



THE BOOK EATING MAGICIAN

BOOK 02

Mekenlo

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The Book Eating Magician

(책 먹는 마법사)

by

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Synopsis

[‘Lightning Magic Primer’ has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[The 2nd Circle magic ‘Lightning Bolt’ has been acquired.]

The unprecedented magician who will eat all the magic books of the world has appeared

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Chapter 101 – Great Forest (3)

The next day, the people, who had spent the night almost entirely sleepless, entered the Great Forest as soon as the sun came up. The sight of trees and bushes which far exceeded a human's height was really fantastic. As they stepped in, the rays of sunlight shining down disappeared, leaving just a few streaks behind.

However, that wasn't the only thing that changed for the party.

“It will be faster if we proceed to the right.”

“Ah, is that so?”

Unlike yesterday when the White Tower Master had been in charge, Edwin and Theo were now leading the group. Apart from Edwin who knew the forest, why had Theodore taken up this role? It was because of last night. His detection ability allowed him to notice creatures faster than anyone else, so it was inevitable that he would have the full trust of the White Tower Master.

As a result, he was the second guide for this mission.

‘Well, to be precise, it is Mitra's role.’ Theodore was conscious of the weight of the small girl on his head.

Every time he took a step, Mitra's bud would spin like a pinwheel. The bright and cheery voice rang out from above his head, matching with the beat of the spinning. He didn't know if it

was because she liked the environment of the Great Forest or for some other reason, but Mitra was really excited after entering the forest.

“Mitra.”

[Heeeee— Woong?]

“I’ll have to depend on you once more.”

As if she had been waiting, Mitra spread her arms wide open.
[Hoing!]

She was now familiar with the way to use the power, so the bud sprouted naturally. The mysterious green light spread, and the scenery transmitting into Theo’s head. The path split to the left and right, so he checked all the possibilities. Theodore found that there was nothing on the left path, then he looked down the right.

However, a subtle expression soon appeared on his face.

“Sir Edwin.”

“Yes, Benefactor.”

“Does this forest have wolves with horns on their foreheads? If we go three kilometers down the path on the right, we will meet them.”

“Wolves with horns on their foreheads... Perhaps it’s the thunder-horned wolf.”

Edwin accepted Theo’s words without any doubt as Theo had proved his skills several times already. In a forest where they couldn’t see beyond 100 meters, Theo’s detection ability was extremely useful. Thanks to that, they didn’t encounter any creatures even once and were able to go through the Great Forest without any interruptions.

“Then we should avoid them. It will be annoying if they bother us.”

“Are they dangerous enough to cause harm?” The White Tower Master asked from where he had been listening to their conversation.

“No, they aren’t dangerous. It isn’t a creature that can survive in the depths of the Great Forest. The greatest threat from the thunder-horned wolf isn’t its combat power but the noise.”

“Noise?”

“Thunder will emerge from the horn on the forehead and produce a burst of sound which is exactly like real thunder. It will draw all the creatures in the surroundings and then run away to survive.”

Indeed, it was better to avoid them. The delegation nodded at the easily understandable explanation.

The magicians specialized in particular fields, but most of the creatures living in the Great Forest weren't known to them. So, the advice of Edwin, who had lived there for hundreds of years, was more reliable than any guidelines.

Thanks to the guidance of these two people, the party was able to reduce any unnecessary friction. When there were occasions in which they had to encounter creatures...

Piing!

Edwin only needed to fire his arrow once for the creatures to vacate the place.

It was different from the storm arrow which had caused massive destruction. This was a fast, translucent arrow which divided into dozens or hundreds of pieces and pierced the heads of the creatures. It was a technique which fit perfectly with the term 'rain of arrows.'

Dozens of headless bodies would roll to the ground instantly.

'Amazing. This is a master-class strength.' Theo admired Edwin inwardly as he looked at the dead bodies. It was incredible that the powerful Edwin was so polite to him.

Regardless of whether they were trolls or ogres, all those struck by the arrow would die. Despite lacking in power to Theodore's Magic Bullet, the arrow's speed and extraordinary trajectory were really scary. Even if Theo predicted it with his sixth sense, he might not be able to avoid or defend against it.

No, considering that Edwin wasn't serious right now, his arrow was quite possibly more threatening than Magic Bullet.

"...I'm really glad he is friendly, right?"

[Hoi?] Mitra made a questioning sound, but Edwin had finished arranging the situation and returned. He pointed at the vacant space where dozens of creatures had previously been and said, "Benefactor, we will take a break here."

"Here?"

"Yes. In the future, there will be many habitats of powerful creatures, and it is likely that we won't be able to completely avoid them, even with Benefactor's abilities. This is the last place where we can rest properly."

Theodore was convinced and looked at the White Tower Master.

Orta raised his hand in agreement and said, "Take a break in that empty spot. We will start moving in two hours, so you are allowed autonomous actions until then. Eat, sleep, take any action that you think you need. If you cause an unnecessary disturbance, you will

be severely punished.”

The magicians’ eyes shone at the words ‘autonomous action’. Why had they come here? It was to find out the secrets of the mysterious land called the Great Forest. They didn’t care about the fatigue which had accumulated in the past day or two as they picked up any material that caught their eye. Someone even got out a shovel and started to dig at the ground. The image of an elegant magician had already long disappeared.

Edwin looked at the scene with a bemused expression. “... Benefactor, human magicians these days are much more active than I thought.”

“Haha...”

Even Sylvia was placing a few bottles of stream water into her dimension pocket. It was impossible to reconcile with the images of magicians depicted in stories. The only one who didn’t move was Theodore. Additionally, the White Tower Master was also standing still.

Orta walked up to Theo and Edwin and opened his mouth to say, “Sir Edwin, can I ask you one question?”

“Speak.”

“For us humans, elves are known as keepers of the forests. I was wondering if this gathering activity is rude.”

“That rumour is half wrong and half right.”

Elves were traditionally known as a species which defended the forests. In fact, they often burned forests, ruthlessly slaughtered animals, and attacked those who invaded them.

Despite this, Edwin didn't hesitate to say that the rumour was only half right. “We defend the order of the ecosystem, not the simple trees, plants, and animals. Your collection of samples is nothing compared to this vast forest, so there is no reason for me to stop it.”

“Hoh, then what about creating a road with attack magic? The vitality of the forest means it won't be hard to restore such damage.”

Edwin's eyebrows twitched at the words. “...Your words aren't wrong. But there is no reason to create unnecessary confusion. I don't believe it is right to do such things just to hasten our steps a little bit.”

“These are the values of an elf. You don't feel the need to smash the framework for progress?”

“That framework is what we must protect.”

Both voices were calm. Nevertheless, Theo could feel the tension between the two of them. The minor altercation started from a

trivial story to an area which was hard for Theo to understand. Humans and elves... Was it possible that different species saw another landscape when stepping foot into the area of transcendence?

Theodore decided to just listen quietly to the dialogue between the two masters. Then Mitra suddenly jumped out.

[Hoiit?!] Mitra, who had fallen asleep on his head, suddenly raised her voice and looked around.

The two masters were amazed by the sound and looked around in a hurry, but they couldn't feel anything. There was only the forest stretching out as well as the sound of birds. Only Theo, who shared his senses with Mitra, was able to hear it.

–Excuse me, who are you?

...Someone's voice was calling out. It wasn't a physical sound but a voice transmitted through a mental connection, like Gluttony.

The voice was broadcasted through his connection to Mitra. He recalled that Ellenoa had once spoken to him in this way. However, before Theo could react, he heard someone speak again. It was a different person this time.

–Why is it so noisy... The ringing voice was drowsy, like the person had just been sleeping.

–What, did something interesting happen? The next voice resonated like a well made bell.

–Don't talk to me about nothing. Then it was a low voice, like a beast growling.

–No, I clearly heard it! It was the first voice Theo had heard.

The four unknown voices touched Theo's head, and he couldn't help asking, '...Who are you?'

At that moment, his head suddenly became quiet. However, that silence didn't last long.

–What?! Someone has really connected to the neural network?

–Who? Reveal your true identity!

–Tita! You don't think that girl is fooling around do you?

–No way. She would've reached the snowfields by now.

–Then who is the guy who just talked?

Theo had a headache due to all the voices. It was a headache he didn't feel when he talked to Gluttony, Mitra, and Ellenoa. Was it because he wasn't accustomed to talking in this way? For now, it

seemed necessary to calm down the agitated voices.

Theo unconsciously grabbed his forehead and said, 'My name is Theodore.'

-Theodore?

-Eh, I think I heard it before...?

-I don't know. Who was it?

Finally, the owner of the light-toned voice changed the atmosphere. -Ah, I remember! The human who saved Ellenoa! Am I right? Answer me!

'T-That's right.'

-Excuse me, how much progress was made? That girl is still neutral right? Did you catch her? Kyah, a romance between a human and elf after a long time! If my memory is correct, it has been 1,500 years!

It was the first time Theo had ever heard such a chatty person, so he couldn't help being dumbfounded. He wasn't unsociable, but the other person gave him no room to even talk. Despite only one person talking, his forehead started tingling again.

Fortunately, the voice of salvation came quickly.

–T-Theodore?! How are you already...?

“Ah, Ellenoa!”

He was so happy to hear her voice that he cried out her name. Edwin was watching Theo and made a startled reaction, but Theo couldn't afford to pay attention to him. Having heard the voice of an acquaintance, Theo asked hurriedly about this unprecedented phenomenon.

Ellenóa replied in a surprised voice, –Theodore has accessed the neural network of Yggdrasil, called Ratatoskr. Only Arv's direct descendants can touch it.

Chapter 102 – Great Forest (4)

“Ratatoskr?”

–Yes, it is the name of a chatterbox recorded in the myths. She realized that there was a realm of space in Yggdrasil that could only be accessed by high elves.

Ellenora had sent the seed of the world tree to Mitra, but she hadn't realized this would happen. At best, she had thought it would expand Mitra's abilities by a level. The high elf, who had been silent since then, opened their mouth to speak, –Dmitra... By planting the world tree in the godhead of the earth goddess... Maybe she is higher than us... Hmmm.

–I-Is that so?

–I don't know exactly... Just a guess... Perhaps I am half right...

If that was the case, then Ellenora had unintentionally created a large incident. However, the high elf who pointed it out didn't sound angry at all. The voice which pointed it out was so soft that Theo's eyelids felt heavier just by listening.

–A human has been granted the right to Ratatoskr. Fortunately, there isn't much use in hearing the voice of the forest... At most, he can borrow a little mana...?

–Um, that wouldn't be a big problem.

–Yes, it is okay if it is at that level.

The silent voices agreed with the opinion. The power of telepathy and being able to borrow the mana of the forest was good for the saviour of a high elf. Either way, ordinary magicians already had flashy powers. Above all, it had been the decision of the high elves to bring out the seed of the world tree, so they couldn't just blame it on Ellenoa.

In any case, Theodore Miller was exceptional in many ways.

As soon as the story was settled, the cheerful elf spoke in a loud voice, –Then let's change the subject. Has the Meltor delegation entered the forest? They arrived sooner than expected, so it is a bit late to greet them, but who wants to go? Me? Or me?

–I'm not going. But you can't either.

–...I'm going to sleep.

–I would like to see them, but I think there is a more eligible person this time.

The four high elves expressed different opinions, but there was one right person.

The quiet high elf, Ellenoa, slowly raised her hand... Although,

that wasn't visible to Theodore who could only hear their voices. In the end, there was an unanimous agreement that she would meet them.

As soon as they came to that conclusion, the high elves vacated Ratatoskr one by one.

—You said you were called Theodore? I'll see you later! The cheerful voice felt distant like an echo in a mountain, while the beast-like voice disappeared silently.

—I'll prepare a welcome. I'm looking forward to it. The gentle voice disappeared with a respectful greeting.

—...Good night, the high elf with the sleepy voice said briefly before disappearing.

They were truly unique personalities. Theo was able to distinguish who they were just by listening to their voices. Theodore said goodbye to them with a smile. In the end, Theodore and Ellenoa were the only ones left.

She greeted him once again in an excited voice, —Long time no see, Theodore! I'm glad to see you again.

‘Ellenoa, thank you for this invitation. I didn't know you would call me as a state guest.’

—I didn't know this was going to happen. I'm in this position, but

I didn't do that much.

It wasn't exactly as she stated. Edwin was of the master class and one of the elves' greatest warriors, and he treated the high elves with great respect. It was why he couldn't neglect the benefactor who had saved Ellenoa.

However, Ellenoa thought it was burdensome since she was born in a small forest and not Elvenheim.

–Isn't it annoying continuing the conversation through Ratatoskr? Then she spoke words that Theodore couldn't understand. –So, I will go to you.

‘Huh? How?’

–Huhu, you'll soon know. Ellenoa laughed lightly before closing the connection with Ratatoskr. She didn't tell him how she was going to come from Elvenheim, which was still far away from here.

Theo opened his eyes only to see someone's face right in front of him.

“Benefactor!”

“Ah, Sir Edwin?!”

Edwin's approach was faster than the terrified Theodore could

retreat. “Did you talk to them? Is it through Ratatoskr, the place only available to the parent dancers?”

“P-Probably?”

“Ohh! You really aren’t a normal human!”

Theo was certainly different. He was the owner of a grimoire, the contractor of an ancient elemental, and a person who had inherited a war hero’s craft... Even if he only had one title, the word ‘ordinary’ definitely didn’t fit him.

Based on Edwin’s reaction, an ordinary elf wasn’t able to enter Ratatoskr regardless of their abilities; only the high elves had access.

‘Ah, this might be dangerous.’

As the other magicians watched him with excited eyes from behind Edwin, sweat flowed down Theo’s back. Their curiosity was stimulated after hearing ‘Ratatoskr,’ a word they had never heard of before. It was a crisis where he would be squeezed into answering questions for the rest of the time.

At that moment, the mana in the atmosphere started to tremble in a strange way.

Wuooooong!

Tree roots blew flutes from under the ground, and the grass started to play a melody. The wind which passed by felt like it was stroking his skin. It was different from a violent aura or magnificent magic power. Theo and Edwin were the only ones familiar with the strange mana wave.

“This...!”

It was the life force (vitality) which was also called Prana.

A green light rose from the ground. Then a lump of dirt, roots, and leaves formed a shape which looked like a human being. It was a phenomenon which even the magicians couldn't help marveling at.

Surrounded by the splendour of prana, she showed up. [Hello everyone.]

The form of Ellenoa, with her natural beauty perfectly reproduced, was standing right there. While everyone was speechless, Edwin bowed politely.

“Edwin, son of the Beech Clan, third branch of the parent tree, greets the sixth dancer.”

[There is no need to bow, Edwin. This body is just a clone created with Ratatoskr.]

“Even so, this body must do its duty as a branch member. You may not actually be here but your will is.”

Ellenora sighed and looked at Theo. Theodore grasped the meaning of her look, and as he walked forward, he said, “I didn’t know you would come this way. I’m really surprised.”

It wasn’t just flattery. He truly was surprised. She had created a body from dozens, perhaps hundreds, of kilometers away. There was no way to reproduce that phenomenon using the magical knowledge Theo had. It seemed like ‘Ratatoskr’ didn’t just have the power to allow for conversations.

Ellenora smiled brightly and waved her arms. [I only came to know recently that this was possible. I will guide you from here. I originally expected you to take a fortnight, so you got here really quickly.]

The White Tower Master took one step forward and said politely, “First of all, thank you for your consideration, high elf Ellenora. ...If possible, can I ask you one thing?”

[Yes, of course.]

“I am grateful that you came here, but you don’t have to worry. Is it not enough if we only have Edwin as a guide?”

His words weren’t wrong. Edwin was a competent assistant, and it wouldn’t be difficult for them to reach Elvenheim, even without

Ellenora's help. Additionally, there was Theo's role as the second guide. So, Orta didn't want to borrow the high elf's hand for no reason.

However, Ellenora smiled like she had been waiting for those words. [This was part of the original plan, so there is no need to be concerned. I don't intend to disparage Edwin's skill, but there is no guide better than a high elf in this forest.]

After saying those words, she abruptly turned and pointed in the direction where the party should move. The dirt and branches moved away at the motion of her finger. It was a simple act, but it was a miracle no one could deny.

“Hah...!”

“T-That is ridiculous...”

A path was formed where there hadn't been one previously. This was due to the vegetation dividing by itself. The overhanging tree roots sank down into the earth, while the leaves and branches moved out of the way. The hills flattened like they were welcoming the party.

There was now a straight path in the Great Forest filled with dense bushes and trees!

“It is really amazing.” Even the White Tower Master couldn't close his mouth which was exposed beneath the mask. Without

destroying nature, Ellenoa controlled hundreds of thousands of plants to create a path? Even an 8th Circle magician like Blundell wouldn't be able to display such a sight.

Orta raised his evaluation of Elvenheim by three levels. At least in the Great Forest, Elvenheim was a powerful country which couldn't be touched by Meltor or Andras.

[A remnant of power remains, so creatures can't access it easily. If we go this way, we will be able to reach Elvenheim sooner.]

The White Tower Master looked at Ellenoa's path with tranquil eyes and opened his mouth to say, "...The natural power that the world tree produces... to think it can be applied this way."

The presence of the world tree was intense enough to kill any creature. Therefore, wherever its roots stretched, it was hard for them to live. The places where its breath reached, the creatures were reluctant to approach. This road, created with Yggdrasil's neural network called Ratatoskr, was able to drive away the creatures.

However, the monster called Veronica could burn this. The White Tower Master shook away the worrisome memory and spoke to Ellenoa, "Do we just go straight along this path?"

[Yes, it will take around three days.]

"Hmm, then it will be half a day. Then Ellenoa, this form doesn't

have the same magical resistance as your actual body?

[That's right, but... half a day?]

Ellennoa was confused, but Orta pulled out a familiar box.

It was a magic which couldn't be used in the forest due to various factors, but it was a different story if the path was laid out like this. The delegation placed the silver rings on their fingers. Finally, Ellennoa's clone put on the ring, and the White Tower Master walked to the head of the party.

The green light created a shortcut in front of them.

Chapter 103 – Exotic Guests (1)

In the center of the elf kingdom, Elvenheim, there was a giant tree which reached up into the clouds. As the last remaining world tree in an era where the power of the myths was almost lost, Yggdrasil was the identity of the big tree.

300 years ago, the four high elves had gathered all their strength to make this world tree, which was still a ‘premature baby.’ Ordinary humans would stop breathing as soon as they got close and even senior magicians were barely capable of withstanding the mana pressure. Yet this was only around one-tenth of the original world trees in the primordial world.

Nevertheless, there was an area surrounded by a fog of mana which was difficult to access even for elves. It was a place where only the gardeners of the world tree, the high elves with Arv’s blood, could access.

This was the most secret place in Elvenheim, located on top of the roots of the world tree. There weren’t many elves who didn’t know about it, but it was considered a taboo to even talk about it. It was a wooden building called ‘Heart of the Forest.’

“They have already arrived? Ahh, I should’ve gone to meet them!” Alisa, the female high elf with bright blonde hair like the sun, cried out. Alisa’s eyes were like the sea, and her unique playfulness stood out.

She had the appearance of being the youngest among the dark

elves gathered here, but she was actually the oldest. Hers was the voice which had first disturbed Theodore.

“You can’t. If we send you, their whole image of the elves and high elves will be crushed like dry leaves.”

“Oh, that is an excessive compliment!”

“It isn’t a compliment!” The elf with the angry voice knocked on the table. With dark skin and silver hair, the elf looked like a species which was already extinct in the continent, while the wide shoulders and angular body indicated he was male.

Alucard, the dark elf who looked up at the moon instead of the sun, snapped in a nervous tone, “You are unworthy to be the oldest one. Why do you act more like a child as the years pass?”

“Isn’t a child’s heart precious?”

“Fuck you!” In the end, a vulgar curse emerged from the high elf’s mouth.

The bickering would’ve continued, but another high elf intervened.

She was an impressive female with brown hair and gentle eyes, like a herbivore. “Both of you calm down. Is this something worth arguing about? We should talk about the guests who have come a long way and the problems that have arisen recently.”

“...I understand.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Alisa’s answer was still playful, but she finally shut her mouth. At the very least, she wouldn’t interfere with the meeting.

Then with perfect timing, Ellenoa spoke with her eyes closed as half of her consciousness was still with her clone. “...I have arrived. I will guide them to their quarters and then send Edwin to his original location. I’m going to call a few people to act as guides. What do you think?”

“I agree.”

“I also agree.”

“Me too!”

There was one voice missing, so they naturally looked in that direction.

With bushy hair and half opened eyes which displayed sleepiness, the high elf stared at them before muttering in a low voice like he was speaking to himself, “...Agr...ee.”

It was a unanimous decision. Ellenoa started focusing on her clone in order to lead the delegation to their accommodations and

summon a few elves. She was still inexperienced with Ratatoskr, so she couldn't manipulate the clone while paying attention to her body at the same time.

Then the rest of the high elves naturally moved onto the next agenda.

“The following is a suggestion from the dryads. These days, there are many creatures damaging the trees in the eastern part of the forest. They want to know if the numbers can be reduced. What do you think?”

“Hmm, the dryads. Aren't they protected due to a contract with the ents? Isn't that enough to protect them?”

Alucard was the first one to raise objections. Dryads were a type of fairy species which were parasites to trees. They had the ability to deceive and chase out those who damaged forests. So, they had a friendly relationship with the moving trees, the ents, to protect their physically vulnerable bodies.

The ents born in the Great Forest had a vitality that was many times stronger than those in other regions. So, even senior creatures avoided fighting with them.

However, Lumia's expression darkened and she shook her head. “The damage is still too great. Two ents in the eastern area have already been burned to death, so there may be a high ranking creature that uses fire.”

“...I agree. That is enough to send one guardian.”

“Edwin needs rest, so choose another!”

“...One... person... agree...”

If possible, they sought a unanimous decision, but if that wasn't possible, they decided using the majority vote.

Ellenora didn't speak in this meeting, but all four high elves, including Lumia, agreed. They decided to dispatch one guardian to the eastern forest as a master would be able to crush even the most serious problems.

The next agenda concerned some species which were causing headaches.

“The chief of the Stone Lion Tribe, Orlando, has come. He says that a suspicious person recently appeared in his area. I couldn't find any signs of that, and it may be a prank by the fairies. So, he has come to make a request.”

“The Stone Lion Tribe, what a stupid person.”

In a rare moment, Alisa responded to the agenda in a chilly voice, “That idiot who would kill a person and then say that they fell? Just ignore it.”

“Judging with personal feelings isn’t a good habit,” Alucard spoke with irritation, but he was also sick of dealing with the ignorant tribe chief. If Orlando wasn’t representing the beasts of the Great Forest, he would’ve been expelled in disgrace sooner.

“...Put it on hold. I will send a few investigators, and if they can’t find any traces, he will be sent back.”

“Che, it can’t be helped.”

“...Agr...ee.”

“Then I will send an investigation team.”

The conclusion of the third agenda created a stiff atmosphere. The four high elves exhaled for a moment and waited for Ellenoa’s next words. They couldn’t help feeling curious about the guests who had just arrived.

At that moment, there was a bolt of lightning inside Alisa’s head as she cried out, “—Ah!”

The other three people were surprised and wanted to ask her what happened.

“Wait! That reminds me, the chief of the Stone Lion Tribe is there!”

“There...?”

“Eh?”

Unlike Lumia who was still confused, Alucard sucked in a breath.

The foolish beast chief who liked to talk with strength... Orlando of the Stone Lion Tribe was staying in the area given to the Meltor delegation. During the time of slave hunting, the beast clans were also sold at a high price by humans.

When he thought about Orlando's temperament, 'that' would certainly happen.

“Ah, no. Ellenoa, guide them to a different place right now...”

“—I'm sorry.” At that moment, Ellenoa spoke with a blank expression, “They have already met.”

*

The beast clans, also known as the werebeasts, were born with two advantages. They had the intelligence of humanoids and the violent nature of beasts. Their prosperity was based on their ability to hunt wild animals and creatures, as well as their intelligence to build a developed civilization. At least, they thought so.

However, their pride was shattered by human development.

Magic and aura overwhelmed the beast clans, who had relied on their natural abilities for generations. They had been drunk on their own strength and ignored the development of civilization, which led them to eventually having to flee from the humans.

The werewolves, who had caused many villagers to tremble in fear, had been slain by the swords of knights, while the bears who had received tribute as master of the mountains had been turned into fire by the flames of magician.

The beast clans then realized they were no longer the strongest and had escaped to the ends of the continent. They hid in the Great Forest which was out of reach of the humans. It had already been more than a hundred years since they fled.

As new generations grew up, the fear in their blood thinned and turned into anger. Yes, just like right now.

“Hey, you bastards! Come out and explain!”

The shout was so loud that some elves covered their ears with a pained expression. It was from a man with an extraordinary body over which was two metres tall and had unusual traits. He stepped forward suddenly and shouted rudely at the party, “Why did you bring humans into this forest?! Did you forget how humans persecuted us? Or did you get deceived by their sly tongues?”

Ellenora couldn't stand it anymore and raised her voice, [Step away right now, Chief Orlando. The people you are being rude to aren't 'humans' but guests of Elvenheim.]

“Don’t command me!” The muscles under Orlando’s scarred skin swelled menacingly. Orlando didn’t practice aura, but he gave off an intimidating pressure as he bared his teeth at the party. Unfortunately, the people he was confronting were stronger than him.

The White Tower Master standing beside Theodore muttered quietly, “A beast clan, what a rare presence. What do you think is the best way to resolve this?”

“...It isn’t a moderate atmosphere, is it?”

Orlando was bold. The man whose hair resembled a lion’s mane wouldn’t drop his head easily. The fact that he was yelling at a high elf in Elvenheim proved this. As Ellenoa’s voice became increasingly colder, Orlando pointed with his sharp claws toward the nearest human, Theodore.

“You’re treating humans better than the chief of the Stone Lion Tribe! Why did you give the VIP room to that guy? I won’t leave this place unless he proves his credentials!”

[Chief Orlando, if you keep continuing like this...]

As Ellenoa raised an eyebrow, Theodore stepped forward with a sneer.

Theo wasn’t afraid of the pressure coming from the two-meter-

tall body. Compared to Veronica's pressure, this was just at the level of a breeze. It was almost embarrassing to compare it to the killing intent of one of the Imperial Seven Swords, Lloyd Pollan.

Theodore stared into the beast's eyes and opened his mouth to say, "Then what are your qualifications?"

Chapter 104 – Exotic Guests (2)

Theo's outspoken attitude confused Orlando. Considering how Orlando was over two meters tall and had the blood of a lion, Theodore just looked like a dwarf next to him. The elves had strange powers, but none of them could go against his sheer brawn.

Then why was no one stopping this human's cheeky impudence?

‘No, I clearly felt something ominous...’

Unlike his ignorant image, Orlando's intuition was moderately sensitive. If not, he wouldn't have survived as the clan leader in the Great Forest, where all types of dangers were present. The moment Orlando found himself in a really dangerous situation, he would run away without any hesitation. Likewise, as soon as he realized he couldn't win, he would bow his head, allowing him to preserve his life until now.

Right at this moment, his intuition was giving off alarm bells.

“...Don't make me laugh!”

However, Orlando ignored the warning. Why should he be scared of a soft and weak looking human male? Additionally, many elves were watching the commotion. Orlando had grown up sheltered and only knew about humans from the old adults of the tribe, so overconfidence filled his eyes.

Crunch, crunch.

Orlando's massive muscles swelled as his skin changed to that of a beast, while his sharp and long nails had enough strength to tear steel. He could normally beat a troll, and in this state, he could even kill a twin-headed ogre. The hard rocks and big trees wouldn't be able to withstand his fists.

This was the Beast Form, the symbol of strength for the werebeasts.

"My qualifications! A weak human dares to question this Orlando's qualifications!" Orlando raised his head as he shouted in a menacing manner. His hairline receded in Beast Form, but he didn't become stupider.

Orlando seemed to think that maybe this human male before him was confident because he was a 'magician.' The human wasn't wearing a sword at his waist or protecting his body with metal. Only magicians would come forward confidently like this.

'I will make it so that guy's mouth can't speak a spell!'

He looked at the still blasé expression on Theodore's face and shouted while pointing a finger, "The Stone Lion Tribe is a brave tribe that uses our fists! If you want to be qualified, prove it with your body! It won't be unfair if we exchange fists!"

Of course, it was unfair. This was the result of Orlando's frantic thinking. If the opponent didn't accept the challenge, he would call them a coward and run away. If it was accepted, he could knock out the human. Orlando was terrified of magic such as fire and lightning, but he was convinced that he could win if they competed with fists.

So, the reaction of his opponent was even more surprising.

"...Exchange fists just once? Is that all?" Theodore asked, and the other magicians couldn't resist smiling or covering their mouths.

Didn't war mages kill knights on the battlefield? Moreover, Theo was the person who had overpowered Rebecca, the aura genius of the empire. So, they had no choice but to laugh. It was the moment when the words 'brave and ignorant' entered their minds.

Their reaction stunned Orlando, but Theo stepped forward and turned to Ellenoa.

She realized his meaning right away and nodded. [I understand. I will assume the role of notary in Elvenheim for the two of you. Chief Orlando, you made this suggestion yourself, so you won't have any complaints later?]

"O-Of course not!" Orlando replied and stepped toward Theodore.

Considering the difference in weight, it was a gap where he could

knock out the opponent with one fist. Orlando had made the offer himself, but for some reason, he felt sweat flowing down his back .

‘It can’t be! My fist can’t be stopped!’ He tried to readjust his mindset as he stared at Theo.

