strength alone. The weight imposed was proportional to muscle mass, meaning that the stronger one's body, the heavier they would feel.

If someone were to move under such conditions, there was only one explanation—they had to exert more strength than their body's natural capacity.

But that wasn't something a normal human should be able to do.

'Exceeding the limits of physical strength? No, that can't be. This is one of the highest-tier abilities within the giants' technique.'

While Igrin was lost in thought, a dull noise came from where Shirone and his group were.

"Heh-heh, what an amusing spell. This is why battles are so fun."

From Canis's shadow, Harvest suddenly emerged.

Seeing both Rian and Harvest defying the spell, Shirone understood.

The weight imposed wasn't an absolute measure; it was relative. This key information meant that the spell's mechanics were different, and thus, so was the way to counteract it.

"Let's see if you can catch me."

Harvest surged toward Igrin. But the fairy chief's aerial agility was not to be underestimated.

Shirone, momentarily distracted by the sight of the chase unfolding like a duel in the sky, snapped out of it and shouted at Rian.

"Rian! There's no time! You have to destroy the statue!"

At Shirone's desperate shout, Rian raised his greatsword in front of the statue. Igrin's face contorted in shock as she hovered in the air.

The shadow pursuing her wasn't human, but the swordsman—Rian—was a flesh-and-blood human.

For him to swing his sword while under the effects of Rulebreaker magic meant he was achieving nearly 100 percent mastery over his physical body.

With a battle cry, Rian struck the statue. The impact sent a deafening sound reverberating through the square, startling the citizens. Yet, the statue remained unscathed, not even a crack marring its surface.

Rian gritted his teeth.

He wanted to smash everything in his path, but all he could do now was add another blow.

“Damn it! If it weren’t for this ridiculous magic!”

The liquid in the glass orbs had already risen to the halfway mark. The participants, having resigned themselves to their fate, had closed their eyes.

To them, Rian might even appear hateful. If he hadn’t interfered, it would all have been over by now—peaceful, even.

Through the mental channel, Arin’s voice spoke.

We need to figure this out. Using words alone to immobilize hundreds of people doesn’t align with the principle of equivalent exchange. There must be a condition we’re missing.

Shirone shared her thoughts.

No matter how bizarre Rulebreaker magic might be, it still operated within the confines of the zero-sum principle of equivalent exchange.

Given the spell’s overwhelming power, there had to be a way to undo its effects.

Shirone recalled Marsha’s advice.

Rulebreaker magic is deeply tied to the caster’s personality. Igrin was the Fairy of Authority. This suggested that her magic likely related to the concept of authority itself.

“Hiyaaaa!”

Rian didn’t give up, continuing to strike the statue.

With each thunderous blow, the citizens’ faces grew paler, their expressions trembling with unease.

At that moment, Amy's crimson eyes flared, her heightened senses detecting a subtle change in her body.

Shirone, the weight isn't fixed. It just got five kilograms lighter. Now seven kilograms, nine... The more Rian swings his sword, the lighter it gets.

Shirone's eyes lit up in realization. Amy's observation unraveled the mechanism of Igrin's magic.

"Rian! Keep going! Just keep hitting it! Rite of Liquor isn't some ritual of rebirth—it's just murder!"

Shirone! The weight just dropped by sixty kilograms! Could it be...?

Yes! I can't be sure, but it seems like Igrin quantifies authority into physical force. The more people doubt her, the weaker the spell becomes.

Igrin's expression twisted, proving Shirone's deduction. Shirone's cries, labeling Rite of Liquor as murder, were sowing doubt among the citizens.

This wasn't just a desperate accusation—it meant the heretics had figured out the spell's activation conditions. Authority-based Rulebreaker magic.

Igrin's magic used a scale to measure belief and doubt within her domain.

The moment she uttered her command, all living beings in the vicinity were divided into believers and doubters.

Currently, the square held 318 individuals, with a belief-to-doubt ratio of 293 to 25.

If everyone believed in Igrin, the weight imposed per unit area would reach 100 percent of the individual's strength, making movement theoretically impossible.

But if belief fell below 50 percent, the "Cost of True Belief" would activate, forcing Igrin herself to endure 100 percent of the imposed weight for 24 hours.

Shirone realized why Rian's actions were affecting the spell. The destruction of Heaven's sacred symbol—the statue—planted seeds of doubt in the citizens' hearts.

Each strike, though seemingly futile, slightly weakened the weight pressing down on them.

“Everyone, wake up! Rite of Liquor is a lie! It’s a spell designed to kill you!”

Shirone’s continued cries pressured the citizens, but the weight’s reduction soon plateaued.

Trials strengthen faith.

While some were gripped by fear, others seemed to steel their resolve.

“Shut up! You’re the ones trying to deceive us!”

“Kill them! Kill the heretics!”

The actions of defacing the statue pushed the devout citizens to their breaking point.

As more fanatics emerged, even those who had started to doubt began reconsidering.

But Shirone refused to give up. Even immobilized, this was the only form of resistance he had left.

“Do you really think Rite of Liquor is about rebirth? You’re next! Why can’t you see that?”

“We follow the law! To fulfill the lifespan granted by Ra and return to our original form!”

Shirone clenched his teeth, frustration mounting at the citizens’ unwavering mindset. Even Rulebreaker magic couldn’t overcome their rigid beliefs.

“You can live longer! The participants of Rite of Liquor don’t have to die today!”

As if by some miracle, the citizens’ clamor ceased.

They turned to Shirone, their faces shocked.

Sensing the sudden stillness, Harvest abandoned his chase of Igrin.

There would be no resolution like this. Instead of aimlessly engaging, he decided it was better to destabilize the citizens’ trust through psychological warfare.

Igrin furrowed her brow. The effect of Shirone’s words was evident in the numbers.

267 to 51.

Seventeen percent of the citizens were now doubting. The reduction in weight was significant enough to feel, and the shifting balance of faith was beginning to undermine Igrin's authority.

"We can live longer? We... we can still live?"

"Yes! If the participants' lifespans truly ended today, there would at least be a funeral for them. But this isn't death—it's murder! Rite of Liquor isn't your resting place; it's your grave!"

Shirone, what are you saying?

Amy was incredulous. If the citizens followed Ra because the Lifespan Records was absolute, wouldn't a lie like this backfire?

Shirone wasn't entirely certain either. But after a sleepless night of consideration, he'd concluded there was a possibility, however slim.

"I met heretics in Purgatory. Some of them weren't even born in Heaven, so they don't know their lifespans. But no one controls their lifespans either!"

"That's because they're heretics..."

"Wake up! Don't you get it yet? It's not that Ra isn't controlling them—it's that Ra can't control them! If God is omnipotent, why would he need your names to do it?"

Igrin's face grew grave.

229 to 89.

If the ratio of doubters surpassed fifty percent, Igrin's authority would vanish. Only seventy more individuals needed to change their minds.

The executor shouted, his voice filled with rage.

"Silence! That too is merely the principle of the law!

Whether we achieve eternal life or rebirth through Ra's will, it remains unchanged! Do not mock the citizens with the heretic's twisted logic!"

"It's not law—it's magic! Whatever power Ra wields, if it's tied to magic, then these people can live longer!"

The mention of magic struck a nerve. If the sacred phenomena enacted through the law were nothing more than magic, Ra's divine stature would fall to the level of human understanding.

"How can they live longer? Do you have any proof?"

A voice called out from among the citizens.

Igrin turned to glare at the speaker sharply. Just moments ago, the count of doubters had increased by one.

"I've studied the nature of time before. To put it simply, time is relative. It applies differently to every individual here."

Even among the citizens, there were those who studied time—the mages of the Norian and the optical engineers of the Meccan.

There were likely six such individuals present. The ratio shifted to 222 to 96 as those who understood Shirone's words began to harbor doubts.

"Even if that's true, what difference does it make?"

"If the ability to assign lifespans is tied to time, then the lifespans of Rite of Liquor participants aren't precise. Even if someone's lifespan is set at forty years, they wouldn't die exactly at the end of those forty years. Time is fluid; it's not fixed."

"That's just a hypothesis. If it's not magic but the law, we wouldn't even have the chance to regenerate."

"It's not a hypothesis. I can prove it. Even if two people have ten years deducted from their lifespans, the times they were born differ. So why doesn't Rite of Liquor account for that difference?"

206 to 112.

Only forty-seven doubters were needed now.

Igrin glanced at the glass orbs. The black liquid had nearly filled them. If even one participant drowned, the ritual would be considered a success, as decomposition of the body began at the moment of death.

"If they can live for even a few more hours—or even one second—then Rite of Liquor is murder. It's nothing more

than drowning the participants and desecrating their bodies!”

The executor’s eyes flared with fury.

“Silence! Even if you’re right, what would that change? Life’s value isn’t determined by time! Are you telling us to deny Ra for the sake of one second?”

“That one second is the difference between choosing to end your own life or having it taken from you! Why don’t you think about that?”

Igrin saw an opportunity to regain control.

243 to 75.

As expected, more citizens were returning to belief.

Shirone had made a foolish mistake. For humans, control over their lives wasn’t truly important.

What they cared about was benefit.

A slight extension of lifespan brought them no tangible gains. The citizens would willingly embrace Rite of Liquor, hoping for future promises.

The shift in the numbers was reflected in the citizens’ reactions as they began to hurl insults at Shirone.

“Damn it! I almost believed you! But in the end, our lifespans are fixed! Nothing changes!”

“So you call yourself Nephilim, but all you do is spread lies? One second? What could you possibly do with just one second? What could anyone do with it?”

Chapter 201: 1. God's Mercy (6)

Shirone forced himself to his feet, his body trembling. Although the load per unit area had dropped to less than 70 percent, standing up required an indomitable will, one beyond normal human endurance.

The citizens looked on in astonishment. While it might be understandable if someone like Rian—a towering figure—had stood up, the sight of the comparatively slight Shirone rising was nothing short of shocking.

“You give everything to your god, even your lives. You obey whatever you’re told. And yet, for just one second? If one second is so meaningless to you, then what kind of god can’t grant even a single second of mercy to those who believe in him?”

Igrin clenched her teeth tightly.

159 to 159.

The ratio of belief and doubt was now perfectly equal. If even one more person wavered, her authority would collapse entirely.

Rian, whose movements had grown much lighter, now wielded his greatsword with ease. If he could withstand nearly 100 percent of the weight, handling 50 percent was trivial.

Abandoning the statue, Rian turned his attention to the glass orbs filled with black liquid. He struck at them repeatedly, and with each blow, the glass cracked, and liquid began to seep out in thin streams.

“Damn it! Damn it!”

Despite his efforts, the cracks weren’t enough to prevent the participants from drowning. The liquid trickled too slowly

to make a difference.

The citizens, watching the precarious dance of life and death, swallowed nervously.

This scene was clearly working against Igrin. Humans instinctively sympathized with the weak, and the sight of someone fighting so desperately pulled at their emotions. Igrin resorted to her final tactic.

“Don’t be deceived! The scales of my authority judge you! Anyone who harbors doubt here will have fifty years of their lifespan deducted by me personally!”

Fear, the most effective tool for maintaining power, swiftly restored the citizens’ faith.

216 to 102.

Her authority surged back rapidly.

As the weight increased, Shirone’s knees buckled once more. He gritted his teeth, straining against the overwhelming force, but it was no use.

What tormented him most wasn’t just the physical burden but the palpable sense of the citizens turning against him again.

“Shirone...”

At that moment, Kanya approached him.

Her face was pale, her expression hollow. How could she remain composed when her mother was submerged in that ominous black liquid?

“Is it true... can she really live? My mother... will she be able to smile again in front of me, Rena, and Dad?”

The citizens glanced back and forth between Kanya and the glass orb.

To smile while saying goodbye in front of your family—what kind of time could make that possible? Just one second.

“Of course. Your mother isn’t meant to die yet. You’ll see her again, smiling.”

Tears rolled down Kanya’s cheeks. She no longer cared what might happen.

She just wanted to see her mother—just once more, the way she had been that morning.

“Then please... save my mom, Shirone. Please, save her. I don’t want her to become a giant. I hate it.”

27 to 291.

Igrin’s eyes widened as if struck by a blow to the head. Her authority had plummeted into the abyss.

Before she could even gasp, the Cost of True Belief activated.

She fell straight to the ground, collapsing onto her knees.

The overwhelming weight left her entirely immobile, unable to even move a finger.

“Now! Everyone, stop the ritual!”

With the weight lifted, Shirone and his companions surged forward as though the ground itself propelled them.

Time was short—no, it was already overdue.

Rian swung his greatsword in a powerful arc, shattering one of the glass orbs.

Amy dashed to the control panel and flipped the switch, halting the flow of liquid.

Tess thrust his rapier into the gaps in the device, triggering an internal explosion.

Families rushed to the broken orbs, pulling the participants out. But the participants were drenched in the sticky liquid, their conditions unclear.

The citizens approached cautiously, their faces tense. If the participants were dead, their bodies would have begun to decompose.

None had the courage to face such a horrific sight.

The families began wiping away the viscous liquid. Slowly, the participants’ skin, eyes, noses, and lips emerged.

To everyone’s relief, decomposition hadn’t begun. Kanya, recognizing her mother, burst into tears.

“Mom... Mom!”

Though her mother hadn’t dissolved, she wasn’t breathing. Kanya’s father rushed over and began performing CPR.

As he opened her airway and compressed her chest, thick liquid spilled from her mouth, and she started coughing.

The citizens erupted into cheers.

For that moment, the law meant nothing to them. The joy of a life returned to its family was all that mattered.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

The bells rang, signaling the end of Rite of Liquor.

A solemn silence swept across the central square.

The participants, supported by their families, turned to look at the bell. According to the law, their lifespans should have ended today. But none of them had died.

2. The Era of Turmoil (1)

The bell rang twelve times.

The sound of the bell left an indelible mark on the hearts of the citizens gathered in the central square.

Though they were still citizens of Ra and followed his laws, it was uncertain if they would continue to do so in the future.

“Chief! Are you all right?”

Peophe flew to Igrin.

Seeing Igrin’s shattered knees, Peophe was overcome with guilt. She had done nothing while her colleagues fought, and the shame gnawed at her.

Igrin forced a smile, as if trying to comfort her junior’s distressed heart.

“I’m fine. This is the price of my Rulebreaker magic breaking down. It’s something I must endure. Are you unharmed?”

“Yes. I’m perfectly fine.”

“That’s a relief.”

Peophe couldn’t meet Igrin’s gaze.

She must have known Peophe hadn’t participated in the battle, yet she hadn’t uttered a word of reproach and instead expressed concern for her safety.

Igrin had always been an intimidating superior, but at that moment, Peophe couldn’t help but feel respect for her.

Igrin surveyed the square with a troubled expression.

The tilted statue, the shattered glass orbs, the smoking, broken device—everything bore the marks of Rite of Liquor being utterly denied.

Today was a revolutionary day for Heaven.

‘Perhaps this will have an even greater impact than when Miro came.’

Miro, that woman, had been far stronger than the blond boy. But precisely because of her strength, she had refrained from acting recklessly. She had understood better than anyone else the repercussions her actions could have on Heaven.

‘What will happen now? An era of upheaval is upon us. Starting today, Heaven will change.’

Suddenly, Peophe stepped forward, shielding Igrin and taking a fighting stance. Shirone and his companions were approaching.

Igrin wouldn’t be able to move for the next 24 hours. On top of that, her knees were shattered. Regardless of what happened next, Peophe had to stand firm.

“S-Stay back! The fight is over! But if you still want to fight, I’ll face you myself!”

Igrin raised a hand to stop her.

“It’s fine, Peophe. I’d like to speak with this boy.”

Embarrassed, Peophe hesitated before stepping aside and standing next to Igrin.

Shirone crouched down to meet Igrin’s gaze.

Having only seen fairies flying in the air, he was struck by how small they were now that they were grounded.

They were truly no more than a handful in size.

Unintimidated, Igrin lifted her chin and spoke confidently.

“Humph! Boy from the world below, just because I lost doesn’t mean the law of the god has been overturned. I am merely one of the middle ranks of the 72 fairy classes.

Today’s victory will not elevate you to divinity.”

“I don’t care about that. I just wanted to save the life of someone who helped me. Was that really such a wrong

thing to do?”

Igrin didn't think it was wrong. But when she considered the ramifications for Heaven, the issue became far more complicated.

Was one life worth less than ten lives? Certainly not. But what about one hundred million lives? Or one billion?

Miro had understood this. That was why she had left Heaven, finding the only answer in the cruel reality where the sacrifice of one was necessary for the many.

But Shirone was different. He didn't consider efficiency when doing what was right. He seemed to adhere to a belief that human life was priceless.

An extreme sense of morality.

Igrin could now feel what Arcane must have sensed before.

“Leave this place.”

It was the only thing Igrin could say.

“You have thrown Heaven into chaos. Even I can't predict what will happen next. So leave. Disappear from our world as quickly as you can.”

“But we—”

Before Shirone could finish speaking, a red light flashed in the east.

The group turned toward the source of the light, their faces filled with shock.

From the Second Heaven, Rakhia, a blinding flash of light erupted. Judging by the distance, it was an enormous release of energy.

Everyone in the square clamped their hands over their ears. A deafening vibration shook the skies, as if signaling the end of the world.

Like a piercing spear of light, the crimson flash struck the center of the square. When the light faded, an angel with tattered wings of light appeared.

Igrin's eyes widened in horror.

“A Fallen Angel... Ikhasa... Why is he here?”

The Second Heaven, Rakhia, was the place of exile for Fallen Angels.

While the Second Heaven had access to the First Heaven, it was extremely rare for a Fallen Angel to enter the domain of the citizens. Once residents of the Sixth Heaven, their pride made it unthinkable for them to interact with humans.

Igrin realized the seeds of chaos Shirone had planted were already beginning to alter Heaven's laws.

"I am Ikhasa, a lower-ranked angel. While watching over the sacred Rite of Liquor, I descended upon this land to address the disorder I have witnessed."

Shirone's body trembled uncontrollably.

Standing over two meters tall, with piercing, slanted eyes, Ikhasa exuded a terrifying presence. Although traces of his angelic beauty remained, his demeanor was entirely different from what Shirone had imagined.

The angel Shirone had seen at Nor's Shelter radiated like a blazing sun. By contrast, this one felt like the dying embers of a setting sun, ominous and foreboding.

"So, you're the one who has denied the divine. Detestable creature! You dare defy the god, blind to the love they bestow upon you!"

Ikhasa glared at Shirone with loathing.

As a Fallen Angel of the Second Heaven, Ikhasa was ranked below the immortal humans of the Third Heaven, Shehakim. How could giants and fairies be considered inferior to humans? Why did the god cherish humanity so dearly? For 20,000 years, that burning resentment had been simmering within Ikhasa. Now, it was on the verge of erupting.

"In the name of the god, I will judge you."

Ikhasa's aura expanded into a one-meter-wide halo of light. The massive ring acted as a rail, accelerating shimmering particles of light like shooting stars.

Igrin's face turned pale. Even though Fallen Angels had been stripped of most of their power due to their sins, their

strength still far exceeded what could be handled in Shamain.

“Lord Ikhasa! Stop! If a Fallen Angel activates their halo...!”

“Ha! The heretics will die anyway! Consider it an honor to be judged by me personally!”

The pressure radiating from Ikhasa’s body left Shirone feeling faint.

The sheer difference in power was staggering. This wasn’t right. Such a being shouldn’t exist.

Mustering every ounce of strength, Shirone turned to his companions. Time felt as though it had slowed, as if he were trapped in a Slow spell. The air in his lungs hadn’t even reached his throat yet.

Finally, as he managed to force out a sound, only one thought dominated his mind.

“Run!”

Arin was already holding the Metagate, trying to activate it.

But even for her, a single second was agonizingly long.

Hurry! Faster! All she had to do was press the button, but the remaining two centimeters felt impossibly far.

A gust of wind blew past Shirone. In the blink of an eye, the Metagate disappeared from Arin’s hands.

The group froze in stunned disbelief.

Ikhasa, now standing beside Arin with one hand resting on his hip, held the Metagate in front of him as if examining it. He hadn’t been invisible, nor had he moved at the speed of light.

But he had been fast.

Somewhere between a living being and a force of nature, his speed was proof of the inherent difference between his kind and humans from the moment of their creation.

Chapter 202: 2. The Era of Turmoil (2)

At close range, Arin stared blankly at her empty hands, unable to comprehend how the Metagate had been taken from her. She didn't even register the Fallen Angel standing right beside her.

"Hmm, this is a Metagate, isn't it? Even citizens aren't allowed to use this. Not bad for a bunch of heretics."

Hearing his voice, Arin's face went pale.

He had been over 30 meters away. How had the Metagate been snatched from her hands?

And even more baffling, it wasn't simply speed—it meant that Ikhasa had accelerated his body purely through physical force to grab it mid-motion.

"Hmm, so you brought a Metagate here? Could it be... Miro sent you?"

Shirone didn't answer. His instincts told him not to share any information with him.

"Well, if you don't want to talk, that's fine. Once I analyze this, the coordinates will show up anyway."

The Metagate was advanced tech created by the Meccans. By dismantling it, they could extract the recorded coordinates without activating the device.

Of course, Ikhasa had already guessed. The boy's actions, especially his interference with Rite of Liquor, were all too reminiscent of the detestable Miro's homeland.

Ikhasa sauntered casually through Shirone's group, his slim figure swaying.

Despite being entirely exposed, no one dared to lift a hand. Ikhasa stopped in front of the women in the group.

Towering over them, the angel's gaze bore down, making Amy visibly tense. But despite the fear, she held her ground, locking eyes with him until the very end.

"Are you... a virgin?"

Amy's face turned beet red. The question was so absurd and inappropriate it felt like a flagrant violation of decency.

"W-What did you just say?"

"Hahaha! So you are. What about the rest of you?"

She gestured toward Tess and Arin in turn. Their faces flushed just as furiously.

"Hmm, so that's how it is. Quite impressive restraint for humans."

Ikhasa leaned closer to examine Arin, scrutinizing her pale face, dark eyes, and black hair that glimmered like the moon.

"Oh... You're from the Eastern races, aren't you? I like that."

Ikhasa seemed pleased. Initially, he had come to vent the anger he'd been nursing for 20,000 years. But unexpectedly, he had found valuable spoils.

Coordinates tied to Miro's homeland and three human girls—these acquisitions alone made the possibility of his ascending back to angelic status seem realistic.

He activated his angelic abilities, his halo spinning rapidly.

"W-What...?"

As Amy, Tess, and Arin were lifted into the air, Shirone instinctively gathered light energy in his hands.

"Stop it! Let them go!"

Photon Cannons blazed toward Ikhasa while Canis and Harvest launched a coordinated attack. Even Rian surged forward, wielding his massive sword.

Ikhasa extended a slender finger and lazily drew a line from left to right. In an instant, every attack rebounded off an invisible barrier.

Shirone's voice trembled with frustration and desperation.

"Release them! Let them down and fight us instead!"

Ikhasa glanced at him with disdain before ascending higher, the three girls floating helplessly alongside him.

Shirone's heart pounded furiously.

It couldn't end like this. Not so helplessly. If things concluded this way, he didn't think he could bear it.

High above, Ikhasa accelerated his halo's rotation. A flaming vortex formed before him, giving birth to a dense, ominous mass. Its blackened body was crossed with glowing orange bands, though its shape remained unclear.

"Taboo, kill the heretics. I am going to Lord Kariel."

"...Yes, Lord Ikhasa."

Ikhasa vanished northward at incredible speed. Amy's desperate cries, calling for someone, faded into the distance.

Shirone stared upward, his face devoid of composure. The reality of what was happening refused to sink in.

He had anticipated danger when coming to Heaven, but he had never imagined they would be so powerless.

'It's because... I told you to come here.'

Shirone clenched his eyes shut.

It was his fault. He should have stopped them from coming to Heaven in the first place. He had foolishly believed the Metagate would offer some degree of safety. What a mistake. Angels were beings far beyond human comprehension.

Boom!

The black mass descended and struck the ground, landing with a thunderous crash. Its surface was smooth like polished stone, but as it unfurled its hunched body, it took on the form of a massive, gorilla-like creature.

A slender orange band ran symmetrically across the blackened figure's body, its color contrast nauseating in an oddly visceral way.

The triangular symbol hovering above its head identified it as a Mara. While it was much smaller than the Mara Shirone had seen at Nor's Shelter, it didn't feel any less threatening.

“Keh keh keh! I am Taboo. It’s been a while since I’ve fought, so let’s enjoy ourselves thoroughly, shall we?”

Shirone and his companions readied themselves for battle, though their morale had hit rock bottom after losing the women.

Whether Taboo understood their desperation or not, he crouched gleefully.

“My power may be suppressed, so showing off feels a bit embarrassing, but...”

The orange bands on Taboo’s body began to glow, unleashing an intense heatwave.

“For weaklings like you, this is more than enough.”

With those words, Taboo launched himself forward.

Rian charged to intercept him, swinging his greatsword.

Taboo didn’t dodge or block—he simply kept running as if Rian weren’t even there.

Boom! The impact sent Rian flying into the air.

Taboo bent his torso back unnaturally, staring at Shirone upside-down before leaping at him. Seeing the inverted figure approach was deeply unsettling—defying every norm of human movement.

Shirone cast Frenzy, a barrier of light, which struck Taboo directly. Yet the Mara plowed through as if it were mere wind.

“Keh keh, an amusing spell.”

Taboo’s grotesque face closed in, his orange vertical lines where eyes should have been and his lipless mouth like a gaping crack.

The Frenzy continued, unleashing rapid bursts of mass at 20 impacts per second. But Taboo moved through it as if strolling through a rainstorm.

With his elongated tongue dangling grotesquely toward Shirone’s chest, Taboo sneered.

“Keh keh. Does it hurt? Losing your woman like that?”

Shirone’s eyes flared with murderous intent. He had to save Amy.

Ironically, the moment Shirone realized this, he forced her out of his mind.

Focusing all his thoughts on combat, his mental clarity intensified the Frenzy's power.

This time, Taboo was pushed back. He stumbled but quickly rebounded, moving in bizarre and unpredictable ways to confuse the battlefield.

Not creative, yet primitive.

Like a feral monkey, Taboo bounced with elastic agility, each strike heavy as a boulder. Shirone's group struggled just to defend themselves.

'Is this the power of a Mara?'

While his sheer strength might not surpass the Whirlwind Serpent, Taboo's overall capabilities would be much higher. Speed, power, balance, and combat intelligence—it far exceeded the Whirlwind Serpent, which was only bigger in size.

If Ikhasa hadn't lost much of his power, Taboo alone might have been a catastrophic disaster.

As Taboo's fist barreled toward Shirone, a Shadow Wall erupted from the ground, shielding him.

Crash! A noise erupted from the other side of the shadow. Taboo didn't stop. He kept hammering, relentlessly pressing his fist.

The shadowy defense shattered by the fist, landing a strike on Shirone's forehead.

The first barrier absorbed most of the impact, but the force was still disorienting—his head spun as if the world had tilted.

From Shirone's shadow, Canis emerged.

"Ordinary attacks won't cut it. You need to unlock the Immortal Function."

"What are you talking about? I've already unlocked it!"

Canis's face twisted in disbelief. Having experienced the overwhelming force of Photon Cannon firsthand, he found it shocking that it hadn't left a single mark on Taboo.

“Is the laser out of the question?”

“Probably. He’s too small and fast.”

It took over five seconds to charge the energy for a focused laser. Against a massive, slow-moving target like the Whirlwind Serpent, it worked, but Taboo’s erratic and unpredictable movements made it nearly impossible.

“Still, we have to try. I’ll hold him off—use that time to attack.”

Canis activated his Power of Darkness. The shadows coiled around Taboo’s limbs like vines, binding his ankles, climbing to his knees, and wrapping his wrists tightly.

Meanwhile, Shirone’s laser began to scorch Taboo, causing his body to glow red with heat. If this held, even Taboo’s immense durability would reach its limit.

“Keh keh keh! Enough! This ends now!”

Flexing his bulging thigh muscles, Taboo leapt into the air, shredding the shadowy bonds like tissue paper.

In an instant, he became a dot in the sky.

Canis clenched her teeth. The Power of Darkness excelled at engineering force but lacked raw physical strength. Holding Taboo would require much stronger restraints.

“Canis! Just hold him a little longer!”

Shirone decided to take a gamble with photon shaping.

Though considered inefficient, his recent success with Shining Impact gave him confidence.

As Harvest engaged Taboo in midair, Canis noticed the light coalescing around Shirone.

At first, the glowing mass seemed weak, lacking the intensity of Shining Impact. It was clear Shirone was attempting something different—suppressing the photon’s vibrations to focus on shaping.

It’s a good idea, but will it really work?

Even if he suppresses the vibrations, he won’t be able to scale it up. It’ll just explode like before.

No, it’s not compression.

Canis turned back to Shirone, whose glowing mass had now transformed into a small, intricately crafted ring between his thumb and forefinger.

‘What is he...? No way...!’

Realization struck Canis like lightning.

While light magic lacked the precise modeling capabilities of dark magic, that didn’t mean shaping light was impossible.

The glowing ring Shirone had created began to replicate itself endlessly, each copy forming seamlessly from the original.

Watching the phenomenon unfold sent shivers down Canis’s spine.

There was a shape photons could form.

A fractal structure.

Fractals replicate a simple shape repeatedly to create a complex whole.

Shirone had devised a way to gather photons into a basic form, then replicate that form infinitely.

Once the shape was finalized, producing the rest was instantaneous.

From the glowing sphere between Shirone’s hands, streams of light burst forth, forming radiant chains that rippled like liquid metal.

This was a strategy that defied convention. While mentally taxing far beyond standard magic, it was the only option against Taboo.

Taboo, who had been pursuing Canis, sensed something amiss and turned toward Shirone.

Around Shirone, the glowing chains—dozens of meters long—swirled and glimmered, their radiance capturing everyone’s attention.

The ability to shape light into forms, often called the power of angels, was considered one of the most challenging feats of light magic.

“You insignificant human!”

Taboo roared, lunging forward. In response, Shirone swung the chains with all his might, hurling them toward Taboo. The chains, intricately bound and glowing, wrapped tightly around Taboo's body. Starting at his ankles, they spiraled upward, coiling around his waist, under his arms, around his neck, and finally crossing over his chest in an X-shape, constricting him completely.

Crack! The sound of metal grinding against stone echoed. Taboo's clenched fist stopped mere centimeters from Shirone's face, trembling violently with pent-up rage. "Grrraaaaahhh!"

Taboo bellowed, struggling.

The links, imbued with gravitational pull, tightened with every movement.

The more Taboo struggled, the more the chains dug into him, leaving no room for escape.

Igrin, the Fairy Chief, stared in disbelief at the bound Mara. Who is this boy?

Even among angels, only a handful could manipulate light to such an extraordinary degree.

Canis, too, was at a loss for words.

This wasn't just a simple chain spell. The structure was crafted using fractal technology, leveraging mass to generate tensile strength far beyond what ordinary magic could achieve.

It was on a different level from Shirone's magic so far. While spells like Photon Cannon and Frenzy had equivalents in other magic systems, this chain spell was entirely unique to the domain of divine light particles.

The Unlocker's potential is evolving at a terrifying speed.

Every new spell he creates defies common sense. First Shining Impact, and now this... Shining Chain?

Canis remained silent. While it was reassuring to see his ally grow stronger, the warrior within him couldn't help but feel a sting of inadequacy.

Canis, your heartbeat is racing. Don't overthink it.
Remember, you came to Heaven to grow stronger. You'll surpass Shirone eventually.
Yeah... Someday, I'll surpass him. But for now, let's focus on this fight.
With those thoughts, Canis steadied herself and began walking toward the immobilized Taboo.

Chapter 203: 2. The Era of Turmoil (3)

“Grrraaahhh! This can’t be happening! I can’t... be trapped by something like this!”

Taboo mustered every ounce of strength he had.

The immense strain reverberated straight into Shirone’s mind, an almost unbearable force pushing back against him.

Taboo’s strength was monstrous.

Gritting his teeth, Shirone funneled every last bit of his indestructibility into reinforcing the tensile strength of the Shining Chain.

The force caused Taboo’s massive frame to snap back and splay wide open, unleashing a roar of raw fury.

“Graaahhh!”

But such defiance came at a steep cost. The radiant chains dug deeper into Taboo’s impossibly tough exterior, cracking it open and slicing into his body.

His limbs twisted at grotesque angles, and his torso bent backward into an unnatural, near-breaking arc.

“Kehehehe... Haha... Hahaha!”

Taboo laughed darkly.

Never in his life had he been reduced to such a pitiful state. And by a mere human, no less.

“So, you’ve got me, huh? But then what? How long do you think you can keep this up?”

Considering Taboo’s durability, there was only one way to end this—by using a laser. But therein lay the problem: the Shining Chain consumed Shirone’s full focus and mental energy, leaving no room to cast another spell.

Shirone knew this limitation well. The mental architecture required for simultaneous spells—something achievable by

rare talents like Iruki's Double Spirit Zone—was beyond most mages, including himself.

Of course, there were rules that made exceptions, but most magic inevitably had a delay.

For example, even the most basic Teleportation prevented the simultaneous casting of another spell.

The Shining Chain was no exception. Like a Fire Wall, it drained his mental energy in real-time, locking him into maintaining the spell.

"Where did you take my friends?"

"To the Angels' Sanctuary. To birth new Nephilim, of course. Keke... Too bad they aren't your children, huh?"

A fiery glint burned in Shirone's eyes.

The word Nephilim barely registered—his rage drowned out any attempt at understanding the term. All he could gather was that something horrific was about to happen to his friends.

Taboo slithered his tongue out, wagging it mockingly.

"Kehahaha! Just give it up! You're struggling against a mere One-Horn Mara, and you think you can save them? By now, those girls are probably in a pitiful state... Guhk!"

Shirone tightened the Shining Chain with merciless force, causing Taboo's neck to twist at an unnatural angle as the glowing links dug in further.

A grinding noise came from Shirone's clenched jaw as he spat through gritted teeth.

"Watch your mouth. I won't let you get away with this."

"Ha! Go ahead, but you'll never hear the fun part. Oh, you're missing out—it's the juiciest tale you'll ever hear! The ultimate forbidden fruit, really!"

Shirone increased the chain's tensile strength to its very limit.

He didn't know how far he could push it, but for now, all he wanted was to silence this wretched creature and ensure he said no more.

"Aaaaargh!"

A desperate scream erupted.

An overwhelming force began crushing Taboo's body, leaving him with no way to resist.

Taboo knew instinctively.

This was the end for him.

"Don't get cocky, human. I will return. On the day when humanity's corruption reaches its peak, I will come for you. I will make sure... Guh!"

Crack!

A sickening sound echoed through the air.

It wasn't the snap of human bones but the grinding and breaking of solid stone.

As the Shining Chain dissipated, only Taboo's grotesque corpse remained. His body, now twisted and mangled like a clay doll crushed in a giant's hands, lay lifeless on the ground.

The sheer destructive power of the Shining Chain left Canis frozen in horror.

If it was strong enough to crush someone like Taboo, it could undoubtedly reduce any lesser life form to dust in an instant. There would be no escape—trapped like a rabbit in a hunter's snare.

The moment Taboo was annihilated, Shirone collapsed to the ground, his body trembling as he gripped the soil with his hands.

There was no thrill from his successful magic or satisfaction in defeating Taboo. His mind was consumed by one thought—Amy, Tess, and Arin had been abducted. And they had spoken of using them to give birth to Nephilim.

An unbearable rage clawed at his chest, a searing hatred unlike anything he had ever felt.

Peophe flew over to Shirone.

As someone who could use magic, she had a sense of just how immense the mental strain required to maintain the Shining Chain must have been.

"Are you... okay?"

But Shirone didn't respond. She leaned closer and heard him muttering, "It's my fault... It's all because of me..." Frustration boiled over within Peophe. She pointed her finger accusingly at him and launched into a tirade.

"You idiot! Why did you have to make things this complicated?! Even if it was a Fallen Angel, that's still a higher law than Shamain's! Do you realize what you've done to this entire district's people? This is all because of you—!" "AAAAARGH!"

Her voice caught in her throat.

When Shirone raised his head, his face was a mess—contorted with rage, anguish, and sorrow. He looked like a man plummeting off the edge of a cliff.

"Because of me... because of me... Amy... Tess... Arin... All of them... It's all because of me."

Peophe couldn't bring herself to continue scolding him. The light in Shirone's eyes no longer resembled that of the boy who had defied the Rite of Liquor or boldly shouted at Igrin.

"They will be safe. At least... for now."

Shirone turned toward Igrin, his eyes desperate. Despite being bound by the Cost of True Belief and unable to move, her expression was serious and contemplative.

"Safe? How can you be so sure?"

Igrin's response was measured.

"Ikhasa took them because they are virgins. They use the bodies of women who have not borne children to implant angelic information and create Nephilim."

Canis interjected bitterly.

"That makes it even worse. You might not care, but for humans, chastity matters. It's sacred."

"The kind of violation you're imagining will not occur. Angels regard physical affairs with humans as deeply shameful."

Rian frowned.

"But that also means it's possible, doesn't it? There's no guarantee that something like that won't happen under the

worst circumstances.”

“Possibility and likelihood are two different things. Angels are a dual-gendered species, so technically, it’s possible. But their pride prevents them from engaging in actions that would tarnish their honor.”

Shirone latched onto this hope.

If angels truly adhered to their principles and values, then there might still be a chance to rescue his friends. And, depending on the situation, Amy and the others might create an opportunity to disrupt the plan.

Rian placed a hand on Shirone’s shoulder.

“Shirone, are you okay? You seem calmer now. I’ve never seen you this angry before.”

“I’m sorry. I got too worked up. I should have focused on finding a way to save them first.”

“It’s fine. None of us were exactly calm either.”

Anyone would have felt the same. Just as Amy was precious to Shirone, Tess was someone Rian relied on, and for Canis, Arin was someone he had vowed to protect at all costs.

‘Arin...’

Canis’s resolve burned like never before.

He had protected Arin even through the brutal life in Radum, yet he had lost her so easily here.

Why hadn’t he rushed straight at Ikhasa?

Because he had grown weak. Hope and dreams of a better future had softened his heart, making him hesitate.

‘Arin, just hold on a little longer.’

Canis silently swore to himself that if he were given another chance, he would abandon all hesitation and unleash everything he had, no matter the cost.

Shirone asked.

“Tell me. How do I get to the Angels’ Sanctuary?”

Peophe’s jaw dropped in disbelief.

“What are you even saying? Are you really planning to rescue them?”

“Of course. Do you know how to get there?”

Peophe sighed heavily, exasperated. Of course, she knew. And she could even guess where Amy and the others had been taken. But she also knew Shirone couldn't go. Not there. Even Igrin, with her authority, would need permission to enter the Sanctuary.

"They'll never let you in! Don't you get it? Whether you're a heretic or a Nephilim, if you go, you'll die!"

"We won't know until we try."

Peophe clutched her head in frustration. Shirone might have defeated Taboo, but angels were on an entirely different level. Facing Ikhasa, a Fallen Angel, would only lead to certain death.

"Wake up, you idiot! The place you're trying to reach is the Sixth Heaven—Zebul! That's where real angels reside!"

Peophe's voice trembled with fear as she spoke.

Angels weren't just strong—they were born as apex predators, at the very top of all living beings.

But Shirone didn't care. His friends were waiting for him, and nothing else mattered.

"Peophe, if you were the one taken, how scared would you be?"

"What are you talking about?"

"What would you be thinking? You'd be desperately hoping someone would come for you, wouldn't you? Believing your friends hadn't given up on you—that thought would be the only thing keeping you strong, wouldn't it?"

Shirone bit his lip hard.

"Maybe we won't be able to save them. But we can't extinguish their hope. If we give up here, the people who've been captured will have nothing left to hold onto."

Peophe couldn't accept his reasoning. No matter how it was framed, it didn't change the fact that going there meant death.

A man from the Mecca tribe approached them.

"The Angels' Sanctuary is located in Zebul, the Sixth Heaven. Geographically, it's right next to Shamain. But it's

five levels higher, so you'll have to go through each level in order. That could take several days."

"We don't have time for that. How long would it take if we traveled in a straight line?"

"In a straight line? If you bypass the Heaven walls, it'd take about a day."

A day. Too long. Ikhasa would already have arrived at his destination by now. With the entry to Zebul uncertain, even a day's delay could mean a death sentence for the captured women.

"Wait, there is one way."

A man in his fifties walked over. Judging by his appearance and attire, he was a Norian.

Shirone's eyes lit up.

"What is it? Tell me!"

"You need to head to Zone 1. It's the innermost area of Shamain and close to the center of Heaven. From there, you can take the central highway straight into Zebul, saving time."

Heaven was divided into six sections, like slices of a pie, with Araboth at its center. The closer one got to Araboth, the shorter the arc lengths became, allowing for significantly reduced travel distances.

"How long would it take to get to Zone 1 from here?"

"About 12 hours."

Shirone's expression darkened once more. While this was shorter than a full day, it was still far too long for the urgency of the situation.

A faint smile appeared on the Norian's lips.

"That is, if you were traveling the usual way. But within Shamain, there's a portal managed by us Norians. Using the Light Spot, you can get to Zone 1 instantly."

So there was a way. Shirone, who had experienced traveling via Light Spot during their time in Purgatory, immediately recognized this as their only viable option.

“Please take us there. Are there any other obstacles we should be aware of?”

“Well, strict control over access to the portal is enforced on the citizens. But that shouldn’t be a problem—I happen to be the one in charge of managing it.”

Shirone didn’t even have the energy to smile at the man’s humor. His body trembled slightly. For the first time, a glimmer of hope appeared.

Perhaps... perhaps he could save his friends.

Kanya approached, tears streaming down her face.

“I’m sorry, Shirone. This all happened because of my family. But... thank you. Truly... thank you.”

Shirone gently wiped away Kanya’s tears. While it was true that denying the Rite of Liquor had placed his friends in danger, there was no way he could blame the citizens for it. True power hid behind systems and remained unseen.

Shirone knew exactly where to aim his anger.

“This isn’t your fault. I’ll save my friends, so don’t worry.”

“Wait a second!”

At the fork in the plaza, Rena came running toward them, holding a bundle of Meccan equipment—specifically a Signa and an Exd.

“I wasn’t sure if these might help, so I brought them.”

Although most Meccan equipment was locked with personalized encryption, weapons like swords and shields fell under the category of shared equipment that anyone could use.

While lending out gear was forbidden by law, after the collapse of the Rite of Liquor, no one cared to enforce such rules.

These tools would undoubtedly be of use to Rian.

For mages, their ability to alter phenomena could often create unexpected advantages, even against powerful opponents. For swordsmen, however, raw power and skill were paramount—and equipment played a much greater role in determining success.

Chapter 204: 2. The Era of Turmoil (4)

Rian took the Signa and Exd, inspecting them closely. Normally, relying on someone else's weapon would wound a swordsman's pride. But with his friends in danger, Rian had no room to indulge in such trivial concerns.

"Thank you. But I might not handle them gently."

"It's fine. Even if they break, it doesn't matter. Please, just save the sister and the others."

Peophe hesitated, lost in thought.

Not long ago, these citizens were preoccupied with their own dwindling lifespans.

But now? Each of them was willingly taking on risks to prevent someone else's tragedy.

Why does the law control humans so tightly?

Their population is restricted, their lifespans regulated, and they can't even leave Heaven. What sort of threat does an increasing human population pose to Ra?

"Are you really going to go?"

Peophe couldn't understand herself—why she was even asking this question.

Everything had changed since she met Shirone. He was chaos, a boulder thrown into Heaven's still waters.

"You know I have to go. And thanks for earlier—for avoiding a fight. Honestly, I didn't want to fight you, either. I also appreciate what you did for Kanya and Rena. It feels like we understand each other, somehow."

Peophe turned away, avoiding his gaze. She didn't want to hear it. The idea of understanding a human was unbearable. How can fairies and humans can understand each other?

“Take care of the citizens while I’m gone. If I make it back safely, maybe we can become better friends.”

Shirone turned toward an uncertain future.

Peophe’s small heart pounded in her chest. As she watched him walk away with the Norian, his figure seemed to blur, as if hidden behind a veil of mist.

“Will you save me too?”

Shirone paused and turned back. Peophe, hesitant but determined, spoke again.

“If I’m ever captured... will you come save me? I mean... if we’re friends, that is.”

Shirone smiled warmly, his voice unwavering.

“Of course I will.”

Peophe lowered her head. *Of course*, he said. But if that were true, then Shirone would die.

He was walking straight toward death.

“Even if you reach Zone 1, you won’t be able to cross the gates of Zebul. But I know a way to save those girls. So... I’ll come with you.”

Shirone’s eyes widened.

She claimed to know a way to rescue them. Right now, he couldn’t even imagine what that method might be.

“Really? You’re saying there’s a way?”

“I can’t guarantee it. But if you go on your own, you’ll definitely die. That’s why I’ll come along.”

Overcome with gratitude, Shirone looked at Peophe.

Embarrassed, her cheeks flushed red as she turned away, feigning irritation.

“Hmph! Don’t get any strange ideas. I’m only doing this because I feel a responsibility to see this incident through to the end.”

Igrin observed the situation with quiet acceptance.

The citizens helping Shirone, Peophe feeling drawn to humans—it all defied the laws of Heaven.

“Has it finally come to this? Or perhaps this, too, is an inescapable law of Heaven...”

Resolute, Igrin spoke.

“Peophe, come here.”

Peophe flinched. Only now did she realize she’d made this decision without her superior’s permission.

To her surprise, Igrin wasn’t angry. Instead, she closed her eyes and transmitted her memories to Peophe.

New information began to embed itself in Peophe’s mind.

“This is...?”

“Take my memories with you, Peophe. They’ll be useful in navigating Zebul.”

Memory transfer between fairies was common, but when a higher-ranked fairy shared their memories with a subordinate, it carried profound meaning. It was akin to appointing someone as their representative.

A mid-ranked member of the 72 rank of fairies, Igrin’s trust weighed heavily on Peophe. Reflecting on her past complaints and dissatisfaction, Peophe bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, Chief. I’ve let you down again.”

“I’ve never been disappointed in you. You are a fairy born into the turbulent era of Heaven. From now on, everything you experience will differ from the laws you’ve known.

That’s why you must see everything for yourself and make your own judgments.”

Peophe’s eyes glistened with emotion. For the first time, she saw Igrin smile.

“You may be reckless at times, but because of that, you’ll learn through your own experiences. Remember, a spiral observes all directions as it moves forward. I believe in you, Peophe.”

Peophe wiped her tears and nodded firmly.

The knowledge that Igrin believed in her gave her newfound courage.

Shirone and his group, with Peophe in tow, left the plaza behind.

The portal overseer guided them to a Norian building not far from the central plaza. Inside, the space was a labyrinth of

rooms, each inscribed with intricate magic circles and inhabited by different spirits.

They entered through a metal door at the corner of the structure, stepping into a dark chamber where a single light spirit floated in the center.

The overseer approached the spirit and gently grasped it. The spirit stilled, and his arm began to glow with a soft white light.

“Using the power of the spirit, we can travel to Zone 1 in an instant. But gathering the energy takes time—about five minutes.”

Having experienced something similar in Purgatory, Shirone didn’t find this unusual.

As they waited, Shirone glanced at Peophe, who floated at eye level. Her tiny figure faced away from him, her transparent wings fluttering as her petite frame fidgeted. Unable to resist, Shirone poked her small butt with his finger.

Peophe surprised, spinning around to cover her behind with both hands.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

Although she was barely the size of a toddler’s palm, it seemed she still cared about her dignity as a woman. Of course, Shirone hadn’t meant to tease her. It was just the only part of her body near the wings that he could poke.

“Thanks for helping us. Let’s work together from now on. Because of you, I feel like we have a chance.”

Peophe pouted but turned back toward the light spirit, seemingly mollified by his sincerity.

The five minutes passed agonizingly slowly—a testament to the relative nature of time.

Breaking the silence, Canis spoke up, addressing Peophe.

“That guy, Taboo... is he really dead? Or, more precisely, can Maras even be killed? Before he went down, he said something about returning when humanity reached its peak of corruption.”

Shirone perked up. It was a critical question. If Maras were truly immortal, they'd need to rethink their entire approach to combat.

"Hmm, how should I explain this? Technically, it's true he was destroyed, but it's not a permanent death."

"Explain it simply."

"Maras are conceptual beings. Even if they're destroyed, they'll eventually come back. In Heaven, we call it 'resetting'."

"How long does it take for them to reset?"

"There's no set time, but it won't happen immediately."

"So, they can die... at least temporarily."

"True. But if you look at it from a different angle—"

"That's enough. For now, that's all I need to know."

Canis's mind was focused solely on battle. To rescue Arin, he had to become stronger. He began running simulations in his head, calculating ways to enhance his mental stamina incrementally. It was a concept known as sequential thinking in magic academies.

"Fine, think whatever you want."

Peophe muttered, waving him off dismissively.

Shirone, however, believed gaining as much information as possible was more important than sequence thinking.

There was one question he hadn't asked yet.

"You said there's a way to rescue our friends, right? What is it? You can tell us now, can't you?"

Peophe rested her chin on her hand, deep in thought.

To be honest, the plan she had in mind wasn't foolproof. But it was far more realistic than charging blindly into the angels' domain without preparation.

"Well, it's not really a *method*, but... there's someone who loves humans deeply. I thought they might be willing to help you."

The overseer announced that he had finished preparing the ancient spell.

As they stepped into the gathering light, Shirone couldn't contain his curiosity and asked again.

"Really? Who are you talking about?"

With a reverent expression, Peophe responded, her voice solemn.

"The leader of the angels, Archangel Ikhael."

As she spoke, a radiant pillar of light ascended, engulfing them.

3. The Eternal Ra (1)

After parting ways with the manager at Shamain's exit and walking for about thirty minutes, Shirone and his group arrived at the walls surrounding the towering structures of the Seventh Heaven, Araboth.

Peophe had suggested that the women were likely at the Sixth Heaven, Zebul, where the virgin conception was conducted using the Art of Life, overseen by Archangel Cariel.

Shirone asked.

"How are we supposed to enter Zebul? There's no way we can pass through the gates."

"That's why we're heading into Araboth instead."

"But if we can't enter Zebul, how are we supposed to get into the domain of god himself?"

"That's why we'll ask for help from Ikhael. She once served as a Chief Archangel, so if we plead our case, she might let us in."

"That makes even less sense. Even if she's an Archangel, she's still a being of the Sixth Heaven. How could she open the gates to the Seventh Heaven?"

"Because Ikhael is currently residing in the Seventh Heaven."

Shirone tilted his head, puzzled. An Archangel leaving her domain in Zebul to stay in Araboth was entirely unexpected.

"Is there some reason we don't know?"

"Yes. Ikhael committed a great sin and was stripped of her title as Chief Archangel. However, Ra loved her so deeply

that instead of casting her down as a Fallen Angel, he exiled her to Araboth."

The revelation was shocking. From everything Shirone had experienced, the being known as Ra seemed like an unyielding judge who enforced the law with cold precision. The idea that he had made an exception—choosing exile in Araboth rather than the Second Heaven—was baffling.

"What kind of angel was she? And what sin did she commit?"

"I don't know."

"What? How can you not know? If she rose to the rank of Chief Archangel, it must've been a huge scandal!"

"Probably. But we've all forgotten. All that remains is the knowledge that Ikhael committed a grave sin and now resides in exile in Araboth."

A chill ran down Shirone's spine at Peophe's words. To forget something suggested that the memory had been deliberately erased. Even if someone's memory were erased, others would pass the information along. The only way such a phenomenon could occur would be if everyone's memories were wiped simultaneously.

Rian chimed in.

"First lifespans, and now memories? That's literal omnipotence. How old is this Ra person anyway? A billion years old or something?"

"Age is meaningless to a god. He is the beginning of everything. We don't know the origin, so we can't measure his age."

Canis shrugged.

"It doesn't matter. We're not here to fight some god. Once we rescue the women, we'll leave immediately."

Shirone noticed the subtle choice of words—Canis had said "the women" instead of just "Arin". Despite their usual bickering, it seemed Canis had grown fond of the others without realizing it.

When the group reached Araboth, they gazed up at its imposing walls. Although these were the inner walls of Heaven, they were even taller than the outer ones. And there was no sign of any mechanism to summon Ikhael. Canis grumbled.

"We're not seriously going to wait here until she decides to take her dog for a walk, are we?"

"Hmph! Laugh all you want now! Without Ikhael's help, you'll never even make it into Zebul!"

Although Peophe was helping Shirone, she was still a civil servant of Heaven. She couldn't tolerate anyone belittling an Archangel who was so revered that Ra Himself had erased the memory of her sin.

Shirone quickly interjected.

"I'll apologize on his behalf. He's just on edge. Anyway, what's our next step?"

Peophe, aware of their urgency, chose to let the slight go.

"All right! From here, I'll try to initiate a conversation with Ikhael."

Shirone's eyes lit up.

"Wait, you can do that?"

"No, I can't."

"...Are you kidding me right now?"

"I'm just telling you the truth. But it's not impossible.

There's a chance Ikhael might already be watching us."

Chapter 205: 3. The Eternal Ra (2)

What was this about?

The distance to Araboth was vast, blocked by barriers. Even if Ikhael's eyesight were extraordinary, the likelihood of her observing this spot seemed nonexistent.

"Don't be so discouraged. For angels, 'seeing' is different from how humans perceive it. There are various ways for angels can 'see', and among them is the ability called 'Oversight'. It allows them to see whatever they wish. In short, angels can see anything they desire."

This was hard to imagine.

According to Peophe, angels merely had to think about what they wanted to see, and it would appear before them.

Even the mythical monsters with a hundred eyes in fairy tales couldn't wield such absurd powers to torment a prince.

"It's true. The reason Ikhasa was the first to arrive after the Rite of Liquor was broken is because he had been overseeing Shamain. Though, I suppose that's why he's still stuck as a Fallen Angel—too petty."

Since Fallen Angels of the Second Heaven ranked lower than fairies of the Fourth Heaven, Peophe had no qualms about criticizing Ikhasa. This was a clear reminder of just how far an angel could fall when they committed a sin.

"But if they can see anything they want, wouldn't that mean angels know everything in the world?"

"Not exactly. Deciding what to observe is no easy task.

Think about it. Even if you could oversee anything, would you really be able to comprehend the entirety of the world?"

"No, that would be difficult."

Shirone recalled the time an angel appeared at Nor's Shelter. Gardrak had said something similar: while an angel could find this place if they wished, it was unlikely.

"No one checks their own fingerprints every day."

"Oh? You already knew about that? Exactly. Anyway, if Ikhael happens to be overseeing this area, she might respond to my voice."

Canis frowned. As a mage, he already disliked relying on probabilities, and this scenario was far too uncertain for his liking.

"That's an incredibly slim chance. This place might be as meaningless to her as a fingerprint. And even if she's watching, what guarantee do we have that she'll help us?"

"There's no guarantee. But I followed you all to offer even the faintest sliver of hope. Where we're headed is ruled by Archangel Cariel. Do you understand what that means? You couldn't hope to defeat him even if you died and came back to life."

Shirone faced reality. If their friends were being held by an Archangel, the only way to secure even a chance of escape was to enlist help from someone of equal standing.

"All right. Let's try it your way. I'll trust you."

Peophe clicked her tongue in annoyance. *Typical Norian doubt*, she muttered to herself. Still, she had assessed the odds before making this decision.

While no one checked their fingerprints daily, Ikhael was known to be compassionate and often oversaw her people.

"Fine. I'll begin. But once the conversation starts, don't interrupt me. I won't tolerate disrespect toward the Archangel."

Closing her eyes, she focused deeply, sending her plea outward in ripples.

Shirone waited anxiously, the seconds stretching unbearably. After five minutes, nothing seemed to change. Was it truly impossible?

The fear of losing hope to save his friends far outweighed the disappointment of failure.

Just as despair began to settle over the group, Peophe's body trembled.

Moments later, tears streamed down her closed eyes.

"Oh, Ikhael."

Shirone whipped around so quickly it felt like his neck might snap.

It was clear she had established contact with Ikhael. He fought the urge to speak, remembering Peophe's warning.

Peophe and Ikhael conversed for some time. Peophe nodded repeatedly, occasionally murmuring replies aloud.

"Yes, understood."

She kept her eyes closed for a long moment, lost in the afterglow of the encounter. Then she suddenly opened them and exclaimed with excitement.

"Did you hear that? She spoke to me! She answered me!"

"Of course, we didn't hear anything. What did she say?"

"Ikhael... she was watching me!"

Peophe cried, gazing reverently at the sky, her eyes glistening with tears. Shirone waited patiently until her excitement ebbed, then cautiously asked.

"So, will she release our friends?"

Peophe suddenly came to her senses. She had been so absorbed in the fact that she had talked to the Archangel that she had forgotten the most important part.

Peophe's expression became a little gloomy.

"No. She said she cannot leave her chamber because of her sin."

"What? Then it was all for nothing?"

Peophe forced a smile.

"Not quite. She's willing to help us. We'll be allowed into Araboth. But... there's one condition."

Canis, whose patience had reached its limit, snapped at Peophe, who was trying to look at the mood of Shirone and her group before stopping to speak.

"What is it? We don't have time for this. Spit it out."

"Ikhael said she wants to meet a boy named... Shirone. Who is Shirone?"

Canis and Rian both turned to Shirone.

Peophe, unaware of anyone's name thus far, realized who it was as the two men's gazes settled on him.

"So, your name is Shirone."

Until just a moment ago, Shirone was nothing more than a collection of countless concepts in Peophe's eyes.

It felt vague and abstract, like an ungraspable fog.

But now it was different.

Shirone.

The moment she recalled the three-syllable word, Shirone's actions, thoughts, and emotions were integrated into her mind.

"Why only Shirone? Did she say why?"

"I didn't ask. She didn't seem eager to explain, and I didn't want to push it."

Canis thought it was a good thing. In order to make the most of the limited time, it was more efficient to focus on each person's mission rather than going around in a group.

"Shirone can go meet Ikael. Honestly, without her help, I don't see how we escape."

"What about you guys?"

"We'll head for Zebul. From the Seventh Heaven, it should be easier to enter the Sixth. If we can get to Amy, we might be able to buy some time."

It was the best strategy they could muster given the circumstances.

As the group agreed on their plan, Shirone looked at Peophe, silently asking her to lead him to Araboth.

Peophe hesitated, unsure of the method herself.

But before she could voice her uncertainty, a radiant light enveloped them.

Peophe clasped her hands in awe.

"Oh... Ikhael."

The group was consumed by the light
And in its place where the light sucked in, nothing remained.

The Seventh Heaven, Araboth.

Shirone looked around with a trembling heart. He had arrived at the most sacred place in all of Heaven.

The top of the spire was shrouded in clouds, obscuring its peak. Peophe had said that at its pinnacle resided Anke Ra. Even her voice trembled as she explained.

“To think I’ve come to the very seat of God’s throne. This is the most glorious day of my life.”

“You’ve only lived a year, though.”

Peophe shot Canis a sharp glare.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s one year or a hundred. Age is irrelevant here. This is not a place you can come to simply because you’ve lived a long time.”

“But isn’t it a little too quiet? If God lives here, there aren’t even guards posted.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, shouldn’t someone be protecting the being who lives here?”

Peophe stopped in her tracks and stared at Canis as if he had just said something incomprehensibly absurd, like claiming one plus one equals a window.

“Are you serious? Ra is the one protecting us. How could we protect Him?”

Shirone finally understood and nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I see now.”

Ra was not like the kings of the human world.

If he was the absolute, omnipotent ruler of the universe, the idea of someone protecting him would only diminish his divine status.

Upon reaching the spire of Araboth, Shirone and his companions prepared to part ways for their respective missions.

Ikhael had requested to meet Shirone alone. Since the Archangel's help was essential to rescuing Amy and the others, neither Rian nor Canis objected to the arrangement. Peophe, tasked with guiding Shirone to Ikhael's chamber, transferred the memories she had received from Igrin to Canis and Rian.

These included a rough map of Zebul.

"The women are likely in the Grand Hall of World at the easternmost edge. That's where Cariel resides."

Canis recalled the map in Igrin's memories and pinpointed the location of the Grand Hall of World. Even with Teleportation, it was a long distance away. However, distance wasn't the real issue.

"What you need to know is that the Grand Hall of World isn't somewhere anyone can just walk into. It's the control center for the movements of the world, protected by top-tier security systems."

"Security systems? You mean there'll be obstacles in our way?"

"Calling them obstacles would be an understatement. To put it simply, the Grand Hall of World isn't even in Zebul."

"Stop being cryptic and explain properly."

"Some of the Meccan systems can alter the spatial information of specific areas. In other words, the Grand Hall of World has been sent to another dimension. To enter it, we'll first need to disable the Meccan system."

"And how do we do that?"

"There's a portal to Inglis on the map of Zebul. It's the hub that controls all information in Heaven, including the Meccan system. If we go there, we can disable it."

"Inglis?"

It was the place mentioned by Chief Kergo during their pact. Kadum had asked Shirone to deliver his will to Inglis, but Shirone hadn't given it much thought at the time, as he hadn't received anything in return.

Now, in hindsight, refusing that arrangement seemed like an excellent decision.

For Canis, however, Inglis held a special significance. It was the reason he had abandoned the Metagate and come to Heaven. It was also the place where he believed Arcane had gained the knowledge to ascend as an Archmage.

While analyzing the notes left by his master, Canis had focused on myths.

If Heaven had influenced humanity for eons, its records would likely be found in mythology rather than history.

Through his studies of ancient texts, Canis had discovered a recurring location across different myths.

Inglis.

A hall of knowledge said to hold the secrets of the world.

“I’ll handle Inglis. While Rian heads to the Grand Hall of World, I’ll disable the Meccan system. It should buy us some time.”

Though it sounded noble, it was effectively a death sentence.

Rian, however, thought it was the perfect task for him.

“Agreed. We’ll head to Zebul now. Shirone, you need to find a way, no matter what.”

“Got it. You two be careful. I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

Without even a moment to watch his friends depart for Zebul, Shirone turned toward the spire.

The interior was vast, without a single supporting pillar in sight. The floor, made of glass-like material, was spotless—no footprints, not even a speck of dust.

Peophe, relying on the memories passed down from Igrin, led Shirone to a corner of the tower.

“Hmm? Why isn’t anything here?”

According to her memory, there should have been an elevator at this spot. However, no visible mechanism could be found.

Suddenly, a seam in the floor emitted a radiant glow, and a blinding light burst forth.

When the brilliance faded, Shirone found himself in an entirely different place.

The new area resembled the ribcage of a fish, with corridors extending outward like ribs. Every ten meters, there were pathways branching to the left and right, and at the end of the main corridor stood a golden iron door.

Peophe stopped in front of the door and turned to Shirone.

“From here on, it’s Ikhael’s domain. As promised, I can’t go any further. Angels can communicate with all beings, so you won’t need me. Just in case, I’ll transfer Zebul’s map to you.”

Chapter 206: 3. The Eternal Ra (3)

Shirone closed his eyes, receiving the memories Peophe passed on to him. The sensation was warm, like sunlight on his skin.

“Thank you, Peophe.”

If not for Peophe, he wouldn't have made it this far. If he could rescue Amy and the others safely, Shirone was ready to credit it all to her efforts.

“Hmph! Don't get the wrong idea. I only came along because I was curious about the ridiculous things you humans were up to. Don't think I'll care about you anymore after this, got it?”

Peophe refused to admit her kindness until the very end, but Shirone could see through her. She was gentle and pure-hearted, someone who, despite her eternal life, couldn't turn a blind eye to the suffering of humans.

“Peophe, you're going to become an extraordinary fairy.”

“Enough already. Just go in. I'm tired, and I don't want to stay here a moment longer.”

Peophe stepped aside to allow him access to the door.

Though curious about the room's interior, she didn't dare to glance inside a celestial chamber.

When Shirone stepped inside, the iron door closed with a resounding thud.

It was only a single door separating them, yet Peophe felt as if Shirone had vanished from the world.

Realizing she was now alone, a sense of loneliness washed over her. Was this the solitude of standing at the pinnacle of existence?

“Tch. Whatever. I'll just head back.”

Gathering her unsettled emotions, Peophe took the glowing elevator back to the first floor.

She decided she would report to Igrin upon reaching Shamain and stand guard until her superior recovered from the effects of the Cost of True Belief. After that, she would sleep, and life would return to normal the next day.

Thud. Thud.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed from the entrance Peophe was heading toward.

Even from the sound alone, Peophe's face went pale.

Though she could only see the shadow of the approaching figure, it was unmistakably a giant. For the ground to shake so intensely, just how massive could this being be?

A single giant emerged from the entrance.

Contrary to her expectations, his size wasn't particularly enormous.

He stood a little over two meters tall—shorter than an average giant, closer to what would be considered a dwarf among their kind.

However, his garments indicated he was of considerable rank in the process of divine refinement, likely a high-level practitioner of the Rite of Liquor.

His broad shoulders and chiseled jaw radiated strength. His forearms looked like solid stone, and his eyes burned with intensity.

Recognizing the giant's identity through her primordial knowledge, Peophe momentarily forgot to flap her wings.

She barely regained balance before she could crash, hurriedly taking to the air again.

'No way... Is this really who I think it is?'

It was Ymir, King of Giants.

Though not physically enormous, the vibrations of his steps came from the sheer density of his muscles.

Legend said his body alone contained the essence of over ten thousand humans who had undergone the Rite of Liquor.

Ymir was said to be the strongest giant in history.

As Ymir's steps quickened upon noticing her, Peophe swallowed hard.

While giants were generally ranked below angels and maras, Ymir was a unique exception.

According to the primordial knowledge, Ymir had once destroyed several worlds using only the strength of his physical body.