“I will give you some concessions. Do it calmly,” Theo said.

Those words were decisive. Orlando’s wounded pride caused him to get angry, and his fear disappeared far away. The beast then made a fist.

Kwaaaaang!

Along with white smoke, there was an electrifying roar. The roar of a powerful man, who ruled as the leader of a clan in the Great Forest, scared off the birds. However, the even more threatening thing was his fist. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the fist which contained the extremes of physical force could break down a small hill.

‘Die!’

Orlando punched out with strong determination and...

Paang!

Theodore’s left hand blocked it.

“...Your punch is weaker than I thought it'd be. Now, is it my turn?”

Thanks to Battle Song which Theo had received directly from its founder, Theo's physical abilities were at a level comparable to Orlando. When it came to martial arts, Theodore's fighting techniques were several times more complex than those of the chief of a beast clan, which was just a crude fist containing power.

However, Orlando didn't know the difference and was devastated.

Theo took one natural step forward and stretched out his fist. Duk.

Then he lightly applied power. Kwaang!

The Beast Form flew into the air, and Orlando couldn't even scream as he was turned upside down. His mind was already devastated by the shock. The sudden hit penetrated his rigid muscles and bones, damaging the insides. If Theo had wanted to kill him, Orlando would've died instantly. What more could be said after he flew 10 meters through the air?

“Kuwek, kuweeeek...” The unconscious Orlando was leaning against a tree, but nobody cared about him.

[Then I will continue giving instructions.]

Ellennoa's face brightened as the party passed by the miserably fallen Orlando and climbed a wooden staircase.

Some magicians even kicked Orlando several times, but none of them stopped. There was no dignity left for the fallen lion.

*

"He was a foolish fellow." Theodore laughed as he arrived in his room and recalled the werebeast that he fought.

Orlando's power itself wasn't bad. No, it was really excellent. If Theo fought a knight with such power, it would be tricky in many ways. One example was Rebecca. Strength harmonized with technology had turned her into a bigger threat.

Compared to that, Orlando's punch was nothing new.

"Without technique or aura, he won't be able to deal with me. Now I know why the beast clans retreated from the continent."

A voice responded to Theo's cynical soliloquy, -Well, don't be too discouraged. There is a reason for the decline of the beast clan.

"What is it?"

-It is ambiguous. It is a mixture of information that can't be said

and intermediate information. You might not be able to understand, but if you want to hear it, I will tell you.

This seemed to be information which hadn't been known before. If historians were here, they would give their gallbladders to find out. However, it was just a mere curiosity for Theo, who nodded.

Then Gluttony replied with a single line of explanation, –It is because the beast king, Fenrir, was murdered by someone.

“...I don't know that name.”

–I knew it.

Theo didn't ask anything more, but Gluttony had raised his curiosity.

Although Theo had read many books in the magic tower's library, Fenrir was an unfamiliar name to him. It had only been 500 years ago that the beast clans had started to decline. However, according to Gluttony, there was more behind it.

However, Theodore's worries didn't last long.

–This is an interesting forest. A world tree that is reproduced using Arv's power, a refuge for the fallen species... It is amazing that an elf kingdom is established in the middle of it.

“Are you talking about Elvenheim?”

–That’s right. Elves originally lived in colonies, but they aren’t a species with a strong sense of attachment. High elves are their focal point, but a kingdom goes against their identity.

It was difficult. Theo was merely 20 years old, no matter how clever he was, whereas Gluttony was a grimoire whose years couldn’t be counted. It might be common sense for Gluttony, but it was forced to speak many words in order to explain.

Elves shouldn’t have created a country? Or maybe they couldn’t make one? Did Elvenheim already exist?

As he was thinking those questions, the next blow emerged.

–I didn’t know there was a grimoire here. Seems I won’t be too bored staying in this forest.

“What, grimoire? In the Great Forest?!”

There had been a day in the past few decades, or maybe centuries, when magicians gathered and organized the characteristics of grimoires which had popped up in history. Some grimoires had looked like books, or the grimoires had chosen their owner using free will.

The inherent knowledge was different, but there were many points which matched up when the grimoires were arranged by

behaviour. There were those who skipped space with no constraints, those who chose their owner regardless of the owner's will, those who had an unknown method of communicating knowledge, and those who controlled the owner's body. The fact that grimoires were rarely seen in the human world was one of the few things they had in common.

However, Gluttony said that he felt a grimoire in the Great Forest. It spoke in a pleasant tone, like it had been expecting Theo's reaction.

–That's right. I remember this wave of power clearly. I can feel the power of the grimoire that started Ragnarok, the war that ended the Age of Mythology.

“Ragnarok...!”

–At that time, Surtr the great archmage got his hands on the grimoire and burned the original world trees. The name is [Laevateinn].

After Gluttony spoke, the information of the grimoire popped up in front of Theo.

[Laevateinn]

[-A grimoire where the realm of fire, Muspelheim is sealed. At the time of Ragnarok, Surtr had unlocked the power of the

grimoire fully and burned the world tree by releasing Muspelheim. However, in return, he was turned to ashes, and his whereabouts after that are unknown.

- * The rating of the grimoire is 'Legend.'

- * When consumed, ???

- * When consumed, ???

- * When consumed, ???]

...A legendary grimoire equivalent to Death's Worship! Theodore's eyes shook as he read the information window.

It was the same rank as the grimoire which had made its host an elder lich in three months? Furthermore, the contents of the information about Laevateinn were even worse. Laevateinn was a grimoire with a sealed off world which burned the world trees. Its timing seemed like it was aiming at Elvenheim.

Theodore cried out involuntarily, "Gluttony, you said you felt it? So, do you know where the grimoire is now?"

However, the answer from Gluttony was disappointing.

-I don't know. The distance was too far, and the power only

manifested for a moment. It was a fluke that I even figured out it was Laevateinn.

“Then how do I find it in this wide forest?” Theo asked nervously.

Gluttony just chuckled. –Don’t worry, it will close on us soon.

“What?”

–The grimoire needs sacrifices to release the seal and exercise its power properly. And Laevateinn’s favourite food is all around us.

The grimoire’s fire which burned the world trees... A thought flashed through Theodore’s mind.

Gluttony opened its mouth and said with perfect timing, –If it lights a fire in this dense forest, it will be able to free at least two seals... This forest also has an offering that is more excellent than anything else.

“...World tree.”

–That’s correct, Gluttony confirmed in a sweet and dark voice, like a demon. –Stay calm and wait. The day will come when [Laevateinn] reaches our mouth.

Chapter 105 – Exotic Guests (3)

For the next few days, the group made their own way around the peaceful elf city. Some went into the forest to collect samples of soil and vegetation, while others got samples from streams or lakes.

Meanwhile, there were quite a few people who stayed to listen to the stories of the elves in the city. Right now, elves were hard to find in the human world. So, the kingdom itself was overflowing with many valuable things to study.

There were only two people who didn't move from their rooms. They were the representatives of Meltor, White Tower Master Orta and Theodore Miller.

‘Is today already the fourth day?’

Perhaps it was because they had arrived too soon, but Elvenheim wasn't ready to meet them. The elves would send a guide when they were ready, so the delegation just needed to wait. Furthermore, the elves' sense of time was several times slower than that of humans.

Theo looked at the forest outside his window and muttered the name of the legend ranked grimoire, “...Laevateinn.”

It was a grimoire of flames which had ended the Age of Mythology thousands of years ago. According to Gluttony, the fire had burned all the world trees growing above the clouds and

destroyed the Arv. If this was true, ‘Laevateinn’ was almost like a disaster to the elves, and it would definitely hit Elvenheim.

‘No matter what happens, it won’t end moderately.’

The grimoire was aiming for the world tree. It wasn’t a position where they could talk about coexistence. Both sides would fight until one was completely gone. Theodore was intent on conserving his strength until the omens appeared. There was nothing more foolish than consuming power and then not being able to use it at important times.

At this moment, someone banged on his door. “Excuse me. Theodore, are you in the room?”

“Yes, I am.”

Theo opened the door, and an elf bowed politely as a greeting. From his accessories and clothing, the elf seemed to be a highly-ranked one. The middle-aged elf proclaimed himself as Theo’s guide, and the news the delegation had been waiting a few days for had finally arrived.

“Please tell me when you are ready. The parent’s dancers have called you.”

*

The delegation members who had scattered everywhere gathered

instantly. Naturally, they had many questions, but they were reluctant to ask the guide in case they would be seen as rude. During times like these, it was the role of the delegation leader to step forward and resolve any questions.

So, Theodore asked the guide who was leading them, “Do we just have to keep walking like this?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The destination is dozens of kilometers from here?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

There were question marks above the heads of the delegation members who heard the answers. Why were the number of questions growing instead of reducing? Moreover, the guests were going to have to walk dozens of kilometers...?

However, when the guide saw their puzzled facial expressions, his only reply was a meaningful smile. Thus, they walked 10 minutes without knowing anything. Theodore and Orta were walking a few steps ahead of the rest when the guide suddenly stopped.

Before them was a fairly large knothole, enough for someone to enter without bending down. Oddly enough, the inside was so dark that even sunlight didn’t expose it.

At that time, Orta muttered in an admiring voice, “Space door...! It is a record of a bygone era, so I never thought I would see one.”

“White Tower Master?”

He didn't listen to the person's call as he touched the knot carefully. Orta's reaction to the knothole almost seemed to be passionate. Based on its name, the space door appeared to be connected to somewhere. After touching the knot, Orta walked into it hurriedly, and his white robe disappeared into the darkness.

“T-Tower Master!”

“Unbelievable...!”

“Ohh...!”

The feelings of the group could be largely divided among three emotions: astonishment; admiration; and fear.

‘Aha, so it is like that.’ Theodore was in the category of admiration as he followed Orta without hesitation.

The knothole was connected with another space, and as soon as Theo entered it, he felt the distinctive dizziness. It was a feeling of discomfort similar to the motion sickness felt from cheap carriages in Bergen.

Fortunately, the discomfort dimmed as soon as he took the next step.

“...This place.”

There was the unique aroma of wood, the refreshing feeling of clear air, and the overwhelming flow of mana. As Edwin had said, a magician, who didn't have at least five circles, would lose control of their magic power here.

However, that didn't have much to do with Theodore who had already reached the limits of the 5th Circle. He calmed down the mana flow with an unconcerned expression.

It was only then that he saw them. There were four high elves were sitting around a table and waiting for him.

“Ellenoa.”

“Welcome, Theodore.”

While Theo greeted Ellenoa, the rest of the delegation crossed the knothole in turn. It was a situation where they couldn't talk privately until all the formalities were gone. The delegation frowned at the discomfort of the space movement, but they kept their mouths shut. It was because they were meeting the legends of the world, the high elves.

Alucard, a dark elf with impressive dark skin, rose and welcomed

the guests. “Guests from the magic kingdom of Meltor! We, Elvenheim, sincerely welcome you who have come a long way. After this meeting today, I hope we will be not just neighbours but friends as well.”

“Thank you for the kind words, descendants of the Arv. We will observe the laws of the forest while staying here, hopefully proving to be worthy friends and inseparable neighbours.”

These were ritual words. White Tower Master replied skillfully to Alucard’s old-fashioned greeting, and Alucard sat down again like the response was satisfactory. Theodore and Orta were seated relatively close to the high elves, with the rest spaced out.

The discussion began in earnest not long after.

“First of all, I would like to talk about trade goods.”

The alchemists of the Yellow Tower were excellent, but they couldn’t reproduce the special goods created from by-products of Yggdrasil. However, Elvenheim traditionally only traded a small volume to other countries. There had never been an exception to that policy, but today was different.

Alucard nodded since they had already consulted each other in advance.

“We feel the same way. The artifacts made by Meltor are useful to Elvenheim. If you increase that number, we will show the same

kindness.”

“If possible, I would like to increase the quantity of raw materials for medicines and...”

“What do you think about tripling the existing amount?”

“Wonderful.”

Indeed, the White Tower Master engaged in the negotiations with diplomatic knowledge and eloquence Theo didn't have. It was impossible for Theo, who didn't really like being social, to negotiate the existing contract and its details with the trading partner. For this mission, it was more accurate to say that Kurt III had sent Theo as a diplomat.

In the meantime, Theodore felt a strange incongruity.

‘Ah, that's it.’

There was one high elf missing. The voice of the chatterbox in Ratatoskr wasn't present. She was the elf who was curious about the relationship between Theo and Ellenoa.

Despite Theo wondering why she was missing, the meeting between the two countries proceeded smoothly. Meltor didn't want to lose this chance to get close to Elvenheim, and Elvenheim was willing to give quite a bit. For that reason, the conversation went smoothly.

“So, if we don’t focus on one area, is it okay to cut from the outskirts?”

“It is fine as long as the balance of the forest isn’t disturbed.”

“I understand. I will be sure to tell you before proceeding with any logging work. In the case of the fruits and harvest, it will be divided in a 5:5 ratio.”

Once the decision on logging, which was an implicit taboo, was finished, the air in the meeting room relaxed. Now, the only things remaining were the matters of mutual non-aggression and emergency military support. These weren’t matters which could be determined in one or two days. So, as representatives of the two countries, Orta and Alucard both were satisfied with their current progress on the negotiations.

However, the moment they were going to move on to the banquet...

Pajik... pajijjik...

The high elves had more sensitive hearing than humans, so they were the first to notice the noise. They stiffened and looked up at the air, while the air above the table started to wobble. Then a wave of light appeared from somewhere.

Alucard was confused as he cried out, “This route... It is the

dryad queen! What is happening all of a sudden? You're accessing Ratatoskr without our permission!"

The scenery turned red, and screams rang out in the distance. Theodore couldn't help gulping as he heard the noises.

Not long after Alucard finished talking, someone's distressed voice spoke up, [Ahh, please forgive me! But, but!]

"Explain what happened! I will investigate your mistake after that!" At the dark elf's words, an image in the air changed. The view rotated slowly to reveal a terrible red sight. There were mandragora-like screams as dryads and ents were swallowed by flames, and beyond that was the source of the tragedy.

"Fire... giant?" Someone murmured when they saw a giant burning the forest.

Flames covered the area every time he took a step, and his fire sword burned up the ents and dryads like they were rotten leaves. The scene where his feet turned the ground into magma was like a nightmare in itself.

‘...That guy.’

Theodore's eyes sunk in as the White Tower Master remained speechless.

According to Gluttony, Laevateinn was an autonomous

maneuver-type grimoire, and the fire giant was its second form. If two more seals were released, it would turn into a master level monster which they couldn't afford to face.

Chapter 106 – Exotic Guests (4)

‘There is still time since it is only in form number two. The problem is how can I persuade the people here...’

Theodore calmly recalled the information about Laevateinn which he had heard from Gluttony.

A world where the sky, the earth, and the sea all burned... ‘Muspelheim’ was a sealed world. It was a crystal of power which existed to burn all life and was one of the few grimoires which could release its own seal without an owner.

The first form was a fire animal which burned trees. The second form was the fire giant, an embodiment of flames as seen in the video. This was already at the level of a national disaster and would need a massive operation to stop it.

However, it was nothing compared to the third and fourth forms. Theo recalled the thrill he’d felt when he first heard it and repeated the name in his mind, ‘...Fafnir.’

The third form was a type of transitional form, a swirl of fire which would give birth to a dragon. Laevateinn’s fourth form actually reproduced the dragon, which was famous for being the strongest species on earth.

It had been an evil dragon in ancient times which literally existed for destruction. The air which touched the scales of the beasts would scream as they burned, while the earth which was touched

by its breath would become so dry that no seeds of life could be left behind.

As it had been recorded in history, wherever that dragon existed, it was a land where life couldn't exist. The greedy grimoire explained in a simple way that Fafnir's flames had caused the birth of the Red Plateau.

Then it added in a dull voice, -Laevateinn is an autonomous maneuver-type grimoire, but it will remain dormant until it is brought close to a forest. There are many uncertain points about this situation.

‘Did someone intentionally create this situation?’

It made sense to think so. He didn't know who the bastard was, but they were stupid. This was a premonition for a great disaster which couldn't even be imagined.

-The moment that Laevateinn reaches the fourth form, this era will come to an end. The person is calling ruin down on themselves, so they must be stupid.

The evaluation of a grimoire which had existed for thousands of years was indeed ruthless. Even if Blundell and Veronica, the most powerful magicians currently existing, joined hands with the Seven Swords of the Empire, they wouldn't be able to reach Fafnir.

It wasn't comparable to the fifth or sixth form which required

the existence of an owner, but it wasn't an opponent which could be won with half transcendentals. Therefore, the only way left for Theodore and his party was to suppress Laevateinn before it reached the fourth form.

[This guy... How long are you going to act like this?] At that moment, someone's shout rang out from the video floating in the air. The person who managed to show such bravery before a giant who burned all life certainly couldn't be ordinary.

As all the ambassadors wondered about the person's identity, the high elves spoke with a bright countenances.

“Oh, they've arrived!”

“Guardian Ellaim.”

“I don't know what the identity of that thing is, but there is no need to worry if the second parent is there.”

There was only one high elf who murmured in an inaudible voice, “...N...o... danger...ous...”

Shortly after that, the guardian sent by Elvenheim attempted a preemptive strike on the fire giant. The elf called Ellaim wasn't an archer like Edwin. A wooden spear, which was strangely shining silver, flew toward the fire giant.

Then he immediately shouted, [Die down!]

The magma hardened, and the fire burning the leaves on the trees died out. An unknown chill suddenly spread around the fire giant. The dryads and ents used that gap to rush back. Simultaneously, the guardian shouted briskly, [Freeze!]

This time, the fire giant froze over. Its arms and legs were stuck in place as its body became covered with thick sheets of ice. The fire giant struggled with annoyed gestures, but the ice didn't melt. Soon, the ice completely covered its body, and there was only a huge statue remaining.

‘Ohh...!’

As the air in the meeting room relaxed, Naia, the silent high elf, shouted for the first time, “Ellaim, get away from that place immediately!”

[N-Naia?]

Naia's voice had always been half-asleep, so Ellaim was surprised by the sudden change and jumped back in retreat. Not only was Naia's loud voice unexpected, it also contained more urgency than they had imagined it could have.

The one who had spoken the words, Naia, was the wisest of the high elves, and her prophecy was right this time as well.

Hwaaak!

[What?!]

The ground where Ellaim had just been standing split apart, and lava flowed up. If he had been standing there, he would've been burned without a trace. A chill went down his neck as he stared at the cracks slowly forming on the fire giant. The ice restraint was meaningless.

As Ellaim stared at the giant, the people in the meeting room looked at Naia, who had warned of the attack earlier than anyone else. She had been snoring throughout the meeting, so they hadn't expected anything from her.

"...What are you looking at?" Naia's eyes, which had dark circles under them, blinked at their gazes. No sleepiness remained in her eyes, proving the emergency of the situation currently occurring.

After knowing her for such a long time, Alucard knew the signs and asked hurriedly, "Naia, do you know about that giant?"

"Well, halfway."

"Half?"

It was a fairly ambiguous answer. Naia nodded and pointed to the giant in the video. "I've read a mention about it in an old myth. It's the incarnation of flame from another world, a living flame... The ruin that moves to burn all life—Laevateinn."

“Laevateinn?”

“Yes. It’s the ancient nightmare that burned our first parents, the primordial world trees, and our ancestors. Beyond that, I don’t know any more. There is also a record of a giant mixed with a dragon.”

The people in the meeting room started to murmur. The old myths of the elves were the far distant past for humans. It was a time when archmages of the 9th Circle, who no longer existed, had nests in each country, and swordsmen who could cut a mountain with a sword had been heroes. None of the people present would be able to resist the existences who had been called ‘monsters’ in that era.

Theodore was the only one who felt pleased by Naia’s words. ‘Okay, this is good. It would be hard if I pulled the story out first, but now I can attach it to a skeleton that has already formed. I can get help from Elvenheim without too much unnecessary attention.’

He knew more about Laevateinn than anyone else in this place, but someone else had to uncover it first. If even the elves couldn’t connect it to an old myth, how could a young human magician? No, he couldn’t take the credit and could only steer the story in the desired direction.

However, thanks to the high elf, Naia, he could now disclose the information about Laevateinn. Theodore carefully raised a hand.

“Theodore? Did something happen?”

“You...?”

Ellenora and the White Tower Master noticed Theo's action and looked at him strangely. Although Ellenora was concerned, the White Tower Master, however, feared Theo would speak nonsense in this situation.

Despite that, the next words from his mouth became a turning point in the meeting. “I've also heard about Laevateinn.”

“What?!”

“I-Is that really true?”

Of course, it was the high elves who showed a strong reaction. Alucard jumped up from his seat, while Ellenora's and Lumia's eyes widened, appearing several times bigger.

Theodore nodded slowly. In order to prevent anyone from asking, he spoke first, “I'm sorry, but I can't reveal the source of my information. There is a secret collection of books in our kingdom, where the removal of knowledge is strictly forbidden.”

This time, the ones surprised were the party from Meltor.

“Perhaps... the Zero Library?”

“It might be possible. This young man received a national treasure from His Majesty, so the possibility of him reading an ancient book from the Zero Library is...”

“However, such knowledge at that age...”

Theo smiled with satisfaction as the gossip entered his ears. He didn't think they would 100% believe this excuse. It was enough as long as they thought there was the possibility.

Veronica had told him a long time ago that the White Tower Master was responsible for the security of the Zero Library, but he wasn't interested in all its contents. There was no way to instantly uncover the excuse he made unless they had read every book in the Zero Library.

Unsurprisingly, nobody questioned Theo. Now, he just needed to prove the veracity of his information. At any rate, the source of his information was meaningless to the high elves. Knowing wouldn't change the situation, and this was the best way to learn how to overcome the disaster.

Naia was the fastest one to regain her composure and spoke to him in a delicate voice, “Theodore. I know the favour you have done us, but this involves the fate of our whole clan. Please understand that the weight of your words will never be light.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And excuse me, can we speak through Ratatoskr from now on?”

Before Theodore could even react, Ellenoa cried out with anger on her face, “Naia! Are you suspecting Theodore right now?”

“We need to be more careful than usual.”

“No, that’s not it. It is because no lies can be passed on through Ratatoskr!”

Theodore smiled as he realized why Ellenoa was angry. She definitely knew how urgent this situation was and about the importance of his words being true. However, the trust and affection she held toward him was greater than that, and Ellenoa proved it directly.

Theo appreciated her gesture and raised his hands.

Clap.

The two arguing high elves turned to stare at him. He appreciated Ellenoa’s gesture, but he also understood Elvenheim and Naia’s position. Anyway, the information he would speak now was taught directly by the greedy grimoire, Gluttony. The authenticity of Gluttony’s was more certain than that of any records.

Rather, Theo was glad to prove his words. “I will do as Naia says.”

First, he summoned Mitra to the floor of the meeting room and picked her up. She rested her head on his and connected their senses in a fairly natural way. At first he had been confused by the flooding of sensations, but he quickly became proficient at maintaining the connection after training in his room the whole time.

It wasn't difficult to move his mouth while speaking through the world tree's neural network, Ratatoskr at the same time.

Then Theodore began his story.

[“The fire that burned the original world trees, Laevateinn, looks like a giant now, but if it continues eating the forest this way, it will soon change into a new shape. According to the book, it is a living thing that grows from eating trees.”]

The magicians, who had always been obsessed with knowledge, focused so hard they forgot to blink, while the high elves confirmed the authenticity through Ratatoskr.

Two of the three countries balancing the northern continent were dependent on a young magician.

[“I will assert this first.”]

As everyone paid attention to him, Theodore raised his finger. He raised all five fingers before folding them into a fist.

Then he looked at the firm fist and declared, ["In the next five days! If we can't kill Laevateinn before then, the northern continent will be destroyed on that day."]

Chapter 107 – Towards The Storm (1)

The meeting started with a shocking declaration, and the story that followed was profound in many ways. As questions were asked, the outline of the plan was gradually formed. There were many problems which Theodore wouldn't have been able to solve if he had been thinking by himself.

After the discussion which seemed both long and short, only two high elves were left in the meeting room.

Lumia picked up the teapot and asked, "Ellenora, do you want a drink?"

"Ah, of course."

Steaming hot tea was poured out into Ellenora's cup. The tea stopped two-thirds of the way, and Ellenora held the handle of the cup carefully.

Lumia and Ellenora were both high elves. However, Ellenora was a young one who had only just experienced her coming of age ceremony, while Lumia was old. So, it was natural for Ellenora to be a bit uncomfortable. As Lumia and the other high elves knew this, they expressed consideration for her.

Lumia drank from her teacup before joking in a playful voice, "By the way, isn't he a great gentleman? That Theodore."

“Cough!”

As soon as Lumia mentioned his name, Ellenoa put down her cup while coughing loudly. To think that it wasn't Alisa but Lumia pulling up this topic. It was so surprising that Ellenoa forgot to manage her expression, and she turned her head with a sense of betrayal, revealing her flushed face.

However, the high elf didn't stop there. “Ahh, I think it is a little sad. You've been here for half a year already, but you still think of him more than us. Wouldn't Naia be crying right now?”

“No, t-that...”

“What, am I misunderstanding? There was also a time when I burned with passion, so I will cheer for you!”

“Thank you—no, this isn't it!” In the end, Ellenoa shook her head with a grouchy expression.

As a high elf experiencing such intense and strange emotions for the first time, Ellenoa found it difficult to maintain her composure when faced with this type of hardship, especially in comparison to the old Lumia who had experienced it before. Lumia, who knew this fact, smiled inwardly as she recalled the young man who had been at the center of the table a while ago. The young man, who displayed his youth and skills, was undoubtedly attractive.

‘It is rare for a human to ignite such passion in us, but... he is

definitely different.'

At 20 years old, Theo had barely stepped into adulthood, but he was already expressing his opinions to wise people many times older than him. He even had the ability to cause the wise Naia to admire him. It was clear that Theo had a heroic nature which would get his name inscribed into the history books.

If Lumia were a hundred years younger, the fire might be burning inside her as well.

“...Oh my, I really had that thought.”

“Huh?”

“It is nothing. I forgot my age for a moment.”

Before the confused Ellenoa, Lumia lifted up the teapot again. If Ellenoa could see Lumia's inner thoughts, Lumia would have to be vigilant. However, the girl beside her was very distracted. Lumia had already finished becoming a beautiful woman, so she would be considered a tough rival for Ellenoa.

That said, fortunately, there was no cold wind coming from Ellenoa in this meeting room. After taking a few sips of tea, Lumia spoke words which pierced through Ellenoa's heart, “Do you want to go fight with him?”

“...Yes.”

“I knew it. But in this situation, the right person is Alucard, not us.”

The abilities of the high elves within the Great Forest were overwhelming. In addition to using mana at will, they could temporarily summon an elemental ruler who had already disappeared from the material world. There were six such people who could this.

Even if Andras and Meltor worked together, this was a power which was difficult to guarantee victory against. It could be called a power that was meant to protect themselves. However, the high elves weren't the Arv and were limited in how they could exercise the abilities.

“You aren't familiar with Ratatoskr and can't summon an elemental ruler. Additionally, Alisa and Alucard have already moved. Our role is to aid them from here.”

“...Yes, I understand.”

“You should bless them instead of worrying, Ellenoa.” Lumia grabbed Ellenoa's trembling hand and whispered in an affectionate voice, “Our forest, parent, and him whom you are thinking about, wish them luck.”

On the other hand, Theodore divided the personnel as planned and moved alongside Alucard, who showed the guidance ability Ellenoa had used. Alucard knew how to use it actively. The trees and earth retreated, creating a straight path through the dense forest.

Once a magician's Grease magic was added to the path...

Swiiik-

Six bodies slid at a rapid pace. They didn't have to take any steps and were moving at a speed which surpassed that of a carriage. The White Tower magician who devised this method had a deathly pale face. Maybe a means of surpassing wind power would soon be born again.

"Look," Alucard said as he slipped next to Theo.

"Why are you calling me?"

"...You don't have to be respectful. It can't be helped in public, but you are Ellenoa's saviour. No, your help in this situation is enough to be called our friend."

Theodore felt nervous. He was participating in the campaign to suppress Laevateinn to prevent a global disaster, but he was also getting some benefits. Unlike Death's Worship which had used black magic power, this was a legend-ranked grimoire which Theo might be able to absorb. If he did, he would smash down the wall

of the 6th Circle instantly. Unfortunately, it wasn't philanthropy as Alucard implied.

As if he knew Theo's heart, Alucard stopped talking for a moment before starting again. "First of all, this is a report on the current situation. Alisa, who moved according to the instructions, confronted Laevateinn and called the wind elemental ruler, creating a vacuum around it."

"The result... No, what is the result?"

"Not bad. The forest fire calmed, and the giant's footsteps slowed considerably. It is regrettable that we couldn't stop it completely, but the spread of the flames is obviously reduced."

Gluttony's advice had been correct. Theo nodded inwardly as he listened to Alucard's report.

The flames which burned from Laevateinn's body was a power that transcended the rules of this material system, but the flames were subjected to the ordinary combustion phenomenon. If they maintained a vacuum around it, the damage wouldn't be so large. Of course, this method alone wasn't a good enough solution.

The vacuum only slowed down the rate at which the giant ate up the surroundings. Sooner or later, the fire would burn down the vegetation, and it would transform into the third form in five days. Then it would be reborn as the fire of destruction which burned all life.

Theodore's primary goal for the vacuum was to stop it and interfere with the full evolution.

However, that wasn't the only news from Alucard.

"What? Are you serious?"

"I'm sorry, but that is how it is."

Theodore's face stiffened. When he started the meeting, he had told them that the ents and dryads should retreat. However, he just received news that they had refused. It was so unexpected that an absurd expression appeared on his face, but there was someone else who answered his question.

It was Edwin who slid closer to him. "Benefactor, the mindset of the ents and dryads are different to the elves."

"Mindset?"

"Yes, to them, the forest isn't a place where they live."

For elves, the forest was their home and the foundation of their lives. The origin of the elves was to live in harmony with the animals and plants.

However, the elves couldn't compare to the ents and dryads when it come to closeness to the forest. Dryads were fairies who

were born from trees, while ents were trees which had accumulated mana over a long period of time.

To them, the forest was their neighbour and family. So, despite knowing that their actions were foolish, they couldn't step back. While dying in Laevateinn's flames, they continued to fight by throwing rocks and spitting poison. Despite knowing that resistance was pointless, the dryads and ents threw themselves to their deaths.

Crunch. Theodore unconsciously gritted his teeth.

‘Damn, if he continues eating dryads and ents... The mutation may occur faster than expected. Once that happens, it is the end.’

The fairies and trees filled with spirituality were like nutrient-rich prey to the Laevateinn. An ent was worth more than a normal tree, and dryads were useful offerings. Moreover, despite the fact that they respected the authority of the high elves, it wasn't a subordinate relationship where they had to listen to commands.

As Theo's mind stirred quickly, he asked Alucard, “Alucard, how much further to our destination? We have already been moving for two hours like this!”

“Pretty soon! Be prepared!” The moment Alucard answered... Theodore felt a feeling of weightlessness and regained his balance. The six magicians, one high elf, and one elf reached their destination after two hours. No one stumbled at this unexpected situation. It was proof that their nerves were tight.

Then they frowned and muttered.

“...How terrible.”

“How many trees...”

The sun was still high in the sky as a red horizon appeared beyond the trees. It had only been a few days since Laevateinn started its activities. With Alucard and Edwin at the forefront, the eight people stepped carefully toward the burning horizon.

‘Hot.’

They hadn’t even walked 100 steps, and they were already soaked with sweat. By the time they reached 200 steps, they could see the devastation dealt to the surrounding trees. Once they passed 300 steps, ash fell as the charred wood broke under their shoes. At 500 steps, the eight people reached the forefront.

At the border of the eastern forest, they could see that a fierce battle was taking place.

[Ohhh... ohh...]

[Stones... throw...!]

Huge trees dozens of meters tall were moving. Like a person,

their arms moved back, and they threw stones from the ground.

The strength was equivalent to a catapult. Any large monster would shatter to pieces if they were hit by the stones. A thunderous sound rumbled continuously in succession as the rocks fell. This was power of the guardian of the forest species, the ents.

Some people admired the sight.

However, Theo approached and shouted harshly, “Stop this and back off right now! You fighting this way won’t be of any help!”

The leader of the ents growled ferociously.

[...Hu...man! Your command... don’t... follow!]

The same was true for the dryads, who were floating over the ents’ heads and informing them of the enemy’s position. The small forms made of blue mana glared at Theo. They might show grace to the high elves, but they couldn’t appreciate humans who mainly invaded and damaged forests.

Thanks to this relationship, it was lucky they didn’t attack him, let alone cooperate.

“Stop it, Old Tree Elder!”

“We didn’t come to fight you!”

Alucard and Edwin tried to intervene, but the dryads and ents continued to fight. They didn't care about the heat getting closer to them, as if they were going to jump into Laevateinn's mouth itself. Some may regard that virtue as stupidity but not Theodore.

‘...Should I just move them through force?’

It wasn't an impossible task. He wanted to avoid any unnecessary power consumption, but it was better than giving offerings to Laevateinn. It might cause problems later, but his first priority was to overcome this crisis.

As Theodore reached this conclusion in a calm manner, magic power flashed around his hands, while the other magicians who noticed this quickly became tense. It was unspoken proof of their willingness to join him.

However, Theo didn't have to do anything.

[Hoing!] It was because the sound of the ancient elemental, Mitra, popping out of the dry land caught the attention of all their eyes.

Alucard exclaimed at the sight of the world tree's bud, while Edwin worried about whether he should bow or not. The magicians' curiosity was aroused despite this situation, and Sylvia wriggled her fingers in greeting.

Then at that moment...

Kuuong! With a heavy sound, the ent leader fell to his knees.

Chapter 108 – Towards The Storm (2)

No, the ent leader wasn't the only one to fall to his knees. The other ents bent their branches and roots which looked like limbs and fell to the ground.

Theodore was confused by the unexpected behaviour as other ents started to fall in a similar fashion. Thump, thump, the sound occurred every time the giant tree hit the forest floor. It was so loud that the crowded area quickly became quiet.

The dryads, who had been threatening Theo with their mana, lost their fierce attitude and bowed politely in the same manner as how servants welcomed a king.

Theodore, standing in the center of all this, looked around with an embarrassed expression and noticed something.

‘These guys... they aren't bowing to me?’

The direction was slightly different. Theo followed their gaze and discovered Mitra looking around with a bewildered expression. He didn't know why, but it seemed like the bud on her head was especially pointed today. Theodore realized the moment he saw it.

Simultaneously, the similarly enlightened Alucard cried out with delight, “Indeed, it is due to the bud of the world tree...!”

It wasn't a well-known fact to humans, but the bud of a world

tree could no longer grow in this era. The density of mana was several times thinner than it had been during the Age of Mythology, and the purity of the Arv's blood was now much lighter. Additionally, there were numerous elements which interfered with the growth of a world tree.

Even if all the remaining high elves on the continent joined forces, they no longer had the ability to grow another Yggdrasil. So, they had never considered the existence of another world tree.

The forgotten Mother Earth, Mitra, was a type of vessel. This meant Mitra could grow a bud of the world tree, the ruler of all the trees on earth. So, it was natural that, as tree-derived species, the dryads and ents couldn't resist her presence. For them, Mitra was an existence they had to serve.

[Hoing? Hoeng?] ...Ironically, the involved party didn't understand at all.

Theo quickly weighed the situation and talked to Mitra in his head. Originally, the dryads and ents were inflexible species who required force to be moved, but the story was different now. It would be best if the situation could be solved without violence, and Theo had the means to make that possible.

‘Mitra.’

[Ye?] The chubby Mitra turned around.

‘Can you tell the ones lying down to go to the forest over there? If you say it, they will probably listen.’

[I noe!] She turned toward the trees lying down and shouted in an adorable manner, [Yew, up!]

Simultaneously, the ents raised their bodies. As the massive trees rose, the ground shook, and the scenery changed into a forest. The ents responded in low voices as they waited for Mitra’s next instructions.

[As... you... command...]

[...We... follow... king...]

[What... next...?]

Then Mitra pointed to the forest on the other side and shouted briefly, [Fere, go!]

It was truly a sight which seemed like a lie. The ents and dryads, who had repeatedly refused the high elves’ request, started to move without any hesitation. They passed the pile of stones they had been throwing and moved in the direction of the dense forest. In their wake, the dryads and ents left stupefied expressions on the faces of Theo’s party.

Theodore was oddly proud of Mitra, who looked delighted, for solving the problem.

*

After the two species retreated, the group was able to approach the burning horizon. The nearby trees had already become charred charcoal or turned to ash. If the party hadn't protected their bodies with heat-resistant magic, the heat would be enough to destroy their respiratory muscles instantly. Additionally, their visibility was distorted by a haze of heat, making it hard to see beyond dozens of meters.

Beyond that, a woman greeted them with great joy.

“Wow, we finally meet!” As the high elf, Alisa, spoke in a pleasant voice, her golden hair blew in the wind.

She looked at Theo in the forefront and cried out, “Hello! I want to say good evening, but isn't it too bright for that? Anyway, it is nice to see you! Are you the boy who has our Ellenoa twisted up? I did as you said. How about it, did I do well?”

“...Yes, very well.”

It was a fairly difficult situation, but Alisa's chatterbox nature still remained. Theodore looked at the present situation while half listening to her words.

‘Is it around 100 meters ahead? It is much wider than I thought.’

From the point where Alisa and the party were located, there was a vacuum which spread for around 100m. It was a space created by a woman floating in the air, the wind elemental ruler—Sylphid. There was no combustion allowed inside, but it was in vain.

This would buy as much time as possible to stop Laevateinn from changing into the third form. In this space, the fire couldn't spread and only the trees touching Laevateinn's body would burn. However, this vacuum could only buy time.

“Alisa, how much longer can you maintain it?”

“Um... 10 minutes? 15 minutes? Any more than that would be hard.”

“I understand.”

The high elves were assisted by the mana of the Great Forest, but that wasn't infinite. Alisa had already been using Sylphid's power for a few hours until the party arrived. She pretended to speak in a leisurely manner, but her forehead and neck were already wet with sweat. If she relaxed for even a moment, she would lose consciousness and fall. The power consumption of the vacuum was enormous.

From this moment on, it wasn't Alisa but Theodore's party who would fight. Along with the six magicians, there was a high elf and a guardian to defeat the legendary catastrophe. As the full weight of the burden fell on him, Theo forced himself to stand upright and cried out, “Then I will verify it for the last time.”

In order to defeat Laevateinn, they needed precise tactics and cooperation. If even one person was out of sync, someone else would die to make up for that mistake.

Therefore, Theodore repeated the explanation he had spoken many times already. “Laevateinn can’t be destroyed by normal attacks, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be damaged at all. The attacks may not be lethal, but it will consume the energy that Laevateinn has stored. Therefore, our primary goal is to reduce the stored energy as much as possible.”

According to Gluttony, there was no way to completely destroy Laevateinn in this era. The archmages who could destroy the second form were only found in the history books. However, a method to suppress Laevateinn existed. While laughing slyly, Gluttony had taught him how to do it.

It was similar to pouring water into a broken jar.

“We will first start with Sylvia.”

Sylvia, who was on the furthest end of the line, nodded and grabbed her white staff firmly.

Theodore’s tactic was based on pouring sequential magic spells at the target as it wasn’t meaningful to concentrate all attacks at once on an opponent who couldn’t be killed.

“Continue in the pre-determined order of attack, but cover each other if someone misses the timing. If possible, use powerful destructive force to bother that guy. The ranged attacks will be handled by the two elves, so don’t worry.”

The two elves nodded in understanding. Alucard could summon the water elemental ruler, while Edwin’s arrow could decimate 1,000 men. If possible, Theo wanted to save the water elemental ruler to play an active role against the third form, but it would be a mistake if they lost because power was conserved.

Therefore, the eight people refined their formation thoroughly. Some practiced moving around the circle at a moderate pace, while another waited and checked their potions. Most of the people here were veterans, and even the less experienced Sylvia still had enough experience.

Soon, the time they had been waiting for arrived.

“T-This...!”

Finally, Alisa reached her limit and released the wind elemental ruler, allowing a gigantic wave of heat to hit them.

Huuuuuok...

A hot wind blew from the horizon, and the ground burned black. The flames burned the ground until there was nothing left, while a black smoke bubbled up and blocked their vision. No life could

survive in the center of this heat.

“—Remnants!” The angry Edwin cried out as he fired his bow.

Piing! A storm of arrows crossed the horizon! Meanwhile, a whirlwind a few hundred meters wide tore at the smoke and revealed the epicenter of the disaster beyond it.

Kukukung...! The earth shook and dust rose. A senior monster wouldn't be able to endure this and would turn into scrap metal instantly.

Shock waves burst from the arrows, causing the party's robes to flap. The evidence of Edwin's destructive power was amazing. A master's attack, shot with the intention of killing something, was really huge.

However, there was no meaning to it.

‘—————!!’

Flames swirled from beyond the horizon. The force, which had been bound by the vacuum until now, burned the air and melted any remnants. It was unknown if Edwin's attack provoked it, but Laevateinn's movements turned toward the party.

“It's coming!” Someone shrieked.

Theo shouted reflexively, ignoring his aching head.

He believed in Sylvia and the other magicians, but it was rare to ever encounter this type of oppression. After having absorbed Alfred's experience and encountering Superbia, Theo wasn't overwhelmed by the pressure, but Laevateinn's presence surpassed human imagination.

Shortly after that, the giant moved at a terrifying pace, riding the aftermath of the explosion.

“Sylvia!”

“Master of the cold, Ymir!”

The talent of the Blue Tower's top genius allowed her to use the prepared ice magic even when she was shocked. The vortex around Sylvia's body cooled the heat quickly and revealed its chilling teeth as a 100 meter tall monster. It was a swirl of frost which even monsters used to the cold of the north couldn't withstand.

‘Minor Force, Blizzard.’ As Sylvia was a 5th Circle magician, who was close to the 6th Circle, her original spell swallowed up the flame giant.

Starting with that blow, the curtain for the fight against the legend ranked grimoire, Laevateinn, was raised.

Chapter 109 – Towards The Storm (3)

Jjeok, jejejeok.

The flames on the ground were frozen over. Blizzard was originally a 7th Circle advanced magic, so the range of this Blizzard was extremely reduced. The range of effect which remained was reduced to a radius of around 10 meters. However, within those 10 meters, Sylvia had perfectly reproduced a magic of the 7th Circle.

Even the flames of Muspelheim were caught in the ice for a moment.

“Heinz, two seconds later!” At that time, Theodore had predicted the situation sooner than anyone else and pointed to the next magician to cast their magic.

Group fighting was familiar to knights, but it was difficult to keep their hands and feet in the right spot without any special training. The only one capable of catching the timing of the flow and then conducting the group was Theodore, who had awakened his supernatural senses.

The White Tower Superior, Heinz met those instructions. “Blow, a storm! Capture the enemy!”

Two seconds later, the fire giant broke through the thick ice but couldn't even enjoy a sense of liberation before being caught in a storm. This was 6th Circle wind magic. Vortex Prison rippled around the giant and caught it. According to the records, large

monsters like the high ranking cyclops couldn't escape the Vortex Prison. No, they were usually caught in that vortex and torn to pieces by the wind blades.

However, that wasn't enough to stop Laevateinn.

Kururung! Kwarurung!

There was a thunderous rumble from inside the vortex, and the storm started burning as the giant beat at the wind with its two fists. There were random air discharges due to the shock waves as well as occasional lightning bolts. It was the manifestation of ineffective power. The firepower, which had already surpassed a master's output, eventually destroyed the vortex.

However, the fire giant didn't see what was happening to the ground.

"Olson!"

"Earth, hold that ungodly presence in your arms!"

The ground sank suddenly, and the pouring in of earth and pebbles became a mass weapon. The soil buried fire giant like a tsunami, swallowing it faster than its flames could melt the soil. Of course, the pressure was nothing more than an ankle grab, and the fire giant eventually crawled out from the ground.

Theo followed suit with another cold order, "30 meters in the 6

o'clock direction, two seconds later!"

A huge iceberg plunged from the sky into Laevateinn and protruded from its body without any errors. The chunk of ice was the size of a house, making it too big for the flames to melt it instantly. By the time the giant emerged, the next magic had already been prepared.

"After three seconds, Ordu!"

The wind shell exploded against the fire giant's head several times.

"46 meters in the 10 o'clock direction, now!"

Ice arrows poured down from above and tore the flames to pieces.

The chain of magic attacks never ended. Once someone's magic succeeded, another person's followed. The immortal Laevateinn could hardly move.

The two elves watched the perfect chain of attacks and couldn't help feeling in awe. The power of each magic which could stop the fire giant was great, but the greatest thing was the ability of the person conducting this battlefield.

Without Theo, this deadlock would've collapsed much sooner.

“...Amazing. Isn't this close to a prescience ability? Or a prediction ability based on experience? Either way, it isn't an ability someone that age should have.”

“Yes, I think so as well.”

This ability involved an insight which looked ahead a few moves, as well as the use of tactics which focused the power on the right place.

Theodore was stretching out his hand comfortably in an area which could only be reached through decades of fighting. Despite this, he wasn't at all aware of how ridiculous his actions were. Instead, he focused on being the support in this situation, by calculating the distance and seconds for enemies and allies.

‘Damn, are we almost there yet?’ Theodore didn't even have time to blink. He wiped away his sweat and glared at Laevateinn.

For those who didn't know, it might seem like they were dominating, but that wasn't the case. In the midst of such furious attacks, the party was slowly being pushed back. With a rate of three steps per 10 seconds, they were retreating approximately 5 meters per minute.

Additionally, this cyclic attack couldn't be maintained for much longer. It would be dangerous if he didn't reach his primary goal within the next 30 minutes.

Theo recalled Gluttony's advice in his head, –Despite being a grimoire, Laevateinn doesn't possess any intelligence. It acts instinctively for its own purpose, but its actions have to comply with the rules. Its weakness lies in the rules.

Laevateinn's third form was merely a transient process for shifting from the second form to the fourth form. It was a process of offering up everything in order to burn away all life. That's why the third form was a diffuse flame storm.

However, what would happen if the second form wasn't able to obtain the offerings and was constantly disturbed?

Exactly 15 minutes later, Laevateinn answered this question.

*

There was no one specific who noticed it first as the group of people, who were constantly pouring magic attacks, were all sensitive to any changes in the target. After all, the target was a flame giant which could melt any metal in a moment.

The flame giant suddenly stopped struggling and curled up into a ball. Its appearance was like a chrysalis waiting to emerge, so those watching it suddenly felt greatly alarmed.

As Edwin drew back his arrow carefully,

Chill. Theodore felt a terrible chill run down his spine.

‘Death.’ Defense magic didn’t mean anything as every being in this place would die.

As soon as this reality appeared in Theo’s mind, he exclaimed, “Alucard!”

They would’ve died if it hadn’t been for Gluttony’s advice, if Theo hadn’t explained it in advance in the meeting room, and if Alucard wasn’t in this place.

“Gentle water mother, El-Mare!” Alucard immediately moved according to Theo’s will which had been close to a scream.

It was also thanks to Alucard previously hearing about how dangerous the third form was. The lack of offerings reduced the power considerably, but it wasn’t something which magicians who hadn’t reached the master level could withstand.

[Did you call?] The water elemental ruler was quickly revealed. If it wasn’t for this location, there would’ve been a shower when she was summoned, and the dry land would become wet. Without giving her a word of greeting, Alucard cried out, “Protect us from the mighty flames!”

[...Child of the forest, I will accept the request according to the contract,] an inorganic voice answered the call.

As soon as El-Mare spoke, a blue shield wrapped around the party. This was the soul which governed all water. It could only endure one or two rounds of the 7th Circle Inferno. So, it was inevitable that the party would receive some punishment.

Immediately afterwards, a super heated hell unfolded.

‘—————!!’

There was no sound. The heat had already long evaporated the air. Then there was a fierce flash of light which threatened to burn their retinas. Theo endured the few drops of blood flowing from his eyes and barely managed to look ahead.

Apart from the light, the Muspelheim’s heat penetrated the shield. It was a wonder they could even breathe. The elemental ruler was their only lifeline.

“...Crazy,” Theo muttered as he barely recovered and saw the sight in front of him. The rest of the group noticed the difference a few beats late.

“.....?!”

“.....?!”

They looked around to where light and ash could be seen. It wasn’t beautiful but literally a disastrous hell. No life could survive on this burning land. Air, water, and everything else needed to

survive had disappeared. The remaining vegetation on the horizon was the only comfort. If the green hadn't entered his eyes, he really would've thought that the world had been destroyed.

Theodore regained his calm sooner than anyone else. 'It is finally coming.'

As a grimoire that ate grimoires, Gluttony couldn't eat a book which didn't exist in this world.

So, it was impossible to subdue the fire giant, Muspelheim's second form. No matter how many times it was destroyed, the infinite flames would reappear, and those who weren't transcendent had no way to resist it. However, from the third form onwards, Laevateinn's body was revealed.

From where Theo was standing, it took a little over 20 steps to reach the center of that hot hell.

"A bead of light."

The white bead shone brilliantly. It was the passage connecting the material world to Muspelheim, the reality of the grimoire which existed to destroy the world. Then Theodore finally caught sight of Laevateinn's body and took a step forward.

Chiiik.

"Ack!"

As soon as Theo took one step, his skin turned red. Despite the protection of the water elemental ruler and 5th Circle defense magic, human flesh couldn't withstand this heat, especially if the person wasn't a sword or magic master.

Maybe Theodore would somehow survive 10 steps. After that, his flesh would burn, his blood would dry up, and his bones would break. For that reason, it was Theo's fight alone from here onwards.

“...!”

“.....!”

He had a silent conversation with his group.

Someone saw him take one step and thought he should reconsider. Someone else gave him protection magic, despite it being meaningless.

Sylvia tried to catch up with him but was grabbed by a magician of the Blue Tower, while Edwin bowed his head in apology for not being able to help. It was because his powers became extremely weak in a space where upper ranked elementals were ineffective.

Theo glanced at all of them before looking back to the front.

‘Not yet... A little more. I can endure it...’

He took one step and then another step. The heat peeled his skin, but it wasn't to the extent that he would die. His disciplined body and mind could endure this much pain. At the fifth step, his red skin was peeled off, and his muscles started burning. Then Theodore pulled out his trump card.

Wuuong! Emerald light emerged from the mark on his right arm and wrapped around his entire body.

The national treasure Umbra. The treasure that gave its owner its abilities, including Fluidization. Umbra had the ability to ignore physical attacks, so it could handle this heat. So, after the first five steps, Theodore's body turned transparent. However, he wasn't completely free from the heat.

‘Kuok...! This is outside the laws of physics...!’

Muspelheim's flames even hurt spiritual bodies. Theo took seven more steps, but the stronger heat started to shatter his body.

He managed another eight steps forward. However, in order to put it in the range of Gluttony's tongue, Theo needed at least three more steps. It meant that this hell would become three times stronger after this.

Theodore really wanted to run away right now, but he gritted his teeth and persevered.

‘Let’s go.’

If he didn’t stop Laevateinn here, the world would perish. Even if a transcendent he didn’t know about showed up to stop Laevateinn, Elvenheim would still be destroyed. It couldn’t be helped if he had never started this operation, but he couldn’t forgive himself for running away when he was so close to the end.

Theo took one more step.

As he patiently tried to endure the heat which seemed like it would melt through his bones, Theo complained to someone who wasn’t there.

He complained to the White Tower Master Orta, who had declared he wouldn’t participate in this subjugation mission.

Chapter 110 – Towards The Storm (4)

Beyond the eastern forest, the horizon was burning red. Perhaps it was proof that Theodore and Laevateinn's battle was reaching the next stage. Flames would sometimes emerge through the clouds, while the whole forest itself was filled with bursting heat.

White Tower Master Orta sat idly on a stump in front of a cabin and watched the scene.

His lips, revealed under the white mask, suddenly parted. "In the last war, the empire lost two master swordsmen. The 3rd and the 6th, they were tough opponents."

Unlike his emotionless voice, Orta really meant it. If he looked back on when he encountered the 3rd Sword, he would still get goosebumps. There were dozens of senior magicians who had died from that man's sword. The 6th Sword's swordsmanship couldn't be ignored either. The wounds from his sword had been so strong that they never faded. From that time on, Orta had started using this mask.

Orta unconsciously touched the mask and smiled bitterly. "It has already been 15 years, pretty fast."

Even if the magicians and swordsmen reached the master level, it was hard for their lifespan to exceed 200 years. Meltor and Andras had repeated wars, so their lifespan was short on average. Nevertheless, the battle between the magic kingdom and sword empire continued on, and the reason for that never changed.

There were always people who appeared to fill those empty seats.

“...The personal talk ends here,” Orta said as he got up. Then he turned in the direction of the cabin and stared. No, to be exact, he was staring at a area of air. Orta looked alert, like he was convinced that someone was there.

“Won’t you show yourself, Sword Master? If you take one more step, then I won’t be able to stay still.”

Anybody would be confused if they saw this scene. There were nothing in the place where Orta’s eyes were fixed on, just an occasional breeze passing through. No life could hide in it, and there wasn’t even a flicker of mana.

In this first place, this was the Great Forest, so no one could avoid Elvenheim’s Ratatoskr surveillance. It was an impossible feat even for White Tower Master Orta, who could use space magic. At that moment, Orta’s index finger drew a line in the air.

Kaaang!

Suddenly, flames emerged. In the empty space, two powers collided, and there was a shock wave.

Then as the two powers canceled out, the shock wave rippled through the ground and showed traces of a border. This wasn’t a coincidence. It was just a step away from the point where Orta had

given the warning.

Simultaneously, a shocked voice rang out, “No?!”

The voice sounded like an echo, not leaving any traces of where it came from. It was like a whisper in his ear as well as a yell in the distance. So, it was impossible to find the owner just by listening to the voice.

However, Orta was convinced he knew and looked at a point two steps to the right of where he had originally looked. As a positive light shone in Orta’s eyes, the space where nothing was present began to distort.

“...I am amazed. You... are you really looking at me?” A man appeared within the distorted space.

His face was covered with a mask similar to Orta’s, but the colour was a dark black, as if to melt into darkness. There were a sword which was neither long nor short hanging from his waist. It was an arming sword, designed to be handled with one hand and suited for those with a sleek physique.

Oddly, there was a masked man standing in the forest of the elves.

As the tension rose, Orta opened his mouth first. “3rd or 6th, which one are you?”

“I don’t know. Do all sword masters have to belong to the empire? I could just be a sword master passing by.”

“...How slippery.” Orta frowned at the man’s joking answer.

The opposition was an unidentified person and surely one of the Empire’s Seven Swords, but there was no way to prove it. The existence of a master who hadn’t been exposed to the outside world was annoying in many ways.

On the surface, there was a non-aggression pact, and a third country wouldn’t be able to plan this in a few days. In this situation, Andras wouldn’t suffer any losses.

“You are the one who released Laevateinn.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“At the time of the delegation, you released the monster and infiltrated the deepest part of Elvenheim. Due to Laevateinn, you can aim at the neural network where the gap is weakest. Is your purpose the assassination of the high elves?”

The man flinched at the truth that emerged. He hadn’t said anything, yet the opponent had pierced through their plan in an instant. It was a really terrifying insight. When the man’s mouth shut, it was an inadvertent sign of agreement, and Orta immediately understood that his thoughts were correct.

‘It is well-organized in its own way. The risk is low, and there is nothing connecting it back to Andras. They overlooked the danger, but...’

Andras probably didn’t understand completely what Laevateinn was. If they knew, they wouldn’t have released a monster which would burn away all life in the material world. They almost destroyed themselves in their last ditch effort to stop the Meltor Kingdom.

Andras just thought it was a plan which could deal a fatal blow to Meltor and Elvenheim in either direction. If Elvenheim collapsed due to Laevateinn, that would be good. Even if it failed, it would cause massive damage, and they could assassinate the high elves in the meantime.

In Elvenheim, a country which originated from the world tree, the high elves were the focal point and not simply a symbolic meaning. At least four high elves were needed to keep the world tree alive. If it fell below that, the world tree would weaken and wane.

If this happened, rather than Elvenheim playing a role in the war between Meltor and Andras, the existence of the country itself would be jeopardized.

“Who?”

“What?”

“Only idiots would use a knife that they don’t know much about. The person who released Laevateinn and sent you here, I want to hear their name.”

However, the man just laughed and shook his head. “I don’t know what you are talking about. And you, will you even be in a state to receive the answer?”

“I see.”

“Well, I did realize something.” The man naturally raised a hand to his sword.

Wuuong-

The sword which had accepted its master’s hand cried out threateningly. A frivolous attitude was nowhere to be seen as the sword master’s eyes sharpened behind the mask. The man activated the power behind a sword master’s existence, Aura ability.

He didn’t know how, but his opponent had seen through his stealth and realized the whole plan. This meant it was too risky to keep Orta alive.

“You have to die here.”

A sword master’s flesh contained its own lethal power. Falling leaves were shattered without warning as a white aura formed

around the sword. The current sword would even be able to break a dragon's scales.

Despite facing a blade which could slice at his neck any moment, Orta opened his arms without any fear. The number of people who had witnessed the White Tower Master fight didn't even reach 10. The white mask covered his face, but a strange smile was revealed underneath it.

"It has been a long time since I've felt this tension. It is quite delightful."

"...Are you going to fight like this?"

"That's right."

There was only a 10-meter distance between the two masters. For a sword master, it was such a short distance that it wasn't even half a step. The man thought he was being thought lightly of, and indignation bubbled under his black mask. There had been a desire to pay homage to the enemy who had fought against his seniors. However, that died down after his pride was wounded.

"I am familiar with the rumours. The White Tower Master, a fugitive who doesn't hesitate to show his back on the battlefield... You yourself claimed that combat isn't your specialty, isn't that right?"

"Well, your words aren't wrong."

“Is that so? Then...”

‘Die.’

There were no preliminary actions. His ability, ‘Disappear’ removed him from the world. Visual, auditory, olfactory, as well as tactile senses... all signs of his existence were erased. So, all of his attacks were like ambushes, and the front was no different from the back.

There wasn’t even a flutter of mana as he stretched out toward the elder’s neck.

Kiiing.

Shortly after that, the positions of the two masters were reversed.

Fushu!

Red blood spurted out. Drops of blood splashed out from torn flesh and flowed down the neck. It was obvious that if the attack had been even one step deeper, it would be his brain, not his ears, which would have been damaged, and he would’ve died instantly.

“Hmm, I am still rusty,” Orta murmured as he looked at the sword master whose ear he had cut off.

“...You, how?”

“Well, it is as you said. My magic is forever exploring space and time, so I never thought of combat as my specialty.” A creepy light appeared from behind the white mask. “It isn’t my specialty, but I never thought I lagged behind in it.”