In terms of sheer brute force, he was stronger than a mid-tier angel.

Peophe nervously gulped, standing still as Ymir approached. When his foot landed with a thud and he stopped, Peophe instinctively blurted out a greeting.

"H-Hello!"

Instant regret consumed her.

Though fairies and giants held equal rank between the Fifth and Fourth Heavens, they rarely got along. They were infamous for sniping at each other with insults whenever they met.

"Who are you?"

"I-I am Peophe, a fairy of the Spiral."

Peophe swallowed hard, unsure of how Ymir, her natural rival, would respond.

To her surprise, Ymir greeted her warmly.

"I see. I've heard of you. They say a peculiar fairy has appeared in your realm. So it's you."

Peophe had never heard this before. It must've been a topic discussed among the higher laws.

But peculiar? What had she done to earn such a reputation?

"You're a cute little one. So, why have you come to Araboth?"

"Oh, I'm here on an assignment as a deputy for Chief Igrin."

Peophe hastily replied. Though it was true, she felt guilty about using Igrin's name to lend herself credibility.

"Well, then. I heard Ikhasa came to Shamain. He took heretics away, didn't he?"

“Yes, that’s correct. By the way, do you know what happened to the women who were taken?”

Peophe bit her lip, regretting her own question.

What could she possibly do even if she learned their whereabouts?

Her task here was done; all that remained was to return home.

Yet, her ears strained eagerly to catch Ymir’s answer.

“They seem to be in Cariel’s laboratory. I heard they found a Metagate, causing quite the commotion in the Grand Hall of World.”

The fact that Ymir referred to Archangel Cariel without honorifics was shocking. But it also revealed the magnitude of his strength and defiance of divine norms.

“I see. But... what kind of commotion?”

“They say the Metagate holds lost coordinates. I’m not interested in the specifics, but it seems war is inevitable.

That’s why I’m here, to petition Ra to return my body to its original form.”

“Ah... I see.”

The tale of Ymir’s body being stripped was well-known in Heaven.

If Ikhael had her powers stripped due to sin, Ymir had his body limited simply because he was too strong.

Ymir’s raw power had been a threat to the balance of Heaven, forcing Ra to impose physical restrictions on him.

It was one of the rare events in Heaven’s history that defied conventional law.

Ymir raised his hand, causing Peophe to flinch and shut her eyes tightly. She braced herself for what felt like an oncoming wall.

Instead, she felt a soft touch.

Ymir’s massive fingers gently patted her head.

“War is inevitable. When it starts, fight alongside me. If you stay by my side, no one will dare to harm you.”

“Y-Yes, I will.”

Ymir's eyes crinkled in what seemed to be a smile as he walked past her, and his heavy footsteps resumed. The ground quaked with each step until he vanished into light fragments at the elevator. Only then did Peophe let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Whew... At least I made it through that."

Though she felt embarrassed for being so nervous around the giant, she convinced herself she'd held her own reasonably well enough to face Ymir.

Still, it was a memory she wished she could erase.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Peophe exited Araboth and charted her course back to Shamain.

But her gaze kept drifting elsewhere, and her thoughts spiraled into conflict.

The Grand Hall of World. The Metagate. War.

Ever since the Rite of Liquor was disrupted, unforeseen terms kept surfacing.

Peophe paced back and forth, torn between fleeing and staying true to her duty.

Shirone's voice echoed in her mind.

"Peophe, you're going to become an extraordinary fairy."

Peophe clutched her head and shook it, trying to banish the memory. But Shirone's words had taken root and refused to leave.

"Ugh, this is driving me crazy!"

With a burst of determination, Peophe shot into the sky. A single fairy was now headed for the angels' sanctuary, Zebul.

Anke Ra resided atop the spire of Araboth.

An omnipotent being, capable of freely manipulating the lifespans of his subjects and governing even their memories.

Ymir, the King of Giants, ascended the tower to meet this divine presence.

Ymir, the King of Giants.

The strongest giant in the history of Heaven.

The Rite of Liquor, which divided the pursuit of biological perfection into ten final stages, had seen no equal to Ymir—a giant who had uniquely achieved the ultimate tenth stage. Even so, Ymir could not help but feel tension as he approached Anke Ra's throne of divine authority.

The pinnacle of the towering spire, piercing the heavens, was less than one percent the size of the base floor.

When Ymir reached the summit via the light elevator, all that stood before him was a stark iron door.

"Anke Ra, your servant humbly requests an audience."

Ymir waited in silence.

The iron door began to shudder, its central seam splitting open and swinging inward.

Ymir stepped forward with unyielding strides.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The rhythmic, resonant sound of expanding and contracting pulses filled the chamber, echoing like the beat of a slow drum.

The room was barely one hundred pyeong.

Thin, hair-like neural fibers wove through cracks in the floor, spreading outward in every direction. Organs resembling intestines hung from the walls in thick, sagging bundles. The nerves from the floor rose and brushed against Ymir's ankles as if testing him before quickly withdrawing, losing interest.

Ymir knelt on one knee before Ra.

"The giant Ymir humbly greets Anke Ra."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Behind Ymir, a massive mass of flesh, pulsating like a heart, responded to his presence.

It weighed 26 tons. Covered in a viscous, reddish-brown secretion, its form was indistinct, appearing as a collapsed amalgamation of flesh.

Its center bulged outward, while its extremities drooped like deflated balloons.

Tangled bundles of intestinal-like appendages branched out from its ends, covering the walls. Neural strands extended from the walls to the floor, surging in waves.

Ra's physical form resembled a convergence of all biological systems.

A heart, a brain, digestive organs, and sensory structures.

Ra's nerves around Ymir writhed wildly, and the fleshy mass at the center began to swell. A wet, stretching noise echoed as it tore horizontally. The epidermis split open, peeling apart to reveal a massive eye.

Anke Ra (The Eternal Ra, Date of Origin Unknown)

The pupil, the size of a human head, contracted and expanded as it adjusted its focus on Ymir.

A high-pitched noise, sharp as if nails were being dragged across steel, pierced the air.

"Screeeech! Giant... Screeeech! Ymir, why have you... Screeeech! sought me out?"

Despite the ear-splitting noise, Ymir's expression remained unflinching.

"Heretics have infiltrated the sacred land of Heaven. Those who defied the Rite of Liquor have been handed over to Cariel and are being prepared for the Art of Life."

"I am... aware."

Ra's voice gradually stabilized, though it remained unnaturally high-pitched. The static noise had vanished, but the voice carried an unearthly resonance.

Ra knew everything. For Ymir, this meant he had yet to receive a response. But no matter how long he waited, Ra offered no further words.

"What are your intentions?"

"Nothing. Must I... concern myself?"

"This is an unprecedented event. It is said that coordinates from a previously inaccessible world have been recorded in the Metagate. This is a rare opportunity to convey your will."

"Y-m-i-r."

As Ra slowly pronounced Ymir's name, his voice shifted drastically, descending to a deep, resonant tone that filled the chamber.

"I am the beginning and the end of the world. All is connected to me; therefore, I need not concern myself with anything."

Ymir's lips tightened into a firm line.

Ra was omnipotent. No event could fall outside his domain. Yet, Ymir could not leave without addressing the matter of his body.

"I wish to reclaim my original form. Please, melt the Eternal Ice Wall that binds me."

"Ymir, are you not my servant?"

"Do not misunderstand. Giants uphold the law. This, too, is to uphold the laws of Heaven."

"I refuse."

Ymir raised his head, fiery determination in his eyes. But as he met Ra's massive, unblinking gaze, all his emotions dissolved into nothingness.

"The actions of ten billion heretics are less disruptive than a single step from a giant. And if that step belongs to the King of Giants, the commotion is magnified."

"Do you doubt my loyalty? Do you believe I would ever turn against your greatness?"

"Ymir, do not misunderstand me. Your strength threatens the balance of the world. Remember, the law exists to preserve the whole."

With that, Ra closed his massive eye. The membranous fissure sealed seamlessly, and the intensity of his pulsations grew.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Chapter 207: 3. The Eternal Ra (4)

Ymir realized that his allotted time had come to an end.

As he turned slowly, his eyes carried an indescribable mixture of frustration and rage.

If Ra had decreed it so, then so be it.

Yet, Ymir's instincts whispered a truth different from Ra's words—or perhaps, they illuminated a truth Ra was concealing.

'I need to confirm it with my own eyes.'

With that determination, Ymir began his journey to the angelic city of Zebul.

When Shirone stepped into Ikhael's chamber, he instinctively glanced around.

The sight was far from what he had imagined. The room, furnished with a table, chairs, a bed, and even a carpet, bore an uncanny resemblance to a human living space.

Yet, it didn't feel human.

Every object seemed to radiate sunlight, as if isolated from the flow of time, without a single blemish to tarnish its perfection.

It was an inexplicable sensation, the sight of absolute flawlessness.

For an ordinary human, these objects would seem unassuming. But anyone standing in this room would sense a purity that bordered on obsessive.

Curious, Shirone picked up a teaspoon from the table and glanced at his reflection in its surface.

As he had suspected, its polished surface was so immaculate that it felt eerie—so much so that it evoked

thoughts of a holy artifact, something humans might revere as sacred.

‘Huh? Now that I think about it...’

There was no sign of Ikhael. Had he been deceived by Peophe? She had said that Ikhael could not leave this room. Could it be that she was fooling herself?

A surge of unease gripped Shirone, and he began frantically searching the room. Yet, no matter where he looked, the same emptiness greeted him. All the objects were pristine. The absence of any imperfections gave the space an unnerving quality.

Then, suddenly, a melody, beautiful and ethereal tune filled the air. Shirone froze, turning toward the source of the sound. His gaze fixed on the window five meters above the floor.

The clear resonance of what sounded like a harp seemed to originate from there.

The angelic vibrations.

As though spellbound, Shirone slowly moved toward the window.

Sunlight streamed in through the glass, hitting an unseen form. When Shirone regained awareness, a woman was sitting on the windowsill, gazing out.

Her face was breathtaking, beyond the capacity of any artist to capture.

Shirone’s eyes were drawn to the radiant halo above her head, glowing with a warmth that an immeasurable contrast to the cold, menacing aura of the fallen angel Ikhasa.

As the light illuminated her figure, great wings of light unfurled behind her, their majestic brilliance overwhelming Shirone’s senses.

“Welcome, Shirone.”

In that moment, Shirone was certain.

This was none other than Ikhael, the Archangel.

The first among the beings of causality. The symbol of purity most cherished by Ra himself. And now, she was standing

right before him.

Ikhael descended gracefully from the windowsill to the floor. Although her height exceeded two meters, which could have been intimidating, it was overshadowed by the gentle and radiant presence she exuded.

It was difficult to describe the feeling. Even to call her beautiful felt like an insult, as if mere words sullied her essence.

If the concept of good could take on a physical form, it would look like her. If Miro of Space-Time embodied the truth, then Ikhael embodied goodness itself.

Despite her mature appearance, Ikhael wore a playful expression as she glanced around for a place to sit.

Finding nothing suitable, she casually sat down on the floor with a soft thud.

Shirone stared in astonishment as her dress settled gently around her. Then, Ikhael, seated demurely with her legs tucked together, patted the floor beside her, gesturing for him to join her.

“Come, sit here.”

Shirone couldn’t resist. An inexplicable allure drew him to her side.

They were so close that their bodies nearly touched.

Perhaps she had asked him to sit on the floor so she could see him more closely.

As expected, Ikhael leaned in, her face mere inches from his. Her gaze fixed on him, and the corners of her lips lifted into a soft smile.

Shirone, overwhelmed by shyness, averted his eyes. Finally, Ikhael broke the silence.

“I’ve been wanting to meet you, Shirone.”

“Me? You know who I am?”

Ikhael scratched her eyebrow awkwardly, her expression tinged with a hint of embarrassment.

Her demeanor felt human. Given the arrogance that characterized fallen angels like Ikhasa, her humility was a

startling contrast.

“Whether I know you or not isn’t the point. What matters is how much I understand you. And as you know, that isn’t something words can easily convey.”

Gathering his courage, Shirone lifted his head and studied her face. Their gazes locked, and for an instant, it felt as if their sense were perfectly in sync, sending an electric thrill through his body.

Shirone looked up at the radiant halo above her head. It was the first time he had ever seen one up close.

The sight of light hovering above someone’s head was nothing short of miraculous.

Realizing he had been staring for too long, Shirone quickly shook his head to snap out of it.

“Ah, sorry.”

Ikhael waved off his apology with a gentle shake of her head.

“The halo is the manifestation of an angel’s mind. Humans enter their Spirit Zone through concentration, but for angels, the Zone exists externally. We call it the Overspirit.”

Hearing her explanation, Shirone viewed the halo with newfound awe. It was as though she constantly maintained a perfect externalized form of a human’s mind detachment. It was, quite literally, the spirit of an angel.

Her essence itself.

Perhaps sensing a bit of Shirone’s embarrassment, Ikhael offered further explanation.

“It used to shine much brighter than this. But I committed a sin, and Ra suppressed the power of my light.”

“What kind of sin did you commit?”

Shirone immediately regretted asking, quickly following up with an apology.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked such a thing...”

“It’s alright. Though I made a mistake, I don’t regret it, even now.”

For some reason, Shirone felt reassured. He didn't know what kind of wrongdoing she had committed, but if she herself didn't regret it, then perhaps it wasn't as shameful as it might seem.

"Um..."

Shirone hesitated.

He knew what he was about to ask was absurd. Yet, once the thought occurred to him, it refused to leave.

"Go ahead. Say whatever's on your mind."

"Just once..."

"Yes?"

"Can I... touch it?"

Ikhael blinked, then burst into laughter as if she finally understood.

It was an unexpected request.

In all of Heaven, no one had likely ever dared to ask to touch the halo of Archangel Ikhael.

"Alright, go ahead."

"Wait, is it really okay? I don't want to be rude or disrespectful..."

Ikhael shook her head lightly, as if to assure him it was fine.

Only then did Shirone relax enough to reach out his hand.

When his fingertips made contact with her halo, it felt like touching pure light—both warm and energetic. The pleasant sensation flowed down his arm like a gentle stream.

"It's warm."

"That's because you are a warm-hearted person, Shirone."

"Hehe..."

For the first time since coming to Heaven, Shirone felt truly at ease. It seemed as though all the worries in the world would disappear if he could stay by her side.

He wanted to be with her forever.

At that moment, Ikhael reached out her hand. Shirone instinctively flinched and pulled back, prompting a startled expression from her.

"Oh... Your hair was just a little messy."

“Haha, I guess I’ve been running around too much. A lot’s happened, after all.”

Shirone scratched his head with an awkward laugh. It wasn’t that he disliked her touch—he had simply been caught off guard.

But as he collected himself, a sudden realization hit him like a hammer.

How could he do this without going crazy?

He had completely forgotten that the most important thing was left to do.

“How could I forget... Amy!”

Shirone shot to his feet.

How could he have been so absorbed in this meeting with Ikhael that he forgot his friends were in danger?

“Please help me! My friends have been taken! They’re planning to use the Art of Life or whatever it is to create Nephilim!”

“Oh my, that’s terrible.”

“They’re calling them heretics, but I swear they’re not bad people! Even if they were, this kind of treatment is just too cruel!”

Ikhael fell silent for a moment, seemingly lost in thought.

“Shirone, do you care for your friends? Enough to risk your life for them?”

“Of course! I’d do anything for them!”

Ikhael smiled, as if his answer was exactly what she had been hoping for.

“Good. But, Shirone, if you want to save your friends, there’s something you must hear first.”

What could possibly be more urgent than saving his friends right now?

However, the gravity of her words—“if you want to save them”—made it impossible to refuse.

“What is it that I need to hear?”

“About Heaven. And about a woman named Miro.”

Shirone's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't expected Miro's name to come up—not from Ikhael, of all people.

Adrias Miro.

When he first arrived in Heaven, he had thought of her as just another one of many Unlockers.

But the more he learned about her, the more he realized she was deeply intertwined with Heaven's mysteries.

Who was she? What kind of person was she, really?

"You know Miro?"

"Yes. I've met her before. I like her very much... though I doubt she feels the same about me."

Shirone was stunned. Not only had Ikhael met Miro, but the thought of Miro disliking someone as kind and radiant as Ikhael was baffling.

"It won't take long. But before we begin, may I comb your hair?"

The halo above her head expanded into a ring, glowing even brighter.

As the light circled her hands, it formed into a radiant comb.

Photon shaping

Creating something as intricate and delicate as a comb in an instant.

No matter how powerful an angel's mental energy might be, the intrinsic properties of light could not be easily manipulated.

Compared to something like the Shining Chain, the craftsmanship of this object required a level of skill and power that defied comprehension.

Shirone suddenly realized the secret of all these abilities lay in the halo.

Even when he had sensed the overwhelming presence of Ikhasa, it had been at the moment when his halo expanded into a glowing ring.

"How is it possible to shape photons like that? Does it have something to do with the transformation of your halo?"

“The halo processes vast amounts of information at incredible speed. We call it a halo, but it functions like a magic circle for humans. By spinning at the speed of light, it assembles countless concepts together.”

Though she had likened it to a magic circle, Shirone realized the comparison hardly did it justice.

Assembling concepts at the speed of light—no number of human mages working together could ever achieve such precision and speed.

“Alright, let’s begin. Lie down here, Shirone.”

Ikhael patted her lap, motioning for him to rest his head there. It seemed she couldn’t resist the urge to comb his hair.

Shirone obeyed, thinking there must be some deeper purpose behind her gesture.

And truly, where else could he experience such luxury?

Reclining with his head on the lap of an archangel, staring up at Heaven’s radiance, Shirone felt Ikhael’s comb gently glide through his hair.

‘Huh?’

A strange drowsiness washed over him.

The more she combed, the more his consciousness seemed to slip away, as though it were being pulled out piece by piece. He fought to stay awake, desperate to hold onto his thoughts. His friends were waiting for him—they needed him.

‘I can’t... I can’t let this happen...’

But no matter how hard he tried, Shirone’s eyes fluttered closed.

Ikhael gazed down at his sleeping face, her expression tinged with sorrow.

So many thoughts swirled in her mind. And through the comb, they seeped into Shirone’s mind.

Then, with a quiet resolve, she began to speak, her voice as soothing and melodic as a lullaby.

“Long, long ago...”

4. The Truth of Heaven (1)

The Grand Hall of World within Zebul served as both the research laboratory of the Archangel Cariel and an observatory overseeing the operations of the world.

Due to a unique function of the Meccan system that erased the space itself, not only was entry impossible while the security systems were active, but even finding a trace of the hall was unfeasible.

True to its name as a “Hall”, the space was vast enough to encompass Alpheas Magic Academy in its entirety.

The overall color scheme was a mechanical navy blue, and the hemispherical ceiling was illuminated by tens of thousands of blinking electrical signals.

In the northwest corner, a hologram of a globular cluster with stars densely gathered expanded slowly.

At the center of the room floated a massive steel sphere over 30 meters in diameter, with two orbiting bands rotating along the paths of revolution and rotation.

Amy and her companions sat near the globular cluster, their wrists bound by steel cuffs.

Ikhasa, the one who had abducted the girls, had initially hoped that Cariel’s approval would lead to his reinstatement as an angel. However, after receiving no response from Cariel, he simply returned to the Second Heaven.

For Amy and the others, that brief moment of Ikhasa’s departure was the only thing remotely enjoyable since arriving in this place.

In contrast, everything else about their situation was grim.

None of them had expected that someone of the Archangel’s rank would go so far as to cuff their hands.

Chapter 208: 4. The Truth of Heaven (2)

The cuffs had symbols etched on them, similar to the ones seen in Nor's Shelter, but they seemed fixed in space and immovable. They also made it impossible to activate any magic.

There was no way these restraints were used simply out of fear of humans.

Amy recalled frogs tied down in a laboratory before dissection.

The reason they tie up the limbs before dissecting them wasn't because anyone was afraid of the frogs.

The thought sent chills down her spine.

At the very least, it implied that whatever awaited them would naturally provoke resistance.

Perhaps thinking the same, Tess and Arin remained silent.

As if refraining from making a sound would somehow preserve the fragile tension indefinitely.

The only small consolation was the absence of the drone on Tess's wrist.

Upon arriving at Zebul, she had secretly sent the drone off without Ikhasa noticing.

It was a clever move, a skill she had learned during her training as an infiltrator.

'What's going on? Why can't I see anything?'

But her efforts were currently proving futile.

While the drone could potentially guide Shirone and the others to their location, her retinal screen showed absolutely nothing.

She didn't know that the Meccan system had isolated the space itself, preventing any external interference.

Meanwhile, Cariel was inspecting machinery about 70 meters away from the globular cluster.

The massive column he worked on stretched all the way to the ceiling, its thousands of panels glowing with various colors of light.

Suspended ten meters above the ground, arms crossed, Cariel examined a screen.

The screen was filled with incomprehensible symbols that Amy and the others couldn't begin to understand.

Amy examined Cariel's halo.

Compared to Ikhasa's, Cariel's was incomparably larger and more luminous, an immense and vivid ring.

Within the halo's boundary, diagrams and equations appeared as afterimages, disappearing just as quickly, and with each shift, the machinery's screens rapidly changed as well.

System check complete. Beginning the Art of Life. Please input the molecular structure of the genetic material.

A chilling female voice echoed from the ceiling.

The mechanical tone was so alien that even Arin couldn't analyze it. Attempting to connect psychically with Cariel would be pure madness.

After a moment of staring at the screen, Cariel floated toward the girls.

A low, resonant vibration, like the sound of a contrabass, accompanied him.

He was a strikingly handsome man, standing at an imposing 230 centimeters tall, clad in white robes. His halo was so radiant that it felt as if it punched holes in the very fabric of the space.

Amy mustered all her courage and glared at him.

If something had to happen, she resolved to face it first. She didn't want to imagine Tess or Arin enduring pain before her.

"A so-called Archangel, and yet you're not ashamed?

Release these cuffs right now!"

“Such a base human notion. As an Archangel, I am fulfilling my duty by restraining you.”

Arin bit her lip as she stared intently at Cariel.

This was a level of interaction she had never experienced before.

All she could perceive was vibrating strings, trembling and weaving into indistinct forms.

Cariel existed solely as probabilities, not as a fixed entity.

Amy shot back defiantly.

“Your duty? What exactly are you planning to do to us?”

“Ah, it seems I forgot to introduce myself. I am Archangel Cariel. Under Ra’s command, I am tasked with carrying out the Art of Life in occupied territories. That ritual will now be performed on you. It is an honorable mission, so accept it with joy.”

“What nonsense is this? Tying us up and spewing this drivel? Release us already!”

Amy thrashed her body, but with the cuffs fixed at waist height, the only movement she could manage was stamping her feet like a frustrated child.

Tess, pondering Cariel’s words, asked curiously.

“Wait a minute. ‘Occupied territories’? Are you saying that Heaven invades other worlds?”

Cariel paused in thought. The law was always correct, but persuading humans required a different approach.

“It is merely the delivery of Ra’s will. The Creator loves humanity and desires its eternal preservation. Your world, too, will eventually submit to Ra’s will.”

Tess felt a chilling realization creeping over her.

Her thoughts turned to the possibility that Ra was nothing more than a tyrant of the universe. She speculated that Heaven’s inhabitants might also have been residents of worlds once conquered by Ra.

Amy shouted.

“We saw the Rite of Liquor! Is that what you call loving humanity? It’s no different from some depraved serial

killer!”

“You misunderstand. Humans often mistake love for power. Don’t flatter yourselves into thinking that being loved is some great ability. Ra cherishes you simply because you are capable of naming things.”

Amy recalled the Lifespan Records. Fairies controlled the lifespan of subjects by their names.

But wasn’t naming something anyone could do? What did naming truly signify to Ra?

Tess sneered.

“So what’s your plan? Are you going to love us with whips now that we’re in cuffs?”

“You have a significant mission.”

“A mission? What mission?”

“To conceive my child.”

Amy, Tess, and Arin’s faces simultaneously turned crimson. Their skin crawled, and an uncontrollable fury boiled within them.

Amy, her jaw trembling, couldn’t suppress her outrage as she shouted.

“You pervert! Don’t you dare lay a hand on me! I won’t let you get away with it!”

“How pitifully primitive your reaction is. Fear not. It is merely a transfer of angelic information into your bodies.”

Tess found his words even more infuriating. It was the kind of language that perverts use when they justify their actions with meticulous, detached phrasing.

“So basically, you’re saying you want to have your way with us, right?”

Cariel’s expression soured.

“Human language is so utterly base. The Art of Life is a sophisticated technique that only I, among the archangels, can perform. Do not insult it by comparing it to the vulgar reproductive methods of lower beings.”

The Art of Life is ready. Data integration at 100%. Shall I proceed with replication?

A cold, female voice echoed from above.

Without wasting words, Cariel ascended into the air.

“Replicate.”

Replicating genetic material. Estimated time: two minutes, thirty seconds.

Cariel’s halo expanded into a massive ring over 20 meters in diameter.

Bringing his index and middle fingers together, a bead of light the size of a pearl emerged at their tips.

Though small in size, its intensity was powerful enough to illuminate the entire chamber of the Grand Hall of World.

Cariel retracted the halo and returned to the women.

A diamond-shaped, violet-glowing glass panel was created at his fingertips where the light had disappeared.

“This panel contains information on life approaching infinity. Understand this—creating humans requires the genetic data of every lifeform that existed before them.”

“I don’t care what’s in there! Whatever it is, we’re not doing it!”

Amy shouted. She was already so angry that she was about to die, but now that he had added an explanation, her irritation skyrocketed.

Cariel continued explaining, seemingly reveling in the pride he took in his ritual, even without a willing audience.

“Angelic information is delicate and intricate. Women who have already borne children experience drastically reduced success rates in producing Nephilim. In that sense, you are fortunate. You have the honor of carrying the lineage of a great angel within you.”

“What are you planning to do with the Nephilim once they’re born?”

“They will be sent to another world. In this case, to your own world.”

“To what? To indoctrinate humans and offer them up to your god?”

Cariel fell silent. Her words struck at the truth.

Indeed, this was the plan: have women from occupied territories give birth to Nephilim, use them to convert the humans of that world, and then lead them to serve Ra.

Tess realized the Nephilim were essentially spies.

The phrase “free from the Law” suddenly made sense.

A soldier sent to infiltrate enemy territory wouldn’t be bound by the rules of their homeland.

Cariel extended the glass panel he held toward them.

“Don’t worry. The process will merely transfer information. You will not feel shame.”

When the panel touched someone’s forehead, glass-like needles would emerge, rooting themselves into the brain. Through these roots, angelic information would invade the body, creating life within it.

Cariel moved the panel close to the foreheads of each of the three women in turn, as if measuring whether it would fit.

All three had clear, flawless foreheads that seemed perfect for the roots to take hold.

“Hmm. Very well. Shall I let you decide? Which one of you will have the honor of going first in this glorious ritual?”

All three women shouted at the same time.

“I’ll go first!”

Cariel raised an eyebrow, clearly unprepared for their reaction. The women glanced at each other, a renewed sense of solidarity giving them courage.

Cariel seemed pleased.

For the Art of Life to succeed, the angelic information had to be precise, but the role of the host was equally critical.

The success rate of the ritual was roughly one in thirty. A failed attempt would result in fatal brain shock.

However, stronger mental resolve and exceptional physical health could significantly increase the odds.

By those standards, all three women were ideal candidates.

Replication of genetic material complete.

The voice from above signaled.

Cariel raised his hand, and two identical panels materialized alongside the one already in his grasp.

"You are a harmonious trio. Since I cannot choose between you, I shall embed the information simultaneously in all three of you."

The three panels floated away from Cariel's hand, gliding toward the women as if swimming through the air.

Amy and her friends were consumed by uncontrollable rage. Now, the truth was undeniable.

The Archangel Cariel was worst kind of pervert.

Rian and Canis arrived at the Zebul.

The view of Zebul, confirmed immediately after crossing the outer wall, resembled countless discs spreading outward in a concentric pattern. It was like seeing a floating city built upon a lotus flower.

As expected from the outside, the interior of Zebul was a labyrinth of dimensions.

The method of leaping between spaces was far too complex for the human mind to comprehend.

Surely, there must have been some sort of governing rule, but neither of them had the time to figure it out.

Relying on the memories provided by Peophe, they followed only the designated coordinates as they moved forward.

After several instances of returning to the same location, Canis finally located the portal leading to Inglis.

"This is where we part ways. Even if you know the route, finding it is a separate matter. It's better for at least one of us to get there first."

"Are you sure? If you can't disable the Mecha System, there's no point in you going first. If there's an enemy at Inglis, it might be more effective to deal with them together."

Canis glanced back at the portal.

There weren't any visible mechanisms, but according to the memories Peophe had transferred, this was undoubtedly the

path to Inglis.

So far, they hadn't encountered anyone. The likelihood of an enemy waiting at Inglis was slim.

However, if there were enemies, they would be at least as formidable as a Mara.

In that sense, Rian had a point—moving together could be advantageous.

Even so, Canis stuck to his decision.

No one could say how long it would take to disable the Meccan system. In any situation, wasting manpower wasn't a sound strategy.

"Nothing is certain anyway. There's no guarantee it'll be easier with the two of us. Let's each focus on what we can do. Right now, that's our best bet."

Rian accepted the reasoning. After checking the Signa and Exd he had received from Rena, he headed toward the eastern side of Zebul.

Canis took a deep breath and stepped onto the platform.

There wasn't anything specific he needed to do. The moment his feet touched the designated coordinates, a gap opened in the floor, and a burst of light erupted with a loud bang.

In the brief moment it took to close and open his eyes, the scenery had completely changed.

The Angelic Archive, Inglis.

Contrary to the warmth the word "archive" might evoke, the surroundings were entirely mechanical, devoid of any trace of humanity.

From the central control unit, four paths extended in a cross shape. The walls were covered with vertical, rectangular panels, stacked like countless filing cabinets.

Harvest materialized with visible discomfort.

To a being that perceives the world through vibrations, Inglis was a space overflowing with constant oscillations, leaving no room for stillness.

Canis cautiously scanned the area for any threats.

Though he might have to search every corner to be sure, no one—or nothing—had appeared yet.

Chapter 209: 4. The Truth of Heaven (3)

"It seems there's no one here."

"Honestly, that's for the best. Whether it's a Mara or an angel, I can't say I'm confident about fighting them."

Canis tilted his head, surprised. He hadn't expected such cautious words from Harvest, who had inherited the memories of his master, Arcane.

"You're different from my master."

"Memories alone don't define one's personality. I was designed to protect you. To be blunt, without Ikhael's help, completing this mission will be impossible."

In the end, it all came down to that. The key to returning to their original world rested in Shirone's hands.

Though Canis felt a pang to his pride at not being the one to take center stage, he wasn't foolish enough to let it disrupt their teamwork.

"But if we don't disable the Meccan system, there won't be any opportunities to act. Let's start by taking a closer look around."

Canis began walking, surveying the surroundings.

Something felt odd, prompting him to approach the wall.

The panels embedded at regular intervals resembled rows of bookshelves in a library.

As his hand brushed against one of the panels, he felt a faint vibration.

When he pressed down, there was a faint click.

Worried that he might have triggered an alarm, he quickly stepped back. A soft hum followed, and the panel slid outward.

Gripping the panel, Canis fully removed it. Attached to the transparent, rectangular frame of the panel was an electronic board.

He examined it vertically, then horizontally.

When his thumb touched the edge of the panel, glowing text materialized on its surface.

‘So, this is the Angelic Archive...’

Canis realized, taking in the overwhelming number of panels that filled Inglis.

The entire archive was a repository of knowledge.

As his finger brushed a blinking arrow on the glass, the pages turned. Words endlessly appeared, filling the surface.

It was far more advanced than any book, containing an immense density of information.

Unable to read the script, Canis’s attention drifted to the numbers inscribed at the bottom of the glass.

One thought immediately came to mind: the note his master had left behind.

Inglis

113-325-4739-49359-234

That was all Arcane had left in his records. It must have been an identifier for a panel within Inglis.

Canis now had no doubt that his master had once visited this archive. Here, he must have uncovered secrets that led to the enhancement of dark magic.

Canis looked closely at the script on the glass. He had no idea how to pronounce the words, let alone understand them.

“Harvest, can you read this?”

“No. This is a language I’ve never encountered before. You’d probably need Arin for this.”

Just then, the letters began to distort, rearranging themselves into the language they spoke.

“Automatic language translation? That’s insane.”

Inglis wasn’t created specifically for Canis. It seemed to house every language ever known.

The sheer scope of its information was awe-inspiring. Canis turned back to the now-readable text. It seemed to be discussing the concept of dreams. As he scanned the words, he began reading aloud.

“...‘Dreamo is a world accessible through dreams. To enter, one must find the Dream Being, Luber. Luber resides in places removed from the central events of the dream, so finding him requires concentration. Usually, he can be found cooking in a house or tending to children. Since only Luber emits color, identifying him is not too difficult.’”

He turned the page.

“‘When you find him, give him money and say you’re looking for work. He will suggest a few dream jobs, and if you decline three times, he will send you to Dreamo. If you find a job you like, you can stay and enjoy the dream for as long as you wish, but if you wake up, it will leave no trace in your memory.’”

Canis pursed his lips, glancing at Harvest.

When Harvest shrugged nonchalantly, Canis returned his focus to the panel, continuing to read.

“‘Dreamo exists outside of time, allowing countless Objects that defy causality to exist. To bring an Object from Dreamo into reality, five conditions must be met. First, you must help the item’s owner and receive it as payment. Second, report the item to the authorities to—’”

“Stop. That’s forbidden by the laws.”

Canis’s voice faltered as he turned his head slowly. At the first corner of Inglis stood a small, sharp-eyed woman.

Her lavender skin glowed faintly, and her slanted eyes were sharp and keen. Her curly green hair was voluminous, and above her head floated a red, triangular aura.

She was a Mara.

As tension rose, Canis and Harvest stood frozen, glaring at her without moving a muscle.

“Please, slowly put that back where it belongs. Even a great archangel would need the librarian’s permission to access

Inglis.”

Without breaking eye contact, Canis carefully slid the panel back into its slot.

The moment it clicked into place, it became indistinguishable from the others, as though he had never touched it.

“Sorry about that. This is my first time here.”

Canis said, opting for an apology to buy himself time to think.

“I figured as much. No law-abiding citizen would dare break the rules. Still, it’s been ages since heretics showed up here.”

Canis noticed something peculiar—the movement of her lips matched the words she spoke.

She wasn’t communicating through telepathy, as many in Heaven did.

“How do you know our language?”

“Heh, I’m a collector of languages. Besides, as the manager of Inglis, it’d be pretty silly if I couldn’t communicate.

Actually, it’s not the first time I’ve met someone who speaks your language. If I remember correctly, it’s happened quite a few times.”

The first person who came to Canis’s mind was Arcane.

Then, he thought of the group of Unlockers sent by Kergo’s chief.

“Do you know someone named Kadum?”

The manager’s face lit up with excitement.

“Ah-ha! So you’re one of *them*! Of course, I know him. About 200 years ago, in your time, some heretics came here. They asked me to extend Kadum’s lifespan by 300 years.”

Canis felt a chill as her words confirmed his suspicions.

Inglis was indeed a place capable of manipulating human lifespans.

But how?

Even with its unfathomable density of knowledge, that ability seemed beyond comprehension.

“Is that even possible? How can someone’s lifespan be altered?”

“I get asked that *so* often. I really wonder how people even find their way here if they don’t know.”

She clasped her hands behind her back, pacing like a teacher giving a lecture. Her eyes glowed with affection as they scanned the countless panels lining the walls.

“It’s possible because this place is connected to the Akashic Records.”

Canis froze. The term was familiar. He’d come across it countless times while studying myths.

The Akashic Records—a supranatural repository of information said to contain all records of knowledge in the universe.

The fact that the term existed in Heaven’s lexicon lent some truth to those myths. Still, he found the concept fundamentally flawed.

“That’s impossible. What you’re saying is a lie.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because a record of *everything* in existence can’t possibly exist. How would you verify that it’s complete? There’s always room for doubt, which means it’s inevitably exaggerated.”

“Typical human thinking. I suppose, at your level, that explanation makes sense.”

Her dismissive tone irked Canis.

“So you’re saying it’s not true?”

“The Akashic Records aren’t some grand, awe-inspiring thing. The truth is, *this world itself* is the Akashic Records.”

“Explain in a way I can actually understand.”

The manager’s eyes lit up as if she’d thought of the perfect analogy.

“Alright, since you’re human, I’ll use a Meccan explanation. If you multiply 2 by 3 and then add 1, what’s the result?”

“Seven, obviously.”

“Exactly. That’s how humans think. You need a problem to find an answer. You need an equation to arrive at a result.”

“So? Are you saying your kind thinks differently?”

“Completely. Let me pose a question the way Heaven would. I already have the answer: seven. Now, guess what equation I used to get there.”

Canis fell silent. He couldn’t figure it out. There were infinite ways to reach seven.

“See? That’s the difference. The Akashic Records are the answers. Let me borrow the Norian’s perspective: can you perfectly explain Inglis using any form of expression?”

No language can convey the full depth of a concept. Yet, Canis suddenly understood what the Akashic Records truly were.

“Inglis.”

The manager nodded, satisfied.

“Exactly. Inglis is simply Inglis. It existed long before you arrived. But to you, this place was non-existent—why?”

“Because I... didn’t know its name.”

The realization hit Canis like a thunderbolt. He now understood why Ra required a name to manipulate lifespans.

A name. That was everything.

“Now we’re getting somewhere. To a stone or the wind, the universe doesn’t exist. To them, there is only absolute nothingness, even though they exist themselves. They lack the ability to assign meaning. But the moment you assign the name ‘universe’ to the cosmos, that’s when it truly comes into existence.”

In Heaven, there was no pursuit of singular truths.

Truth either didn’t exist, or it encompassed everything. They create the right answer—they twisted the truth by changing the equation.

It didn’t matter if “seven” became “eight” or “nine”.

Whatever answer emerged was the entirety of existence, perfect in its own way.

“Humans are fools, always chasing the singular truth. But there is no single truth. Whatever the world becomes—that’s all there is.”

The manager gestured to the panels surrounding them. “Inglis is connected to the Akashic Records through the Meccan system. It manipulates formula to alter the truth. This is what’s known as ‘hacking’. Changing someone’s lifespan? That’s nothing.”

Canis felt a deep unease. The technology to twist truth itself—using the Meccan system to obliterate truth—was beyond anything humanity could ever achieve.

The manager snapped her fingers, drawing his attention back.

“Enough explanations. If you’re here to make a deal, let’s get to it. You can modify lifespans at the central control system.”

She pointed to a machine at the crossroads of the chamber, her expression sly and inviting.

Canis suddenly thought of the black-market dealers he’d encountered in Radum. The absurdity of the situation struck him.

The Mara was an agent of Heaven, and he was a heretic. Why wasn’t she attacking him?

“You want to make a deal? Surely you know what’s happening outside right now.”

“Hm? Outside? Something’s going on in Heaven?”

“Don’t tell me you’re unaware.”

“Of course I don’t know. I’m the manager of Inglis. Managing all the information here is already overwhelming. I haven’t left this place in millennia.”

Canis believed her. Her tone implied she didn’t care, but the truth was evident.

She was confined here.

And that was how it had to be.

Granting someone with the authority to manipulate the Akashic Records access to the outside world would spell

disaster.

'So that's why a low-ranking Mara is in charge here. Well, I guess it works out better for me?'

Conflict with her was inevitable. Even if they struck a deal, she wouldn't let him disable the security system unchallenged.

"What kind of deal are we talking about?"

"Oh, don't play dumb. Lifespans, of course. I can extend anyone's life."

"And what's the price?"

The Mara grinned, winking as she held her thumb and index finger slightly apart.

"Cheap, really. Just one word."

"One word? That's all?"

"Exactly. I'm a collector of languages, remember? That's why I'm so smart and got this gig as the manager of Inglis. Any word will do. Just sell me one word you know."

"And if I sell a word, I'll forget it forever, won't I?"

"Correct. You'll never be able to recall it. It'll be erased from the Akashic Records. But who cares? Losing one word won't change anything, will it?"

She wasn't wrong. There were countless words people rarely used.

Giving up a curse word or something meaningless didn't seem like a big deal.

Still, the deal seemed far too convenient, which only made Canis more suspicious.

Chapter 210: 4. The Truth of Heaven (4)

“I can’t understand. Why make a deal like this? I get that you, as the manager of Inglis, can’t interfere in Heaven’s affairs. But you still follow the law, don’t you? Selling lifespans to heretics can’t possibly be part of your official duties.”

The manager blinked blankly.

“You’re awfully direct, aren’t you? Most people would just pretend they didn’t notice. Fine, I’ll tell you. I was made the manager of Inglis because I have the ability to acquire and understand concepts. I’ve been doing this for tens of thousands of years. Do you know what that means? It means I’m trapped here, unable to do *anything* else. That’s why I need words—so I can escape.”

Her explanation sounded absurd, but Canis couldn’t entirely dismiss the possibility.

The lifespan of a Mara was likely close to eternal. If she collected words over countless millennia, she might eventually succeed.

“You’re trying to *become* the Akashic Records yourself.”

“Ha! Exactly! While managing this place and controlling its information, I realized something—I could become a god. But I’m missing just one thing! The information on how to leave this place! That’s why I need it! Heretics like you are my primary clients. Once I escape, I’ll surpass Ra and become even greater!”

Harvest’s voice cut through via their mental link.

Canis, this woman is dangerous.

Canis agreed; she was clearly unhinged.

Theoretically, her plan could work, but no one could predict how long it would take.

Still, he couldn't entirely blame her.

If he were trapped in a library for tens of thousands of years, he'd likely go mad too.

As he analyzed her intentions, the manager's eyes started to gleam with a sinister light.

"Well? Are you going to do it or not? You've been stalling this whole time. Do you have some other scheme in mind?"

A faint bluish aura began to shimmer around the Mara's body. Her hostility was palpable.

If he refused to make a deal, combat was inevitable. But could he even win? Losing here would render all his friends' efforts meaningless.

Canis, this is dangerous. You have to be careful.

Canis could sense the risk as well.

The deal was tempting—trading just one word to extend a lifespan was an offer almost no human could resist.

When the manager first proposed the idea, Canis's mind had immediately gone to himself and Arin.

If their lifespans were extended to 300 years, they would have nothing to fear in the world.

But they hadn't accepted.

The Unlockers who had come here 200 years prior had followed through with the deal to extend Kadum's lifespan but returned to their original world afterward.

The reason was simple.

The price of revealing their names.

The reason Canis didn't risk his lifespan was the same.

Would it be safe to tell a Mara, who could control all information, his name?

If the manager learned the word "Canis", there was no telling what demands she might make, especially given her unstable state.

I know, but I can't stall forever. The Meccan system needs to be disabled.

As Canis remained silent, the manager's face began to contort, her expression becoming monstrous.

She was on the verge of snapping.

'Even a One-Horned Mara is a bad match for me in a direct fight. The only option is to stall for time while negotiating.'

Handing over a single word didn't seem like it would cause catastrophic consequences.

However, those who came 200 years ago had claimed it wasn't worth the price.

Considering the tendency for historical records to be influenced by bias, it likely meant they'd suffered significant losses.

'Still, they made the deal. That much is clear. But what really happens when you sell a word?'

He tried to imagine the circumstances of those from 200 years ago, but nothing concrete came to mind. Then, an idea struck him like a lightning bolt.

'Of course! That's it!'

He issued instructions through his mental link with Harvest. I'll keep her distracted. You find the panel listed in the note's serial number. There's got to be something there.

What's the point? Even if it's a way to enhance dark magic, we can't use it right now.

No, Master knew there was a manager here. If all he left behind was that serial number, it might not be about dark magic at all.

Understood. But it's a long code. It'll take time to locate.

Harvest slipped into the shadows, merging with the darkness to search the area.

"Fine, I'll take the deal."

Canis said aloud, feigning resignation. The manager's face lit up with glee.

"Good decision! So, whose lifespan should I extend? Yours?"

"No, it's for Kadum again."

"Kadum, huh? That guy must be pretty lucky."

“Except this time, don’t extend it. Revert it to its original state. You can do that here, right?”

The manager blinked in surprise.

Many people have asked to extend their lifespan, but this was the first time she had asked to revert it.

Then evil smile broke into her lips.

“Interesting. You must have your reasons.”

Canis matched her smirk.

Kadum, the tribal chief of Kergo, had hoarded resources for himself, letting his people starve so he could buy more years for his life. Canis had always despised him.

Letting Kadum live for another 300 years using stolen resources had been galling enough.

It would be fortunate if they didn’t kill him right here and now and just restored his original lifespan.

“Fine, fine. I like it. This is my kind of fun.”

The manager enthusiastically began tapping commands into the central control device.

Canis pretended to watch with interest, carefully observing the machine’s operation in hopes that the information might prove useful later.

“All done. His lifespan has been reset. Of course, the exact timing varies. Different people process time differently. Still, with 300 years cut off, he’s likely nearing his biological limit.”

“That’s fine. He’s lived long enough.”

“Hahaha! He sure has, for a human. Now then...”

Canis tensed as the manager’s eyes gleamed with manic fervor. Though he had anticipated her unstable nature, witnessing her erratic shifts firsthand was unnerving. He could only hope Harvest would finish soon.

“Deal complete! Time to take that word!”

“Ugh!”

Canis felt a sharp pain in his head, forcing him to grimace.

Whatever ability she was using, it was Rulebreaker.

The problem wasn’t the cost—it was the deal itself.

As a mutual agreement, the terms were unbreakable. Even if they weren't explicitly harmful, they adhered to the principle of equivalent exchange.

"Damn it! I thought I was supposed to choose the word!"

"Of course, you are! I'm just having a little fun. Let's see..."

Oh, this one's nice! And this one! I love them all! How can I choose?!"

Her euphoric reaction made Canis realize just how deep her obsession ran. She wasn't merely eccentric; she was utterly deranged.

Harvest, how much longer?

Almost there! I've located the second entry.

Two down, but the list was long. Buying more time was his only option.

Canis tried to cast a spell but found his thoughts disrupted. Every time he conceptualized magic, she erased it.

'Damn it. That's her ability.'

The manager's Rulebreaker, "Mental Editing", allowed her to edit the thoughts of her contracted targets.

The ability the manager casts on Canis was called "Advisory", which edited his thoughts and made suggestions.

Even when he regained his original thoughts, the momentary disorientation made focus nearly impossible—a fatal weakness in battle.

"How are you feeling? Lost, aren't you? Let's edit... eyes, anger, companion, focus... What else should I edit?"

"Damn you!"

Canis growled, clinging to coherence. Each word she stole fractured the linguistic structure of his mind, leaving entire sections blank.

"Now you understand, don't you? Words are more important than you think. Let me tell you a story. Two hundred years ago, one of your kind sold me the word mosquito. Said he hated them. Do you know what happened next?"

Harvest!

Almost there! Just one more entry!

Canis gritted his teeth.

Even her incessant editing was overwhelming. His head throbbed as though his consciousness was being shredded. Satisfied with his torment, the manager grabbed him by the neck and hoisted him into the air.

Though she seemed fragile, her strength far surpassed that of Taboo.

“That man dreamt of swarms of mosquitoes for days. But he couldn’t remember what they were. He went mad, you see—unable to name the source of his torment. Any human would break under that kind of pressure. Isn’t it glorious?”

At that moment, Canis realized the history could be distorted.

Those who had come before hadn’t just made a bad deal—they had lost comrades. The price of a single word was often a life.

“You’re a goddamn scammer...”

“Oh, please. You’re no innocent either. I can see you’ve got your own schemes.”

The manager turned his head while holding Canis’s neck. All the panels where Harvest had swept through had fallen out. He probably searched through the panels to find words he didn’t know and tried to sell them.

“Haha, you are smart, aren’t you? Too bad it doesn’t work that way. You can only sell words that already hold meaning for you. Didn’t I explain that? Poor learning skills, huh?”

Canis’s face was pale from the lack of oxygen.

“Give it up. It’ll be over faster if you just hand over the word. Otherwise, you’ll die here.”

Ha... Harvest...

Found it! Canis!

Harvest touched the final panel.

Since he felt the world through vibrations, the sentences written on the panel flowed into Canis’s mind.

Suddenly, Canis’s eyes regained focus.

“Fine. I’ll give you a word.”

“Good boy. Now, let’s hear it.”

Advisory is a powerful ability, to be sure, but the true horror lies in Coercion.

Triggered by contract, it permanently takes away the other’s sold words, and the repercussions are life-and-death.

The manager waited for Canis’s answer with eyes filled with madness.

He knew it was insane, but he had to come up with a word.

It was the most exhilarating moment of his life.

“Eu...”

Her face scrunched slightly. Words starting with *Eu* weren’t typically her favorites.

“Eu... re... ka...”

Canis fell to the ground, gasping for breath. When he looked up, the manager—no, *Eureka*—stood frozen, trembling violently.

“H-How do you... know my name?”

The information Harvest uncovered hadn’t been about dark magic.

The Mara Chronicles

Among them, it was a record related to Eureka, the manager of Inglis.

Eureka hadn’t always been mad.

Once, she’d been a brilliant Mara who edited thoughts and minds of intellectuals to help them come up with ideas.

But millennia of isolation in Inglis had driven her to insanity.

“No... It can’t end like this!”

Canis knew Eureka and then forgot about it.

In the end, the current situation meant that Eureka, who could not exist, existed, so according to the law of causality, she had no choice but to disappear.

“I was so close! I could’ve been a god! Tell me! Tell me who I am!”

“I’m sorry, but...”

Canis smiled faintly.

"I don't know who you are."

Shock filled Eureka's eyes. Her pupils flipped over and a screaming roar raced along the walls of Inglis.

When Eureka disappeared, the Rulebreaker was lifted and Canis was able to regain his senses.

"Damn it. That was way too close."

Canis sat down. If Harvest had found the information even a little later, he would have gone to another world.

Oh, wasn't this another world?

"Canis, are you okay?"

"Yeah... I just need a little rest to restore my mental power."

With its master gone, Inglis felt hollow and lifeless.

Canis gazed at the empty space where Eureka had stood.

Loneliness was a word that resonated painfully with him.

Harvest spoke as if to express his feelings.

"She must've been so lonely. Stuck here for millennia, rotting away."

"Maras get reset, right? Maybe... in her next life, things will be better for her."

After a brief moment of reflection, Harvest spoke up.

"By the way, Canis, there's something you should know.

When I encountered the word 'Eureka', parts of Arcane's memories came back. It seems like that word was a key for something."

Realization dawned on Canis, and he bolted upright.

Chapter 211: 4. The Truth of Heaven (5)

“It’s a double-lock mechanism!”

“Exactly. What a meticulous guy. From now on, I’ll show you Arcane’s memories, so see for yourself.”

The memories of Harvest flowed in. It seemed Arcane had arrived in Heaven with his comrades.

At some point, however, he ended up entering Inglis on his own.

As expected, Eureka presented a deal.

Arcane accepted the proposal, betting on the right to freely access Inglis. At the time, Eureka, who was already insane, attacked Arcane the moment the contract was finalized.

‘Master...’

Unlike Canis, who couldn’t even lift a hand during the battle, Arcane stood his ground and engaged in a fierce fight against Eureka.

‘Unbelievable. How is he casting magic when his words have been edited?’

Canis delved deeper into his memory.

The solution was ingenious, fitting for Arcane. Using Abyss magic, he erased all his memories.

Without thoughts, there are no concepts to sell.

And it didn’t end there. Arcane began restoring linguistic morphemes one by one.

He contrasted all the languages that could be formed from the morphemes with the editor’s reactions, aiming to pinpoint Mara’s name.

At some point, during the endless cycle of assembling and disassembling an infinite number of words, Eureka suddenly screamed.

Pale with fear, she flew off to a place where Arcane wasn't. The spot where Arcane's linguistic combination roulette stopped was Eureka herself.

"...This is even possible? He combined tens of thousands of languages in such a short moment."

"When it comes to matters of the mind, there are no limits. Still, you couldn't write a novel like this. It's mathematical. He laid down morphemes, created algorithms, and spun the roulette. Back then, his brain must have been sharp as ever. Anyway, seeing how he even created me, he's undeniably a genius. If only he hadn't insisted on dark magic, he wouldn't have remained as just a 3rd-class mage."

Canis felt proud of being Arcane's disciple.

Moreover, defeating Eureka was also thanks to the notes his master had left behind.

Eureka had likely remained in hiding until Arcane left. During that time, Arcane must have tracked down information about Eureka and recorded her serial number.

The final memory of Arcane entered Canis's mind. Learning the true reason behind the double-lock mechanism sent shivers through him.

Arcane had conveyed the location to his disciple, not through records, but through memory.

Canis walked to the spot where Arcane had last stood.

Imitating his master's movements, he reached out his hand toward the panel.

'Master, thank you.'

Of course, Arcane wouldn't have known at the time that Canis would become his disciple. But the message he left for his successor who would arrive here was clear.

Mages are eternally young.

Canis pulled out the panel Arcane had designated and transformed the language. He confirmed the sentence displayed on the glass plate.

The Grimoire of Light and Darkness.

Canis turned the pages and quickly skimmed through them. One phrase caught his attention, and he stared at it intently. Harvest placed a hand on his shoulder and said.

"You've accomplished the purpose of coming to Heaven."

"No. Not until I return safely. I have to rescue Arin."

"You're right. Do you think the others are okay? Quite some time has passed."

Canis handed the panel to Harvest and headed to the central control device.

"It's the right time for Rian to arrive. Copy the records for me. I'll try to deactivate the Meccan system."

Harvest placed his palm on the glass plate and imprinted the letters in their entirety. He turned the pages, memorizing every pattern of vibrations as he went.

Arriving at the central control device, Canis couldn't touch anything. Cold sweat ran down his forehead.

Although he had observed Eureka touching the screen and grasped the principles, it was impossible for him to handle equipment he was seeing for the first time like an expert.

"Damn it, why is this so complicated?"

Canis started pressing random buttons. What's the worst that could happen? A malfunction at most?

At some point, a complete map of Zebul appeared.

When he touched the Grand Hall of World, the screen zoomed in, displaying numerous items in a row.

Entering the security system, he saw the settings for deactivating the Meccan system.

Without hesitation, Canis chose to disable it.

Several dotted areas on the map suddenly became clearly outlined.

"Canis, I've saved all the records. Since I memorized them as patterns, I'll have to convert them into language later."

"Good. I found something too. The map shows that portals to Inglis are installed in all zones of Zebul. In other words, this place is the heart of Zebul. So, if we reverse-travel

through the portal, we can exit to the portal closest to the Grand Hall of World.”

Canis and Harvest sprinted toward the edge of Inglis.

While things had turned out favorably, the situation hadn’t necessarily improved.

Arin was still there.

They could only hope that Rian wouldn’t be too late.

Ikhael’s memories surged into Shirone’s subconscious in massive chunks. Although the sequence of time was scrambled, the speed of thought outpaced comprehension, leaving no room to feel any contradiction.

Shirone was shocked to see the form of Ra conveyed by Ikhael. It was the epitome of grotesqueness, yet his intellectual depth transcended that of mortal humanity.

“Even if parts change, the whole remains perfect.”

Ra was the first intelligence to recognize the existence of the universe.

“The universe is something God abandoned. Doesn’t nobody even know it exists? But I gave it meaning.

Therefore, this universe is mine.”

The first existence to which Ra gave meaning was an angel.

The primary being of causality divided into a secondary being, which then branched into giants and fairies. Each acted according to the laws bestowed upon them, spreading Ra’s will.

Ikhael led Shirone into a certain world. While countless creatures lived there, none had the ability to bestow meaning.

A giant, 2 kilometers tall, arrived through a dimensional gate. When the giant stood upright, his face pierced through the clouds, and mountain ranges bowed beneath his waist.

Ikhael also explained about the giant.

The Rite of Liquor consisted of ten stages, and only giants who had surpassed the sixth stage could leave for a new world.

The giant let out a roar. His body began to disintegrate, and blood and flesh rained down like a storm.

A long time passed again... At the spot where the giant had fallen, humans began to appear one by one.

Humans formed societies, advancing their civilizations.

When the time came, an angel appeared and bestowed a child upon a girl. One day, that child would become a Nephilim, guiding humanity to Heaven.

As time passed, human society began to change.

Humans who had the ability to assign meaning grew rapidly, and soon, intoxicated by their own power, they began to distance themselves from God.

Heaven's army descended and punished them.

The battle was one-sided. Heaven's might was overwhelming, and the angels and Mara destroyed countless civilizations.

Even so, humanity persisted stubbornly, repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Then, one day, on the southern island of Galliant, a group that denied God appeared.

Archangel Ikhael personally intervened. Using her ability to activate the forces of creation, she amplified the volcanic activity of Galliant by more than 20,000 times, triggering a catastrophic eruption.

Time sped forward, and a world similar to the era Shirone lived in unfolded.

Humanity still flourished.

Deeming that their impiety had reached its peak, Anke Ra finally decided to annihilate humanity.

The final war. The end of the world.

Shirone watched Heaven's preparations unfold.

A portal, tens of meters high, opened, and in front of it, Heaven's army, composed of giants, fairies, and citizens, readied for departure.

The sky resounded with the vibrations of angels, and the ground echoed with the roars of armored Mara.

‘No! This can’t happen!’

Forgetting that the scene before him was a past memory, Shirone shouted in desperation. There was no way to win. If Heaven’s army invaded, the world would end then and there.

As the order to march was given, an enormous army, led by angels, surged into the portal.

Shirone’s consciousness followed them into the portal.

Passing through a tunnel of dazzling colors, an exit came into view.

Nausea welled up from the tension. This was a memory of the past.

But if that was the case, how had humanity stopped Heaven’s army?

‘Such a war isn’t even recorded in history.’

As the destination came into sight, the Mara let out ferocious cries, burning with battle spirit. Shirone flew ahead of them and reached the portal’s end, only to freeze in place.

What lay before him was not the original world.

A pale, empty space. And standing there was a single woman.

It was Adrias Miro.

“Goffin, I will never forgive you.”

Miro was crying. Facing the massive army alone, she clenched her fist and cast a spell.

Then, something astonishing happened. The Mara at the front came to a halt as if blocked by an invisible barrier.

The angels looked at Miro with troubled expressions, while the Mara pounded on the barrier, shrieking in rage.

“You unholy thing! You will pay the price for betraying Ra!”

“Mark my words, Miro! The apocalypse is merely delayed!

When the time comes, I will kill you first!”

Shirone came to understand the entire truth.

A new dimension had been created between Heaven and the human world, severing their connection.

That dimension was... Miro's Space-Time.

From the host of angels, a towering man flew to the portal's edge.

It was the Archangel Uriel.

"How long do you think you can hold out with this? There is no way to avoid the final war. We will return. Use what little time you have left wisely."

Miro bit her lips until they bled. As the new space-time expanded, the distance between them grew.

Uriel glared fiercely at Miro before turning away. Then, one by one, the angels began returning to Heaven.

However, the Mara remained until the end, hurling curses. Their tormented cries echoed until Miro disappeared from view.

Shirone was carried away along with Heaven's army. Yet he couldn't take his eyes off Miro.

He realized why the archmage Arcane had erased his memories to prevent this truth from spreading.

One day, humanity had come to the brink of annihilation. And even now, Miro was still residing in her own space, delaying the end of the world.

5. The Angel's Magic Circle (1)

Shirone opened his eyes.

The first thing he felt was a sense of refreshment, as though he had awakened from a long slumber.

How long had he been asleep?

As that thought crossed his mind, Shirone quickly sat up and shouted.

"No! My friends...!"

Ikhael reassured him.

"Don't worry. You haven't been asleep for more than five minutes."

"But why does my body feel so...?"

"My light penetrated you, clearing your mind. I can activate everything, after all."

As she said, Shirone's depleted mental energy, drained from consecutive battles with Igrin and Taboo, had been completely restored.

"Oh, thank you. I didn't even realize..."

"It's fine. By the way, how does it feel to have learned the secrets of Heaven?"

Shirone reflected on the memories Ikhael had shared. They felt faint, like a dream, but he knew for certain they were no dream.

He had come to know extraordinary truths. The most shocking revelation was what Miro had done.

"The ability to connect dimensions is unique to angels. However, we've long been passing down the angels' powers to humans."

"That's what the Nephilim are."

"Exactly. Nephilim serve as guides, leading humans to God. But some Nephilim have acted in opposition. Civilizations like those often stray from God's will and construct independent societies—just like the world Shirone lived in."

Shirone now understood why the foundation of ancient magic was different. At some point, humans had deviated from God's will, and the magic they independently developed became what was known as the Spirit Zone.

Chapter 212: 5. Angelic Magic Circle (2)

“Goffin. Is he the same Goffin who created the Goffin’s Gate? Why did Miro call out his name at the very last moment?”

Ikhael blinked in surprise.

It was unexpected that Shirone had heard that voice. Still, she continued in a calm tone.

“Goffin was the first gatekeeper who protected your world from Heaven’s army. Miro is, in a way... his successor.”

“What? You mean Miro wasn’t the first?”

“Their circumstances were different, but yes, that’s correct. Maclaine Goffin—he was one of the most extraordinary humans in your world. No, he surpassed even the Nephilim. That’s likely why he separated humans from God.”

“Then where is he now?”

Ikhael shook her head.

“He’s left for a place I cannot observe, leaving Miro as his successor.”

“But if that’s the case...”

“Yes. She has to serve as the barrier in a place where time doesn’t flow, for eternity. Otherwise, Shirone, your world will face destruction.”

Shirone’s lips trembled. The image of Miro’s face at the end flashed vividly in his mind.

How must she have felt, isolated from the world, condemned to endless solitude?

At that moment, a terrifying thought crossed his mind. Conversations he had once shared with the Headmaster began to resurface, one by one.

At the time, Alpheas's face had seemed sorrowful—no, at times, even frighteningly angry.

What if Miro hadn't chosen that path of her own will?

What if she had been forced into isolation by someone else?

Shirone shuddered as he reached this conclusion.

This wasn't something you could merely call a crime. It was a decision to imprison a single person in an eternal hell.

"How long must Miro... endure this?"

"Heaven's army is already preparing for the final war. It might not take much longer. The Metagate that your party brought contains recorded coordinates."

Shirone's mind went blank.

Miro had used Scale magic to seal Heaven's gate. But the Metagate was practically opening a new gate to Heaven.

"No way... that can't be..."

"It's possible. With the Metagate, Heaven's technology can bypass Miro's Space-Time and enter directly."

Shirone felt his heart sink.

This wasn't a matter of his own life or death. This was the annihilation of all humanity.

He couldn't believe it was true. What on earth had they done?

"That's why I'm trying to help. Shirone, your friends have been captured in the Great Hall of World. Cariel plans to imprint the Nephilim's information into the bodies of young girls."

"Why? You said they were preparing for the final war! What does the Nephilim have to do with this now?"

"Because the situation has changed. Miro is not a Nephilim. Yet she managed to open the Immortal Function on her own. Such cases are extremely rare, but they're happening more frequently in your world."

That explained Shirone's confusion when he had first heard about the Nephilim at Nor's Shelter. For descendants of angels, there were far too many Unlockers.

"It's a sign that Shirone's world has drifted far from Ra's will. Goffin bought humanity time so they could understand the essence of the world. Now that will has passed to Miro. Of course, compared to Goffin, the time Miro has held out is modest. But in terms of the speed of humanity's growth, it's not something to overlook."

Shirone nodded in agreement.

The pace of magical development was undeniably accelerating. It had reached the point where achievements from the last 100 years paled in comparison to those of the last 10 years.

"So this time, humanity won't go down so easily, will they?"

"Correct. Although small in number, there are rulers in your world who are aware of Heaven's existence. They're likely preparing in some form or another. Right now, every additional Nephilim is critical."

Shirone trembled with anger. Using human bodies to implant angelic information for the sake of humanity's destruction. He couldn't stand the thought of Amy being used for giving birth to someone.

"Why have you been standing by? As an archangel, couldn't you have stopped it?"

Ikhael looked at Shirone with sorrowful eyes.

"Ah..."

That was the answer. Why did Miro hate Ikhael? Because she was an angel leading Heaven's army. Ikhael, too, had once been an archangel who punished humanity.

"Yes, I'm an angel. If the final war happens... I would have no choice but to fight against humanity."

Shirone felt all strength leave his body.

Was this how it would end? Would he have to watch his friends suffer without receiving help from anyone in Heaven?

"Had this been before I met Goffin, that might have been true."

Ikhael flashed a mischievous smile and stuck out her tongue.

“Don’t worry, Shirone. I want to help you. Unlike angels, humans hold infinite potential. I firmly believe that the final war must not happen.”

Shirone, who had been blankly staring, suddenly realized the weight of her words.

If an archangel who had risen to the highest rank was willing to stand on humanity’s side, there was hope, even if the final war broke out.

She mentioned it was before she met Goffin. Shirone didn’t dare ask what sin Ikhael had committed, but he could sense it was tied to that man.

“But don’t let your guard down. My powers are sealed, and I can’t even leave this room. Even if I want to help you, my aid will have its limits.”

“But... I can’t defeat angels with my power alone.”

“You’re right. Angels are strong. Especially Cariel—he’s a mighty archangel, someone I couldn’t have easily faced even before I lost my powers.”

“Then what do we do now?”

Ikhael wouldn’t have said all this just to demoralize him.

Shirone clung to the faint hope that she had a solution.

“There is one way. It might slightly increase the chances of saving your friends.”

“Really? What is it?”

“The magic circle of angels. Shirone, you’ll have to master it.”

“You mean... the halo?”

“That’s correct. Angels store information in their halos and activate their abilities through them. If you can learn how to use it, you may have one decisive chance in a critical moment.”

Shirone recalled what had happened in Shamain. The overwhelming pressure he felt when Ikhasa had unfolded his halo still lingered in his body.

And now he was being told to wield that himself?
It didn't feel possible. Humans lacked an Overspirit.
Without a Holy Light Vessel to store information, how could one create a magic circle at all?

"Of course, it won't be easy. To use the angelic magic circle, Shirone, you'll need to overcome at least three major obstacles."

Ikhael raised three fingers and explained.

"First, you'll need to create a Holy Light Vessel. The human mind resides within the body, but I know there's a special way to draw it outside. Can you do it?"

Shirone nodded. The concept Ikhael described aligned with the deviant form of the Four-Way Formation.

Indeed, if he used the deviant form, it seemed possible to mimic an angel's Overspirit to some extent.

"The real challenge begins now. Even if you manage to create a Holy Light Vessel, unfolding a halo is on an entirely different level. You'll need to draw a perfect circle. If the circle is even slightly distorted, the speed of light calculation will drop significantly. Even a 0.1% slowdown makes it impossible to manifest an angel's abilities."

Humans cannot draw a perfect circle. But in the mental realm, impossibilities could become realities. The key lay in grasping the mathematical concept of a circle.

It wasn't easy, but it was a hurdle that had to be overcome.

"That's the first challenge. The second is even more serious. An angel's abilities stem from the vast amount of information stored in their halo. To put it in mathematical terms, even a human recording for a lifetime couldn't match the sheer volume of data. Processing that data at the speed of light is the core of a halo's functionality."

Shirone recalled the scene where Ikhael had caused the eruption of the Galliant volcano. Raising a dormant volcano's activity by 20,000 times and triggering an eruption was beyond human capability.

“Even if I can somehow manage a perfect circle, what about the circles? The human brain can’t compute such immense data instantaneously, enough to cause a volcano to erupt.”

“But there is insight. This is where we’ll attempt something unique: mental fusion. I’ll fuse with you and activate the halo myself. That experience will then be imprinted onto your mind and remain as part of your memory.”

“Th-There is such a method...?”

Ikhael’s gaze sharpened.

“Don’t call it a ‘method’. It’s nothing short of the ultimate violence that can be inflicted on a human mind. If something goes wrong, Shirone, your mind could shatter. And if we merge, my mind might not escape unscathed either.”

Shirone’s stomach churned. He didn’t care if his mind was destroyed if it meant saving his friends. He had risked his life from the start. But knowing Ikhael would also be at risk made it a decision he couldn’t take lightly.

“Even if I fail...”

“Shirone, don’t think about anything else. I said I’d help you. Don’t worry about me. Right now, just focus on saving your friends.”

Shirone took a deep breath to steady his emotions. She was right—there was no other choice.

“What’s the third challenge?”

“Even if the circle is completed, enduring its effects is another issue. Without sufficient mental durability, Shirone, you’ll be destroyed. This is separate from my own risks. If you can’t endure it, it’s better not to attempt this at all.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll endure it no matter what.”

He was confident in at least that. From the moment he entered the magic academy, his mental strength had been his greatest asset.

Moreover, he had reached the level of Diamond Mind, so he believed he could withstand it to some degree.

“You don’t fully understand. I know Shirone’s mental strength is exceptionally durable and indestructible. But that may not be enough.”

“You’re saying my indestructible mind could still break? That sounds contradictory.”

“No, the two concepts exist on different levels. Your current mental strength is sufficient to serve as a vessel for your mind. But the concept of an angel’s power, born from a higher dimension, is fundamentally different. A vessel might hold water, but if that water freezes, any vessel would shatter.”

“I see...”

Each challenge was like climbing an insurmountable mountain. None of the three obstacles she mentioned would be easy to overcome.

No, perhaps this was normal.

Then again, this was to master the magic circle of an archangel—taking on this level of risk was only natural.

“The halo will push Shirone’s mind to explode from within. The choice is yours. If you still want to try, knowing these risks, I’ll help you.”

To an angel, the destruction of one’s mind was equivalent to the annihilation of their existence.

If Ikhael was willing to risk everything to help him, Shirone had no reason to refuse.

It wasn’t just for his friends. Opportunities to learn the secrets of an archangel would never come again.

“I’ll do it. No, please—help me. No matter the outcome, I’ll accept it.”

“Very well. The magic I’ll perform on you is called possession. It involves merging our minds and dominating the human consciousness. Normally, dispatched angels use it to convey Ra’s will.”

Shirone had read about possession in various texts. At the time, he’d been skeptical, but hearing it directly from an archangel left no room for doubt.

“If the possession succeeds, our minds will fuse. If I harbor any malicious intent, it would be easy for me to harm you. Conversely, if Shirone loses his purity, that evil will seep into me.”

It was a warning that, unless both sides were cautious, irreparable damage could result.

Shirone nodded without hesitation this time. He knew Ikhael would never harbor malicious intent.

And even if he somehow lost his purity, she was not a weak angel incapable of controlling such things.

Chapter 213: 5. Angelic Magic Circle (3)

"I'll trust you. I won't let myself feel any doubt."

Ikhael smiled. It was fortunate that Shirone was such a quick learner.

"That's the spirit. Let's begin now."

Ikhael closed her eyes and initiated the possession.

Her Holy Light Vessel pierced into Shirone's mind, and his eyes shot wide open.

A flash of light burst from his pupils, and a strange sensation of two minds merging overtook him.

Shirone, how do you feel?

Uh... what? This is...

It was Shirone's first experience with possession, and he was bewildered.

He couldn't distinguish whether the thoughts surfacing in his mind belonged to him or to Ikhael.

It felt like he was acting out the roles of two people in some kind of delusional play.

Don't be confused. I am Shirone, and Shirone is me. Just let your thoughts flow naturally.

Shirone understood what she meant, but even so, the thoughts that arose felt like figments of his imagination, sending shivers through him.

Did he really have to think of *that*? Surely, he could have thought of something else.

Don't doubt! If you start doubting, every part of what makes Shirone will collapse. Possession is a delicate art. Just accept it.

Deciding to trust her, Shirone concluded that even if his thoughts felt like mere fantasies, he would treat them as

truth.

As his mind settled, his heartbeat steadied.

Although there had been a brief commotion, the angelic magic circle had not yet truly begun.

Ikhael decided to tackle the first obstacle.

We'll now create the Holy Light Vessel. Project your mind outward.

Shirone shifted his Spirit Zone into the deviant form.

Although an angel's halo usually appeared above their head, Shirone extended his Spirit Zone forward instead.

It was the direction most familiar to humans.

Does this work?

Yes. No—excellent! Whatever you do, Shirone, your choices are crucial. You must find the most efficient methods yourself. Now, we'll create the halo that forms the framework of the magic circle. You'll draw a perfect circle of light.

Shirone waited without thinking of anything, but no instructions came.

Uh... should I do it now?

Yes, do it now.

Shirone had expected some guidance and was caught off guard. Nevertheless, he reasoned there must be a purpose for the lack of direction and began expanding the light into a circular form.

A halo with a one-meter diameter emerged in front of Shirone.

At a glance, it looked quite impressive.

It was a clean, bright circle, and to Shirone, it seemed comparable to an angel's halo.

Nowhere near good enough. A distorted circle like this can't process the immense information required.

As expected, Ikhael criticized it. On a microscopic level, invisible to the human eye, it was a chaotic mess.

Shirone had no idea how to proceed. A perfect circle was just a concept—it didn't exist in reality. How could he create

something that didn't exist?

A perfect circle?

A realization dawned on Shirone. There was one thing in this world that truly embodied a perfect circle.

Exactly, Shirone. The Immortal Function. That's why Nephilim are called descendants of angels.

By activating the Immortal Function and fully extending his mind, he could achieve a perfect circle.

The whole was always perfect.

But if I do that...

His sense of self would vanish. He had already experienced this in Miro's Space-Time.

You must activate the Immortal Function at full capacity.

Then, pull yourself back and manifest it as a form. I'll control it, but it's undeniably dangerous. Can you do it?

Returning from the infinite was the first trial Shirone had to overcome to master an archangel's abilities.

I'll try. I've done it once before, so the second time should be easier.

In truth, he didn't think it would be any easier. But he needed to say something, even if it was hollow, or the tension might drive him mad.

Shirone opened the Immortal Function.

There were no brakes, no hesitation in its release. His mind disintegrated, spreading infinitely outward.

Shirone's consciousness became the Akashic Records itself. But as it was already perfect in itself, it yielded no new information.

Shirone! Shirone! Listen to my voice! You must not let go of yourself! Burn this sensation into your memory and use Indestructible Mind to pull yourself back!

Shirone used the framework of Indestructible Mind to gather his fragmented consciousness.

A massive ring of light swept everything up and surged back into Shirone's mind.

A piercing, icy sound, as if glass were being sliced, rang out. At the same time, a flawless halo with not a single flaw appeared before Shirone's eyes.

The speed of light spinning along the halo's rail was, quite literally, the speed of light. Even though the Spirit Zone had taken on the deviant form, it was still fundamentally a mage's mind. With such a force spinning within it, Shirone's thoughts were on the verge of paralysis.

In short, Shirone had managed to manifest the concept of the Immortal Function into the real world.

Ikhael's voice grew sharp.

Shirone! I'm about to imprint the unique omniscience of the archangel onto your halo! Do not let go of that Indestructible Mind. You must endure to survive!

A red flash shot out from in front of him, colliding with the center of the halo.

Ripples of red spread, and the simplest operation magic circle for distinguishing between 1 and 0 emerged.

From there, the circle began to grow increasingly complex. Flashes of different colors, coming from unknown sources, rained down on the halo, engraving the magic circles onto it.

Countless circles interlocked like gears, spinning together. Magic circles of varying sizes, speeds, and directions rotated, resembling the intricate workings of a clock.

Shirone's mind was on the verge of exploding.

A single gear turned several others, which in turn activated hundreds more.

The scale of the calculations grew larger and larger.

At some point, Shirone gave up trying to calculate.

He couldn't comprehend the meaning contained in the halo. What could he possibly understand about 170,000 calculation circuits and 4,800 magic circles trying to reveal a single concept?

"Ughhhh!"

Blood dripped from Shirone's nose. He gritted his teeth and tried to endure as an endless stream of circles, numbering over a hundred million lines, spiraled upward. Processing this level of calculation was beyond human limits.

Shirone! Don't try to understand it! I'm understanding it for you! Accept it through your insight!

Shirone grasped Ikhael's intent.

He didn't need to calculate anything. The complex concepts were being simplified into truths and imprinted directly into his brain.

As the number of magic circles engraved into the halo surpassed 40,000, Shirone experienced what could only be described as the realm of the gods.

It was nothing less than the speed of light calculation.

Yet even so, the fact that it was taking so long meant the concepts within the halo far exceeded the capacity of the human mind.

Though he didn't yet know what those concepts were, their immense scale was undeniable.

I can't... I can't hold on any longer...

Cracks began forming in Shirone's Indestructibility.

It was only natural—he was forcing himself to accept the knowledge contained within a higher-dimensional existence.

This was the third trial Ikhael had warned him about.

You're almost there, Shirone! Just a little more...!

Shirone's strain started affecting Ikhael as well.

As the calculation rate exceeded 90%, the magic circle began to approach automatic completion.

Shirone's mind was oversaturated, as if a bomb had been planted in his head and was now exploding.

He could feel countless fractures spreading through his Indestructibility. His mind was breaking—it was madness incarnate.

In reality, Shirone's mind was on the verge of catastrophic collapse.

Ikhael looked at him with a mixture of pity and helplessness. Even if the magic circle were completed, it seemed Shirone wouldn't last. Once the volume of information hit 100%, his Diamond Mind would shatter completely.

But at that moment, something extraordinary occurred within Shirone's mind.

Diamond Mind went beyond merely cracking—it was shattering into countless fragments. If this was the current state of Shirone's mind...

The thought sent a shiver down even Ikhael's spine.

Yet, the result defied her expectations.

Even as the durability of Diamond Mind converged to zero, Shirone's mental structure remained intact.

If Diamond Mind was like a steel ball containing water, Shirone's current state was akin to the water freezing within it.

As ice expanded, the steel ball would inevitably shatter.

But what if the container was made of rubber? The ice's expansion would simply stretch the rubber, not break it.

Shirone had pulverized the durability of Diamond Mind into the smallest particles, transforming it into something more flexible.

Softness overcomes hardness.

Though the steel ball of Shirone's mind had shattered, the shape of the ice within remained perfectly intact.

Ikhael's heart swelled with admiration. Was this the true potential of humanity? Even with his mind ground to dust and enduring unbearable pain, Shirone had held onto his consciousness until the very end.

That determination had evolved Shirone's mental state to a new level: Diamond Form, the advanced state of Diamond Mind.

The framework was gone—only the essence remained.

With nothing left to destroy, Shirone had become unshakable in any situation.

If Diamond Mind was the pinnacle of durability, Diamond Form represented the ultimate flexibility sought by humanity.

The density of the information engraved on the halo surpassed 95%. It was an overwhelming volume of data. But Diamond Form expanded to match the growing data, then compressed again, sealing the angelic information within.

Congratulations, Shirone.

Ikhael offered genuine praise. Was it possible for a human to oscillate so dramatically between extremes?

Shirone had now acquired both strength and flexibility—a leap forward without question.

Submerged beneath the overwhelming angelic information, Shirone couldn't think of anything. He only knew he was enduring, and that it was somehow easier than before.

When the angelic magic circle was finally complete, his consciousness returned.

He saw the halo before him, with dozens of magic circles spinning at different speeds. Inside, likely hundreds more were operating in unison.

It was truly a beautiful magic circle.

The halo Ikhael had activated had now fully transferred into Shirone's experience. While he couldn't yet comprehend the principles, he could imprint the completed concept like a stamp.

I did it, Ikhael...

With those words, Shirone closed his eyes. As his consciousness faded, the world plunged into darkness.

The intense light made Shirone frown. When he opened his eyes, he saw Ikhael gazing down at him with a concerned expression.

"Are you all right, Shirone? How do you feel?"

Shirone sat up, feeling slightly embarrassed.

This was already the second time he'd fainted since meeting Ikhael. Dealing with a higher-dimensional being was proving to be an exhausting ordeal.

Clutching his throbbing head, Shirone asked.

"How long was I unconscious this time?"

"A bit longer—about twenty minutes."

"Huh? Why...?"

If Ikhael had wanted to, she could have woken him much sooner.

When Shirone looked at her in disbelief, Ikhael gave him an apologetic smile.

"You were in shock, Shirone. Forcing you awake wouldn't have left you in peak condition to fight—especially since using the angelic magic circle will demand every ounce of your mental strength."

Ikhael was right. But the fact that time had been delayed still worried him.

"Don't worry about it. This experience has strengthened your mental resilience, Shirone. And now that you've recovered, you should be able to reach your destination faster than before."

Shirone examined the changes in himself. Compared to when he had first reached the level of Diamond Mind, something even stronger was unfolding within him.

His consciousness was pulling him deeper into himself than ever before, restoring his confidence.

'If I move at full speed, I can make up for the lost time. I wonder how Rian and Canis are doing.'

By his estimate, they should have already arrived or were close to doing so. That meant there was still a chance to turn things around.

Chapter 214: 5. Angelic Magic Circle (4)

Shirone, recalling how he had only considered his own position, turned to look at Ikhael.

“Ah, um...”

Ikhael shook her head.

“No, there’s no need to thank me. What happened here is ultimately a result of my own failure. If anything, I feel sorry that this is the only way I can help you. From now on, it’s all up to you, Shirone.”

“Thank you. Truly, I mean it.”

Shirone insisted on expressing his gratitude. Without Ikhael, he would still be sitting helplessly, crying against the walls of Zebul’s fortress.

Ikhael’s gaze softened. Even his stubborn determination was endearing.

“Remember this, Shirone. You already know, but you won’t have many opportunities to use my power. Even though your mind has evolved to a higher state, Cariel is a meticulous angel. Only use the magic circle when you’re absolutely certain it can save your friends.”

Shirone nodded and began preparing to leave. Parting from Ikhael felt bittersweet, but there was no time to linger.

“Be careful. I hope you’ll return safely to your world.”

“Yes. Thank you for everything.”

As Shirone left the room and the door closed, Ikhael sank into her seat with an exhausted expression.

The room, still as perfect as ever, now felt strangely empty. Shirone had been here. As Ikhael reminisced about the brief whirlwind of activity, a chuckle escaped her lips.

‘Thank goodness it was Shirone.’

Her Holy Light Vessel unfolded into a halo and began spinning rapidly. Soon, a crimson vortex whirled into existence in one corner of the room.

“Answer my call, Ashur.”

In front of Ikhael, square glass panes appeared.

The panes, connected by dozens of intersecting lines, glimmered and gradually filled with color until they projected the image of a Mara.

He was a handsome man with jet-black hair cascading to his shoulders, and three floating triangles hovered above his head.

Kneeling before Ikhael, he bowed his head.

“Ashur. I answer the call of yours.”

As the outlines of the glass panes vanished, Ashur’s form became fully three-dimensional.

“I need your strength. Help Shirone.”

“Understood.”

Ashur answered without hesitation, and a tinge of guilt appeared in Ikhael’s eyes.

“I’m sorry for asking this of you.”

“I was born from your concept, Ikhael. My only purpose is to obey your commands.”

Ashur, a high-ranking Mara, was a direct attendant of the archangel—a figure so pivotal that he wasn’t someone who could be summoned lightly.

In particular, Ashur was renowned as the greatest swordsman of Heaven, Ikhael’s personal knight. Though his powers were currently sealed, he was far from someone meant to handle errands.

With a resolute voice, Ashur said.

“Do not worry. Anything precious to Ikhael is also precious to me. I will stake my existence to complete this mission.”

“Thank you. But Cariel is powerful. On top of that, the King of Giants, Ymir, is also on the move in Zebul right now.”

At the mention of Ymir, Ashur’s eyes gleamed intensely.

"I don't know why he's taken an interest in this matter, but we must be cautious. Ymir has reached the ultimate level of physical strength that living beings can aspire to. Nothing good will come from being entangled with him."

A visible trace of displeasure crossed Ashur's face. Though he was the strongest swordsman in Heaven, the title of the greatest warrior was always split between him and Ymir. Many respected Ymir for achieving his position solely through sheer physical ability.

But Ashur did not acknowledge him. One day, he was determined to prove who the strongest truly was.

"Don't worry. Ymir is no match for me."

Realizing she had inadvertently stirred his pride, Ikhael softened her tone to calm him.

"Fufu, of course, I believe Ashur is the strongest. Even if Ymir came at me in perfect condition, I wouldn't be afraid as long as you were there to protect me."

Only then did Ashur, satisfied, rise to his feet.

"Of course. As long as I am here, no one will lay a single finger on you, Ikhael."

"Ah, one more thing."

At the door, Ashur turned back with a tense expression, gazing respectfully at his master.

Ikhael's narrowed eyes carried an overwhelming unrivaled majesty.

"When you meet Cariel, deliver this message to him."

6. Heavenly Chaos (1)

Shirone descended the tower and surveyed the open plains of Araboth.

The path to Zebul had been revealed to him through Igrin's memories. It was a considerable distance—too far for Teleportation.

As he entered the Spirit Zone, a flood of immense information streamed in through his sensory integration.

"Wow..."

He knew his concentration had improved, but experiencing it firsthand was almost unbelievable.

While maintaining the same density as before, the diameter of his Spirit Zone had expanded by 1.5 times. In terms of volume, this was an almost fourfold increase in mental capacity.

In other words, the burden of casting magic had been reduced by four times.

With his Spirit Zone now larger than before, Shirone felt a sense of freedom, as though he had shed a heavy burden. He targeted Zebul, directing his focus toward the space and activating the Spatial Movement.

Previously, the effect of this spell had been limited, but now that his Spirit Zone diameter extended to 25 meters, it could be applied practically.

While 25 meters didn't seem like a significant distance on its own, when transformed into the target form, the additional range extended to 100 meters.

By chaining just ten Spatial Movement, he could effectively cover a distance of over a kilometer.

'Hang on, everyone. Just a little longer.'

Thinking of his friends' predicament, Shirone felt an overwhelming sense of urgency. Yet, with his newfound Diamond Form, his focus remained unshaken.

As omnipotence and omniscience converged, a streak of light noisily painted the sky.

A single flash shot up in the direction of Zebul.

Rian had been running for over thirty minutes. His heart pounded as if it might explode, yet he maintained an even intake of oxygen with each breath. Expending too much oxygen at once would leave him exhausted before reaching his destination.

By now, Canis should have accomplished something.

Rian saw only two possibilities: either the security system of the Grand Hall of World had been deactivated, or Canis was

dead.

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. There was no time to worry about others.

If Canis had failed, Rian would be the next to die.

“Haah! Hah!”

While he didn’t possess an ability like Tess to lighten his body, his years of training had made his physique capable of running for over an hour without tiring.

Finally, his relentless sprint brought him to the last point connected to the Grand Hall of World.

The hallway’s right side was sealed off with glass, beyond which stretched the blue sky.

Zebul was a structure of numerous floating platforms, and this point marked the edge of one such platform. By continuing to run along the perimeter, he would eventually reach the bridge leading to the Grand Hall of World.

As Rian was about to leap forward, something hovering near the ceiling caught his attention.

A single drone approached him frantically.

Although it was just a machine, its hurried movements seemed to convey Tess’s desperate emotions.

“Tess? Are you okay?”

The drone bobbed up and down as though nodding. For now, it seemed no critical situation had occurred.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

A heavy rumbling came from the path Rian had just traveled. Turning around, he saw a hulking figure striding toward him with large steps.

Rian drew both Signa and Exd.

An unknown enemy. The man’s head bore no halo or horns. The first thing that came to mind was a giant.

He was too small to be considered a full-fledged giant, but the earth shook with each step he took, hinting at his immense power.

‘What a monster. Just how heavy is he for his muscles to create that kind of impact?’

The giant's movements were heavy yet precise, with each stride propelling him forward.

Boom!

The giant stopped abruptly in front of Rian by slamming his foot down.

It was a display of strength, a demonstration of his ability to halt his own momentum with sheer physical power.

"What are you?"

Ymir's question was genuine. He truly didn't know.

Rian, holding Signa and Exd, looked like a Meccan, yet his appearance resembled that of a Norian.

"What are you saying?"

The giant couldn't perform mental resonance, so Rian couldn't understand his words.

Likewise, Ymir didn't care about communication. He was more focused on measuring Rian's physical and martial prowess.

"So, you're the heretic who's been causing chaos in Heaven."

When Ymir's aura radiated from his body, Rian instinctively stepped back and raised his sword.

The reaction of this human, who wielded his blade instead of fleeing in fear, stirred something in Ymir. The moment their gazes collided was his favorite part of combat.

'Those are good eyes. You've honed yourself well—for a human.'

Rian stepped his left foot back. Considering the difference in their weight, a direct confrontation of strength was impossible. His best strategy was to strike decisively at any opening.

"State your purpose. Are you an enemy or an ally? If you intend to interfere, I won't let you pass through here."

Though Ymir didn't understand Rian's words, he could read the determination in his intense gaze.

'So you're asking me to choose. But that's my role, isn't it?' Ymir advanced with heavy steps.

To an observer, it might have seemed like a reckless approach, but his timing completely disrupted Rian's rhythm.

Rian, who had hoped for an opening, instead felt a sense of futility and retreated.

Ymir, on the other hand, relished the thrill.

The battle had already begun. From the moment they resolved to kill one another, every emotion became part of the fight—something Ymir adored.

As Ymir closed in, he spoke.

"An enemy."

Rian's hair stood on end.

The overwhelming presence of the giant felt like an immense wall—too vast to fully grasp.

"Shall we begin?"

At that moment, the mechanical sound of the drone echoed from above.

"Lan-gu-age de-code. Shall we begin?"

Ymir's gaze briefly shifted upward toward the ceiling. By the time he looked back down, Rian was gone.

"Haah!"

Signa came slicing in from the side. Ymir raised his arm to block, causing a powerful shockwave that rippled through his skin like waves on water.

But his body didn't budge an inch.

Lifting Signa with his arm, Ymir tilted his head and glared at Rian.

His eyes resembled those of a snake stalking its prey.

"A nice ambush. But I feel bad now. If you're a swordsman, I should at least face you with a sword."

With that, Ymir pushed Signa away. His body then twisted, and a powerful hook arced toward Rian.

Rian crouched and raised Exd as a shield.

When Ymir's fist collided with the shield, a thunderous roar erupted. The holographic energy of Exd struck Ymir.

But even then, the giant didn't flinch. Instead, Rian was sent flying.

Rolling across the ground, Rian knelt to regain his balance.

The Exd on his arm, struck as though by a cannon, now revealed its inner mechanisms, exposed and damaged.

Ymir smirked as he looked over his shoulder at Rian.

"As you can see... few weapons can withstand my strength."

"Damn it... this is humiliating..."

Through the drone above, Tess's watchful gaze seemed to press on him. Imagining her desperation fueled Rian's anger even further.

"Let's gooooo!"

Rian charged at full speed.

He hurled Signa mid-sprint, leaping into the air and unsheathing the greatsword on his back.

Ymir caught the oncoming Signa*and crushed it as though it were a cracker.

Simultaneously, Rian brought his greatsword down.

Ymir responded with a punch, meeting the blade with his bare fist.

The sound of metal clashing made Rian's eyes widen in shock. Ymir's fist had parried the blade as if it were steel striking steel.

Using the recoil from his swing, Rian flipped backward. But Ymir pursued instantly, raising his fist for another strike.

"This was fun. Let me give you a parting gift."

"Hnghhh!"

Rian planted the greatsword into the ground. Using its flat surface as a shield, he pressed his shoulder and thigh against it, channeling his entire body weight into defense.

Chapter 215: 6. Heavenly Chaos (2)

Bang!

As Ymir's punch landed, only the greatsword remained in place—Rian had vanished.

Rian's mind raced as his body flew through the air. He knew he needed to regain his balance and land on his feet to block any follow-up attack. He barely managed to steady himself, almost touching down on both legs.

But in the next moment, he realized he wasn't standing—his body was crumpled, rolling across the floor.

When the lingering shock finally left his body, the cold sensation of the ground pressed against his cheek.

Unintelligible sounds escaped his mouth. His body wasn't in pain, but he couldn't summon any strength.

Ymir glanced at the collapsed Rian, then picked up the greatsword lying on the ground. To a human, it was a massive weapon, but in Ymir's hands, it seemed like an ordinary longsword.

Ymir inspected the blade, his eyes lighting up with interest.

"Hoo? This is quite useful."

"G-Give it back... That's my grandfather's..."

Rian staggered to his feet, his legs trembling.

Years of pushing his body to its limits had trained him to recover from blows faster than an average person—a resilience born from relentless conditioning.

Ymir grinned and casually tossed the greatsword. It slid across the floor, stopping at Rian's feet.

"Are you going to try again? I like your tenacity."

With difficulty, Rian picked up the greatsword and charged once more. The disparity in strength was undeniable, but if

Ymir was heading toward the Grand Hall of World, there was no choice but to fight.

Rian and Ymir clashed in the center of the hallway. Ymir didn't even attempt to block the greatsword.

Clang! The greatsword struck Ymir's forehead—or more accurately, Ymir *blocked it with his forehead*.

Ymir's fist came swinging in a wide arc.

Rian knew there was no way to dodge. Realizing his fate, he widened his eyes in defiance. If he were to die, he wanted to fight until the very last moment.

Ymir felt a thrill as he locked eyes with Rian.

'It's a shame I don't know his name.'

Ymir's fist tore through the air where Rian had been standing.

For a moment, silence filled the hallway.

Ymir's expression darkened with irritation. Few things annoyed him more than interruptions during a fight.

It was an odd yet familiar phenomenon.

Just before his punch landed, he had clearly seen Rian's body fragment into dozens of squares.

"Honestly... the higher-ups have no sense of timing."

About three meters away from where Rian had been standing, glass panes flickered into view. The panes displayed two figures: Ashur, the handsome man with jet-black hair, and Rian, now kneeling beside him.

Ymir's lips twisted into a cold smile. The arrival of Ashur—a Mara notorious for being immovable in Heaven's hierarchy—was a clear sign that something unusual was unfolding in the Grand Hall of World.

"Well, well. Look who's here. The busy man himself. Did you leave your precious someone behind to wander the battlefield alone?"

"Ymir, failure to abide by the laws will bring grave consequences. Leave now."

"Heh, and if I refuse?"

"Then you'll face annihilation."

Ashur raised his hand, and 30 glass panes arranged themselves in three rows before him. A long, slender sword radiating violet light materialized within them.

“Signal, is it?”

Ashur’s ability, Signal, allowed him to collect all types of signals.

Each glass pane contained one signal, and by combining the patterns across these panes, he could create phenomena that bordered on the infinite.

Ashur’s sword, Shockwave, was forged by gathering 30 distinct signals.

Powered by electromagnetic pulses, it vibrated intensely, reducing anything it pierced to ashes with devastating lethality.

Rian stared up at Ashur in a daze. It felt as though he had died and been reborn, with no memory of what had happened in between.

“Who are you?”

“Go. I’m an ally.”

The words were brief, but Rian understood immediately. Shirone must have created some new variable in the situation.

Rian glared at Ymir, but the giant had not looked at him once since Ashur’s arrival.

Biting his lip, Rian turned and sprinted toward the Grand Hall of World.

His insides burned with frustration. It wasn’t fear of defeat—he hadn’t grown up so fragile. But the humiliation of failing to land even a single effective strike gnawed at his pride. He sensed Tess’s drone following him from above. Though the machine remained silent, he could almost hear her comforting words in his head like a phantom voice.

“Damn it! Damn it!”

Rian pushed himself to his limit, running full speed toward the Grand Hall of World.

Ashur continued to block the path. While he wanted to follow Rian into the Grand Hall of World, his immediate priority was stopping Ymir.

With the ability of his Signal, Ashur could use Transmission to move instantly by sending a signal to a desired location. However, that was impossible when it came to the Grand Hall of World.

The area was saturated with electromagnetic interference, making it faster to physically run there than to wait for a signal to transmit.

That was precisely why he had sent Rian ahead.

“Stand down, Ymir. I won’t tolerate any more of your recklessness.”

Ymir stroked his chin and replied.

“Looks like something serious must’ve happened for you to leave that pretty angel behind. Why not clue me in on what’s going on?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“For some reason, it sounds like it *is* my concern.”

Ashur didn’t deny it.

Ymir, the King of Giants, sought nothing but battle. Stripped of his body purely because of his overwhelming strength, Ymir longed for intense, life-or-death combat where he would have to rely on the raw power of his true form to win. In contrast, Ikhael’s goal was to prevent war.

If Ikhael wanted peace, Ashur would comply. As long as he stood here, nothing would happen in Heaven. Thus, Ymir had no reason to interfere.

Ashur raised his Shockwave, pointing it at Ymir’s chest.

“By the command of Archangel Ikhael, I hereby revoke all your privileges.”

“Ha! Since when did lowly angels have the authority to do that?”

Ashur surged forward like a storm.

Ymir crossed his arms to block the attack, but his forearms split open, spraying blood. The electromagnetic vibrations

from Shockwave seared his bones with a scorching heat. Ashur's gaze burned with contempt as he glared at Ymir. "How dare a mere giant defy an archangel? You are nothing but flesh. Do not insult a noble mind with your wretched tongue."

"A mere giant?"

Ymir's eyebrow twitched.

"I am Ymir."

Sensing the surge of murderous intent, Ashur quickly created distance. However, Ymir closed the 10-meter gap in a single leap.

Ymir's powerful straight punch slammed into Ashur's abdomen.

"Guh!"

Ashur's eyes widened in shock.

His form, frozen in time, began to blur, and the 180 glass panes containing signals flickered before disappearing altogether.

Ymir turned with an irritated expression, only to see Ashur standing tall in a new position, his Shockwave held gracefully at his side.

"Ha! Aren't you pushing yourself a bit too far? I've heard your powers are heavily restricted."

"I don't need your pity. Worry about your own body instead."

"Is that so?"

"Hell of Ice and Flame."

The space surrounding Ashur and Ymir was enclosed by countless glass panes.

Roughly 2,400 panes flickered in and out of view, collecting signals of heat and frost. Flames and ice alternated every 10 centimeters, creating a dizzying spectacle.

What would happen when all the signals were transmitted? Would the space burn to ash in the flames? Or freeze solid in the cold?

"You brought this upon yourself. Don't blame me."

"I blame no one. I'm the strongest."

Ymir bared his teeth like a beast and charged forward. Ashur, his eyes glinting coldly, raised Shockwave in response.

As the transmission completed, a storm of blazing heat and frigid cold erupted simultaneously.

“Tess! Just hold on a little longer! I’m almost there!”

Rian stopped conserving oxygen. After running for ten minutes since parting with Ashur, he finally reached the bridge leading to the Grand Hall of World.

The bridge stretched a kilometer long and spanned 60 meters wide. With no guardrails, it felt like floating in the sky. A strong wind swept through, sending an uneasy sensation churning in his stomach.

At the end of the bridge stood a domed structure—the Grand Hall of World—where his friends were being held captive.

Seeing the building was a good sign. It meant Canis had succeeded in disabling the Meccan system.

“What’s this? You’re still here?”

Rian turned to see Canis approaching.

“How are you here already?”

“I took the portal. But what happened to your face? You look like you got beaten up.”

Rian touched his face. He hadn’t even realized how bruised and swollen it had gotten from tumbling across the ground. Feeling guilty, he glanced at the hovering drone.

‘You must have been worried, Tess.’

Canis noticed it too. Without needing an explanation, he could tell the drone belonged to Tess.

Even while being captured by angels, Tess had managed to release the drone—proof of her resourcefulness.

“What’s the situation inside? You’ve checked, right?”

“Yeah. So far, everything seems fine. But...”

Suddenly, the drone began to malfunction. It erratically darted around before plummeting to the ground as though it

had lost power.

Rian hurriedly caught it and inspected the device.

The indicator light was off. Since the drone was connected to Tess's brainwaves, its failure meant something had happened to her.

"What's going on? What happened?"

"I don't know! We don't have time to figure it out!"

Rian dashed forward. While Dark Port could allow for instantaneous movement, the bridge was entirely bathed in light, making it inaccessible.

Canis, suppressing his pride, activated his photonization magic.

The two of them turned into a streak of light and shot across the bridge.

"You bastard!"

Amy glared at Cariel, shouting in fury. Tess and Arin's faces were similarly twisted with anger and disgust.

The information being transmitted through the panels implanted in their heads left them disoriented, as if they were drunk out of their minds.

"Don't worry. Your hormones are simply being adjusted to make you compatible with the Art of Life."

Cariel said indifferently as he glanced at their condition before turning back to the screen.

"There won't be any noticeable changes until the ritual is complete. Not that it matters, does it? Every living being experiences this at least once in their existence."

"Shut up! Who gave you the right to decide that?! You think we'll let you do this? I'd rather bite my tongue and die than go through with it!"

Cariel frowned, his expression one of disdain, as though he were staring at something filthy.

"I don't understand. This isn't punishment. You've been chosen for a noble mission—to bear the Nephilim. Do you

know how few women have ever refused the Art of Life? Don't you want eternal life?"

"I don't care about eternal life! Even if I die tomorrow, I'll live the way I want to!"

"There's no reasoning with you, is there? Either way, it's out of your hands now. Once the information in the panels is fully transmitted, there's no turning back."

Art of Life progress: 20 percent.

A woman's voice echoed from the ceiling. It seemed to announce the progress every 10 percent. From their perspective, it was a cold, emotionless sound, which only made the situation more terrifying.

Amy struggled furiously against her restraints.

If she could just free her hands, she would rip the panel from her forehead, even if it killed her.

If she were to die, she would die living her own life.

"Tess! Amy! Arin!"

The doors to the Grand Hall of World burst open as Rian and Canis stormed in, racing as though competing to get there first.

Tess, who had been watching them cross the bridge, shouted.

"Rian! Over here! Hurry, get us out of this!"

Rian froze mid-step, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the Grand Hall of World.

It wasn't just the size of the space—it was the alien nature of its components and devices.

One side of the room displayed a rotating planet, while on the opposite side, a tower emitted dazzling bursts of light.

"Damn it! What is this place?"

Cariel ascended to a height from which he could view the humans at a glance.

"You've come for the women? Another foolish display of human ignorance."

"You're the one responsible for this, aren't you? Don't think for a second that you'll get away with what you've done to

my friends.”

Rian spat as he raised his sword, eyes sharp with vigilance. Though he spoke with confidence, his movements were cautious. Having witnessed the power of the fallen angel Ikhasa, Rian could only imagine the destructive force of an archangel.

Chapter 216: 6. Heavenly Chaos (3)

As Rian cautiously closed the distance, looking for an opening to attack, Tess shouted in frustration.

“You idiot bear! Stop wasting time fighting and untie us first!”

“Damn it! I’d love to, but...”

He desperately wanted to rush over and free them, but diverting his focus while facing an archangel was as good as signing his death warrant.

Arin spoke calmly, explaining the situation.

“Canis, the Art of Life has already begun. You need to remove the panels attached to our foreheads. If we don’t stop this, all of us will end up bearing Nephilim.”

Before Canis could respond, Rian’s eyes widened, and he shouted in disbelief.

“What?! You should’ve told me that first!”

“That’s what I was telling you, you idiot! If you don’t want to see me lose my mind, get these cuffs off, now!”

“Alright! Just hold on a second!”

Despite their bickering, Rian and Tess were more alike than either cared to admit. Unlike Canis, who preferred to analyze the situation until there was a chance of winning, Rian made a snap decision and rushed to rip off the panels. At that moment, a shockwave erupted in front of him. Rian reeled back, wincing at the jolt of pain, and looked up.

Floating in midair, Cariel wore a displeased expression, his hand extended.

‘What’s this? That’s not as strong as I thought.’

Though the sudden shockwave was impressive, it lacked the overwhelming power Rian had feared. Feeling emboldened,

he gripped his greatsword tighter.

Canis, too, noted the development with interest.

The archangel's power isn't as strong as expected. This might be our chance.

It's probably because of that Art of Life thing. Creating life must take a massive toll, right?

It would seem so. But still, it's strange. Even with us here, he's continuing like this.

Though angels were powerful, their purpose wasn't solely combat.

For example, Archangel Ikhael's ability—activation—had little to do with fighting.

Yet, its sheer scale was enough to terrify even Mara and other angels.

Similarly, Cariel embodied the grand concept of creation. Explosion, combustion, machinery, chemicals.

Cariel's ability allowed for countless combinations to bring forth new creations.

Of these, what Cariel took the most pride in was life itself.

Creating life consumed immense energy, no matter what life was created.

And the Art of Life demanded even an archangel to pour nearly all of his mental focus into its execution.

"How dare humans—creatures who barely live a century—interfere with an archangel's calling."

Unnoticed by anyone, Canis released Harvest into the shadows. The plan was to distract Cariel long enough to launch a surprise attack and free the women in the meantime.

"Calling? What's the point of creating Nephilim? You can find Unlockers in our world just fine."

Amy caught on to his strategy and joined in.

"Heaven plans to use Nephilim to attack the human world. Because so many Unlockers are appearing on our side, they're trying to balance the scales."

"A conquest? Are you saying they're planning a war?"

“Exactly. Nephilim aren’t some divine apostles. They’re spies sent to occupied territories.”

Cariel didn’t deny it. He didn’t care about the petty thoughts of humans.

With the greatness of Ra, and the superiority of angels. Human concepts had no place in interfering with the actions of an archangel.

“You should be grateful. Thanks to you, the Final War can now begin.”

The group’s attention snapped to Cariel. The phrase “Final War” was terrifying enough, but his declaration that they had enabled it was incomprehensible.

“The Final War? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Your world will soon face annihilation. Until now, that accursed Miro was holding back the end, but thanks to you, the curtain has risen on the war.”

Canis felt a chill run through him. The woman Shirone had been searching for was the one preventing the apocalypse? Then he recalled Arcane’s actions. If humanity’s survival was at stake, it made sense why his master had erased his own memories.

“Why is it our fault? What did we do?”

“Miro has blocked the passage between Heaven and the human world. But the Metagate you brought has opened a new path. Soon, Heaven’s army will burn your world to the ground.”

Everyone’s hearts sank. If Cariel’s words were true, they had done something irreparable. Their actions had accelerated humanity’s extinction.

Pointing to a mechanical device, Cariel shouted.

“Behold! The Metagate that Ikhasa brought! Once the Art of Life is complete, I will analyze its coordinates. The moment the new portal opens, your world will face its end!”

The group turned their gaze toward the device.

“...”

A heavy silence filled the Grand Hall of World. No one spoke a word.

Confused by their lack of reaction, Cariel slowly turned his head.

His face mirrored their expression of stunned disbelief.

The fairy clutching the Metagate stood frozen, her mouth agape, staring at the scene before her.

Cariel opened his mouth as if to say something but then closed it again.

Why was a fairy here? It wasn't the law, and even if that's the case, there was no causality—it made no sense.

The awkward silence stretched on until the fairy, Peophe, spoke first, breaking the tension.

"Uh... hello."

Cariel tilted his head, puzzled. Was she greeting him? If so, at least she wasn't entirely out of her mind. Hoping to establish some semblance of logic, Cariel responded.

"And who are you?"

"I'm Peophe."

Cariel almost lost his composure. But revealing his frustration would have been beneath his dignity, so he steadied himself and continued.

"Very well, Peophe. Why are you here?"

"Oh, I came to retrieve the Metagate."

"...I see. Then why... No, wait. Why would someone like you come to retrieve it?"

"Because we can't let the war happen."

At that moment, Cariel's patience snapped. He raised his hand, his thoughts filled only with obliterating the pest before him.

All at once, with a blow.

"Die."

Harvest! Now!

From the shadows of the Grand Hall of World, Harvest emerged.

He swung his sharp shadow like a blade. Cariel was sent flying upward, slamming into the ceiling.

Seizing the opportunity, Canis sprinted toward the women, shouting as he ran.

“Rian! Protect Peophe! Don’t let her get taken!”

Rian immediately shifted direction, running toward Peophe. Though he wanted nothing more than to free Tess, he knew better than to ignore a mage’s orders in a crisis.

“Peophe! Over here!”

Peophe, still flustered by the sudden battle, heard Rian’s voice and flew toward him.

Cariel, evading Harvest’s pursuit, attempted to target Peophe again. However, Rian intercepted him, raising his sword to guard the fairy. Cariel frowned and swiftly retreated to the ceiling.

Rian let out a sigh of relief and turned to Peophe.

“Are you alright?”

“I don’t know! I thought I was going to die! Here, take this already!”

Peophe’s face was pale, almost soup-like in its color. Having to provoke an archangel had been terrifying, and even now, she couldn’t believe she’d managed to do it.

Rian took the Metagate from her hands, his stoic demeanor giving way to a flicker of gratitude.

If he activated the Metagate now, he could at least ensure his own return home.

Of course, he had no intention of doing so, but the thought that their situation had improved gave him a surge of courage.

“Thanks, Peophe.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea! I wasn’t trying to help you!”

Peophe trailed off, unable to finish her sentence. The situation was too clear for her to find any excuse to hide her true feelings.

She had defied an archangel’s orders to help humans—a direct violation of the laws, no, an outright destruction of

them.

Resigned, Peophe muttered bitterly.

“So, what now? I’m doomed anyway.”

“Come with us.”

“What?”

“Come with us. There’s plenty to see in our world. You saved us, so we’ll do everything we can to save you.”

Peophe turned her head away quickly, flustered. Deep down, she was moved by his words.

But she couldn’t accept his offer. Going to the human world wasn’t the reason she had acted.

“Forget it, you idiot! Focus on saving your friends first!”

While keeping an eye on their surroundings, Rian checked on Canis’s progress. Canis was using his Power of Darkness to sever the cuffs binding the women.

Art of Life progress: 40 percent.

The voice from the ceiling announced the update, prompting Amy to scream.

“Hurry up! We’re running out of time!”

“Shut up, you pumpkin! If I lose focus, I’ll end up slicing your wrists off!”

Canis carefully rotated a razor-sharp shadow, meticulously severing the cuffs. The precision required was immense, as the restraints were tightly bound to the women’s skin.

Meanwhile, Cariel, dodging Harvest’s relentless attacks, felt his irritation mounting. He was tempted to abandon the Art of Life and simply slaughter them all.

With his powers of creation, he could think of at least 50,000 ways to kill them.

But canceling the Art of Life wasn’t an option.

Despite the progress surpassing 40 percent, none of the women were showing the expected positive responses.

‘These are the perfect vessels. I can’t afford to give up now.’

As a last resort, Cariel opened a portal. With his remaining mental power, he could summon a competent Mara—one perfectly suited for the situation.

“Answer my call, Ba’alv.”

The atmosphere of the Grand Hall of World darkened ominously as a new Mara emerged. Everyone except Canis looked up at the ceiling, immediately counting the horns. It was a two-horned Mara.

“Mara of Sleep, Ba’alv. I answer the call of Lord Cariel.”

Ba’alv appeared as a distinguished middle-aged man. His slicked-back, oiled hair revealed slightly pointed ears.

He was tall, nearly matching the angels in stature, and wore a cloak with a collar that rose higher than his head.

“Subdue the humans. The Art of Life must not be interrupted.”

“That is certainly my specialty. Understood.”

Ba’alv placed his right hand over his chest and descended to the ground.

“Peophe, hold onto this for a moment.”

Rian said, handing her the Metagate before charging at Ba’alv. Even though he had resolved to fight to the death, Rian found himself unable to get close. As he approached, a wave of drowsiness overwhelmed him, and his consciousness began to fade.

‘What is this? Why am I... suddenly so sleepy...?’

In a life-or-death battle, falling asleep was unimaginable—an absurdity.

But this was clearly some sort of ability.

Realizing this, Rian quickly retreated. Once he moved beyond the invisible field, his awareness returned. However, the fatigue remained, weighing heavily on his body.

Frustration bubbled up inside him.

“Damn it, what kind of cheap trick is this now?”

Giants, fairies, Mara, angels—every opponent here had incomprehensible abilities. Reflecting on how useless he had been since arriving in Heaven, Rian couldn’t help but feel humiliated.

Ba’alv turned toward him gracefully.

“It’s no use. You won’t even be able to swing your sword at me.”

A red gemstone orbited Ba’alv [slowly](#). Is that the cause? Rian adopted a defensive stance and cautiously moved forward. As expected, when he crossed a certain threshold, the red gemstone glowed, and the drowsiness returned in full force.

‘Damn it. So it really is that thing. But what is it?’

While no one could identify the gemstone, the Harvest, as a magical lifeform, recognized its unique wavelength.

Canis, this is bad. You should retreat for now. That’s an Object.

An Object? That thing is an Object?

Canis, who had only heard about Objects from Arcane, was seeing one for the first time.

Objects were items.

The difference from ordinary items is that they exert some unusual properties that could influence the external world in strange ways.

Some were familiar to humans.

The cursed blue diamonds or flying carpets, for instance.

Just as humans collected such items, it wasn’t surprising that many Mara, who traversed countless worlds, possessed at least one.

For example, an Object owned by a certain Mara could absorb all the blood around it, while another’s Object incited rage, leading to murder.

Ba’alv’s Object was the Object of Sleep, a device that could plunge any living being within its range into a deep slumber.

Chapter 217: 6. Heavenly Chaos (4)

As the rotation of the gemstone accelerated, even Canis began to feel its effects.

A crushing wave of drowsiness engulfed him. Though he bit down hard on his lip to stay conscious, he knew that continuing to cut the cuffs in this state would result in severing the women's wrists.

'No! I can't leave Arin behind!'

Blood seeped from his lips as he bit down harder.

Amy and Tess watched helplessly, unable to offer any advice.

The only one who could intervene was Arin.

"Canis, there's still time. Step back for now. If you keep this up, you'll collapse first."

"Damn it! Damn it!"

Canis knew she was right—he had to retreat.

Just a little more, just a little more and I'd be done! If he had power like his master's, he could have cut all the cuffs by now.

Information transfer progress: 50 percent.

"I'll save you. Just hold on a little longer."

Unable to meet the women's eyes, Canis reluctantly stepped outside the range of the Object's influence.

As if by magic, his mind cleared instantly. Yet the lingering memory of the oppressive drowsiness refused to fade. The force was incomparable to any ordinary sleep spell.

'Right, that's what it is—force. That's the hallmark of an Object.'

Objects were anomalies of the material world, born of cosmic errors that warped the very concept of an item.

Because they didn't violate causality, there was no way to counteract their abilities.

And now, time was running out. The choice to summon a Sleeping Mara in such a time-sensitive scenario had been a calculated one.

"Rian, fall back. I'll handle him."

Canis said, stepping forward to take Rian's place.

The Object of Sleep was poison to someone like Rian, whose mental resistance was weak.

Peophe shouted, pointing toward the entrance of the Grand Hall of World.

"Guys! Look over there!"

The massive figure of Ymir, the giant, was barreling toward them.

Rian's eyes widened in alarm. Though Ymir seemed slightly smaller than before, there was no doubt it was the same giant.

Even Canis, usually composed, couldn't suppress his frustration this time.

"Damn it! Now the giant's here too!"

"Stay calm. I'll handle the giant. You focus on taking down Ba'alv."

It was a sound decision given their respective strengths. But even without considering their abilities, Rian wanted to face the giant himself.

He had failed to land a single critical hit in their first encounter. This time, he intended to prove himself.

As Rian reached the entrance, Peophe flew over, clutching the Metagate.

"Hey, what am I supposed to do with this?"

"Hold onto it for me. We'll come back for it."

"What? You want me to guard something this important?!"

She couldn't finish her sentence. It was an overwhelming and daunting request, but looking at Rian's face, she couldn't bring herself to argue.

It wasn't the face of someone planning to return.

“What if... what if something dangerous happens?”

Rian turned back to her with a gentle smile.

“Then throw it away and run. Nothing is more important than your life.”

Peophe pressed her lips together tightly, glaring at him with a mix of anger and sadness.

How could he say something like that? Why are humans all so reckless?

“Don’t say such nonsense! Why can’t you just admit it? You want me to protect this with my life because without it, you can’t return home!”

Rian didn’t answer.

“You idiot! Do you even understand who you’re up against? That’s Ymir, the King of Giants! Fighting him is suicide!”

Rian finally registered the name. Ymir. Not just a giant, but the king of giants.

An opponent worthy of being his final challenge.

Peophe’s chest tightened. *Is this what it means to be human?* Short-lived compared to fairies, they burned so brightly, so desperately.

Rian positioned himself at the entrance, his figure silhouetted against the light like a total solar eclipse.

“What... what’s your name?”

Peophe’s voice cracked as she forced the question out.

Revealing one’s name in Heaven was a dangerous act, but Peophe felt she needed to know. At this moment, she trusted him completely.

“Ogent Rian.”

He said, lifting his greatsword and turned to look at Peophe.

“I am Shirone’s blade.”

Thump!

Rian planted his greatsword into the ground, leaning against its blade as he crouched low.

Ymir’s massive figure charged toward him, his grotesque grin splitting his face.

“Hahaha! A rematch, is it? That’s what makes a warrior!”

“Come, King of Giants.”

Without slowing, Ymir charged forward.

The pressure was immense, like a rolling boulder about to crush him. Rian steadied himself, shouting his battle cry.

“AAAAAAAH!”

Imir’s shoulder collided with Rian’s torso like a battering ram.

The greatsword bent under the strain before snapping back. Crack!

Rian felt something snap inside his chest. Blood erupted from his mouth, painting the sky a vivid red.

The Shockwave pierced through Ymir’s chest.

The battlefield, where Heaven’s greatest swordmaster and warrior clashed, lay in utter ruin.

Every spot they passed bore the marks of craters and destruction, with shards of broken glass allowing fierce winds to rush in.

Ymir leaned against the wall, a twisted grin stretched across his face. Waves of electromagnetic signals from the Shockwave surged through him, breaking his body apart at a cellular level.

“Heh... heh... Not bad. So? How does it feel? The feeling of piercing me?”

Ashur grimaced. Ymir had lost his original body, but even so, he was not someone who would easily allow himself to be struck like this.

“...Was this just a ‘fragment’ of you?”

Ymir was a giant who had achieved the unprecedented 10th stage of the Rite of Liquor. How many bodies he had absorbed was a mystery known only to Ra, but it was widely accepted to be well over ten thousand.

“Just because I’m a giant doesn’t mean I can’t think. Take your time. I’ll be waiting for you there.”

As Ymir slowly slumped down, Ashur’s blade slid out, slicing through the giant’s head.

Moments later, Ymir's body began bubbling, dissolving into a black liquid.

Ashur glared at the liquid pooling around his feet. Extending his palm, he dispersed his sword back into signals, causing it to vanish.

"Damn it. I let my guard down."

Ymir was not one for strategy. He considered it the desperate fallback of the weak. But today, he had swallowed his pride and chosen to retreat toward the Grand Hall of World.

Was it some kind of animal instinct? No—it was something more, a superhuman intuition.

Ymir might have preferred simplicity, but he always triumphed over complexity. This was thanks to one innate trait.

His unparalleled ability to smell war.

Throughout the history of Heaven, Ymir had always found himself at the center of every pivotal conflict.

And this time was no different.

Ymir's instincts told him that the events unfolding at the Grand Hall of World were critical to recovering his original body.

"Maybe I'm already too late."

Though their personalities differed, Ashur knew Ymir's instincts were trustworthy.

The fact that Ymir had abandoned the fight and vanished only meant one thing—there was no longer any need to stall.

The situation at the Grand Hall of World had to be spiraling into something far more dire than expected.

With a forceful leap, Ashur kicked off the ground, leaving the battlefield behind.

"Canis! Step back! You can't keep going any further!"

Arin shouted. It had already been 10 minutes since they entered the domain of the Object. Yet instead of retreating,

Canis only increased the speed of his magical attacks. Ba'alv, deeming it unworthy to respond, had already withdrawn from the scene. Even though the two-horned Mara surpassed Canis' abilities fundamentally, there was no need for it to intervene directly as long as the Object was present.

The Object of Sleep would plunge living beings into slumber, but its more terrifying aspect lay in what happened if one resisted.

If one forced themselves to endure, the accumulated fatigue of sleep deprivation would inevitably lead to death.

Currently, Canis' mental state was equivalent to someone who had not slept for roughly eight days.

"Impressive for a human. But how long can you last?

Without proper rest, death is inevitable."

Canis tried to collect himself.

He hadn't heard what Ba'alv had just said. The sights before his eyes no longer translated into signals his brain could process.

Canis! Snap out of it!

Harvest shouted through the mental channel, but it was futile. Canis seemed to be slipping into paralysis, unable to even respond.

"It seems you care quite deeply for him. I suppose that's only natural, given that you share life itself."

Harvest turned to look at Cariel. The archangel had descended to observe the situation. He had clearly deduced that Harvest's strength was waning.

"Maintaining darkness requires significant energy, doesn't it? Are you supplementing that with human life? An interesting idea, but it only scatters your strength."

Canis slowly stood up.

He hadn't even realized he had been lying face down until moments ago. He wasn't aware of the drool trickling from the corner of his mouth either.

"Arin, not all of us are going to make it back alive."

“...No! Canis! Absolutely not!”

A terrifying thought crossed Arin’s mind.

If Canis, who shared their mentor’s personality, had come up with a method to deal with this situation, it could only be the same card Arcane had played at the brink of death.

Harvest had arrived at the same conclusion.

Canis, you’re not thinking of the Abyss Memory, are you?

But you’re not like Arcane. You might not survive it.

Canis shook his head. Such a half-hearted resolve would not be enough to defeat the two-horned Mara.

No. I’m going to try what I mentioned before. I need your power, Harvest. Will you help me?

No. That’s a spell that only works theoretically. You’ve never even tested it. At the very least, you should interpret the Grimoire of Light and Darkness first before attempting it.

Harvest, if any of us must survive, it has to be Arin. You know that too.

Harvest did not reply. But the lack of denial meant he acknowledged Canis’ words. It also signified his own impending end.

Very well. Take my power.

Harvest’s form was absorbed into Canis’ shadow.

With a faint restoration of consciousness, Canis braced himself for death.

He had never thought deeply about how he would die. He was simply ready to embrace the eternal void.

“Limit of the Abyss.”

The spell that only exist in theory came to life.

Instantly, the mental fatigue vanished. But unlike Arcane, Canis hadn’t erased his memories.

What he erased was his own limits.

Canis knew who he was. He wasn’t someone like Shirone, capable of ascending to the supreme realm.

So, he chose to surpass his limits in his own way.

Children who do not know fire willingly place their hands into the flames. Monks, through self-realization, burn

themselves and enter nirvana.

While the gap between ignorance and enlightenment is vast, the mental resolve to leap into the fire is the same. If he could not be an enlightened monk, Canis chose to become the ignorant child.

The result was a temporary Immortal Function state.

Of course, it wasn't true nirvana. But for combat, it provided a mental power close enough.

"Here I go!"

Until the duration of the Limit of the Abyss expired, he felt no fatigue. But to Arin, the sight of Canis, alive with energy, was nothing short of hell.

"Canis! No! Please, don't do this!"

Tears streamed down Arin's face as she screamed. Without Canis and Harvest, she couldn't find the courage to face the world.

But Canis could no longer hear anyone's voice. For the first time, he felt a faint thrill as he activated the spell he had never succeeded in before, casting the most powerful magic at his disposal.

'Minion of Darkness.'

A spell that transformed the caster's mental energy into physical force. While Arcane's servant had been a Dark Golem, Canis' servant took on a completely different form. Shadows spread across the ground like a liquid surface before a massive creature, a worm-like being called a Dark Wurm, erupted forth.

'Master...'

The Minion of Darkness was the perfect match for someone who could harness mental fortitude akin to an Immortal Function.

'You'll praise me, won't you?'

The 10-meter-long wurm arched through the air and fell vertically.

Ba'alv showed no signs of tension. He didn't even uncross his arms, simply stepping back indifferently.

“Impressive. This one deserves prai—”

Before Ba’alv could finish speaking, another Dark Wyrn erupted from the ground.

Like a reverse waterfall, the second wyrn surged upward, swallowing Ba’alv and crashing into the ceiling.

The Object shattered with a brittle crack as the sound of Ba’alv’s bones breaking echoed. Moments later, Ba’alv’s grotesquely twisted corpse fell to the ground.

Chapter 218: 6. Heavenly Chaos (5)

Canis gasped for breath. His head was spinning so badly it felt as if his brain was melting.

But he couldn't allow himself to rest just yet. He had to keep fighting for Arin until the very end.

"Ba'alv, you look absolutely wretched."

At Cariel's voice, Ba'alv's body flinched.

"I am sorry, Lord Cariel."

Canis' face went blank. He had shattered every bone in Ba'alv's body—how could he still be alive?

No, it wasn't just that he was alive.

Each of his bodily organs was morphing into bizarre forms. Insect-like legs, covered in chitin, jutted out, and tentacles resembling those of mollusks stretched and squirmed.

"Thank you for granting me demonic awakening."

Ba'alv's form grew to the size of a mountain, forcing everyone to crane their necks upward.

It was a grotesque amalgamation of countless living creatures.

The term "amalgamation" fit perfectly.

It looked like someone had thrown together an octopus, cockroach, fly, maggot, and snake into a cauldron, boiled them, and then dried the concoction.

"Kikiki! It's been two thousand years since my last awakening."

"So this is... the end."

Canis' hope dissolved like foam on water. The Object was nothing more than... a toy for Mara.

By the time Canis realized he had risked his life for something impossible from the start, it was already too late.

“Rian... Rian...”

Peophe looked back at Rian with tear-filled eyes. Even as everything crumbled to nothing, he kept fighting.

No, he wasn't just fighting—he was holding the line.

After vomiting blood during the first clash, Rian had wrapped his arms around Ymir and locked him in place mentally.

Better to break than to bend.

As the price for choosing such a dangerous path, he had gained physical strength equivalent to that of Schema.

Ymir soon realized that unless Rian's body was completely destroyed, the lock would never come undone. Blow after blow, Ymir's fists pounded down.

Each impact rocked Rian's body, causing his greatsword to sway.

“Ugh! Not yet...!”

As the fight dragged on, even Ymir began to find it odd.

His opponent's resilience felt like steel—hard and unyielding. This wasn't the kind of strength a living being should possess. And given the havoc he'd wreaked on Rian's insides, Rian shouldn't have been able to muster any strength at all.

‘Among humans, only a rare few can wield this kind of power.’

Throughout countless battles, Ymir had occasionally encountered such people—humans who could endure like this. But without exception, they were the greatest warriors their civilizations had to offer.

To place a human who couldn't even use giant's technique in the same league as those warriors seemed like an insult to them.

“Keh keh! Let's see how far you can go!”

Ymir launched an uppercut at point-blank range.

The moment the blow ruptured his abdominal muscles, Rian's eyes opened wide. Though his knees buckled when

his feet hit the ground again, he clung to Ymir and held firm. The next moment, Rian released the mental lock and shoved Ymir's shoulders away.

The clinch, which had seemed unbreakable, abruptly ended, leaving Ymir with a puzzled expression.

But did it matter? He was the strongest, after all.

Whenever a creature fought the King of Giants, this was how it always ended.

"Have you finally given up? For a human, you've lasted quite long. As a reward, I'll end this without pain."

Ymir took a powerful step forward and swung his fist. With enough force to tear muscles even at close range, a blow like this, backed by his full weight, would surely obliterate Rian's body.

But Rian wasn't fazed. Smiling at Ymir, his eyes looked past the giant's shoulders.

"You're here, Shirone."

Shirone closed the kilometer-wide distance in just 30 seconds.

As the Grand Hall of World loomed, Shirone saw the giant swinging his fist and the battered state of Rian.

"Riaaan!"

Ymir flinched. However, the momentum of his power-packed punch carried it forward, hurtling toward Rian's abdomen.

Shirone cast Shining Chain. Chains stretching dozens of meters wrapped around Ymir's body.

"Huh?"

By the time Ymir realized what was happening, his body was being yanked away with tremendous force.

"Raaah!"

Even midair, Ymir poured his strength into trying to break the chains.

Shirone felt the giant's brute force clashing against his mind. But he had no intention of humoring such a crude challenge.

With a flick of Shirone's arm, the chains twisted, and Ymir was slammed to the ground.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Ymir's chain-bound body traced a trajectory in the air before crashing repeatedly into the earth. The final slam sent a resounding shockwave through the ground.

Lying sprawled in a spread-eagle position, Ymir didn't move. It was humiliating.

The fact that his body had been mocked by a mere human mage made his blood boil.

"Do you think breaking me by slamming me into the ground will be enough? I'll shatter these chains right now! Feel the strength of my body!"

As Ymir flexed and swelled his muscles, the chains pulled taut. Shirone frowned. But if his opponent was coming head-on, a mage's answer was to redirect the force.

"How about this?"

With another motion of his arm, Shirone sent Ymir flying far beyond the edge of the cliff.

Suspended in midair, Ymir looked at Shirone with a stunned expression.

"You..."

He tried to speak, but before the words left his mouth, gravity seized him, and his body plunged down into the abyss.

7. Heaven (1)

Ymir, plummeting, gazed at the receding bridge above him. Only when the landscape became obscured by clouds did he finally escape the sense of futility gripping his heart.

"Those damn mages..."

He didn't care if he slammed into the ground below. Better to have a durability contest with the earth waiting below than to waste away as a mere "part".

At least, that's what he told himself.

But the moment the boy appeared, that smell returned. The sharp, metallic scent of the battlefield.

It wasn't over yet. The hottest place in Heaven remained the Grand Hall of World.

"There's no way I'm missing out on that."

He had to reach the Grand Hall of World.

Using his "part" power for a leap would weaken him even further, but the battlefield's call—its smell of blood—left no room for hesitation.

"Hrrruuuuph!"

Ymir inhaled deeply, swelling his body.

As he deprived himself of oxygen, his skin hardened like porcelain. The blood drained from his face, and life faded from his eyes.

His lips parted, and his pulse stopped.

And so, Ymir died.

Boom! His corpse's front exploded, and another Ymir, identical in form, emerged from within.

With immense propulsion, the new Ymir leapt dozens of meters upward, slamming his fingers into the column supporting the bridge.

"Phew. Every time, it pisses me off."

For someone who pursued power, the weakening of his strength was an unbearable humiliation. Especially since being reborn as a part required dying first, a process he detested to the core.

He endured all this humiliation for one reason: to witness the end of the battle with his own eyes.

Clinging to the column, Ymir pressed his feet against it and relaxed his shoulders. With a pull of his arms and a powerful push, his massive body defied gravity and soared upward.

Art of Life progress: 80 percent.

Shirone glanced back at the Grand Hall of World. As he approached the entrance, Peophe transferred all the memories she had accumulated thus far to him.

Shirone looked down at Rian, who was bleeding heavily.

"Are you okay? Sorry I'm late."

“No, you’re not late. Go and save the women.”

Rian was a wreck. He would need at least some time to recover his stamina before he could even think of returning home.

“Shirone!”

Amy’s voice rang out as she cried out to him. Her suppressed emotions finally erupted, tears pooling in her eyes. She thought she had held up well, but the distress she hadn’t been fully aware of had finally broken through.

“There’s no time! Once the information is transmitted, it’s over!”

Shirone understood exactly what she meant. His fingertips trembled with rage.

Throughout their time together, he had never felt that Amy needed his permission for anything.

But now, faced with this situation, he realized something important.

No one—absolutely no one—was allowed to harm Amy without his consent.

From Shirone’s shadow, Canis emerged.

“What’s the situation? Did you figure out a way to escape?

Did Ikhael agree to release the women?”

“Ikhael won’t be coming.”

“Does that mean all this effort was for nothing?”

“Maybe. But from here on, I’ll handle it.”