If anyone in Meltor were asked about the greatest magician, they would say Blundell Adruncus. If anyone in Meltor were asked about the most powerful magician, they would say Veronica’s name. If anyone in Meltor were asked about the most mysterious magician, they would cautiously mention the Yellow Tower Master.

This was why White Tower Master Orta was more dangerous than anyone else. If there was an opponent he couldn’t win again, he would flee and kill someone he could win against. In fact, it was Orta who had taken down the 6th Sword in the last war, but no one had witnessed how he’d fought.

As the black masked man understood this fact and started sweating, Orta sent him a cold smile.

“The price of not giving me an answer is costly. Don’t think you will be able to leave with all your limbs...!”

The second battlefield was unveiled in the deepest part of the Great Forest.

*

‘Two steps left.’

Theo’s bones were already trembling. His physical body didn’t exist, so it was likely that his brain would melt from the heat. The water elemental ruler’s protection and Umbra were used to maintain his life, but Theodore had already reached his limit.

He needed to take one more step. However, his intuition told him that if he took this step, he would surely die.

“Da...mn!”

He had no choice but to go. He knew he had to go. He ought to go.

However, the soles of his feet didn’t move.

The boundary of life and death... this last hurdle was so hard. Theo might die the moment he took this footstep. All the glory in his hands would turn to ashes. He was afraid that even his soul would burn up.

There was no way to bring out more strength. Mitra’s strength was pointless in this dead land, and he had already mobilized the power of Umbra to its limit. The current result was because he also used the defense magic in Memorize.

Theo somehow understood that this was the boundary. This was the realm of a hero, the realm of those who overcame the fear of death and threw themselves into the struggle. Then, he remembered it.

‘What...?’

Theo had already crossed this boundary once. If he reached the place where he’d left his footprints, he would feel more comfortable. The face of Ellenoa, who he had almost died to protect, entered his mind. As he recalled the moment he’d dealt with Superbia, all hesitation disappeared.

He made the third step. Then as the flames burned his consciousness, Theo shouted, [Gluttony—!]

–I have been waiting!

The tongue stretched out from his left hand, and in the swirl of heat and light which no one’s eyes could see through, the nemesis of a grimoire appeared. Even the grimoire Laevateinn, who didn’t have a separate intellect, tried to withdraw as it felt an unconscious fear.

However, just before that could happen, it was caught by the tongue.

–I got it!

Chapter 111 – Towards The Storm (5)

In the end, Gluttony's tongue wrapped around Laevateinn, who had been trying to run away. It was an odd sight in many ways. In the epicenter of the fire which burned the clouds, a bead of light was caught by a tongue.

However, Theodore didn't have room to enjoy the curious sight.
[Hey! Swallow it quickly!]

The duration of the Fluidization effect was reaching its limits. Despite the fact that Gluttony had restrained Laevateinn, the heat was getting worst, and it wasn't at a level which his physical body could survive. Theo would die instantly the moment Fluidization was released.

Somehow, he had to win before that. Theo's sense of urgency was conveyed as the tongue became more taut.

Gluttony shouted in a voice which couldn't contain its joy,
–Bastard! Resisting, meaningless!

Then it tugged Laevateinn's body as hard as it could.

Huwoook!

This was the final, desperate struggle. Flames soared into the sky through the gaps of the tongue wound tightly around it. The

clouds floating tens of kilometers above Theo were scattered like a lie, and the atmosphere distorted.

It was a power comparable to the Dragon Breath Veronica had shown previously! Theodore was overwhelmed as he looked at the torn sky.

‘If that flame had turned on us...’

They would have been killed without being able to do anything. It was an output which could sweep away the elemental ruler’s power. Perhaps if Laevateinn changed to the fourth form, it could pour out these type of flames infinitely.

However, with a final roar, Laevateinn’s body lost the power to resist. Gluttony mentioned this as a weakness of the third form. The body lost all defense functionalities in order to bring out all the power it had.

Gulp!

As always, there was the sound of good food being eaten as Laevateinn entered Gluttony’s mouth. Simultaneously, the information about the legend ranked grimoire, Laevateinn, was updated. The contents previously veiled with question marks were now revealed.

[Laevateinn]

[This is a grimoire where the realm of fire, Muspelheim is sealed. At the time of Ragnarok, Surtr had fully unlocked the power of the grimoire and burned the world tree by releasing Muspelheim. However, in return, he was turned to ashes, and the grimoire, who lost its owner, closed its eyes and waited.

- * The rating of the grimoire is 'Legend.'

- * When consumed, fire magic affinity will rise to the limit. The magic power consumed by fire magic will be reduced by half. Fire damage lower than the user's level will be ignored. Fire damage above the user's level will be reduced.

- * When consumed, Ring of Muspelheim will be acquired. Muspelheim's fire can be used step-by-step.

- * When consumed, you can't control the power of this grimoire with your current capabilities. If you want to be recognized as its master, you must be at least a 8th Circle master or 9th Circle user.]

It was truly ridiculous.

'...What is this?!'

Theo was so astonished that he forgot about the pain. The grimoire sealed in his inventory, Death's Worship, was also

ridiculous. He would be able to absorb 50% to 100% of a 9th Circle warlock's ability and control the undead. However, due to the danger of having his body taken over, it was just a pie in the sky.

In comparison, it might not be unusual that Laevateinn would grant those abilities.

At that moment, the bright field of view returned to normal.

[Urgh...?!]

The whole world seemed vague. His pupils had reached their limit after facing such a bright light for a long time. Theodore didn't look ahead and closed his puffy eyelids. He didn't need to see to guess what had happened.

The world returned to its original state after the source of the heat and light, Laevateinn, disappeared. The question was whether he could survive in this situation...

“Theo!”

As the air evaporated, his hearing came back. Theo heard the approaching sounds and turned off Fluidization as he started to feel dizzy. He expected Sylvia to take the proper measures. Then the pain from his blackened flesh and boiled blood entered his head.

“-Aaaack!”

‘Horrible pain!’ Theo now understood why burning was the most brutal death sentence.

Even the wind passing by caused his burned nerves to tingle and seize. Maybe it was because the damage he’d suffered while under Fluidization was transmitted to his body, but Theo was covered in burns.

Sylvia looked at his condition and instantly used magic. “Hold on!”

Her hands shone with a blue light as she used Chilling Touch and held Theo’s neck. It was to stabilize him before starting to earnestly heal the burns. There would be no chance of recovery if the heat remained in the wounds.

This action was effective in its own way as Theodore’s breathing calmed down a little bit. The rest of the group, who came a beat later, added a helping hand to his treatment. They squeezed out their remaining power, creating a bright flash of healing magic.

Then the high elf, Alucard, asked for help from the water elemental ruler, who was still summoned. “El-Mare, please heal him! If the price isn’t enough, I will prepare a tribute for you in the future.”

The status of the elemental rulers was so high that even high elves didn’t dare make demands to them. The water elemental ruler, El-Mare, stared at Theodore with a blank expression. The

mana which Alucard provided had already run out, so she would have to use her own power to heal him.

Originally, she wouldn't have accepted the request even with a tribute, but in this moment, she nodded.

[The one who extinguished the flames that were the world tree's enemy and averted a catastrophe... It is an achievement I can't overlook. I won't accept a tribute. Young human, be proud of today's feat,] El-Mare said while spreading out her palms.

Wuuuong!

An auspicious light spread. The dry soil became wet, and a little bit of vitality returned to the uninhabitable land. It was a power similar to what the high elves had but on a higher level. The light covered Theodore, and his skin started to return to its original colour. The torn nerves were restored, and the pain disappeared as his burned skin grew back.

Theodore was able to half regain his mind. He grasped the situation and bowed to the water elemental ruler, who provided him with such grace.

“T-Thank you.”

[Don't mind it.] El-Mare shook her head before speaking again. [All the heat remaining in your body was driven out. But you shouldn't carelessly use the power that you have accepted, or you

will know the consequences,] she warned while looking down at Theodore's left hand. There wasn't a burn mark there but a tattoo resembling the sun.

It was the power which Gluttony had extracted from Laevateinn, the Ring of Muspelheim. The power to summon Muspelheim was too much for a mortal who wasn't even at a master level yet. The slightest slip would cause the power to be abused and burn him up.

Theo smiled wryly and bowed while replying, "Yes, Water Mother. It was an honour to meet you."

[I never thought I would meet one being from the Age of Mythology, let alone two. It was an exciting trip.]

Other people might not have understood, but Theodore couldn't help flinching.

Indeed, the eyes of the elemental ruler didn't miss Gluttony's and Laevateinn's existences. However, El-Mare didn't seem like she wanted to expose it as she smiled strangely before disappearing from the material world. A big wind blew past as the huge presence vanished.

As everyone understood that the situation was over, the group couldn't help sighing.

"Hooo... It is gone."

“Somehow, I can’t believe it.”

“I am the same.”

One person was conscious of the death they had just faced, while another person had difficulty believing their own survival. Theodore was the only one injured in this place. However, if he hadn’t taken the last step, then the whole continent would’ve turned into hell.

The fight against the legend ranked grimoire had been terrible. It had been so hard that the victors couldn’t enjoy it.

‘...It is good that we won.’

The exhausted Theodore leaned against Sylvia and stared up at the sky. The thrill of what happened still hadn’t disappeared. Theo looked at the sky distorted by Laevateinn, then he dropped his gaze to his left hand.

‘Ring of Muspelheim.’

“I understand... I think.”

El-Mare’s advice was that the power was like an overwhelming fountain which would hurt his body. It was like an active volcano and was still too much for Theodore Miller. If he freed it now, he would burn himself and everything around him.

Right now, it was time to concentrate on his goal while keeping an eye on this power from the Age of Mythology.

The 6th Circle was carved into his heart. This was proof of the 6th Circle which Theodore had wanted before leaving for Elvenheim. However, right now, it seemed painful to close his eyes and concentrate internally.

Sylvia carefully held his side and asked, “Theo, are you somewhat okay now?”

“...Yes, I’m okay. And thank you for the help. It might’ve been dangerous if it hadn’t been for Sylvia.” Theo felt a subtle discomfort as he answered.

Just like with Death’s Worship, what would’ve happened if he and Gluttony weren’t here? Could he have won against Laevateinn who had burned the world tree and Elvenheim?

The current result was due to Gluttony being a nemesis for grimoires, but their victory hadn’t been through a frontal confrontation. It was more likely that Elvenheim would’ve sacrificed all their power in vain.

‘I don’t know if an incident occurs wherever I go, or if I happen to go to places where incidents will occur.’

It might seem the same, but his behaviour could vary greatly

depending on the cause. The nemesis of grimoires... Gluttony's existence itself was a strange thing, let alone having such a function. It was like a carnivore drawing in insects with its scent.

However, Theodore's thoughts didn't go much further than that.

"Hua! I thought I would die out there!" At this moment, the high elf Alisa approached the party after recovering her power.

She must be quite tired from calling the wind elemental ruler for several hours, but she moved while showing no signs of it. Thanks to that, the group gained enough strength to start moving. However, Alucard didn't seem to demonstrate the same recovery ability.

"Then shall we go back?" Alisa raised her thumb and pointed at the forest behind her. "Let's have a celebration as soon as we return!"

Chapter 112 – World Tree's Reward (1)

There was no need to rush while returning. Theo had recovered some stamina, but he was still weak. Therefore, he didn't have the strength to run or climb over trees.

However, unlike his tired body, everyone else was shining brightly. It was a life or death battle where a legend of the elves had been revived, but they had survived. Everybody understood that wanting more than this was greedy.

They tried to ignore the fatigue accumulated in their bodies and talked more than they usually did. In the end, it was natural that Theodore would become the center of topic, as the one who had ended Laevateinn.

“By the way, I was really surprised! Superior Theodore!” Someone said while patting him on the shoulder.

“Huh? Amazed?”

“I didn't know there was a way to survive that terrible heat! I don't know about Veronica, but we couldn't even take a few steps.”

The middle aged magician had a white beard and wore robes symbolizing the Blue Tower, but he didn't hesitate to treat Theodore in this friendly manner. Perhaps he felt a bond after fighting together.

The magician called Philip, who had aimed the iceberg at Laevateinn, praised Theo's courage and whispered while squinting at his right arm, "The thing on your arm, that is the ability of the national treasure, right?"

Phillip's voice indicated he was already half convinced, so Theo sighed with relief. Apart from the elemental ruler, no one had perceived Gluttony.

He naturally restored his facial expression and gave Philip the answer he wanted, "Yes, that's right. I'm glad it helped."

"Indeed! The moment that the emerald light was seen, I recalled His Majesty. Thanks to this, it saved all of our lives. Isn't this Meltor's blessing?"

"It is as Philip says. I wouldn't even be able to approach it without Umbra."

It was half right, half wrong. Theo didn't lie, but he didn't disclose everything either. This was the excuse that Theodore, who was only a 5th Circle magician, used. After all, it was the national treasure Umbra, of which even the White Tower Master didn't understand the reality of its powers. Theo had insisted that he could defeat Laevateinn with the power of the national treasure and asserted that only he could destroy its body.

The power of the high elves saw that Theo was telling the truth.

Truly, Theo hadn't said that he could destroy it with Umbra. He just said, 'Umbra can be used to destroy Laevateinn's body.'

If they sat down and examined the context calmly, some people might be able to detect something suspicious. However, they were facing a crisis, and it was a confusing situation for everyone.

'Well, it isn't a lie either.'

If Theo didn't have Umbra's Fluidization ability, he would've died before he could even approach it. In his words, Umbra had been essential in destroying Laevateinn's body. As a result, he didn't tell a single lie despite not mentioning Gluttony.

While laughing inwardly, Theo gave the same answer to Heinz, the fourth magician who whispered to him. In this way, everybody was caught in the perfect misunderstanding.

"Oh! Who came to meet us?" Alisa asked as she pointed into the distance.

The humans weren't the only ones who couldn't see anything. The guardian, Edwin, was the same. As the weary Alucard noticed the situation belatedly, a white robe flashed before the party. It was the surprise appearance of the masked White Tower Master, Orta.

"T-Tower Master?!"

“Heok!”

However, Orta’s sudden appearance wasn’t the reason why Theo’s group was shocked.

Duk. Dududuk. Duduk.

There was blood was dripping down. A few drops of blood occasionally fell on Orta’s white robes, but he didn’t let go of the thing in his hands.

It was someone’s left arm. Clearly, the arm had been attached to someone’s shoulder just a while ago. Blood flowed without interruption from the area where the cut had occurred. It was so out of the blue that the party couldn’t help feeling shocked.

However, Orta opened his mouth and spoke as calmly as always, “Philip.”

“Eh? Ah, yes!”

“Take this.”

Philip came forward, and Orta threw him the arm. The arm was still bleeding heavily, and Philip looked frustrated by the blood on his robes. However, his expression changed after hearing Orta’s next words.

“It is the arm of an assassin, presumably from the Seven Swords. I remember that the Blue Tower developed a tracking magic that uses the blood of the target, is that right?”

“...Yes, it is.”

“Make a device that can track the owner of that arm. Make a lot and have it be as accurate as possible. He is someone who has a ‘stealth’ type aura ability. Be thorough when working on it.”

“I will follow your words!”

The gazes of the party changed after hearing the mention of the Seven Swords. Although they looked like they were going to collapse right then, they were all suddenly ablaze with a fierce fighting spirit.

It wasn’t just the magicians who reacted to Orta’s mention of the assassin.

Alisa’s playful look was gone as she asked, “Assassin? Is that true?”

“In my opinion, yes.”

“...The targets?”

“It seems like you have already guessed.”

Crunch. A loud sound emerged from between her lips.

Unless they were idiots of the century, nobody would send assassins into the Great Forest just to pursue the Meltor delegation. However, killing ordinary elves would just buy them Elvenheim's enmity. As to the valuable targets that only a sword master level assassin could aim at... they were the high elves in the Great Forest.

"I was thinking of killing him, but it is difficult to pursue him. Above all, it is difficult to pursue an opponent in this forest which has many barriers."

In the end, Alisa sighed and bowed her head. "No, I am grateful. An assassin who can deceive the parent's eyes... The children may have been in danger if it wasn't for you."

"I am just acting as a friendly neighbour."

"Kuk, is that so? Then we should also act as neighbours." Alisa seemed to like Orta's ridiculous words as she shrugged and laughed again.

She normally thought of humans as boring, but she didn't hate humans who talked like this man. The debt wasn't that burdensome either. In any case, Elvenheim was now forced onto the same boat as Meltor.

It wasn't confirmed that the people of the Andras Empire were the ones behind this, but it was obvious. For them attempt burning the Great Forest with Laevateinn and assassinating the high elves... the sin was heavy.

It was at this moment that...

Basurak.

A group of people moved through the thick bushes and arrived at the party's location.

Theodore's eyes widened when he saw the person in the lead. The magicians of the Red Tower and elves who used fire elementals had been missing from the subjugation mission since fire magic didn't work on Laevateinn.

Currently, his mentor Vince was dragging some people who were tied up.

Without missing a beat, Orta asked, "The result?"

"It is like Tower Master said... Come out!" Vince stepped away, and one of the bound people walked out slowly.

"We have already secured their testimony. They are mercenaries hired by the black masked man and didn't know what they were carrying. There is nothing else, even if they are tortured."

“Hrmm, it is futile.”

“Do you want me to handle this?” Vince asked cruelly as a red flame appeared above his palms.

The bound captives started struggling.

“P-Please spare us Mister!”

“We didn’t know anything!”

“H-He, no, that son of the bitch was the one!”

“Please, I will do anything as long as I can live!”

They were evil and confident people in their own backyards, but they looked terrified at the thought of being killed. Orta nodded before squinting at the high elves. They might be lowlifes from Meltor, but this was Elvenheim, so the elves had the right to decide the punishment.

Therefore, he naturally turned to Alisa. “Alisa, how does Elvenheim punish sinners?”

“Huh? Well, there is a lifetime of servitude in the mines... or turning them into a worker responsible for harvesting or hunting?”

“Then do so.”

“Eh.” Her eyes widened for a moment then she giggled as she understood. “Are you sure you aren’t a hundred year old snake? Well, okay. I won’t refuse. Guys, take them!”

The group didn’t struggle as elves appeared and took them away. It was better than being burned to death by a man with an expressionless face.

Soon after Vince joined, the group arrived at the place they’d left a few hours ago. It was a seemingly ordinary cabin, but inside was a space door Orta admired.

“I can finally relax...” As someone muttered that to themselves, the door opened, and someone ran out.

“Theodore!” It was Ellenoa, with hair which resembled grass as well as a clear, refreshing fragrance. She and the high elves had watched the fight through Ratatoskr.

“Ah, Ellenoa...” Theo wasn’t given a chance to respond.

Ellenoa leapt forward and stretched out with both hands.

Snap. Theodore’s face was suddenly grabbed.

Theo didn't know this, but Ellenoa had watched him jump into the fire. So, she was now looking at his face and body, searching for wounds which weren't yet healed.

“E-Elleoa?”

“You aren't hurt anywhere? Hot air blew from the front, so can you see properly? You can move well?”

“I-I'm fine. Alisa treated me once and—”

“Alisa can't finish such a big task!”

Alisa was upset by Ellenoa's sudden outburst, but Alucard just sneered at her. The rest of the party didn't intervene at the high elf's sudden appearance and just watched. Fortunately, Ellenoa ended it quickly.

“Phew, you don't seem to be greatly injured.” After examining Theo a few times, Ellenoa finally stepped back, and her head cooled down. She suddenly realized how daring she had been and stated, “That, I didn't mean to do this... that is...”

Elleoa then inadvertently took a few steps back as all eyes were on her. As her white skin flushed red to an extent in which she couldn't hide it, Ellenoa covered her face and ran out of the cabin.

Then Lumia appeared with a confused expression. “...What happened?”

She didn't know what was going on with Ellenoa, but she sighed at the awkward atmosphere before continuing, "First of all, on behalf of Elvenheim, I would like to thank you for your victory in this tough fight. I'm glad that all of you returned in one piece. We of Elvenheim will never forget your grace. And..."

After the usual greeting, Lumia slowly smiled.

"There are new sprouts in the burned fields. Please join us in our festival."

She invited them to an event at which no human had ever been present since the founding of Elvenheim.

Chapter 113 – World Tree’s Reward (2)

Apart from that invitation, Theodore was forced to take a few days of rest.

Nobody had been killed or seriously injured in the fight against Laevateinn, but it had been a battle in which senior magicians over the 5th Circle had consumed most of their magic power in a short period of time. It was normal to feel physical fatigue, not to mention the burden on the circles. Only the Red Tower magicians, who were active elsewhere, weren’t affected.

Vince sat beside Theodore’s body and said with a smile, “It was unavoidable, but I can’t help feeling ashamed that I had it easier than my disciple.”

“Wasn’t it also difficult for Master?”

“It was nothing compared to what you went through.”

In the last battle, the Red Tower magicians had reluctantly been excluded. It was because the existence of fire magic would have been meaningless against the legend ranked grimoire, Laevateinn. Even the master level Veronica wouldn’t have been able to help, let alone 6th Circle magicians.

Therefore, Orta had instructed them to capture the group which brought Laevateinn into the Great Forest. The result was that the arsonists were properly captured.

The Red Tower magicians hadn't even been able to fight properly! Their frustration at not participating in the historic fight exploded above the heads of the unlucky idiots. The arsonists had been blinded by money and ended up dealing with the war mages of the Red Tower, the famous elite troops of Meltor.

Of course, there were a few who had tried courageously to resist, but they were then turned into gruesome lumps of charcoal. 'It was a worthless battle,' Vince recalled.

"I've been thinking about it since then, and I think it is a good idea to combine magic of other attributes. At this age, I realized that I am still immature and there are many profound paths."

"Ha, haha..."

Theo had no choice but to nod at this scene.

Vince had entered the 6th Circle in his 50s while studying ancient languages, and now he wanted to learn magic of other attributes? Theo wondered if Vince would only sleep three or four hours a day. Having a curious heart which didn't know how to stop was also a trait of a magician.

At this moment, the two of them took the chance to have a private conversation. The serious conversations had taken place over a few nights, and now they were just waiting for people to come and get them.

Since the fight against Laevateinn, the elves had been preparing a ‘festival,’ along with the evacuated ents and dryads. It was something which those who were stuck in their rooms didn’t realize.

Not long afterwards, someone knocked on their door.

Edwin appeared at the door and spoke while bowing, “As my parents have ordered, I have come to collect the both of you.”

*

Like the last meeting, the elves guided the whole group at once. However, the difference from that time was Edwin’s attitude toward the delegation, apart from Theodore. Originally, the elves hadn’t been rude, but they had been very polite. That coldness was now released into a gentle friendliness.

Theodore guessed the reason and nodded inwardly. ‘It seems like the fact that we destroyed Laevateinn was announced. If this were human history and not the history of Elvenheim, things wouldn’t flow so smoothly.’

It was a cynical thought, but it wasn’t that wrong. Unlike the elves who prioritized returning the favour over themselves, humans generally took care of themselves first. If this had happened in a place like the Austen Kingdom, they might have sent Theo as bait instead of providing support troops. Then once it was over, they would probably try to claim Theo’s work in defeating

Laevateinn as their own.

As such, it was hard to find a country which would publicly declare and treat them as saviours.

However, the pleasant mood didn't end there.

[Wait... a... minute...] A hollow voice rang out.

There were loud footsteps, then the large source appeared.

Part of a species which treated branches as their arms and legs, it was an ent who lived in the eastern forest. Little boys and girls, who were like fairies, sat on the branches and laughed while chatting.

‘The ent I saw last time... and the dryads as well?’ Theo remembered their unfriendly attitude and wanted to step back.

However, the ent leader spoke up, [Great... person... you...]

“...Me?”

[...Inde...ed.] The answer was confusing, but the ent suddenly bowed toward Theodore.

The tree branches descended a few meters, so he couldn't call it

anything else.

[Sorr...y. And... forest... protecting... thank you.]

Then the dryads on the branches started speaking in a talkative manner.

[Thank you! Thank you!]

[Thank you and my apologies! I'm sorry and thank you!]

[Apples are delicious!] (TL: Apple and sorry sound the same in Korean)

[Sweet potatoes are delicious!]

There were many words Theo couldn't understand, but he could recognize their sincerity. It wasn't the same as the human society which used lies as a weapon. Theodore smiled and reached out to a branch before his eyes. "I was also rude at the beginning, so I'm sorry."

[...Me... as... well.]

"Yes, then let us reconcile."

The ent paused for a moment before extending its finger like

branches. It was a moment when two different species shook hands. After a series of exchanges, the two species returned to the eastern forest, while Edwin took the lead again.

Once again, a large knot hole greeted them. His interest in the space doors was still great, so the White Tower Master stepped forward first and asked, “Can we pass through like last time?”

However, Edwin just stepped aside with an unknown smile. The knot hole before them was humming and crying out.

“Yes. But the road isn’t to the same place as last time. It is a good experience, so I think it is better for you to just enter than to hear it from me.”

“Hmm, I see.” Orta touched his chin briefly before stepping in without any hesitation.

The sight of the white robe being swallowed by darkness was the same as before. Theo didn’t know what was beyond it, but he walked forward with a strange sense of anticipation. He wondered what Edwin would call a ‘good experience.’

The moment his entire body passed through the knot hole...

Huuuuong!

A heavy wind caused his red robe to flap. It was a strong wind which was difficult to find on the plains. Nevertheless, it was cool

and unobtrusive, and it felt fresh. Theo took a deep breath while his heart beat faster. Then he felt a strange familiarity and recalled the Miller Barony.

‘This place... Is it a mountain?’

This was similar to the wind he’d experienced when he climbed to the top of a hill in his childhood. Theodore moved his hands reflexively and looked around. He was expecting a good view reminiscent of his distant memory.

Then his eyes and mouth opened wide at the same time.

“...Wow.”

The scenery that appeared was ridiculous. He could only admire the world before him.

White clouds floated at eye level and made his fingers damp when he touched them. The scenery below his feet truly made it seem like he was looking down at the ground from heaven. Was this the point of view which made the word, ‘god,’ emerge from the mouths of priests?

Theodore Miller was literally walking above the sky. After a desperate attempt at using magic to calculate the height, an amazing answer emerged.

‘...11km above the surface?!’

He calculated it again and again, but the result didn't change. Orta, who had arrived first, gave him a similar answer.

"11km, or to be more exact, 10km and 824m. If it wasn't for the power of the world tree, it would be natural to freeze to death at this height. It would be difficult just breathing, but we are having no problems at all.

"I see... um?"

As people climbed a mountain, the air became thinner, making it hard to breathe. However, they had no problems breathing despite being at such a high altitude above the surface. It was possible due to the power of the world tree, an existence with the power of life.

Theodore was shocked as he belatedly realized the meaning of the words. "W-World tree?! Tower Master, then this place...!"

"Yes, that is correct."

As the rest of the group arrived, a gentle voice greeted them. The lump of clouds blocking the view moved aside, and her appearance was revealed. Lumia was a high elf with dark brown hair, like tree bark, and gently shining green eyes. She smiled brightly as she answered their questions.

"This is one of the branches of the world tree as well as a place you can't enter unless we open the way for you."

“The world tree, here...?”

“...It is a ridiculous size.”

The ground, which was dozens of meters wide, was just a branch? As the magicians admired this fact, Lumia waved her arms toward the clouds. The clouds which blocked the rest of the path were removed, revealing the banquet hall.

The rest of the four high elves sat there.

“What the, you came too late!” Alisa grumbled as she had already eaten something.

Meanwhile, Ellenoa waved when she found Theo. Naia was sleeping with her face on the table as always, while Alucard’s expression was brighter than usual. Instead of being a national event, this was like a normal banquet, and Lumia recommended that they sit anywhere.

“Today’s banquet isn’t just between Meltor and Elvenheim, but an event to celebrate the saviours of the forest. So don’t distinguish between statuses and sit anywhere.”

“B-But...”

“Come on, it isn’t so hard. Please think of us as friends from now

on.”

It wasn't possible to refuse after hearing that. The delegation were forced to sit around the table, and Sylvia quickly took the seat to the right of Theo. Once everyone settled in their seats, Alucard decided to assume the role of host and opened his mouth.

Perhaps it was due to the mood, but his voice was a little more excited than usual.

“Then, I will now start the festival. The parent tree has blessed this meeting, and I hope we can change from distant neighbours to friends by the end of it. Just as you saved us from a crisis, we won't sit back if you are ever in danger!”

“The grace and blessing of the world tree and its offspring. Meltor will treasure this covenant.”

As they lifted their cups, the voices of the high elves and humans joined as one.

“Cheers!”

Chapter 114 – World Tree's Reward (3)

The mood got more relaxed after the first drinks. At first, the magicians had difficulty talking, but their mouths soon started opening under the power of alcohol, and the high elves showed interest in their words.

Alucard was showing interest in a Yellow Tower magician talking about mushroom growing, while Lumia ears pricked curiously as she listened to the conversations between the humans. Naia was still dozing, but she occasionally asked about topics she was interested in.

Among them, Alisa was the most active high elf.

“Hey, why are you wearing a mask today? Were you expecting a masked ball or something? Or is it for another reason?”

“It is because of a personal matter.”

“I see. Then can you show it to me? Or tell me why! My curious nature won't let it go until I find out.”

“It looks like it.”

“Eek.”

She seemed to be interested in Orta as the woodpecker-like

conversation continued. In a sense, both of them were difficult to approach, so the area around them became quiet.

Moreover, there were many high elves for the magicians to talk to, and the main character of this banquet was sitting somewhere else. Theodore, the young man who led the mission against the legendary monster Laevateinn and created the opportunity for this mission to Elvenheim... he deserved to be at the center of this banquet.