Shirone walked toward Ba’alv, though his real focus was on Cariel, who stood beyond.

“If you release the women now, I’ll just leave.”

“And what difference would that make? You cannot prevent destruction. The Final War will happen, and all humans can do is wait for death.”

“No. You won’t destroy us.”

“I don’t know what basis you have for such nonsense.

Heaven’s power is supreme. Without Ra, your world would not even exist.”

“That may be true. But Ra is no god.”

It wasn't defiance or sophistry—it was something Shirone truly believed. And Miro felt the same.

"Shirone, gods aren't particularly great beings. They're just designers of worlds."

When Miro had first told him that, Shirone hadn't understood. He thought it was the arrogance of an Unlocker who wielded Scale magic, belittling gods.

But now, after uncovering Heaven's secrets, he understood. Miro had known all along: beings who considered themselves great could never truly be gods.

There was only one god—the one who had designed the world.

"Humans aren't as foolish as you think. Any being we can see, feel, and analyze cannot be a god! We will fight! If the Final War comes, it's Heaven that will face destruction!"

Cariel's expression twisted. It had been a long time since he'd heard such blasphemous words.

"This settles it. Humanity deserves annihilation. Ba'alv, eliminate them."

"It would be my greatest pleasure, Lord Cariel."

Ba'alv's massive body began to squirm. Strange, unknown organs flailed uselessly as his massive form shifted.

"Canis! Stand back!"

Around Shirone, countless photons began to rise. The vibrating tension of the light was terrifying, ready to explode at the slightest touch.

As Ba'alv lunged at Shirone, a dozen photon cannons fired. Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

Amazingly, Ba'alv's massive body was pushed back, accompanied by a shriek so piercing it seemed to rip the air apart.

The photon cannons hammered his enormous body relentlessly.

Insect legs snapped, and the tentacles of mollusk-like appendages lost their elasticity as if chewed by massive jaws.

Ba'alv's body was completely overturned, yet the relentless cannon fire drove him backward toward Cariel.

Only then did Shirone cease his magic. It had been an attack fueled by all his rage, released at once.

Even so, he wasn't tired. Despite the increased power of his single strike, he felt no fatigue.

Watching this unfold, Canis felt a sense of despair. Was it truly possible for a human to elevate the power of their magic in just a matter of hours?

On battlefields, it wasn't uncommon to gain new insights at the cost of one's life.

But Shirone hadn't undergone a mental shift. Every measurable parameter that defined him had risen uniformly. 'This can't be happening. He can't have left me behind like this.'

When Canis had fought Shirone only a few months ago, the gap between them hadn't been this wide. After losing to Shirone's light magic, Canis had trained harder than anyone to surpass him.

And yet, Shirone had grown far beyond reach.

Why didn't he falter? What was the source of his strength?

Cariel addressed the fallen Ba'alv.

"Enough playing around, Ba'alv."

His expression was as calm as ever. Shirone's magic might have been impressive for a human—enough to place him in the top 40% of Heaven's subjects by their standards.

But it wasn't enough to defeat the Mara.

Even if there were ten Shirones, they wouldn't stand a chance against Mara's overwhelming power under Heaven's laws.

"I apologize, Lord Cariel. It seems the Grand Hall of World will sustain some damage."

"You have my permission."

At Cariel's command, the ground began to quake. The countless organs making up Ba'alv's body all writhed upward toward the ceiling.

“Kikiki! Waking my adorable test subjects from their slumber? This will be your nightmare.”

Chapter 219: 7. Heaven (2)

In some civilizations, Ba'alv was known as the God of Anesthesia—a Mara who put all living beings to sleep and transplanted their organs into his own body. Sleep demoted living creatures to the status of inanimate objects.

Any being caught by Ba'alv became no more than a tool, forced to live the rest of its existence as part of the monster's body.

Art of Life progress: 90 percent.

The over-100-ton Ba'alv flailed his bulky form as he chased after Shirone. Appendages resembling the front legs of a quadruped emerged from his shoulders and slammed into the ground.

The Grand Hall of World trembled under the impact.

“Kikiki! How does it feel? That’s the strength of 260 lions! Soon enough, you’ll become a part of my body as well!”

Art of Life progress: 91 percent.

Once the progress passed 90%, the percentage began updating with every single increment. The voice announcement of only 9% remaining sent a chill through Shirone’s heart.

“...Rone! Shirone!”

Canis’ voice snapped him out of his daze.

“What are you doing, spacing out like that? If you’ve got a plan, use it now! Don’t tell me you charged in here without a strategy!”

If Shirone had only come here because his magic had improved a little, Canis resolved to cast a Dark Wyrmspell on himself.

He'd rather die outright than spend eternity as a part of this Sleep Mara, suffering endlessly.

Hearing Canis' words, Shirone recalled the magic circle Ikhael had given him.

However, even if he could create the halo, he wouldn't be able to wield it immediately like an angel.

"There is something... but..."

"Then do it! What are you hesitating for?!"

From Ba'alv's lower body, twenty crab-like legs erupted.

As the rapidly moving legs pushed his massive 100-ton weight forward, Shirone and Canis simultaneously dove to the side.

Ba'alv leaped 10 meters into the air, slamming into the spot where they had just been.

The Grand Hall of World quaked, and metal dust rained down from the ceiling.

"I need time. Can you hold him off for a little while?"

Canis exhaled deeply. So, it had come to this after all.

But how long could he hold off the Mara, an opponent difficult to face even at full strength?

"Ten seconds. I can't manage a second more than that."

"I'm asking for one minute. Please."

As Shirone darted away, Ba'alv swung his tentacle-like appendages. The slimy tendrils smashed into the ground just as Canis twisted his body midair like a flying squirrel to evade them.

"Kihehehe! You're quite good at running away. Well, I suppose that's the only strength weaklings like you have."

"Tch! Says the oversized slug, full of himself despite being so slow."

Canis steadied his mind and began counting the seconds.

The difference in their raw power was overwhelming, but if he focused purely on evasion, survival wasn't entirely impossible. After all, just because a mosquito couldn't defeat a human didn't mean it couldn't avoid being swatted for a minute.

Meanwhile, Rian gripped his greatsword and struggled to his feet.

"I... I have to go..."

He couldn't remain idle any longer. Shirone was preparing something, and if nothing else, he needed to help Canis buy time.

At that moment, Peophe looked outside and screamed.

"Th-That!"

When Rian turned to look, the King of Giants, Ymir, was charging toward them with fury burning in his eyes. His target was clear—Shirone, who had humiliated him.

Dragging his broken body, Rian mustered all his strength to tackle Ymir, pushing the giant's body to the side. As Rian rolled across the ground, he clung to his greatsword and blocked Ymir's path to Shirone.

'What...? How is this possible?'

He had thrown himself in desperation, but he hadn't expected Ymir to be pushed back. It felt as if Ymir had grown weaker than before.

Ymir stood up, brushing off his knees.

"This makes three times. But this is getting tiresome."

"I am Shirone's sword. You will not get past me as long as I am alive."

Thanks to Peophe's telepathic ability, they could now understand each other's words. But Ymir only frowned, visibly disappointed.

"You're wrong. Strength does not exist to protect something. The essence of strength is destruction. Without understanding that, you'll never be able to stop me."

Ymir moved like the wind. While his raw strength seemed diminished, his agility had increased instead.

A barrage of rapid blows rained down on Rian's body.

Already battered to his limit, Rian couldn't even counterattack.

But that was enough for him. As long as he was alive, Ymir wouldn't reach Shirone.

'Just hold on. Just a little longer, and I can die in peace.'

Ymir's eyes began to glow a deep red. No matter how much he attacked, Rian wouldn't fall. Even after destroying everything in sight, Rian endured as if there was still something left unbroken.

"Rian! Rian! Stop it, you bastard!"

Tess screamed, her tear-streaked face twisted in agony.

"Please stop hitting him! You're going to kill him!"

But Ymir didn't stop. His assault carried a madness different from what one might feel in an ordinary battle.

The collision of life against life was palpable, an electrifying sensation running through his skin.

It was thrilling. Rian was an utterly fascinating human.

"Magnificent! Destroying you will be my mission!"

A sound like tearing flesh echoed as Rian's body shook violently.

Unable to bear it any longer, Tess shut her eyes. Yet she could still feel it—through every sense—Rian was dying. Tears streaming down her face, Tess turned to Cariel and screamed.

"Fine! I'll bear them! I'll give birth to as many Nephilim as you want, so please, just stop this!"

Cariel was unmoved.

"Creating Nephilim is inevitable. And Ymir is not under my control."

Art of Life progress: 96 percent.

Ymir paused his assault, breathing heavily. He was shocked. What on earth was this human made of?

Rian should have been dead—no, he *had* to be dead.

Standing there, unable to even raise his guard, Rian looked devoid of any life force.

And yet, he still clutched his greatsword.

How? Ymir had pulverized every muscle in his right arm. It should have been impossible to hold steel using only the tendons.

‘No. He’s nothing but a corpse. His body has simply stiffened.’

Despite being certain of his victory, Ymir didn’t feel as though he had won.

“I’ll end this for good!”

Gritting his teeth, Ymir widened his stance and raised his fist, preparing to deliver a final, decisive blow.

At that moment, Rian’s greatsword began to rise. Slowly, ever so slowly. When Ymir widened his field of vision, he realized that in the entire battlefield, Rian was the only one moving.

‘Tch! This again?’

Having fought countless wars, Ymir recognized this phenomenon as the seesaw of time. When the world’s pace suddenly accelerates, it can feel as though time slows for the one perceiving it.

As one side speeds up, the other side moves slower.

In this case, Ymir’s slowed perception meant Rian’s arm was moving with blinding speed.

‘Damn it!’

Ymir suddenly understood how the boy before him, broken as he was, could still move.

His mind had not been destroyed. That unbroken will was moving his body directly.

This was a technique that transcended the biological mechanics of life—where the mind gives orders, and the body obeys.

It was an art reserved only for the highest-ranking giants: Incarnation.

Schema, the art of giants, had always been linked to this principle. Incarnation was a similar concept in the human realm.

In Schema, swordsmen reinforced their brains to control their bodies via mental locks.

But when those locks were pushed beyond their limits, the mind and body fused, allowing the body to move precisely

as the mind willed.

In the human world, this phenomenon was referred to as Divine Transcendence.

‘Keh keh. If only you’d shown me this from the start.’

Ymir twisted his body to dodge as he watched Rian’s greatsword rise toward the ceiling.

Just when he thought he’d shifted enough to evade it, time suddenly snapped back to normal speed.

The greatsword disappeared from view. At the same time, Ymir’s severed right arm spun through the air.

Ymir’s face twisted bitterly. The faster Rian moved, the slower time seemed to flow. The fact that Ymir couldn’t fully dodge the blow meant that evasion had been impossible from the outset.

BOOM!

When the greatsword struck the ground, Rian’s right arm burst apart. Torn muscles dangled, and his exposed bones jutted out grotesquely.

His body couldn’t withstand the speed of Divine Transcendence.

Art of Life progress: 97 percent.

The Art of Life was nearing completion, just as the lives of the humans approached their end.

Canis, struck by Ba’alv’s tentacle, was flung dozens of meters into the wall, where he collapsed, unable to rise again.

“Ba’alv, finish this.”

“Yes, Lord Cariel!”

Having dealt with Canis, Ba’alv charged toward Shirone. The one minute Shirone had requested had already passed, yet nothing seemed to have changed.

“Shirone! Watch out!”

Shirone didn’t hear a word. His focus was entirely consumed by the process of fully unlocking and rewinding his Immortal Function, leaving no room for his senses to intervene.

“Kahaha! I’ll hang you from the most hideous part of my body!”

A scorpion-like tail emerged from Ba’alv’s back, its stinger tipped with a black droplet. A single injection of that venom could paralyze even a dragon.

At that moment, Shirone’s eyes snapped open. *Whoosh!* A two-meter-wide circle formed around him, deflecting Ba’alv’s attack with a shockwave.

Cariel’s face twitched in confusion as he observed.

‘No... it can’t be. That’s impossible.’

It wasn’t within the realm of possibility for a human to wield the powers of an angel. No mortal mind could comprehend such abilities.

So why was he feeling this unease? What was this lowly, oppressive anxiety gnawing at him?

“Ba’alv! There’s no time!”

“KIEEEEEEEEEK!”

At Cariel’s command, Ba’alv screamed and launched himself at Shirone in a frenzied charge.

Shirone’s halo spun at the speed of light, a crimson dot glowing at its center. The first magic circle began to call forth countless concepts.

The Magic Circle of Angels.

Infinite Light of Judgment Halo.

Cariel’s expression turned to one of utter shock as the halo bloomed into countless magic circles like a lotus flower.

It was truly a Halo.

It was impossible for a human to manifest something like this on their own. Someone had to have taught him.

But who? Who in Heaven would dare teach a human the Halo?

As Cariel struggled with the implications, Peophe flew toward the women.

“Hurry! Quickly!”

“Got it! Just a little more!”

Using spiral force, she twisted the cuffs binding them.

Thanks to Canis, who had already severed more than half of the restraints, Peophe was able to break them easily.

Meanwhile, Cariel couldn't take his eyes off the Halo.

What was unfolding before him was far more serious than the Nephilim.

The betrayal of an angel was a crisis that shook the very foundation of Heaven.

He had to know who was responsible.

And that being had to be annihilated.

Ba'alv deployed every organ in his body to crush Shirone, but his attacks stopped before reaching him, as if hitting an invisible barrier.

"Kreeeeek!"

Ba'alv tried with all his might, but it was futile. It was like a child trying to kill its mother—a higher law recorded in the divine authority prevented even proximity.

Brilliant beams of light slammed into the Halo, birthing countless interlocking magic circles that turned like gears.

As the density of information within the Halo exceeded 80%, its concepts transformed, and its rotation accelerated exponentially.

The sheer speed of the halo's spin felt like it could unravel the entire world.

Ba'alv's face turned pale as he realized what the magic circle represented. His legs gave out, and he collapsed with a thud.

He had encountered the one thing that every Mara feared most.

"Hiiik! Ata...! Ata...!"

Desperate, Ba'alv used every limb he could move to crawl toward Cariel, but his disoriented state left him incapable of properly pushing himself forward.

Abandoning all will to fight, Ba'alv looked back and screamed.

"Lord Cariel! Run! It's the Power Amplification Halo—Ataraxia!"

Cariel knew this already. Yet he didn't move. His mind was a storm of thoughts, as though time itself had frozen.

Ataraxia.

The strongest law in Heaven, capable of subjugating countless angels. Ikhael's trademark, said to make even the fiercest Mara scream.

Had someone truly passed such power to a human?

No.

It was more plausible that his eyes had betrayed him and that the one standing there was actually Ikhael disguised as a boy.

'Ikhael... have you truly gone mad?'

No, she hadn't gone mad.

She had genuinely resolved to stop the war, even at the cost of abandoning her honor as the strongest angel and siding with humanity.

Art of Life progress: 98 percent.

Cariel's body trembled. Just 2% remained. And yet, Ataraxia loomed before him.

He saw Shirone's gaze locked onto him. Was it truly possible for a human to unleash such a spell?

Perhaps it was a deception. The Art of Life had to continue.

But if what was happening now was real...

Then he would face annihilation.

"IKHAAAAEEEEEL!"

Cariel's roar of rage echoed as Shirone's Photon Cannon fired.

Chapter 220: 7. Heaven

(3)

Kwakwakwakwakwakwa!

Blinding light erupted from Ataraxia.

Shirone couldn't control its output. The further the light spread, the more it filled the Grand Hall of World with an overwhelming radiance.

Ba'alv flailed his dozens of limbs, crawling across the ground, but he was soon swept away by the wave of light and disappeared without a trace.

Everything caught in the path of the light was obliterated, as if space itself was being pushed aside.

Boooooom!

Great fire engulfed the far edge of the Grand Hall of World.

The massive dome's barrier exploded. Two incomprehensibly large beams of light split the heavens.

"Huff... Huff..."

Shirone dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. His legs gave out beneath him as he saw the destruction he had wrought.

Half of the Grand Hall of World was gone. Even though he had caused it, he could hardly believe it.

What had Ikhael been thinking when she engraved such power into his mind?

Only one figure remained in Shirone's sight: Criel.

Behind the archangel, the sky was visible, and the ground had been carved into a massive Y-shape.

Above Criel's head, a golden halo spun at an incredible speed.

Art of Life progress: 99 percent.

Shirone whipped around in a panic.

Amy was clawing at the panel embedded in her forehead, desperately trying to tear it off. Blood ran down her skin from the ferocity of her efforts, but it wouldn't budge. Just as despair began to take hold, the voice sounded again. Transmission canceled. Art of Life: halted.

The panel embedded in Amy's forehead slid out and disintegrated into particles smaller than dust.

Shirone exhaled in relief and turned back to Cariel.

The archangel's face was twisted in fury. Despite the slight time lag in the system's announcement, it was clear that the activation of Ataraxia had made him to regain his strength.

For Cariel, there had been no other choice.

Even if he had completed the Art of Life, the result would have been the same. Ataraxia's amplifying power was beyond anything he could withstand while pouring his mental power into the Art of Life.

Cariel unfolded his massive golden wings and ascended into the air.

"Do you understand now, foolish human? This is the Art of Life. Even for an archangel like me, creating life requires abandoning everything else and devoting myself entirely to the process!"

Cariel looked down at the scorched remnants of the Grand Hall of World.

The magic Shirone had cast was nothing more than the work of a novice. And yet, the destruction was this severe.

Why was such power allowed to fall into the hands of a human?

Humans couldn't control themselves. No matter how virtuous one might be, the allure of power would always lead to corruption.

This boy would undoubtedly strive to become a king. Using the powers of an angel, he would dominate the world, indulging in all manner of hedonism.

'Perhaps that wouldn't be so bad.'

Wouldn't it be better to just let him back?
Letting them destroy themselves might be better. That way, humanity would perish without the need for the Final War. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He knew that Ikhael must have been aware of these possibilities.
So why? Had she truly lost her mind?
How could anyone in their right mind consider passing down the law of an angel to a human?
'Does she trust this boy that much?'
What had Ikhael seen in this human?
Of course, Cariel recognized Shirone's talent. Without innate ability, no one could possibly accept the law of an angel. But even that wasn't a sufficient explanation. There had to be something more—something Cariel didn't know.
Which was why he had to act now. If he let Shirone escape, Heaven's most powerful weapon would fall into human hands, threatening the celestial order.
"Do not beg me for mercy any longer."
It was a declaration of war, but Shirone and his companions were too preoccupied with their escape to hear him. Arin was carrying Canis, and Amy was shielding Peophe. Tess ran to retrieve Rian, but Ymir still stood in the way. Ymir, who had been gazing indifferently at Tess's murderous glare, shifted his attention to the kneeling Rian. Rian's upturned face, staring at the ceiling, no longer resembled that of a living person. His right hand had been reduced to bone, yet he still gripped his greatsword.
It was the terrifying result of the Incarnation, where the mind and body had fused into one.
"One win, one draw, one loss. Shall we call today a tie?"
"..."
"Keh keh, so weak. If you're like this, what'll be left when you face my true body?"
Ymir picked up his severed right arm that turned into liquid and shoved it into Rian's mouth. The black liquid melted

into Rian's throat and disappeared.

"Take him. Treat him well. If he survives, perhaps he can save humanity. That would make for an entertaining war for me."

Ymir tossed Rian across the ground, where he slid toward Tess. She hurriedly picked him up.

The sight of his skeletal arm brought tears to her eyes, but she had to focus on getting him home for treatment.

A drone flew down and attached itself to Tess's arm as a gauntlet.

She cast one last furious glare at Ymir before turning and running to join Arin.

Ymir, his body beginning to melt from the legs upward, smiled faintly.

He hoped Rian would survive. Humanity needed to grow stronger—strong enough to force the King of Giants to awaken once more.

Destroying a stronger humanity was his destiny.

'The day will come when we fight again. Until then, I'll take a long nap.'

Ymir dissolved into a black liquid. No fragments of him remained in Heaven. He would slumber forever in Eternal Ice Wall, waiting for the Final War.

Shirone, we're ready!

Arin's voice echoed in Shirone's mind. He wanted nothing more than to escape immediately, but the Metagate would take 30 seconds to activate. Timing their exit would mean the difference between life and death.

Shirone knew it was impossible for all of them to escape with Cariel in his fully restored state.

Someone had to stay behind and buy time for the others.

Arin. Open the Metagate now. Get everyone out, no matter what.

What about you?

I'll hold Cariel back. If I can delay him for just one second, that'll be enough for you to escape.

But Shirone! None of us could—
Please. Make sure Amy gets home safely.
It was clear what he meant. If Amy knew Shirone was staying behind, she would refuse to leave.
Arin couldn't argue with him. Someone had to survive, even if it came at the cost of another's life.
Canis had made that choice. So had Rian. Now Shirone was making it to save the ones he held dear.
Alright, Shirone. Signal me when you're ready.
Shirone steadied his resolve.
What would become of him? His friends wouldn't return to Heaven to rescue someone whose fate was uncertain.
If he died quickly, that would be a mercy. But if Cariel captured him, he might face endless experiments.
He was terrified.
Everyone else would escape, leaving him behind.
'I'm sorry, Headmaster. You were right all along.'
A bitter smile tugged at Shirone's lips. Then his gaze sharpened, locking onto Cariel with unwavering determination.
He had to charge forward. It would take just one second to activate the Metagate and step through it. Somehow, he needed to distract Cariel for that single second.
By now, Arin had probably explained the plan to the others. None of them would know that Shirone planned to stay behind.
Shirone took a deep breath.
It was the moment of farewell.
Arin! Now!
As Arin activated the Metagate, Shirone lunged at Cariel.
Amy turned, her eyes wide with shock.
'Why? Shirone?'
This wasn't the plan they had agreed upon. Hadn't they decided that everyone would throw themselves at the escape together, leaving the outcome to luck?

The sadness on Arin's face instantly gave Amy an understanding of what was happening. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she reached out her hand.

"No! Shiro—!"

Arin wrapped his arms around Amy's waist and leaped into the Metagate's portal. Tess, carrying Canis and Rian, also dove into the portal, her eyes squeezed shut.

'Shirone, please... let's meet again.'

Shirone tilted his head back, letting the tears fall from his eyes. His expression was a mix of joy and sorrow.

It was fortunate that Cariel wasn't paying attention to his friends. Perhaps, from the start, Cariel had only been after him. If that were the case, it was almost a relief.

If he could save his friends, Shirone would gladly allow himself to be captured.

Don't do it, Shirone.

Startled by the sudden mental resonance, he looked to the side. Flying alongside him was Peophe, smiling softly.

Peophe, why are you still here?

Her thoughts quickly penetrated his mind.

Humans are such strange creatures. You choose your own paths in life. And for that choice, you're even willing to accept death.

What are you talking about all of a sudden?

A wave of anxiety swept over Shirone. He felt as if something was happening that he didn't understand.

It was entirely possible. Perhaps the real reason Arin had agreed to the plan was...

'No, that can't be. It *mustn't* be.'

This little fairy had been helping them all along. Even if he were left alone in Heaven, he wouldn't feel completely lost as long as Peophe was by his side.

Annihilation is a terrifying thing. But when I watched you all, I thought to myself—humans, who can sacrifice their lives for those they love, are truly magnificent.

Peophe, don't do this.

Go back to your friends. And...

Tears welled up in Peophe's eyes.

I love you, Shirone.

Peophe severed the mental connection and charged at Caryl.

Shirone stared blankly as she flew away. Moments later, his legs stopped moving of their own accord, and his body turned toward the Metagate.

"Ugh... Ugh!"

Blinded by tears, Shirone ran toward the Metagate.

The world seemed distorted, as if he were underwater.

Faced with a miraculous chance to escape, he felt endlessly weak.

He could go back. He could return to the world he knew, to everyone he cared about.

'Mother, Father, I'll come back. I'll definitely return and—'

Shirone came to an abrupt halt. Conflicting emotions battled within him, each carrying equal weight. But one thought rose to the forefront—a promise he had made to Peophe.

"If I get captured, will you come save me? Because... we're friends, right?"

"Of course."

"Of course... Peophe."

His voice trembled as he clenched his fists. Summoning the last reserves of his strength, he cast Teleportation magic.

Her words, "I love you", echoed in his mind like a phantom.

For the one-year-old fairy, love was such an immense concept. It wasn't romantic love, nor the love between friends or family—it was simply a singular, pure love.

Peophe had been a fairy with an untainted, radiant soul.

Leaving behind a friend like that to return home would be a pain greater than death.

'Peophe! Please! Please wait for me!'

Peophe, facing her impending death, was paralyzed with fear. Was this what annihilation felt like? Everything was terrifying and unfamiliar.

With every passing moment, an unknown world unfolded before her, and her emotions swung between extremes. Had she made the right choice? Were her words to Arin spoken with complete sincerity?

“I’m Peophe. If someone must stay behind, let everyone else go. I’ll stop Cariel.”

“But... what about you?”

“I can’t leave Heaven anyway. Besides, as Heaven’s ministry of internal affairs, this is my responsibility.”

Peophe forced herself to smile.

‘It’s okay. I am a Fairy of Spiral. No matter how shaken I may be, I always move forward.’

She would never see Igrin, who had recognized her worth, again. But having reached this realization at the end of her life, she was content.

It wasn’t the Rite of Liquor itself that was remarkable. What was truly remarkable was the willingness of humans to accept it through their own sacrifice.

She was glad Shirone had been able to survive.

“What an arrogant little fairy.”

Cariel scoffed, extending his hand. With his power, he could erase a fairy in an instant.

Sensing her end, Peophe’s lips quivered, and she began to sob.

But she didn’t back down. With both hands, she unleashed all her strength in a spiral of energy.

“Peophe! Stop!”

Shirone’s unexpected voice startled Peophe, and she turned around. At that moment, Cariel lunged. The angel’s slender hand aimed straight for Shirone’s neck.

‘I won’t let you go. You, at least!’

Cariel intended to capture Shirone, dissect the secrets of Ataraxia, and make its power his own—no matter how cruel the methods required.

Kaaaaaaah!

A violet longsword pierced between Cariel's fingers. A black-haired man suddenly stood between Cariel and Shirone. It was Ashur, one of Ikhael's subordinates, and a three-horned Mara.

"Ashur... Even you intend to stand in my way?"

"I bear a message from Lady Ikhael."

Cariel's eyes burned with fury.

A mere three-horned Mara dared to relay a message? Did Ikhael still believe she commanded Heaven?

Once, he had respected her. But she had done something unforgivable.

"Does that disgrace dare send me a message?"

"Watch your words."

"I'm not wrong. The once-noble archangel debased herself, bearing the child of a mere human—"

"Ca-ri-el!"

Ashur's eyes widened like a demon.

"I told you. This is a direct message from Lady Ikhael."

Cariel fell silent. If it was truly Ikhael's command, he couldn't ignore it.

"She said that if you harm this boy, she will never forgive you."

Cariel's nose wrinkled in frustration. He couldn't comprehend her motives.

Ikhael had fallen—she had become a disgrace.

Yet he had still held some respect for her, the last vestiges of his admiration for the angel he had once revered.

But this? This betrayal was a blow he couldn't accept.

The archangel, who had risen to lead the angels, was now devoting herself to a mere human. Why?

Unable to respond, Cariel could only maintain his pride through silence. Ashur turned to Shirone and said.

"Go. People will be safe. I swear it on Lady Ikhael's name."

Exhausted from his Teleportation spell, Shirone could barely move. But hearing Ashur's words brought a faint smile to his lips.

If it was Ikhael, he could trust her. She was the one who had entrusted him with everything.

“Goodbye, Shirone.”

Peophe said softly, activating her spiral power to launch Shirone into the Metagate. And those words were the last thing Shirone heard in Heaven.

Chapter 221: 1. Memories of Galliant (1)

Kergo Autonomous District.

The room where Shirone and his companions had stayed was neatly arranged.

In the still air, a black sphere formed. It resembled a two-dimensional hole, and from within it, five people were expelled.

Amy, tumbling across the floor, crawled toward the portal and called out for Shirone. She couldn't believe that he wasn't coming back.

Tess and Arin grabbed hold of her before she could dive into the portal.

Amy resented them for stopping her. They should never have left Shirone behind.

"Let go! Move! I'm going to save Shirone!"

"Amy! If you go in, you won't come back! We have to wait!"

"Wait for what? You're the ones who left Shirone in that tunnel!"

"No! Peophe—!"

Arin stopped mid-sentence and turned to look at the portal. From the other side of space, Shirone came flying through, spinning uncontrollably.

Tears welled up in Amy's eyes.

She opened her arms and caught him, tumbling to the floor under the force of the Spiral's energy. She was so overwhelmed with joy that she couldn't even feel the pain. Arin watched as the Metagate's portal faded away, thinking of the fairy who had stayed behind in Heaven.

'Thank you, Peophe.'

The portal had opened inside the room provided by Kergo's chief.

Heaven was far away, but since they had traveled through the Goffin's Gate, there was no issue of time relativity.

Calculating based on the solar calendar, about three days seemed to have passed.

"Rian! Rian...!"

Tess's tears dripped onto Rian's face. Though she had returned alive, there was no joy in it. The man had always declared that he would become the world's greatest swordsman, yet now he had lost an arm.

Rian's right arm was reduced to bare bone. He had tried to release his grip on the greatsword, but his fingers refused to unclench.

Tess was stunned. There was no muscle left—his tendons were severed, leaving his arm dangling uselessly—so how was he still holding his sword?

At that moment, the door burst open, and a Kergoan rushed in.

He froze for a moment, staring blankly at the women guarding their wounded comrades, then suddenly sprinted toward the exit, shouting.

"They've returned! They have returned!"

Arin picked up on the hostility in the warrior's aura. Amy, sensing the shift in the atmosphere, snapped out of her shock and asked.

"Arin, what's going on?"

"I don't know. But we should leave—immediately. That wasn't a friendly reaction."

With their wounded in tow, Amy and the others hurried out of the room. The cave's structure was complex, but no one had forgotten the path to the exit.

The problem was that there was only one way out.

The sound of footsteps echoed from the depths of the cave, and within moments, dozens of warriors blocked the exit.

"Where do you think you're running, traitors?!"

Arin used mental resonance to interpret their words.

“The crime of disgracing Kergo cannot be repaid even with death! We will flay your flesh for three days and three nights and dry your corpses under the sun!”

Even through translation, the words sent chills down her spine.

Amy couldn’t understand what had happened.

They had failed to complete Kadum’s request, but it had never been a formal contract in the first place.

Amid the warriors stood a familiar old man. His face was deeply wrinkled, and his muscular body had withered, leaving behind sagging remnants of its former bulk.

“You... no way...”

“You damned wretches!”

It was Kadum, the chief of the Kergo tribe.

Could someone age that drastically in just a few days? Had decades passed in Heaven while they were there?

“How dare you try to destroy Kergo! Give me back my lifespan!”

“We don’t know anything about this! What happened to you?”

“Don’t lie! If you didn’t tamper with something, then why has my lifespan been stolen?! I should have lived another sixty years!”

Then, a thought struck Arin.

‘Canis...’

Even if all the men had been given the opportunity to adjust their lifespan, only Canis would have made such a choice.

And she supported it. Compared to what Kadum had done to his own people, this was a lenient punishment.

But even Canis hadn’t foreseen this outcome.

As the warriors approached, radiating immense power, Amy instinctively activated her Spirit Zone.

She searched for Mahatu but couldn’t sense him anywhere.

If the Anti-Angel faction had been purged, then this place was enemy territory. They had no allies left.

“Capture them alive! They will suffer the most gruesome death imaginable!”

The Kergo warriors advanced with their weapons drawn. Each individual was powerful, but their collective energy was suffocating.

‘What should I do? Block the passage with Fire Wall? But that’s too dangerous in a cave.’

Just as five towering warriors prepared to charge forward with their spears, a commotion erupted near the exit.

Kadum, startled, turned and shouted.

“What’s going on?! What’s happening?!”

His aged body seemed to have affected his mental sharpness as well.

Moments later, the warriors guarding the rear were sent flying toward Amy and her group.

“Are you alright?”

Amy’s eyes widened in disbelief.

It was Mahatu, who she thought had been captured. More shocking, however, was the group he had brought with him.

Jiese, whom they had parted ways with after their translation work, stood under the protection of the Parrot Mercenaries. Beside him stood their leader, Marsha, and vice-leader, Freeman.

“Jiese? What are you doing here?”

“No time to explain! Hurry this way!”

Before Jiese could even finish speaking, the Kergo warriors charged.

To them, capturing Shirone’s group was an absolute necessity.

A civil war had already broken out within the Kergo Autonomous Zone.

The citizens had sided with the Anti-Angel faction, and if the situation continued, the Angel faction would be doomed.

“Freeman! Get the kids out of here!”

Marsha kicked Freeman’s butt forward.

Freeman, who had abandoned his Reverse Technique Tree, demonstrated unparalleled speed.

Not a single spear or blade could graze him. He had forsaken regeneration in exchange for extreme agility—a Gunner’s Schema specialized in speed.

Tuka! Tuka! Tuka!

Freeman dashed into the heart of enemy lines, firing his guns in all directions. Every time he pulled the trigger, a Kergo warrior was sent crashing into the cave walls. Soon, Freeman alone remained standing, surrounded by the lingering smoke of magic bullets.

Amy found herself doubting whether this was the same man she had once fought. Changing his Schema had completely altered his combat style.

“Let’s go. We can’t hold out forever.”

“A-Alright!”

Following the Parrot Mercenaries, Amy and the others fled the scene.

Though some of Kadum’s warriors pursued them, their numbers weren’t threatening.

The dictator who had ruled Kergo for centuries had lost all his power along with his decaying body.

“No! Don’t leave me! I don’t want to die like this! Please, give me back my lifespan!”

Kadum’s desperate screams echoed through the cave.

As they made their way out of Mount Toa, Shirone and his companions listened as Mahatu explained the situation.

When Kadum’s body began to age rapidly, the priests declared martial law and imprisoned the Anti-Angel faction. The one who rescued them was Jiese.

After arriving in the autonomous district to settle his debts with Falcoa, he sensed the unrest in the air and started investigating.

That was when he discovered that Mahatu had been imprisoned and led the Parrot Mercenaries to break him out.

“Thank you, Jiese. We wouldn’t have survived without you.”
Amy’s gratitude made Jis blush.

“This is nothing. Compared to what you guys did for me, I barely helped. But seriously, what happened? Why are all the men in such terrible shape?”

Amy checked Shirone’s condition. He still showed no sign of waking up.

“This is how things turned out. Can we find a councilor on the island? Or do we need to go to the Magic Guild?”

Marsha assessed the wounded.

Though Shirone and Canis were merely unconscious, Rian’s condition was dire.

The flesh on his right arm had been completely stripped away. Normally, a wound like this would have caused fatal blood loss, but strangely, there was no bleeding.

“What the hell happened to Rian? No, more importantly, how did he even survive this? Are you sure he’s going to be okay?”

Tess sobbed as she replied.

“I don’t know. He ate a giant’s arm, and I think that’s why. But as long as he’s alive, I’ll find a way to fix it, no matter what.”

“A giant? He ate an arm? What the hell are you talking about?”

Tess just shook her head.

When they reached the base of Mount Toa, the Parrot Mercenaries’ carriages were waiting.

Mahatu bowed his head in apology.

“The chieftain’s immorality placed the messengers of God in danger. Please forgive us.”

The Anti-Angel faction had been formed to oppose those who used the name of God for their own selfish desires. To Heaven, they were heretics, and their ideology could spark the Final War—but Amy couldn’t bring herself to blame Mahatu.

“One of my troublesome friends must have found Kadum intolerable. Honestly, we should be the ones apologizing. Things turned out okay in the end, but we nearly lost a lot of people.”

“This was inevitable. If Kadum had been at full strength, overthrowing him would have required far greater sacrifices. Thank you.”

Amy waited for Mahatu to ask more questions.

But he didn't. Even after they had returned from Heaven, he asked nothing. He had chosen to walk his own path.

Amy climbed into the carriage. Just as Mahatu prioritized the happiness of his people, she prioritized the safety of her friends.

Mahatu remained standing, unmoving, until Amy and her companions disappeared beyond the horizon.

“Quickly! Hurry!”

Marsha had searched all over Galliant Island and managed to gather one councilor and four healing mages, who rushed into Jis's home.

Upon examining Rian, the councilor recoiled in shock.

He could only pray that the boy hadn't been conscious while enduring such torture.

“Th-This is...”

Tess clung to him, sobbing.

“Councilor! Please save him! You can fix this, right?”

The councilor fell silent. What was he supposed to do?

Healing meant restoring something that had been damaged.

But when something had been completely destroyed—how could he bring it back?

“There's no helping it. I'm not a particularly skilled councilor, but even if I were, the answer would be the same. If we don't amputate, he could die.”

“Amputate?! He's a swordsman! He was supposed to become the world's greatest swordsman!”

“We need to cut from just below the shoulder. Unless he’d rather become the world’s strongest corpse.”

Tess collapsed to her knees. The councilor was right. Even if Rian woke up, seeing his skeletal arm would be enough to break him. There was no telling when the wound might start bleeding again.

“Damn it! This isn’t a joke!”

Meanwhile, the healing mages worked in pairs, casting restoration spells on Shirone and Canis.

They used Healing to enhance their bodily functions and Purify to clear their minds, but it felt like trying to fill a bottomless well.

“What happened to these kids? I’ve never seen patients remain unconscious for this long despite continuous treatment.”

Amy answered.

“They’re magic academy students. Their cases are more complicated than normal.”

“Gah! If we sustain this for more than ten minutes, we’ll have to rest for an hour. We’ve already exceeded our limit!”

“Please, just ten more minutes! I’ll pay you whatever you want!”

“I don’t need money at my age, but how about a date? You remind me of my first love.”

Amy’s eyes widened before she quickly nodded.

“Huh? Alright! I’ll do it! Just please, keep trying a little longer!”

“...Don’t make an old man’s joke sound so pathetic. Anyway, he must be important to you. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

As Amy expressed her gratitude over and over, one of the mages that casting Purify clicked his tongue and scolded his colleague.

“Was that really necessary?”

“How was I supposed to know?”

“No, I mean... I distinctly remember your first love being the ugliest woman in town.”

The two elderly mages burst into laughter. They had never been formally recognized as high-tier mages, but for the first time in years, they felt their blood pumping again.

“Let’s go full power, shall we?”

As they amplified their recovery magic, Shirone’s body began to glow.

The mage working on Canis, not wanting to be outdone, increased his own output.

Meanwhile, the surgeon turned to Tess and gave her instructions.

“Alright, lay him here. There’s going to be a lot of bleeding, so prepare plenty of towels.”

Still weeping, Tess carefully moved Rian’s body to the center of the bed. The surgeon then pulled a massive saw from his bag—a tool designed for amputation.

There was no need for anesthesia; Rian was already unconscious. Even if he were awake, there was no form

of local anesthesia that could dull the kind of pain he was about to endure.

Chapter 222: 1. Memories of Galliant (2)

“I’ll finish this as quickly as possible. Don’t worry. I once took a surgery course, you know.”

Unlike general medicine, surgical procedures required the use of Schema. Though not a master surgeon, the surgeon was skilled enough in basic Schema to swiftly sever the bone.

“I’m starting now. Hold him down tight—he might convulse.” Tess nodded, sobbing uncontrollably. Amy and Arin, watching, were at a loss for words.

If they had been the ones making this choice, they would have run away. Tess was the only one strong enough to bear this burden—to make a decision knowing she would take responsibility for Rian’s life.

“Huff! Huff! Alright, here we go—”

“Stop.”

Just as the surgeon placed the saw on Rian’s shoulder, a voice rang out, making him jump in shock.

Shirone had regained consciousness and was stepping down from the bed. The exhausted healing mages lay sprawled across the floor, panting heavily.

“Tess, what are you doing? Why are you cutting off Rian’s arm?”

“Shirone... Shirone...”

Tears streamed down Tess’s face. She didn’t know what to do anymore. Lost in the flow of events, she had surrendered all control over her decisions. And now, seeing Shirone awake was like a lifeline thrown into a storm.

“Shirone, what should I do? We’re going to amputate Rian’s arm. Rian... he’s...”

"No. Cutting off his arm will destroy his life."

"But he'll die if we don't! Rian will die!"

"Even if that's the case, I won't allow it."

Shirone's words pierced Tess's heart like a dagger.

Of course, Shirone was Rian's master. Even if he died, Rian wouldn't blame him.

But what about her? Who would understand the agony she was going through?

"Tess, think this through. Rian wouldn't want this."

"I know! I want Rian to become the greatest swordsman, too! But that's *his* dream, not mine! I don't care if he loses an arm!"

"How can you say something so cruel?! Could you say that in front of Rian when he's awake?"

"That's *why* I have to do it now! While he's unconscious, I'll make the decision for him! Rian is giving up the sword! So you should give up, too! Councilor, start now!"

"He's still holding his sword!"

Tess turned to look at Rian, her face going pale.

"Look at him! He's still gripping his sword! He's nothing but bone, yet he's still fighting! And you want to amputate him? Until Rian gives up himself, no one has the right to tell him to!"

Tess stared at Rian's arm.

Why wouldn't he let go of his sword? Was he really planning to remain Shirone's sword until his dying breath? If that was the case... then she would never have him to herself.

But it didn't matter. Because that was Rian. And she loved him for it.

"I love you... so much."

Tess buried her face in Rian's chest.

She would not allow the surgery. If he died still holding his sword, then he would remain a swordsman even in death.

Then, a faint voice escaped from Rian's lips.

"Te... ss..."

Tess's head shot up.

“Rian! I’m here! Are you awake? Does it hurt?”

“Shirone... Where’s Shirone...?”

“He’s fine! He made it back safely! We’re at Jiese’s house! But you’re the one in the worst condition!”

Rian shifted slightly and raised his upper body. When he turned to look at his skeletal right arm, everyone held their breath.

“What... is this?”

Contrary to expectations, Rian didn’t even flinch. Looking at his ruined arm, he remained completely calm—a superhuman level of composure.

Tess realized that Shirone had been right. She had known it all along. From the moment Rian had sworn his knight’s oath, he had carved that determination into his very soul.

“Why is my arm like this? What happened to it?”

Rian was more irritated than anything else. With his nerves severed, he felt no pain. His hand, still clutching his sword, didn’t even feel like it belonged to him.

“Rian, it’s... well...”

At that moment, his greatsword fell from his hand with a loud *clatter*. The bones of his five fingers snapped open, and blood gushed from his shoulder.

“Rian! Rian!”

The councilor pressed down on Rian’s shoulder and shouted.

“He’s bleeding out! Bring the hemostatic agent and bandages, now!”

No one moved.

The councilor shot them a murderous glare, but then—a strange sound came from Rian’s arm.

Squelch. Squelch.

It was the sound of a viscous liquid sloshing.

The councilor turned his head. Like everyone else, he stared blankly at Rian’s arm.

The blood spilling from his shoulder was forming into a shape.

It was impossible. Even the greatest healing mages couldn't alter the very nature of blood.

"Y-You... what are you...?"

Rian watched his arm regenerate with a calm expression. As his nerves reconnected, he gradually began to feel it as his own again. He carefully flexed his fingers, then turned to his friends.

"Can someone explain what's happening to me?"

"You... ate a giant's arm. You cut off the giant's arm, and then he fed it to you. It turned into some kind of liquid—like the kind used in the Rite of Liquor—and went down your throat."

"I cut off a giant's arm? Seriously?"

The memory was fragmented—nothing more than scattered images.

But he vaguely recalled the moment he had severed Ymir's arm.

'At least I managed to land a hit.'

He clenched his fist, feeling a surge of strength. Was this also part of the Rite of Liquor secrets?

The room fell silent. Rian turned to see everyone staring at him, jaws slack.

"What? Haven't you seen muscles before?"

"You... you're really okay? Your skin is even regenerating...!"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Shirone shouted.

"That's not the point, you idiot! We're asking *how* this is even possible!"

"I dunno. It just happened, so I guess I'll accept it."

Even for someone as fearless as Rian, shouldn't he at least question his own body? Or maybe he wasn't fearless. Maybe he was just stupid.

"Alright! He's awake!"

The healing mages assigned to Canis cheered.

Canis sat up, his eyelids half-open, and lazily glanced around before scowling.

“Shut up. I’m exhausted. Don’t wake me up.”

Then, he flopped back onto the bed and immediately passed out.

It made sense—he had suffered under the Object of Sleep for so long. But given the situation, the only thing his friends felt was sheer exasperation.

Arin gently stroked Canis’s hair and whispered.

“Sleep well, Canis.”

For three days after returning from Heaven, Shirone and his companions received the utmost care from Jiese and Yuna. They averaged 16 hours of sleep per day, spending their time either eating or sleeping again.

In the early evening, they would gather in the living room for dinner, and Shirone would recount the events that had transpired in Heaven.

However, he kept silent about the Final War.

Rian frequently broke objects with his right arm. His newfound strength was *too immense* to control. Tess explained that it would take time for him to develop the fine motor control necessary to regulate his power.

Tess spent every spare moment cleaning and maintaining her drone. She never let it leave her side, even caressing it in her sleep while making eerie sounds. Because of this, Amy and Arin were terrified every night.

Canis and Arin spent a lot of time alone together. It seemed they had found what they were looking for in Heaven, but they never shared what it was. However, Canis openly admitted that he was the one who had shortened Kadum’s lifespan.

Amy walked around with the Ancient Spirit, Jack O’Lantern, keeping its flickering flame beside her. When she commented on how cute it was, Rian said, “You’re cuter, Amy”.

When the men and women socialized separately, Amy would often stare at Shirone for long stretches of time. But

true to her meticulous nature, she never let anyone notice. Shirone spent a lot of time sitting on the couch, deep in thought. Whenever his mind drifted, Archangel Ikhael's face was the first to appear.

The insight of Ataraxia still burned brightly in his mind. Everyone who had ventured into Heaven had gained something, but none had received as great a gift as Shirone. Canis had thrown a fit, calling it unfair and demanding that Shirone teach him the secret. But Shirone truly had no idea how to explain it.

'Ikhael... are you doing well?'

Due to the nature of the Metagate, they had no choice but to leave it in Heaven. Its coordinates had been reset, but with Heaven's technological prowess, they might still find a way to bypass Miro's space-time barrier.

Yet, in the end, Cariel had not defied Ikhael's advice. As long as Ikhael stood on humanity's side, the Final War would not come.

At the same time, Shirone found himself longing to see her again. The thought of Peophe, grumbling on the outside but soft at heart, filled him with aching nostalgia.

"Shirone, let's sleep. You should rest properly for tonight, at least."

Amy stood in the doorway, wearing her pajamas.

Bathed in moonlight, she looked beautiful.

For the past few days, both of them had felt a silent obligation to talk about something. But in the end, they simply smiled at each other and let it be.

"Yeah... let's sleep."

Shirone entered the men's room, where Rian's snoring echoed like thunder. Beside him, Canis lay fast asleep, pressing a pillow tightly over his ears.

Shirone sat in a corner, gazing into the darkness. The realization that everything they had experienced was real sent shivers down his spine. His lips curled into a tense smile, his eyes reflecting the starlit sky.

That night.

Jiese, returning home after a long shift at the port, suddenly flung the front door open. Panting heavily, he scanned the room before bolting toward the men's bedroom.

"This is bad! Get up! Hurry!"

He threw open the door and shouted, only for Canis' pillow to hit him square in the face. No one woke up. After all, what could possibly be a big deal after traveling to Heaven and back?

"Seriously! Get up now! Don't come complaining to me later!"

Shirone rubbed his eyes, groggily waking up.

"Jiese... what's wrong?"

"Wake up the others and come downstairs! We need to leave—NOW!"

Without waiting for a response, Jiese rushed downstairs and stormed into the women's room.

"Girls! Wake up! Yuna, you too—hurry!"

"Ugh... what the hell...?"

Amy, still half-asleep, lay sprawled out like an animal. But as reality snapped into focus, her eyes shot open, blazing with fury.

"HEY! Do you have a death wish?! You don't just barge into a girl's room!"

"Agh! I'm sorry! It's urgent!"

It was only after seeing the girls in pajamas that Jiese realized his mistake. Tess, lying there with her bare midriff exposed, looked more like an adult woman than a teenager. But there was no time to hesitate. Grabbing Amy's hand, Jiese dragged her upright.

"Just trust me! If you don't get up now, you'll regret it later!"

"Fine, fine! Everyone, get up! Jiese has something to say!"

"Ughhh... I'm so tired. What is it now?"

By then, the men had also stumbled out of bed, rubbing their eyes as they came downstairs. Shirone, annoyed at

losing his precious sleep, peeked into the women's room out of curiosity.

Arin and Tess were straightening the blankets, while Amy, still half-asleep, was being dragged into the living room by Jiese.

"You better have a damn good reason for this. Otherwise, I'll beat the hell out of you for barging in here."

"Hit me all you want! But once you hear what I have to say, you'll change your mind!"

Despite some grumbling, everyone finally gathered in the living room.

Jiese hesitated, wondering how to break the news without shocking them to death. Then, he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Do you guys know what today is?"

"No clue. Is it your birthday?"

"NO! It's the day that comes once every ten years—!"

Before he could finish, Yuna suddenly burst into the room, still in her nightgown, shouting at the top of her lungs.

"BROTHER! KAIOS! KAIOS!"

Shirone tilted his head.

"Kaios? What's that?"

Not wanting to be outdone, Jiese yelled even louder.

"THE SEA DRAGON! KAIOS IS COMING!"

"Faster, please!"

The carriage carrying Shirone and his friends raced toward the port.

Amy bit her lip anxiously. They had no time to prepare, so she was still in her pajamas.

Chapter 223: 1. Memories of Galliant (3)

“Isn’t it already too late? Didn’t you say he’d only stay for about 10 minutes?”

“That’s why I told you I had to get up quickly. I was so busy taking care of you guys that I completely forgot. I only realized because the number of tourists wasn’t decreasing, even at night.”

“Aah, come on.”

The sea dragon Kaios is known to travel across three oceans along the equator over the course of ten years.

On Galliant Island, he stays for about 10 minutes, yet the number of tourists coming just to see the dragon reached a staggering 2,000.

When they arrived at the port, it was so packed with people that there wasn’t even a gap to squeeze through. Walking to the dock seemed impossible.

Someone shouted that there were 10 minutes left.

Canis, who was gauging the ratio of darkness in the surrounding space, grabbed Arin’s hand.

“Well then, we’ll be taking our leave.”

The two of them swiftly disappeared into the shadows. By casting Dark Port, they could reach their destination without being noticed.

Shirone and his companions were left dumbfounded.

Especially Amy, who trembled with rage as she cursed Canis’s appearance. From the names of animals and body parts she used, it was clear just how furious she was.

“What should we do? Isn’t there a way to get inside?”

“I’ll try talking to the people at the port. Just wait a moment.”

Amy grabbed Jiese before he could dash toward the management office.

"It's too late for that anyway. Do we just have to settle for watching from here?"

Someone shouted that there were 5 minutes left.

At that moment, flashes of light shot up from the edge of the crowd, illuminating the night sky. They were mages from the continent who had come to see Kaios.

Shirone and Amy exchanged grins.

"Alright! Let's go!"

Shirone's group soared into the sky using Teleportation, blending naturally with the flashes of light. In a situation like this, who could tell students apart from mages?

Contrary to their expectations that the breakwater would be the most crowded, most people were actually gathered on the outer side of the dock's boundary.

Though Kaios had never harmed people on Galliant Island, the sheer presence of a dragon was still intimidating.

On the other hand, mages and swordsmen accustomed to battle were gathered inside the dock.

The density of seasoned warriors—something one would usually only see in the mercenary market of the capital—was enough to prove just how popular the dragon was.

"Yo, I saved us a spot."

Canis, who had arrived first, greeted his friends without a single change in expression. Amy rolled up her sleeves and stormed toward him.

"You traitor! You ran off just to save yourself?"

"Is it really necessary to talk after life and death we through? We made it here, so we can just watch now."

At that moment, the crowd erupted into cheers.

Without even needing to see what was happening, Shirone's group instinctively turned and ran toward the edge of the dock.

A massive wall of water was surging in from the open sea. Judging by its size and speed, it was more than enough to

submerge the entire port.

“W-What? What the hell?!”

Shirone and his friends were struck with fear. As the tsunami closed in within 200 meters, they found themselves breathless.

Just as they thought they would be helplessly swept away, an enormous figure rose vertically from the sea.

The shape of the water collapsed, and thousands of tons of water surged skyward, drawn by Kaios.

“Uwaaaah! Waaaah!”

Shirone’s group screamed as if they had been electrocuted. The dragon had lifted the ocean itself. The magic power was beyond comprehension.

The rising column of water burst apart at 300 meters in the air, forming dozens of arches.

Kaios, encased within an arch spanning over a kilometer in radius, displayed his overwhelming majesty.

Kiiiioooooooooo!

A sorrowful yet beautiful cry echoed across the sea.

At that moment, a flash of light erupted behind Shirone.

People were aiming cylindrical devices at the sea dragon, firing bursts of light.

“Why are they doing that? Are they attacking it?”

Jiese chuckled at Shirone’s naive question.

“No, those are optical cameras. They’re devices that can capture light exactly as it is. I heard they’re incredibly expensive. But on a day like this, they sell like crazy. There are even professional photographers who travel the world just to take pictures of Kaios.”

As Kaios glided elegantly as if diving underwater, the Galliant autonomous government launched a massive display of fireworks into the sky.

According to Jiese, the tourism revenue was so immense that they spared no expense.

Watching the dragon swimming through the fireworks reflecting off the water-formed arches was a visual feast, a

spectacle as sweet as the finest dessert.

Amy, her eyes sparkling, turned to Jiese.

"Jiese, thank you. Just seeing this makes coming to the island worth it."

"Hehe, I promised, didn't I? That I'd make sure you all got a proper tour."

Tess, seeing Canis and Arin sweetly holding hands, felt a rush of emotion. Not wanting to miss such a golden opportunity, she stealthily clung to Rian's arm.

"W-What? What are you doing all of a sudden?"

Rian recoiled as if she were some kind of insect, leaving Tess utterly dumbfounded.

"Hey, isn't that too much? No matter how hideous I am, am I really worse than your arm?"

"N-No, that's not it! I was just really caught off guard!"

Under normal circumstances, she would have felt dejected, but the breathtaking spectacle over the sea was so dazzling and beautiful that it erased all other emotions.

The sea dragon turned toward the audience as if bidding farewell. The arches stretched rapidly toward the distant ocean, and twelve fireworks exploded against the silver-plated moon.

Tess suddenly began to sniffle.

"Hic... I don't know anymore..."

Her friends turned to her in surprise, especially Rian, who looked completely flustered.

"W-Why? I swear, it's not that I hate it! I was just surprised..."

"Shut up, you idiot. I got attached. What do I do now?"

Her friends felt the same way.

"We have to leave tomorrow, don't we? I don't want to say goodbye. Maybe I should switch to being a mage too? Then we'd see each other all the time at school."

"What are you talking about? Of course, you should be a swordsman. We can always meet after graduation."

Shirone's words reassured Tess, and she nodded repeatedly before pulling Amy and Arin closer to clasp hands together.

"Let's write letters to each other. Okay? We'll stay in touch no matter what."

Arin pointed to herself.

"M-Me too?"

"Of course! We're Heaven's Party members! Is there any bond stronger than this in the world?"

Amy recalled the first day she met Tess.

There had been awkward moments, but now, she truly enjoyed being with her. Who wouldn't love Tess, with her righteous and warm heart?

"Yeah. We'll definitely see each other again. Just us girls next time."

"Great! Heaven's Party is officially formed!"

Shirone's group made their way home.

Although shops remained open 24 hours due to the special occasion, they wanted to spend the final night of their vacation quietly together.

When they arrived, Jiese found a letter in the mailbox.

"Huh? It's from the captain. This one's for you."

"From Marsha?"

Shirone unfolded the letter and read through it carefully.

"Haha! This is just like her!"

Amy squinted suspiciously.

"What is it? What's so funny?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing."

"You! Hand it over right now! What, is it a love letter or something?"

When Amy lunged to snatch it, Shirone handed it over without hesitation.

Amy, flustered, hesitated.

"W-What? You're really just giving it to me? If it's important, I don't have to read it..."

"No, it's fine. Probably."

Probably? What was that supposed to mean? Grumbling, Amy read the letter—only to tilt her head in confusion.

There was nothing written on the paper.

“...What? It’s blank?”

“Yeah. But she still left a letter.”

Tess smiled knowingly.

“I see. She really did leave a letter.”

Shirone gazed up at the distant sky. The blank page contained everything she wanted to say.

This was Marsha. Someday, they would meet again.

‘I should write her a letter when I get back.’

He wished her the best on her journey ahead.

1. Waiting for School to Start (1)

Upon returning home, Shirone spent joyful moments with his parents, and whenever he had free time, he wrote letters to his friends.

Marsha had conveyed her emotions with a blank sheet, but her wit was impossible to match. That was why he put even more effort into filling his letters with words.

“All done. Now I just have to send it.”

He planned to go to the city tomorrow to mail the letters. By the time they reached his friends, the vacation would be nearing its end. Ever since returning from Heaven, he had come to appreciate the value of everyday life. He wanted to return to school as soon as possible and see his friends again.

“Shirone, come down and eat.”

“Yes, I’m coming now.”

Hearing his mother’s voice calling from the first floor, Shirone blew out the candle and left his room.

Capital City, Baschka.

In the noble district of the royal palace administration area stood the Mercodine estate.

On a modest dining table—unbefitting of a first-class noble—sat a meal consisting of nameless wild greens, the kind an

ascetic might eat.

Iruki's mother detested it, but the Mercodine father and son enjoyed simple meals. They disliked the dulling effect of satiety that followed eating meat.

Iruki ate rice with a fork and occasionally chewed on the greens.

Seated across from him was a man who looked exactly like him, only with a few added wrinkles.

This was Mercodine Albino, Iruki's father and the current head of the Order of Dragon Thunder^[1]. Though not a Savant, his knowledge was so vast that it was said no one in the world knew more than he did.

Albino suddenly asked an unusual question.

"How is the entropy problem going?"

"I think I've more or less solved it."

Iruki answered without even lifting his head. There was no bad blood between them, but in his mind, all that was needed for questions and answers were ears and a mouth. After finishing his meal, Albino set down his utensils and asked,

"Iruki, what is one plus one?"

"Two."

"No. It's three."

For the first time, Iruki looked up. This was a situation where eyes were necessary.

"No, it's two."

"Then make it three."

"Why?"

Albino shrugged.

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not?"

"Prove it and bring me the answer. If you can do that, you'll be one step closer to the solution you seek. This is your final assignment for the vacation."

"It'll take at least six days."

Albino's eyes gleamed.

“Oh? So you already have an idea?”

“No. But you’ll be leaving on a business trip in five days.”

Iruki resumed eating his rice—grain by grain. As long as he had the minimum energy to keep his brain running, satiety was the enemy. Thinking nonstop throughout the vacation had left even his Savant-like mind feeling overloaded.

Albino spoke again, this time a little late.

“I won’t check. I’ll just believe you solved it.”

“I didn’t know you trusted me, Father.”

Albino chuckled. Even if Iruki didn’t solve the Akashic Records within six days, it wouldn’t matter. He was simply proud that his son had calculated his business trip schedule first.

“No knowledge can surpass wisdom. Let’s say you’ve won this time.”

“Thank you for the meal.”

Iruki bowed his head and cleared the dishes. As Albino sipped his tea and read the newspaper, Iruki finished washing up and was about to leave when the head butler entered.

“Young Master, a letter has arrived. It’s from someone named Arian Shirone.”

“Huh? Shirone?”

Iruki’s face lit up as he rushed over, while Albino, pretending to read his newspaper, slyly observed his son.

Arian Shirone. Since his son had returned from finishing this semester, that name had come out of his mouth exactly 3,742 times—the most frequently spoken word.

In Albino’s view, Iruki was an outstanding talent. He possessed the genius of a prodigy and a depth of human emotion.

As a child, those very traits had caused him hardship, but after finishing this semester and returning home, he had changed.

He no longer feared his own talents. And that change must have been influenced by the boy named Shirone.

Chapter 224: 2. Waiting for School to Start (2)

“Haha! This is so like Shirone. How can a letter be this long?”

Seeing his son laughing so brightly was a rare sight at home. Finally admitting defeat, Albino put down his newspaper and asked Iruki.

“Is this the boy you mentioned?”

“Yes, he sent me a letter. He’s a very good writer.”

“If you’re that close, invite him over. An Unlocker, huh? I’d like to meet him at least once.”

“...Alright. I’ll try asking him.”

There was no soul in Iruki’s response. Introducing Shirone wasn’t the problem—it was introducing his eccentric father to his friends that was the *real* problem.

‘Six days from now, Father.’

Central City, Thaddia. Thaddia was home to the largest number of regional nobles in Tormia.

As a famous granary region, its financial foundation was solid, and while there were few forces expanding outward, internal competition for territory was fierce, leading to frequent shifts in the hierarchy. The West family, to which Nade belonged, was no exception.

During the vacation, Nade practically lived in his workshop. His eyes were sunken from staying up for two nights straight.

The workshop looked like an extension of a Paranormal Psychic Science Research Group. Tools with no apparent purpose lay scattered across the floor, and on the table rested the engine section of a mechanical device.

“Phew, I guess I’ll stop here for today?”

The season had transitioned into autumn, but the workshop was still humid. As he tossed off his shirt, a scar that ran diagonally across his back was revealed. It was an old wound, but at times, it throbbed unbearably.

Nade pulled a tarp over the table. If his family found out, they’d throw a fit over him wasting money on pointless things.

Though now fallen, just three generations ago, the West family had owned half of the Thaddia granary region.

No one had ever explained to Nade why their family had declined, but after living for seventeen years, he had a feeling there was no special reason. They had simply *spent it all*.

“Nade, Nade.”

As he returned to the mansion, a voice made his heart stop. The irony was that the voice belonged to his mother, yet to him, she was the most terrifying person in the world.

“Yes, Mother.”

“You’re good with machines, right? Go to the Jones family and fix something for them.”

“Let me just rest my eyes for a moment before I go.”

His mother’s expression twisted like a monster’s. That look alone was a lock that left Nade utterly immobilized.

As a child, he had tried rebelling against her. But when she started self-harming, he was condemned as the worst kind of ungrateful son.

There was no defeating a mother who inflicted wounds upon herself. In this world, no child can win against a parent.

“I’m just exhausted. I haven’t slept for two days.”

“What exactly do you do? You don’t go out to earn money, nor do you contribute anything at home. I never told you not to sleep, so why are you making excuses?”

Nade clenched his facial muscles, refusing to let his face twist into the same expression as hers.

“Do you not see how hard I’m struggling? Do you even realize how much it costs to send you to that prestigious magic academy? You might as well just disappear from this house! I can’t afford to support you anymore.”

Nade tried to recall a time when she had *ever* supported him. But no such memory existed—only the burning pain of the horrific scars carved into his back.

No one in the West family had ever considered using their remaining wealth to start even a small business. They did nothing. Because they had never done *anything* in their lives.

“...I’m sorry, Mother. I’ll go.”

A searing pain spread from his wound, as if it were burning. But he couldn’t let it show. The rest of the family avoided her—not because they were powerless, but because they didn’t want to deal with her.

And on the days she did harm herself, all the family’s frustration would be taken out on Nade.

As a child, he had wondered, *Why is it always me?* But as he grew up, he realized—there was no reason.

His family had always pushed their burdens onto someone else. And he was the only one who knew that he couldn’t do the same.

“Hurry up and go before the sun sets. The Jones family is looking for someone to inspect their boiler—why don’t you consider becoming a repairman?”

“...I think I’ll be able to graduate soon. Please, just let me finish school first.”

“That damn school is nothing but a parasite that sucks up money without teaching anything! Maybe I should just die instead!”

Nade wanted to understand his mother.

She had married into a wealthy family, only to watch them burn through their fortune. Of course, it was heartbreaking. But no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn’t find a single reason why he should become a boiler repairman

for their sake.

After his mother disappeared into the mansion, a hot breath escaped through Nade's clenched teeth.

It felt as if murderous intent was settling into every cell of his body. Just a little more... Just a little more, and it might explode.

"Young Master, a letter... Hiik!"

The approaching butler paled in fear. Only then did Nade snap out of it and shake his head. The moment he realized that his mother's expression was beginning to appear within himself, a second wave of pain struck.

"Ah... I didn't get much sleep. What is it?"

"A l-letter... from someone named Arian Shirone."

"...What? Shirone?"

Nade's face instantly lit up. He snatched the letter and eagerly read through Shirone's handwriting.

The moment he saw the words "I miss you", an overwhelming surge of emotion welled up inside him, and tears threatened to spill from his eyes.

"Just wait a little longer, Shirone! I'll be there soon!"

Clutching the letter tightly, Nade stormed out of the mansion. From now on, the Jones family wouldn't need their boiler fixed for the next ten years.

The main estate of Fortress, Serielle's family, was located in Creas, just like Amy's.

Although their noble rank wasn't particularly high, their lineage was prestigious, having produced many great doctors, making them well-recognized throughout the kingdom.

At school, she was Amy's best friend and a model student, but at home, she was a reckless troublemaker who let her younger brother, an aspiring doctor, take the spotlight while she stayed in the background.

Even now, she was on her third day in hiding to escape her mother's nagging. Her younger brother's room—where the

future greatest doctor was expected to emerge—was the one place in the house untouched by nagging.

“Hic... What do I do? This is so touching...”

Serielle, curled up under the blanket, couldn’t hold back her tears as she read a romance novel.

Sitting at his desk, her younger brother Bale was on the verge of losing his mind.

“Ugh, be quiet! I’m trying to study! Just go back to your own room! Or at least stop crying!”

Serielle clutched the tragic love story against her chest, savoring the lingering emotions. By her own evaluation, it was one of the best novels she had read during the break.

“It was such a Thadd love story... Ah, isn’t there a man like Joseph out there somewhere?”

Bale, who had been taking notes, paused and looked up.

“There is.”

“Really? Who?”

“Joseph.”

“You little—! Are you messing with me?!”

“Why not? If he doesn’t exist in real life, you might as well just hold on to the fictional character, haha.”

Serielle pursed her lips and glared at the back of her brother’s head. Since she had been imposing on him for a few days, she had held back her temper, but now he was getting way too comfortable.

Just then, the door swung open, and with her mother’s nagging, a letter landed on the floor.

“A letter came! I won’t tell you to study, so stop bothering your brother and come out. If you’re going to laze around, at least go take a bath. At this rate, I wonder if you’ll ever get married. Tsk, tsk.”

Serielle pouted and crawled out from under the bed.

She assumed it was from Amy, but when she checked the sender, it was someone unexpected.

“Oh? It’s Shirone! Shirone!”

Excited, Seriel quickly opened the envelope and began reading. Her expression softened instantly. She breathed in the scent embedded in the paper and held the letter close to her chest, mumbling,

“Ah... Isn’t there a man like Shirone out there somewhere?” Bale, who had been studying diligently, looked exhausted. ‘Shirone is a real person, you idiot. Just go date him.’

The words reached the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed them back. No words would reach this woman now. She had been buried in romance novels for days, so it was clear she was not in her right mind.

Creas Municipal Training Grounds.

Mark paid the hefty entrance fee and stepped into the training grounds. Having successfully skipped a grade alongside Maria, he was assigned to Class Six for the next semester and could hardly contain his excitement.

‘I’m finally going to have underclassmen in the advanced class!’

If he hadn’t met Shirone, this day would have never come. Ever since his defeat at the Bridge of No Return, he had chosen Shirone as his role model, training relentlessly until he achieved his goal.

“Hey, Maria.”

“Oh, you’re here? You came earlier than yesterday.”

Maria, who had been waiting at the training ground, teased him with a playful scolding. She had once been deeply depressed, even endangering students by activating the Bridge of No Return’s mechanical system, but after becoming Thadd’s protégé, her personality had brightened considerably.

“Sorry, my father was giving me looks. He kept saying there are plenty of good teachers at the Magic Association, so why do I have to train outside?”

“Well, it makes sense. The Slider family is closely tied to the Magic Association. Are you sure you want to keep training

with us?”

“No problem. I’m a man of my word.”

Mark winked and gave a thumbs-up. The truth was, he had barely escaped home this morning—even skipping breakfast. At some point, his fifteen-year-old eyes had started seeing his nineteen-year-old senior as a woman. ‘I must be out of my mind. I actually used to think about messing with such a cute woman?’

“Hey! Sorry for making you wait! I’m late!”

As Thadd rushed in from the entrance, Mark’s expression darkened. It was none other than his *greatest rival*. Though it was ridiculous that a master and disciple were competing for the same woman, a twenty-six-year-old man and a nineteen-year-old woman was a reasonable age gap. The real problem was that Thadd didn’t seem opposed to it either.

Maria, unaware of Mark’s inner turmoil, greeted Thadd with the warmest smile.

“No worries. We just got here, too.”

“Yeah, I was seeing off the Headmaster, so I got held up.”

“Oh? Where did the Headmaster go?”

“Just... had some business. Anyway, sorry for keeping you waiting.”

Feeling left out of the conversation, Mark was irritated. He had long accepted Thadd’s womanizing nature, but it bothered him even more when it came to Maria.

Just then, Maria clapped her hands and took a letter out of her bag.

“Oh, right! Have you seen this? A letter from Shirone arrived.”

“Huh? From Senior Shirone? I didn’t get one.”

“I’m sure you did. I picked mine up on my way here. I haven’t even read it yet.”

Maria playfully waved the envelope before opening it and reading. Her expression melted as she took in the kind words written inside.

“Ah... He’s really such an amazing person. Strong but gentle... Amy must be so lucky to be dating Senior Shirone.” Thadd’s face stiffened slightly.

To be honest, he had been about 70% sure Maria had fallen for him. But now, hearing her speak, he started to wonder if it was just admiration all along.

Seeing Thadd sulk, Mark felt triumphant.

Most of the younger female students spoke about Shirone like Maria did, so there was no reason for him to feel jealous. Besides, Amy was an unshakable wall standing beside Shirone.

‘Good! Now my goal of following in Senior Shirone’s footsteps is even stronger!’

Feeling uneasy, Thadd tried to regain his footing.

“Haha! Yeah, Shirone is great. But normally, people prefer older partners, don’t they? Or at least someone their own age. Younger guys aren’t that interesting.”

Mark immediately countered.

“Says who? Love has no borders, so why should age matter?”

“Age is more important than borders. Should we ask Maria? Which do you prefer—older or younger?”

Maria rested her chin on her hand, pretending to ponder deeply before sticking out her tongue playfully and dodging the question.

“Hehe, who knows?”

Both Mark and Thadd, who had been eagerly waiting, deflated in disappointment. She was probably a true master of push-and-pull.

Of course, they couldn’t just sit around chatting after paying such a hefty entrance fee. As Mark and Maria warmed up with sequential training exercises, Thadd looked up at the sky, thinking about Shirone.

‘Vacation’s almost over. What kind of trouble will he cause when he gets back?’

Ever since Shirone enrolled, his path had been truly unprecedented in school history.

And that was why it was concerning.

Depending on what their teacher returned with, their school life could change completely.

‘This time won’t be easy, Shirone.’

Chapter 225: 2. Waiting for School to Start (3)

Capital Baschka.

The Jerome family was a prestigious lineage of educators that had produced outstanding teachers for generations, making it one of the most influential families in the kingdom.

The saying that “the king’s teacher holds a position higher than the king himself” was not entirely a joke.

Even if they gathered only the students they had taught, it would be enough to govern an entire nation.

Alpheas arrived at the main house of the Jerome family and, guided by the butler, walked through the corridor built in an ancient style.

Though he had known her for thirty years, this was the first time he was visiting her room.

When the butler opened the door, a splendid scene welcomed him.

The floor was so polished that it reflected his face, and the shelves lining the walls, divided into three levels, were filled with all kinds of antiques.

To the north, a leopard-print carpet large enough to accommodate ten people lying down was spread out. Given her disdain for fakes, it was likely genuine. But he couldn’t help but wonder if such a massive tiger had ever existed in the world.

A woman sat on the sofa atop the leopard-print carpet.

Though in her fifties, she looked young enough to be mistaken for someone in her thirties.

She was still beautiful, but in her youth, she had been truly exceptional. She had been so reserved and elegant that

men found it difficult to even approach her.

"If you've arrived, close the door and sit down. Why are you just standing there like you've never seen anything before? You're still as foolish as ever."

Alpheas couldn't hold back his laughter.

Her condescending attitude toward all men remained unchanged. Her voice was as clear as a nightingale's, making him feel as though he had traveled back in time.

"No, it's just fascinating. I wondered what kind of place you lived in, and it turns out you've recreated your personality in your surroundings."

"Barging into someone's house uninvited and then making rude remarks—how shameless. What would a country bumpkin like you know about the value of my belongings?"

The carpet was undoubtedly of the highest quality. So Alpheas deliberately stepped on it, pressing down with his shoes.

It was a small act of defiance, a fleeting display of authority, as he was the only man who had ever made the most prideful woman in the world cling to him, even if only once. She did not scold him. But instead of reacting as he expected, her expression showed sheer disbelief.

"What are you doing right now? Ah, never mind. Just state your business briefly."

Alpheas grinned playfully. She hadn't changed at all, not in thirty years.

Jerome Olivia.

A certified 2nd-class Archmage and currently an auditor for the Academic Council. Moreover, four years ago, she had even served as the headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic.

"Is there really a reason? You didn't respond, so I came in person."

"And what do you expect me to do? You got yourself suspended from teaching, and now you want me to clean up

after your mess? Headmaster of a rural magic academy?
And only for six months as an interim position?"

"It's not necessarily fixed. If you want to stay longer, you can."

"Why, though? What possible reason do I have to leave this wonderful home and move to the countryside?"

"We're both getting old. Wouldn't it be nice to relax and have tea together?"

Olivia's expression turned icy with anger, making her look even more like her younger self.

"Are you delusional? Whatever affection I had for you was thirty years ago. Besides, I doubt you've forgotten how you treated me. And more importantly, you're not charming anymore."

"Haha! That's true. But you are still beautiful."

Olivia ground her teeth. This was exactly why she despised men. Just because she had once given him her heart, he acted as though he owned it forever.

He was nothing more than an unemployed man who had lost his position as headmaster, yet he had the audacity to stand there smiling as if nothing had happened.

"What gives you the right to be so confident? I am a 2nd-class Archmage who once served as the headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic. You are a 4th-class mage and a rural school headmaster. I've earned more money than you and received more respect than you. And yet, here you are, making a request while acting so shamelessly. Why?"

"Hmm, who knows? Maybe because you still like me?"

"You... absolute... lunatic."

Olivia's face flushed red. For a man his age to utter such ridiculous things—had he become senile? He was now saying things he would never have dared to before.

"Honestly, I just didn't want to seem pathetic in front of you after all these years. I thought it might make you Thadd."

"Oh my, not at all. In fact, I've imagined countless times that you would come crawling to me on your knees."

Alpheas let out a bitter smile. Thinking back, her wounds had probably been far deeper than his.

“Alright. Since you put it that way, I’ll make my request clear. Should I kneel here and now?”

Olivia responded with a scoff. What would it even matter if he kneeled now?

“So what have you been up to? Fired from your job. Did you really go through a midlife crisis?”

“Not much. Reading books, taking walks, chatting with Erina about various things.”

For the first time, Olivia’s eyes showed a flicker of shock. Alpheas’s first and only love. Erina still lived in his heart.

‘He still hasn’t moved on. What a fool.’

After wandering for ten years following his wife’s death, Alpheas had returned, aspiring to become a teacher, and became the student of the much younger Olivia. As a legendary genius who had solidified theory of photon, Olivia had taught him with affection.

Affection. That had been the problem. She should never have taken in someone older, more talented, and—above all—so handsome as her student.

Unable to control her growing love, Olivia eventually confessed her feelings to Alpheas.

But Alpheas, still unable to forget his wife, rejected her without hesitation. From that day on, Olivia’s life had changed entirely. The humiliation of rejection had brought her to tears more nights than she could count.

What infuriated her the most was how pathetic it felt to lose the man she loved to a woman who no longer existed.

Her burning love in her twenties had blinded her. In her rage, she had even gone so far as to destroy a painting of Erina right in front of Alpheas.

That was the first time Olivia had seen Alpheas’s murderous intent. She had clung to his pants and begged for forgiveness, but from that day forward, he had treated her as if she didn’t exist.

It would have been better if she had stopped there. But back then, Olivia had been too desperate, too passionate. She had lacked the courage to give up on her first love. But she should have. Visiting Alpheas's room that night had been the greatest mistake of her life.

"Don't flatter yourself, Alpheas. The reason I never married wasn't because of you. I simply find men to be a nuisance."

"So that's why you collect all these strange artifacts? Olivia, no one truly rejects love."

"Love is a petty emotion. The only reason I pursued you back then was because of my pride. You ignored me, obsessed with a dead woman."

"Strangely enough... I just remembered that night."

Olivia's face turned pale.

"You came to my room, took off your clothes..."

"Enough!"

Olivia thrust out her hand and shouted. Though it had been thirty years, the memory was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. It was the first and only time she had exposed her naked body to a man.

At the time, she had been willing to do anything to win Alpheas's heart. But even when she had begged him to hold her just once, he had refused.

'That bastard...'

Even now, the memory made her tear up from sheer indignation.

How could he shamelessly brag about the most humiliating moment of her life? Why was it always the woman who had to suffer?

'I won't forgive you. I'll make sure you regret it.'

Having failed to establish dominance, Olivia decided to get straight to the point. She picked up the document envelope resting on the sofa.

"Fine. Let's take a look."

The documents contained information about Alpheas Magic Academy.

“Alpheas Magic Academy. Ranked fourth among the five great magic academies. Eleventh among all special-purpose schools. For an idiot, you’ve climbed quite high. When you first founded it, it was an absolute mess.”

“I was lucky. I had many good students.”

Olivia wanted to smack Alpheas on the head, just like she used to when they were teacher and student.

“I’ve heard the rumors. There’s a student named Shirone, isn’t there?”

“You sure did your research. Were you planning to accept my request from the start?”

“Think what you want. What I’m curious about is why your school only surged ahead at the beginning. Over the past ten years, your achievements have barely kept you in the top five.”

“I did my best to provide the students with a good learning environment. Isn’t that enough? The school’s ranking doesn’t matter.”

“Haha! You’re still so old-fashioned.”

Olivia uncrossed her legs and leaned forward.

“Alright. Six months. I’ll take the position. I’ll turn it into a much greater institution than it is now.”

“Oh? That sounds ominous. But if you do that, I’d be grateful.”

“But I have a condition.”

Alpheas raised an eyebrow and smiled. He hadn’t expected her to agree without demanding something in return.

“There are students I taught when I was the headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic. Transfer them to your school. Here are their profiles.”

Alpheas postponed his answer and accepted the profiles. The students were two seventeen-year-old boys and a girl, all of whom had outstanding academic records, even at the kingdom’s top institution, the Royal Academy of Magic. As he flipped through the profiles one by one, Alpheas’s eyes widened at the last page.

“Dante? Is this the same Dante I know?”

Olivia covered her mouth and laughed.

“Hoho! He’s far too exceptional for your school. But since I’ll be the headmaster now, well...”

Alpheas blinked in disbelief. He never imagined that Olivia would go this far.

Pointing at Alpheas, Olivia made her declaration.

“You will accept Airhaine Dante and the other two as transfer students. That is my condition.”

Five mages dashed through the treacherous mountain terrain.

The group consisted of young individuals in their early to mid-twenties, all of whom were certified specialists in their respective fields.

Their target was a bandit hideout nestled in the mountain range near the capital—an outlaw group ranked B, a force that could not be taken lightly.

Taking down the bandits would not only bring them fame but also considerable rewards. However, their objective today was different from usual.

“Why is it so quiet? Could they already be dead? No matter how arrogant they were, they were still just kids.”

“Hmph! Why should we care? It’s not like we killed them. You were there too. You saw how much they disrespected us. Just because they’re from the Royal Academy of Magic, they think they’re superior?”

“Exactly. Even if they’re young, they shouldn’t have looked down on active, certified mages. Kids these days are too arrogant. They need a real lesson.”

But upon reaching the hideout, they were met with an eerie silence.

Pushing the door open, they were greeted by a shocking sight—forty B-rank bandits lay sprawled across the floor, completely incapacitated.

The students, seated at a round table, greeted them casually.

“Oh? You’re late. We’ve been waiting forever.”

The mercenaries were speechless. They had only started ten minutes behind the students. For them to have wiped out an entire B-rank bandit group in such a short time—it was impossible for mere students.

“W-Who the hell are you?”

“Why so serious over something so trivial? How embarrassing for grown men. Hehe!”

A tall, muscular boy, uncharacteristically built for a mage, burst into laughter.

It was Bonifar Closer, a student of the Royal Academy of Magic.

His sharp features, tanned skin, and swept-back dark brown hair made him look as fierce as a porcupine ready to strike.

“Kekeke! Just the other day, you were talking so big. Don’t tell me you arrived late on purpose because you were scared?”

The cat-like girl, Victor Sabina, smirked playfully, mocking the mercenaries. Though shorter than her peers, her figure was well-developed, and her waist was as slim as if tightly bound by a rope.

The mercenaries clenched their teeth. Being bested by students was a humiliation. Worse, if this incident spread, they could be blacklisted from the mercenary world altogether.

“I think it’s about time you acknowledged it. We won, didn’t we?”

The one who started it all, Airhaine Dante, finally spoke. His gray hair, reminiscent of storm clouds, framed a face that was both fierce and intellectual.

The mercenaries bowed their heads. In the world of mages, reputation and achievements meant everything. No client would ever hire a mage who had been bested by students.

Chapter 226: 2. Waiting for School to Start (4)

“We lost. Please, keep this a secret.”

“Ha? Weren’t you the ones boasting about humiliating us and getting us expelled?”

Though his body trembled with humiliation, the leader of the mercenary group was a man who could accept reality.

For the sake of his and his comrades’ future, he had to endure this.

“I’m sorry! Just this once, please help us! You’re going to be a mage too, aren’t you? You’re stronger, do you really have to destroy our livelihoods?”

Dante shook his head, seemingly unsatisfied.

The mercenaries realized what the boy wanted and flushed with embarrassment. In the end, even the four standing behind the leader bowed their heads respectfully and apologized.

“Please have mercy. We have to make a living too.”

Finally satisfied, Dante placed a hand on the leader’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I was just bored during the break and played around for a bit. But weren’t you being a little too careless? How did you even get your certifications?”

At that moment, the door swung open, and a woman entered. The mercenaries instinctively straightened their backs, pretending as if nothing had happened.

“Oh my! It’s already over? What a shame.”

She had curly bobbed hair that clung to her cheeks. Her playful expression made her look like she was in her early twenties, but in reality, she was well over thirty.

“You’re... Killine?”

She worked in the editorial department of the Academic Council's academic journal, traveling across the country's magic academies to write reports.

Her articles were published in *Spirit*, a magazine distributed to every magic academy in the nation. If a story was published there, gaining fame was only a matter of time.

"I came after hearing rumors, and of course, you didn't disappoint. Dante, is this disastrous scene all your doing?"

Killine struck an exaggerated pose as the photographer accompanying her snapped a shot with his optical camera. The mercenaries squirmed in embarrassment.

To them, *Spirit* was nothing more than a nostalgic magazine from their school days, but it was also a major publication distributed nationwide. If their disgraceful actions made it into an article, their families would be humiliated.

"No, of course not. How could I have done this alone without my seniors' help? I asked them for some hands-on training, and they generously agreed. I learned a lot. Thank you, seniors."

As Dante turned around, the mages, who were known for their keen instincts, quickly adjusted their expressions.

"Haha! It was nothing. But you really are something else. You truly live up to your reputation as the kingdom's top star."

Killine's eyes sparkled as she turned.

"Oh my! You know Dante? Well, I suppose it makes sense. A prodigy like him is bound to stand out, even among active mages."

"Of course. My colleagues and I talk about Dante from time to time. We all believe he will become a 1st-class Archmage one day."

Killine meticulously recorded the leader's interview.

Spirit was already a popular magazine, but when an article about Dante was published, its sales increased by at least 1.5 times.

Dante's appearance was striking enough to captivate young girls, and his undeniable talent also stirred the jealousy of many men.

'Ah, how adorable. You've grown up so well, my dear Dante.' Having interviewed Dante since his childhood, Killine's career had risen alongside his. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that she owed her current success as the kingdom's top reporter to him.

"Alright, since the interview is over, let's go celebrate. The Academic Council is treating us!"

As Dante stepped out of the hideout, Airhaine's butler approached, carrying a box.

"Young Master Dante, Lady Olivia has sent you a package."

"Master? Why all of a sudden?"

"I do not know the details... However, the head of the house instructed me to deliver it personally."

Even fearless Dante wouldn't dare defy Olivia. She was the one who had recognized his talent from a young age and ensured his admission into the Royal Academy of Magic. The same went for his peers, Closer and Sabina.

"Alright. Hand it over."

He accepted the package and tore open the wrapping, revealing a thick set of documents. As he flipped through the pages, a deep crease formed between his brows.

"What? These are transfer applications?"

Closer and Sabina peeked over his shoulder. The documents contained not only Dante's profile but theirs as well.

Killine leaned in.

"What is it, Dante? Hm? What is it?"

"Well... It's a transfer application. Master has apparently taken on a temporary headmaster position at a certain academy. She's inviting us to study there with her."

Closer spoke up.

"Then, of course, we have to go. If Master is going, how could we not follow?"

Sabina added.

“Where is it? Isn’t the school name written somewhere?”

“Yeah. It’s Alpheas Magic Academy. But... where even is that?”

Students from Baschka had little interest in provincial schools. Dante’s group only knew that it was one of the five great magic academies in the kingdom.

Killine’s eyes gleamed with excitement at the scent of an exclusive scoop.

“Oh my, Alpheas Magic Academy? And Olivia as the interim headmaster? This is huge. Alpheas Magic Academy is ranked fourth among magic academies. It’s located in Creas. Its most famous graduate is none other than the current Head of the Magic Association, Micaea Gaold.”

“Oh, Gaold studied there?”

They hadn’t been particularly impressed by the fourth-place ranking, but the mention of Gaold’s name changed everything. He was one of only five 1st-class certified Archmages in the entire kingdom. Attending his alma mater wouldn’t be a loss in reputation.

Closer grinned.

“Let’s go check it out. School’s starting across the nation soon anyway. We can transfer just in time.”

“Right. Master will be settling in around then too.”

Dante pocketed the letter and handed the documents to Sabina. They could discuss the details after meeting Olivia in person. For now, he was simply excited to have something interesting to look forward to.

As he gazed at the setting sun below the mountain, Dante turned to his friends with a smile.

“This should be fun. Alpheas Magic Academy, huh?”

3. Where is Shirone? (1)

The second half of the semester at Alpheas Magic Academy had begun.

From the morning, the main gate was crowded with carriages carrying students.

A spectacle unfolded as young students accompanied by their parents cried and whined about not wanting to go to school.

In contrast, adolescent boys, perhaps embarrassed by their butlers' assistance, crossed the gate with indifferent expressions.

The entrance ceremony was scheduled for 11 AM, and students returned to their dormitories to unpack.

Shirone, who had arrived early in the morning, arranged his books on the bookshelf and placed his clothes and daily necessities in order.

"Shirone!"

His friends burst through the door.

"Nade! Iruki!"

Shirone beamed and ran toward them. Even though they had only been apart for thirty days, it felt like a year.

So much had happened. How would they react if they knew he had been to Heaven?

Gripping each other's hands, they shouted in unison.

"I have something incredible to tell you!"

Then, they stared at each other blankly.

Though they had no idea what had happened to each other, one thing was certain—today would not be a short day.

"Alright. Let's go in order. Shirone, you go first."

"Alright. I went to Galliant Island with Amy, and...!"

Suddenly, Nade grabbed him by the collar.

"What! You mean... No way... That...! Damn it! You traitor! I'm so jealous!"

Shirone's face turned bright red.

"No! That's not it! Just listen to the whole story!"

"Argh! This is ridiculous. Even if I was born a loner, I thought I'd beat Shirone in this regard. How could this happen...!"

Nade was on the verge of losing his mind.

Even Iruki's pupils were trembling. It seemed like this topic was a significant dilemma for men in general.

Shirone firmly denied any misunderstandings before he could finally begin his story.

An hour passed in the blink of an eye. But none of them realized how much time had gone by.

“Wow. You really... came back from the brink of death. That was incredibly dangerous.”

“That’s true, but the Final War... How do I even describe it? It was so overwhelming that it didn’t even feel real.”

Nade and Iruki were lost in thought, deeply impressed by Shirone’s vivid descriptions of Heaven.

Meanwhile, having unburdened himself, Shirone was eager to hear about his friends’ experiences.

“Now it’s your turn. What amazing things happened during your break?”

The two exchanged glances before Iruki spoke first.

“I ate ice cream that tasted like crayfish.”

“A spider the size of my fist appeared in my workshop.”

“Haha! Sounds like you had a thrilling time.”

Just imagining it was hilarious. Ice cream that tasted like crayfish? And a fist-sized spider appearing out of nowhere? It was both amusing and terrifying.

“Damn it!”

Nade pushed Shirone’s cheek with his fist.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“You had an exciting adventure all on your own! And with the unbelievably beautiful Amy, no less!”

“I nearly died! And what do you mean, ‘unbelievably beautiful Amy’? Don’t be childish! Ouch!”

While Nade continued to push Shirone’s face, Iruki was on the ground, pounding his fists in frustration.

“What a waste. I should have gone crazy and not returned home. I’m curious about that Ataraxia magic or whatever. Can you show me?”

“Huh? Ataraxia?”

He could always demonstrate it later, but now wasn’t the right time. Expending his mental strength was a concern,

and casting it in a crowded area would only cause unnecessary complications.

“I’d like to, but another time. I’ll show you when there’s a good opportunity.”

“Oh? Holding back, are we? Fine, then I’ll keep my new magic a secret too.”

Hearing about new magic, Shirone’s eyes sparkled. Given Iruki’s Savant-like skills, his new magic was bound to be on a different level than what ordinary students learned.

“What is it? Hm? What kind of magic?”

“It’s a secret. But here’s a hint—it’s my secret weapon to beat you.”

Iruki then turned to Nade and asked.

“By the way, what about you? Don’t tell me you just lazed around during the break.”

“Ah, I was insanely busy. Lately, I’ve been studying alchemy. I also strengthened my magic for that field.”

Alchemy was a major branch of magic, but it wasn’t taught at magic academies. It was a vast discipline, and alchemists were trained separately by the Alchemy Foundation.

Iruki looked concerned. In the end, Nade had spent his break focusing on something unrelated to their coursework.

“Are you sure about this? If you want to become a magic engineer, a mage certification would be more beneficial.”

“Of course, but I also want to study material science.

Function begins with form, and the origin of form is essence. I thought it was important to understand the basics of alchemy.”

From the hallway, the dorm supervisor’s voice echoed.

“The entrance ceremony is about to begin. All students, please gather at the central event hall.”

All students from Class One to Class Ten gathered at the training grounds.

Shirone searched the stage for Alpheas, but for some reason, he wasn’t there.

“Huh? The headmaster isn’t here?”

“Six-month suspension. An interim headmaster is starting today. I don’t know who, but I hope they don’t make the classes too difficult.”

Nade closed his eyes and prayed. His dream was to become a magic engineer, but for now, he had to graduate from magic academy. If the new headmaster made the curriculum tougher, it wouldn’t be ideal.

As the newly appointed headmaster stepped onto the stage, murmurs spread through the crowd.

Iruki’s expression turned serious.

“Oh no... Of all people, it had to be her.”

“Huh? Do you know who she is?”

“Jerome Olivia. Former headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic. She’s likely a 2nd-class certified Archmage.”

Shirone observed Olivia carefully. She looked much younger than her age and, above all, stunningly beautiful. The teachers standing beside her were visibly tense.

‘She must be incredible. A former Royal Academy headmaster...’

Olivia waited until the students quieted down before beginning her speech.

“Greetings. As of this semester, I will be serving as your new headmaster, Jerome Olivia. Though my position is temporary, I promise to do my utmost to educate all of you during my tenure.”

Chapter 227: 3. Where is Shirone? (2)

Cheers and applause erupted. With someone who had served as the headmaster of the nation's top educational institution now leading them, the students' expectations were higher than ever.

"I have long heard of Alpheas Magic Academy's reputation, so I do not intend to interfere much with its existing policies. However, the modern magical society pursues high efficiency and practicality. Practical application—this is the seed I intend to plant during my tenure as headmaster."

The implication was that Alpheas Magic Academy had thus far been disconnected from real-world application. The students might have been offended, but since an Archmage had said it, they could only accept it.

"This is serious. I knew this would happen."

Having once attended the Royal Academy of Magic, Iruki had sensed it the moment he saw Olivia.

He had heard that she had retired from her position as headmaster years ago. What sudden wind had brought her here?

Among the students of Class Four, similar murmurs spread.

"I had a feeling this would happen. *Spirit* was right. We're going to suffer starting tomorrow."

"I heard her students are coming here too."

"Yeah, I read that too. One of them is Dante, right?"

Shirone listened closely to their conversation. It seemed that many students had already learned during the break that Olivia would be taking over as headmaster.

"Iruki, what is *Spirit*?"

"It's an academic journal published by the Academic Council. Most magic academy students subscribe to *Spirit*. It covers trends in graduation exams, the latest magic techniques, and school-related issues."

"I see. Do you read it too, Iruki?"

"Are you crazy? Why would I care about what other schools are doing? I stick to my own path."

Shirone turned to Nade.

"What about you?"

"I used to borrow copies from my friends, but I haven't read it recently. Since I'm going to be an engineer anyway, I don't find it particularly relevant."

Iruki added.

"Still, if it's Dante, the whole school is going to be shaken up. At the student level, he's practically ranked number one in the kingdom."

Number one in the kingdom. Shirone couldn't even fathom the weight of those words.

What kind of student was he? No, what did it feel like?

To be ranked first in an entire nation.

After the entrance ceremony ended, on their way back to the dormitory, Iruki asked.

"Shirone, what's your plan? It doesn't seem like you'll get to see Headmaster Alpheas today."

"It's the first day of school, so everyone will be busy. I'll just go see him tomorrow during the lunch break after morning classes."

He had a mountain of questions for Alpheas. How much did he know about the existence of Heaven? What were the secrets surrounding Miro? But today was not the right time. Resolving to visit tomorrow, Shirone returned to the dormitory.

Early in the morning, Shirone joined his friends and headed to their first-ever Class Four lecture.

The classroom was already half full. Having always been the first to arrive in Class Five, this felt different.

As nervous as Shirone was, the students of Class Four were also discreetly observing him and his friends.

In particular, Shirone had achieved an unprecedented feat—climbing from Class Seven to Class Four in just six months.

Naturally, he had become the center of attention.

He wasn't the most exceptional student in the school's fifty-year history. However, those at his level usually started in higher classes, making Shirone's case unique.

It felt strange for Shirone to now be classmates with people who had been his seniors until yesterday. Meanwhile, Nade and Iruki casually waved to others and took their seats.

"You finally made it. Welcome."

A hand suddenly appeared in front of Shirone. He looked up to see a smiling boy with a round jaw and a friendly demeanor.

It was Chris Boyle, the top-ranked student in Class Four. His specialty was summoning magic.

True to his reputation as a model student, there wasn't a single flaw in his appearance. His collar was buttoned up to his throat, and his hair was neatly parted 2:8.

Shirone grasped Boyle's hand and replied,

"Nice to meet you. I wouldn't say 'finally'—I barely made it."

"Haha! No need to be so modest. This is the final gateway of the advanced class. Now is the time to assert yourself rather than be humble."

Though meant as advice, Boyle's words carried a subtle hint of superiority. However, as Boyle had pointed out, perhaps this was just another way of asserting oneself.

"Thanks. Let's get along well."

"Of course. Though, I don't know how long we'll be classmates."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm applying for the graduation class soon."

Class Four students could apply for the graduation class at any time. This year, Amy was the first to take the step, followed shortly by Serielle. With a total of eight students having already advanced, only two spots remained.

“Usually, most applicants register in the latter half of the year, but Amy took the challenge so early that there aren’t many spots left. It’s first come, first served.”

At Boyle’s words, the students pricked up their ears. From Class Four onward, individual performance was no longer the main concern. It became a tactical decision of whether to push forward into the graduation class or to solidify one’s foundation first.

Of course, no one rushed into it recklessly.

Once admitted to the graduation class, there was little time to refine the basics. Moreover, failing the graduation exam even once carried a heavy mental toll.

In fact, while 60% of successful graduates passed on their first attempt, only 20% of the second-time test takers across all magic schools managed to succeed.

With that data in mind, students were carefully considering whether to move up.

Boyle asked.

“What about you? I assume you’ll prove your worth in Class Four and claim one of the two remaining spots?”

Shirone had discussed this with his friends the night before and reached a conclusion—it was too soon.

Although he had scored over 80 in all subjects in Class Five, it had been purely through strategic test-taking rather than deep mastery.

Since there was also a direct route to graduation upon entering the advanced class, spending half a semester reinforcing his fundamentals wouldn’t be a waste.

“No. I’ll stay in Class Four for this semester.”

Boyle was surprised. Given how quickly Shirone had climbed to Class Four, he had expected him to push further to break records.

Was it a bluff? That didn't seem like his style. Either way, it wasn't a bad thing to have one strong competitor step aside.

"Well, that's that, then. Let's all do our best. Iruki, Nade, you guys too."

"Yeah, well... Not sure how hard we'll work, though."

Iruki responded lazily. The students could tell that none of the three were planning to advance to the graduation class this semester.

Since they wouldn't have made such a decision without reason, it prompted others to reconsider their own paths. The fact that Boyle was the first to greet Shirone's group was no coincidence.

This, too, was part of Class Four's power dynamics.

For that reason, Azelio Pandora, the second-ranked student, was annoyed.

When Amy had been in Class Four, everyone had been beneath her, so rank didn't matter much. But now, only a single point separated Boyle and Pandora.

As Boyle's conversation wrapped up, Pandora casually approached Shirone and raised her hand.

"Hello?"

Nade grimaced. As someone friendly with everyone, his discomfort alone spoke volumes about her personality.

She was infamous in the advanced classes—a girl who truly believed she was the greatest in the world.

Shirone was aware of that, but her self-centered way of living without a single friend also seemed lonely to him.

"Hello, Pandora. We're in the same class now. Feels a bit strange."

"Hehe, how does it feel to attend class with a beauty like me?"

Pandora leaned forward, throwing him a flirty look. Shirone could only feign ignorance.

She wasn't unattractive, but her heavy makeup was overwhelming. Even the scent of her perfume made his

heart race uncomfortably. It was likely related to her specialty—fragrance magic.

“Oh my, look at you blushing. No need to be shy. Let’s get along.”

It seemed she had approached him with intent, as her blouse was unbuttoned two notches lower than usual. When she leaned forward, Shirone didn’t know whether to close his eyes or pretend not to notice. Either choice seemed like the wrong move.

“Hey, what’s this now? Shirone is already taken.”

Nade covered Shirone’s eyes while sneaking a peek at Pandora’s exposed cleavage himself.

Pandora was too irritated to care about the gazes of the male students.

Shirone’s so-called *partner* was none other than Carmis Amy.

Back when Amy had been in the advanced class, no one had dared to act superior.

Grades, looks—she had been unmatched in everything. The reason Pandora flirted with Shirone was to prove that, given the chance, she could steal him for herself.

“Hmph, I know he’s dating Amy. But it’s not like they even get to meet. Plus, she’s bound to pass the graduation exam and leave school soon. Shirone needs someone new. A sophisticated and intellectual woman like me.”

Pandora subtly pushed up her chest as if presenting a prized possession.

“Anyway, you’d best choose your alliances wisely. I’ll be overtaking Boyle soon. If you align with me, I’ll treat you well.”

Iruki pulled Shirone away, wagging his finger.

“You’re underestimating us. We’re in Shirone’s faction.”

“Hohoho! Enjoy yourselves for now. You’ll soon learn that Class Four isn’t so easy. See you later, Shirone.”

Pandora blew a kiss and walked away. Shirone was already mentally drained before the first lesson even started. But at

least he now had a better grasp of Class Four's dynamics. Boyle and Pandora, the top two students, were vying for graduation spots, while the rest were watching and waiting for their own opportunities.

Shirone felt reassured that he had decided against entering the graduation class this semester. He had no intention of avoiding competition, but he didn't want to engage in petty disputes with his friends over the limited spots.

If he achieved significant growth this year, next year he would apply for graduation before anyone else, just like Amy.

Three classes passed without issue, and as they waited for their fourth class, Psychology, the teacher entered with three transfer students.

Students who subscribed to *Spirit* magazine immediately recognized them and began whispering among themselves. Victor Sabina.

Bonifar Closer.

Airhaine Dante.

All three were from the Royal Academy of Magic in the capital, Baschka, and were currently the most talked-about students in the kingdom.

Especially Airhaine Dante—he was so extraordinarily talented that even professional mages regarded him as the next Archmage among current mages.

"Alright, settle down! These are the transfer students who will be joining Class Four. Let's give them a warm welcome."

Dante stepped onto the podium and scanned the students.

His first impression: Mediocre. Having lived in the capital, where the latest trends flourished, everything here seemed outdated to him.

Dante's gaze locked onto Boyle. His outfit screamed *mama's boy*, yet his eyes held an unsettling level of confidence.

'That kid... Is he Shirone? No way.'

The Shirone that Olivia had described didn't match this impression at all. He wasn't sure about his face, but at the

very least, he hadn't expected this aura.

Meanwhile, a heavily made-up girl was throwing flirty glances his way. Her face was attractive, but the excessive makeup was unbearable. In the capital, she'd immediately be labeled a barmaid.

"Dante, what are you waiting for? Introduce yourself."

Shaking off his thoughts, Dante spoke.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Airhaine Dante. Let's get along."

That was all.

Chapter 228: 3. Where is Shirone? (3)

If any other student had introduced themselves this way, they would have been met with jeers, but Dante was an exception.

The students already knew enough about him from magazines—what more was there to say? Their pride kept them from commenting further.

After Sabina and Closer finished their introductions, class began.

The instructor for psychology was Carman, a sixty-year-old philosopher who had earned an 8th-class mage certification. He had a good reputation in Creas, but his lectures were notoriously dull.

“Today, we will explore the algorithm that distinguishes individuality from arrogance. We all desire to be different from others. However, simply being different does not constitute individuality.”

From the start, Dante’s group was uninterested. This subject barely made the top 400 rankings at the Royal Academy of Magic.

Slouching in his chair, Closer muttered,

“This class is unbelievably boring. Who cares whether it’s individuality or arrogance? People live how they want. Why are we still studying psychology at our age?”

Dante wasn’t paying attention either. What intrigued him more was the student named Shirone.

That morning, Dante had met with Olivia, who had given him a direct order—*crush Shirone*.

Since it was right up his alley, Dante had accepted without hesitation.

Whoever Shirone was, he had likely been walking around with his nose in the air. But after today, he wouldn't even be able to lift his head.

'Strange. Why isn't he ranked first?'

If a 2nd-class Archmage personally issued an order to crush someone, that person should at least be at the top of the advanced class. Yet, the top-ranked student was a *mama's boy*.

So who was Shirone?

Dante's sharp gaze swept across the students until it locked onto a particular boy.

It was Mercodine Iruki.

'Oh, right. That guy.'

Back when Dante had attended the Royal Academy of Magic, they had been on the verge of forming a rivalry—until Iruki transferred out, ending any competition before it began.

Time had passed. Dante had since become the best in the kingdom, while Iruki hadn't even been featured in a magazine. The gap between them had widened significantly.

No—Dante believed that none of the students here could even compare to those at the Royal Academy of Magic.

The Royal Academy did not have class distinctions—only rankings from first place to last.

Only students ranked within the top 30, known as the Magic Barrier, were eligible to take the graduation exam. As of now, Dante and his group were ranked 31st, 32nd, and 33rd.

Dante was confident he could pass the graduation exam even now. But his goal was to be number one.

Among those in the top 30, some were as old as 32. Their skills may have declined, but their decades of experience couldn't be ignored. Dante planned to prepare thoroughly and graduate with the highest score.

The five prestigious magic academies each received ten graduation tickets from the Magic Association. Alpheas

Magic Academy used those tickets to graduate ten students annually.

However, the Royal Academy of Magic, being the top academy in the kingdom, received ten additional tickets as a privilege.

With the capital's dense population and the advantage of a two-thirds pass rate on the graduation exam, it was no surprise that the nation's most ambitious aspiring mages flocked to the Royal Academy.

Ultimately, the 30 students in Alpheas's graduation class and the top 30 at the Royal Academy were on completely different levels.

For Dante, being assigned to Class Four—determined by a cutoff of 30—was an insult to his pride.

Regardless, he first needed to identify this Shirone character. None of the students seemed particularly special, so Dante turned to the girl beside him and asked.

"Hey, which one is Shirone?"

"Huh? S-Shirone? He's sitting at the far end. Why do you ask?"

Dante didn't even bother to respond and turned his head toward Shirone. To his surprise, the boy sitting next to Iruki was the one. Among all the students, he had been one of those Dante was sure wouldn't be the one.

"Hmph. He looks like he'd be good at studying, but he doesn't seem particularly strong."

Closer and Sabina were also observing Shirone.

"Heh, no need to look further—he's a total bookworm. Must be a countryside thing. Looks like all they do here is bury their heads in books. I'm already bored to death. When do we get to actual combat training?"

"His fashion sense is awful, but he is handsome. And his calm demeanor *screams* Unlocker through and through."

"Hah, if he plans to get by with Immortal Function, he should be meditating on a mountaintop, not wasting time at a magic academy."

Immortal Function was rare, but it wasn't an absolute measure of magical prowess.

Among the five 1st-class certified mages in the kingdom, only one was an Unlocker, which spoke volumes.

Meanwhile, Carman's lecture on psychology was nearing its conclusion.

"The more difficult it is to act on a thought, the more we can consider it individuality. Furthermore, if others can easily accept your thought, it becomes a conviction. The real problem arises when something is both easy to act upon and difficult to accept. That, we call arrogance."

The students nodded in agreement, while Dante was nodding off in boredom.

"You will all have many thoughts in the future. Individuality is good, and conviction is good. But do not fall into arrogance. If you can conceive something that others cannot but still gain their approval, then you can be certain your thought is right."

The lunch bell rang. The students, relieved that they could finally rest, applauded, and Carman left the lecture hall, satisfied.

"Guys, I'll be back."

Shirone hurriedly packed his bag. Lunch break was the only time he could meet Alpheas, so he was in a rush.

"Are you sure? You haven't even eaten."

"Skipping a meal is nothing new. Who knows? Maybe the Headmaster will treat me to something good."

"Alright. Do your best."

"I might be late, so let the teacher know for me."

As the students prepared to head to the cafeteria, Closer stretched and let out a long yawn.

"Ugh, finally over? Damn it. Just one class, and I'm already dying of boredom. How am I supposed to last half a year here?"

"Well, we do have practical training in the afternoon, so maybe that'll be better. Dante, Dante, wake up. It's

lunchtime.”

Dante rubbed his eyes as he got up.

“Ugh, what kind of class was that? It’s like a sleep spell. Anyway, let’s get started. Since we’ve arrived at *his* turf, it’s only polite to pay our respects.”

Dante scanned the room sharply, but no matter where he looked, Shirone was nowhere to be found.

“What? Where is he?”

Just as Dante was about to move, Boyle and Pandora blocked his path. Boyle, as he had with Shirone, extended his hand first.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Chris Boyle.”

“Boyle, huh? What’s your ranking?”

Boyle straightened his shoulders as if he had been waiting for that question.

“I’m first. I hold the top rank in the advanced class.”

As expected, Shirone wasn’t ranked first. But why had his master said nothing about Boyle? If Olivia had unleashed a beast like Dante, shouldn’t he at least be going after the best?

“Then what’s Shirone’s rank?”

Boyle felt irritated that the kingdom’s biggest star was more interested in Shirone than in him. But revealing his emotions would be a loss, so he maintained a smile.

“Shirone just moved up this semester, so he doesn’t have a rank yet. But he’s definitely promising. You could say he’s my rival, though I’ll probably be moving on to the graduation class soon.”

Dante stared at Boyle’s still-outstretched hand.

“Sorry, but I’ve never heard of you. So, tell me—why exactly should I shake your hand? Just because you’re the top of the advanced class, you expect me to bow to you?”

Boyle’s face turned red. That hadn’t been his intention, but part of him had expected some level of recognition.

“I... I just meant as a fellow student. To get along...”

“Fellow student? So, you think you and I are equals?”

Feeling the chill in Dante’s gaze, Boyle instinctively took a step back. He had climbed to the top of Class Four through fierce competition, but this kind of crude provocation was unfamiliar to him.

“What’s your specialty?”

Boyle, determined not to be belittled any further, lifted his chin defiantly.

“Summoning magic.”

“Pfft—HAHAHA!”

Closer burst into laughter, then suddenly lunged forward and struck Boyle in the stomach. Boyle’s feet lifted a few inches off the ground before he crashed to his knees, gasping for breath. Even through the pain, he couldn’t comprehend what had just happened.

“S-School violence is—Urk!”

Closer’s next kick struck Boyle’s abdomen. Though he enjoyed hand-to-hand combat more than magic, even he felt slightly guilty this time.

Seventeen years old, and the guy looked like the world was ending after one punch. Just a bunch of country bumpkins, all of them.

Dante looked down at Boyle, who was coughing up spit.

“Sit tight. Soon enough, you’ll all be standing beneath me.”

The atmosphere in the lecture hall turned ice cold. Within an hour, Dante’s group had shown their true colors, and no one dared to challenge them.

Meanwhile, Sabina approached Pandora, who was too stunned to react, and blatantly evaluated her appearance.

“What’s with all that makeup? Guess it’s different in the countryside. Do you work at a bar or something?”

Pandora’s face flushed red. She prided herself on being bold, but she had never experienced humiliation like this before.

Sabina’s hand grazed Pandora’s cheek.

“Hehe, best not to move. My hands are sharp.”

Pandora couldn't move. Sabina's touch was soft, but her words weren't an exaggeration. A chilling sensation surrounded her.

"Now, what should I do with this feisty little thing...?"

Watching from the sidelines, Iruki intervened.

"That's enough. Don't act like children."

Sabina frowned, but before she could respond, Dante stepped forward.

"It's been a while, Iruki."

"What? How do you know me?"

A vein bulged on Dante's forehead. They hadn't spoken much before, but they had been in a well-known rivalry. There was no way Iruki didn't remember. He was clearly looking down on Dante.

Nade stepped in to lighten the mood.

"Wahaha! Let's not fight. We shouldn't be clashing on the first day of school. We'll be studying together, after all. Let's try to get along, yeah?"

From Dante's perspective, there was no advantage in antagonizing Iruki. He had no interest in friendship, but Iruki was still from the Dragon Thunder family.

Ignoring Iruki, Dante turned to Nade.

"Where is Shirone?"

Shirone had gone to see Alpheas. But Nade wasn't about to hand that information over so easily.

"Shirone? Ah, he's famous! But hey, I'm pretty popular too. Why don't we be friends instead? I'm the president of the Paranormal Psychic Science Research Group, you know..."

As Nade stalled, Closer suddenly swung his fist. Nade barely leaned back in time to avoid it.

It happened in an instant, as if they had synchronized.

'Hoh, this guy...?'

Closer raised an eyebrow. Dodging at the last second without even blinking—that meant he was used to fights.

Dante smirked.

“For someone who keeps laughing, you sure have your guard up.”

“Wha—?! That scared me! Why’d you do that?!”

Nade still looked clueless about what had just happened.

“Hmph, forget it. Whatever your game is, I’ve got no business with a coward like you.”

Dante turned to Iruki.

“Alright, you know, don’t you? Where is Shirone?”

“Why are you looking for Shirone?”

“Just to say hello. He’s going to have a hard time at school from now on, and you’re not going to tell me you don’t know him like that coward. The world’s greatest Mercodine.”

“Of course not. Shirone is this way.”

Iruki pointed to his feet. Dante, looking at the floor, furrowed his brow.

“What, on the first floor?”

“No. Somewhere on this planet.”

With that, Iruki and Nade left the room. Dante was red up to his ears.

“That asshole...”

Chapter 229: 3. Where is Shirone? (4)

Dante asked other students about Shirone's whereabouts, but all he got were uncertain responses. He could wait, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to look around the school himself. As he wandered, he realized that, contrary to his expectations, the facilities were decent. The campus was vast—comparable even to the Royal Academy of Magic. Still, he felt no attachment to the place.

When they couldn't find Shirone anywhere, Sabina grumbled.

"Seriously? How hard is it to just tell us where he is? He must be pretty well-trusted."

Closer burst into laughter.

"Pfft! Hahaha! Country bumpkins are always ridiculously loyal. No real talent, so they just act all serious about stuff like that."

"But Iruki is here too."

At Dante's words, Closer's laughter stopped. Even to him, it was strange that Iruki was at this school.

"Makes no sense. Why would someone from the House Mercodine be stuck in a place like this?"

"He used to attend school with us. I heard he got expelled—or maybe he dropped out after causing trouble. Never thought I'd run into him here."

Dante decided not to overthink it. Sooner or later, he'd have to face Iruki anyway.

"Doesn't matter. The one Master Olivia pointed out is Shirone. We'll deal with him first and figure out the rest later."

When they arrived at the cafeteria, Dante observed the students greeting each other as seniors and juniors. It was a common scene in schools with a class system, but for Dante, who had clawed his way up from the bottom at the Royal Academy, it was laughable.

“Seriously, what century is this? A class system? That Alpheas guy must be stuck in the past.”

“Yeah. According to the magazines, they only use ranking systems in the graduation class.”

“Hah, no wonder these kids lack any real drive. Did you see that soft little thing earlier? One punch, and he was down.”

Ignoring the chatter, Dante strode toward the students. If this was how the system worked, he might as well take advantage of it.

At his approach, the students turned in unison. What magic academy student wouldn’t admire Dante? Having the kingdom’s greatest rising star at their school was surreal.

Dante shoved his hands into his pockets and waited. When no one reacted, he frowned and spoke up.

“What’s with you? A senior walks in, and you don’t even say hello?”

The younger students, who had been staring blankly, snapped out of their daze and quickly bowed.

“Ah, g-good afternoon, senior!”

Even if it was a trivial gesture, being acknowledged felt satisfying.

As Dante scanned their faces, he spotted a woman who appeared to be at least two years older than him.

By all logic, she should have been in Class Four. Yet, there she was, standing among a bunch of kids—it was ridiculous.

“Hey, you.”

“M-Me, senior?”

Class Six’s Maria pointed to herself hesitantly.

“Yeah. How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

Dante's expression twisted with disdain. So weak-willed—no wonder she was stuck here with younger students.

"You know Shirone, right?"

"Senior Shirone? Yes, I know him."

"Where is he now?"

"Uh... I'm not really sure."

Dante hadn't expected much from her anyway.

Deciding to check inside the cafeteria, he started moving, but Closer stepped in as if passing the baton.

For someone with Closer's extensive experience charming women at the Royal Academy, Maria was the perfect target.

"Oh? You're cute. What's your name, beautiful?"

"Erlang Maria."

Maria's face tensed with displeasure. She had been in a magic academy since childhood, so she had no issues with the class system. But having her age pointed out so blatantly irked her.

"Oh, so you *can* frown? That's not a very respectful attitude toward a senior."

"I-I apologize."

Closer was pleased. Why were the students at this school so naive? Encouraged, he grabbed Maria's wrist and leaned in closer.

"No need to apologize. Instead, why don't we have some fun? Must be frustrating, being stuck with a bunch of immature boys. I promise, I'm *very solid* where it counts."

Maria's face burned with humiliation. She tried to pull her wrist away, but Closer's grip was too strong.

At that moment, Mark stepped in, grabbing Closer's wrist in return.

"That's enough, senior."

Closer scowled. The grip was firm—stronger than he had expected. Few mages trained their bodies, so Closer lifted his gaze and found himself facing someone as built as he was.

"Is there a junior who grabs a senior's wrist? This school is a complete mess."

"And what exactly are you doing, senior? Harassing a female junior like this must go against school regulations."

"Harassing? This isn't harassment; it's the natural push and pull between men and women."

"Maria is uncomfortable."

"What do you know about handling women, kid? Girls at her age just pretend to resist when you pull them in forcefully. Or what, were you planning to make a move on her yourself?"

Mark lost his temper.

"You bastard, I've had enough—"

"Hahaha! Look at this little brat! You're seriously mad? Don't tell me you actually like her? Is that why you're all flustered, afraid I'll steal her away?"

Mark wanted to yell yes at the top of his lungs, but he swallowed his words. He wasn't even close to Shirone's level yet. But one day...

"Maria is my friend. And I don't let anyone insult my friends. I don't care if you're a senior or a teacher. If you want respect, act like you deserve it."

Closer's expression shifted. The amusement drained from his face, replaced by a cold, ruthless stare.

"Oh? Then let me make sure you respect me. You'll be eating dirt soon enough."

Without another word, the two stepped apart. Since using magic on campus was forbidden, the watching students tensed up. But neither Closer nor Mark entered the Spirit Zone.

"A real man settles things with his fists. Don't you agree?"

"It's laughable hearing *you* talk about being a man."

"Heh, you're practically begging to get beaten. Come on, kid."

Closer raised his fists in a boxing stance and beckoned.

Furious, Mark charged forward. He wasn't about to hold back against someone who had harassed Maria.

But just as he was about to reach Closer, his opponent smoothly stepped back.

Mark's anger flared. Acting like he was ready to fight, then suddenly retreating—what kind of nonsense was that?

Feigning a strike to the face, Mark saw Closer duck and immediately swung his other fist into his opponent's stomach.

'It landed!'

An 80-kilogram body putting its full force behind a punch—there was no way Closer would stay standing.

"Kuh!"

But the one grimacing in pain was Mark.

It felt like he had punched solid rock. That's not a human body. He must be hiding something...

At that moment, Closer's counterattack slammed into Mark's face.

His vision blurred.

'What... is this?'

The impact severed the connection between his brain and body, leaving him momentarily paralyzed.

Mark had sparred with skilled martial artists before, but this was something entirely different.

"Hahaha! What a weakling! So? Feel like respecting me now? Huh?"

By the time Mark regained his senses, he was curled up on the ground, being kicked over and over.

"How does it feel? Getting stomped like a dog by your senior? Fun, isn't it?"

Even through the pain, Mark seethed with frustration. His mind screamed at him to fight back, but his body refused to move.

Maria rushed over and shielded him.

"Please stop! He'll die at this rate!"

“Heh, what are you talking about? Trying to pin the blame on me? This guy threw the first punch.”

Maria suddenly realized why Closer had let Mark land the first hit.

If this continued, Mark wouldn't just be beaten—he might face disciplinary action.

“I'm sorry. I'll apologize. I'll even kneel if I have to. Just please stop.”

Dante finally stepped in to end it. Causing too much trouble on the first day would only be annoying later.

“Listen up, juniors. From now on, when you see us, bow at a perfect 90-degree angle. If you ever think about disrespecting your seniors, remember what happened to this guy.”

Once Dante's group left, the students sighed in relief. It seemed the kingdom's brightest star was also its most terrifying presence.

Maria's eyes welled with tears as she looked over Mark.

“Mark, are you okay? You idiot, what were you thinking?”

Mark had already regained consciousness. Being in Maria's arms felt like a dream, making it hard to focus on anything else. But not wanting to worry her, he quickly sat up.

“I'm fine. It's nothing.”

As Maria checked him for injuries, Mark glared at the retreating figures of Dante's group.

“Those guys... they're dangerous. If they keep acting like this, what's going to happen?”

“Who knows? I heard they're Headmaster Olivia's students. Maybe they think they can do whatever they want because of that. ‘Kingdom's greatest star’ my ass. They're just thugs.”

With a new headmaster, everything was changing. Most students dismissed today's events as a random incident, but Mark, who had been on the receiving end, sensed the truth. This wasn't just some one-off altercation—it was only the beginning of something much worse.

Walking through the corridors of the advanced class building next to Olivia, Thadd was miserable.

Alpheas had ordered him to help the new headmaster adjust, leaving him no choice but to play secretary.

“Um, Headmaster, why don’t you take the tour later and eat first? Our school is famous for its food.”

Olivia paid him no mind, flipping through documents as she strode ahead. Thadd was amazed she could walk so fast while reading.

“Why are there so many 8th-class instructors here? You can’t expect to teach students properly with 8th-class mages. In this day and age, even unofficial 9th-class mages are being recognized if they make a name for themselves. Graduating students should be at an official level.”

Thadd wanted to ask what the point was of making a name for oneself as a mere magic student.

But remembering his master’s advice to endure with patience, he chose a diplomatic response.

“Most of our 8th-class instructors are experts in other fields. For character education, we’ve gathered professionals in philosophy, art, engineering, and other disciplines.”

“This is a special-purpose school. Leave general education to the noble houses and focus on magic first. Who are the stars of Alpheas? The Royal Academy has Airhaine Dante. Oris Academy has Miko Laina. Even Florent City Academy—not *even one of the top five*—has Axion Cabel, someone students idolize.”

“But Headmaster, how many students in the entire kingdom are even like that?”

“That’s not the point. The fact that they *exist* matters. Other schools have stars. This one doesn’t. That’s why this school has been stuck at the bottom for the past decade. The faculty here is way too complacent.”

She didn’t even wait for a response.

“The teaching staff needs more tension. If this school is to remain among the top five, it should have young, brilliant instructors. Even Olipher Siena wouldn’t be considered top-tier by Royal Academy standards. Honestly, the only teacher here with real prestige is Romi Ethella.”

Thadd wanted to sew Olivia’s mouth shut. To him, a great teacher was one who truly cared for their students. But Olivia seemed determined to rank *even the teachers* by skill.

“We need more. Or we need to develop them. Ah, maybe holding regular seminars would help.”

As she spoke, text appeared in midair beside her—a form of spoken-word magic called Dot Transcription, which recorded speech into writing.

She spoke so fast, Thadd almost suspected she was using Supersonic Speech—a technique of verbal spellcasters. Yet, her transcription kept up effortlessly.

Chapter 230: 3. Where is Shirone? (5)

Olivia suddenly stopped walking as if something had come to mind.

"This won't do. I'll personally observe the afternoon classes. I'll visit all the way from Class Ten down, so make the necessary preparations."

"Yes, understood."

Thadd responded as if under hypnosis. He couldn't resent her for trying to elevate the school's prestige.

As Olivia resumed her brisk pace, Shirone appeared from the opposite end of the corridor. It was too early for him to have returned from lunch, so Saad tilted his head in curiosity and asked.

"Shirone? What brings you here?"

"Oh, hello."

Olivia scrutinized the approaching Shirone. The boy Alpheas had said resembled him. But the Alpheas she had known was not like this.

Well, she had met him in his early thirties, when he had become a broken man after losing his wife. Could this boy be a reflection of Alpheas before he was married, the man once called the Light of the Milch?

"So, you're Shirone."

"Yes, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"I see. But isn't it lunchtime?"

"I was looking for the headmaster. I checked the office, but he wasn't there."

"Of course not. From today onward, I'm the headmaster."

"Ah, I apologize."

Realizing his mistake, Shirone looked flustered, and Thadd quickly intervened to smooth things over.

“Master is in his private study. If you go right from the central building, there’s an annex. You’ll find him there.”

Thadd gestured for Shirone to hurry along. Understanding the situation, Shirone bowed his head and retraced his steps.

“Phew! I thought I was going to suffocate.”

Once outside, Shirone took a deep breath.

The aura of a 2nd-class Archmage was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

He had felt pressure from Arcane before, but Olivia’s presence far exceeded that. It was only after stepping out of her domain that he realized he had been holding his breath.

After calming himself, Shirone followed Thadd’s directions and found the annex. He grabbed the doorknob and knocked. Alpheas, dressed in comfortable clothes, welcomed him.

“I was expecting you. Come in.”

As Shirone entered, he glanced around the modest study before his gaze landed on a portrait hanging on the wall.

Alpheas gestured toward it and introduced her.

“My wife, Erina. You’ve heard of her, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Hello.”

Shirone bowed to the portrait. For some reason, it felt like the right thing to do. Alpheas raised an eyebrow at the unexpected gesture but did not comment.

“So, you must have a lot on your mind. But before we get into that... are you hungry?”

“A little, actually.”

“I made some cream of mushroom soup. Let’s eat together.”

The two sat facing each other as they ate. Alpheas, just as curious, remained silent, waiting. The hardest part of any conversation was getting started.

“Headmaster, I went to Heaven.”

Clang! The utensil slipped from Alpheas's hand. He hastily swallowed his soup and wiped his beard.

It was unbelievable, yet Shirone's face told him it was true. It wasn't the expression of a traveler who had visited a wondrous place, nor that of an explorer who had made a great discovery.

"Heaven, you say...?"

"I'm sorry. It just happened. Canis—"

After listening to Shirone's story, Alpheas fell into deep silence. The revelation that Arcane had been to Heaven was something he had never heard before.

Looking back, Arcane had always been a man of secrets. He had chosen evil over good, yet he leaned closer to nihilism than true darkness.

"Headmaster, I have a question. How did Miro end up in that role?"

Alpheas realized what Shirone had inferred. But his thoughts remained unchanged. The past was unchangeable. One person trapped in it was enough.

'Gaold...'

Micaea Gaold. Now one of the kingdom's few 1st-class Archmage, but in Alpheas's memory, still his disciple, a pure-hearted young man.

"Shirone. Don't try to know too much. This is a transnational matter. The moment you step into it, your life will become entangled."

"But if Miro—!"

"And what would change if you knew?"

Shirone fell silent. Knowing wouldn't change anything. Even now, this world was held together by the power of a single individual.

"Headmaster, if Heaven's army breaks through Miro's space-time..."

Alpheas shook his head.

"Since Miro blocked them, think tanks across nations have been preparing for years. Do you understand, Shirone?"

Nothing will change. You have your own dreams. Don't let untouchable truths ruin your life."

The words were the same as before his journey to Galliant Island, but now Shirone understood them. Just dipping his feet into that world had almost ruined not just his life, but his friends' lives as well.

"Yes, I understand now. I've learned my lesson."

Alpheas smiled gently.

"Ataraxia is impressive, even to me. In ancient times, the power of angels was called dragon-slaying magic. If you get the chance, study the history of the dragon race. They have a much longer history than humans, so you might learn more about angels."

Shirone had gained unexpected insight. Until now, he had only considered the relationship between Heaven and humans, but this was an issue tied to the entire world.

'I should study the histories of other races, too.'

With that thought, Shirone asked.

"Should I take responsibility for this power?"

"Haha, Shirone, there's no such thing. No one knows what consequences your choices will bring. You must think and decide for yourself."

"I hesitate every time."

"Hahaha! That's natural. When Ataraxia is fully unleashed, you could even surpass me."

Alpheas wasn't exaggerating. If Shirone's story was true, then for the brief moment Ataraxia activated, its power exceeded that of a certified 4th-class mage.

But Shirone wasn't happy.

He understood what Alpheas had meant—"for the moment Ataraxia is unleashed".

Theory and reality were different. Remaining defenseless for an entire minute with Immortal Function activated was practically inviting death.

"I see what you mean. Right now, it's a power beyond my control. I'll train hard to master it."

“Good. You’ve been given a valuable gift. It’s yours now. Embrace it and reflect on it as much as you need.”

“Thank you.”

After confiding in Alpheas, Shirone felt much lighter. Perhaps he had just shifted his burden onto an adult. But ultimately, that was the natural order.

The only thing he could do was grow up as soon as possible and share that responsibility.

As Shirone returned to school, Alpheas locked the door behind him and adopted a serious expression.

For the first time in a year, he had received new information about Heaven.

When Miro returned from Heaven, she accepted the reality that she could only save everyone with her sacrifice.

But Shirone was different: He fought Heaven.

Struggle makes enemies, but it also makes allies.

In return for his struggle with Heaven, Shirone gained allies.

The world would take notice of his accomplishments in a different sense than Miro’s.

“Honestly, honey, I’m afraid. I don’t even know who he is anymore.”

Ataraxia, He told him to embrace it and handle it himself, which was irresponsible.

But it wasn’t in his nature to be a mentor in the face of a force he couldn’t handle.

“It’s been a long time since my blood boiled. I know it pains you to hear me say this, but I made a mistake in leaving you behind so I could meet this boy.”

He didn’t think he was the only one who could teach Shirone. But Alpheas’ younger self’s failures would surely serve to improve him.

“What do you think, can I be a little more greedy?”

Erina smiled in the painting.

Arin strolled pleasantly through the flower bed behind the advanced class section, where autumn flowers were in full

bloom. It was a secluded place that no one visited due to its narrow space, which made it all the more appealing to her. Even though most of the lessons covered things she already knew, adjusting to school—something she was experiencing for the first time in her life—was much harder than she had anticipated.

“Arin, did you wait long?”

Canis ran up, holding rice balls against his chest. Since Alpheas had paid their tuition, room and board were free, but he didn’t want to rely on the school’s support. Using the dormitory while refusing their meals might have been a childish stubbornness, but Alpheas didn’t stop him.

After all, this was the school that had killed Arcane. Even without bringing up his young age, his determination to uphold his loyalty to his master was admirable.

“Let’s eat. I’m not sure if I got the seasoning right this time.”

Arin sat down by the flower bed and picked up a rice ball. At first, they had been so salty that they were nearly inedible, but over time, the flavor had deepened.

Canis mumbled between bites.

“Maybe I should find some work at night.”

“Canis, the Headmaster is already giving you an allowance. Being stubborn about this just makes you look foolish.”

“I know. But the moment I start thinking of it as something I deserve, it’s over. I’ll take what I have no choice but to accept, but I need to start rejecting things little by little. He was our master’s enemy. I can’t just lower my head and surrender like a coward.”

Canis added another thought.

“If things get desperate, I’ll use it. But I still don’t want to depend on them.”

He wasn’t entirely wrong. More than anything, the two of them still weren’t used to mingling with the other students in the cafeteria.

“Tch, not here either. Where the hell did he go?”

Dante and his group entered the flower bed. Canis had heard of them through rumors but had no interest in paying them any attention. Whether they were some kind of kingdom stars or not, they just seemed childish.

“Should we ask them?”

Dante also noticed Canis and approached. But when he got a closer look at them, he felt a pang of pity so strong it nearly brought tears to his eyes. He had thought they might be on a date, but instead, they were crouched down, miserably eating rice balls. They were definitely being ostracized. In any group, there were always those who ended up isolated.

“Hey, what’s your class?”

Dante asked, but there was no response. He had spoken loud enough for them to hear, but it seemed as if all they could see was their rice balls.

Closer sneered.

“You guys can’t even afford to buy food? Does this country school take in beggars too? This is pathetic.”

Arin glanced at Closer briefly. Then, as if afraid her food might be snatched away, she began chewing like a squirrel. She had known since childhood that the ones who looked down on food were always the first to pick up a fork.

Closer was taken aback. Despite her slender frame, the girl had an enormous appetite.

“Are you starving or something? Eat slower. I’m not going to take it from you.”