‘...By the way, what is this?’ However, Theo was in an unexpectedly difficult situation.

On his left, there was Ellenoa...

“Theodore! This fruit called Zaoyan is delicious. It is a rare fruit from the northern forest, but this is a famous delicacy of Elvenheim, so you definitely can’t miss it.”

“T-Thank you.”

And on his right, there was Sylvia...

“Theo, take a bite of this. I sprinkled some spices on it, so it is much tastier.”

“W-Wait a minute.”

“What? Oh, it is because of the skin. I’ll take it off, so just wait a minute. If I place the blade along here...!”

There was no room for Theodore to stop this. He didn’t know who first started it, but the competition became increasingly fierce as he couldn’t refuse and ate the piled up food. Unable to ignore the looks in those two pairs of eyes, Theodore kept on chewing.

There were empty bowls piled up in front of the three people, and the weight of his stomach was becoming increasingly dangerous.

‘Uhh, how long do I have to eat...?’ Theodore looked desperately for a way out. Was the heavens turning a blind eye to him...?

Fortunately, he spotted Vince sipping from a cup nearby. The moment that he felt Theodore’s gaze on him and was about to ask what Theo needed...

Vince heard someone’s voice from behind him, “Oh, my, is that wine in your mouth?”

The high elf, Lumia, who had been standing on the outskirts, approached Vince. She was a high elf, a survivor of a species from the myths, and an existence normally hard to meet. As a magician and one of the delegates, he had no choice but to respond to Lumia’s words instead of paying attention to his disciple.

“Ah, yes. It is a strange but delicious taste.”

“That is a relief. The wine is made from the grapes that my tribe grows ourselves, and it is highly appreciated for its fragrance and flavour. Would you like to try another kind?”

“Oh, it would be an honour.”

“Huhu, I should be the one saying it is an honour. Come this way.”

Vince moved away without thinking, and Theo looked after him with a devastated expression. Simultaneously, Lumia turned back to look at Theo and gave him a strange smile.

‘Why?’ Theo thought.

Then a whisper entered his mind through Ratatoskr. It was Lumia’s voice.

–Well, try it yourself.

‘Huh?’

She didn’t say anything beyond that as she led Vince away.

With that, Theo’s way out had disappeared. There were two bowls set before Theodore, filled with more food that he couldn’t eat. Perhaps he could endure if he used Battle Song to accelerate

his metabolism?

Then a stupid idea emerged in his head. "...Alcohol."

He didn't enjoy it very much, but his eyes caught an unopened wine bottle. Among the Elvenheim specialties, there was a wine which couldn't be made anywhere else. Theo couldn't understand why they made it since it wasn't good for the bottle, but it was an elf specialty.

Ellenora was the first one to notice his attention on the bottle.

"Oh, do you want a drink? I don't know the taste of it, but this wine is well-known in the forest. Perhaps Theodore will enjoy it."

"Hmmm... If you say so."

"Yes, then have a drink." As she nodded, a fragrant liquid emerged from the mouth of the bottle.

Ellenora poured a cup for Theodore and for herself before putting the bottle down. Indeed, there was no cup for Sylvia. The subtle action caused Sylvia to mutter in a low voice, "...Why aren't you giving any to me?"

Ellenora cocked her head and replied, "Based on the standards of the human species, aren't you not allowed to drink until you experience the coming of age ceremony?"

“I’ve had my coming of age ceremony already! It was this year!”

Maybe it implied that she looked young. Sylvia stared sharply at Ellenoa, took the bottle, and poured the wine into her cup. Her timing was a bit late, so the pouring wine barely came to a stop before it overflowed.

Then without waiting for a toast, she poured the contents into her mouth.

Gulp. Sylvia quickly finished the drink and turned triumphantly to the two people.

“...Hua.”

She fell face down onto the table.

*

Typically, the body of a magician was stronger than that of ordinary people, so they were more resistant to harmful substances such as alcohol. There was no statistically analyzed data, but it was natural since high density mana circulated through their body.

Therefore, Theo couldn’t help feeling surprised when Sylvia became drunk on one glass.

He sighed slightly and muttered, “Ah, I’m glad I decided to drink water instead...”

“Ahaha.” Ellenoa heard his words and laughed awkwardly.

She hadn’t expected this to happen either. Consequently, the two of them were now left alone. As Sylvia, the biggest obstacle, had self-destructed, Ellenoa could achieve her purpose without any interference. She immediately used a pretext of a walk to get alone with Theo.

Regardless of whether he knew the meaning of the walk, Theo looked at the ground spread under his feet and exclaimed, “By the way, it is amazing to see. I never expected the banquet to be in such a high place.”

“Is that so? I had a similar reaction to Theodore when I was first brought up here. There was a large tree in my hometown, but it didn’t soar to the height of the clouds.”

“I never thought I could touch the clouds like this...”

The clouds around his fingertips scattered like a torn spiderweb, leaving a damp feeling behind. He looked like an amazed child, causing Ellenoa to step toward him with warm eyes. The place they were going to now was impossible to reach without the ability of a high elf.

“Please follow within three steps of me.” After saying that, Ellenoa moved slowly.

The closer they got to the world tree, the more the high elves could exercise a power which was close to that of their ancestors. It was possible for them to open a space door or jump some distance without using a knot hole. The foundation of this phenomenon was different from magic, but the result was similar.

Shortly afterwards, Theo’s keen senses noticed the change. “Ah.”

It was similar to the Shukuchiho method used by the White Tower Master. He took a few steps after Ellenoa, and their position suddenly changed.

Theo kept track of the changes. It wasn’t so difficult when looking at the height of the clouds, the perspective of the landscape, and the density of mana. The problem was that the changes didn’t happen just once or twice.

‘The banquet hall is 350 meters below... No, it has just changed to 500 meters. Then we went down by 100 meters...’

It was at a pace much more than fast! Theo marveled at the rate of change as the map in his head was destroyed. They had gone up and down so many times that he didn’t know where he was now.

After five minutes of walking, Ellenoa was able to reach the desired destination. When Theodore saw the destination, he spoke

carefully, “This is...?”

The two of them stopped in front of a shabby cabin. The cabin’s planks of wood were so rotten and the pillars were so old that it wouldn’t be strange if the cabin collapsed immediately. It was too shabby compared to the magnificence of the world tree.

However, Ellenoa seemed to be rather solemn in front of it as she looked at Theo.

“This is a place where you can’t enter or leave unless you have the consent of a high elf like me.”

In such cases, the majority of high elves had to agree to let the person enter.

Ellenoa then started explaining about the cabin. It was different from its insignificant appearance. Her voice sank slightly when she said it contained the history and wisdom they had kept for thousands of years.

Then she gazed into Theodore’s eyes with a serious expression while her golden eyes shone brightly beside her pale green hair. “Theodore. For the second time in the history of the elves, you have been recognized as a visitor of the Fountain of Wisdom.”

“Fountain of Wisdom... this cabin?”

“Yes. It was called a different name during the ancient times, but

it is now a legacy of a forgotten era. In the history of the human race, there were a few records of when they dealt with it in the Age of Mythology.

Theo gulped as he understood the value of this rundown cabin.

The Age of Mythology was an era when humans hadn't yet become masters of the continent. It had been thousands of years ago when gods, demons, dragons, and ancient species walked the world. Meltor was a kingdom which collected artifacts and relics more enthusiastically than anywhere else, but they hadn't been able to find any traces from that period in time.

If there was only one book or scroll in that cabin, it might be worth dozens of libraries in this age. However, Theo's surprise was only beginning.

"I brought Theodore to this cabin because a wise man foretold that you would come."

Theodore became blank at those words. Who would the elves refer to as 'wise,' and how could they have predicted this situation?

The appearance of the legend ranked grimoire, Laevateinn, as well as the powers of Andras and Meltor... This moment had occurred as a result of numerous causal relationships. Theo had no choice but to be astounded.

Then Ellenora dealt the heaviest blow. “The wise man who predicted Theodore’s visit was the first of his kind in the world, the first human to make a contract with an elemental ruler.”

‘No way.’ The words entered Theodore’s ears as Theo stared at her.

“Myrdal Herseim, the great elemental, said that he left something for you in the Fountain of Wisdom.”

Chapter 115 – Mysterious (1)

‘Myrdal Herseim!’

Theodore’s face stiffened at the unexpected name. Yet, in actuality, it wasn’t surprising that Myrdal was treated as a sage by the elves. In a world where the high elves couldn’t call the elemental rulers without borrowing the power of the world tree, Myrdal, however, had managed to call one with his own power.

This phenomenal feat was more than enough of a reason for him to be a valued guest of Elvenheim.

“Sage Myrdal said this.” Ellenoa ignored Theo’s inner confusion and started to recite the prophecy in a calm voice, “After a long time, the sixth dancer will open their eyes, and forgotten beings will awaken from a deep sleep. Two countries will compete against each other and summon an indescribable disaster. But there is no need to be afraid. The guest who comes from a distant place will avert the disaster. Once that happens, please guide the guest here.”

“...Is what you just spoke the prophecy?”

“Yes.”

It was like a mysterious puzzle, but Theo was forced to feel a chill since it had all come to pass.

At least a hundred years ago, maybe more than that, Myrdal had

visited this cabin and made a prophecy. He predicted the events which began with the birth of the sixth dancer, Ellenoa, and then the appearance of Laevateinn and the visitor who managed to stop it.

Theodore thought up to there and was struck with a crazy idea. ‘Impossible... Even if he is contracted to an elemental ruler, how long can a human live for?’

He had met a few existences who lived beyond the ordinary standards of life, such as a sword master who could collapse a mountain with a sword, while an 8th Circle magician who could resist even natural disasters. There were also the guardians of Elvenheim who could reverse a situation with one arrow.

Nevertheless, Theo hadn’t felt like this when he faced them. This was a feeling of an incomprehensible awe and fear. Myrdal Herseim was something entirely different from the masters of this age. At that moment, a piece of a puzzle floating around slotted into place.

[An original book has been consumed. Promoting a connection to Myrdal Herseim... Success. Myrdal Herseim has accepted the connection with the user.]

[Connect is starting.]

‘Connect’ was a phenomenon he had only experienced when he

ingested Introduction to Elemental Magic.

“Ah...!” A sound emerged from Theo’s mouth. There was no evidence to support his speculation, but his intuition was convinced that he was right.

In the records of the Magic Society, Myrdal Herseim was a great mage who had understood elementals more than anyone else 300 years ago...

And he was still alive. Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence that Theo had made a contract with Mitra. In order to bring him to this cabin, Myrdal might have arranged something. However, as he was worrying alone, Ellenoa had continued her explanation.

Then it soon came to an end. “...That is all I can tell you.”

Fortunately, Theodore had been half listening and could remember all her words. Only one person could enter at a time, so she explained how to use the Fountain of Wisdom. He inscribed her instructions into his mind.

After finishing the explanation, Ellenoa opened the door. Then the darkness welcomed him.

‘It is another space door.’

The door led to another space, so while the cabin might look shabby, the interior was completely different. Theo took one step

before turning back toward Ellenoa and saying, “I’ll be right back. Wait a bit.”

“Ah...” She blinked like a surprised squirrel as Theo completely disappeared into the darkness of the cabin.

Simultaneously, the shabby door closed, and Ellenoa was left alone. However, she didn’t feel bad despite being alone. Theo had told her to wait and that he would be back soon.

Ellenoa replied one beat too late, “...Yes, I’ll wait.”

Her ears peeked through her hair like a rabbit as she lowered her red face.

*

After the familiar dizziness of space travel, Theo reached a space beyond the threshold of the cabin.

This was the Fountain of Wisdom. He had stepped into a mystery of the elves, whose true name had been forgotten.

When he saw the reality of it, an exclamation flowed from Theodore’s mouth, “...Indeed! This is why it is called the Fountain of Wisdom.”

It was literally a fountain. The fountain was transparent enough

for him to see the bottom, and there was a blue light shining from it. According to Ellenoa's description, all the elves' recorded wisdom was contained in this spring water. It looked like spring water, but it wasn't. Additionally, it wasn't possible to make contact with it unless a gourd from the world tree was used.

Theo wanted to explore the principles of the magic here, but that would take more than a day or two. The time limit of this place was 30 minutes, so he had to prioritize what he wanted to know.

Dakak.

Theo first picked up a gourd hanging from the wall, as Ellenoa had described. It was made from a seed of the world tree, but there was no difference. When the thickness and sizes were compared, the gourd was slightly lighter.

‘Just one time.’

There was a sound as the blue spring water entered the gourd. He tried to soak his fingers as a test, but all he felt was air. The same would apply even if he jumped in the spring water; it would be like falling into a deep pit. This was a place which stimulated the intellectual curiosity of magicians.

Theodore placed his lips on the gourd.

–Drink from the spring water and think about the wisdom that you want. Then you will receive an answer to that question.

The blue spring water flowed down. It passed from his lips into his mouth, and from his tongue down to his throat. However, Theo couldn't feel any of that. Apart from the taste, there was no sensation of liquid being in his mouth. According to Ellenoa, drinking it was just a ritual to insert the spirit of the fountain into him.

'Myrdal Herseim.' Then he started thinking hard about the existence which reminded him of a mountain range, the eyes which resembled the sea... the old man with flowing white hair and beard.

Theo recalled the memories of that day when he couldn't even lift a finger. Then as the gourd emptied...

Wuuuuuuu.

The blue water started fluctuating. The transparent and clear spring water shone with a white light before moving back and forth, like a wave raising his body.

No, it wasn't a wave raising his body. It wasn't even the spring water. In the middle of the fountain, an image resembling a human appeared. It broke and merged several times, but the final form was familiar to Theodore.

It was the old man with a magnificent presence, Myrdal.

[Hoh, the guest I've been waiting for has finally come.]

“...Myrdal Herseim.”

Despite having already met once, Theo barely managed to speak. It was just a form reproduced by the Fountain of Wisdom, but Myrdal's presence was remarkable. Theodore shook as it felt like a weight was crushing his shoulders.

However, Theo was different from that time. He had grown in circles and as a person. Therefore, Theo was able to stand firmly without being disturbed by Myrdal's presence.

The old man smiled gently at the sight. [You've gotten better. You are still immature, but you are better. It might be incomplete, but you have gained the primordial flames. If you don't mind, I, Myrdal, want to hear your name.]

“Theodore Miller.”

[Theodore... No, Theodore. Haha, it is a funny name for a magician.]

(The first Theodore, author uses the spelling with the Korean pronunciation. Second Theodore, author uses spelling for English pronunciation)

Myrdal found it funny...? However, before Theo could ask what it meant, Myrdal shocked him with the next words.

[It has been a while, 'Greed.' No, should I call you Gluttony now?] The old man spoke directly to Theo's left hand.

Theo didn't know how, but it was evidence that Myrdal Herseim knew about Gluttony. So, Theodore couldn't expression his surprise when the mouth appeared on his left hand and a voice flowed out.

-...Yes, it was you. Gluttony's voice sounded nervous. -A fragment of memory calling out to me, how pretentious.

[Huhu, please forgive me. I foresaw your visit, but I'm not able to move at this time. So, I am forced to greet you and your contractor in this way.]

-Giving excuses... Perhaps it was because Gluttony felt uncomfortable that it changed the topic without any further complaints.

Indeed, Gluttony's mild attitude was different than usual. In other words, this person called Myrdal Herseim, was someone who made Gluttony nervous and unable to cope with. Theo listened to the conversation between them carefully.

Gluttony was the one who cut to the chase first. -I wonder how you are still alive. Explain why you waited for me, no, for my user. If the answer isn't acceptable, I will consider you as an 'enemy' from now on.

[You are still too stiff. I am the one who allowed your user to sign an elemental contract. Shouldn't you have been more alert?]

However, Gluttony remained silent. This was a silent protest which meant it wouldn't listen to any more nonsense. It was the first time Gluttony had acted wary toward someone, so Theo watched the confrontation with a strange mood.

In the end, Myrdal raise his hands and answered in a low voice, [It is because your thoughts are too different.]

–Me?

[That's right, Gluttony. Unlike the other six, you don't pay much attention to the fate of the world. Pride who wants to eat all species, the one who wants to stop the present world...]

Then Gluttony shouted in a sharp voice, –Stop!

Myrdal closed his mouth like he had been waiting for it. Theo didn't know what was going on, but it was clear that Myrdal said something that stimulated Gluttony. It must be bad if the almost emotionless Gluttony was forced to shout. Theodore examined the few words that he picked up.

‘Myrdal mentioned Pride. If so, the rest of the information that Myrdal was going to say...’

It was about the rest of the Seven Sins. As if affirming Theo's idea, Gluttony spoke to Myrdal in a voice which didn't hide its anger, –Are you trying to threaten me? A remnant of the myths.

[I am asking politely.]

-...You sure talk very well.

Theo couldn't understand the conversation at all. He merely realized that the two had agreed on something. Myrdal wanted to expose something to Theo, but Gluttony had stopped him before taking a step back.

In the end, Gluttony waved the white flag and spoke in an annoyed voice, –I will tolerate it only once.

[Thank you for your generosity.]

Chapter 116 – Mysterious (2)

After completing the agreement with Myrdal, Gluttony maintained its silence. It seemed like it wasn't quite satisfied about the result of its quarrel with Myrdal. Theodore tried to speak to Gluttony a few times in his mind, but Gluttony didn't answer and fell asleep.

Instead, Myrdal chuckled and said to Theo, [Huhu, I suppose it is upset. I'm sorry for being rude in my own way.]

'Truly a formidable figure.' Theo gazed at the old man before him calmly.

It was hard to guess Myrdal's real intentions from his eyes, despite just being a memory left in the fountain. Myrdal Herseim, a person with the behaviour and depth of a great magician, as well as being a great sage... He wasn't the type of person that Theo, who was only 20 years old, could face as an equal.

"So, why did Myrdal want to see a young man like me?" Theo spoke in a brusque tone as he couldn't help feeling uncomfortable.

It felt like he was a plaything for the two unidentified beings, Gluttony and Myrdal. Both of them were beyond Theodore's understanding, but he didn't want to bow to them.

Myrdal let out a jolly laugh, like a grandfather looking at his grandson. [Who can call the contractor of one of the Seven Sins a young man? So, don't be alarmed Theodore. This old man is just

trying to help you.]

“...Why?”

[Huh?]

“I don’t know the specifics. If you want to help me, then please tell me why.”

It was a situation in which a story Theo didn’t know about had happened, and a decision had been made regardless of his wishes. He felt like something being swept adrift by a wave, like a puppet dancing comically on someone’s palm.

Theodore stood up to a great magician whom most magicians didn’t even dare look at.

Myrdal hadn’t expected this reaction and was speechless for a moment. Then after that moment, he spoke in a voice where all the laughter had disappeared. [...That’s right. Your position must be uncomfortable. It might just be words, but I apologize.]

Myrdal bowed his head as he finished talking. It was the apology of a great man who had rewritten dozens of magic records.

It was Theo’s turn to be taken aback by Myrdal’s behaviour.

Then the old man lifted his head and spoke again, [But I want you

to know that it means there is a secret I can't tell you right now, and it's a secret that you 'shouldn't know.' At the very least, you need to unlock the 5th seal of Gluttony to be qualified.]

“Myrdal, you are truly...!”

[Yes, I know. The purpose for the appearance of the ‘Seven Sins’ in this world and the acts they left behind... and...]

Myrdal's hand reached out suddenly, giving Theo no chance to react. Was it because he couldn't feel any malice? Maybe it was because the very existence of Myrdal was unclear. Before the warning could flow through his system, the hand made of fountain water grabbed Theo's left hand.

[If the Ego allows it, I can do this.]

At the same time, there was a blue flash in Theo's head.

‘—————!’

Something was pouring in. There were unknown lessons, scenery he had never seen before, letters he couldn't understand, and so on. It felt like he had eaten dozens of magic books at the same time. Theo's brilliant head couldn't cope with the amount of information.

The forced knowledge expanded his brain's tolerance and awakened an area which hadn't been seen before. It was a

phenomenon that could be expressed as a type of awakening.

Additionally, that wasn't the only change Myrdal caused.

[Error! Error...! Accepted. This is a legitimate request. Gluttony's 4th seal has been released.]

[Gluttony's function has been opened normally. The user should check the information window of the corresponding function immediately.]

[Grimoire "Gluttony" / C Rank]

[Gluttony's 4th seal has been released through a normal path. From now on, the user can borrow the power of an author that Gluttony has extracted. However, once the author has been overwritten, the author can't be reloaded. Previous owners have called the feature 'Overwrite', but you can change the name if you want.

* Once the Overwrite function is demonstrated to its limit, 'Transmission' will be triggered to completely take over the power of the author.]

Previously while fighting Superbia, Gluttony had been forced to open the fourth seal. This time, the method wasn't recognized as

an unusual means. Theo could only feel in awe at the phenomenon he couldn't understand, as he realized that a new wisdom was filled into his mind.

‘No, that expression is a bit strange.’

The dizziness disappeared, and Myrdal's knowledge remained in him. It was like acquiring a vessel which already contained that knowledge. The knowledge that Myrdal left behind in the Fountain of Wisdom was well-suited to the title of ‘Sage’. So, Theo would only be able to fully understand it after crossing two walls.

Theodore intuitively realized this and raised his head. He felt it was a blessing, but it was hard for him to reveal any of his feelings to Myrdal.

Myrdal was well aware of this. So, he spoke to Theo instead of trying to buy his trust. There wasn't a lot of time remaining for him to use the Fountain of Wisdom, and there were still things he wanted to say to Theodore.

[There is a trace of the reason why the seal was already unlocked once. Thanks to that, I have a bit more to talk about.]

“.....”

[Cough, don't look at me like that. I don't even have five minutes left. Please listen to this old man's advice.]

As Theo stared at Myrdal with an expressionless face, the old man coughed a few times before opening his mouth again.

[Honestly speaking, you are in a dangerous state right now.]

Theodore's eyebrows twitched at the words. It was a serious topic. This wasn't the diagnosis of an old man but the great magician Myrdal. Just as Veronica had once noticed Theo's unstable circles, the eyes of the great magician noticed the cracks Theo couldn't feel.

Myrdal groaned lightly as he touched his beard. [It is due to eating Laevateinn during this incident. Power was extracted from the grimoire, as well as the unknown dimension. Additionally, the power of the artifacts and treasures... It is too hard for a man who is only 20 years old to bear.]

“...What specifically is the problem?”

[I will ask you a simple question. If you pour more contents than a bowl can handle, what will happen to the bowl?]

‘It would break.’ Theo shook off the eerie feeling.

Then Myrdal nodded like Theo's speculation was correct and continued the story. [Fortunately, drinking from this fountain has increased the grace period. It probably won't be a problem for two years. But after three years, your body will start to collapse, and you will die in five years.]

“That...!”

[Sorry, but I have no time.]

There was a time limit. Myrdal’s form was collapsing little by little. The fingers pointing at Theo became watery and the overall shape more blurred. However, Myrdal’s voice remained clear, like he was directly speaking into Theodore’s head.

The old man felt he had a responsibility to finish the story until the end. [Increase the capacity of the vessel. Get rid of the day-to-day fighting and eating of a magician, and live like a beast. Explore the wide world and increase the size of your vessel as you bump into many people.]

“That is too abstract!”

[No, you already know the method.]

Despite the crumbling face, Myrdal’s blue eyes were bright as they penetrated inside Theo.

[Just like how you once struggled through the years, do it again this time. Don’t hesitate to walk the tough and difficult path. Become a magician who walks his own way through the wilderness.]

Theodore hadn't known Myrdal's purpose, and despite the conversation they just had, he still didn't know. However, he could tell one thing from the story. Myrdal had been a magician before he became a sage, and so, he taught his junior. Theo understood that he should engrave this advice into his mind.

Myrdal quickly disappeared, and the fountain became calm again. The whole thing felt like a summer night's dream.

Theodore Miller's gaze lingered at the space before him, then he began to move quietly. '...Let's go.'

The opportunity had been to use the Fountain of Wisdom once, so staying here any longer would just be a waste of time. With many questions and realizations, the young magician left the elves' holy place behind.

*

For Ellenoa, it was exactly 30 minutes later when Theodore emerged. As he appeared at the door of the cabin, he had on a weary face.

Ellenoa had been waiting quietly, and she quickly walked toward him. Up close, Theo's face looked a bit different than usual, and she felt her cheeks becoming hot. Fortunately, Theo didn't notice it.

"Theodore, welcome back."

“Ah, Ellenoa.”

“How was it? The holy land of the elves.” She smiled with anticipation.

Then Theo told her honestly how he felt, “I have more to think about than I expected.”

He had met an unexpected person in an unexpected place, Gluttony’s seal was now released again, and he received a deadline. Theo didn’t know what to feel as too many things had happened at the same time.

Regardless of whether she knew his complex heart or not, Ellenoa’s expression turned serious.

Then she said the words she had prepared while waiting, “My role ends here. It was to guide Theodore to the Fountain of Wisdom and back to the banquet hall. From here on out, it will be my personal favour, so can you listen?”

Theo cocked his head and agreed.

Then Ellenoa gained confidence and held out her hand. As moonlight flowed softly over the world tree, her fingers seemed to shine with a silver glow. The beauty and atmosphere of a fairy tale temporarily caught his eyes.

“...Can you walk with me a bit more?” Ellenoa closed her eyes, pretending not to know about her fingers trembling in fear of the rejection. Then her eyes widened as a warm and rough hand touched hers.

Theodore accepted the small favour by taking her hand. “I want to walk around a bit more too.”

A bright smile emerged on Ellenoa’s face at his acceptance, while Theo looked down at such a beautiful smile but ended up gazing at their hands. Perhaps it was the mood. Or perhaps it was because his hand had grown larger in the meantime. Ellenoa’s hand felt more tapered than half a year ago.

‘...Well, I must be mistaken.’

Unfortunately, he just hadn’t realized it yet.

Chapter 117 – Mysterious (3)

“...That is all. I did my best, but from the moment I entered the Red Plateau, I couldn't follow their actions. Perhaps it was because of the White Tower's famous space magic,” a knight wearing all black reported.

The black armour favored mobility over combat power, while the black sword was designed to melt into darkness. Compared to the normal knight's uniform, this was an invisible appearance. No such uniform existed out in the open among Andras' knights.

However, if a third party was in this place, they would've reeled back in fear.

The Knights of Shade were shadows who did the dirty work of the empire, from gathering information to assassination. It was a secret organization which even the empire's Seven Swords couldn't mobilize without an imperial order.

They were people who didn't officially exist in the empire, and were famous for carrying poison and self-destruct scrolls with them. In that case, who was looking down at the knight...?

“Indeed, it was a perfect failure. I have to admire the skillfulness of our enemies,” someone's voice resonated in a low tone.

The emotionless voice contained an odd sense of oppression, forcing the two knights in front of him to shut their mouths. However, it wasn't a consciously transmitted intimidation; he had

merely opened his mouth.

This was the presence of a person who couldn't be ordinary. It was a presence which only came from a person whose pride had been great since birth and whose family had been recognized for decades. In other words, he was someone who had the temperament of a ruler.

“P-Please kill me!” In the end, the Knight of Shade couldn't withstand the pressure and lowered his body while confessing his sin. However, he didn't ask for pardon from the other party. As a shadow of the empire, failing a mission meant death. There was no point in living if he had failed the mission.

The Knight of Shade knew that better than anyone, so he was surprised by the other party's next words.

“No, it isn't your fault. You clearly followed my instructions perfectly. If so, this failure is my responsibility, so don't mention it anymore.”

“But...!”

“Stop. Until I call again, go prepare a personal biography of that person called Theodore.”

Nobody would dare disobey, so the Knight of Shade trembled and carefully withdrew. Indeed, as a shadow, he walked out of the room without any sound. Then the man looked at the knight who

still remained and said in a rare playful tone, “How surprising. I thought you would’ve cut him down on the spot.”

The knight, a black masked man, didn’t deny it. “...I thought so as well.” Then he spoke calmly with his head down, “But the shadow did its duty until the end. If he took one step forward, my sword would’ve given him a peaceful death.”

“Well, that is an interesting view.” The man laughed with satisfaction. Although the man might’ve snorted at the knight’s confidence, he knew the skill of the swordsman in front of him.

The knight had once been the head of the Knights of Shade, and he was now a sword master, promised for the position of the 6th Sword. Despite losing an arm, he still wasn’t an easy opponent. His ‘Disappear’ ability made him invincible against an inferior opponent.

Rather, the White Tower Master who had overwhelmed the superman knight before the man deserved to be honoured. The man’s mind stirred at the thought.

“By the way, it is shocking that the White Tower Master is so strong. Did his presence pale due to the Blue Tower Master and Red Tower Master?”

“I think so.”

“Well, he is a hidden card.”

Despite having been arch rivals for hundreds of years, it was hard for Andras to fathom all of Meltor's power. This was the strength of a magic kingdom, where unexpected things could keep emerging.

At the end of a battle where they were sure of their success, an 8th Circle magician would suddenly appear and destroy the balance. The battle power of the White Tower Master, who had suppressed a middle ranked Seven Swords, also belonged to such variables.

"I heard that the White Tower Master confronted the previous 3rd and 6th Swords directly... They fought in the last war. So, I don't know how many more of his abilities haven't been revealed."

"...Next time."

"Hmm?"

The masked man lifted his head for the first time. A red light shone through the half-shattered mask, and a strong momentum rose from his body. His fighting spirit hadn't been lost after one defeat. He managed to barely suppress it, but his voice which emerged from underneath the mask bubbled like magma as he said, "Next time, I will use every effort to kill him."

"Even with that arm?"

“Yes.”