Still, the two of them gave no response. Dante grew frustrated. Maybe it was because they were from the countryside, but he kept witnessing things he’d never see in the city.

“Are you eating in hiding because the other kids are bullying you? You guys really live like losers. Just go crazy and fight back. Stop letting them walk all over you.”

“And what if we do?”

Canis couldn't hold back and lifted his head. What he hated most in the world was being interrupted while eating. Dante locked eyes with Canis and realized his mistake. Practical experience? No, it was something deeper. A hostility lingering from the very core. This guy had crossed a forbidden line.

Now that there was finally a reaction, Closer clenched his fist.

"Oh? Acting tough, huh? Maybe you need to taste my fist to wake up?"

"Leave it, Closer."

Dante stopped him. He had a gut feeling that getting involved would only make things messier. Even in this situation, there was no trace of nervousness in Arin's expression.

Was it confidence? Or had she lived through battlefields littered with corpses?

"Hey, are you the top-ranked student in Class Four?"

"Top-ranked? That would be Shirone, right?"

'Is this guy also talking about Shirone?'

Dante fell into thought. First Iruki, now Canis—both had pointed to Shirone. He finally felt like he was starting to piece things together. Master Olivia had been right on the mark.

Chapter 231: 3. Where is Shirone? (6)

“Where’s Shirone?”

“How would I know? Isn’t he at the cafeteria?”

“I’m asking because he’s not there.”

Canis had a guess. Shirone had probably gone to report to Alpheas about matters concerning Heaven.

He wouldn’t have minded giving them an answer if it meant getting rid of these annoying guys, but he wasn’t in the mood.

“What do you want with Shirone?”

“I’m going to crush him. They say Shirone is the best, so if I beat him, that means you’ll have to fall under me too.”

“Hahahaha!”

Canis burst into laughter, finding it absurd. Closer glared at him and stepped forward.

“You think this is funny? Do you even know who we are?”

“And do you know who Shirone is?”

Dante spoke up.

“Of course, we do. He’s the one who’s reached the realm of Immortal Function. But so what? If you think being a mage is just about enlightenment, you’re dead wrong. Magic is fundamentally a killing technique.”

Canis didn’t disagree with that. After spending so much time around someone as wise-like as Shirone, hearing something that actually made sense for once was refreshing.

But if Shirone had truly been just a naïve pushover, Canis himself would have trampled over him long ago.

Shirone was different. That was the key.

“I’m really saying this for your own good—if possible, don’t mess with that guy. Looking at you reminds me of my past

self, that's all."

"Haha! So what? Are you saying that because you lost, I'll lose too? Now that I look at you, you're just a loser."

Canis remained calm. He had not lived a life pleasant enough to waste emotions on such cheap provocation.

"Winning and losing isn't what matters. Tell me, just how far have you fallen?"

"I don't know what you mean, but I've never fallen. Unlike you."

"In that case, go ahead and try. You'll find yourself crushed all the way down to the lowest depths you can imagine.

Heh... heh heh."

Dante's face turned red. Even in the capital, Baschka, no one had ever looked down on him. It wasn't because this place was great—it was because they were ignorant. He shouldn't have wasted his time dealing with these country bumpkins in the first place.

"Fine. I'll take him down. And when that happens, you'll have no choice but to kneel before me."

As Dante and his group left, Canis completely lost his appetite. He couldn't understand why so many nobles lived as if the world revolved around them.

Arin, still chewing her food, spoke up.

"That was unexpected, Canis. You admitted Shirone is the best without hesitation."

"I hate troublesome things. I don't want to stand out in a place like this."

"Well, Shirone will handle it just fine anyway."

Canis pursed his lips. He didn't care much, but he had expected Arin, as a member of the Heaven's Party, to be at least a little concerned.

"I get that, but... doesn't that sound kind of irresponsible?"

"Mmm, no. It's just that I really believe Shirone will be fine."

Arin licked her fingers and then looked at the rice ball still in Canis's hands.

"Did you already finish yours?"

“No, this is—”

Canis instinctively pulled the rice ball closer in defense. He really should have eaten faster. Because of that pointless argument, he was about to lose his meal.

“Ugh, fine. It’s all yours. Take it.”

“Hehe, thanks.”

With her hunger mostly satisfied, Arin regained her usual composure and asked.

“Now that I think about it, Shirone sure has a lot of enemies.”

“But he has just as many allies. He won’t be lonely.”

Canis gazed up at the clear sky. At this very moment, Harvest was analyzing the Grimoire of Light and Darkness that they had brought from Heaven.

Since he had inherited Arcane’s legacy, there was no need to rush. Taking it easy once in a while wasn’t so bad. They had been running non-stop until now, after all.

“Slowly, little by little, we’ll get there.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

Canis smiled and looked at Arin. Then, shaking his head as if he couldn’t help but be exasperated, he lightly patted her back.

“Eat a little slower.”

4. Combat Simulation (1)

After lunch, it was time for the integrated advanced class session. As always, the instructor was Ethella, and the class was held in the training ground, where the Image Zone was located.

About ten minutes later, Shirone came running in, completely out of breath.

Having gotten used to teleporting around during the break, he hadn’t expected running to be this exhausting.

“Ah, Ms. Ethella. I’m sorry. I tried to be on time.”

“It’s fine. Nade told me about it. Go in and get ready for class.”

Dante and his group wore sour expressions upon realizing that meeting Shirone during lunch had been impossible from the start.

If that was the case, why hadn't someone just told them? Why make them run around like fools?

"Alright, everyone. Nice to see you all. I see some new faces this semester. Dante, Closer, Sabina—welcome to Alpheas Magic Academy. Let's all give them a round of applause."

Dante raised an eyebrow in surprise. He had expected something more from a class taught by Romi Ethella, a name well-known even in the Royal Academy of Magic. But the impression he gave was completely unexpected.

She had a gentle face, wore large glasses, and had her hair lazily tied back. Since she was a monk, that much made sense, but the way she conducted class reminded him of the nanny who had taught him when he was seven.

What was even more surprising was that, despite the childish nature of her instructions, the students were earnestly clapping.

"Now, let's begin the lesson. Lower-class students will focus on Four-Way Formation and sequence formulas, while upper-class students will work on mental pulses, targeting, and sequence formulas in that order."

Sabina whispered to Closer.

"So, the graduate and advanced classes are completely different here."

"Yeah. I was looking forward to practical training, but this is just as boring."

The only thing Sabina had been excited about when transferring was taking a class with Ethella, who held the title of Triple.

A "Triple" was a title given to those who achieved level 6 or higher in three different disciplines. Ethella was regarded as a prodigy in the education field, having reached level 6 in magic, martial arts, and Spirit Zone.

However, now that she was actually in class, Sabina found not only Ethella's speech childish, but the curriculum itself was nothing more than tedious fundamental training.

Sabina raised her hand and asked.

"Ms. Ethella, aren't there any other training exercises? I want to learn Sniper Mode."

"That's a specialized course, so it's not taught in the advanced class."

"But you could teach it, couldn't you? Honestly, I transferred here just for this class."

"Finding your aptitude is what the advanced class is for. Even Sniper Mode ultimately relies on Four-Way Formation. Learning applied techniques after mastering the fundamentals is never too late."

"Ugh, then could you teach me privately? If I could say I learned it from you, I'd have something to brag about to my friends."

Apparently, in the capital, who one learned from was a major status symbol.

If that was the culture in Baschka, then it wasn't her place to interfere. However, Alpheas Magic Academy's rules clearly stated that teachers could not provide instruction outside their designated curriculum.

"I'd like to, but it would be unfair to the other students. If you really want to learn Sniper Mode, then improve your skills as quickly as possible and move up to the graduation class."

A clear voice rang from the entrance.

"That's not necessarily true. Being too rigid with the fundamentals can also hinder progress."

Olivia walked in, followed closely by all the advanced-class instructors, trailing behind her like attendants.

Among them were Thadd and Siena, who, along with Ethella, were known as the three pillars of Alpheas Magic Academy.

Meeting Ethella's gaze, the two shrugged as if to say, *Is this really happening?*

It was only because they were outside Olivia's direct line of sight that they dared to react.

"Good day, Headmaster."

Ethella greeted her with the respectful bow of a monk. Olivia returned a slight nod before turning her attention to the students.

"I overheard a student wanting to learn an applied technique. If their passion lies in learning, shouldn't a teacher be able to teach them?"

"But according to school regulations..."

"Ah, I'm well aware. But rules change with time. You have someone as renowned as Zoner on staff, and yet you insist on only teaching the basics? I find that inefficient."

Because Ethella was such a great Zoner and exceptional talent, Alpheas had deliberately assigned her to teach fundamental skills to the advanced class.

But Olivia saw things differently. While fundamentals were important, a school also needed visible results to elevate its standing.

"Each of these students is unique. Trying to force them into a single mold under the name of *class structure* is pointless. If they show potential, we should actively support their growth."

Thadd and Siena, who were usually quick to engage in debate, remained silent this time.

A certified 2nd-class Archmage held that much authority. The classification of mages was a globally standardized system called the Line—a massive network that managed all mages.

There were three Lines, with the widest bandwidth belonging to the Red Line, overseen by the Mage Association.

All certified mages, from class 1 to class 10, belonged to the Red Line, which also distinguished between certified and

non-certified mages.

Teachers within the Red Line knew just how difficult it was to reach Olivia's position.

In most kingdoms, there were fewer than five 1st-class mages, making a 2nd-class certified mage one of the highest authorities in the Red Line.

No matter how eccentric her philosophy was, there was no arguing against someone who had reached 2nd-class.

Ethella spoke up. A Zoner was within the Red Line, but at the same time, she was also a monk unaffiliated with the mage network, giving him more freedom to speak than the other instructors.

"Students in the advanced class still lack a proper understanding of magic. What's important is not simply having a unique trait that sets them apart, but finding an individuality so distinct that no one else can imitate it. That's why we emphasize the fundamentals."

The other teachers' faces turned pale. Meanwhile, Thadd and Siena subtly gave a thumbs-up.

Despite her gentle appearance, Ethella was firm at her core.

"Is that what you believe? Very well. Then how about we test how well your students have mastered the fundamentals through a Lifting Assessment?"

Ethella had heard of the Lifting Assessment at academic conferences before. Many considered it a more objective evaluation method, as it effectively measured the overall level of a student's Spirit Zone.

Shirone and his classmates felt their nerves tighten at the teachers' brewing conflict.

"Wow, Ms. Ethella is no joke, but neither is the Headmaster."

"Yeah. Is this really going to turn into something serious?"

"No way. Even Ms. Siena isn't saying anything, so it should be fine."

Ethella confidently nodded.

"That's fine. I'm not bragging, but I can say with confidence that my students' fundamentals are solid compared to any

other school.”

“Then let’s begin. Has anyone in Class Four practiced Spirit Zone Lifting before?”

Only Dante and his group raised their hands. Alpheas had rejected the practice for lack of proven effectiveness, but the Royal Academy of Magic had formally adopted it a year ago.

“Good. I’m sure everyone is curious about the transfer students’ abilities, so Dante, why don’t you come up and give a demonstration?”

“Yes. It would be an honor, Headmaster.”

As Dante walked toward the Image Zone, Olivia instructed the instructors to set the target’s sensitivity to its maximum level.

Ethella addressed the students.

“The Lifting Test is an evaluation of the overall functionality of one’s Spirit Zone. The goal is to hold a highly repellent target within the Spirit Zone. Since the target bounces unpredictably based on the density, weight, and shape of the Spirit Zone, the longer you maintain it, the more proficient your Spirit Zone is.”

Dante positioned himself at the center of the Image Zone. With a snap of his fingers, a spherical target materialized above his head.

Chapter 232: 4. Combat Simulation (2)

The moment he entered the Spirit Zone, the target trembled as if electrocuted.

Then, following the changes in its mental state, it began to bounce unpredictably.

As the target attempted to escape the Spirit Zone, Dante utilized the Four-Way Formation to secure the space.

Then, at the moment of mental pulse, he swiftly pulled it in with focused concentration.

As the target returned to the center, it rampaged again.

Each time, Dante skillfully transformed the form of the Four-Way Formation to prevent the target from escaping.

As time passed, the target's movements became faster, and its trajectory changed in increasingly bizarre ways.

At certain points, it vibrated as if trapped against a wall, while at others, it shot out with full force, extending over ten meters.

Even just watching was enough to make the students tense.

When the target flew so fast that it could not even be caught by the longest-ranged targeting method, a gasp escaped from the spectators.

"Whoa...?"

At that moment, Dante expanded the Spirit Zone using the sequence method.

As the target's range extended further, it was once again trapped. Without fail, a mental pulse occurred, pulling the target back.

The audience was left speechless by the near-miraculous operation of the Spirit Zone.

After a minute had passed, Olivia halted the demonstration.

“That’s enough. I think this should suffice for the demonstration.”

Dante pulled the target in, suspended it above his head, and then deactivated the Spirit Zone.

The students watched in awe.

Even if only for a moment, the technique of moving the target in the desired direction was something impossible to achieve with ordinary mental power.

“This is the Lifting Test. If you’re in Class Four, you should be able to maintain it for about a minute. Now, shall we have the other students try it as well? From what I heard, Shirone —”

Boyle raised his hand.

“I’ll do it.”

It was a strategy to humiliate Shirone, but with an unexpected volunteer stepping forward, Olivia was caught off guard.

Maintaining lifting for a full minute was far beyond the average level of Class Four.

Even Dante, who had practiced ever since the test was introduced, found two minutes to be impossible.

“I’m the top student in Class Four. I can do it.”

Olivia’s eyes sparkled.

It was a shame that it wasn’t Shirone, but comparing with the top student of the advanced class would provide objective data to pressure Ethella.

“Alright. Since it’s your first time, think of it as getting a feel for it.”

With confidence, Boyle walked into the Image Zone.

As he climbed the steps, he glared at Dante, but Dante merely shrugged and stepped aside.

With tense expressions, the students watched as Boyle’s lifting attempt began.

As soon as he entered the Spirit Zone, the target resisted strongly.

It was far more difficult than he had anticipated. It felt as if a rubber ball were bouncing inside his skull.

True to his talent as the top student of the advanced class, he managed to maintain the lifting, but the frequency at which he had to pull the target back with mental pulse became noticeably shorter.

In the end, the speed at which he transformed the Four-Way Formation failed to keep up with the target's speed, and the target escaped from the Spirit Zone.

"Huff... Huff..."

Boyle exhaled repeatedly. For a first attempt, he thought it was decent.

However, the expressions of the students were dark.

When he checked the display board, his pupils shook in shock.

21 seconds.

Not even half of Dante's performance.

Perhaps with more practice, he could aim for a higher score, but even then, maintaining it for a full minute seemed impossible.

"Damn it! Damn it!"

Boyle lowered his head and returned to his seat.

He couldn't bear to face Ethella.

His failure had essentially proven that Ethella's student had weaker fundamentals than Olivia's student.

However, Olivia did not rejoice, nor did she rebuke Ethella.

Although it had started from a childish motive, as someone who had dedicated her life to teaching, she was sincere when it came to matters of the school.

"Boyle, you did well too. Maintaining it for 20 seconds on your first attempt is very respectable. I am not someone who disregards the fundamentals. What I want to say is that no matter how fundamental something is, it must still be functional. In an era where students across the country are undergoing specialized training, clinging solely to tradition will only lead to obsolescence."

Hearing her words, they began to make sense.
For the first time, the teachers considered that they might have been wrong.

Had they unknowingly fallen into complacency?

To keep up with the changing times, fresh stimulation was necessary.

Perhaps that was precisely why Alpheas had personally gone out of his way to bring Olivia here.

Olivia offered the students a warm smile.

The woman, who usually had a cold impression, seemed even more beautiful when she smiled.

"Now, I'm sure you all want to give it a try. For today, let's use this as a free practice session to train your lifting skills. Since it's your first day, getting a feel for it is important, so try whatever you like. Now, begin your practice."

The students rushed forward as if they had just been given a brand-new toy.

Olivia did not leave her spot, watching over the students' practice with satisfaction.

For once, it seemed like there was nothing left for Ethella to do today, and she headed toward the group of teachers.

As she approached Thadd and Siena, her shoulders slumped.

"I'm sorry. It really was like trying to break a rock with an egg."

Thadd comforted Ethella.

"Haha! Don't think that way. Honestly, it was refreshing to hear you speak your mind, Ethella. Besides, Dante is the number one in the kingdom. Boyle's fundamentals are by no means lacking."

Siena had a similar thought.

There was a difference in skill, but if Boyle had practiced lifting, it would have been a good match.

Considering that most summoners only start to shine in their thirties, Boyle, who had risen to the top of the

advanced class at such a young age, was undoubtedly a rare genius.

“What worries me is what happens next. Since Dante won, the Headmater’s influence will only grow stronger. If things go wrong, it could even shake the foundation of the school.”

“Oh, come on. That’s unlikely. The scope of what can be done in the advanced class is limited anyway.”

With the graduation class in place, it wasn’t feasible to impose intense training on advanced students.

Besides, the curriculum wasn’t that poorly designed.

Still, Siena felt uneasy.

She believed Olivia had some ulterior motive in using Dante as her front.

The three of them watched the students practicing their lifting.

As they became more accustomed to it, most students performed well, with Boyle and Pandora displaying skills befitting the leading group.

Siena pointed toward Shirone’s group.

“Huh? What are they doing?”

Shirone, Nade, and Iruki had teamed up, practicing lifting with a single target.

Intrigued by their unique approach, the other students paused their practice to watch.

One person would trap the target, and when it bounced away, another would catch it and continue lifting.

“Oh-ho, oh-ho! This is fun.”

As Nade clumsily trapped the target, Iruki’s Spirit Zone intercepted it.

The next moment, Shirone snatched the target and moved it to the rear.

The two without a target rushed in fiercely, and Shirone held on for a long time before eventually losing control to Nade again.

Now, every student was watching Shirone’s group.

They had always been the mischievous bunch since Class Five, but seeing them enjoy themselves without the pressure of competition was almost enviable.

“But hey, was Shirone’s Spirit Zone always that big?”

“Huh? You're right. He’s expanded it tremendously!”

The Class Four students immediately noticed the change in Shirone.

It was common sense that students trained during breaks, so everyone showed some improvement, but Shirone’s progress was simply astonishing.

Even Dante’s group couldn’t ignore the size of Shirone’s Spirit Zone.

“Whoa, that’s huge. At that level, he’d rank within the top 30 at the Royal Academy of Magic.”

“Tch! So what? He’s only about as same as Dante at best.

He knows he can’t beat Dante in lifting, so he’s just playing around like that. Typical loser mentality. Right, Dante?”

Dante didn’t respond. He simply watched Shirone’s group practicing their lifting.

“Heh, those little kids. Should we show them how it’s really done?”

Closer led Sabina to the Image Zone. Seeing them approach, the students instinctively made way.

The two of them were no less skilled at lifting than Dante.

In particular, Sabina momentarily twisted her mind to execute a vortex technique. The target spun spectacularly and, just as it was about to escape, snapped back into place, drawing a series of impressed gasps from the students.

Thanks to this, even the teachers got a chance to assess the transfer students’ skills.

Olivia’s students were undeniably exceptional.

Even Thadd, who had been most tormented by Olivia, had to admit it.

“They really are the kingdom’s finest talents. What do you think, Ms. Ethella? As a Zoner, how would you assess

Dante's abilities?"

"Hmm, it's difficult to judge just from lifting, but he certainly has an exceptional edge. Kids these days seem to have an incredible natural sense for magic."

Siena added.

"But it's a bit disappointing too. They have immense talent, but it feels... superficial. I get the sense that these kids see magic as nothing more than a tool for showing off."

"That's inevitable. Magic has been a part of their daily lives since childhood. The true spirit of a mage, their passion—it seems to have faded. They only chase after spectacle and fame. In that sense, Shirone, Iruki, and Nade have a more classic approach. Heh."

Ethella smiled as she watched Shirone's group.

There was a time when magic had been a dream for children. But for those raised in the capital, it had become more like an accessory to enhance their prestige.

There was no stopping the tide of changing times.

Still, it was refreshing to see Shirone and his friends, whose passion remained pure.

As the back-and-forth game ended, Shirone descended from the Image Zone, panting.

Sweating after the intense activity, he felt exhilarated.

While Shirone wiped his sweat with a towel handed to him by a female junior, Dante approached.

No one had to announce it—every student instinctively stopped their practice and turned their attention toward them.

The long-awaited moment had arrived.

Dante stared intently at Shirone's face.

'So this is the guy my master told me to crush?'

Based on Shirone's appearance alone, no one would think he was particularly strong.

That was precisely why Closer and Sabina weren't nervous, even after Olivia's special directive.

But battles weren't won by looks.

Dante's undefeated record at the Royal Academy of Magic was built not just on innate talent but also on his meticulous vigilance.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Dante."

Dante was the first to extend his hand.

The students were surprised at how different he was from the way he acted in class. But no one felt more humiliated than Boyle.

Unaware of all this, Shirone took Dante's gesture in good faith and shook his hand.

"Yeah, I've heard a lot about you."

"Of course you have. I've heard about you too. You're an Unlocker, right? You're just perfect for me to step on. Ah, but don't get me wrong, I don't mean to belittle you."

"Haha! Sure. Let's get along well."

Despite Dante's direct provocation, Shirone didn't seem the least bit upset.

Dante attempted to analyze Shirone's true feelings but quickly dismissed the thought, realizing it would only complicate things.

"Anyway, let's get along. If you ever have any questions, feel free to ask. After all, in learning, there are no masters or friends. If you want, I'll teach you properly."

"Hmm?"

When Shirone tilted his head in confusion, Dante felt annoyed.

Even a clueless bumpkin should know that when a transfer student appears as a potential rival, it's natural to be wary. Dante couldn't believe that Shirone was genuinely oblivious.

"You really don't get it? You specialize in photon magic, right?"

"Yeah. Photon magic is my major."

"So do I. My nickname is Shining Boy. You seriously didn't know?"

Shirone finally realized his mistake and stuck out his tongue apologetically.

“Oh, sorry. I really didn’t know. I don’t read academic journals.”

“You didn’t know?”

Dante was the undisputed number one prodigy in the photon category in the kingdom.

Every student in magic academy knew that. Claiming he didn’t know just because he didn’t read academic journals was a flimsy excuse.

“Hah. You’re quite good at provoking me. I guess you won’t be a boring opponent.”

“No, I really didn’t know. It wasn’t intentional. I’m honestly sorry.”

Chapter 233: 4. Combat Simulation (3)

Dante could no longer endure the insult.

“You little—! Do you think I’m a joke? You expect me to believe that?”

“What Shirone said is true.”

Iruki approached and placed a hand on Shirone’s shoulder.

“I understand why you’re upset, but Shirone really doesn’t know who you are. He hasn’t even been in magic academy for a full year yet. This is only his second semester.”

Dante pursed his lips, looking dumbfounded. Since the semester had just begun, that meant he had only been here for about half a year. And yet, his Spirit Zone was already comparable in size to Dante’s. It was something that defied common sense.

‘No, no way. They’re just ganging up on me to make me look like a fool.’

Feigning composure, Dante scoffed.

“Hmph, so you’re telling me that every single one of you got on your knees before some guy who’s only been learning magic for half a year? This school must be full of nothing but garbage.”

The students bristled at his words, but since what he said was technically true, they couldn’t refute it.

The only one who had the right to speak up was Shirone himself.

“Why are you saying it like that? We don’t learn magic just to defeat others.”

“Haha! You sure know how to talk. Well, I haven’t seen your skills for myself yet, so let’s see.”

Regardless of how magic was originally created, modern society thrived on competition. Talking about its essence was either the dream of the weak or the hypocrisy of the strong.

Assuming Shirone was the latter, Dante rose onto his toes to look down at him.

“I’m going to expose all your lies. Just wait and see.”

At the end of the day, the teachers of the advanced class gathered in the meeting room.

Olivia had spent the entire day observing the school and was meticulously noting down the issues she had found.

Then, after placing a fresh sheet of paper on the desk, she began the meeting.

“Since we toured the school together, I don’t need to waste time with long explanations. At this rate, the school’s ranking will continue to fall. I believe we need drastic measures.”

It was already expected that Olivia would drop a bombshell. What remained uncertain was what kind of bomb it would be.

“I’ve considered various solutions, but frankly, there are no viable alternatives within the advanced class. However, there is one method. We can adopt the graduation class’s system.”

The teachers’ eyes widened. Before they could even process their disbelief, Olivia made her announcement.

“I am requesting that the Combat Simulation Training Ground, Icheonban[\[1\]](#), be opened to the advanced class.”

Thadd slammed the table and stood up.

“Headmaster! Icheonban is far too dangerous! Even the graduation class only uses the training ground under strict supervision!”

“What exactly is so dangerous about it? There’s no need to coddle the students. Even if Icheonban is close to real combat, we can simply lower the synchronization rate.”

Seeing that Olivia was serious, Thadd tried to reason with her calmly.

“You do have a point, Headmaster. We have admittedly been overprotective of the advanced students. However, I can confidently say that the graduation class is not weak. They already undergo rigorous competition, and real combat training should be reserved for them.”

“If the middle tier isn’t competitive, how can the upper tier be? The advanced class feeds into the graduation class. Where do you think we get our graduates from? You can’t achieve innovation with that kind of thinking. You need to change your perspective.”

Ethella spoke up.

“But what about the graduation class? They use Icheonban every day.”

“There are two Icheonban training grounds. If we count the Colosseum used for the graduation exam, that makes three. With proper scheduling, at least one of them could be made available for the advanced class.”

The teachers fell silent.

The reason the graduation class existed was to train in real combat through Icheonban. While there was no strict rule preventing its use in the advanced class, the pride of the graduates was also a significant factor.

More than that, it was a direct contradiction to Alpheas’ long-standing educational philosophy, which he had cultivated over decades for the school.

As the silence dragged on, it became unclear whether this was still a meeting or just a standoff.

Olivia, who had been patiently waiting for someone to voice an opinion, finally nodded.

“I see. So that’s how it is. You refuse to listen to me because I’m only here temporarily, is that it? Do you all still think of Alpheas as the headmaster?”

“N-No, not at all...!”

"You can be honest. It's only human. But don't be mistaken. I, as the current current auditor of the Academic Council and former headmaster of the Royal Academy of Magic, am not here to patch up Alpheas' shortcomings. No one understands that better than Alpheas himself, which is why he personally sought me out and pleaded with me to take this role."

Thadd broke into a cold sweat. As Olivia said, she was the headmaster now. And the teachers had no choice but to acknowledge that fact.

But what was unacceptable remained unacceptable. She would only be here for another six months. Alpheas' philosophy was the school's history and tradition—it had to be preserved.

"No one is denying your reputation, Headmaster Olivia. I, too, respect you greatly. However, such a sudden proposal is —"

"Follow Olivia's decision."

All the teachers turned around at once. Alpheas had entered through the back door, smiling. With the appearance of their spiritual pillar, Olivia's expression soured.

"What's this? Are you spying on me? I was given full authority. I don't need your permission for anything."

"Of course not. I was just taking a walk when I thought I heard some ultrasonic noise. Hohoho!"

"In that case, kindly stay out of it, former headmaster."

"Before I go, I want to say a few words to my disciple."

Thadd, the headmaster of this school is Olivia. You need to remember that."

"Understood."

With Alpheas personally affirming it, the other teachers had no choice but to accept the decision. They had questioned whether he had truly handed over full authority to an acting headmaster for six months, but now, there was no room for doubt.

"Hohoho! Well then, this idle old man will be on his way."

Olivia scoffed but refrained from showing further displeasure. This was something that needed to be clarified at least once.

When Olivia turned back to Thadd, he had already made up his mind. Bowing his head, he spoke.

"I will inform the advanced class."

A notice was posted on the advanced class bulletin board. It stated that integrated training would now take place at Training Ground No. 27.

The lower-class students were confused, but those in the upper classes, who knew where that was, couldn't help but feel tense.

Nade and Iruki immediately sensed that something was off. "Isn't that where Icheonban is? Are they seriously doing this?"

"We didn't really expect things to end here anyway. What does it matter? It's not like we're gonna die."

As Iruki said, no one was going to die, but it was undeniably dangerous.

A combat simulation wasn't some kind of childhood war game where they made sound effects with their mouths.

"Still, this is making me nervous. Are they really going through with this?"

"It's hard to say. Given the Headmaster's attitude, it's possible. She did say she believes in real combat training. Anyway, let's go tell Shirone."

Nade glanced around.

"By the way, where is Shirone? He hasn't even eaten dinner."

"He skipped it. We're supposed to meet at the research society later. He said he had something to do at the training grounds."

"At this hour?"

"He said it wouldn't be ideal to practice when it's crowded. This is the only time he has."

“Don’t tell me... Ataraxia?”

Iruki grinned knowingly.

“This is the perfect time to sneak a peek. Let’s go.”

Shirone stood alone in the empty training ground. The reason he had skipped dinner and come here was to train Ataraxia.

Even he thought that a one-minute preparation time was far too long. While the magic circle wasn’t constrained by space and could be used as a siege weapon, it wasn’t as if he was about to jump into a war. He had to be extremely cautious about wielding something capable of mass destruction.

‘If I practice hundreds or thousands of times, I’ll get used to it. But realistically, I can probably only manage it once a day.’

The inability to train repeatedly was another obstacle in mastering Ataraxia. But Shirone didn’t give up. After all, hadn’t he accomplished his goal when he resolved to read history books in the Ogent family library? Everything in life gains momentum over time. If he kept walking forward, eventually, he would find himself running.

“Alright! Let’s do this.”

Shirone cast Halo. A one-meter-wide circle appeared before him, absorbing countless concepts.

The multicolored waves surging from the front were a mesmerizing sight no matter how many times he saw them. After reaching a certain state, multidimensional structures beyond comprehension began to carve themselves into reality, and Ataraxia was born.

Fixing his gaze on the target in front of him, Shirone selected his magic. Since Photon Output had no physical force, unlike a Photon Cannon, he could use magic without holding back.

“Hey, Shirone...!”

The moment Nade and Iruki entered the training ground, a massive beam of light shot out from the Ataraxia magic

circle.

From a bird's-eye view, the entire training ground was illuminated. Even students far away noticed the mountain beyond them glowing and turned their heads in shock. Nade and Iruki's eyes widened. The sheer output of the light sent shivers down their spines.

This wasn't something a human should be able to control. It felt as if a phenomenon of nature itself had been transplanted right in front of them. What could possibly remain in the wake of that light?

To their surprise, not even a speck of dust rose. Iruki realized that Shirone had used Photon Output. Cold sweat trickled down his back. If that had been a Photon Cannon instead, the cliff that bordered the training ground would have been obliterated.

'Shirone really is incredible. Only someone at that level can make my ultimate technique shine.'

Nade awkwardly moved his legs, as if he had forgotten how to walk.

"Hey, Shirone. This is..."

Before Nade could finish his sentence, Shirone collapsed with a thud.

Normally, he would have retained some level of consciousness. But since he could only attempt this once a day, he had poured every ounce of his strength into it.

"Shirone! Shirone! Wake up!"

Nade propped him up and lightly slapped his cheeks. He couldn't help but imagine the worst—there had been cases where mages died from overexerting their magic.

To his relief, Shirone opened his eyes almost immediately.

"Huh? When did you guys get here?"

"Are you okay? We were here the whole time, ever since you started casting that Ataraxia or whatever."

"Hahaha! So you saw it? I was trying to keep it a secret."

Shirone pushed himself up with his hands. He staggered a bit but wasn't in danger of collapsing again.

Iruki, still staring at the target site, slowly approached.

"The magic you cast in Heaven... that was Ataraxia plus a Photon Cannon, right? I can't even imagine how destructive that must have been. After seeing this, I wouldn't dare ask you to try it."

"Yeah, that's right. Realistically, I doubt I'll ever have to use such a powerful force. But I still want to refine it. The biggest problem is how long it takes to activate."

"That's not necessarily true. You might get a chance to use it in a real situation sooner than you think."

"Huh? What do you mean? What chance?"

Iruki glanced at Nade. Initially, they had just come to vent their frustrations to Shirone. But after witnessing what had just happened, they were now genuinely intrigued.

"Starting tomorrow, we'll be training in Icheonban. The Headmaster made it official."

"Icheonban? What's that?"

Iruki pointed to the sky.

"A virtual suffering."

Nade added.

"A combat simulation system designed for archmages."

Ten minutes before the start of the advanced class's integrated training, the students' tension was higher than ever.

Training Ground No. 27 was a vast open space, carved flat from a mountainside. The ground was tightly fitted with small metallic blocks.

Four steel towers stood around the perimeter, each towering at least seven meters high.

The instructors overseeing the training were Siena, Thadd, and Ethella. Since all the popular teachers were present, the students were satisfied.

Chapter 234: 4. Combat Simulation (4)

Olivia stood before the students at the training ground. "Since this is our first class, I will explain everything myself. The sudden change in curriculum must have caused some confusion. However, mages must be strong. You should already have some knowledge about Icheonban. It is a system developed by Louis Jacquelain, a pioneer in magic engineering, designed to allow combat training under conditions that closely resemble real battles."

To Nade, the name Jacquelain rang out as if blared through a loudspeaker.

He was the greatest magic engineer in the world, the very man who had created the masterpiece known as the Image Zone.

With the advent of the Image Zone, Spirit Zones became visible to the eye, and that technology had since evolved into Icheonban.

People admired the dazzling fame of combat mages, but who was responsible for raising those mages?

Without the devices created by Jacquelain, the development of mages would have stagnated for at least thirty years.

"Mr. Thadd, please bring me the master bracelets."

Thadd brought over two bracelets.

After fastening them to her wrist, Olivia held them up for the students to see.

"Here, we have a red bracelet and a blue bracelet. Each bracelet has a different function, so do not swap them with your friends. The red bracelet converts the mage's state into data, while the blue bracelet converts the external

environment into data. These two sets of information are then transmitted to the towers, creating a virtual world. Now, try it yourselves.”

Each student received a pair of bracelets. When they fastened them to their wrists, red and blue lights illuminated.

“Now, I will activate Icheonban.”

As the administrator started the system, the ground shook as if an earthquake had struck. The physical blocks embedded in the floor shifted, forming a complex terrain that simulated a natural environment.

When an entirely new virtual landscape was projected over it, the students stared in awe, their mouths agape.

They had heard about it from their seniors in the graduation class, but experiencing it firsthand was an entirely different level of realism.

The simulated environment depicted the cityscape of Creas. There were no people walking around, but the sight of hundreds of clustered houses looked so real that one could easily mistake it for reality.

“This city setting is unsuitable. Change it to a different landscape.”

The arrangement of the blocks began to shift again. A quarter of the total area, specifically the northeastern edge, suddenly lowered.

Water pooled in the depression, forming a lake, and the surrounding terrain transformed into a dense forest.

It was an unspoiled mountain landscape, untouched by human feet.

“This truly is a prestigious school. Even with Icheonban, creating a lake is difficult. Over 80 percent of natural features here are made of physical blocks, but the scenery itself is entirely virtual. The blue bracelet receives data and transmits it to your brain. If you remove the bracelet, only the physical blocks will remain. Take some time to explore. You have ten minutes.”

The students entered Icheonban in orderly rows. No one had told them to maintain formation, but the fact that they did was proof of their nervousness.

Even though they had seen such things in the mountains before, even the scattered rocks on the ground felt fascinating. Shirone's group headed toward the lake to investigate.

Nade touched a tree, and the blue bracelet glowed, transmitting its texture to him.

"This is amazing. This isn't even a physical block, but it's still virtual?"

"The leaves feel real too."

Shirone plucked a leaf. It didn't disappear—it rested in his palm like a tangible object.

Iruki approached the lake and scooped up some water with his hands, taking a sip.

"How is it? Does it taste like water?"

"It's more than that—it actually quenches my thirst. Of course, it's just an illusion, but my brain is convinced it's real. This could be dangerous."

Shirone thought the same. What if it wasn't water but fire? Would his brain recognize the heat and cause his body to burn?

Since it wasn't real fire, that probably wouldn't happen—but he couldn't be entirely sure.

Shirone turned to Nade, who was more knowledgeable about such matters.

"Nade, this..."

"Yeah! It's just like the mechanics of a Spirit Zone! This is insane! Louis Jacquebain managed to replicate human consciousness through a mechanical system."

If a biologist's dream was to replace human organs with artificial ones, an engineer's ultimate goal was to create machines that could think like humans.

Although that dream was still far off, Jacquebain had at least succeeded in converting human consciousness into data.

“When the faculty decided to open Icheonban to the advanced class, I heard they strongly opposed it. Now I understand why. If something goes wrong, someone could actually die.”

“Yes, you could die.”

At some point, Olivia had approached them.

“If we could die...”

“But don’t worry. Outside of the graduation exam, the synchronization rate is never set to 100 percent. I’ve temporarily removed the filters for this demonstration, but when you use it, it will be limited to around 50 percent. For the graduation class, it’s 80 percent. This is a regulation set by the Kingdom’s Education Law.”

Iruki spoke up.

“Even at 50 percent, that doesn’t guarantee complete safety, does it?”

“You’re more cowardly than I expected, Iruki.”

“I just don’t want to be the fool who charges in blindly and dies.”

Olivia stared intently at Iruki. He was once regarded as being on the same level as Dante.

However, the Royal Academy of Magic was not a place that tolerated arrogance, and in the end, she recalled that he had dropped out.

‘So all that remains is his sharp tongue? How pitiful.’

Olivia turned back to the students and spoke.

“Iruki is right. Icheonban is dangerous. However, it is a controlled danger. At the Royal Academy of Magic, students train under conditions that closely resemble real combat by adjusting the synchronization rate anywhere from 1% to 100% based on their skill level. I’m not telling you to recklessly accept risk—I’m telling you that this system is entirely manageable.”

There was no need to apply a high synchronization rate. Since this was, after all, an educational setting, training at

an appropriate level would naturally improve their combat sense.

Once the students returned to their places, Olivia officially began the Icheonban lesson.

“The bracelets I’m wearing are different from yours. These are master bracelets, which allow me to control various functions of Icheonban. Let me demonstrate the difference.” Above Olivia’s head, a red gauge measuring 60 centimeters in length appeared.

“This represents my mental energy, quantified as a percentage. During your practical training, you will not be able to see this gauge. Now, let me explain its role. Mr. Thadd, please summon a monster.”

The master bracelets shared functionality. Even if a single instructor attempted to endanger the students, as long as the other instructors also wore master bracelets, the system was designed to prevent any real harm.

“Understood. But, uh... which one should I summon?”

Faced with a dilemma akin to picking an item from a lunch menu, Thadd decided to pass the decision onto Olivia instead.

However, she seemed equally uncertain, resting her chin on her hand in thought.

“Hmm, is this version 6.2?”

“Yes, the latest version. We updated the data ten days ago.”

“Then demons must have been added. Let’s go with a succubus.”

The students’ eyes widened in shock.

“A s-succubus? You mean we can actually summon a real succubus?”

Demons were on an entirely different level compared to regular monsters. They were usually found in isolated locations like ancient towers or underground labyrinths, places so dangerous that even the government prohibited entry unless the party was ranked Level 6 or higher.

According to prevailing theories, the characteristics of demons in mythology reflected the collective consciousness of ancient civilizations.

One argument supporting this idea was that no new demons had emerged in modern times, where individuality was emphasized.

Back in ancient times, the concepts of good and evil were ambiguous, and unthinkable taboos were practiced.

The kind of intense stimulation people sought back then was said to be even stronger than the horrors of modern warfare. Demons—often called the *ancient gods*—were believed to be the embodiment of that fervent desire.

Since the prevailing theory suggested that succubi originated from mass orgiastic rituals, it was no surprise that the more curious students were feeling both anticipation and anxiety.

“Alright, let’s begin.”

After locating the code name for the succubus, Thadd transmitted the data to the central control room.

Beams of light shot out from the four towers, and within the tranquil scenery, a translucent figure flickered before materializing into a succubus.

The students stared, barely blinking. Having encountered succubi mostly in novels and myths rather than academic texts, they had high expectations—only to be met with a horrifying sight.

The creature had the bare body of a woman, but its skin was a sickly blue, mottled with bruises. A grotesque pair of bat-like wings sprouted from its back.

Its slanted eyes stretched unnaturally, its nose was an upturned pig snout, and its teeth were so crooked that even with its mouth closed, its lips protruded unnaturally. Its blue-tinged lips, reminiscent of a corpse, only added to its ghastly appearance.

“T-That’s supposed to be a succubus?”

The male students grimaced in disgust. No matter how attractive the body might have been, its other grotesque features made it utterly repulsive.

Olivia scrutinized the succubus's face. As the faculty auditor, she had received reports about the creature, but this was her first time seeing it in person.

Recognizing the key characteristics of the succubi she had once slain in her younger years, she gave a nod of approval. "Hmm, this is decent. Data on demons is scarce, so I wasn't sure what to expect.

Clapping her hands, Olivia drew the students' attention.

"Alright, everyone. This is likely your first time seeing a succubus. This is what they actually look like. The monsters generated by Icheonban are based on the compiled information from countless explorers and scholars. This is also my first time seeing the demon version. Now, let's test how well its dream-weaving abilities have been implemented."

As Thadd switched the system to test mode, the succubus's appearance began to change.

The students gawked, their mouths hanging open. Some of the male students even drooled slightly.

Now, the succubus had long, straight black hair, flawless white skin, and a delicate, pure face. She smiled softly—while still being completely naked.

"Um, Headmaster... We have young students here. Isn't this a bit inappropriate...?"

Thadd spoke up, but Olivia instead stepped aside to give the students an even clearer view.

"So? Would you call this beauty?"

A deafening cheer erupted from the male students.

"Whoaaa! She's perfect! Absolutely perfect!"

"If every lesson was like this, I'd never get tired of school!"

Olivia smiled sweetly.

"In that case, you're all dead."

Silence fell over the room like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over them.

“It doesn’t matter what they look like—demons are demons. And what are demons? They are the vile mistakes of ancient humans. When faced with a demon, there is only one question to ask. Can you kill it, or not? The moment you start considering anything else, your head will be rolling on the ground.”

At Olivia’s signal, Thadd restored the succubus to its original monstrous form.

The students felt a chill run down their spines as they realized that, for even a moment, they had been entranced by such an abomination.

“There’s an old saying, ‘What you see is what fills your mind.’ The appearance of a succubus is enough to shake a mage’s Spirit Zone. That is why it takes a party of Level 6 or higher to face a demon. At that level, even the slightest distraction leads to complete annihilation. Whether it’s a swordsman losing focus, a surgeon rushing to aid the wounded, or a mage faltering—there is no room for hesitation. It is because mages remain coldly analytical that their comrades can fight at full strength. That is why, in any party, the mage’s survival is the top priority. If they must die, they must be the last to fall.”

The students listened intently. This was their first time receiving such a brutally realistic lesson about what truly happened on the front lines.

This was the essence of Olivia’s real-combat education philosophy.

“So? This is the effectiveness of Icheonban. No matter how much I explain, there’s no comparison to seeing it for yourselves. Of course, none of you will be fighting demons anytime soon. However, Icheonban combat is one of the subjects in your graduation exam. If you make such a mistake in the Colosseum, you will fail. And if a mage like

that were sent to an actual battlefield, they would get their entire party killed.”

Chapter 235: 4. Combat Simulation (5)

Shirone listened carefully. No matter what profession he chose in the future, a mage had to be able to protect both himself and his comrades. After all, they were only assigned tasks that ordinary people couldn't handle. If a mage spent his life sitting at a desk flipping through paperwork, then hiring a scholar would be far more efficient.

"Now, let's begin in earnest. Testing with a succubus isn't ideal, so this time, summon a Dragonfang Warrior."

Thadd had been waiting for those words. Without hesitation, he immediately erased the succubus.

As soon as he input the Dragonfang Warrior's code, a metallic-colored skeleton was projected into Icheonban.

Once again, the students cheered in excitement.

Dragonfang Warriors were magical creatures forged from a dragon's fangs. They were so tough that physical attacks were nearly useless, making them formidable opponents. Without a holy mage capable of casting Turn Undead, running away was often the best option.

"To demonstrate, I will invite one of the instructors."

"I'll do it."

Thadd stepped forward.

Honestly, he didn't want to, but he couldn't send Siena or Ethella instead.

Watching a woman get beaten by a Dragonfang Warrior wasn't something he wanted to see.

"Although this is virtual, the information you perceive is based on real Dragonfang Warriors, so you can consider this a real battle. Let's start lightly at a 50% synchronization rate. Is that alright?"

“Haha! Of course. Fifty percent should be fine.”

In reality, it wasn't fine at all.

Even for a certified 6th-class mage, a Dragonfang Warrior was a powerful monster. Even if the damage was reduced by half, he couldn't guarantee that his mind would endure the impact.

“Now, Mr. Thadd will receive an attack from the Dragonfang Warrior.”

The Dragonfang Warrior stomped forward with heavy, thundering footsteps.

‘Damn, this is terrifying.’

Thadd waited with a grim expression. As the towering skeletal warrior raised its ancient-looking sword overhead, the students' eyes widened.

Its sheer presence was overwhelming.

“Huh? H-Huh?!”

The Dragonfang Warrior's arm came crashing down at terrifying speed.

The virtual blade passed straight through Thadd's body, and the gauge floating above his head instantly dropped by 50%.

Thadd struggled to maintain a composed expression.

“As you can see, Mr. Thadd's mental energy has been cut in half. This is because being struck by the sword is considered fatal. Since the synchronization rate is currently at 50%, only half of the energy was deducted. If a mage receives a fatal value, the hologram will pass through their body. This is called ‘consumption’. Now, let's demonstrate a defensive value. Mr. Thadd?”

Like a well-trained assistant, Thadd immediately cast a spell. As he activated Air Skin, a compressed layer of air enveloped his body, and his percentage gauge only dropped by 1%.

Since mental energy was quantified, casting spells consumed it just as much as receiving attacks did.

“Now, Mr. Thadd will receive the Dragonfang Warrior’s attack again.”

The warrior lifted its arm and swung down its sword once more. This time, it was different from the consumption value. The blade struck the top of Thadd’s head and stopped abruptly, as if it had hit something solid. His gauge dropped by 1.8%.

Olivia nodded in satisfaction.

“Impressive. By spending only 1% of his energy on Air Skin, he managed to block 48.2% of the attack’s power. In a real battle, this means that even after taking a full-powered strike from a Dragonfang Warrior, Mr. Thadd’s mind remains nearly unaffected. Now, do you understand just how strong he is?”

All the students shouted yes in unison. For a certified 6th-class mage to lose 1.8% of his energy from a single strike meant that advanced-class students would be instantly killed if they were even grazed.

Thadd puffed up with pride. There was no need to tell them that he had secretly deployed an extensive series of sequencing formulas just before impact.

“A hologram stopping upon impact is called ‘blocking’. Consumed or blocked. When either of these judgments occur, Anti-Magic and Mental Control techniques are used to drain mental energy.”

Mental Control was a technique that blocked specific circuits in the brain, making it impossible to concentrate.

A Spirit Zone activated the entire brain. Thus, even if only a portion of the cerebral network was blocked, focus became impossible.

Whenever one circuit was blocked, the brain immediately rerouted information through alternative pathways.

However, the Mental Control system continuously switched blocking routes at a speed of 20 times per second, making it possible to think but impossible to enter a Spirit Zone.

Of course, if one could surpass that 20-block-per-second rate and bypass irregular patterns, they could still enter a Spirit Zone.

But according to the official stance of the association, only certified 2nd-class Archmage were capable of doing so.

Although it was an advanced technique, the students had no interest in Mental Control.

It wasn't something that physically harmed them, and since it was originally developed for restraining criminals, it was only fascinating to those aspiring to be engineers.

However, the term Anti-Magic sent chills down their spines. "Headmaster, Anti-Magic is a bit..."

"Yes, I know what you're worried about. It is a magic that damages the mind. However, as long as the synchronization rate remains below 80%, there is no significant risk, so you don't need to worry."

Olivia dismissed their concerns firmly and moved on to the next topic.

"Now, let's move on to attack value. This is called 'repulsion'. Mr. Thadd?"

It was now time for the Dragonfang Warrior to be attacked. But Thadd couldn't help but click his tongue.

Without holy magic, one needed either enough physical force to shatter a dragon's fang or enough heat to melt it. Although he could do it if he went all out, he didn't want to struggle in front of the students.

"Um, about the Dragonfang Warrior..."

"Ah, I see. I'll handle it."

Thadd stepped aside, and Olivia took his place.

Raising a hand toward the Dragonfang Warrior, she casually cast Holy Cross. A radiant burst of light erupted from her palm, and an enormous glowing cross detonated against the warrior's solar plexus.

The impact sent the skeletal warrior staggering backward.

"This is repulsion. While virtual information cannot physically push you, a hologram can be manipulated freely.

Even the death value of a monster falls under the category of repulsion. Let me demonstrate.”

Olivia pursed her lips ever so slightly. A seductive gap formed between them, and a sharp, high-frequency sound slipped through.

As she cast Holy Cross again, a cross four times larger than before obliterated the Dragonfang Warrior.

Fragments of bone dancing and scattered into the air. The students’ eyes widened in shock.

Even the instructors were stunned.

As the highest authority on incantation magic, Olivia had effortlessly demonstrated an advanced technique of supersonic magic known as Single-Sound Magic.

Siena watched her with complicated emotions. She had intended to hold out until Alpheas returned, but she was struggling to suppress her growing admiration.

“Incredible. Judging by the amplification, that must have been over 2,000 syllables.”

“I think it took her about 0.82 seconds. That’s like reading five pages of a novel in less than a second.”

Ethella’s vivid analogy sent shivers down their spines.

Even trying to imagine that level of speed was beyond comprehension.

“The foundation of incantation magic is to internalize and then vocalize. Pronunciation is one thing, but her thought process is terrifyingly fast.”

“Exactly. That’s why S-rank criminals are restrained with cage instead of mind control devices. It completely prevents them from thinking in the first place. Of course, the Headmaster isn’t a criminal.”

What shocked them most was that Olivia’s mental gauge hadn’t dropped at all.

At most, it had decreased by 0.1%. Destroying a Dragonfang Warrior seemed easier for her than breathing.

“This concludes the basic explanation of Icheonban. We will alternate between Image Zone and Icheonban for classes,

so make sure to check the schedule carefully. Class Seven will begin with a synchronization rate of 20%, increasing by increments of 10% per level, with Class Four reaching 50%. For reference, the graduation class is currently training at 80%, and during the graduation exam, it will be set to 100%. If you have any additional questions, ask now."

A Class Four student raised his hand.

"What happens if the gauge reaches zero?"

"Good question. Look at Mr. Thadd's gauge."

The students turned their eyes toward Thadd.

At some point, his gauge had been completely restored.

"The mental energy gauge reflects a mage's current state in real time. It decreases when taking damage and also when casting magic. Of course, it regenerates when resting. If it reaches 0%, both bracelets will emit light, and the Icheonban effects will disappear. Any other questions?"

"Uh... Is that really all that happens?"

Olivia smiled warmly.

"Yes, that's all. Through Icheonban's practical training, you will greatly improve your tactical and strategic understanding. More importantly, the core feature of Icheonban has yet to be revealed, so there's no need to be nervous just yet."

The teachers' expressions darkened.

Although they acknowledged Icheonban's effectiveness, they had originally restricted its use to the graduation class for a reason.

"No matter how powerful a monster is, it is nothing more than pre-recorded data—collected, static information. If a pattern exists, it can be analyzed and countered. But the true strength of Icheonban lies elsewhere. It is not about predictable patterns. It is about the clash of living, unpredictable information."

A murmur spread among the students. Those who understood Icheonban's system were beginning to grasp the meaning behind Olivia's words.

“The real essence of Icheonban... is dueling.”

The advanced class’s integrated lessons were divided into Image Zone and Icheonban sessions. Having quickly adapted to Olivia’s policies, the students no longer felt any resistance toward Icheonban.

“Hey, over there! Get it!”

“No, you have to drive it this way!”

The Class Seven students were hunting a Tycon.

This hairless, reddish-brown monstrous bird had a long beak and sharp talons. Since it wasn’t very large and the synchronization rate was set at only 10%, it was a monster they could hunt without fear.

As dozens of students cast magic into the sky, an aerial fire net formed. Caught in the crossfire, the Tycon was pummeled by a barrage of spells and came crashing to the ground.

“We got it! It was hit by Ice Sword!”

“No, you idiot! My Wind Cutter took it down!”

“Either way, we won! We took down a monster!”

The proper method for hunting flying monsters was to create a fire net along their flight path. Class Seven students were experiencing firsthand just how effective an aerial fire net was in real combat.

Shirone could feel the students changing. Ever since the Icheonban lessons had begun, every student had been dedicating themselves more intensely to magic training. It was proof of Olivia’s real-combat philosophy taking effect. After the junior students finished their practice, it was time for Class Four, and the difficulty level of the monsters increased dramatically.

The Ulk, which Shirone had previously encountered in the Slash-and-Burn villages, was just the beginning. Now, there were also giant scorpions, as well as harpies capable of using sound magic.

The most troublesome of them all, however, was the troll, which possessed regenerative abilities. They had heard that trolls were weak to magic, but half-hearted attacks didn't even leave a scratch.

"Come forth, Mercus."

Boyle summoned Mercus, a creature that inhabited the Arctic seas.

A monster classified under the Extreme-Shell Monster phylum in the Urchin class, it had a spherical body about 50 centimeters in diameter, covered in stiff, spine-like cilia. Although it had no intelligence, once it latched onto a target, it instinctively released cold energy to recreate an environment similar to its natural habitat. For this reason, summoners often chose Mercus when they needed ice-related abilities.

Since it couldn't survive for even a minute at room temperature, the Mercus clinging to the troll's back instinctively began emitting freezing energy.

As the troll started to freeze, its regenerative abilities weakened, slowing its movements. Seizing the opportunity, the students launched a concentrated attack, completely shattering the troll.

"We did it! We took down a troll!"

"Boyle, you're amazing! Don't you need to survive in an extreme-cold environment for at least two months to master Mercus? When did you even go to the Arctic?"

"Haha! The Arctic? No way. I just lived in a freezer every day."

With the introduction of Icheonban, Boyle's reputation had risen. In previous lessons, there were few opportunities to showcase the usefulness of summoning magic. However, in real combat situations, summons with extreme abilities that ordinary mages couldn't wield were beginning to shine. On the other hand, Pandora, who had been ranked second in Class Four, was growing increasingly anxious.

She desperately wanted to stand out, but overwhelming monsters with fragrance magic was simply unrealistic.

Chapter 236: 4. Combat Simulation (6)

‘What’s going on? Is fragrance magic useless in real combat?’

Pandora shook her head.

While fragrance mages were rare, once certified, they were given favorable treatment in the magic society. This was because scents were invisible, affected everyone within their range, and had uniquely distinct effects.

However, to students who didn’t understand the true potential of fragrance magic, it seemed almost insignificant. Pandora glanced at her competitors.

Boyle was training by the book, like the model student he was, while Shirone’s group was hunting freely, acting like the troublemakers they were known to be.

But the strangest group was Dante’s.

Even though Icheonban was open, they simply sat outside, watching as other students hunted monsters.

“Hmph. What’s with them? Are they trying to act superior? How arrogant.”

Dante casually met Pandora’s gaze before gesturing toward Closer and Sabina, who were seated behind him.

“Hey, that girl is staring at us.”

“Keke, she must be panicking. I like her taste, but her skills are trash. Did they not even teach her how to fight using scent?”

“I bet they just told her to wait until the graduation class to learn real techniques. Either way, it’s annoying. That country bumpkin girl is glaring at us like she’s ready to pounce. Should I go crush her?”

Closer turned to Dante.

“What do you think, Dante? Should we give them a little demonstration?”

“Go ahead. Show them what Icheonban is really about.”

At that, Closer and Sabina finally put on their bracelets. The simulated landscape was an expansive grassland. As they stepped inside, the students who had already been training stopped what they were doing and turned to watch.

They had heard stories about Dante’s group through magazines, but this was their first time seeing their skills in action.

Sabina raised her head arrogantly and said.

“You’re all doing it wrong. If you want real combat practice, this is how it’s done. Mr. Thadd, load Package 17, please.”

Thadd, who had been sitting idly in a corner, yawned and transmitted the request to the core.

Package 17 was known to be chaotic. But since the synchronization rate was low, there was no real danger.

Thunder roared as monsters appeared across the land, sea, and sky.

Golems rose from the ground, while Ulks and skeletons charged down from the hills. Meanwhile, corpse-eating scavenger birds called Nachals dove down, using their spear-like beaks in vicious melee attacks.

The battlefield-like scene left the students breathless. The sheer overwhelming number of enemies made it impossible to formulate a strategy.

“Heh, now this is more like it.”

Sabina leaned back slightly and cast a spell. A cold wind swirled around her body, and in the next moment, she vanished from sight.

Thadd, who had been watching with half-lidded eyes, suddenly sharpened his gaze.

‘Wait... Haste, isn’t it’

Haste was a specialization spell from the air magic branch.

It enhanced movement speed by manipulating the power of wind.

The Ulks chasing Sabina swung their claws wildly, but she had already slipped behind them, slicing through them with Wind Cutters.

Meanwhile, the golems ignored Sabina entirely, focusing instead on Closer, the only visible opponent.

“Keke, let’s show them why we’re the stars.”

One of the golems swung its massive fist down toward Closer’s head. Despite being made of earth, the golem’s sheer weight was nearly a ton—far beyond what any mage’s physical body could withstand. But instead, the attack was valued as blocked.

‘Earth Rise? That’s another specialization spell, yeah?’

Earth Rise was a magic that drew power from the land, enhancing durability. Although the caster couldn’t move while using it, its unparalleled defensive capabilities made it a force to be reckoned with.

‘I see. So that’s the secret behind their reputation as the kingdom’s stars. It’s all about passive magic.’

While active magic focused on specific phenomena, passive magic were magic that reinforced a mage’s inherent attributes.

Wind was swift and earth was sturdy. From these elemental properties, Haste and Earth Rise were derived.

Since passive spells remained active after casting, they could be used alongside other active spells, creating an overwhelming advantage.

A prime example of a mage’s passive spell was Teleportation.

It was often mistaken for an active spell, but in reality, it merely converted the mage into a photon state.

How they moved while in that state depended entirely on their senses. That was why, when Shirone first trained in Teleportation, he had spent an entire month rolling around on the ground.

“Hahaha! Too slow! Too slow!”

‘Kekeke! These guys are too weak!’

Sabina would deal a critical blow, and Closer would use earth's power to crush whatever was left.

This pattern repeated until the number of monsters dwindled rapidly.

Since they had already mastered magic from the graduation class, clearing an advanced-class monster package was effortless for them.

Thadd held his forehead and shook his head.

"What the hell is with all these passive spells? Is this the Royal Academy of Magic's approach now?"

Siena approached and replied.

"It reflects the capital's emphasis on individuality in magic training."

"Individuality is fine, but what about diversity? Students need exposure to various types of magic to understand their own aptitudes and talents. Passive spells can be trained through Teleportation alone. What's the rush?"

"It is efficient, though. Active spells have the drawback of not being able to cast two spells at once. Iruki is an exception with his Double Spirit Zone, but look at Sabina. She's casting Wind Cutter while already enhanced by Haste. That's why she's performing at a level far above the other students. Even Canis and Arin, who studied with Arcane, specialize in passive spells."

"But Siena, at our academy—"

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying I support Baschka's approach. I just want to understand why students all over the country are so fascinated by them."

Siena adjusted her glasses and pointed toward a corner of Icheonban.

"Regardless... there are students achieving the same results using active spells."

Thadd turned to look at Shirone's group. They were facing Package 7, a unit composed of golems.

Lightning Bolt, Atomic Bomb, and Photon Cannon were raining down on the enemies. As expected from active

spells, there was a lot of chaotic movement, but the group was working together well despite that.

Most importantly, they weren't taking things too seriously. Even while panting for breath, they were laughing hysterically, making one wonder whether the words "real-combat training" and "school" really belonged together.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted. Let's stop here."

No sooner had Nade finished speaking than the shattered golem corpses began absorbing the dirt around them and rising back up.

Ethella, who had activated Package 7 and then left, had yet to return.

Of course, Ethella was an excellent teacher. But there was no denying that she was terrible with machines.

Leaving the reset function on and then walking away—what were they supposed to do about that?

"Let's just take off our bracelets. That's the only way.

Seriously, Ms. Ethella is too much."

"Wait a second. I just thought of something I want to try."

At Shirone's words, Nade and Iruki stepped aside, curious about how he was planning to handle the situation. For one person to clear an entire package, he would likely have to either burn through them with lasers or bombard them with Photon Cannon blasts.

But their predictions were off.

Shirone conjured a sphere of light, and from it, golden chains burst forth like flowing water.

It was the Shining Chain, a technique he had mastered in heaven.

The sight of an unfamiliar spell instantly drew all the students' attention to Shirone.

Even Dante couldn't ignore this one.

Shirone wrapped the leading golem in Shining Chain.

The chains were strong enough to crush even Taboo, meaning they could easily destroy an earth golem.

However, that method wouldn't be enough to take down all of them at once.

Instead, the golem ensnared by the chains was lifted into the air, then whipped around at high speed, slamming into the other golems and driving them into the ground.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

No matter how large they were, their fundamental composition was still dirt. Pummeled by another golem of the same weight, they were unable to resist and were completely flattened into the earth.

The students were left speechless as they watched.

"What kind of magic is that?! How do you even learn something like that?!"

"It must be possible because of Immortal Function. This is insane."

Closer and Sabina, who had been basking in the spotlight after showcasing their skills by clearing Package 17, ground their teeth.

Despite all the flashy tricks they had displayed, all eyes had shifted elsewhere.

Even Dante was watching Shirone.

To be honest, as a fellow light mage, it was shocking. Photon magic was already difficult to combine with other elements, but shaping it into solid forms was supposed to be impossible.

'So, he does have some tricks up his sleeve.'

As Icheonban grew livelier, Ethella came running over in a panic.

Nade crossed his arms and glared.

"Teacher..."

"Oh my, I'm sorry! You waited long, didn't you? Should I activate another package for you?"

Flustered, Ethella fumbled with the master bracelet.

Seeing that, Shirone felt exasperated, but at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to be mad. Realizing that even

someone he respected had things she wasn't good at made it impossible to dislike her.

"Just turn it off. Please."

The mere sound of the golems rising again made him feel like throwing up.

Completely exhausted, Shirone's group slumped their shoulders as they exited Icheonban.

Dante was waiting at the exit.

"Is that a fractal?"

Shirone thought for a moment before nodding.

"Yeah. Complex shapes aren't possible with photon shaping, after all."

"I see. It's a solid approach. Impressive."

"Haha, thanks."

"But it's flawed. Your method has a serious weakness."

Nade scowled.

Shirone had overcome countless obstacles and had continuously refined his abilities through real combat.

There was no way his evolved skills had a fundamental weakness.

"I acknowledge your omnipotence as an Unlocker, but the problem is that you have no other options. You still haven't learned any passive spells, which makes your balance completely off."

Iruki countered.

"Off balance? Shirone has offensive magic, defensive magic, sustained damage magic, and even binding magic. How exactly is that unbalanced?"

"From a structural perspective, it might seem fine. But all of his spells are high-cost. I don't know how many battles he's fought, but at this rate, he wouldn't last an hour. Am I wrong?"

Shirone blinked, momentarily caught off guard. Now that he thought about it, he had never fought a battle that lasted longer than an hour.

Iruki knew that, too, but he had always considered it a matter of fighting style.

Carnivores couldn't run as long as herbivores—not because they were weak, but because their power was meant for short bursts. If one could unleash overwhelming force in a short time, endurance was a secondary concern.

“So what? Offense is way more advantageous than defense. We're talking about an entire hour—not five or ten minutes. Most magic battles end long before then.”

“You're not entirely wrong. But, well... There's no changing things now. I'm just offering my opinion. For reference, the longest battle I've ever fought lasted 10 hours and 27 minutes.”

To Shirone, who was essentially a sprinter, those words were shocking.

10 hours and 27 minutes of continuous combat—that was an experience completely beyond his understanding.

“So don't be in such a rush. Magic isn't just about short sprints.”

Leaving those cryptic words behind, Dante walked away.

The Image Zone lessons felt sluggish.

Just a month ago, it had been the primary setting for evaluating the advanced class's combat ability. But compared to hunting monsters, simply hitting targets felt tedious.

Even the Class Four students no longer seemed as eager to rack up points.

Unable to stand it any longer, Ethella gathered the students and scolded them.

“Everyone, if you don't train your Four Way Formation, you won't be able to improve your skills. Sharpening your fundamentals will only make your monster hunting even better.”

“Isn't this a good thing? It just means we've adapted to the advanced education of the Royal Academy of Magic.”

“Dante is now a student of Alpheas Magic Academy. Refrain from making comments that fuel regional rivalry.”

For once, Ethella’s tone was harsher than usual. But it didn’t have much of an effect.

The students still looked bored, all waiting impatiently for the next Icheonban lesson.

Shirone, however, was different. Lately, the thing that ignited his passion wasn’t Icheonban—it was Lifting.

He had realized that the secret to shortening Ataraxia’s activation time might lie in Lifting.

Chapter 237: 4. Combat Simulation (7)

To construct Halo, Immortal Function had to be expanded infinitely.

However, since Shirone had already grasped the concept of a perfect circle, he now had the means to simplify the mechanism after the second activation.

A Lifting target reacts sensitively to changes in mental state. Thus, if the mind remains in absolute stability, the target will not move.

This meant that he could now draw a perfect circle without stepping into the realm of infinity.

From that point on, instead of practicing normal Lifting techniques, Shirone focused on keeping the target in a completely still state.

After a month, he started seeing results.

Watching a high-resistance target floating motionlessly within the Spirit Zone was a mesmerizing sight.

This was only possible because Shirone, having mastered Immortal Function, had attained the sensation of a perfect circle.

The students gasped in admiration, though they couldn't understand why he was training this way.

Closer scoffed.

"He's been doing the same thing for a month straight now. And he still can't hold it for even ten seconds."

Sabina, unwilling to be left out, added her own remark.

"He's not a monk. Does he really need to go this far? How does this even help with magic?"

The target floating above Shirone didn't so much as tremble. This meant that not even the slightest mental

fluctuation had occurred.

It was no different from brain death—an unnatural mental state that a normal human could never achieve. Only Shirone, who had reached the state of Diamond Form, could pull it off.

But even he couldn't hold it for more than ten seconds. Eventually, the target began shaking violently before flying out of the Spirit Zone.

For the first time, Dante spoke.

"It's grown... a little, hasn't it?"

"Huh? What has?"

"His Spirit Zone. It looks bigger than before."

Closer and Sabina took another look at Shirone.

Even to the naked eye, it was clear—his Spirit Zone had expanded.

"No way. If it were that easy to increase a Spirit Zone, everyone would be an Archmage. Normally, you'd have to go through grueling training or reach some kind of enlightenment... Wait. Enlightenment?"

Sabina suddenly realized something. Mages underwent awakenings, but since a Spirit Zone was a purely mental construct, it was more closely tied to the state of a disciplined mind.

This was why Ethella, a bishop of the Karsis Monastic Order, was also one of the most renowned Zoners in the kingdom.

Sabina's guess was correct.

Having reached Diamond Form, Shirone no longer had any mental barriers restricting his expansion. And as he continued to revolve the perfect circle, his Spirit Zone was strengthening at an astonishing speed.

While Closer and Sabina tried to mask their discomfort by throwing out dismissive remarks, Dante remained silent, watching Shirone intently.

Icheonban lesson time had arrived.

The class was overseen by three instructors—Ethella, Siena, and Thadd. By now, the students had come to accept it as routine.

Siena took the lead in conducting the lesson.

“Starting today, we will be learning one-on-one combat. This differs from tactical training, so follow the control guidelines carefully.”

One-on-one combat differed from tactical training in several ways.

First, because it involved powerful magical exchanges, energy gauges depleted much faster. This meant that Anti-Magic would be much stronger.

Most importantly, passive spells could trigger a repulsion value even against humans.

One of the most infamous incidents involved two mage teleporting and colliding midair at the exact same location. Even though it was a virtual reality, such an accident could still lead to severe injuries.

“This is also why three instructors are supervising today’s lesson—because of the risks of this one-on-one combat. Since it’s the first day, we will begin with practical exercises. If there are any volunteers...”

“I’ll do it.”

Boyle raised his hand immediately.

He had been waiting for this moment.

“Very well. Then, for Boyle’s opponent...”

“Teacher, can I choose my opponent myself?”

Personal grudges weren’t ideal in training, so Siena was about to refuse. But Boyle was already glaring at his intended opponent.

Dante pointed at himself in disbelief.

“Me? You want to fight me?”

“That’s right. You’ve been acting all high and mighty, so don’t back down now. If you’re as amazing as you claim to be, prove it with your skills.”

Dante could fight if someone challenged him. But as the top-ranked student in the kingdom, he couldn't just accept any random challenge.

"You're that desperate to take me down? No matter what?"

"Don't get it twisted. I'm the rightful number one of the advanced class. You're the one issuing the challenge here. So why don't you come up? I'll fix that rotten personality of yours."

"Hahaha! You've got a sharp tongue! Alright, then how about this? The loser kneels and admits defeat to the winner."

Ethella interjected.

"Dante, this is still part of a formal lesson..."

"It's fine. Please allow it, Ms. Ethella. In fact, this is exactly what I wanted."

Boyle pleaded with an earnest look in his eyes. The memory of being beaten by Closer was a humiliation he could never forget. Now that he had a chance to redeem himself, he was actually grateful.

As the duel was confirmed, Shirone grew curious about how Dante would handle Boyle. The photon magic had no offensive spell. Of course, someone like Dante would have learned spells from other branches, but he had clearly declared himself the Shining Boy—a mage of light.

While Shirone was lost in thought, Boyle and Dante moved to a distance of about 50 meters within the Icheonban training field, awaiting the start of their duel.

The initial positioning in one-on-one battle was crucial.

Once the fight began, variables would come into play, but the opening move always started with both fighters facing each other. The key was deploying sequential formulas to land the first strike.

Summoners, however, had a different approach compared to other mages, giving them more flexibility in their opening strategy.

Rather than going for an immediate attack, summoners prioritized calling forth their summons as quickly as possible to defend against incoming attacks.

Knowing this, Dante smirked and said in a declarative tone. "Go ahead and summon first. Let's take it easy. I'm not the type to make a fuss right from the start."

Boyle couldn't bring himself to believe Dante's words.

But at the same time, it didn't seem like he was lying just to set up an excuse in case he lost.

This was a benefit to the summoner, who was forced to play defensively in the early game anyway.

"Do as you like. I'll fight in my own way."

His response allowed him to maintain composure while also binding Dante to his own words.

Dante remained relaxed but scratched his eyebrow in mild frustration. He had assumed Boyle was nothing more than a pampered greenhouse flower, but the guy actually knew how to play mind games.

'Summoning magic, huh? That is tricky.'

Summoners could call forth their creatures using a unique and difficult state of cognition known as Correspondence.

The first entity a mage summons is always themselves.

This is called a Doppelgänger. If they successfully summon their Doppelgänger, it creates the potential for it to evolve into an independent third entity.

To summon something means to possess absolute knowledge of it.

That is the essence of Correspondence, which consists of three stages.

The first stage is the Engrave, where the mage observes the target with all five senses and imprints its image into their mind.

Since summoners must perfectly memorize the appearance of their summons, their observational skills surpass those of ordinary people by an overwhelming degree.

One of their training methods was called the Arrangement Technique.

It involved randomly mixing 30 rods, each differing in length by a mere millimeter, and requiring the student to sort them in perfect order within a minute.

The second is the Empathy, where the mage studies the behavior of their target until they have absolute confidence in understanding it.

This could be achieved through extensive research, but most summoners opted to live alongside the creature for an extended period to experience its nature firsthand.

No matter the species, spending over a year in an isolated environment with it would naturally lead to a deep-rooted understanding.

The less intelligent the creature, the simpler its reactions and the easier it was to complete the stage.

The third and most crucial stage is the Extinction.

This required the mage to eliminate the engraved target, erasing its physical presence.

If the target was still observed in the real world after this stage, it meant the summoner had failed to materialize it through their Doppelgänger.

However, killing was not always necessary. The key was to ensure that the summoner could *never see it again*.

The stronger this condition was enforced, the clearer the summoned entity would become.

Killing a creature they had spent years bonding with was a horrifying experience, but sparing it could be equally dangerous.

For example, a female mage once attempted to summon a healing monster called Opoi but hesitated during the Extinction.

She eventually *cleared* the stage by selling the Opoi to a collector of magic creatures. However, five years later, she learned that the Opoi was still alive somewhere in the world. As a result, she permanently lost the ability to summon it.

Summons were classified into ten tiers, with Tier 10 consisting of 13,872 known species. However, according to the Magic Association's research, only three species had ever been recorded at Tier 1.

One of the Tier 1 summons was the Lich, an archmage among undead monsters.

It was famously known to be the summon of Zulu, an archmage from the Middle East. When this information became public, the entire academic world was thrown into chaos.

The Extinction required erasing a being from existence, yet the Lich was an undead entity *incapable of death*.

Some speculated that Zulu herself had become a Lich and was merely summoning a Doppelgänger. But since she refused to speak on the matter, the truth remained unknown.

Boyle rolled his neck and spoke arrogantly.

"Last semester, I was ranked second in the advanced class. Barely behind first place. Do you know why I deliberately chose not to move up to the graduation class and stayed here instead? Because I believed I was still lacking."

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

"But not anymore. I spent four whole years on this. And during this past break, I finally succeeded. My summon will tear you to pieces."

"I look forward to it. To be honest, that Mercedes was a bit disappointing."

Boyle's lips curled into a grin. At this moment, he wasn't a sheltered student who played by the rules—he was a summoner, ready to battle.

"Don't worry. This time, it'll be different."

As Siena announced the start of the battle, both Boyle and Dante entered their Spirit Zones simultaneously.

Sequential formulas deployed, their mental energy surged, and their Spirit Zones transformed according to their styles. Boyle's was defensive. Dante's was the offensive.

“Come forth, Gaos!”

The moment Boyle extended his hand, another Boyle appeared beside him.

Following the trinity logic of a mage’s Doppelgänger transferring into a summon’s Doppelgänger, the entity transformed into a Tier 6 summon—Gaos.

KRAAAAAAAAAAH!

A monstrous humanoid, measuring three meters in length, crouched in a quadrupedal stance. Its smooth, hairless skin gleamed a deep blue, its muscles split apart like cracked stone.

Though its body was humanoid, its face had no eyes, as if it wore an eyepatch. Instead, its entire snout was a massive, jagged mouth stretching from its nasal bridge to where its chin should have been.

Rows of sharp fangs jutted unevenly, and inside, straw-like tongues intertwined in a disturbing tangle. From its spine, long tendrils crackling with electricity extended outward. It had four fingers, each tipped with ten-centimeter claws as hard as diamond.

“G-Gaos... He really summoned Gaos.”

The students were dumbfounded. They had heard Boyle had undergone special training over the break, but they never expected it to be for Gaos.

Among Tier 6 summons, Gaos was considered one of the strongest. In terms of pure physical prowess, it could even rival lower-tiered Tier 5 monsters.

The instructors were just as astonished.

There were no summoners in the current graduation class, but only a handful of students had ever graduated from the school after reaching Tier 6 summoning.

“My goodness. When did he learn such advanced summoning magic? It’s impossible to achieve that in just a single break.”

At Ethella’s comment, Thadd let out a bitter chuckle.

“He must have been planning this for a long time. That kid...
He trained it from the very start with this in mind.”

The cunning of modern students never ceased to amaze him.

Advanced and graduation class mages were all vulnerable to physical attacks. By summoning Gaos, which possessed Tier 5 physical capabilities, Boyle had essentially ensured an easier path through the graduation exam.

Chapter 238: 4. Combat Simulation (8)

Even after the battle began, Dante did not move. To be honest, he had never expected a Tier 6 summon to appear. “How about it? Wouldn’t it be wiser to surrender now before you embarrass yourself? If you do, I might cancel the part about making you kneel.”

“Amazing. How did you manage to summon Gaos?”

When Dante made a weary expression, Boyle straightened his shoulders proudly.

“I wouldn’t even have been able to stand being near that thing, let alone live with it for years. Don’t tell me... you crossed the forbidden line?”

Boyle’s eyes flared.

Due to the nature of a summoner’s profession, living alongside magical beasts for extended periods was natural. In fact, some eccentric mages had crossed the line of taboo in order to complete the Empathy stage.

It was a well-known fact among mages, but for Dante to say it outright was nothing short of blatant ridicule.

“I will make you kneel before me.”

Gaos charged forward at a speed nearly impossible to track with the eyes. Even Shirone, who had once fought Ulks in the slash-and-burn village, had no desire to face something like Gaos.

‘How will Dante handle this?’

Contrary to expectations, Dante evaded in the most conventional way—teleporting away.

But that alone was not enough to stop Gaos.

The monster twisted its body with terrifying agility, instantly closing the distance and slashing with its claws.

Everyone thought it was over.

However, at that moment, Gaos's movement slowed.

"What...?"

Still mentally linked to Gaos, Boyle noticed the small magic circle shimmering beneath it.

Just by observing the effect, Shirone immediately recognized the spell.

"A Slow Magic Circle?"

Dante interlocked his fingers behind his head and smirked mockingly.

"Is that all you got? A Tier 6 summon, and it's this slow?"

Furious, Gaos tensed its muscles, but brute strength could not distort the flow of time.

KRAAAAAHH!

Finally escaping the magic circle, Gaos let out a deafening roar and charged at Dante once more.

But once again, it stepped into another pre-laid Slow magic circle, humiliating itself once more.

Dante yawned as he watched, then pointed downward with a bored expression.

"Look at the ground, look at the ground. Are you stupid?"

"You bastard! How dare you mock me!"

Boyle shouted, and electricity surged from the hoses connected to Gaos's spine. Bolts of lightning exploded, turning the area Dante stood in into scorched earth.

Taking a direct hit from a Tier 6 summon's magic, Dante should have been finished.

But the space was empty.

Boyle belatedly realized why.

"An Illusion magic circle?"

Only a small magic circle was drawn on the ground where the lightning had burned. It had been a trap laid from the moment he cast the first Slow magic circle.

'Where the hell did he go?'

As Boyle anxiously scanned his surroundings, Dante suddenly slung an arm around his shoulders from behind.

Boyle's heart nearly stopped from the shock, leaving him unable to even lift a finger.

Dante's face appeared over Boyle's shoulder with a grin.

"Are you playing around? I accepted your challenge, so at least take this seriously."

"Kugh! G-Gaos!"

Gaos turned and charged with a furious roar, but Dante teleported away once more.

After observing the fight, Shirone finally understood Dante's specialty.

"I see. A magic circle battle using light magic, specifically information magic."

It was an advanced application of Photon Output, the technique Shirone had studied for his Speed Gun Test.

Photon magic, being the fastest at transmitting information, had a natural synergy with magic circles.

Even the angelic ability, Halo, wasn't its core substance light-based?

Moreover, Dante's magic circles were all one-time-use—Instant Magic Circles.

Though they lasted only about a minute, they could be deployed in under a second.

Currently, dozens of magic circles floated around Dante.

Gaos, who had been wildly charging around, finally halted, noticing the changed environment.

Watching from a distance, Closer smirked.

"A Reflection magic circle. He's caught. Boyle can't escape now."

Boyle's face turned grim as he looked around. Everywhere he turned, shimmering magic circles surrounded him.

There were exactly 48 of them. Using his summoner's superhuman perception, he quickly analyzed their identical size and shape—each had a diameter of precisely 57.62 centimeters.

Dante raised both hands like a conductor orchestrating a grand performance.

“Welcome to Dante’s playground.”

“Shut up!”

Dante fired an Air Strike spell at one of the Reflection magic circles. The moment Gaos lunged forward, the spell bounced between seven different circles before striking Gaos in the ribs.

The fact that Dante didn’t even attempt to dodge meant that he had complete control over time and space.

Like a conductor leading a symphony, Dante fired spells everywhere.

His Air Strike spells ricocheted between the three-dimensional network of magic circles. From a Duplication magic circle, each Air Strike doubled before converging on Gaos.

KRAAAAAAH!

No matter how powerful Gaos’s physique was, enduring a continuous barrage of Air Strikes, strengthened by magic circles, was too much.

Boyle was stunned. No matter where he moved Gaos, an Air Strike would strike it directly. When three consecutive hits landed, he nearly lost control of the summon entirely.

“What’s wrong? The great Gaos is crumbling under such minor attacks?”

Boyle clenched his teeth and endured Dante’s mockery. The only reason he wasn’t reacting was because the magic circles’ duration was about to expire.

Just a little longer. If he could endure, an opportunity would arise. If he seized even a single chance, victory could still be his.

“Now’s my chance!”

The moment the magic circles disappeared, Gaos launched forward at full speed.

Slow magic circles were still scattered throughout the area, but Boyle wasn’t foolish enough to fall for the same trick twice.

Yet, as if laughing at his thoughts, Dante targeted Gaos's shoulder and knee, placing two Slow magic circles directly on them.

With different time flows applied to separate body parts, Gaos lost its balance and flipped onto its back.

"You really are an idiot. Magic circles are still magic. If you try to avoid them, I can just place them directly on your body."

Boil gritted his teeth. Just who was this guy? How was he treating a Tier 6 summon like a mere toy?

Gaos struggled even to rise.

Even as a virtual summon, its characteristics were identical to the real thing, which meant that, regardless of the summoner's mental stamina, if its body exhausted its energy, it could no longer fight.

"You okay? Your little darling looks like he's in pain."

"You son of a—!"

Humiliated in front of everyone, Boyle made a desperate decision.

Blue lightning erupted from Gaos as it transformed into a state of pure electricity.

This was a self-destructive attack—one that even the real Gaos would only use when its life was truly on the line.

KRAAAAAAAAAAH!

"Giving up already? That's too boring."

Dante raised his hand and pointed at Gaos. Ten magic circles aligned in a single row on the ground, then slowly began to rise.

It was an advanced technique of information magic—Rising Target.

'That's an Amplification magic circle...'

Boyle quickly calculated the distance. If the Air Strike passed through all ten of the magic circles lined up in a row, it would increase in power by nearly tenfold.

However, with Gaos's speed, it could at least make it through four of the circles before impact. That would limit

Dante's amplification to six times, making this a winnable fight.

'I have the advantage in raw power. I'll go for a strong offensive.'

The moment Gaos reached the first magic circle, Dante cast an Air Strike.

But instead of aiming at Gaos, the spell shot off in a completely different direction.

The Air Strike traveled forward, bounced off a triangular cushion, and reversed its trajectory, entering the Rising Target circles from the farthest end first.

'Did he reverse the distance calculation?'

Since both Gaos and the magic were moving in the same direction, the Air Strike was now set to pass through all ten circles before impact.

Boyle still held onto hope. Gaos was fast. All that mattered was striking Dante before the Air Strike hit.

"I won!"

As Gaos reached the final magic circle, Boyle unconsciously shouted in victory.

But his hopes were shattered in an instant—Gaos's movements suddenly slowed down dramatically.

By the time he realized the last magic circle was actually a Slow magic circle, it was already too late.

Despite Boyle's superhuman observation skills as a summoner, there was no way to determine the nature of the final magic circle when ten were stacked together.

The Air Strike, having passed through nine magic circles, struck Gaos square in the back. The force sent it flying diagonally before it completely dissipated.

Boyle could do nothing but stand there in shock.

If he forced himself, he might be able to summon Gaos again. But he didn't want to.

Dante possessed a genius-level understanding of time and space. His strategy of manipulating information magic to

gradually corner his opponent into a dead end was so overwhelming that it stripped away any will to fight.

Dante shrugged his shoulders.

“Is this really the end? Even after I went easy on you, you still managed to disappoint me.”

“Don’t be so cocky! It was just a hair’s breadth difference! If Gaos had just a little more stamina left, you would’ve been the one going down!”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that. But you know what? If I wanted to, I could have ended this fight at any time.”

“Ridiculous! You were also fighting with everything you had —!”

Suddenly, a magic circle lit up beneath Boil’s feet, and his body sank downward.

In the next instant, he was ejected through the underside of a magic circle floating in the air—and dropped directly in front of Dante.

“Uwaaaah!”

Boyle crashed into the ground, his body arching in pain.

Dante clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Don’t you know that passive spells triggers a repulsion value? Magic circles count as passive spells, you know.”

“Ugh...! You... when did you set up a magic circle under me...?”

“Good question. Why don’t you guess?”

Boyle desperately replayed the battle in his mind. But Dante had spent the whole fight evading Gaos and had never gotten close to him.

No—except for one moment.

“Wait... was that why you put your arm around my shoulders...?”

“Bingo. I can activate magic circles on a time delay. It’s called Time Walk. Summoners control two consciousnesses at once, so they usually stay in place. Also, flipping a magic circle upside down is a technique called Spin. It’s actually pretty tricky to pull off. Anyway, while you were busy

obsessing over your darling, I was ready to take you down at any time. Got that, *mama's boy*?"

"You—you bastard...!"

"But I'm getting bored now. Let's end this."

The moment Dante finished speaking, another magic circle activated, and Boyle was swallowed downward again.

"UWAAAHHH!"

Boyle was helplessly thrown into a chaotic sequence of seven space-shifting magic circles, warping in unpredictable patterns.

He couldn't even struggle—the actual physical distance covered was zero.

It was no different from simply standing still.

Dante calmly calculated the timing, then fired another Air Strike. The spell ricocheted precisely six times before slamming into Boyle's back as he plummeted downward.

The consumed value triggered, and both bracelets on Boyle's wrists lit up.

His vision of the simulated battlefield in Icheonban disappeared, replaced by the metallic block flooring of the real training ground.

The students were all frozen in stunned silence.

Boyle didn't understand what they were so shocked about. All he knew was being bounced around helplessly before being hit by a surprise attack from his blind spot.

But what the students had witnessed was something else entirely—a dazzling display of technique.

Boyle and the Air Strike had crisscrossed through the air, colliding at one exact point to decide the battle.

Even if someone could theoretically calculate it, replicating it was another matter entirely. Dante glanced around at the silent, awestruck students, then turned to Siena.

"Teacher, could you activate my percentage gauge?"

Revealing one's remaining mental energy was typically something people avoided, but Dante had no reservations.

Siena used her master bracelet to project his percentage gauge into the air.

His mental energy hadn't even dropped to one-fiftieth of its full capacity.

Shirone understood—this was a message from Dante. The reason he could create so many magic circles while consuming so little mental energy was because they were all based on fundamental magic.

Photon Output was an accessible magic anyone could use, and constructing simple information-based formations required almost no effort.

Rather than a single magic circle that amplified energy by ten times, placing five circles that each doubled the output was far more efficient.

Yet when combined, those magic circles had produced an overwhelming effect—enough to toy with a Tier 6 summon like it was a mere pet.

A strategy that never relinquished control, steadily tightening its grip until the opponent drowned.

This was the combat style of the Shining Boy—Dante.

Chapter 239: 4. Combat Simulation (9)

“Ugh! This is ridiculous... How could this...”

Boyle was in shock at the realization that he hadn't even managed to shave off one percent of Dante's mental energy.

He hadn't been fighting against an Archmage. Dante was just a fellow classmate of the same age, and Boyle himself was a prodigy who had gained recognition for his summoning magic.

In the end, the difference came down to detail.

Dante had seized control of thousands of minor variables that occurred during battle, widening the gap to an extreme degree.

“Stop stalling and get on with it. We made a deal, remember?”

Dante stood there arrogantly, hands in his pockets, waiting. The official number one student of the advanced class, Boyle, now had to kneel in front of everyone.

The weight of being number one only fueled Boyle's rage.

But a promise was a promise, and there was no way out.

“...I lost.”

As Boyle dropped to his knees and admitted defeat, it was as if a downpour of rain fell over the students' hearts.

Even Shirone's group, who had been rooting for Boyle, felt a heavy weight in their chests.

But there was no room for excuses.

Iruki muttered.

“Gotta admit, that was undeniable. Information magic, huh? That's a real pain to deal with.”

Sabina cut in.

“No, it’s only possible because it’s Dante. We’ve been fighting under Ms. Olivia since we were ten years old. The number of real battles we’ve experienced is on a completely different level from yours. Dante’s official record is 472 wins of 472 matches. And in unofficial duels, he’s never lost even once. He’s an undefeated legend. A mere countryside school’s number one doesn’t stand a chance.”

472 official matches. And if you included the unofficial ones, he had fought over a thousand battles.

Any mage would develop incredible adaptability if they had that much combat experience.

But what made Dante truly terrifying was the fact that, in all that time, he had never lost. Not even once.

As his record became known, the students began murmuring. In an instant, Dante transformed from an insufferable classmate to a kingdom-wide star.

No matter how bad his personality was, overwhelming skill naturally commanded respect. Or perhaps, that was exactly why people worshipped him even more.

All the students flocked toward Dante. They didn’t show it outright, but it was obvious they were all looking for a chance to speak with him.

Once the crowd dispersed, only Canis and Arin remained standing in place.

Even though this was their first time watching Icheonban’s dueling system, they had fought so many battles themselves that it didn’t leave much of an impression.

“Huh. Interesting. So this is how magic academies conduct training. Canis, wanna give it a try?”

“Not interested.”

“You’re not scared of losing to Dante, are you? Heh.”

Despite her teasing, Arin’s feelings weren’t much different from Canis’s. She wasn’t drawn to Icheonban either.

“What’s the big deal? Even Shirone isn’t reacting, so why should I be bothered?”

“Shirone’s staying quiet because he just doesn’t like fighting. That’s different from you.”

“Arin, I’ve been noticing this lately... You sure seem to be sticking up for Shirone a lot.”

Arin stuck out her tongue playfully.

Of course, anyone who was an enemy to Canis was also an enemy to her. If the two ever clashed, she would fight with all her strength to support Canis. But even so, Shirone was someone she couldn’t bring herself to dislike.

“Anyway, what do you think? Information magic—it might be the new trend. Can you beat it?”

Canis let out a deep breath through his nose.

He didn’t care for Icheonban, but Dante’s skill was the real deal. What interested him even more was that Dante and Shirone were like opposite kinds of geniuses.

Iruki was also a genius, but he was a little too one-sided in his strengths.

“Hm... If we were to clash on an actual battlefield...”

“If you were to fight?”

Canis, who had been silent for a long moment, gradually grew serious.

Sensing the shift in his emotions, Arin poked his side and urged him on.

“Hey? If you fought, then what? What would happen?”

Canis averted his gaze, then muttered in a small voice.

“It... it’ll be... one hell of a fight.”

5. Match Point (1)

“Hell yeah! I won! Hey, hurry up and kneel.”

“Damn it! Let’s rematch! If I hadn’t messed up—!”

At some point, a catchphrase had become popular in the advanced class: *kneel down*, spread by Dante.

Even in Class Seven, similar scenes were happening everywhere. It was all in good fun, but the competitive atmosphere was anything but playful.

If A fought B, who would win? Could the winner then defeat C?

The entire student body was gradually adapting to a ranking system, mirroring the Royal Academy of Magic's structure.

"Tch! I don't like it. The school's gone to hell ever since that weird headmaster showed up."

Lying on the grass, Mark grumbled as he watched the younger students engage in one-on-one battles at the Icheonban training grounds.

Currently, his match point rank was number one in Class Six. Every challenger who came at him had been utterly crushed. In the past, he would have walked around with his head held high, but after coming to respect Shirone, the ranks of the lower classes no longer meant anything to him. Beside him, Maria absentmindedly plucked at the grass and commented.

"Mark, she's still our headmaster, you know. What if someone hears you calling her weird?"

"What do you want me to do when it's pissing me off?! And that Dante guy—I can't stand him. Especially Closer. That bastard used a passive spell when fighting me! If it had been a fair fistfight, he wouldn't have stood a chance."

Maria also vividly remembered the scene of Mark getting beaten. Especially how Closer, despite being younger, had gone so far as to mock him.

"Senior Shirone will take care of it. They're in the same Class Four, after all. If things get out of hand, I might even talk to Mr. Thadd about it. What do you think?"

Mark found it humiliating to even discuss the matter. He wanted to get revenge on the guys who had hurt Maria, but their skills were the real deal. Of course, as someone who proudly called himself part of *Shirone's Line*, he had plenty of monstrous seniors on his side—Shirone, Amy, Iruki...

Knowing they had his back allowed him to ignore Dante and his group, but at the same time, it drove him crazy that he couldn't solve the issue himself.

"I really don't like this... Not one bit..."

It wasn't just the younger students who were obsessed with ranking fights—Class Four students were just as invested.

However, since Dante had already established dominance over Class Four, their attention turned higher up the ladder.

"If Ms. Ethella and Ms. Siena fought, who would win?"

"Oh, come on, obviously Ms. Ethella. She's famous across the kingdom."

"Yeah, but reputation doesn't win fights. Even though she mastered the Triple, Ms. Siena is an authority on ice magic. In real combat, specialists reign supreme."

"By that logic, then it's gotta be Mr. Thadd. Between two mages of the same 6th-class, fire magic beats ice magic any day."

No matter how much he tried to ignore them, Shirone couldn't escape the conversation and finally spoke up.

"That's not right. All of them are incredible teachers. They wouldn't fight just to prove who's stronger."

The students looked unimpressed. Ever since Boyle had kneeled, the center of gravity in the advanced class had shifted from Shirone to Dante.

At first, students had expected Shirone to step up and restore the academy's lost honor. But that never happened. Instead, he seemed to be avoiding the issue altogether.

Lately, rumors had even started circulating that Shirone was deliberately dodging fights with Dante out of fear.

"What's the big deal? It's a safe place to fight. Why shouldn't we talk about it? Let's be honest—you're just scared of Dante. You don't even participate in the duels."

"I'm not scared. I just don't see the point in fighting for no reason. Tactical training is one thing, but dueling has nothing to do with grades."

"Tch, grades, grades. That's all you ever talk about. In the real world, real mages need to be strong in actual combat." Realizing further discussion was pointless, Shirone just shrugged.

Seeing that even their taunts didn't work, his classmates turned away in disappointment.

"Tch. Shirone's just the same as the rest."

"What can you do? In front of the kingdom's star, Shirone's just some backwater talent."

Shirone couldn't understand what was so important about defining rankings among students. The strength he pursued was of an entirely different nature—something beyond simply overpowering others in combat.

Of course, there were students who saw battle as everything. One such student was Pandora, the current second-ranked student in the advanced class.

Ever since Dante had defeated Boyle, she had been actively following Dante's group. At this point, she was practically one of their lackeys.

"Hey, Pandora! Hurry up! I'm dying of thirst over here!"

At Sabina's sharp voice, Pandora rushed over with a cup of water.

"Sorry! The line was really long."

"You should've just said it was for me and cut in front. Honestly, you have no tact."

"Hehe, you must be tired. Want me to massage your shoulders?"

"Oh? Sure. I overused Haste, and now I'm all stiff."

Pandora diligently massaged Sabina's shoulders. She'd be lying if she said it didn't hurt her pride. But she convinced herself that sooner or later, they would recognize her worth. If she got close enough to Dante's group, she would instantly become part of the kingdom's most promising elite. Jumping from a rural academy's second-ranked student to the fourth-ranked student in the entire kingdom—wasn't that a gamble worth taking?

Closer fanned himself and commented.

"Hey, Pandora. I'm thirsty too."

"Oh? Got it! I'll get some water."

Pandora ran straight to the cafeteria. With today's heat, there was already a long line of students waiting. She could use Dante's influence to cut in line, but that felt beneath her. Instead, she resorted to her usual trick—annoying the people ahead of her until they left in frustration.

"Hey, what are you, elephants? Drink already and move! Other people are waiting too!"

"Here, take mine."

Boyle handed her his cup. Pandora frowned at him, but since Closer was waiting, there was no reason not to accept it.

"Hmph. Thanks."

As Pandora turned to go back, Boyle called after her.

"Wait a second. You're not seriously taking that to *him*, are you?"

"What's it to you? Don't tell me you're holding a grudge just because you lost to Dante."

"I've accepted my defeat. But what's with you lately? There's nothing wrong with getting close to Dante, but do you really have to be this pathetic?"

"And what business is it of yours? What, are you already worried that I'll surpass you?"

"That's not it! You've been my rival since we were kids! It pisses me off to see you grovel like this!"

"But not anymore. I'm joining Dante's group. Soon, my name will be in academic journals, and when I graduate, organizations will be fighting to recruit me. Just admit it—you're jealous. You already lost, so nothing you say has any weight."

Boyle clenched his jaw and fell silent. He had plenty to say, but none of it would reach Pandora's ears. That was simply the fate of the defeated.

"Damn it! Do whatever you want!"

From afar, Shirone's group watched Boyle's frustration.

Every social dynamic in the advanced class now revolved around Dante. No one dared challenge the absolute top ranker. And the more that happened, the more Shirone wanted to distance himself from all of it.

He believed that success would come naturally if he simply kept refining his own skills.

Right now, his mind was focused solely on mastering Ataraxia as quickly as possible. Dueling had no place in his thoughts.

He had dedicated himself to daily Lifting training, and at last, he had managed to hold a target in place for a full twenty seconds.

At this point, it was almost a spectacle. Most people couldn't maintain that mental state for even a single second, yet he had lasted twenty.

"Wow, Shirone, you really are amazing. Your Spirit Zone keeps growing too. No matter what anyone says, your talent is incredible."

"Tch! So what? It's just because he's an Unlocker. He can't even look Dante in the eye."

"Honestly, Dante *is* too strong. I get why Shirone avoids him."

"Why do you assume Shirone ran away? He's just as scary when he's in the thick of it. Besides, we still have Canis and Iruki."

"If he's so confident, why doesn't he fight? If I had his skill, I'd challenge Dante out of sheer frustration. But instead, he's just running away, and that's why even the girls are flocking to Dante."

Chapter 240: 5. Match Point (2)

“Do you think Shirone is like you, fighting just to gain popularity?”

“What? You wanna say that again?”

Whenever students gathered, they would compare Shirone’s group to Dante’s. Most viewed Dante as the undisputed number one, and beneath him, countless speculations ran wild. It had only been two months since Olivia had taken over as the new headmaster, yet the academy had already changed drastically.

Nade was irritated by the constant murmuring around him. Before the introduction of Icheonban, students had never been so blatantly divided into factions. Still, academic achievements were improving, so the faculty had no reason to overturn Olivia’s policies.

“Ugh, seriously! Maybe we should just transfer to another school.”

Nade blurted out an empty threat. A group of girls whispered among themselves while casting glances in their direction. Then, with sneering smiles, they ran off to Dante’s side.

“Forget it. Just ignore them. We’ll do things our way.”

Shirone spoke calmly before returning to his Lifting training. Nade clicked his tongue in frustration. Dante, acting like some kind of king among students, was already ridiculous. But Shirone, staying completely unfazed even as people called him a coward, was just as baffling.

A week later, the mid-term evaluations took place.

Dante’s group dominated, claiming first through third place. As a result, every student in Class Four saw their ranks drop.

Of course, the hierarchy itself remained unchanged. After the mid-terms, students stopped talking about Shirone altogether. Without any reaction from him, gossiping about him lost its purpose.

Pandora, despite her relentless efforts to integrate into Dante's group, still found herself hitting an invisible wall. Realizing she needed to change her approach, she subtly brought up the topic while massaging Sabina's shoulders. "Hey, Sabina... I really want to get better at real combat. Do you have any tips?"

"Real combat? Well, yeah, I guess you do stick to textbook magic. You should learn a passive spell—it makes everything way easier. It's not like learning it early will mess you up or anything. Ugh, this school is so backwards."

She gave advice, but it was clear she wasn't willing to put in any extra effort for Pandora's sake.

Desperate, Pandora decided to be direct.

"Why don't you guys just teach me in Icheonban?"

"Oh? Are you challenging me?"

"N-No! Not at all! I just... I think it'd be good to learn some passive spells or practical combat techniques."

Closer's gaze dropped to Pandora's chest. He had been waiting for an opportunity, and now that she was offering herself up, things had become much easier.

"Well, you're part of our group anyway. There's nothing wrong with making you stronger. How about we give you some *private lessons*?"

Pandora felt like she was floating with joy. More than anything, it thrilled her that they were acknowledging her as one of their own.

"Oh wow, really? I'd be so grateful!"

Of course, everyone in Dante's group saw right through Closer's intentions. Dante craved power. Closer craved women. Sabina craved popularity.

Since childhood, they had always worked together to get what they wanted. So this time, even Dante let Closer have

his way.

“Alright. Been a while since we warmed up. Let’s head to Icheonban.”

In a secluded corner of the training grounds, Dante’s group positioned Pandora in the center, taking turns giving her advice.

Like most training from others, it was really just common knowledge wrapped in fancy words.

Closer casually draped an arm around Pandora’s shoulders as he spoke.

“Alright, we’ll surround you and attack. Try using your fragrance magic to counter us. Don’t worry, we’ll take it slow.”

“O-Okay, got it.”

Dante’s group applied light pressure using basic magic. For Pandora, it was a useful training experience, but to the other students watching, it looked more like they were training a dog.

Feeling entertained, Sabina laughed and called out.

“Haha! Not bad! But don’t just run away—fight back! Otherwise, we’ll get bored.”

Encouraged, Pandora cast Olaf’s Floral Scent, which induced mild confusion. It wasn’t an instant effect, but because it lowered an opponent’s guard, it was frequently used in real combat.

And Sabina fell for it perfectly. Seeing an opportunity, Pandora released her trump card—Fire Flower (manufactured by Alones).

Sabina, already dazed by the Olaf fragrance, ended up inhaling a small dose despite knowing better.

A burning heat spread through her lungs as if she had swallowed fire. If the sync rate had been at 50%, it could have been truly dangerous.

“Ugh! Cough, cough!”

“Sabina! Are you okay?”

Pandora hurried toward her in concern—then froze. Sabina, head bowed, slowly raised her gaze. Her icy, venomous eyes made Pandora's skin crawl.

"S-Sorry..."

"It's fine. You actually did really well. This is how you improve."

As if nothing had happened, Sabina's face relaxed into a fake smile. There was no way she would let anyone see her get humiliated, especially in front of younger students.

Still frightened, Pandora hesitated.

"Umm... I think that's enough for today. I really learned a lot."

"What are you saying? You've already improved this much! Now it's time for the *real* training!"

Before she could react, Dante and Closer lunged at her. The moment Pandora had dared to land a hit, they had decided to make her pay for it.

"Here comes another one, Pandora!"

"Haha! Don't fall behind!"

Now that they were serious, Pandora had no way of defending herself. Their attacks rained down, the Anti-Magic shaking her Spirit Zone and sending her sprawling to the ground.

And they didn't stop. They deliberately adjusted their power so that her gauge would drain as slowly as possible, prolonging the torment.

The students watching from a distance murmured uneasily.

"Hey... Isn't that too much?"

"That's not training anymore. That's just beating her up."

Pandora, utterly defeated, just hung her head and took the attacks. The humiliation was so overwhelming that she couldn't even bring herself to beg them to stop.

Seeing his rival being humiliated, Boyle clenched his fists. Pandora had a rough personality, but she was also someone who had worked her way up from Class Ten to where she was now. What had she done to deserve such disgrace?

As her mental strength depleted, the bracelets lit up. Since no more magic could be used, Sabina finally stopped her assault and sneered down at her.

“How was that? Did you learn something useful?”

Pandora lifted her head, her eyes filled with sorrow. She didn’t need anyone to tell her what had just happened to her.

But she forced a smile. If even Dante’s group abandoned her now, she would have nowhere left to go.

“Yes. I learned a lot. Thank you.”

“Puhahahaha!”

Closer clutched his stomach, bursting into laughter. He had always known she was a country bumpkin, but he never expected her to be this naïve.

Sabina, however, still wasn’t satisfied. At the very least, she had to return the humiliation she suffered from the Fire Flower.

“You only get stronger by experiencing this again and again. Got it?”

“Yes. I think I was too weak. I’ll ask for your help next time too.”

“Oh? Then kneel down.”

Pandora looked up in despair. But Sabina’s gaze was as cold as ice.

“What are you waiting for? You lost, so kneel and beg. Did you already forget the rules?”

Pandora tried to hold back, but she couldn’t stop the tears from welling up. Her shoulders trembled, and soon, she broke down in sobs.

“Hahahaha! Are you actually crying? Don’t tell me it’s because you’re frustrated! Acting all tough when you’re this weak—look, everyone! Your senior is bawling her eyes out!” The younger students turned their heads, embarrassed. Just imagining themselves in her position was horrifying.

The teachers also realized the situation had gotten out of hand. Thadd, in particular, had no intention of letting this

slide and started walking toward them. There would have to be a formal disciplinary action, no doubt.

Sabina, noticing Thadd, realized they had gone too far. She had let herself get too worked up over that country bumpkin.

But she couldn't afford to show weakness. At Baschka, getting disciplined once or twice was practically a badge of honor.

Still, dragging this out any longer would do no good, so she tried to wrap things up as quickly as possible.

"What's wrong? Can't bring yourself to kneel? Then just get lost. And don't ever look at us again."

"No, that's not it."

Pandora shook her head. She acted before she could even think. If they could just acknowledge her feelings, then what did it matter if she kneeled now?

"I lost. So..."

Just as she was about to lower herself, *someone* grabbed her arm. Thadd stopped in his tracks and Boyle's eyes widened.

"Shirone? Why...?"

Pandora turned her head, confused as to why Shirone of all people had come to her aid. He had never once interfered with Dante's affairs.

Shirone didn't stop at Pandora, he walked past her and approached Dante. The silence was longer than expected, but no one felt it drag on. This was the *first clash*. It had taken three months to reach this moment.

"Why are you doing this?"

Dante scoffed. So this was the first thing to come out of Shirone's mouth? Some cliché hero speech?

"What do you mean, *doing this*? What did we do? We were just practicing one-on-one combat."

"You attacked Pandora. Three against one. And you kept going even after she lost the will to fight."

Sabina covered her mouth and giggled. Maybe she could use this to get out of trouble.

“Oh my! Do you like Pandora? This is huge! You might as well confess now—”

“I wasn’t talking to you. Stay out of it. I’m talking to Dante.”

Shirone’s complete disregard for her made Sabina’s face flush with anger. But Dante didn’t pay her any mind. He judged that it would be best to handle this matter carefully.

“Fine. I’ll admit we went a little overboard. But Pandora asked us to teach her, and we agreed to help. That’s all there is to it. If you want details, ask Pandora yourself. Now, we’re done here.”

Dante turned to leave. Pandora lowered her head in dejection.

She resented them for shifting all the blame onto her, but she had been the one to bow first.

“Don’t talk nonsense. Who the hell are you to be teaching anyone?”

Dante stopped dead in his tracks.

He knew it was a provocation, but this one had real bite. If Shirone had deliberately chosen those words, then it was a brilliant choice.

“...What did you just say?”

“Don’t get cocky. Just because you’ve beaten a few students doesn’t mean you’re the best. You can’t claim to be the strongest until you’ve fought *everyone*.”

“Hah! That’s ridiculous. That’s why we have ranks and records. I’ve never lost a single match, and I already crushed this academy’s former number one. What more proof do you need?”

“So you’re that confident, huh? Then why don’t you try fighting me?”

The students gasped in shock. For the first time, Shirone had issued a challenge. He, who had remained unmoved all this time, was now standing up against Dante.

Even Dante's expression wasn't as composed as before. If things went on like this, wouldn't Shirone be seen as a hero, while he would be the villain that needed to be defeated? A champion should have the battlefield set for him, not be dragged into someone else's stage.

"And why should I?"

Dante had no intention of playing by Shirone's rules.

"Think about it. You've been the one dodging battles all this time. And now, suddenly, you want to fight? I don't just fight because someone tells me to. I'm not someone who fights when it's convenient and runs when it's not."

"I don't want to fight someone who doesn't want to. Just promise me you won't bully my friends again."

This. This was what Dante hated about Shirone. Dante considered power to be the most important thing in the world. And Shirone, who had no interest in the throne that so many desired, disgusted him.

"Who did I bully? They're all crawling to me on their own. If you don't like it, you should've stopped me from the beginning. You can't just suddenly throw a tantrum after you let it happen."

Regardless, Olivia had given Dante a special mission. And Shirone was one of his targets. After some thought, Dante came up with a way to protect his pride and crush Shirone.

Chapter 241: 5. Match Point (3)

“Alright. I’ll give you one last chance. Defeat Sabina and Closer, then come to me. I already beat Boyle, so you shouldn’t have any complaints. If you can defeat them both, then I’ll take you on.”

Closer and Sabina grinned. The stage was now set for Dante. Of course, that didn’t mean they had any intention of losing to Shirone.

“No. That won’t be necessary.”

Shirone rejected Dante’s proposal.

“Hey, get a grip. You’re the challenger here. If you want to face me, at the very least—”

“All three of you come at me at once. I want to finish this quickly and stop wasting my time.”

“This crazy bastard...!”

Dante’s group’s eyes widened in shock. Not even at the Royal Academy of Magic had they ever been insulted like this.

Watching from the sidelines, Nade clicked his tongue.

“I swear, he’s got a way with words. I’m never getting into an argument with Shirone.”

“He’s got a talent for pissing people off. I just don’t want to bother dealing with it.”

Iruki, who had said that, casually walked into the tense battlefield. Up until now, he had held back only because Shirone hadn’t stepped up. That didn’t mean he enjoyed being ignored.

“Yo, Shirone. If it’s something this fun, count me in too.”

Dante shot a sharp glare at the unexpected intruder. It was obvious he was trying to turn this into a team battle

because Shirone alone wouldn't be able to handle it.

"Iruki, this isn't your fight. I can see right through your little scheme."

"What are you talking about? This is exactly my kind of thing. I'll take all three of you at once too. If I calculate one second per person, this should take, what, *one second*?"

Closer scoffed.

"You idiot, if it's one second per person, then it should be three seconds—"

Then he realized what Iruki actually meant, and his face twisted.

"You little shits! Do you have any idea who you're messing with?!"

"If you're so confident, why not come at us one at a time? In the end, all that matters is winning the fight, right? Who cares about all this 'beat this person first' nonsense? Isn't that right, Dante?"

"You misunderstand. Telling you to 'beat them first' wasn't about *draining* Shirone before facing me. If you want to challenge me, you have to prove you're worthy first."

"That's fine. If Shirone beats you, there won't be anyone left to challenge him anyway."

Iruki gestured toward the students watching from the sidelines.

"You see? No need to overcomplicate things. If you beat us, you're the best. You'll have conquered the advanced class. And that's exactly what you were sent here to do, isn't it?"

A direct hit. If Iruki had attended the Royal Academy of Magic, then he would be well aware of Olivia's strategy. Even if he didn't know the full details, he could at least sense that she had some involvement in their rampage. Now that their cards were on the table, Dante had no reason to hide anything either.

"Fine. Let's make it a team battle. We can't interfere with classes, so we'll do it as an unofficial match this weekend. One match per week, and the first to two wins takes it. If

you lose twice first, then there's no need for me to fight Shirone at all—it's my victory. Do you accept?"

"Alright. If you want to dress it up and make it look all official, go ahead. I'll win anyway. You won't even have to fight Shirone."

"Heh, big words. In that case, add a third member to your team. Anyone. Call Boyle if you want."

"That wouldn't be fun. We have our own 'line' too, you know."

Iruki turned his head. Nade, looking dumbfounded, pointed at himself.

Helping Shirone was one thing, but he never expected to be dragged into an actual battle. Still, if he backed out now, it would weaken Shirone's momentum, so he had no choice but to step up.

As Nade walked forward, Dante tilted his head.

"Nade? You're sure about this?"

From what he had observed so far, Nade wasn't particularly outstanding in academics or practical evaluations.

But Iruki had called it a "line". Since he had been given a special mission to crush Shirone, it was actually better if he could stomp out everyone connected to him.

As he reached the battlefield, Nade whispered to Iruki.

"Hey, what the hell are you thinking? What if I lose?"

"Just stand there. I'll take care of everything."

While the two whispered, Dante approached the teachers. They had been listening to the entire exchange, so there was no need for further explanation.

"We want to settle this. I request permission to use the Icheonban Training Grounds this weekend."

Siena spoke on behalf of the group.

"This isn't something for us to decide, but we'll review it. Go back and wait."

The students stopped their practice and waited anxiously. Shirone throwing down the gauntlet was an unprecedented

event, but if the school didn't approve it, the duel would amount to nothing.

Once all the instructors of Icheonban had gathered, Siena spoke.

"So, it has come to this. Should I say it was bound to happen sooner or later?"

Thadd shook his head.

"I am against it. We cannot allow one student to judge another's wrongdoing. We should convene a disciplinary committee and publicly announce Pandora's harm."

Ethella, who had been resting her chin in her hand, deep in thought, spoke up.

"Hmm, I do agree with part of what you're saying, Mr. Thadd. But the word 'judge' feels too harsh. Can't we interpret it as a form of self-regulation among students?"

"I understand the importance of autonomy. But this is a duel. Having students resolve matters through magic combat doesn't sit right with me."

"Even so, Boyle and Dante have already dueled. Many other students are dueling as we speak. Opening Icheonban on weekends isn't much different from holding supplementary lessons."

Siena agreed with Thadd's point. However, she also understood Ethella's reasoning for wanting to entrust the matter to Shirone. She knew that Thadd's argument wouldn't hold up in the school.

"Our opinions are divided, so we have no choice but to bring in a practical concern. If we reject this, Dante will take the matter to Headmaster Olivia. What do you think she will decide?"

Thadd let out a deep sigh. Olivia would certainly approve it. He didn't know why, but it seemed as if this was her intention all along. Moreover, Alpheas had explicitly told them to follow her decisions. What was Alpheas thinking when he brought Olivia into the school?

“We are the teachers. Are you going to trust Shirone in this situation? Why?”

“Because Headmaster Olivia trusts Dante. And Headmaster Alpheas trusts Shirone. Looking at it now, this doesn’t seem to be just a student matter anymore.”

Ethella spoke.

“I want to trust him too. Just as I am both a teacher and a monk, Shirone, though still a student, embodies the spirit of a monk who seeks righteousness. Knowing this, isn’t that why Headmaster Alpheas entrusted everything to Headmaster Olivia?”

Thadd fell into thought. Looking back, this was indeed strange. No matter how great a man his master was, he should not have been able to recruit Jerome Olivia, the kingdom’s greatest educator.

There was definitely a deeper story behind this.

‘How do you cause more trouble than your own student, Master?’

With a sigh, Thadd walked over to the students and announced the initial decision regarding Dante’s request.

“After an emergency meeting, we have decided to approve the opening of Icheonban and unofficial one-on-one combat training.”

The students erupted in cheers, so much so that Thadd’s words about requiring upper management’s approval were completely drowned out.

Not that it mattered—it wasn’t something worth mentioning anyway.

“This is huge! A major event!”

“It’s finally happening! Shirone vs. Dante! Dante vs. Shirone! Wooooah!”

Unable to contain their excitement, the students bounced around wildly.

In the midst of the roaring cheers, Iruki tapped students on the shoulder one by one, pointing at himself.

“Hey, it’s not just Shirone fighting. I’m in this too.”

“Wooooah! Iruki! Did you hear? Shirone and Dante are going to fight!”

“.....”

The news of the duel spread like wildfire throughout the school.

In the underground research societies, flyers detailing the two contestants’ information were already being distributed to stir up betting.

The faculty lounge was also abuzz. The entire teaching staff had gathered to discuss how to handle the situation.

“I’ll say it again, this is dangerous. Allowing students to resolve personal emotions through physical confrontation goes against school policy.”

Thadd’s words didn’t even make Olivia bat an eye.

“This isn’t a fight—it’s a competition to determine the best. Sooner or later, they’ll all be in their graduation years. This is simply an extension of their competitive growth.”

“But Headmaster! If this continues, the school’s reputation will—”

Olivia raised a hand as if to say, *Enough*.

“The duel between Shirone and Dante will be an event the entire kingdom watches. I will personally propose to the Academic Council that we dispatch special correspondents to cover it.”

The room fell silent. The fact that the Academic Council’s chief auditor herself would summon reporters meant that Alpheas Magic Academy would gain massive public attention. If they could feature Dante, a star of the kingdom, in scholarly journals, it would be an incredible boost for the school.

Visions of prestige clouded the teachers’ minds. Alpheas Magic Academy—the kingdom’s number-one institution. And the finest teachers who educated its students—none other than themselves.

Meanwhile, Thadd was in a sour mood. He was always in favor of elevating the school’s reputation, but he didn’t like

the idea of using it to silence teachers.

“Headmaster Olivia, may I say something?”

“Thadd, proceed as planned.”

“Yes, proceed as plan—Wait, what?”

Thadd’s face turned red as he looked to the side.

Alpheas stood at the back entrance. Given the gravity of the situation, even Olivia hadn’t ordered him out this time.

“As expected, you have great foresight, Mr. Alpheas. This is an incredible opportunity for the school. Letting it slip away would be foolish.”

“Of course. It seems I’ll gain some fame in my old age as well. Hahaha!”

“Once the duel ends, the headlines will be all about Dante’s victory. That Shirone boy will be left deeply wounded, and yet here you are, enjoying yourself. It’s almost pitiful.”

“Hah! Both of them attend Alpheas Magic Academy, making them my students all the same. But I, too, believe that the strongest must be determined.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed. His ability to counter every word irritated her to no end.

For once, even Alpheas’s gaze turned sharp. Two veteran educators, each reaching the culmination of their careers, had found their final prodigy. This was the clash of decades of educational philosophy.

One hour later, the proposal for the unofficial duel was formally approved.

6. Magic Clash (1)

The students eagerly counted down the days until the upcoming weekend.

It had been nearly a decade since Alpheas Magic Academy had seen an event that generated such widespread excitement.

Rumors spread that on the day of Shirone and Dante’s duel, the Academic Council would even dispatch special correspondents to cover it.

The male students joked about pulling off outrageous pranks to make themselves known to the world, while the female students worried about what to wear.

Iruki and Nade made their way to the research society. Even during the short walk, they overheard countless stories—so many that it was impossible to distinguish truth from fiction—but none of them were about themselves.

“I wasn’t expecting much from the start, but now that it’s happening, it feels kind of disappointing. Are we just side characters?”

“Well, at least the recordkeeper is coming. Hey... do you think I should go first?”

Nade had been anxious ever since the match was approved. Since Closer had set his sights on Iruki, his own opponent would most likely be Victor Sabina.

A terrifying woman who accelerated with Haste and unleashed Wind Cutters in all directions.

Excluding the graduation class, she was strong enough to be ranked among the top 20 in the entire nation. Regardless of type advantages, it was clear this would be a difficult fight.

Chapter 242: 6. Magic Clash (2)

“What are you so worried about? You should be grateful you’re included, but all you do is whining.”

“What do you mean, what else can I do?! If I lose, how frustrated do you think Shirone will be?! Why did you even pick me?! You know it too, I...!”

“Losing is better. Better than running away.”

Nade came to an abrupt stop.

Iruki turned back and spoke.

“In the end, as long as one of us wins, that’s enough. Can’t you tell from the atmosphere? Our role is to get Shirone to Dante. And that’s an important job. It’s something we can never entrust to someone outside our group.”

“Iruki...”

Nade’s face was touched with emotion.

“And honestly... I don’t think you’ll lose. There are a few variables, but you have a real chance of winning—that’s why I chose you. Don’t feel pressured. Just do your best.”

Iruki was right. Whether they won or lost, if Shirone had already resolved to fight, then getting him to his opponent was not something they could leave in someone else’s hands.

He didn’t want to live with the memory of running away, and more than anything, if he wanted to stand proudly as Shirone’s friend, he had to take the risk.

“Alright! Let’s do this! Damn it all!”

The weekend of the first match finally arrived.

Nade versus Sabina wasn’t the biggest headline, but the students had already gathered at Icheonban Training

Ground.

Since this was the first match to determine whether Shirone and Dante's duel would actually happen, it was by no means unimportant. Additionally, both teams had distinct styles, making it an interesting fight to watch from multiple perspectives.

By the time Amy arrived at Icheonban, it was already so packed that there were no empty seats left.

"Amy! Over here!"

Serielle waved from the front row of the temporary spectator stands. Amy, who had thought she arrived early, was astonished by her enthusiasm. She also spotted Mark and Maria sitting beside her.

"Greetings, senior!"

Mark greeted her with a booming voice, while Maria bowed politely. Amy gave them a brief nod in return and sat down next to Serielle.

"When did you even get here? You must have a lot of free time."

"Hehe! Actually, I gave Mark a special mission to save seats. I didn't arrive much earlier than you. But come on, you wouldn't want to watch something this important from far away, would you? Especially since it's such a crucial match for Shirone."

"Crucial, my foot. Honestly, he gets into trouble more than you'd think."

Amy spoke nonchalantly, but she wasn't as indifferent as she appeared.

The name Airhaine Dante was one she had heard so many times that it felt engraved into her mind—even she, who had been recognized as a genius, was sick of hearing it. A boy who had surpassed all aspiring mages in the kingdom and secured the undisputed rank of number one. The obstacles Shirone had overcome until now were on an entirely different level compared to this one.

Though Shirone's skills had improved drastically at Heaven, experts commonly agreed that Dante's information magic was so intricate that even professionals found it difficult to replicate.

"It's starting! It's starting, senior!"

At Mark's voice, Amy turned her attention to Icheonban.

Nade and Sabina were already inside the arena, while

Shirone stood with Iruki on the sidelines, watching.

The referees were instructors who took turns overseeing Icheonban, and today, it was Thadd's turn.

Thadd called Nade and Sabina to the center and explained the rules of the match. The key point was that if the physical impact of their attacks became too severe, the referee had the authority to stop the match at his discretion.

Nade and Sabina, however, were too focused on their silent stare-down to even turn their heads, as if they couldn't hear a word.

Just ten minutes ago, Nade had been agonizing over the match, but now, he seemed calm, as if he had finished his mental preparations.

Closer pointed toward Nade and spoke.

"That guy might be a dark horse. When he dodged my punch on the first day, I could tell—he's used to fighting."

"No, it's more than that..."

Dante shook his head as if rejecting Closer's words, but he couldn't quite put his thoughts into words.

Calling it mere combat experience didn't quite fit. If he had to compare, Nade's style was somewhat similar to Canis's, but even that wasn't entirely accurate.

"Well, we'll find out in this match. No matter who he is, Sabina is going to win."

With the explanation over, Thadd instructed Nade and Sabina to return to their designated starting positions.

The starting distance had been agreed upon by both parties—each standing 30 meters apart, for a total of 60 meters.

It was beyond the range of Spirit Zone, but close enough for an immediate first strike through sequential boost.

“Now, we will begin the match between Nade and Sabina.”

As Thadd raised his arm to give the starting signal, the murmuring voices of the students fell silent all at once.

Graduation students who had experienced one-on-one combat in Icheonban said that this was the most nerve-wracking moment.

The way a combatant handled Spirit Zone at the beginning—whether they advanced or retreated, attacked or defended—determined the course of the match.

The Four-Way Formation were fundamental, but various irregular techniques created countless variables, making this the most crucial stage of the battle.

“Begin!”

Nade and Sabina had the exact same thought.

Advance, attack, strike first.

Their contest of sequence formulas was evenly matched. As their Spirit Zones overlapped, Electric Bolts and Wind Cutters clashed against each other.

In terms of speed, few elements could rival electricity except for photons. However, the electric force, which was highly sensitive to charge, had the drawback of reduced accuracy.

In the end, the Wind Cutter struck first, slicing Nade’s arm as it passed. Seizing the moment when his Spirit Zone wavered, Sabina cast Haste on herself.

There were few students who could track Sabina’s zigzagging dash with their eyes. The way a human-sized figure moved like a cat gave the illusion of a trick in a magic show.

As Sabina closed in behind Nade and swung her hand like a blade, a gust of razor-sharp wind slashed across Nade’s neck.

‘Did it land? Is it over?’

At the very moment Sabina thought this, a faint electric current flowed through her arm. It was Nade's signature technique—Image Copy spell. When she turned her gaze, dozens of Nades had already surrounded her.

"Hah! Not bad for a cheap trick!"

Verifying them one by one would take too much time and risked falling into a trap. Without hesitation, Sabina heightened her concentration and deployed Cutting Flower, a high-level technique. Bringing both hands above her head, she spun in place, sending Wind Cutters radiating outward in all directions.

One of the Nade illusions urgently threw itself to the ground. The real Nade emerged from the range of Cutting Flower and looked at Sabina with a pale face.

Over forty Wind Cutters had been launched per second. This was clearly beyond advanced class level.

Air magic was divided into two categories: the Press type, which compressed air, and the Blow type, which manipulated air currents. Sabina seemed to be a mage specialized in the Blow type.

'So, the standard approach won't work?'

As Nade focused, blue clouds began to form around him. From within them, electromagnetic bolts popped and crackled, moving in straight trajectories.

"Plasma?"

Sabina abruptly stopped her approach. Even she couldn't afford reckless movements in front of plasma.

"Whoa, so that's plasma? Guess that guy's skill wasn't just a fluke last time."

"Idiot, you think you can master something like that by luck?"

Real plasma formed at extreme temperatures, but in magical manifestations, it existed within the domain of electricity, meaning its temperature didn't rise significantly. Even so, for an electricity mage, plasma was one of the strongest weapons available.

Plasma spread like a cloud of electricity, filling the surroundings. Just as fish ruled the water, within an electric cloud, an electric mage was a king.

The usual drawback of bolt magic—lack of accuracy—did not exist in plasma. Instead, bolts could be redirected freely at will. Since the entire environment became infused with electricity, the mental strain required to cast spells was reduced. Most importantly, it was a passive spell.

For an electric mage, it was a blessing.

However, even professional mages found it difficult to comprehend the electric domain of plasma, as it only occurred in extreme conditions.

For the first time since the match began, Sabina felt tense.

The battle guide advised that unless there was a significant skill gap, one should avoid engaging an electric mage who had established a plasma field.

“In that case...”

Sabina changed her tactics. The only way to attack Nade without entering the plasma zone was to summon a tornado from the outside and sweep everything away.

As she cast the tornado spell, multiple whirlwinds, each ten meters tall, began to spin and dance around the battlefield. Nade attempted to close the distance while disrupting her focus with Image Copy illusions.

One Electric Shock was all he needed. If he could stun her for just one second, no one would be able to withstand the rapid-fire electrical bombardment that followed within the plasma zone.

However, Sabina’s agile movements with Haste allowed her to navigate freely around Icheonban, never exposing an opening.

As the plasma field expanded, so did the number of tornadoes. Sabina seemed to have made up her mind—she began merging the thirty tornadoes one by one. Their total number quickly halved, but their size quadrupled.

If they all combined into a single entity, there would be nowhere to escape in Icheonban. Nade realized that if he was going to act, it had to be now. He analyzed the battlefield's composition through the plasma's electrical sensitivity.

About 32 percent of the environment contained metal. Of course, this was merely a simulated environment within Icheonban, but as long as it was a conductor, plasma could control it.

'I feel a little bad using a technique from another discipline, but...'

Now was not the time to be picky. If he lost, the burden of securing Shirone's duel would fall entirely on Iruki's shoulders.

Nade used plasma to generate a magnetic field. Metallic particles mixed in with the rocky ground burst upward. As the magnetic storm intensified, a metallic tornado took shape instantly.

Sabina was stunned. Though it was only a tenth the size of her own tornado, it carried nearly three tons of mass. If it spun at the same speed, its destructive power would be on par with hers.

'No! No one can break my ultimate technique!'

Gritting her teeth, Sabina merged the remaining fifteen tornadoes. Rotational fusion was an advanced skill, yet she succeeded in fusing all thirty tornadoes within just two minutes.

What emerged was a vortex so massive it could only be described as a typhoon. Nade's metallic tornado charged straight toward the eye of the storm.

Everyone knew this would be the final clash.

Holding their breath, the students watched as the two tornadoes collided at the center of Icheonban.

It was a contest of mass and size. The steel tornado rampaged within the massive vortex, shredding the air currents chaotically.

Sabina's bracelet activated its Anti-Magic mechanism, rapidly depleting her energy reserves.

Nade wasn't in great condition either. Though he was disrupting the structure of Sabina's tornado, the difference in sheer scale was overwhelming.

"Guh...!"

The overwhelming wind pressure gradually broke apart the density of the metallic particles, slowing its rotation. At a critical point where both rotational speed neutralized each other, the tornadoes locked in balance.

Sabina's tornado turned into chaotic turbulence and dispersed. A deafening roar erupted as violent winds spread beyond Icheonban. The spectators on the sidelines couldn't withstand the blast and were pushed back.

As the dust clouds settled, students eagerly awaited the outcome. Some of the dust rose into the air, while other particles fell to the ground, revealing the two competitors. Sabina was hunched over, gasping for breath, while Nade had collapsed onto his knees, completely drained.

Thadd checked both of their energy levels through the master bracelet.

Their mental reserves were completely depleted—neither was in a state to be declared superior.

However, the students were more impressed with Nade than Sabina. No one had expected someone only ranked in the mid-tier of the advanced class to push a nationally recognized mage like Sabina to this extent.

'I don't know... Sabina might actually lose...'

Panting heavily, Sabina slowly walked forward. The fact that she had struggled evenly against an unknown student wounded her pride.

Chapter 243: 6. Magic Clash (3)

“I won’t let this slide!”

Sabina charged forward without even casting Haste. She assumed her opponent wouldn’t be able to maintain his plasma field either.

At that moment, Nade spoke words that shocked everyone.

“I lost.”

Sabina, who had been about to strike Nade’s neck, abruptly stopped her charge at his sudden declaration of surrender. She wanted to end it with her own hands, but attacking after a surrender was an automatic disqualification.

Now that it had come to this, it didn’t even feel like a proper victory. Something about it left her uneasy. However, considering Nade had exhausted all his strength in the final clash, she let it go.

“Hmph, you got lucky. Kneel properly and formally admit your defeat.”

Nade immediately complied. Since he was already on his knees, all he had to do was move his lips.

“Yeah. I lost.”

Sabina’s expression twisted in dissatisfaction. The whole point of this rule was to enjoy watching the loser wallow in humiliation. But from Nade, she felt no bitterness or resentment.

“Are you even a man? You lost to a woman, and you can kneel this easily?”

“I lost, so I said I lost. And honestly, it’s really embarrassing, okay? Can we be done now?”

Nade lowered his head deeply, as if truly ashamed, and walked back to his friends. If he had at least laughed it off

as if denying the loss, she wouldn't have felt so annoyed. Thadd clicked his tongue as he watched Nade walk away. 'You should've pushed a little further. Sabina was nearly at her limit too. Still, well done, Nade.'

The match had ended sooner than expected. For a student from Class Four, it was normal to have at least one spell with overwhelming destructive power.

In real combat, there wouldn't be many opportunities to cast such spells, but in this match, the elemental matchup and skill level had been well-balanced, leading to a clean contest of strength versus strength.

When Nade reached his friends, he shut his eyes tightly and lowered his head, unable to suppress his overwhelming sense of guilt.

"Shirone, Iruki! I'm sorry! I lost! Really, I'm sorry!"

"What are you talking about? This was a team fight. It's not like I can guarantee I'll win either. It's okay. You did your best."