The man’s words touched a sore point, but the swordsman wasn’t shaken at all. It was fatal for him to have lost his right arm. However, if he could fix his style, he could regain his original strength. It would take a long time, but it was worth it for the master who had rescued him from hell. His loyalty was one of the reasons why the man trusted him.

The man gave a pleased smile and opened his mouth to say, “... Ah, I can’t even joke properly.”

He didn’t know that the immigrant child he’d helped in his childhood would grow into his right arm. It was because he didn’t show his ego that the masked man served him loyally. While facing the swordsman, the man took out a box from behind him, then he threw it to the masked man.

“M-My Liege?”

“Open it.”

The item had been hard to obtain, even with his status. It was a reward for his subordinate, but there was no other person more worthy and dependable to handle it.

“This is a reward for your loyalty. I will shoulder the responsibility for this failure. I also understand how big the loss of one arm is for you.”

“...My Liege!”

“I won’t speak for long. Take it.”

The swordsman didn’t dare refuse and opened the box. A storm of power flowed out, like it had been waiting. The seal around the lock was released, and there was a silver light as the thing trapped inside the box broke free.

Flash! There was a blinding light, and in the box, something in the form of a sword flashed clearly.

The sword master couldn’t keep his composure any longer. This wasn’t something made by human hands but a relic hidden in a forgotten history. Anyone who wasn’t at the master level would probably burn as soon as they held onto this.

It was the relic of a divine species which had lost its original name.

“Train your left arm so that you can use this in one year.”

The mask swordsman shook his head and didn’t dare reply. He held the radiant silver sword to his chest and pledged allegiance to his master.

The man looked down at the scene with satisfaction before

staring into the air. “Not yet, not yet. In the next five years... I will bring down my incompetent father and change this empire.”

It was a law that those who used violence and climbed over the strongest would conquer the throne. In the Andras Empire, the royal family was the strongest. and their blood had never weakened since King Fernando took the throne.

The eyes of the empire’s third prince, Prince Fermut, shone.

*

After reaffirming their relationship with Elvenheim, the delegation and Theodore passed through the new Red Plateau.

The concept of a few kilometers didn’t matter when they were accompanied by the White Tower Master. As the sun rose a day after they left the Great Forest, they had already crossed Meltor’s border. It was literally at a speed which couldn’t even be expressed with lightning. The old saying that those who walked were spoiled was moot, as the White Tower Master barely breathed roughly.

“...We will rest for 30 minutes. I don’t have enough magic power to use Mass Teleport.”

“I understand.”

However, there was a restriction on Shukuchiho. The group could move a great distance quickly, but the burden on the user

was huge. Anyone who didn't have the almost unlimited power of a 7th Circle would be depleted after a few uses. Well, even so, it was a charming magic.

Orta leaned against a wall and started rotating his circles.

Theo squinted at the White Tower Master and muttered inwardly, 'If I can learn that space magic properly, it will be a great power, but... I shouldn't be too greedy.'

H'de met the sage at the Fountain of Wisdom, and right now, Theodore's power had already exceeded his own vessel.

The power of Laevateinn, Umbra, and the essence extracted from treasure ranked artifacts... If he swallowed an artifact related to the White Tower Master's space magic, it was possible that his remaining grace period would become even shorter.

'Five years... If I think about it properly, it is more like three years left.'

His body would collapse. He didn't know what that meant, but he could sense something ominous from it. It was clear that something bad would happen. So, three years... Over the next three years, he needed to build a vessel which could handle his abilities. Thanks to this incident, his name value and treatment would increase.

No, he shouldn't take advantage of it.

-Get rid of the day-to-day fighting and eating of a magician, and live like a beast. Explore the wide world and increase the size of your vessel as you bump into many people.

That was Myrdal's advice. Theo could roughly guess why Myrdal hadn't mentioned the solution directly.

The 'vessel' wasn't a generic concept in Meltor, which was known for its magic knowledge. Instead, it was an unknown field which couldn't be calculated or accessed. So, Myrdal had given a past example which Theo could understand.

-Just like how you once struggled through the years, do it again this time.

Five years after starting Bergen Academy, Theo had met Gluttony and then became qualified. At the end of a long path without any hope, he had faced a fate which could be called legendary. If he had been told that at the time, he might not have acted so sincerely.

If so, what did Theodore Miller need now? Fortunately, he was accompanied by someone who could answer any questions.

'A question and answer.'

Once he returned, he would report his achievements to Kurt III and then ask Gluttony.

In a sense, this time limit was due to using Gluttony's power. It wouldn't want to lose its contraction, so it shouldn't be difficult to obtain Gluttony's cooperation. Gluttony wouldn't hesitate to teach Theo how to widen his vessel.

Of course, the fundamental question lay elsewhere.

‘The purpose and the identity of the other Seven Sins... and the truth of the world that I still don't know about.’

It was the fate of a magician to follow the mysterious and unknown.

His immature self had no answer yet, and Orta had already finished resting.

The struggle with the legend ranked grimoire, the talk with the nearby neighbours, and the unforeseen adventure had all ended. No matter what event was waiting for him this time, he had to go back...

...Back to the heart of the magic kingdom of Meltor, Mana-vil Capital.

Chapter 118 – Book Eating Magician (1)

The signing of the friendship treaty with the neutral country of the north, Elvenheim, was probably one of the most important undertakings in the past few hundred years.

The Andras Empire as well as other countries of the central continent had dispatched their intelligence sources. So, there was no doubt that the responsibility on the dispatched delegation was enormous. If the talks were ruined due to someone, the responsibility wouldn't end with just them. It would spread to their family and relatives as well.

However, despite their concerns, the delegation returned home with better results than expected. They had achieved the signing of a historic treaty!

The court officials gathered just one hour after being given the news. Later historians might say this was exaggerated, but if they knew that even the most isolated nobles rushed out of their homes, they would shut their mouths.

“It seems like everyone is gathered. White Tower Master, report,” the king of Meltor, Kurt III, ordered.

However, Kurt was also a bit different from usual. He was full of dignity as always, but there was a slight anticipation as he waited for the White Tower Master's words. It meant that he was filled with expectations.

Orta's mouth opened amidst the heavy silence, and his words unexpectedly provoked a storm.

- A triple increase in the number of trade items.

- Significant increase in the number of mass production type artifacts to be exported.

- Obtained the right to cut down a limited number of trees in the Great Forest.

- Promised a regular exchange of delegates.

None of those conditions were light. For some, they were heavier than gold, so the nobles and magicians couldn't help stirring. They might have jumped up and rushed over to the White Tower Master if the king hadn't been watching. Just one of those conditions was enough to double or triple their income! Most of the things Orta mentioned were like that.

Finally, once details of the military aid and support forces were mentioned, Kurt III rose from his throne and shouted, "Wonderful!"

Kurt III was a ruler who avoided any formalities or showing off. Had he ever praised someone like this?

At the very least, the people here had never heard him do so. It was the first time they had seen the king smiling with such a joyful

expression. He looked around the delegation before stopping at one point.

A familiar young man was standing there.

‘My eyes are truly good.’

The young man was wearing a red robe, and there was still a slightly tired expression on his face. He was Theodore Miller, the one who had been at the center of the recent big event. According to the secret report by the White Tower Master, Theodore’s performance had been essential.

It was a higher merit than even Orta, who cut off the arm of a sword master, had achieved. If so, Kurt III needed to acknowledge him. “Theodore Miller.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“I have heard that your merits are also great this time. You used the national treasure and elevated the name of the Meltor Kingdom.”

“I am undeserving of those words.”

As Kurt III admired the young man bowing calmly, he revealed the reward. “The achievements you have accomplished are enough to elevate you to the rank of Prime. As of this time, I will declare Theodore Miller a provisional Prime. Any extra procedures will be

skipped, and he will be upgraded to Prime the moment he reaches the 6th Circle. Are there any objections?”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

“Okay. I will prepare individual rewards for each delegate member.”

After nodding a few times with a satisfied face, Kurt III looked at Theo who was still calm.

‘I don’t know why, but the atmosphere around him has changed a bit.’

The feeling around Theodore had been much lighter a few months ago. Perhaps he had realized something on this journey.

The king of Meltor laughed cheerfully at the thought of the birth of the next tower master. However, he didn’t know that the young man in front of him had already jumped over the wall of the 6th Circle.

*

As soon as Theodore returned to Mana-vil, he met the king, so he couldn’t return to his room until sunset.

The sight of nobles and elder magicians gathering like hungry

dogs was terrifying in many ways, but fortunately, they didn't bother the people who had just returned from Elvenheim. The exact cause was Veronica.

Still, she had let Theodore leave after stating that they should have a meal together later.

“Why should you deal with unnecessary things? Those old people.” The strongest beauty in the kingdom with blazing red hair had stroked Theodore's head. He had been prepared to be dragged around by her for a few hours. However, she had merely shrugged and laughed, then she poked Theo's heart with a finger.

‘...It looks like it has been discovered, my 6th Circle.’

He had to admire Veronica, who was aware of it without his circles being activated. Well, it was true that she made things more comfortable for him, so he would give her a dessert box from the capital's confectionary store later.

Theodore opened his door and unpacked while being satisfied with the quiet surroundings.

Then he lay on his bed and murmured, “Prime, it is definitely an attractive position.”

Aside from the Supreme rank which was for the tower masters, the Prime rank had the highest honour and prestige in the magic towers.

They could create their own organization or research team, or use a part of Meltor's budget for their own exploration. Even the princes and dukes of small and medium kingdoms didn't dare look down on the Primes and elders of the magic towers.

If he stated that he was at the 6th Circle at that time, he could've been promoted to Prime. However, Theo decided not to select that path after some consideration.

He would completely become Meltor's new figure. As his status and rights grew, the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders would become heavier. It would be difficult to leave home and travel if he was a Prime mage.

The right to use the kingdom's properties freely meant being part of the kingdom itself. So, the restriction on leaving was natural. The problem was that the constraint was fatal to the present Theo.

Theodore thought this and suddenly raised his left hand, "Hey."

-.....

"I know you are awake. There are many things to talk about, so don't waste my time."

-Hmm.

It was impossible for deception thanks to the connection between them. So, in the end, Gluttony gave up on the silence and coughed. Then Theo tossed it the books he had already prepared.

[‘Application of Fire Magic’ has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[Proficiency in fire magic has increased. The fire attribute affinity has already reached its limit. In compensation, the level of proficiency will rise even further.]

The knowledge of the book penetrated his head naturally. Theo focused on the sensation for a moment, before looking down at his left palm. It was time for a question and answer. In the meantime, he had used this mainly to receive answers to difficult formulas as well as explanations and applications of magic.

Theo thought carefully about his words before saying, “What is Myrdal’s identity?”

-...So, it did come out.

If it had been a person, Gluttony would be frowning. The greedy grimoire paused for a moment before replying in a testy voice, –It is an abstract thing, and I can’t give you concrete information. Even this wouldn’t have been possible if he hadn’t released the fourth seal.

“Then can you give any information about the other Seven Sins?”

–Not more than that. In the case of Pride, its importance was low, and I was able to temporarily answer because we encountered it. If you want to hear detailed information about the other five, you need to release the sixth seal.

Indeed, if Gluttony could answer it, then there was no reason to block Myrdal from speaking. Theodore had felt doubts, which was why he asked Gluttony the questions. However, as he had guessed, Gluttony was under some type of constraint, and it would be hard to answer the question.

Then he thought about Myrdal’s advice, ‘...the secrets I can’t tell you right now, and the secret that you shouldn’t know...’

At the very least, the old man hadn’t shown any signs of malice toward Theo. Maybe Theo just didn’t notice, but he decided to trust his own intuition. If he fell into needless doubts, then he wouldn’t be able to get out of this situation.

He had to take the first step to overcome the crisis.

Theo shook off the rest of his thoughts and said, “Then I will change the question. Is it true that my body will only last five years, like Myrdal said?”

–It is true. To be exact, it is 4 years, 8 months, and 23 days. The

error range is expected to be within a week.

“...Damn.” He truly accepted it after hearing the details of the deadline a second time.

In fact, wasn't the grimoire responsible for this? It didn't explain the side effects of the eating, and his life was now suddenly in danger. Thus, it was inevitable that Gluttony should take responsibility for this matter. If Theo died, it would have to find a new contractor and start again, so it would just damage Gluttony as well.

Theodore regained his calm and asked directly, “Myrdal told me to expand my vessel. How do I do that?”

–This isn't a subject that can be answered in reply to one question.

“Don't make me laugh,” he coldly dismissed the grimoire's excuse. “I confirmed that you can act on your own discretion during the fight against Pride. If you think of me as your contractor, you have a minimum of responsibility for any situations that you didn't warn about in advance regarding you. Isn't that right?”

–Hrmm, you have a point.

It was pointless to make an emotional argument, as the grimoire was more flexible with logic being refuted. Theo had already been

connected with Gluttony for a year, so he had some ideas of Gluttony's personality and behaviour.

As expected, Gluttony accepted Theodore's argument and gave in to his demand.

–The easiest way is human sacrifice.

“What?”

–I don't distinguish by gender or good and evil. It won't be difficult to expand your soul if you properly sacrifice around 100,000 people. It may also help you get beyond the wall of the 7th Circle.

“...Dismissed, I won't do that.”

The grimoire didn't care about ethics and suggested something evil. Human sacrifices? It was the worst sin committed by warlocks a few centuries ago. Sacrificing 100,000 people... It was an evil beyond the national scale.

Theo gritted his teeth and shook his head.

Then Gluttony presented a second option. –Build up your karma.

“Karma?”

–Whether good or evil, every act that affects the world expands your ‘vessel.’ You can save someone. You can destroy someone. Building up dharma will shake off the confines of karma. That is the master level that you talk about.

Gluttony’s words were so profound that Theo couldn’t comprehend everything, but he understood the gist of it. In other words, he had to create a disturbance which affected the material world in any way. It could be good or bad. If he did so, his ‘vessel’ would increase in size.

It was a theory Theo would investigate later, so he asked for the next option, “Other than that?”

–There is nothing to ask.

“What?”

It might be because the two options were rejected, but Gluttony sounded testy. –Work harder than you have done so far. The efficiency is lower, but you can meet the deadline.

“I have to do the same thing?”

–Yes. To the confused Theodore, Gluttony declared, –Hunt original books.

Chapter 119 – Book Eating Magician (2)

Original books were not books which were created with duplication magic, but the first copies the authors wrote directly. So far, Theo had swallowed three original books: Ballistics Magic; Introduction to Elemental Magic; and Battle Song. They acted as the foundation Theo's abilities were built on.

However, how would original books solve his problem?

“...I don't understand. Hasn't my vessel already reached the limit?”

–Yes.

“Then won't eating original books be like pouring more water in? Why is that the solution?”

–Hmmm, the explanation is lacking. Gluttony thought for a moment before opening its mouth again. –Your question isn't entirely wrong. The abilities you learn from the original books will fill up the vessel. But in the process, you can acquire something else.

“What is it?”

–The fragment of the author's soul set inside the original book.

Gluttony said that although it was small, a piece of the author's soul was contained in the original book. So far, Theodore had met the author's of the original books he'd eaten. He had experienced Alfred on the battlefield and Lee Yoonsung using his martial arts. Myrdal's case was a little bit different, but the old man should be treated as an exception.

Theodore realized the meaning of Gluttony's words and asked, "So absorbing the fragment of soul can expand my vessel?"

–That's right. In fact, your vessel was already half full when you absorbed Umbra. If you hadn't used 'Transmission' on Alfred, you would've died.

"...Transmission." Theo noticed a secret hidden in the word.

General predation couldn't absorb all the abilities of a book. It didn't matter about his talent or aptitude. Just like how it was impossible for Theodore to shoot Magic Bullet like Alfred, it was impossible for him to obtain 100% of the author's ability.

However, Theo overcame that limit with Transmission. Theo thought had that Transmission was just a function which effectively accepted the author's ability, but he now realized it was different. Transmission was the ability to expand the vessel beyond its limits.

Otherwise, there was no reason to take the risk that the contractor's ego would collapse. If Theodore's mentality hadn't been strong and Alfred hadn't been willing to help, he might've

become brain dead after fighting Pride.

–No, that is a bit wrong.

“...What?”

As it had read Theo's thoughts, Gluttony interrupted, – Transmission isn't normally used in that way. At that time, it was instant because the situation was imminent. However, it was originally a process that allows for gradual assimilation.

“Process?”

–As you can see, sometimes a confusion of self can occur. Of course, it isn't a problem if the user is overwhelming strong. But if the other party is superior, the user could end up being eaten. You were lucky in many ways last time.

In other words, if Alfred was a bad person, then he could've taken over Theo's body. However, after that, Theo couldn't call on Alfred anymore.

Theo organized the information he had received before replying. There were three ways to avert the three-year deadline. Among them, he erased the first idea without even thinking about it. Human sacrifice belonged to the black magic area and was a taboo in Meltor, with severe punishment if caught. Theodore wouldn't be excluded from the punishment even if he had received a medal.

The second method, however, was worth considering. ‘Doing something good or evil.’

It was strange to think about. So far, Theo had taken down two grimoires and destroyed the elder lich. As a result, the number of lives he saved wouldn’t be light. Regrettably, Gluttony asserted that his heroic actions weren’t helpful at all.

–Grimoires don’t count. They are located outside the causal relationship and don’t affect karma. It would be more meaningful to catch a few bandits.

It was unfortunate, but it made sense. Theodore understood this and looked at the darkness outside the window.

The capital of the Meltor Kingdom, Mana-vil... From the tall magic tower, the scenic view of the capital was spectacular, but it was nothing compared to the superb views he’d seen with Ellenoa on the branch of the world tree.

There were still many sights in the world which he hadn’t seen. On a bookshelf in a narrow room, there might be an unknown mystery hiding. A magician should find their own wilderness.

‘Am I prepared to leave the comfort of the familiar road for a hard and unfamiliar road?’ Theo asked himself.

“Well, it seems like what I need to do is already determined.”

As Gluttony fell asleep, Theo made a fist.

He wished to experience hardships in order to improve himself. Just like when he broke through an army of undead, when he faced Pride, and when he jumped into Laevateinn without any fear... Just like always, he had to believe in himself and move forward.

Regardless of whether he would be a hero or not, Theodore made a decision as he looked at Mana-vil's night view.

*

The next day, as soon as Theodore opened his eyes, he went into action. A person's determination could dull over time, so the sooner he put it into action, the better.

Theo dressed in the familiar robe and decided to first tell his master his choice. It wasn't merely a procedural problem but a matter of morality.

‘He will certainly be worried, but... I can't conceal it from him.’

Despite reaching the 6th Circle, Vince Haidel was Theodore's master and a companion whom he shared the secrets of the grimoire with. The relationship between the two men was much stronger than an ordinary bond shared between master and disciple. He couldn't keep the threat to his life a secret, and Vince might be able to give him useful advice.

Theodore finally stopped in front of Vince's door.

Knock knock.

As Theo took a deep breath and knocked, he heard the familiar voice of his master.

"Theo, is that you? It is open, so just come in."

"Yes, Master."

As Vince said, the door wasn't locked. The familiar smell of coffee greeted Theo after he opened the door.

It was the handmade coffee Vince had been drinking since Bergen Academy. Theo felt like smiling as he sat on the chair Vince brought him. The face of his teacher, who had a few grey hairs, appeared before him.

Theo felt his heart relaxed as he opened his mouth to speak.

The story wasn't long. By the time Theo's story finished, the steam rising from Vince's coffee mug was gone, and the angle of the light coming through the window had changed by a few degrees.

However, Vince's expression wasn't as simple as the story. Vince

swallowed down a sigh and tried to act calm as his disciple mentioned the time limit. It wasn't a story which should come from a young man who was only 20 years old.

“...Hoo. I have a lot of things to say, but I won't. You already seem to know how serious this situation is.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

“There is no need to thank me. Ah, wait a minute. I just completed the present that I was going to give you.”

A present he was going to give Theo? Theodore looked confused as Vince pulled out a book from his drawer.

Based on the still wet ink, it was true that Vince had just completed it. He used a simple drying magic and handed it over. It was a summary of his years of research.

[Ancient Magic Overview — Balcard] was written on the cover.

‘Appraisal.’

[Ancient Magic Overview — Balcard]

[This book deals with the magic of Balcia, an empire which existed in ancient times. The magicians of that era used magic

which was several times more efficient and powerful than modern magic systems. After years of research, the author, Vince Haidel, has awakened this system. The depth of wisdom is superior to ordinary magic books.

- * The level of your understanding is minimal. (0%)

- * This magic book is rated 'Rare.'

- * When consumed, the fundamentals of the 'Balcard Language' will be learned.

- * This is the original that was directly written by the author. You have a close relationship with the author. There is a high probability that you will absorb some of Vince's proficiency.]

Theodore looked at the information from the unconsciously used Appraisal and felt great awe.

'Restoring a magic system that was used in ancient times!' Once this achievement spread through the Magic Society, it was clear that Vince Haidel would be given a Prime position as well as praise and rewards.

Vince smiled at Theo's impressed look and said, "If you need original books, then mine will be helpful. Although I don't know if it will help your problem."

“...No, it is brilliant.”

“Well, it was thanks to you that I was able to finish the research. I’m glad it can be of use to you in this way.”

Theo placed the magic power in his inventory, while Vince’s expression became heavy.

‘Going on a trip to find original books... It won’t be easy,’ Vince thought.

Theo had already decided. Leaving the country where he was lauded as a hero was never easy. In order to avoid the empire’s gaze, he had to conceal his identity and couldn’t do as he wished in a foreign country.

Perhaps he should tell Theo to forget Myrdal’s advice. It was shameful as Theo’s mentor, but he might not have given that advice if he were in Myrdal’s position. Still, Vince passed on what information he could.

Chwaack!

He pulled out a map and moved his fingers as he started to explain, “If your purpose is to look for original books, you must first go to the central continent.”

Meltor was known as the magic kingdom, and as the name suggestion, it was full of magic books. However, the story was

different when it came to original books. As mentioned several times, the Magic Society treated originals and copies the same. It was because they didn't want to see the value of knowledge rising or falling due to scumbag collectors.

So, the people who collected original books weren't from Meltor. Instead, they were nobles or merchants who resided in other countries and wanted to decorate their office.

“In particular, the trade kingdom Kargas at the center of the central continent. All types of people swarm there. Original books are sold there for an expensive price, meaning only people who have nothing but money will buy them.”

“Kargas on the central continent... I will keep that in mind.”

“If possible, don't cause any friction. Your skills aren't a problem, but there are many outlaws in the central continent.”

Experienced advice was always valuable. Theo was taught by his teacher about things necessary for the journey, such as how to get across the border, the laws of different countries, and how to act in them.

Fortunately, Theo had a strong memorization ability, so he remembered all of it without much difficulty.

“Oh, I forgot.” After a lengthy explanation, Vince sipped from the coffee which had cooled down. “You are now the hero of

Meltor. The Magic Society and royal family won't like you leaving the kingdom. How are you planning to go abroad?"

It was a reasonable fact. Theo's status had increased after confronting the monster called Pride and becoming the national guest of Elvenheim. There was no way to guarantee his safety outside the kingdom.

If Andras' Knights of Shade had an assassination list, the name 'Theodore Miller' would probably be among the top five of the list.

For that reason, Theo had only one person he could depend on. He was the culmination of power in Meltor and the only one who could command all four tower masters.

"I have no choice but to ask His Majesty directly."

Chapter 120 – Book Eating Magician (3)

Kurt III had taken the throne with the support of all the magic towers, led by the great magician Blundell. When Kurt III was crowned, he had been but a puppet king of the Magic Society in many ways. He had been merely 20 when he reached the throne of the magic kingdom and jumped directly onto the battlefield against the Andras Empire.

After decades of washing away blood, the boy king had grown into a king with sober eyes. He used strong soldiers and a system of reward and punishment. His rule absolutely adhered to these two principles, and the kingdom had now reached its greatest heyday since its founding.

He was a ruler who stuck to these principles but didn't forget to understand the ecology of magicians and that he could be flexible. This was the ideal ruler for the current Meltor Kingdom, Kurt III.

Theodore had grown up knowing about Kurt III's achievements.

'If they persuade him with proper logic and rationales, he will listen to the words of a person below him.'

Then the problems which Theodore needed to solve was narrowed down to one. The question wasn't how to persuade the king, but how to talk to the king alone. Theodore had some accomplishments which raised his status, but it was still difficult to meet the king personally. It was only possible for the tower masters and the top nobles of the kingdom.

However, his worries were for nothing as shortly thereafter, Kurt III asked Theodore to join him for dinner.

“Theodore, it is time.”

It was a place where other nobles or servants wouldn't be present, so confidential matters could be discussed. Theodore, who wanted to avoid the attention of others as much as possible, accepted the invitation without hesitation. He had no idea that things would be resolved so easily.

Thanks to that, he opened the door with a much lighter heart.

“Yes, I'll go straight away.”

The middle-aged man waiting for Theo was the one who had delivered Kurt III's invitation. The royal chamberlain, Douglas, was a person who had risen from being a commoner to being the closest to the king. He was unusual as he gave off an impression that made people comfortable.

“I will guide you there. Ah, if your body feels uncomfortable...”

“It's okay.”

“Then we will proceed as scheduled. Follow me please.”

Theo was a young man of a lower standing, but Douglas' attitude didn't shake at all. He didn't care if Theo was a hero or young. Douglas just served with an attitude that didn't mix in any personal feelings. This faithfulness to his duties was probably what had caught Kurt III's eyes.

In any case, all the preparations were over.

“His Majesty is waiting inside.”

Douglas stopped in front of a gorgeously lavish guarded door. The patterns symbolizing the magic towers were harmoniously intertwined with the patterns symbolizing the royal family.

It meant that neither side was above or below the other and that they were both the pillars of the Meltor Kingdom. These patterns might be sensitive to some authoritarian nobles, but it made independent magicians feel a strong sense of belonging.

Beyond this, the man standing at the top of the Meltor Kingdom was waiting.

‘...Let's go.’ Theodore placed his hand on the lavish door without shrinking back from nerves.

Was there weight reduction magic on the door? Compared to the weight he'd expected, the door under his palm was much lighter. It was huge, but he had no problem pushing open the door.

The scene beyond the door unfolded silently.

“Eek.”

Theodore forgot all the words he planned in advance.

*

Theodore had no idea how the situation had flowed into this direction.

It was good that he had achieved his purpose of meeting Kurt III in isolation. The meeting place was also quite good. It was a restaurant in the palace where no one could eavesdrop—the chamberlain’s restaurant.

However, he never thought there would be such a variable.

“Now, ahh—” Veronica placed a big chunk of meat on her fork and extended it to Theodore’s mouth.

It was a well-known action used by parents for their children... or between lovers. It wasn’t to be used at a royal restaurant, right in front of the king’s watchful eye.

“T-Tower Master.”

“What, do you dislike me feeding you?”

“That isn’t...”

The dour expression placed a high pressure on him, making it hard to turn her down. Theo eventually ate the meat that Veronica gave him while feeling like a child. A place for a serious conversation had turned into this.

Fortunately, Kurt III interrupted the interesting exchange between the two of them. “Haha, this is the first time I’ve seen this. Veronica doesn’t take care of anyone, so she must be quite taken with you Theodore.”

“Y-Your Majesty!”

“Don’t be shy. I called this tomboy here for you to relax, so please do so.”

So, the culprit was the king. This caused Theo to sneak glances at him. Even Veronica didn’t dare interrupt the king’s meal without permission. This meant that she had been given permission in advance or that she’d been invited.

Well, Kurt III seemed to have invited her because he thought Theo would be nervous if it were just him. In a sense, it was a small consideration, but it turned out this way.

Theo sighed deeply, looking like a person who didn’t get a good

night's sleep.

‘Well, it can’t be helped.’

Additionally, there was a chance that Veronica would side with him.

The situation was different from what he’d expected beforehand, but it didn’t change what he needed to do. He conversed with the two of them while waiting for the right time to bring out the topic.

‘I don’t know if it’ll be more appropriate to talk about it after a few dishes and drinks...’

They talked about what had happened in Elvenheim. Theo described the five, out of six, high elves he’d met. He also mentioned the power of a guardian’s arrow.

During the description of the close battle with Laevateinn, the thirsty Veronica and Kurt III often emptied and refilled their drinks. One person was a ruler of a country, while the other was too strong to go on adventures. Therefore, they felt satisfied hearing his stories.

By the time Theo’s eventful tale stopped, the desserts and tea were brought out.

Kurt III exhaled and muttered in a weak voice, “...How great. I also want to live like you.”

“I am undeserving of those words.”

“It is a good thing that I issued you the national treasure. Someone might say that I had a vision, but it was just luck. This is why the king shouldn’t be stingy.” Kurt III took another gulp of alcohol and placed his empty glass on the table.

The king had already gone through a few bottles with Veronica, but his purple eyes weren’t shaken at all. His expression was as attentive as always as he asked Theo, “So, what do you wish for now?”

“...!?”

“Don’t say there is nothing. At the very least, you must be thinking about something inwardly. I’ve listened to your story happily, but that isn’t the point of this dinner.”

Theodore bowed his head as he struggled not to reveal the astonishment on his face. He was worried about showing a disgraceful expression in front of the king. Kurt III had a friendly presence, but Theo was still below him. This was the man who had brought Meltor to its golden age. Theo’s ignorance about this area gave him a weakness.

Fortunately, he managed to maintain his composure due to training his mental power steadily after absorbing Umbra.

“...I’ll be honest.” It meant nothing to avoid it now. Theo realized this fact and opened his mouth to explain.