Iruki added a remark.

"For you, that was pretty good. You've improved compared to before."

Honestly, he hadn't expected Nade to hold his own this well. Back when they fought Lucas from the Parrot Bandit Crew, Nade had given up completely. Still, at least recently, he seemed to have gained some control over himself.

"I'll head back to the dorm and get some rest. That's okay, right?"

"Yeah. You must be exhausted. Get some rest."

Even Shirone couldn't argue against that.

And so, Nade left the training ground, blending into the crowd of students. However, instead of heading to the dorm, he walked toward a secluded park. Once he confirmed that no one was around, his pent-up emotions finally burst out.

"Argh! Damn it! You idiot!"

He had wanted to be of help to Shirone. But Sabina was truly strong. If the match had gone on any longer, the price

he would have paid was unimaginable.

For now, he still needed the safety net that the school provided.

“Hahaha! So this is where you are? You acted all composed, but I bet you’re dying of embarrassment.”

Nade let out a deep sigh. When he turned around, he saw Sabina standing there, having followed him.

“Do you still have business with me? The match is over.”

“Well, I still do. Honestly, I feel really annoyed. I don’t know why, but it really feels like you didn’t truly accept your loss.”

“I literally knelt. What more do you want?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you kneel again and find out?”

Nade had no patience to entertain Sabina’s nonsense. All he felt was guilt toward Shirone and frustration at himself for failing to be useful to his friend.

“Just think whatever you want. I won’t complain even if you go around bragging about being stronger than me. Just leave me alone. I’m leaving.”

As Nade turned to go back to the dorm, Sabina spoke.

“I did some digging, and it turns out the West family is quite famous.”

Nade’s steps came to an abrupt halt.

“There’s no mess bigger than that mess of a family. From what I heard, the head of the household is a broke gambler, and the lady of the house is an outcast in high society. They say your family has nothing yet still acts all high and mighty, spending money you don’t have—”

A clap of thunder echoed.

Sabina suddenly found herself unable to breathe. The world spun wildly before her eyes. When she came to her senses, she realized she had been slammed against a tree deep within the forest.

Nade, his hand wrapped around her throat, loomed over her.

“Say that again.”

“Guh! Gah...!”

Sabina's eyes locked onto Nade's face, and fear consumed her. This wasn't the face of a human. He wasn't a villain. He wasn't a psychopathic killer. He was simply a monster.

'I'm going to die here.'

This wasn't a possibility—it was a certainty. If she had been captured by a murderer, there might have been a sliver of hope. But there wasn't a single creature in this world stupid enough to expect mercy from a beast.

"Do you want to live?"

Desperately, Sabina nodded her head. As her consciousness faded, she lost control of her body, and began to urinate without her realizing it.

"Should I snap your neck? Or drain your blood?"

She couldn't understand what he was saying. It felt as if her head and body had been severed, as if her legs no longer obeyed her.

"Hnnngh...! Hngh...!"

Nade's face twisted in anger as he gathered electricity in his hand. He was ready to vaporize her blood on the spot.

At the moment the voltage in his grip peaked, a face flashed through his mind. A voice, soft yet firm, gently calmed the beast within him.

'Nade, isn't one mistake enough?'

His bloodshot eyes looked ready to spill tears of blood. But gradually, his pupils regained their humanity. Releasing his grip on Sabina's neck, he slowly backed away.

"Gah! Gah...!"

Sabina collapsed, gasping for air. She had no idea what had just happened, but her lungs frantically sucked in oxygen.

"You won, and I lost. That's all that happened today.

Understand?"

Sabina nodded. No matter what Nade said, she planned to nod in agreement.

But Nade seemed satisfied with that and walked out of the forest. Just before exiting, he stopped and slowly turned his head toward a massive tree.

'Eek! What do I do? Did he notice me?'

Hiding behind the tree, Pandora's heart pounded violently. She had planned to get revenge on Sabina but had inadvertently witnessed something she never should have seen.

Nade's voice called out.

"Pandora, I already avenged you. Go home."

Mentioning her name was a warning—an instruction not to escalate things any further. Even though he couldn't see her behind the tree, Pandora covered her mouth and nodded.

Nade left the park, his heart filled with misery. In the end, things always turned out this way. He wished the sky would open up and rain down, but it remained as dreary and overcast as his heart.

"Iruki, I'll never become a mage."

The weekend of the second match had arrived.

With the previous fight between Nade and Sabina drawing great attention, even more people had gathered this time. Many expected this battle to be even fiercer, especially since if Iruki lost, the third match would be canceled.

Perhaps because of that, even the teachers who had claimed to have no interest in student fights were now awkwardly lingering around, smiling as they looked for a place to watch.

While Ethella, the referee, was checking the regulations, Shirone and Dante's group waited on the sidelines.

Sabina's expression was grim. The trauma from being ambushed in the forest still hadn't faded. No, rather, it had only worsened, to the point where she was now tormented by nightmares every night.

As the time for the match drew near, Closer began warming up. His stretching routine was uncharacteristically intense for a mage, loosening his muscles as he lightly jogged in place and glanced at Dante.

"I'll finish this. There's no need for you to step in."

The rule was simple: the first team to win two matches would claim victory. However, Dante knew that as long as Olivia was overseeing the event, such an easy resolution would never be allowed.

“But the duel won’t be canceled.”

“What? Why not?”

“Our master wants Shirone to be utterly crushed. He’s already applied for official correspondents through the Academic Council. The school itself won’t want to let an event like this go to waste.”

“I see. So even if I win, you and Shirone will still fight?”

“But the stage will be different. If we secure two wins, we can make Shirone’s defeat even more humiliating. That would be the best possible outcome.”

“Kukuku. Good, then I’ll set up the perfect stage for you.”

At Ethella’s signal, Iruki and Closer stepped forward. After the rules were explained, Closer looked down at Iruki, his towering height adding to the intimidation.

“When Anti-Magic hits, you get a stinging sensation in your nose, don’t you? But when you fight me, Anti-Magic won’t be the only thing you feel. Have you ever had your nose broken? By a punch, I mean.”

Iruki didn’t respond.

“It hurts like hell. Makes you cry like a baby. I’m gonna cave in your nose like an orc’s. Even if you scream for me to stop, I’ll keep beating you down. That okay with you?”

A wicked grin spread across Closer’s face.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue? Are you scared? Well, too bad. The match has already started, and you’re about to get the beating of your life. Ten minutes from now, you’ll be on the ground, bleeding from your nose and screaming. You’ll probably lose a few teeth, too. That ugly face of yours is about to get even uglier.”

Ethella interrupted.

“No unnecessary chatter before the match. Both of you, move to your designated positions.”

Closer waved a massive fist at Iruki before returning to his position, going over his pre-match strategy.

Iruki's specialty was rapid-targeting deviate form and explosion with no arrival speed. On top of that, he was a Savant Syndrome mage with a strong affinity for sequence, meaning preemptive strikes would be ineffective.

Standing 60 meters away, Closer flexed his fingers, preparing his initial defense. His greatest strength also lay in defense, so as long as he followed the textbook strategy, he would have no problems.

"Match, start!"

At Ethella's signal, a series of explosions erupted around Closer. Shielding his face with his arms, Closer's eyes widened in shock. An explosion the moment the match began? Typically, deviate form magic lost power over long distances. But for Iruki's attack to reach 60 meters instantly without any movement—it was an exceptionally advanced sequence.

Shirone gave a bitter smile. He had already sensed it during the Speed Gun test, but the sheer power of Iruki's logarithmic sequence was staggering.

In fact, Iruki's Speed Gun score was the highest in the history of the magic academy, excluding Shirone when he activated his Immortal Function.

The students were mesmerized by the sight of Closer's massive frame engulfed in flames. Even with a 50 percent sync rate, repeated hits could pose a real threat. As the flames subsided, Closer's figure emerged.

The dirt walls that had shielded his body crumbled away, revealing his face—smiling leisurely.

"Kukuku, is that all you've got? That tickled like a mosquito bite."

With his passive spell, Earth Rise, reinforcing his body, and the added protection of Earth Skin, his magical earthen armor, even moderate explosions barely registered.

Closing the distance in an instant, Closer pushed the match into close-quarters combat, the exact opposite of Iruki's preferred style.

"Rock and Roll!"

As Closer swung his arm upward like he was scooping earth, the ground trembled.

The terrain curled and rolled, forming a massive boulder three meters in diameter that crushed the spot where Iruki had been standing.

But Iruki had teleported away. However, the moment his feet touched the ground again, it crumbled beneath him as if a trap had been set.

"Kukuku! This is the end!"

Sealing Iruki's movements with Earthquake, Closer immediately followed up with Eruption. Compressed earth generated frictional heat, triggering a powerful explosion. Nearly five tons of soil burst upward from the pit where Iruki had fallen.

Iruki shielded his face with his arms as he was launched into the air. Meanwhile, in his mind, the detonation equation was rapidly unfolding.

Chapter 244: 6. Magic Clash (4)

The drawback of detonation magic is that the charging process is not intuitive, so the casting time varies greatly depending on the explosive power.

A 1 kilobuster refers to an explosion powerful enough to blow away a single horse-drawn carriage. On average, a certified 10th-class mage took 21 seconds to cast a 1-kilobuster spell.

However, Iruki, as a Savant, could complete the charging in just 3 seconds. And now, the power he was casting, taking more than 10 seconds, reached a staggering 10 kilobusters. Closer instinctively felt that this explosion was going to be extraordinary due to the eerie silence of Iruki's magic.

Trying to defend against it entirely would likely result in serious injury.

Predicting the impact point, Closer concentrated his Earth Skin to the left. As if fast-forwarding time, the soil rapidly piled up, forming a sturdy earthen wall.

At that moment, Iruki's Atomic Bomb detonated.

Since there was no knockback effect, Closer remained in place, but his Earth Skin was obliterated without a trace.

"Phew!"

Closer exhaled roughly. Though he had managed to neutralize the shock, the sheer power that had destroyed his Earth Skin sent chills down his spine.

At this point, even Iruki became serious. He hadn't expected Closer to completely block a 10-kilobuster explosion. This mage was far more formidable than anticipated.

'I have no choice but to do this.'

Iruki split his consciousness in two and deployed another Spirit Zone. The moment two Spirit Zones invaded his synesthesia, Closer's eyes widened.

It felt like he was fighting two mages at once.

'Damn it. Isn't this cheating?'

From this point on, Closer could no longer afford to enjoy the fight. If Atomic Bombs with the power of 10 kilobusters came flying from both sides, defense would be impossible.

"I'll finish this before that happens!"

As he cast Heavy Stone, dirt rapidly coalesced in midair at an incredible speed, forming a boulder weighing nearly a ton, which plummeted toward Iruki's head.

Although it was merely the process of transmuting (an alchemical term for creating a new substance) soil, when executed from a high altitude, the gravitational force alone could be enough to crush an opponent to death.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

No matter where Iruki moved, boulders rained down.

Since transmutation took time and the falling speed had to be calculated, it wasn't highly effective in direct combat, but if an opponent found themselves in a situation where they couldn't move, it would be terrifying to even imagine.

'So that's his aim, huh?'

Iruki saw through Closer's strategy. The delay before the rocks reached the ground meant that they could be used in combination with other spells to create time-lagged attacks.

As expected, Closer cast Heavy Stone over a wide area.

While multiple boulders were forming in midair, he skillfully detached the charging process of Heavy Stone and prepared a new charge.

As he cast Slug spell, pebbles in the vicinity began to float before shooting out like bullets.

"How about this!"

Rocks rained down from the sky while a barrage of pebbles scattered forward like shotgun pellets.

"Tch! I really didn't want to use this."

Iruki converted one of his Spirit Zones into a defensive form and cast a protection spell.

Along the surface of the Spirit Zone, hundreds of tiny 10-grambuster bombs spread out in a spherical shape. As the incoming pebbles struck the bombs, they detonated in small bursts of flame.

The students stood in stunned silence as countless chain explosions erupted at the boundary of the battlefield.

It was the iconic technique of a detonation mage—the Bomb Bullet Barrier.

A technique that involved floating hundreds of miniature bombs around the mage to intercept incoming projectiles before they could reach him. The key factor was how many miniature bombs could be manifested within the Spirit Zone. In that regard, Iruki had reached the level where he could manifest a total of 387 miniature bombs simultaneously.

Based on quantity alone, his skill was comparable to that of a professional, yet even with the Bomb Bullet Barrier deployed, Iruki found himself being pushed back.

His talent for deviate form was almost too exceptional. Most of Iruki's advanced techniques relied on deviate form.

However, the Bomb Bullet Barrier was most effective when utilized within a defensive Spirit Zone.

In other words, it was like an aggressive dual-wielding swordsman giving up one of his swords to hold a shield instead.

Of course, since Iruki possessed a double Spirit Zone, he could still wield at least one sword, but unless he deployed two deviate form techniques simultaneously, he wouldn't be able to break through the defense of earth magic.

"Kehaha! This is the end for you!"

Covering his face with both arms, Closer charged straight into the Bomb Bullet Barrier. He was only able to do this because he trusted in the defensive power of his Earth Skin. As he pushed through the veil of miniature explosions, Iruki quickly detonated a series of Atomic Bombs in rapid

succession.

The repeated 10-grambuster explosions battered Closer's guard relentlessly, causing him to grimace. But instead of stopping, he charged in even deeper. Then, the moment his Earth Skin shattered, he raised his fist and struck Iruki square in the face.

Iruki's vision spun, and he was sent flying.

A heavy silence fell over the Icheonban. No one had expected that in a duel between mages, one of them would resort to punching.

"W-Wait, is that even allowed? He just punched him."

"I don't know... But it's a duel, so does it really matter? There's no rule against using physical attacks."

The students' eyes naturally turned toward the referee. Ethella wore a troubled expression.

Checking Iruki's condition with the master bracelet, she confirmed that the previous blow had an extraordinary effect.

Up until now, Iruki's gauge had been decreasing at a steady rate of 1% per minute. The constant decline, like an hourglass, indicated how well he was managing his magic. However, the moment he was struck by Closer's fist, his gauge was suddenly cut in half. It was the inherent weakness of mages—vulnerability to physical attacks.

After a brief deliberation, Ethella stepped back, signaling her decision to acknowledge the outcome.

"Kekeke, didn't I tell you? Even when I gave you a hint, you couldn't pick up on it. So much for being a genius."

Closer kicked Iruki in the side just as he was trying to get up. Iruki's body tumbled and landed face-down on the ground.

The same attack had brought down even the massive Mark in a single blow, so maintaining a double Spirit Zone was already impossible for him.

Still, Closer approached cautiously, fully encasing his body in Earth Skin just in case.

“Shall we start remodeling now? Let’s toughen up your body first.”

Closer raised his foot and stomped down on Iruki’s body repeatedly. Iruki, unable to move, curled up and covered his face.

“Hey, does it hurt? Huh? Does it? Why won’t you show your face till the end? You were ugly to begin with, so what’s the big deal?”

“That bastard...! I’ll kill him.”

Nade clenched his fists and trembled. Even so, he didn’t charge in—he was holding back for the sake of Iruki’s last shred of pride.

“Shirone, step back. I’ll take responsibility.”

“If we’re going to fight, we should fight together. But I don’t think we need to step in. Iruki hasn’t given up yet.”

Nade studied Iruki carefully. Between the arms covering his face, he could see that Iruki was smiling. His Bomb Bullet Barrier had already been destroyed, leaving him with no viable options. So what was he thinking, grinning even as he was being beaten?

“You’re tougher than I expected. Hey, turn over.”

With another kick from Closer, Iruki rolled onto his back. Contrary to Closer’s expectation that he would be terrified, his expression was lighthearted.

“This bastard is pissing me off to the very end. This time, I’ll really break that nose of yours.”

Irritated, Closer lifted his foot and aimed for Iruki’s face. One good hit would be enough to break his nose.

“Heh... Hehehe!”

Iruki suddenly let out an eerie laugh, his voice twisted and strange. Then, arching his back like a bow, he propped his head against the ground and looked straight at Shirone.

“Shirone, I’m sorry. I was saving this for you.”

The students fell silent. Iruki’s bizarre antics were about to start again.

“This bastard...!”

Feeling insulted, Closer stomped down like a lightning strike—right as Iruki's lips stretched into a wide grin.

"I'll show you something fun, Shirone."

Boom! Closer's boot struck the ground.

Iruki had rolled away to evade and slipped right into Closer's arms. With his slender wrist, he swung his fist.

Closer was dumbfounded. His Earth Skin was active, and he even had Earth Rise reinforcing him. All Iruki would accomplish was injuring his own hand.

"Ugh...!"

Contrary to expectations, a heavy impact landed on Closer's abdomen, making him let out an involuntary groan.

His pupils wavered in shock. The attack's power itself wasn't remarkable, but the defensive magic covering his body had completely vanished.

"W-What...? How...?"

Iruki leaped into the air, mimicking the stance of a crane martial arts technique. Then, using only two fingers, he jabbed at Closer's eyes.

"Ah—!"

"Argh! My eyes!"

Momentarily blinded, Closer frantically tried to cast Earth Rise. But again, the same thing happened. Just as the magic seemed to activate, it was undone, as if time itself was rewinding.

Knock. Knock.

The recorder observing the fight was so transfixed by Iruki that he dropped his pen.

"...Cancellation?"

Magic Cancellation.

A magic spell that negated a mage's omnipotence. Its power aside, it was one of the most difficult spells to perform.

Magic texts often explained Cancellation with an analogy to a glass cup.

If you drop a glass cup on the floor and it shatters into pieces, can those fragments ever spontaneously reassemble?

The answer is: *yes*.

The reason no one has ever seen such a phenomenon is that the probability is unimaginably low.

Since the beginning of time, the world has been moving from a stable state to an unstable one.

That's why, when a glass cup falls, it shatters due to countless variables.

However, in the one-in-infinity chance that, at the precise moment the glass shatters, all the forces and velocities involved are perfectly reversed, the cup can restore itself. In truth, *breaking* is simply the result of molecular bonds being severed. If the force acting at the atomic level is reversed, the glass can return to its flawless state without even the faintest crack.

Mages call this phenomenon "The Returning Glass".

Iruki had infiltrated Closer's Spirit Zone with his own deviate form Spirit Zone, analyzing the mental processes driving Closer's magic.

Then, he reversed the equations of specific spells, succeeding in a real-world application of the Returning Glass.

This required an incomprehensible level of calculation ability, something no ordinary human could replicate. The fact that 72% of mages who could use Cancellation had Savant Syndrome was proof of its difficulty.

"Ughhh! This is so frustrating!"

Closer flailed his arms in frustration. Abandoning defense entirely, he cast Heavy Stone, forming over ten boulders in midair.

Iruki casually pointed his fingers, applying Cancellation one by one. As if time were reversing, the forming boulders unraveled and disappeared.

"Ah-cha! Ah-cha! Ah-cha!"

Iruki stubbornly continued his martial arts stance. To the onlookers, it seemed as though he was mocking Closer, but he was completely serious.

When he struck Closer's nose bridge, twin streams of blood gushed out.

There was no way to counter magic that was being forcibly nullified. It was as if a mage was fighting a regular human.

The fearsome nature of Cancellation was evident on the faces of the teachers watching. Even if he was still a student, mastering such magic changed the entire conversation.

"I knew he was talented, but when did he learn such a skill...?"

"The environment must have played a big role. His father is... well..."

Mercodine Albino, the leader of the Dragon Thunder.

He seemed easygoing, but few in the kingdom truly understood what was going on inside his mind.

Savants had the potential to become the best in Anti-Magic and Cancellation. If anyone, it would be the great Albino who ensured Iruki trained from an early age.

"Not all Savants have a mind as sharp as Iruki's. But with proper guidance, he could reach an unrivaled domain in the future."

Like clothes getting soaked in a slow drizzle, Closer's body accumulated hit after hit from Iruki's relentless punches, making his bones ache.

Closer's face was an absolute mess. His eyes were swollen, his nose was bleeding profusely, and his lips were split, stinging with every movement.

Chapter 245: 6. Magic Clash (5)

“I won’t let this slide! I don’t care about the duel anymore!” Closer abandoned his magic and charged forward. In a physical fight, there was no way he would lose to Iruki, right? But that very thought was proof that he had lost his composure.

The moment Closer threw his punch, an explosion equivalent to 10 kilobusters erupted. His mental gauge plummeted, and his knees hit the ground. Had his synchronization rate not been at 50 percent, he would have died instantly.

With a dazed expression, Closer looked up at Iruki—only for a straight punch to slam into his nose. At this point, even the slightest touch hurt unbearably.

Tears welled up in Closer’s eyes.

“Arghhhh!”

“Well then, shall we make you look like an orc?”

Iruki rubbed his knuckles as he spoke, and Closer, snapping back to his senses, hurriedly raised his hands.

“W-Wait! I admit it! I lost—!”

Iruki’s powerful punch crushed Closer’s nose before he could finish. His massive upper body reeled backward, his head slamming into the ground.

Iruki grimaced as he shook out his hand. Apparently, punching people wasn’t as easy as it looked.

“Ow, my fist.”

As Ethella declared Iruki the winner, the students erupted into cheers, as if they had been holding back their excitement.

Mark and Maria, in particular, were practically jumping with joy. Seeing the detestable Closer utterly humiliated felt like having a long-standing toothache finally cured.

‘Incredible. Shirone’s friends are just as amazing as he is.’ Iruki was undoubtedly impressive, but Mark had never truly respected him. He had simply considered him another genius born with the biological advantage of Savant Syndrome.

But now, things were different. The fact that Iruki had completely toyed with Closer, one of the kingdom’s most renowned students, was undeniable proof of his skill.

Though Iruki was normally unpopular at school, right now, he was basking in the attention of countless female students. It seemed many people had a grudge against Closer, just like Maria.

“You’re so cool, Senior Iruki! You’re the best!”

“Yeah! Wow, you’re really handsome too!”

Iruki shrugged his shoulders and then placed his right foot on the unconscious Closer’s cheek. He casually raised his fingers into a V-sign for victory.

The cheers abruptly stopped. No matter how much they hated Closer, stepping on the head of a defeated opponent was going too far. That twisted personality of his would never change.

Serielle, who had been watching the fight without even breathing, gulped and turned to Amy.

“Shirone and his friends... They’re moving up next year, right?”

“Yeah, I think that’s what they said.”

“I see... Then I have to graduate this year no matter what. If all of them join the senior class, it’ll be pure competition hell.”

Serielle was already an established powerhouse among the seniors, but no one could take her words as a mere joke. In fact, most of the seniors weren’t smiling.

They were simply watching their future rivals with cautious and wary eyes, knowing that these rising students could block their path to graduation.

‘Well, I should be careful too. I realized it before, but... he really is an extraordinary guy.’

Iruki had visited Class Five once before. They had exchanged a few words, but at the time, his talk had seemed so absurd that Serielle hadn’t taken him seriously. But thinking back now, those seemingly nonsensical words had been Iruki’s reality all along.

Shirone and Nade ran toward Iruki, their faces filled with shock. Shirone, in particular, had no choice but to acknowledge that Iruki’s so-called secret weapon against him had not been an empty boast.

Of course, calculating the Returning Glass was extremely difficult, but once analyzed, any mage would feel completely hopeless about fighting Iruki.

“Iruki, that was incredible. I got chills just watching.”

“Yeah. You never told us about this. When did you even practice?”

“This was actually my first time using it. During the break, my father had me locked up, making me solve formulas like crazy. I had a feeling it would work well in actual combat, and sure enough, it was easy once I tried.”

Normally, they would have smacked him on the head for bragging, but today, they couldn’t bring themselves to be annoyed.

With this, the duel score was tied, and their original goal—sending Shirone to Dante—had been achieved.

While Sabina was waking up the unconscious Closer, Dante approached. But instead of speaking to Shirone, he addressed Iruki.

“That was a good match. Your Cancellation magic—it was impressive.”

“That’s a problem for you, then. In your duel, it’ll be even more impressive.”

Dante scoffed. Cancellation was an ultimate-level magic that even professionals struggled with. In the end, the top student of the advanced class was neither Boyle nor Shirone—it was Iruki.

“I thought it was over when you left the Royal Academy of Magic. But I see now that talent never truly fades. That makes it even more disappointing. Honestly, I wish I were facing you instead. That would’ve been a much better duel.” His words implied that Shirone wasn’t even worth considering. In reality, Dante was already contemplating a rematch with Iruki, knowing it would be more entertaining for the spectators.

“I get what you’re saying. But with that naive mindset, you won’t stand a chance against Shirone.”

“Haha! Me? Lose to this country bumpkin? You should know better. That will never happen.”

“Do you know why I left Baschka? Because I believed there was no one there who could stop me.”

Dante’s expression twisted. That statement was an outright insult to him and the entire Royal Academy of Magic.

“I don’t know about now, but back then, that’s what I thought. That there was no one who could control the dangerous power inside my head.”

“So what? Are you saying there’s someone here who can?”

“I met two people. One of them turned me down, but the other accepted. That person is Shirone. I don’t care what impression you’ve formed, but if you think you’re already the best, next week’s duel will be your worst nightmare.”

Dante turned his gaze toward Shirone. Why was everyone placing such high expectations on him?

At first, he assumed it was simply because Shirone was an Unlocker. But someone like Iruki, who had mastered Cancellation—an elite-level talent—would never judge based on such a shallow standard.

The students who had been eavesdropping on their conversation started murmuring.

It was already known from last semester's Speed Gun Test that Shirone could stop Iruki when he lost control. But now, Iruki had mentioned meeting two people.

"Who could it be? Who's the other person?"

"Maybe Senior Amy? There were rumors before that Iruki was targeting her."

Several names were suggested, but unless Iruki revealed it himself, no one could be sure.

Regardless, the second duel had concluded with Iruki's overwhelming victory.

As the students walked back to their dorms, their hearts pounded with excitement. Next week marked the highlight of the big matches—Shirone versus Dante.

Although many cheered for Shirone in their hearts, they had to admit that, objectively, Dante was the favorite.

A flawless record of 472 wins and 0 losses. The coming week was going to feel excruciatingly slow.

The long-awaited day had finally arrived.

Since morning, the school had been bustling with preparations to welcome new guests.

The students cleaned their dormitories, washed up, and dressed in their finest clothes.

Killine, a special correspondent from the Academic Council, entered Alpheas Magic Academy accompanied by a video recorder. Seeing that students had already gathered at Icheonban, she smiled.

'As expected, even for a provincial academy, Dante's reputation is something else. There are still hours left before the duel begins.'

Killine made her way into the training ground, parting the waiting line between Mark and Maria.

"Excuse me, I'm a special correspondent. I'll be entering first."

Maria watched her with a curious gaze.

“Wow, so that’s Killine. I’ve only heard her name in academic journals, but she’s prettier than I expected.”

“Hmph, doesn’t matter. I heard she’s a hardcore Dante fanatic. That makes her our enemy.”

As the duel time approached, the training ground was opened. Shirone, too, waited in line with his friends at the entrance before stepping inside.

Despite being an unofficial match, the stage was lavishly decorated. The rumors that an event company had been brought in the night before seemed to be true.

The polished physical blocks were spotless, and torches had even been set up to enhance the atmosphere.

A video recorder was installed at a vantage point overlooking the training ground. Unlike optical cameras that captured still images, this device could record the passage of time.

According to Nade’s explanation, the optical crystal used in the video recorder was called Obscura B, which was 200 times more expensive than the Obscura A used in standard optical cameras.

It was a mineral that formed in ultra-low-temperature darkrooms, making it impossible to synthesize through alchemy, thus significantly increasing its value.

Because of this, Obscura B was strictly regulated by the kingdom, and its use required approval from the relevant authorities.

“In other words, the kingdom decided that Shirone’s duel was worth recording. If you win this match, your name will truly spread across the entire kingdom.”

While Nade was excited as if it were his own match, Iruki remained level-headed.

“They probably got approval to record Dante, not Shirone. Mages who can handle information magic as well as Dante are rare. They likely intend to use this as an instructional material for the Royal Academy of Magic.”

“Tch! Who cares? Shirone’s going to win anyway. Right, Shirone?”

Shirone wanted to smile, but his lips wouldn’t curve up easily. He was about to face Dante. He was determined to give it his all, but Dante was not an opponent he could be certain about defeating.

On his way, he ran into Canis and Arin. Despite always claiming not to be interested, it seemed today’s match had piqued their curiosity.

The front row of Icheonban was reserved for teachers and officials, so Mark and Maria had secured seats in the second row. Amy and Serielle had also arrived early to claim their spots.

As Shirone approached, Mark bowed politely.

“Good morning, Senior!”

“Shirone! Shirone’s here!”

Like an excited puppy, Serielle rushed over, grabbed Shirone’s hand, and led him toward their group. Amy examined Shirone’s face—he wasn’t overly tense, but he wasn’t completely at ease either.

Canis, who had been walking behind Shirone, raised a hand upon seeing Amy. Since their return from Heaven, they had both been busy, so this was the first time they were meeting properly in one place.

“Yo, Pumpkin. Been a while.”

“And where do you get off speaking so casually to a senior? Shouldn’t you be calling me ‘senior’?”

Their rivalry from Heaven continued even at school.

“Come on, don’t be so uptight. If that’s the case, should Arin be calling you ‘senior’ too?”

Arin, in fact, was unsure how she should greet Amy.

“Of course, Arin’s an exception! Honestly, you keep trying to connect yourself to Arin, but that won’t work on me!”

Shirone stepped in to mediate.

“Alright, alright. It’s good for everyone to get along. But seriously, why do you two start arguing every time you

meet?”

Canis and Amy both pointed at each other and shouted.

“He starts it first!”

Shirone couldn’t help but laugh, momentarily forgetting his nerves about the duel. Their long-standing feud had begun when Arcane infiltrated the school. In that sense, it was impressive that they still managed to maintain a functional friendship.

Mark and Maria, as much younger students, couldn’t join the conversation and simply observed from a distance.

Seeing them all gathered together, it was clear that Shirone’s group consisted of some of the academy’s top-tier students. At least, in Mark’s eyes, those seven people looked like a walking army.

Just then, another group—Dante’s entourage—approached from the other side.

Mark, who had been glaring at them, suddenly smirked. Compared to the imposing presence they had when he first transferred, they now seemed significantly diminished. Sabina looked drained, and Closer’s face was covered in patches of bandages.

‘Heh. Serves them right, those idiots. I told them not to mess with Shirone’s group.’

Dante, however, kept his gaze fixed on Amy. Not because he intended to, but because she was simply that striking. She didn’t actually emit light, but somehow, she stood out more clearly than anyone else.

The crimson-eyed Carmis family. And before joining the senior class, she had decisively outclassed Boyle and Pandora to claim the top rank. If anyone here was suited to be considered the queen, it was her.

“Greetings. I’ve long heard of the Carmis family’s esteemed reputation. My name is Airhaine Dante.”

“Yeah. Do your best, and I hope you achieve good results.”

Chapter 246: 6. Magic Clash (6)

Dante was bewildered. He hadn't necessarily expected a warm reception, but at the very least, he thought that as the nation's top-ranked student, his greeting would elicit some kind of special reaction—whether positive or negative. However, Amy simply offered a generic word of encouragement, just as she would to any other junior.

"...Is that all? Honestly, I was hoping for at least a little praise. Not that it matters—I'm going to win anyway."

Serielle, furious at his arrogance, grabbed Amy and Shirone's wrists and forced them to hold hands.

"What a joke! That's more than enough for someone about to fight her boyfriend! Amy is on Shirone's side no matter what, so dream on!"

This was the first time Dante had heard such a thing. Come to think of it, he had never asked who Shirone's girlfriend was. He simply assumed that Shirone wasn't the type to get along with women.

"Is that true, Senior Amy?"

"Yes, it's true."

With Amy's confirmation, Dante's expression twisted into one of utter disgust.

"Student Shirone! Student Dante! Over here! We need to do the interview, so hurry up!"

A school official called out to them. It was part of the schedule to conduct an interview before the match.

As Shirone followed the official, he turned back and said, "I'll be back soon. See you afterward. Don't leave without me."

Dante silently walked behind him. Honestly, he felt like he had taken a hit and had no energy left to provoke Shirone. How could Amy possibly be dating a bumpkin like him?

‘Hmph, she’ll be mine soon enough. Once I crush him in this duel, she’ll see the difference.’

Dante wasn’t as obsessed with women as Closer, but having a beautiful and intelligent woman by his side only made a man shine brighter.

And in that sense, Amy belonged beside him. She was far too distinguished to be with a bumpkin like Shirone.

Unable to suppress his curiosity, Dante observed Shirone carefully.

He had been gathering information about him for some time, and everyone he asked had said the same thing—Shirone was the best.

What stood out the most, however, was that despite their admiration, none of them seemed bitter or displeased about it.

‘How could someone this soft be considered the best? Is there still something he’s hiding?’

Canis had said there was no benefit in messing with Shirone. Iruki had said that only Shirone could control him. Amy, the school’s top genius, was his girlfriend.

Even in the face of Dante’s reputation, Mark and Maria never wavered in their respect for Shirone.

And at that moment—his heart began to race. It was a kind of tension he had never felt before.

The more information he gathered, the less he seemed to understand who Shirone truly was.

Just who was Shirone?

With those unsettled thoughts, Dante arrived at the back of the training ground. The teachers’ interviews were still ongoing, with Killine questioning Thadd while the video recorder captured everything.

With each question, Thadd’s face grew paler, like a blank sheet of paper. Dante even wondered if his skin might

become transparent enough to reveal his bones.

"I believe the odds are 50-50 between Dante and Shirone. However, if any variables come into play, it might shift to 60-40."

"I see. Thank you for your input."

Killine turned away without hesitation, as if she had heard enough. The interview lacked substance, and capturing the anxious expressions of nervous teachers was useless.

Besides, 50-50? In Killine's mind, the real odds were Dante at 10 and Shirone at 0. Of course, for the article, she planned to write it as 9 to 1.

Killine then approached Ethella, who was next in line. It seemed like she wasn't used to situations like this, as she appeared flustered.

"Haha! Well, yes, Shirone is a very kind boy! Ah, but Dante is also an excellent student! I just hope everyone gets along and has fun together, haha!"

"...Understood. Thank you for your time."

Killine swiftly ended the interview, and Ethella let out a sigh of relief. Realizing how disastrous his own interview had been, Thadd walked over to Ethella and pretended to cry.

Their statements would never make it into the article.

Killine was starting to get irritated. She had prepared extensively, thinking that a top-tier academy would have better faculty, but every teacher she met lacked any sense of charisma.

She decided to give it one last shot with Siena, who was up next. If that didn't work, she would scrap the teacher interviews entirely.

"Hello, Ms. Siena. I'm Killine from the Academic Council."

"Yes, I'm Olipher Siena."

With her usual cold demeanor, Siena nodded at the video recorder.

Killine's eyes lit up—finally, she had something usable.

'Oh? Good presence, good expression... This one's a keeper.'

Siena answered each question without hesitation. Since she was simply expressing her own thoughts, there was no reason to be nervous.

"I see. Thank you for your insights. Now, just one last question. As today's referee, who do you think will win—Dante or Shirone?"

Asking a teacher to predict a student's victory was cruel, but that was Killine's job.

The harsher the question, the more entertaining it was for readers. That was the kind of content that made students across the nation buy academic journals.

Siena pondered for a moment before responding in a composed manner.

"Personally, I believe Dante has the advantage. I'd say it's about 70 to 30. However, regardless of who wins, it doesn't determine a mage's true caliber. Limiting magic to mere combat is an outdated and barbaric mindset."

"...I see. Thank you for your time."

Siena gave a slight nod and walked out of the camera's focus. Even her exit was refined, making Thadd feel even more miserable. Meanwhile, Ethella couldn't help but exclaim in admiration.

"Wow, that was impressive. I was so nervous I couldn't say a thing."

"Tch, she's from the Olipher school. How could someone like her understand the struggles of an unknown teacher like me?"

"Hehe, don't say that. You did well too, Mr. Thadd."

Ethella patted his back, but it did little to comfort him.

At last, Killine made her way toward the stars of the day.

The priority was to interview Dante first and Shirone last.

Considering the remaining time before the duel, the first to finish would have more time to compose themselves.

"Dante, you'll do great today, right? I'll write an awesome article for you, so make sure to put on a good show."

“Haha! Don’t worry. When have I ever not been spectacular?”

“How can you be so charming with your words? Alright then, let’s start the interview.”

Killine’s smile disappeared as she moved on to serious questions.

Dante, as expected, answered smoothly, incorporating his characteristic wit. He even seemed to know the exact angles that made his face look the best.

“Yes, this is in accordance with Master Olivia’s vision. Spreading the advanced magic of the capital to local communities is a great way to bridge the gap in skill levels between magic academies.”

“Oh my, but isn’t that a disadvantage for you, Dante?”

“Haha! Not at all. If the overall level rises, it only fuels me to improve even more. And after this semester, I’ll be moving up to the graduating class. It’s time to become a pro.”

“As expected of the kingdom’s most promising talent! A confident statement indeed. Now, for the final question—so far, you have overwhelmed your opponents with an undeniable gap in skill. What about today’s match? Can we expect the same?”

“Well, first of all, Shirone is an Unlocker. He also has remarkable talent. It should be a good match. But as always, the winner will be me. Today, I will show you the true essence of information magic.”

“Thank you for the interview. We look forward to seeing the results. Now, let’s continue with Shirone’s interview.

Shirone, would you please come forward?”

“Ah, yes!”

Shirone had expected some time to prepare after Dante’s interview ended, so he had let his guard down. Snapping back to reality, he hurriedly stepped in front of the video recorder.

Only now did he truly understand how the teachers must have felt.

Dante's interview, despite including compliments about his opponent, had been carefully calculated. Shirone wasn't sure whether he should say what Killine wanted to hear or simply be honest about his feelings.

"Um... So... Yes. I enrolled in the magic academy this year."

"So, the rumors were true! There was a reason Dante acknowledged you as his opponent. Then, Shirone, what do you think about Dante? You've been given the opportunity to duel against the kingdom's top student—do you feel lucky?"

Most of Killine's questions revolved around Dante. However, Shirone didn't even have time to feel annoyed. The expectant gaze pressing him to answer made it difficult just to form a response.

"Ah, yes. I don't particularly enjoy fighting, but having this opportunity is a good thing."

Killine sighed inwardly.

'Did he just use the word "good" twice? That makes him sound clumsy. This kid is definitely not cut out to be a star.' No one had ever beaten Dante, but there were plenty of students who had clung to his fame to make a name for themselves.

But Shirone was unmistakably a countryside boy. He looked decent enough, so with some grooming, he might be marketable—but with such an unpolished demeanor, he wouldn't appeal to the girls in Baschka.

Dante, who had been listening, turned away as if he had lost interest.

Meanwhile, Killine asked her final question.

"I can't skip asking Shirone for his opinion. Most experts are predicting your defeat. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Uh... I cannot acknowledge Dante."

Killine's smiling face froze into an empty mask. Dante, too, stopped in his tracks and turned around.

"I don't think Dante understands what's truly important. It doesn't matter how famous he is in the capital or who he

has defeated to get here. A mage is not merely a performer who lights fires and freezes water. The pursuit of intellect—that is what magic truly is. No matter how incredible his spells may be, if his mind is twisted, I see no reason why I should lose to him. No, I will never lose to a mage like that.” Even Killine, who had covered countless battles, momentarily hesitated for 0.5 seconds at Shirone’s explosive declaration.

She quickly recovered and continued.

“W-Wow! Such bold words from the challenger! I wish you the best of luck as well, Shirone. This has been Killine, special correspondent for the Academic Council.”

Dante kept his gaze locked on Shirone as he walked away. Beneath that awkward demeanor was an unwavering, steely resolve. He seemed to waver, yet his form never changed.

‘I see... So that’s who you really are.’

For the first time, Dante truly saw Shirone.

The audience seating was completely full.

The front row was occupied by the teachers, with only two seats left vacant in the center. Even without looking, everyone knew who would sit there.

“Haha, as expected, Headmaster Olivia is quite resourceful.”

As Alpheas and Olivia arrived, the teachers stood in respect. Seeing this, the students at the back, though unsure of what was happening, also rose to their feet, making the crowd ripple like a wave.

Taking his designated seat, Alpheas glanced around before grabbing the armrests and pulling himself forward.

“My eyesight isn’t what it used to be. I need to sit closer to get a better view.”

With this absurd action, he instantly turned the entire first row into the second row. Olivia, her face flushed red, stormed over.

“What do you think you’re doing?! You’re embarrassing us in front of everyone.”

“Haha, don’t be like that. Come closer, the view’s great.”

“You think I’m crazy? You expect me to act like you?”

“Well, then, just ignore me and go back to your seat.”

Alpheas remained laid-back, making Olivia fume. Then, after a brief pause, she coldly turned around—only to drag her chair forward and sit beside him.

If she left him alone, there was a real chance an article would come out about Milch Alpheas had gone senile.

Alpheas casually crossed one leg over the other, reclining in his chair as he waited for the match. Everything about his posture irritated Olivia.

“Sit properly! Act like headmaster. Do you think this is some underground fight club?”

“Haha, it’s been a while since I’ve felt this excited.”

“And what exactly do you plan to do with that excitement at your age? Honestly, men... Our pictures are going to be in the academic journals, you know? Sit up properly.”

In response, Alpheas leaned back even further, resting his arm on the chair’s armrest and propping his chin on his hand. Olivia shot him a cold glare, thinking to herself how stubborn he had always been, even as a student.

Meanwhile, Alpheas’ eyes burned with an intensity she hadn’t seen in a long time. For a brief moment, she was lost in nostalgia, and before she knew it, she pouted.

“...You’re not seriously looking forward to this, are you? Dante is going to win no matter what.”

“That’s something we can’t know yet, is it? Besides, I’m not sitting here to cheer for anyone. If Shirone loses, that will be a good result in its own way.”

“And what kind of nonsense is that?”

Chapter 247: 6. Magic Clash (7)

“Shirone is strong. He’s not the type to be discouraged by a single loss. In fact, he might gain something even greater from defeat. A true mentor should also teach how to learn from failure.”

Olivia raised her hand as if to block out Alpheas’s voice.

“Understood. I’ll take that as an excuse from a 4th-class loser.”

“Haha, either way, I’m just a spectator today. Shirone and Dante... This will be interesting.”

Finally, the time for the duel had arrived.

As Siena, the appointed referee, walked to the center of Icheonban, the atmosphere in the venue turned solemn.

In just a moment, the greatest talent of Alpheas Magic Academy would clash with the greatest talent of the kingdom.

Mark, who was trembling as if he were having trouble breathing, turned to Iruki beside him.

“Ugh, I feel like my blood is running dry. Senior, do you think Shirone will win?”

“In my opinion, both of them will have at least one opportunity. Shirone has a wider variety of offensive magic, but Dante’s tactical execution can’t be ignored. If the number of magic circles increases, Shirone will eventually find himself restricted.”

Even from Iruki, one of Shirone’s closest friends, there was no hopeful assessment. Mark was about to complain with a dejected face when suddenly, the students burst into cheers.

Shirone and Dante were ascending to opposite sides of Icheonban.

Referee Siena first paid her respects to both the former and current headmasters before calling Shirone and Dante to the center.

As the two met, the students, who had been watching with fascination, suddenly turned pale. Shirone had stepped beyond the designated position and was approaching Dante. 'Ah!'

Realizing his mistake, Shirone snapped back to attention and stopped walking. However, by then, Dante's face was already right in front of him. He had been so deep in thought that he hadn't been paying attention.

The students interpreted Shirone's action as provocation, making them even more excited. But those who knew Shirone well thought differently.

He was clearly nervous.

Killine chuckled, seemingly feeling sorry for him.

"Oh dear! It's such an outdated trick to try a cheap provocation like that."

There had been many challengers in the past who had tried such tactics against Dante.

Each time, Dante had responded with composure, turning the situation around and humiliating his opponents instead.

'Hehe, Dante. What kind of performance will you put on today... Hm?'

A look of doubt crossed Killine's face. Dante wasn't moving at all. He was simply staring at Shirone, completely still.

Siena was explaining the rules, but it didn't even seem like they were registering in his ears.

Dante had never acted this way before, and even his friends found it puzzling.

Sabina, nervously biting her nails, spoke up.

"Dante... He looks a little tense, doesn't he?"

"That's not like him. He was in great shape this morning.

Let's wait a bit. Maybe this is just part of his showmanship."

Iruki, who had been listening to their conversation, spoke up.

"There's no way he wouldn't be nervous."

"Huh? What do you mean there's no way?"

Mark turned to him, eyes wide with shock. His anxiety had peaked to the point where anything Iruki said startled him.

"Shirone has never lost in competition. He may not have been learning magic for long, but that's precisely why he's had to keep breaking through impossibly high barriers to get here. Of course, Dante has also spent years reigning at the top, building an almost impossible winning record. And now, these two are facing off."

Amy added.

"Defeat is a mark that stays with a person for life. In one way or another, it changes the course of their future. But neither of them has ever experienced it. Their careers have been completely flawless, without even a single mistake. And that's something they don't want to let go of."

Iruki continued.

"And today, one of them is going to lose for the first time. That loss will be etched into their life forever."

Mark was left speechless.

'So this is the world that geniuses live in?'

At just fifteen years old, he already had defeat engraved into his record, yet he couldn't even begin to grasp their level.

But he didn't feel regretful at all. He simply hoped that Shirone, who had once defeated him, would win again. His heart pounded painfully in his chest.

"Ugh, I'm going crazy. When is this going to start?"

Siena finished explaining the rules and instructed them to step back into position. But neither of them moved. It was as if they hadn't heard her voice at all.

"You two, return to your designated positions and stand by."

A storm of thoughts raced through Dante's mind. *Who is this boy?* At first, Shirone had claimed he didn't want to fight.

Then, he had said he had no interest in power or fame. But now, he was glaring at him as if he wanted to devour him. 'No. Stop thinking.'

Dante shook off his thoughts. He had gone undefeated in 472 matches. There was no reason to believe he would lose now. Just like every other challenger before him, he would simply trample Shirone underfoot.

"Shirone! Dante! Follow the referee's instructions!"

Only when Siena barked at them fiercely did the two snap out of it. Without breaking eye contact.

They stepped back into position, taking a deep breath, Dante moved his body to loosen up.

The 60-meter distance between them felt farther than usual.

But he had climbed to the top by defeating all the strongest opponents. As long as he fought the way he always had, there was no way he could lose.

'Yeah, I just have to fight my way. His only option is to go for the first strike. I'll turn that against him. Since I'm a target-type mage, I have the advantage in speed.'

Dante accelerated his Four-Way Formation to the limit and deployed a Spatial Movement magic circle beneath Shirone's feet. It wouldn't cause any real impact, but it was the best way to break his balance. After that, all he had to do was cook the situation as he always did.

"And now, Shirone versus Dante, Dante versus Shirone..."

Siena's voice was drowned out by the thunderous cheers of the crowd.

In ten seconds, the collision would begin.

The heat in the air made it feel as if the temperature had risen.

Siena abandoned the idea of signaling with her voice and instead raised her hand. The cheers grew even louder, and both Shirone and Dante locked their gazes onto the signal.

"Match, begin!"

Dante immediately unfolded a high-speed arithmetic sequence. The numbers started from 1, rapidly accelerating to 10,000, and his target form Spirit Zone extended outward, engulfing Shirone.

‘Got him...!’

Or so he thought—until his eyes widened in shock. Dozens of Photon Cannons had already closed in on him.

Dante immediately switched his charge and deployed a defensive magic circle. The Photon Cannons, fired in a barrage, pounded against his shield. Only then did he grasp the situation.

‘Immortal Function!’

Shirone had activated Immortal Function from the very start. On top of that, he wasn’t even thinking about tactics—he was simply firing Photon Cannons without stopping.

The sheer physical force rivaled earth magic, and it was incredibly fast. Now that he was experiencing it firsthand, it was an incredibly frustrating spell to deal with.

His defensive magic circle was cracking, and while he was stacking information to repair it, he wouldn’t last much longer.

Dante used Teleportation to escape. Shirone, who had been rapid-firing Photon Cannons, immediately cast photon magic and chased after him.

Two beams of light streaked across the sky of Icheonban.

From the very start, it was an all-out slugfest—or rather, a one-sided display of firepower. The students watched in awe, completely mesmerized.

Iruki let out a hollow laugh.

It was a solid strategy, but he hadn’t expected Shirone, who was usually cautious, to go all-in so early.

“He’s trying to make sure Dante doesn’t even get a chance to deploy his magic circles.”

Mark spoke in a trembling voice.

“This is incredible. Is this really the same person I had a Teleportation duel with last semester?”

“Probably not. Either way, the fact that he’s not giving Dante any time to use his techniques means he’s dead serious. At this point, the outcome is unpredictable.”

Shirone overwhelmed Dante with dazzling movements. He used his Patrol technique to block off both sides, then reversed Rainbow Drop to launch himself skyward. Dozens of photon masses were forming beneath him every second, tailing him closely.

Shirone fired them all at once. As the Photon Cannons dominated the space, Dante was forced to escape to the only remaining safe zone—back to the ground. An air-to-ground bombardment followed, but he didn’t even want to look up.

‘Damn it! Let me use my magic too! Is he insane?!’

Or perhaps... this was actually better.

After all, he knew that Shirone couldn’t sustain Immortal Function for long. If he could just endure this early onslaught, then victory would inevitably be his.

‘Yeah, at best, he can last thirty minutes in this state. If I just hold out for thirty minutes...!’

Photon Cannons rained down, scorching the ground in a straight line. Dante changed direction and searched for Shirone’s position.

Dozens of photon masses were raining down on the exact spot where Shirone should have been.

Then, realization hit him like a cold shock.

‘Damn it! Forget thirty minutes—I won’t even last five!’

He blocked the first wave of bombardment with his defensive magic circle.

Then, in the delay before the second wave, he found an escape route and broke through the barrage. But he had nowhere left to run. Without realizing it, he had been driven to the edge of Icheonban.

Shirone used his Patrol technique to dominate the space, forcing Dante into a corner. The moment Dante attempted

to break free, Shirone threw a compressed mass of photons. A straight beam shot forward.

Dante, unable to escape the corner, hastily deployed his defensive magic circle. Unlike before, the impact carried an entirely different level of weight.

When the second and third attacks struck the same point, his magic circle cracked even as he repaired it.

Iruki sighed, shaking his head.

“He got so nervous that his brain stopped working. By now, he should’ve realized—there’s no way a hastily constructed magic circle could block that.”

As the magic circle protecting Dante shattered, Shirone compressed space into a single point and charged in a straight line.

Dante abandoned the idea of dodging and chose to brace himself, gaining time to prepare. He quickly deployed multiple magic circles to cut off Shirone’s approach, but Shirone crouched and activated Frenzy.

“Gah...!”

The pulsating attack struck his magic circles thirty times per second, making Dante feel like his mind was being torn apart.

He had seen Frenzy used defensively before, so he assumed it wasn’t very powerful. But experiencing it firsthand, he realized it was practically a wide-area destruction spell.

All seven of his magic circles shattered, and his thoughts scattered. Shielding his face, he glanced past his arm to check the front.

But Shirone was nowhere to be seen.

Then he looked down. And locked eyes with Shirone, who was crouched, compressing photons in his hand.

Shirone lunged forward, thrusting his hand. The afterimage of photons trailed behind.

Two seconds was more than enough time for a mage to amplify an attack. Dante had no time for other thoughts—he instinctively deployed his defensive magic circle.

The Photon Cannon, thrown at point-blank range, crashed into his shield and shattered it in a single blow before slamming into his stomach.

Dante felt his vision blur. But upon quickly assessing himself, he realized the damage wasn't fatal.

'Tch! At least I managed to block some of it! From here on —!'

Before he could finish his thought, Shirone grabbed his collar with both hands and cast photonization magic.

Unexpected by Dante, his body turned into light and was forcibly moved.

When the spell ended, he frantically searched for Shirone's position while his senses scrambled.

But when he turned around, Shirone wasn't there. Instead, an innumerable barrage of photon bullets filled his vision.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

As the Photon Cannons struck, blinding white explosion erupted where Dante stood. The students tried shielding their eyes with their fingers, but the light was overwhelming.

Shirone finally halted his attack and steadied his breath. Only five minutes had passed since the battle had begun. Dante stood with seven magic circles deployed in front of him, his arms raised to shield his face. But then, the light from his magic circles faded, and like fragile glass, they shattered. His knee buckled, and with a loud thud, he dropped to the ground.

The students' eyes trembled in shock. He had managed to deploy a shield, but it was clear he hadn't completely blocked the attack.

Iruki's eyes gleamed.

"It finally landed. That one hurt."

Dante was known for never losing control of a battle.

Once the battle began, his genius allowed him to neutralize opponents' attacks and end fights with well-timed counters.

But Shirone had broken through his impenetrable defense and landed a clean hit.

Among the 500 spectators, not a single person spoke. Even Killine, who had watched Dante since childhood, stared in disbelief.

472 matches with 472 wins.

And yet, in just five minutes, the undefeated Dante had been forced to his knees.

The fierce battle had stirred up violent winds, sweeping through Icheonban.

Chapter 248: System Operation (1)

Silence settled in the wake of the passing wind.

The students were speechless. In the span of mere five minutes, a storm-like offensive from Shirone had brought Dante, the one renowned as the kingdom's greatest talent, to his knees.

"What? Is this real? That Dante...?"

One student suddenly shot to his feet and shouted.

"Shirone took him down! He took down Dante!"

As if on cue, Icheonban erupted in a deafening roar.

"Wasn't that too one-sided!? It wasn't even a contest from the start, was it?"

"Even Dante stood no chance against Shirone. I knew Shirone would win from the very beginning!"

The students clamored. Among all of the students of the Royal Magic Academy, Dante's defensive prowess was considered unparalleled. Yet, he had fallen to Shirone's onslaught without even managing a proper counterattack, it was only natural for the crowd to be in an uproar.

Once a defensive wall is breached, what's to stop it from being breached again?

Though the duel was not yet over, judging by the battle so far, victory already seemed to be tilting in Shirone's favor.

As the emotions of countless spectators surged, a heated competitive spirit rose high into the sky. The only ones who remained coldly composed were the hidden protagonists of this duel, Alpheas and Olivia.

Even they had not anticipated such an early turn of events.

Olivia had not expected Dante to be brought to his knees so

easily, and Alpheas was taken aback by Shirone's lightning-fast assault.

But such was the world of magic. No, even beyond magic, all competition in this world was inherently relative.

"A mage is..."

Alpheas carefully chose his words, as if defining something of great importance.

"...a human who has ceased to be human."

"..."

Olivia held her tongue. There was nothing to discuss the moment Dante had been struck down.

"Most humans can't even enter the Spirit Zone. Once you've enrolled in this academy, you've already surpassed the realm of ordinary people."

Olivia's gaze sharpened. If she twisted his words, it meant that even someone as prodigious as Dante was, in the end, just another magic academy student.

"So what? Dante hasn't lost yet."

Ignoring her, Alpheas continued.

"But... when you gather children who've surpassed the bounds of humanity, something fascinating happens.

Among them, someone rises even higher. They compete at that elevated plane, and from there, yet another stands out."

Contrary to Olivia's expectations, Alpheas hadn't brought this up to belittle Dante. He was reflecting on his own life through the duel between these two students who had surpassed the ordinary.

"And when you climb high enough, there comes a point where there is no higher place to reach. Isn't that the realm of a 1st-class Archmage?"

Alpheas turned to Olivia with a faint smile. She was lost in thought, her expression haughty, an oddly endearing look for her age.

Finally, Olivia spoke.

"...Are you mocking me for being 2nd-class right now?"

Alpheas didn't answer, instead turning his gaze back to the arena.

How could anyone mock a 2nd-class Archmage?

But when he thought about it... no mage who had reached that rank would ever be satisfied with their position.

Once you step into the realm of an Archmage, everyone, without exception, races toward the 1st-class.

They simply fail to reach it.

Students, professionals, even 2nd-class Archmages, none can escape the competition.

Such was the world of magic. A lifelong, solitary struggle to advance even a single step further in the field you've devoted yourself to.

Alpheas, too, had once dreamed of becoming a 1st-class Archmage.

The future was always uncertain, but there had been a time when both he and others had expected it of him.

Yet, after losing his wife, Erina, and wandering for ten years, that ambition had faded.

Had he started anew even then, could he have become a 1st-class mage?

Alpheas could say with certainty. Impossible.

That was not what the 1st-class was. It was not a rank one could aspire to after wasting ten years, not when countless geniuses vied for the same spot.

Then what of Olivia?

She was a sharp woman, not one to live as recklessly as he had. If anything, after her own failure in love, she had honed her magic even more fiercely, driven by vengeance.

Alpheas wondered. Just how close had Olivia come to witnessing the dazzling glory of that rank?

"It's not as though you didn't try, right?"

His question was abrupt, but Olivia understood immediately. She, too, was a mage.

Olivia blinked her long lashes, sinking into calm contemplation before finally pursing her lips.

“1st-class... That isn’t a realm you reach just by doing your best. No, I don’t know. Maybe there’s someone in this world who worked harder than I did. But at least in my view, it’s the domain of absolute talent.”

Olivia reflected on the years behind her, weighing the credibility of her own answer. Then, recalling something she had overlooked, she added slowly.

“Or perhaps... the domain of madness.”

Alpheas’ eyes half-lidded. Deep creases formed at their corners as the light in his pupils seemed to be swallowed by an abyss.

“You mean Gaold.”

Micaea Gaold, a graduate of Alpheas Magic Academy and current chairman of the Tormia Magic Association.

Back in their school days, no one had expected him to become a 1st-class Archmage.

They had thought he would become a good man.

And he had been a truly kind boy. A devout believer who once said his dream was to preach love to the world.

Yet now, that same man stood at the pinnacle of the Red Line as the kingdom’s greatest Archmage.

While it might be the highest honor for a mage, for Gaold himself, it might have been a terrible fate.

Olivia dredged up a distant memory.

There had been a day when the eyes of the world’s most powerful figures had converged upon Alpheas Magic Academy.

It was an event that transcended the ordinary weight of human affairs, and Olivia had been among those present.

“What happened with Miro... I’m sorry.”

Alpheas remained silent. Adrias Miro and Micaea Gaold.

Even now, the thought of his two disciples made his chest ache.

Suddenly remembering, Olivia asked.

“The Supernatural Psychic Science Research Society, right?”

Alpheas nodded bitterly. Every world-shaking incident had begun from that place.

“Miro and Gaold were both founding members. What a pair of troublemakers they were. Back then, they were nothing but headaches, always causing unbelievable incidents. But without them, this world as it is now wouldn’t exist.”

“Does it still exist? The society, I mean.”

Alpheas’ lips curled slightly. Thinking back on it now, it was a strangely twisted bond.

“Shirone, Iruki, and Nade. This duel’s main players and the kingdom’s greatest troublemakers are the ones keeping it alive. They’re Miro’s direct juniors.”

Olivia’s eyes gleamed as she watched Shirone.

The Supernatural Psychic Science Research Society seemed at odds with the intellectual pursuit of the magic academy, but the more one pondered it, the more one trembled at the vastness of its true purpose.

If Miro had been at its center back then, now it was Shirone. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, but something told her that his decision to inherit Miro’s society as the only Unlocker was tied by an inexplicable thread, one beyond the analysis of mere cause and effect.

The students’ cheers grated on Dante’s nerves. Part of him wanted to leap up and smash Shirone to the ground immediately, but he needed at least two more seconds to recover from the shock of the anti-magic.

This is maddening. I still can’t stand.

Shirone’s attack was a marvel that couldn’t even be described as merely brutal. Had Dante been even a fraction slower in casting his defensive magic circle, the match might already have been over.

But I endured. That’s all I need to think about.

For a mage of defensive inclinations, danger was familiar. Taking hits was part of his path to victory. One knockdown wasn’t as critical for him as it would be for an offensive mage.

Yet the humiliation burned deep.

No matter how inconsequential it was in the grand scheme, this was the first time he had ever been knocked down so quickly in a fight.

Two seconds. One second. There.

Finally free from the shock, Dante slowly pushed himself up. As unbelievable as it was, looking back, perhaps this outcome had been inevitable.

He hadn't been careless. But something worse than carelessness had stolen his quick judgment, a tension that dulled his reflexes.

The moments before disaster strikes are always the most terrifying. Now that he had felt Shirone's power firsthand, he would never allow himself to fall so helplessly again.

"I'll give you credit. Pushing me this far puts you in the top twenty across the entire kingdom."

Shirone said nothing. Dante's arrogance of ranking fellow students as if it were his right, didn't even register in his eyes.

That had been a full-powered assault with Immortal Function unleashed. Honestly, Shirone had thought the match was over. But Dante hadn't stayed down. That fact alone infuriated him.

As Dante steadied his Spirit Zone, he spoke again.

"But from here on out, it'll be different. You'd better prepare yourself..."

"Dante."

Shirone cut him off, as if there was nothing left to hear.

He needed to push further. He needed overwhelming force, enough to ensure Dante could never rise again.

"This is the last time I'll warn you before I start."

The moment Shirone transformed into a streak of light and lunged, Dante felt his heart plummet as he hastily triggered Teleportation.

He barely dodged the fangs closing in on him, his chest heaving. Had he been even a fraction slower, they would

have collided.

Had Shirone been aiming for mutual destruction? No, he must have anticipated this reaction.

The initiative still lay firmly in Shirone's hands.

But I'll turn it around here.

As Dante, who had been retreating relentlessly, suddenly shifted direction, Shirone's streak of light veered sharply to pursue.

Within the ten meter radius of a single Teleportation, two streaks of light painted the sky with monstrous movements. The students stared in disbelief. It had only been a year since Shirone had taken his advancement exam by teleporting across the Bridge of No Return.

Of course, even back then, he had cleared the Dragon's Labyrinth, a 10th-tier difficulty trial. But the techniques he was displaying now were all high-level skills typically wielded by professionals.

Dante was matching him move for move, but he was a specialist who had trained rigorously at the Royal Magic Academy since he was young.

In short, Shirone's growth was too fast. It almost seemed as though time flowed differently for him.

"Just when did he reach that level...?"

The instant Mark spoke, Shirone and Dante charged at each other simultaneously.

The students' hearts stopped at the same moment.

Neither Shirone nor Dante had expected the other to commit to the charge. Yet neither showed any intention of backing down.

It was a game of chicken, if neither yielded, they would both die.

Two streaks of light collided along the horizon. Just as the students braced for the worst, squeezing their eyes shut, the two figures pivoted at the exact same moment, veering in opposite directions.

Mark couldn't tell who had dodged first. Even in this deadly standoff, the two were evenly matched.

"Are their magical instincts on the same level?"

Iruki murmured in genuine awe. Despite having been knocked down once, Dante's movements lived up to his reputation as the kingdom's finest.

Shirone and Dante were now chasing each other's afterimages.

Their eyelids seemed frozen in place, their pupils absorbing everything in their field of vision.

Even as he pushed his concentration beyond human limits, Shirone couldn't help but marvel at Dante's defensive prowess.

His defensive instincts are insane. I can't find an opening.

Dante's movements when fully committed to defense were a work of art. For every 10 meters Shirone advanced, Dante retreated 10 meters. Even when Shirone varied his approach by 9.8 meters, Dante adjusted flawlessly, maintaining the exact same gap.

Chapter 249: System Operation (2)

But Shirone did not stop teleporting.

No matter how precise the defense, it could not surpass the mechanism of stimulus preceding reaction.

Now!

The instant Shirone tilted his body in photon state, Dante transformed into light and retreated.

A superhuman reflex, but this time, it worked against him. Shirone withdrew his feint and pulled back.

Damn it!

By the time Dante realized Shirone's strategy, his Teleportation had already activated, carrying him away. The distance between them widened to 20 meters in an instant, and Shirone immediately fired a Photon Cannon. Against the encroaching net of photon fire, even Dante's movements were useless. His only escape was the ground. The moment he landed, he deployed a defensive magic circle overhead.

Shirone gritted his teeth and cast spell after spell.

Immortal Function expanded a mage's mind infinitely, but reality was far from forgiving. Fully unlocking the infinite would dissolve the self entirely.

That was why Unlockers drew power through the Spirit Zone. The Spirit Zone acts as a barrier between reality and the infinite.

In essence, it could be called endless mental strength, but if the Spirit Zone's endurance failed to bear the weight of infinity, the user risked being swept away in an instant.

Yet Shirone remained unshaken, even as he expended mental energy beyond his limits. His mind had transcended

endurance, reaching a diamond-like state of unbreakable focus.

More! More! More!

Bolstered by his colossal mental strength, Photon Cannons rained down without pause.

“Ghhh...!”

Dante spread ten defensive magic circles like a roof above him, holding on with everything he had. Even so, it made no sense. Any mage’s spells weakened slightly with continuous casting, yet Shirone’s assault only grew fiercer.

Damn it! What kind of monstrous firepower is this!?

He had never felt this overwhelmed, even against the kingdom’s hardest hitters.

Then it struck him. Immortal Function. The realm he had dismissed as mere monkish meditation was now crushing him mercilessly.

The bombardment lasted a full two minutes.

Dante couldn’t move an inch from where he stood. Even his evasion skills, his greatest strength, were useless against the relentless onslaught.

The students glanced uneasily at the Icheonban bracelets growing hot. The heat on their skin was proof that the amount of information exchange between Shirone and Dante was skyrocketing.

“T-They’re not going to explode, are they?”

Mark’s frightened question replied by Amy.

“Don’t worry. Even the graduating class never had issues. If the Icheonban system overheats, the safety measures will kick in before the worst happens.”

Mark let out a sigh of relief.

“O-Oh, okay.”

Amy added more.

“Though it’s not every day they get this hot.”

Shirone was growing impatient. Over three minutes had passed, and Dante’s defense still held. But the sheer