Regardless of who spoke first, the hierarchy here didn’t change. Right now, although he was a hero and worshipped in this country, he still had to ask for his wish in a respectful way.

After his words, the faces of the two people stiffened slightly.

Veronica didn’t say anything, while Kurt III asked with a puzzled expression on his face, “Leave? At this time?”

Looking at Theodore Miller’s life, this was the most effective time to raise his status. He had the biggest merit in the Elvenheim mission. Theo was a hero who had embarrassed the Andras Empire and elevated the kingdom’s status. If Theodore captured this opportunity correctly, he could become a marquis or an earl. No, he could get away from the nobility and receive the treatment of an elder in the Magic Society.

Kurt continued in a voice which showed his lack of understanding, “You made a big achievement with the book you took from the Zero Library last time. It is now a completed version of ‘Battle Song,’ and Meltor’s military power has increased by nearly 10% thanks to that.”

It was a feat which had raised Theodore up to the Superior rank in the shortest period of time. Nobody cared even about the excuse he’d made that the original book had been damaged in the process.

Theodore's existence was like a good luck charm for the Meltor Kingdom. The royal family and nobles increased their favorability toward Theo and would give him rewards.

“So, I will give you the right to take another book from the Zero Library.”

“.....”

“It isn't just one book. As a Prime, you have the right to freely rent any books in there. Isn't it much more efficient to train in such a rich environment?”

“...Your Majesty.” Theo understood Kurt III's feelings.

From the standpoint of his country, Kurt III couldn't let Theo go so easily.

The king wasn't concerned about betrayal. However, Theo was confirmed to be a tower master candidate by Veronica and was a national guest of Elvenheim. So, it was uncomfortable to place such excellent timber outside his field of view. The king was also worried about the empire, who would be furious after this incident.

However, Theodore didn't bend in his wish. “Your Majesty, please understand my heart.”

“You...”

“Additionally, I’ve already got a clue about the 6th Circle. I realized that the experience I gained from the mission is the foundation for it, and it is different from wrestling with ink in my room.”

Theo raised his head and confronted Kurt III’s grim gaze. There wasn’t any killing intent or fighting spirit in Theo’s eyes, but it made the person facing him feel a strong will. A heavy expression appeared on Kurt III’s face as he turned toward Veronica, who had been struggling for a while.

The moment that Theodore’s expression was darkening...

“-Hoo, I don’t know,” Kurt III muttered.

All of a sudden, something flew toward Theo.

Tak.

The item which came from Kurt III was caught by Theo. It was a heavy metal, but it was thin and filled with magic power. This bracelet, bare of any decorations, was an accessory the king had worn.

Before Theodore could ask what it was, Kurt muttered in a low voice, “It is a self-defense artifact made by the Yellow Tower Master. I don’t know if it will help you, but it is better than nothing.”

“Y-Your Majesty.”

“As soon as you leave this room, you will be struck with inspiration and won’t leave your laboratory for a few months. It isn’t an uncommon phenomenon. Isn’t that right?”

“...Yes, that’s right,” Theo agreed, noticing the meaning behind the king’s words.

Theodore Miller was too famous. If he left the kingdom without thinking, he would have to pay attention to assassins and spies.

So, he should cover up his tracks. Using the fact that magicians were often shut up in a room while involved in research, they would make it seem like Theo was still in Meltor. It wasn’t a perfect camouflage, but it would buy him some time.

In other words, it was the same as allowing Theodore to leave.

After making the drastic decision, Kurt touched his left forearm a few times. Then he turned toward Theo and said, “Then it is time for you to go. There is a lot of preparation needed to stay in a room for a few months.”

“...Thank you for your kind words, Your Majesty,” Theo replied in a small, trembling voice before leaving.

The benefits which Kurt III mentioned were privileges that hardly anyone else enjoyed. Theo could rent books from the Zero Library freely, and he would be treated as an elder. It was a huge kindness that the king had granted Theo's request.

Theo's heart was beating wildly, and a strange heat spread from it.

He now understood why so many people praised the cold Kurt III.

*

After Theodore left the room, Kurt III and Veronica were silent. They sipped their bitter tea and swallowed it. Then they bit and swallowed their sweet dessert. This process was repeated again and again until someone opened their mouth.

“...It is surprising.”

“Huh?” Veronica looked at Kurt with confusion.

“I thought you would say that you want to follow him. It is rare for the Red Tower Master to do any work directly. I was going to allow it if you grabbed my collar and shook me.”

The Blue Tower Master and Red Tower Master... It would be painful for one of the two pillars of the Meltor Kingdom to leave for a short time, but that was how valuable Theodore Miller was.

Theo was a magician who seemed blessed by the heavens. He had become stronger at a faster rate than anybody else, leaving behind achievements which were usually seen in the old stories. Theo was a youth who was following the footsteps of a 'hero.'

Veronica looked down with a strange expression. "Umm, I wanted to follow him too."

"But?"

"I was going to go with him when I was struck with a thought. I don't want to deal with him at this age."

This time, Kurt III was the one who made a strange expression. "Was there an incident?"

"I thought he would catch up with me in 10 years, but it now seems more like 5 years." As she said so, she licked her dry lips lightly. The sight of the red tongue moving smoothly could shake the heart of any man.

Even though it was only a quarter, she was the great magician who had inherited the lineage of a red dragon. The desires and passion running through her blood could never be compared to men and women of the human species. It was the fate of every generation of draconians to ignite desire in both men and women.

Veronica's instincts, inherited from her blood, were thrilled.

“...Perhaps I won't be able to call him a kid anymore.”

Her heart beat violently as she looked at the door through which Theo had left.

Chapter 121 – Crossing The Wilderness (1)

Meanwhile, the city of Mana-vil bustled with life as news of the exchange between Meltor and Elvenheim spread throughout the city.

Among them, the busiest people were the merchants from large trading companies. They were better than anyone else at sniffing out the money and didn't miss this opportunity. Some would say it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance at a jackpot.

One of Meltor's largest trading companies, Polonell thought the same. 'If we pick things up properly, then we can live well.'

However, the boss of Polonell wasn't greedy. The magic towers and even the high ranking nobles knew that the merchants would be drooling and lingering for rights.

Therefore, he picked the next best thing. This time, it was to obtain a large amount of raw materials, since the export of artifacts and goods was going to become three times larger. He would then supply the artifacts and goods to the Magic Society. The bonus was that he could gain extra money as well as a good relationship with the magic towers.

As a result, the top company, Polonell, was able to start a procession heading toward the Central Continent faster than anyone else.

Dagadak, dagadak. The carriages made an upbeat sound as they

moved quickly down a road.

Normally, they would be moving slower due to carrying a lot of baggage, but the purpose of this procession was to import raw materials quickly. For that reason, there wasn't as much baggage, and the carriages moved faster than usual.

Furthermore, the carriages they were riding weren't ordinary. It was the carriage Theodore had borrowed when he went home, the express carriage which hadn't been commercialized yet.

In the second carriage from the front, a middle-aged man laughed excitedly as he said, "Hahaha! Magician, you are lucky that you joined!"

He was a man with bushy hair, giving him the impression of a bear. That's why he was actually called 'Bear.' Bear was an experienced merchant who rejected the general preconceived notion that merchants resembled snakes or foxes.

The brown-haired young man sitting in front of Bear raised his eyes. "Lucky?"

"Yes!" Bear nodded without hesitation. "Didn't you just join on the departure date, yet you get to ride an express wagon like this? We weren't able to hire a magician to accompany us because it was such a sudden trip, so it is really lucky that our paths crossed like this!"

“Ah, that might be so.”

“Additionally, you’re the junior of the hero, Theodore Miller. Isn’t this a good relationship?”

Theodore Miller also felt lucky as he laughed inwardly at Bear’s words. Using his own name as a recommendation was working well.

That’s right. The brown-haired young man with hair which was brown, instead of black, and eyes which were blue, instead of green, was actually Theodore Miller. It would be difficult to find people who recognized him now because his face was different.

While feeling a sense of incongruity from looking at a face of a stranger, Theo recalled the information of the necklace hidden behind his clothes.

[+6 Who am I? (Accessory)]

[-An artifact created from an unknown failure. This artifact in the form of a necklace can circumvent the perceptions of others by subtly changing the wearer’s appearance. It shows its abilities regardless of the user’s will, and once the magic is released, the medium will be destroyed immediately. It can defend against magical insight, but it can’t conceal the fact that the user is ‘hiding.’

- * The rating of this magic tool is 'Precious.'

- * When consumed, a considerable amount of magic power will be absorbed.

- * When consumed, the digestion time will be 18 hours.

- * When consumed, understanding of transformation magic will increase.]

Just before Theo's departure, Vince had brought him an artifact from the magic tower. It was an equipment usually used to infiltrate enemy territory or carry out secret missions.

Thanks to it, Theo was able to disguise himself without needing to reveal his identity or status. Now, he wasn't the 'hero,' Theodore Miller, but the 4th Circle Theo who was going to visit distant relatives in Kargas.

'I honestly thought the pseudonym was too obvious, but...'

Vince had laughed and shaken his head.

"Sometimes it is better to do this than to conceal your name thoroughly. You will be going around unknown countries, so I don't think you should use an alias. Do the east call it 'hard to tell if it is a sham or real'?" His mentor had explained that a carelessly made lie could attract the human eye more than a moderate one.

In any case, his name would be meaningless if they were a person who could see through the artifact.

“Huuuu...”

In the end, this was the best way to watch out for himself.

Theodore looked out the window as the carriages kept moving. The carriages had traveled far enough that the capital and the top of the magic towers couldn't be seen. He didn't know if he would come back in the next four months or even years. It was then that Theo suddenly realized he was all alone.

His master, who always pointed out the parts where Theo was lacking, the good-hearted and pretty Sylvia, whom he had a meal with once in awhile, and Veronica, who was very caring towards him, even though she was sometimes too much... Theo wouldn't be able to see the people who were like his second family for a while.

‘No, I shouldn't have a weak heart already.’ He tried to put aside the terrifying thought and pulled out a book from his bag.

It was [Ancient Magic Overview – Balcard] which Vince Haidel had completed after decades of hard work. This was a magic book that Theo didn't understand despite reading it for half a day already.

Pararak.

The carriage suddenly became quiet, with only the sound of paper turning. Even the loud Bear knew what it meant when a magician opened a book, so he kept his mouth shut.

This was why books were good. As Theo studied the indescribable and difficult-to-understand wisdom, any misgivings would fade. The hesitation in Theo's eyes had long since disappeared, and his brain was already drifting away into the knowledge contained in the book.

Theo, who showed intense focus, was truly the image of a magician, regardless of his age.

*

As Theo started the journey, and it was different in many ways from what he thought. It was impossible to find the romance of adventure when he was literally in a carriage for hours. Sometimes he couldn't rest at night or could only take a short nap.

Despite this, Theodore, as the only magician and precious guest, wasn't tired at all. However, it was a murderous schedule for the merchants and mercenaries.

[Hoing!]

Of course, that didn't mean Theodore was just sitting there.

‘...To the northeast, the distance is roughly 2 kilometers?’

After Mitra’s abilities were awakened in the Great Forest, they could now be used in other regions. Right now, her power was telling him of an incoming enemy.

Theo could feel that there were 23 of them. Judging by the weight on the floor, they were hobgoblins. They were enemies which the procession could cope with on its own, but it would be annoying.

So, Theo’s magic power spread into the distance.

-Kieeek!

-Kirururk!

It might not be perfect, but the presence of a 6th Circle magician, enhanced with Ring of Muspelheim, was incomparable to that of an ogre. The hobgoblins knew this intuitively and retreated. In this way, he drove back the creatures which had been approaching the carriage. The procession just thought they were lucky, and there was no need to break that illusion.

Theodore’s purpose was to get to Kargas quietly, and it would only become noisy if he drew attention to it.

Thanks to Theo, the carriages moved smoothly without a hitch. By the time the horses had started panting heavily, the procession had reached the intended destination for a rest stop at nearly record speed.

It was the Sipoto Plains, which acted as the border for the Austen Kingdom and Kargas Kingdom. Unlike the grasslands which had been green until now, there was a vast stretch of plains where only sparse tufts of grass were growing.

As soon as they reached the beginning of the plains, Bear shouted loudly, “Stop! It is up to here for today! Mercenaries should be alert until the camp is ready, and the rest of the staff should get out of the carriages to install the tents and make the campfire. Then we’ll start eating after that!”

During to his hulking figure, Bear’s voice was rather loud. The sound of horseshoes was really loud, but Bear’s yell went even beyond that.

Simultaneously, the restless horses stopped moving, and sweat poured down like a shower. The carriage drivers hastily poured water on them and comforted them. Then steam rose from the skin of the wet horses. This was the result of running harshly for a week. At least they could eat as much as they wanted today, as well as recover from the fatigue by sleeping.

After Bear gave the instructions, he looked back at Theodore and asked, “Theo. It will take some time for the meal to be prepared. What do you want to do until then?”

Theo thought for a moment. So far, he had hardly left the carriage except to eat. It was because he had turned to studying the ancient magic in order to calm his confused mind.

However, the result of the week long fierce concentration was as followed:

[* Your level of understanding is high. (84.5%)]

He couldn't say that he had mastered it perfectly, but he could use easy vocabulary to trigger the ancient language magic. From this point on, it wasn't just learning but using it directly. So, this wasn't something he could achieve from being stuck in the carriage.

Theodore thought this and jumped out of the carriage. "Then I will go and get some fresh air."

"Alone?"

"There are few creatures in the Sipoto wilderness. I won't go too far away, so don't worry." Theo relieved Bear's anxious expression, then he stepped forward without thinking.

He walked until the carriages looked small and stared at the moon and stars shining in the wilderness.

‘After the Sipoto Plains is the continent.’

The Sipoto Plains were different from the creepy Red Plateau. It had a similar bleak landscape, but signs of life could be felt here, unlike at the Red Plateau. Compared to ordinary land, the land here was weak, but it was still an area where people could live. However, there was a lack of food and water, so they couldn’t live here long.

The real problem was in the land located beyond it. It was the Austen Kingdom, where the drought had started. The drought had spread and was killing this plain.

Theo had heard about the Austen Kingdom later from Vince, but he couldn’t justify their reasons for kidnapping Ellenoa. However, they weren’t evil people, and a sigh emerged as he thought about the warriors bending their pride.

So, Theo had to ask once.

“Gluttony. What was the cause of the drought that no magicians or scholars in the world could discover?”

Chapter 122 – Crossing The Wilderness (2)

The number of magicians and scholars who had sought to uncover the cause of the catastrophe far exceeded tens of thousands. It didn't fall under any theory of meteorology, and even Blundell had returned empty-handed back when he was a 7th Circle magician.

However, Gluttony replied in a casual tone, –You want to know the truth of the drought?

“Yes.”

–I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question free of charge. If you want to hear it, I will take one of your rights to ask a question.

The reason was enough to require using one of his rights for a question and answer? It might not seem worth it. However, Theodore knew from his experience so far that the information itself was priceless. Even if the information seemed useless at present, it might unravel a knot someday, especially when it was involving something like the drought.

As he nodded without any hesitation, Gluttony opened its mouth and said, –...Hrmm, understood. Then I'll teach you what I remember.

If this place had been in the middle of the Austen Kingdom, they would've cut small ear holes in the wall with a knife in order to listen.

The Seven Sins grimoire, which contained such valuable information, was opening up. Gluttony was someone who recorded the secrets of the Age of Mythology, so he might not know about modern disasters.

However, Gluttony shocked Theo with a single sentence, –The sand dragon, Desertio who lives at the center of the Meuse Desert, is at the epicenter of the drought.

“Dragon?!”

–That’s right.

The strongest species, the dragons, were a transcendent species which remained in this world after the Age of Mythology ended. They were monsters who lived for close to an eternity and looked down on all other species.

Sometimes heroes called dragon slayers would kill them, but there were only a handful of such people in the history books. The dragons were born as the strongest and were a species which spread the power of life.

However, the cause of this drought was a dragon...?

Theo couldn’t understand the response, and Gluttony continued as though it hadn’t finished yet.

–Don't misunderstand. Desertio might not be causing the drought maliciously. The dragon, who has survived for nearly a million years, is already closer to a spirit than a creature. Therefore, he changes the environment around him.

“Indeed, he is a sand dragon.”

–If Desertio was a red dragon, lava would flow from that area and a volcano would erupt every cycle. In a sense, desertification is still moderate in some ways. In other words, the sand dragon, Desertio, is just living. His lair is in the middle of the desert, and he is just waiting for the end of his life, without any malice toward the humans.

As the dragon is the strongest species in the material world, it will pay back the world's grace by returning its flesh to nature. Desertio's huge body will probably transform into grains of sand.

The grimoire ended its explanation here. On the other hand, Theodore's face distorted subtly. “What? So, the old dragon is waiting to die, and the Austen Kingdom is suffering from the aftermath?”

–Yes.

“That is too extreme!”

Theodore felt his head hurt at the unexpected answer. It wasn't a monster in the desert aiming for the end of humanity, but an old

dragon waiting for his death? Furthermore, the other side had no idea. Humans were just so weak that they couldn't endure being around him.

Gluttony chuckled like it was sympathetic. –Yes, it is as you said. Too extreme. In the ancient times, the number of dragons was high, and this occurrence was more frequent. From the standpoint of the humans and other species, the dragons were too territorial.

“...It can't be.”

–Yes, there was a war against the dragons.

It is also known as Dracomachia, the great war of that era, where some records still remain. Most of the species in the material world joined forces to hunt the dragons, who numbered around 1,000.

Even the dragons, the strongest in the world, couldn't endure against hundreds of thousands of enemies. Back then, it was an age where there were 9th Circle magicians in every country.

At the end of the devastating war, the dragons were slaughtered, leaving only a few survivors behind. The remnants of that mighty war still remain in this day and age.

Theodore's eyes shook as he suddenly found out one of the world's secrets.

The reason why the powerful dragons had almost been

exterminated was so shocking that horror overwhelmed his curiosity. He now understood what Myrdal meant by ‘a fact that you shouldn’t know.’

As if it knew how he was feeling, Gluttony advised, –So, if you were wanting to solve the problem of the drought, quit now. A dragon is a species that becomes stronger in proportion to time. If you fight now, you won’t even be able to last a second.

“I know that much. I understand that this is a story I can’t afford to get involved in,” Theodore answered as he turned away from the direction of the Austen Kingdom.

Theo hadn’t backed down even when facing Pride, but his opponent was too big this time.

The greatest magician in the kingdom, Veronica, had killed a dragon who had only lived for 3,000 years. Nevertheless, she had complained that she had almost died many times. Theo couldn’t guess just how strong was a dragon who had lived for nearly a million years.

Fortunately, the drought wouldn’t last forever. According to Gluttony, the next drought would disappear if Desertio died in the next 300 years. Until then, it would be painful, and the kingdom would just have to be patient.

In a bittersweet mood, Theodore walked back the way he came.

“Theo, you came back!” Bear welcomed him as he returned to the camp.

It seemed like the preparations had finished in the meantime as white tents were fluttering on the desolate plains. There was a fence around the camp to stop things like snakes and scorpions from getting in.

Bear’s words that he had crossed the Sipoto wilderness many times didn’t seem to be a bluff.

“Yes, the wind was cool.”

“Hahaha! It is an annoying place without any trees! It is hot like hell in the daytime, but it gets quite cool after the sun goes down.”

Then Theodore made a curious sound. “...? If that is the case, shouldn’t we move at night? The hot daytime will make the horses tired sooner.”

“Oh, good point! If this was a typical desert or tropical region, that would be the case.” Bear chuckled. “But on these plains, there are many creatures who like to move at night due to the reason you said. There are creatures like sand worms and desert ants. They only start their activities after the sand cools down.”

“Aha, I see.”

Indeed, it was the answer of an experienced merchant. Theo was convinced by the explanation and looked at the bound horses sleeping. The mobility of the party depended on the horses and carriages, so there wasn't enough power to defeat swarming creatures. If Theodore were to reveal his power, they would be able to move at night.

However, Theodore just sat down obediently at where he was directed.

‘The meal... Smoked meat in a vegetable soup? Sounds good.’

It was easy to fill the stomach with just meat, but it would be hard to cope with the constant movements if they weren't getting the proper nutrients. Additionally, a tasteless meal would have a negative effect on the morale of the group as well as the mercenaries' strength. This was why top trading companies developed basic and high quality food which could be conserved.

Dalgurak.

Unfortunately, he only took a few bites before Theodore's spoon was forced to stop.

‘...What is this ticklish feeling?’

There was an itching on the back of his neck. It was a feeling of discomfort similar to having a piece of grass brushing against it.

Theo put down the bowl and gazed in the direction where his senses indicated to look.

The wilderness meant that nothing interrupted his view, but he couldn't find any uninvited guests in the landscape which stretched out before him.

Bear was surprised by his sudden movement and asked, "Theo? What is going on?"

"Wait."

Instead of replying, Theo's eyes shone gold as he used Hawkeye. It was a secondary magic that perfectly reproduced the eyesight of a hawk. In this state, Theodore could penetrate through the darkness of the night.

At the end of his extremely sensitive field of view, a faint dust cloud could be seen.

"-The enemy...!" He shouted as he noticed its identity.

'Enemies?'

Moonlight bounced off blades, and the dust was coming from the animals which people were riding on. They were the cause of the discomfort which tickled his neck, the warning from his sixth about the approaching enemies.

However, he intuitively understood why the warning was weak, and Theodore couldn't help laughing inwardly.

'The opponents are so weak that my senses almost didn't feel it.'

Come to think of it, so far, his opponents had been too strong. From the elder lich born from the power of a grimoire, and Pride who freely reproduced the traits of creatures, to the legend ranked grimoire Laevateinn, that burned the original world trees... His senses had screamed everyday, so he couldn't help wanting to laugh now.

Theo brushed the dust off his collar and looked around.

"R-Really? Enemies are coming!"

"Take your formations! Archers, hurry up and move back behind the barrier!"

"Put out the campfire!"

The reactions of the merchants and mercenaries weren't bad. They quickly turned off the lights and armed themselves in defense positions. It would be enough to repel the enemies approaching now as the mercenaries hired by the Polonell Company were all skilled.

However, Theodore couldn't expect optimistic results. This was because the power of the group was beyond what he thought.

There were 10 aura users, and the captain was almost at the master level. The swordsman felt similar to Rebecca, who Theo had once competed against. The mercenaries wouldn't be able to go against such a powerhouse.

'I don't know who they are, but it is tough because I can't reveal my identity.'

Theo's trademark move, Magic Bullet, was currently sealed. Any 5th Circle magic and the Ring of Muspelheim were also sealed. The only tools he had available in this situation were Mitra, magic of the 4th Circle or below, close combat, and artifacts. Umbra might be okay if he used it in a manner that wasn't obvious.

'...Okay, I will try it once.' He thought deeply and acted quickly.

Theodore poured magic power into the bracelet hanging from his wrist.

Huuuuuuong!

At that moment, the bracelet started to emit a resonant sound as unknown characters emerged. The bracelet made by the Yellow Tower Master had been crafted with unknown materials and designed to be used for Kurt's self-defense.

The high-level magic contained in the bracelet soon produced warriors in the air from Theo's magic.

Ching! Ching!

It was armor. From small gaps in the armour to the boots and helmet, they looked like fully armed invisible knights. The six suits of armour stepped into the wilderness.

The name of the magic recorded on the bracelet was 'Living Armor.' Depending on the capabilities of the creator, they might be weaker than farmers or stronger than elite knights... and the one who designed these living armours was the Yellow Tower Master.

"Protect the company. This command should be kept until all enemies within a one kilometer radius have disappeared."

[Yes, my master.]

Theo calmed down the confusion of his companions at the emergence of the armor and looked at the approaching enemies. He didn't feel any tension. Neither was there a single trace of fear. Compared to the enemies he'd faced so far, these people were just stones on the roadside.

There was no chanting.

In the next moment, an intense fireball appeared above

Theodore’s head.

Chapter 123 – Crossing The Wilderness (3)

Hwaruruk!

The 3rd Circle Fireball was the most popular attack magic. Once five large fireballs bigger than an adult's head appeared, the darkness disappeared and revealed the place where Theodore was standing.

The procession members were quite far away, but the light and heat still stung their eyeballs. It wouldn't be difficult to burn a human-sized creature with this amount of power. However, the one who actually made the fireballs, Theodore, looked up at them with a puzzled expression.

‘What? I used enough magic power to make only three.’

But that worry was quickly resolved. The circular scar on his left hand, the mark of the ‘Ring of Muspelheim,’ throbbed like it was boasting of its own merits.

The mark had the ability to dramatically increase the owner's fire affinity and reduced fire magic consumption by half. It seemed like this power acted independent of Theo's will. If so, Theo had to add that variable into his calculations.

Once he finished thinking, Theodore gazed ahead of him.

“...Fast. Is it a quick animal like a camel?”

It was like he said. The dust on the horizon came close enough that he could distinguish the colour of the fluttering turbans. Camels were a rare sight on the northern continent, but in fact, camels were one of the best animals for fast riding. They were short-distance sprinters who could run around 65km/hr.

Aside from admiring it, his cold eyes also caught the targets for his fireballs.

“Go,” Theodore declared, and the five fireballs flew forward. They were aimed at the ones coming in the forefront. The vanguard of any group was strong, and the charging power of this vanguard was reduced by half.

“Å ¢ ¢ °C£...?!”

“° C ¥ £ ¢!”

However, Theo’s instincts told him there was something unusual as the enemies acted quickly.

They scattered widely in all directions, heading away from the massive magic, while the proficient enemies who remained wielded their swords directly against the fireballs. The crescent-shaped shamshirs moved, and the fireballs literally split apart, bursting in the air.

Theo scoffed in a cold manner as he watched.

Puk! Puuok! Puk!

The brow, throat and mouth... Translucent arrows pierced the areas which couldn't be protected by armour, causing a fountain of blood.

The one who had destroyed the fireball was devastated by the surprise attack and fell off the camel. The thick darkness wasn't a friend. It made them miss the wind arrows hiding behind the fireballs.

This was real magic, different from those obsessed with flashy displays. The previous attack took out five people, so it wasn't too bad.

“¢ Å ¢! Å\£ ¢ ¥ Å°C—!”

However, the enemies weren't stupid. In exchange for taking out five men, Theodore had exposed his position. Magicians were strongest in a group battle where they could exercise their abilities in a safe place. The enemy boss knew this and headed toward the lone magician with a few men.

However, he did this without knowing that it was Theodore's aim.

Was it because they had lost a companion...? One warrior came forward recklessly, jumping off the camel while drawing his

sword. The light around the curved blade proved that he was an aura user. In other words, he had a power which could cut through magic shields in one strike!

“°C°CÅ(Die!)”

“...How simple.” Theodore accepted the blade without any hesitation.

Swaeek!

It cut—no, it couldn't cut anything. The warrior who struck with his sword was confused for a moment. There was no feeling of cutting through something despite having clearly cut the enemy. The moment that his movements stopped, Theodore turned off Fluidization and punched out.

‘Battle Song. Rhapsody of Power. Mezzo Forte.’

The impact of Theo's attack was strengthened by magic. The first punch penetrated the armour in one blow and crushed the heart hidden in the ribs.

Kwang!

The warrior's breathless body was thrown back.

The enemy leader's face stiffened as he watched the scene. Then

he raised his left hand and gave instructions to his men. After his gestures, the camels running in a straight line shifted directions and started circling around Theodore.

‘An encirclement command? Moreover, it was done through hand motions? Aren’t they more like soldiers than bandits?’ Theodore’s doubts shifted to this conviction.

As proof of this conviction, the leader came forward to speak after the encirclement was completed.

“Young man, your skills are very good.”

“...The north’s official language?”

“But I believe that your skills are just up to here. If you resist anymore, I won’t be able to spare your life.”

Theodore laughed at the threat. “Are you telling me to surrender now?”

“That’s right. Our goal is your surrender, and once the ransom for you is received, you can return to your homeland.”

“Do you even believe the nonsense that you are speaking?”

It wasn’t just the leader who spoke the north’s official language that responded to Theo’s antagonism. The warriors lashed out as

well.

“-This guy!”

“This young man doesn’t want to live.”

“Stop.”

“Let’s just kill him, Boss! Even if the mage uses his fist, how can he deal with so many people at this distance?”

“I told you to stop!”

As they argued about his life, Theodore lips parted with cynicism on his tongue. How arrogant were they to think they could decide his life? There was a lot he wanted to teach them properly, but he needed to check something first.

He stared straight into the leader’s eyes and asked, “Should I even really call you bandits? Aren’t you Austen’s regular army led by a Janissary? Or a looting unit?”

“...You.”

“Don’t say that you’re not. The warriors move according to military discipline, and they use the same swordsmanship.” Theo cut off the leader with his words before continuing in a loud voice, “Isn’t it said that the Janissaries are the Sultan’s sword? Then this

plundering was ordered by the Sultan?”

The atmosphere changed after that. In the desert kingdom of Austen, the Sultan was the representative of the gods. Unlike the commoners’ perception toward the monarchy in common countries, all the people in Austen believed that they were born to serve the Sultan. In particular, the Janissaries were fanatics who would bite off their tongue if ordered to do so by the Sultan.

The enemy’s leader—no, the Janissary, replied in an eerie voice, “No, we have no affiliation with him.”

“Hmm?”

“And I’m not a Janissary. My men aren’t regular soldiers of Austen.” A white sword emerged from the sheath hanging at his waist. “Stop the chatter, we are enemies. I destroyed my name and pride, and am just a regular bandit killing merchants on the roads!”

“...Is that so?”

“I will kill you here!”

The Janissary and his men gradually approached Theo without destroying their formation.

There were seven aura users and one of the expert level. Even experienced war mages wouldn’t be able to escape from their

encirclement. However, Theodore didn't panic at all at the thought of his skin becoming like a beehive. As Theo had known earlier, they weren't ordinary enemies.

‘Then I will put the final touches on his self-professed person.’

The preparations were already finished, and Theo counted their steps in the darkness. 30m to 25 m, 25m to 20m... Then finally, it was a distance where they could reach him in one leap.

However, the moment the warriors took one step forward...

[Pall dow!] Mitra's voice resonated loudly from under the ground.

“°CÅ£ ¢ ?!”

“£ ¢ ¥ ¥ £!!”

The firm ground collapsed, and the hard floor turned into a sandy field, making them slip on the ground.

There was no way to escape it since they noticed too late. Every piece of land they tried to use as a foothold turned into sand, and every time they tried to move, their heavy weight made them sink further.

Pusususu-... The sound of the sinking sand was creepy.

This terrible sandbox was an ant hell.

“-This, guyyyy!” Only one person, the Janissary, responded to the ant hell. He was one beat late, but he managed to run across the sand and aim the tip of his sword at the culprit, Theodore. If this blow reached, it might reverse the unfavourable situation.

However, Theodore’s magic finished quickly. “[Gale, be my blade.]”

The first magic spell he had used from the Balcia Empire shattered the bodies of the warriors buried in the sand.

*

The ensuing battle was one-sided.

The warriors that the Janissary had brought with him to attack Theo were the elites, while the others were less powerful. Since the main force had disappeared from the battlefield, the mercenaries hired by Polonell were able to struggle against the remaining bandits.

Additionally, there were the six living armors left behind by Theodore.

Kang!

Living armor itself wasn't that rare. It was an inferior product made by imitating found relics, and nobles often purchased them as guards, despite the lack of practicality. However, disciplined living armour, which could deflect the sword of warriors and then attack exposed gaps, was rare.

At that moment, another warrior lost his life due to a living armor.

“A-Amazing...” The merchant Bear was impressed as he watched.

He had seen the living armour from a noble family fight against a knight but had thought it was nothing more than window dressing. However, what about the living armour currently in front of him? They were just like real knights as their swords slashed at the enemy's neck with smooth motions.

His merchant's instincts wriggled as he was filled with the desire to buy them instantly.

Thanks to the living armor and the resistance of the mercenaries, the enemies started to struggle and were destroyed without knowing their leader had already died. The living armor confirmed the disappearance of the enemies' life force, and their summoning was released.

In the end, Bear could only watch and drool over the empty space. “Ah... Too bad.”

“Huh? What is so unsatisfactory?”

“Ah, Theo!”

Bear looked over at the approaching Theodore, who was wiping off the blood stuck to his robes.

Although Bear had complained that moving away from the party was suicidal, the story was different now. He hadn't been able to see it closely, but Theo's performance had been great. They might not have won if Theodore hadn't lured the boss.

Of course, the truth was different from that, but Theo didn't say anything.

“It's nothing. Oh Theo, what happened to the leader?”

“...Dead.”

“Oh, by Theo directly?”

“Yes.”

Theodore's face wasn't that bright despite the victory, and Bear's words reminded him of the scene from that moment. The Janissary, who had been fighting to the end with his right arm cut off, knew that Theo had been trying to capture him, and made the decision without any hesitation.

He had exclaimed, “Glory to Austen’s sun, the Great Sultan!”

Theodore still didn’t understand the loyalty which had driven the leader to give up his life for the Sultan. Still, the great drought of the Austen Kingdom had driven a Janissary to looting.

Filled with more complicated emotions than the joy born from victory, Theo looked at the starry sky, realizing once again just how much of a mortal he was.

Chapter 124 – Crossing The Wilderness (4)

There were no more raids after that day.

They may or may not have been regular soldiers disguised as bandits, but their superiors could probably guess that something unbelievable had happened when they didn't return. Thanks to Theodore, the horses could move during the day without hesitation and rest at night.

The Sipoto Plains might be bleak, but it wasn't a bloody place like the Red Plateau.

With a merchant's intuition, Bear, who had been watching the horizon all day, suddenly cried out, "Oh, I am beginning to see it!"

Theodore turned in the same direction and saw sturdy walls. It was a dark colour, like baked mud. This was different to the white bricks of Meltor. They were the walls of Sipoto City, a border city of Kargas, the trade kingdom.

Theodore confirmed the sight and calmed down his senses. 'Phew, I'm glad we arrived without any more difficulty. If people, stronger than those who came the last time, came again, I wouldn't have been able to finish it quietly.'

Truth be told, exposing the living armor wasn't that wise a move. Living armor artifacts weren't rare, but they weren't common either. However, Theodore wasn't so cruel as to sacrifice people who could be saved, especially when their carriages were taking

him to Kargas. He couldn't let Bear shoulder that burden.

Some might say it was stupid, but it was part of his beliefs.

As they approached the outer wall of Sipoto, the procession gradually slowed down to be checked by the guards at the gate. The name of the Polonell Company could move a few people out of the way, but Bear chose to wait patiently.

However, his lips weren't good at staying still. "By the way, it was really dangerous! I knew that refugees from the Austen Kingdom had started turning to robbery, but I didn't think we would be attacked as soon as we got close to the border."

"Refugees?"

"Yes, I hear they have increased due to the drought. The price of water has risen 10 times higher, while those in power have run away to other countries. So, it is natural for the people to feel impatient. Tsk, tsk. For the time being, I won't be able to step into the Austen Kingdom."

Bear clicked his tongue, but Theo was forced to smile bitterly.

It would've been better if the people who attacked them had just been refugees. Bear didn't know that the regular army was the one doing the looting. Did this mean that the Sultan's Janissaries were commanders of the looting operations? It was safe to say that the kingdom was accepting it.

However, Theodore wasn't willing to tell the truth.

‘At this point, it is too big to publicize carelessly.’

Additionally, the enemies from the raid didn't have anything to prove their identities. The warriors used rough shamshirs, and even their turbans were just pieces of shabby cloth.

The Austen Kingdom would have their honor completely tarnished if this were revealed, so the warriors had used every means to get rid of their identity. Even if this wasn't the case, the scale of the incident wasn't something that Theodore could get involved in.

“...When you go back, you should increase the number of escorts.” In the end, Theodore kept his mouth shut and changed the topic.

Bear nodded before exchanging a few more words with Theodore. Fortunately, there was no need to continue the unpleasant conversation when the checkpoint guards approached. As a business company, the procedures were completed quickly. The guards' mood was heavy due to the recent lousy atmosphere, but there were no problems.

The identity card, which had been forged directly in the Magic Society, was enough to prove his identity in any country, and even if it wasn't, the name of the Polonell Company was enough to send Theo in.

Once beyond the gate of Sipoto, Theodore said goodbye to the procession, including Bear.

“Wait, are you going to leave immediately?”

Theo’s purpose was in Kargas, so there was no reason to go together. Additionally, his identity might be revealed the longer he stayed with them. It was hard for Theodore to change his diction and demeanor, since he had never been taught to do so properly.

Bear grumbled as he faced Theo’s rigidity.

“Hoo, a man who I owe a favour to. I never dreamed I would be sent away like this,” Bear said before pulling something out and handing it to Theo.

It was a plaque engraved with the two horses which symbolized the Polonell Company, as well as Bear’s name. Sensing Theo’s confusion at the unfamiliar object, Bear explained while scratching his head, “In our company, this is given to the top merchants, and one of its functions is proof of identity.”

“One way?”

“Well... it is also a type of guarantee.” Bear avoided his gaze like he was embarrassed. “If Theo presents this plaque, then you can receive the best treatment from any branch of this company. You can rent a carriage or borrow money without any interest. In many

ways, there are a lot of benefits.”

“So, the responsibility... Ah.”

“Yes, it falls to me since I am the one giving you the plaque.”

Theodore realized the meaning of this gesture and accepted the plaque from Bear. In a sense, this plaque was also a request. It was a tool signifying a good relationship between the two of them. He didn't know what value Bear saw in the fake Theo, but regardless of his intentions, the uses for this were endless.

The Polonell Company had many branches in various places, so it was possible to obtain accommodation and other miscellaneous things.

“Thank you, Boss Bear.”

“Hahaha! It is nothing. If anything comes up, please use my name.” Bear laughed for a moment before speaking in a coy voice, “And that bracelet... Is it really not possible to sell it?”

Theodore shook his head with a wry smile. “I'm sorry. This was loaned to me, so I can't just sell it as I want.”

Bear had fallen in love with the living armor after what he had seen that night. There was no need to hire them with money, and he didn't need to worry about betrayal, unlike humans. Bear was willing to pay more than 100 gold for it.

However, Theodore knew the true value of this bracelet, so 100 gold was a ridiculously small amount.

[+? Defend Me, These Tin Cans! (Accessory)]

[This is an artifact made with ancient magic which can summon autonomously moving living armor. The soldiers attached to this bracelet, made by Yellow Tower Master Norden, will move with their owner's magic power. Additionally, their performance will increase if the owner continues to supply magic power. Up to six soldiers can be called at a time, and if they are capable of their full performance, an aura attack will only cause slight damage. The armor and swords are all made of an unknown material.

* The rating of this magic tool is 'Treasure.'

* When consumed, a large amount of magic power will be absorbed.

* When consumed, the digestion time will be four days.

* (Can't be grasped with the 4th stage Appraisal ability.)

* (Can't be grasped with the 4th stage Appraisal ability.)]

The living armor soldiers had a durability which could withstand an aura attack with only minor damage! As a test, Theo had tried fighting them, and their battle skills had been comparable to that of first rate warriors. The surface of the armor had only distorted slightly when hit by 4th Circle magic, so it had the durability of adamantium.

It wasn't at all enough to hand over this treasure for 100 gold coins. Moreover, in the first place, it was something which Kurt III had lent him, so Theo couldn't sell it.

There was no room for negotiation, so Bear soon gave up. Greed was a merchant's driving force, but reckless greed would only hurt him. Additionally, Bear's discerning eyes couldn't discover the truth of the bracelet, so it was best to let it go.

"Then I'll see you later! Take care!" Bear bid Theo a last farewell before walking away. Theo looked at Bear's back for a moment, before soothing the subtle emotions stirring within him. From now on, it was time for the owner of the grimoire, Theodore Miller, to move in earnest.

'Umm... It is still too early to go there.'

After checking the position of the sun, Theodore looked around slowly.

Kargas' border city, Sipoto, had the same name as the wilderness adjacent to it, but the atmosphere was completely different. The merchants and guests from other countries explored the streets,

while sellers shouted in loud voices.

It truly felt like an exotic landscape to Theodore. Although Sipoto fell behind the prosperous Meltor, it had its own mood. There were eyes, hair, and skin colours which weren't common sights in Meltor. So, Theodore's eyes naturally moved back and forth, soaking in the sights.

For a brief moment, he forgot the weight on his back and moved like the young man he was.

*

Theodore's wanderings didn't last a long time. After eating delicious bread from the street stalls or eating fresh fruits, he realized that the sun was setting. The clear eyes of the young man instantly sank in, becoming as heavy yet sharp as a weapon. The time he had been waiting for had finally arrived.

'It won't appear if the sunset isn't at its peak.'

This was information he'd heard while interrogating Canis, the black merchant dealer in Bergen.

The shadows of the city were naturally close to others like them. Black market traders were famous for dealing with goods, but there were those who dealt in something else, like the Information Guild. Among them, the 'King of Mice' was the best.

“He never sets foot in the north, but in the central continent, he is more powerful than some noble families. I don’t know what will happen later, so familiarize yourself with the information now.”

As he recalled Canis’ words, Theodore entered the back alleys of Sipoto.

‘I didn’t know I would use that information this way.’

Stories often had simple passwords in bars, but the reality wasn’t like that. If they concealed the position of the Information Guild so poorly, who could trust the information coming from them? Therefore, Theodore focused his senses even more, and his eyes turned gold as he used Hawkeye.

He kept an eye on the graffiti carved on the wall, the garbage on the ground, and the shabby roofs.

‘Six on the third pillar, three cracked planks...’

Even secretly trained agents wouldn’t be as good as Theo. In one glance, he deciphered the password which looked like graffiti. He detected traps with his sixth sense and crossed the maze-like, twisted alleys.

“...Here.”

After 10 minutes, Theodore faced a door at a dead end. It was evident that Theodore had come to the right place. Then he lifted a

hand without hesitation.

Knock knock knock, knock, knock, knock knock knock knock knock knock.

Three brief knocks, followed by two single ones, then six brief knocks. He didn't know if the knock which Canis had taught him was still valid, but it was good if they responded.

If they ignored it, Theo would step back and find another way. He could use the plaque Bear gave him to obtain information without the need for the Information Guild. Additionally, he could also press with force and take what he wanted.

‘Now, how will they act?’

Theodore watched the scene before him and...

Kkiiik-

The shabby door opened, and a burning smell floated out with the wind.

Chapter 125 – Life Is Timing (1)

‘Does this mean to come in?’

Theo waited a moment, but there was no further reaction. He was a bit curious about the procedure which opened and closed the door, but there existed something more important than a trivial question.

It was dark enough inside that he couldn't see anything from the outside. Some people would be reluctant to step into the darkness, but Theo walked forward without any hesitation.

Step, step.

His clean-soled shoes rubbed against sand and made unpleasant noises. No, maybe they had laid the sand for this very purpose. As a rustling sound entered his ears, Theodore scoffed.

He'd noticed breathing sounds coming from the narrow passages on the left and right. However, it wasn't that their stealth was inadequate; Theodore's senses and Mitra's detection ability were just superior. It was to the extent that he could determine the number and skills of those hiding.

‘Six people, among them is an aura user. I'm not sure about a head-on fight, but his stealth is equivalent to a regular knight.’

Just like inhabitants of the dark side of the world, the life which

permeated this place was insidious and sticky. For those who lived in the shadows, a head-on battle was only a last resort, and fighting skills wasn't necessary. It was probably a prerequisite that they knew how to strike from the back, not the front.

However, Theo continued moving calmly. The nasty feeling wasn't a problem, but he didn't relax his guard either. He might find them ridiculous, but it would be stupid to not be wary.

Theo put on his best cold expression as he walked on. Then after precisely 100 steps, Theodore arrived in front of a shabby door that he calculated to be around 20 meters below the surface. Finally, a space filled with deep shadows greeted him.

‘This information guild... Is he the [King of Mice] of the Sipoto branch?’

The space was unnaturally open, and there was an unusually old-fashioned table in the center of the room. Theo's keen eyes were able to distinguish the good quality of the wood and that it was made by a skilled craftsman.

Theodore looked at the person sitting beyond the table. Under the dim light, the man who boasted a unique appearance grabbed Theo's attention. Despite having the distinct brown skin and brown eyes of the desert people, the man was big enough to be eye level with Theodore while sitting down.

Even so, the presence around him was like a fog.

‘Considerably skilled.’

It didn’t feel like the man could beat Theo, but it would be hard to catch him if he ran away. Theodore raised his evaluated level of the Information Guild by two stages. The man sitting behind the desk looked at Theo quietly and opened his mouth to say, “...It has been a long time since I’ve had uninvited guests.”

“Uninvited guest?”

Did that mean the instructions Canis provided him were wrong?

However, he got an answer to his question as the man continued speaking, “You aren’t a guest that my kids brought, or any of those who work with them. Based on your speech and clothing, you recently came from Meltor in the north.”

“How do you know that?”

“There are all sorts of tricks. How you tie a shoelace, the tan marks, dirt attached to the hem, and so on. There are many things that can’t be hidden unless you are a properly trained secret agent.”

Indeed, Theodore admired the man’s keen eye for detail. It had been less than three minutes since Theo arrived at the door. However, that man had casually uncovered Theo’s hometown and that he had arrived in Sipoto recently.

If this was the level of the man in charge of the guild, Theo couldn't doubt their credibility.

Theodore sat in the chair before him. "As expected of the best information guild in the central continent."

"Yes, who introduced you to this place?"

"A black market trader called Canis."

The eyebrows on the brown skin raised. "Canis? That cub is still alive. Though there has been no message from Meltor recently..."

"Are you acquaintances?"

"We've done business a few times. His skills aren't bad, but his way of thinking is too narrow. He must've found a pretty good rat hole," the informant mumbled before extending his thick arms. The tattoo of a two-headed serpent on his forearm wriggled.

He reached out as if asking for a handshake, before his rough face smiled. "I am Sipoto's branch chief, Gibra."

"Theo."

Gibra finished the greeting and brought up the subject first. "So, why did you come to find us?"

Theodore was relieved. Asking for the job was the same as accepting the request. He was concerned about being an outsider, but as Canis said, the Information Guild didn't distinguish between the origin and identity of the guests.

The only important thing was whether the customer could pay the price, the black market trader had said.

‘Then this story will be fast,’ Theo thought with a strange smile as he looked at his left hand.

Before leaving Meltor, he had changed all his goods into cash and stored them in the inventory. It was a tremendous amount when he added in the rewards he'd accumulated from his achievement in Elvenheim. The prices of original books or the sales commission wouldn't even make a dent in it.

There was no reason for Theodore to hesitate, since he possessed both wealth and power.

So, he said, “There are things I want to buy in Kargas.”

Gibra listened with a bright expression.

Theo continued, “I want to know the location of all the original books in Kargas and the information about the owners. I will leave it to you to act as the agent for the purchase. The status of the item is fine as long as it is an original, and if the item is bought at a reasonable price, you'll be paid part of the purchase price.”

“Original books? You mean the original copy of a magic book? It will take a lot of money to buy all the ones in Kargas.”

“How much?”

“30 gold as a deposit, the survey period— ...Ah, whoops.”

As Theo wondered about the sudden interruption, Gibra scratched the back of his head with an embarrassed expression. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take the commission. I can’t.”

“How come? If it is simply a matter of the cost...”

“No, it’s not that. Honestly, the money is good, but the timing is really bad.”

‘Timing?’ Theodore made a perplexed expression.

“Timing?”

“That reminds me, you’re from the north? Then you won’t know about a famous attraction of Kargas.”

The Kargas Kingdom was the center of the central continent and a trade kingdom, so it didn’t have anything to symbolize it. In Kargas, all logistics from the north, south, and center gathered before spreading to the rest of the continent. It was a kingdom

where numerous foreigners frequented, and there was a mixture of cultures. It would be strange if there was something unique about this place.

However, there was something behind Kargas. It was the place where money and desire gathered from all over the world in the abyss of the trading kingdom—the underground auction houses.

“Every year, it will be held in secret for a few weeks. There is a saying that the goods that move through there go beyond the yearly budget of a few kingdoms.”

“What does that have to do with my commission?”

“The auction is a place where sellers can handle things at the highest prices. Even more so when there are original books on sale.”

When Theodore made an expression of realization, Gibra continued, “You finally understand. The auction is more attractive than selling it to an unidentified buyer. The right time for the commission would be a few months after the auction ends. So, I can’t accept your request.”

Theodore was convinced by the reasonable explanation, so he wasn’t embarrassed by the rejection.

The auction house where buyers from all over the world gathered was indeed more attractive than a single buyer. It might be

possible to persuade the owner prior to that, but there would be more people who preferred the tradition of the auction house.

As Gibra said, Theo's timing was really bad.

‘...No, not yet. There is still a way.’

Theodore's expression recovered as he lifted his head. He looked at Gibra and expressed his idea, “How about participating in the auction directly?”

“If possible, that would be for the best. The auction house isn't just for sellers, as buyers can also get things at reasonable prices.” However, Gibra shook his head. “Sipoto's auction house isn't a place for the uninvited. Isn't it an event where the budget of a kingdom is moved? The guild doesn't accept commissions for entry. It will be a problem if we are caught. It is better to wait a few months for the commission.”

“That is only true if I was an uninvited guest.”

“Hmm?”

This time it was Gibra's turn to be confused. Theodore smiled and placed his hand on his chest. Everything was lining up, so it felt like the heavens were helping him. It hadn't even been a day since he'd received the plaque from Bear. The dim light shone from the palm of his hand.

Gibra's expression turned into one of shock for the first time as he grasped the identity of the plaque.

"The Polonell Company?"

"You know it."

"I would have to die if I didn't know the symbol of the top three trading companies in the north. By the way, I don't know how you got your hands on this at your age."

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that." Theodore shrugged casually.

Judging from Gibra's reaction, this plaque would qualify him to enter the auction house. Who would've expected his journey to produce this result? Theodore seemed to feel an unknown flow of life around him.

Gibra calmed down from his shock and held his chin. The expression in his eyes was different from before, and his blurred appearance seemed unusual.

"You are eligible if you have the mark of the Polonell Company. Prior to that, I want to ask one thing. Guest from Meltor, do you intend to sincerely participate in Sipoto's auction house?"

A remarkably intimidating atmosphere emanated from Gibra, but his opponent was Theodore, the master of a grimoire. Theo wouldn't be overwhelmed by anyone who wasn't a master. Above

all, Theo had no time. Just a few months was enough to make him feel rushed. The time limit was decreasing with every day that passed.

Theodore nodded with a serious expression, and Gibra opened his mouth to say, “Okay, then I will call you Employer from now on.”

Chapter 126 – Life Is Timing (2)

‘Commission!’

After hearing that, Theodore’s hard expression loosened slightly. The form of the commission had changed somewhat, but the power of the Information Guild could be useful in any situation.

This was the case even if it was the underground auction, which was a hidden specialty of the Kargas Kingdom. It was lucky that Theodore had the qualifications to enter, but if he hadn’t found this place, he might’ve missed the timing for it.

Above all, he liked Gibra’s honesty.

‘There was no need to talk about the auction, and he could’ve just accepted my commission. He could’ve made a lot of money, and I wouldn’t have received anything.’

This was the morality of a merchant, whether they were in the shade or the sunshine. There were those who treated it as the fault of the person who was stupid enough to be deceived. Even if Gibra stabbed Theodore in the back, there would be no way to make him take responsibility. Additionally, if he overwhelmed Gibra with force, it would just create another enemy.

Moreover, Gibra had pointed out frankly that Theo’s request wasn’t appropriate and taught him about the auction. It was evidence that he wouldn’t betray Theo for a few extra gold coins.

“First, I need to know about my employer’s foundation,” Gibra said.

Regardless of whether he knew Theodore’s feelings, the story began in a much softer atmosphere.

“Foundation?”

“Budget. Timing is very important, but in the end, the most powerful hand at an auction is money. If you have a thick wallet, you will win.”

“The budget...” Theodore thought for a moment before coming up with the answer. “Around 500 gold.”

“5-500? If you had come at the right time, you could’ve swept up all the original books in this kingdom. But with this, we can obtain plenty of books.”

“Then I’m glad.”

Theodore’s sense of money was a little strange, so he didn’t feel it. However, 500 gold was tough for anyone who wasn’t from a noble family to spend. Of course, 500 gold wasn’t all he had. The amount of money that Theodore had accumulated over this year was tremendous. It was to the extent that he could spare this much.

Gibra knocked against the table with a thick finger and opened his mouth, "...Then the budget isn't the problem. Is there anything specific that you want? Or is it good as long as it is an original book?"

"That is good. You can exclude unnecessary items and secure as many original books as possible."

"You want quantity over quality. Now I understand your policy." Gibra nodded a few times before suddenly pulling out a map from the drawer.

The structure of Sipoto was revealed. Theodore hadn't looked around the city yet, but the map had such a sophisticated bird's eye view that he could know its structure in one glance. Gibra pointed to several places and explained, "The auction will take place in exactly three days, after sunset. And separate auctions are going to be held at each of the displayed places."

"Separate... So, there isn't just one auction house?"

"Yes. There are at least seven, and each auction house sells different goods. So, we have to know these things in advance."

According to Gibra, the auctions of Kargas were held by renting out whole buildings in the north, south, east, and west.

The east sold weapons, the west sold clothing, the south sold accessories, while the north mostly auctioned goods not traded in

the three areas mentioned above. Theodore's original books belonged in the miscellaneous goods category.

This time, there were three auction houses being held in the north. The quality and value of the goods were lower than in the other auction houses, but the number of places increased due to the large number of goods.

Theodore's expression changed subtly, "Then am I forced to miss two auctions?"

"If you were participating alone, then yes. But we can help you there."

Since a large number of auctions were being held at similar times, the existence of agents was inevitable.

What if they had the plaque of one of the top three companies, Polonell? It meant that Theodore could cover all three northern auction houses without having to go personally. Moreover, the Information Guild's manpower meant they would be better informed than him.

However, that didn't mean he could act casually. Gibra calculated the cost for the three agents before confiding to Theo about the 'special auction' on the last day.

It was a large auction in the center, not the north, east, south, or west, which covered all types of goods! The auction on that day

was the crown of the Kargas underground auctions.

Gibra was so eager when explaining this that he couldn't help spitting. "Agents can't be used for such a big auction. Only qualified people can enter it. It will be your fight alone, so please prepare your mind for it."

The informant of the guild gave advice to his young employer in a calm voice, "An underground auction... It will be a different experience."

Theodore gave an interested smile. Truth be told, he had no interest in it no matter how many big people participated in the auction.

Compared to Veronica's fists, the Seven Swords of the Empire, and the grimoires, the powers here were just small. As long as there were no masters, it was rare for anyone here to be capable of threatening him.

In the end, his attitude remained unchanged despite the information.

"I don't know if your attitude is bad or good... Well, okay. I have accepted the commission, so I will do my best. I will investigate the list of items that will be released the day after tomorrow as well as the competitors. If I see something we need to take care of, then I will point it out."

“I understand. I accept.”

“Hmm, where will you be waiting for the news? If you have a place to stay, then please tell me.”

When Theo thought about it, he hadn't found a place to stay. Theodore pondered for a moment about where it was best to stay, before turning and asking Gilbra. The other person was the branch president of the information guild rooted across all of Sipoto and the central continent. There was no one more suitable to receive a recommendation from.

“Ah, then would you recommend me a good place to stay?”

It was natural that Gibra's face would distort at becoming a guide for a traveler.

*

For two days, Theodore wandered around the city without any intents, just enjoying the exotic scenery. Kargas might not have any unique specialties, but there was a value in being the trade kingdom. For Theodore, it was the first foreign land he had stepped on, aside from Elvenheim.

Theo often felt like a hillbilly. However, that didn't mean there were no results during the three days that Theodore waited for the auction to start.

“The branch manager told me to deliver this.”

At midnight, exactly one day before the auction, a man in a mask came to Theo's window and gave him a box. According to his sight magic, it contained several books. The masked man left as soon as Theodore took the box, but he didn't care.

He could only respond to what was inside.

“...Original books.”

It was a possibility. Although the auction house was a good place to sell, not all items would be sold at a high price. So, it was possible to get original books from those who had no preference or who wanted to sell in a hurry.

If such things appeared, Gibra smiled and promised that he would surely get it. As such, he obtained the information in two days and sent the promised goods.

‘[Gentle Breeze], [Understanding of Heat Magic], [Principles of Hardening Magic], and finally... [Canyon Summoning].’ Theodore pulled out the books with tense hands and read the information in turn.

Among them, three of the books had information which was easy to understand for beginners, so they had the ‘Common’ rank despite being original books. According to the information, the authors of these original books fell behind the present Theodore.

So, it would be strange if these original books were ranked higher than 'Common.'

However, the final book called [Canyon Summoning] was different.

[Canyon Summoning]

[This book records the history and specifics of summoning substances or living organisms which don't exist in the physical world. The author, Satomer, refused to recognize that this summoning magic was banned and wrote this book in Marduk Canyon, a place which shakes due to an ominous force. Even so, he didn't succeed in summoning a senior ranked creature and died.]

* Your understanding is very high. (95.6%)

* This magic book is rated 'Rare.'

* When consumed, your understanding of summoning magic will greatly increase.

* This is the original copy which was written directly by the author. There is a chance to contract with one of the Satomer's summons.]

It was a 'Rare' ranked book, but Theodore gazed at it with a strange look in his eyes.

He knew about summoning magic. In the myths regarding heroes, summoning magic often played a big role. However, in this era, summoning magic was mainly regarded as a remnant of old times without any use.

Summons like rock giants or ice dragons appeared in the stories, but even the best summoner on the continent in present times was limited to intermediate level summons.

Would it be useful to learn this summoning magic? He read [Canyon Summoning] several times because he was interested, but the conclusion didn't change. Theo didn't know why, but summoning magic had a limit.

'Hoo, if the situation wasn't like this, I would postpone it until later...'

It couldn't be helped. The deadline was approaching, so he had no right to grumble about the food. Theodore held out his left hand on top of the original books and named [Principles of Hardening Magic] and [Canyon Summoning] as today's prey.

"Eat, Gluttony."

The tongue moved and swallowed the two books at the same time.

['Principles of Hardening Magic' has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[An original book has been consumed, but the fragment of soul contained inside is too weak for 'Synchro' and 'Transmission.' It will be absorbed into the user's soul.]

“Oh?” Theodore’s eyes widened at the unexpected words. He didn’t know this would happen because he had never eaten a ‘Common’ ranked original book.

In a sense, it was good news. If he went through Synchro or Transmission for every original book, it would waste too much time. In that case, if it was a ‘Common’ ranked original book, he could expand his vessel just by eating it.

The digestion sound of the main dish rang out one beat later.

['Canyon Summoning' has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[Your understanding of summoning magic has greatly increased.]

[An original book has been consumed. Synchro rate will be

checked with object name 'Satomer'... It is judged a normal rate. You will absorb a fraction of Satomer's proficiency. The duration of the episode is 40 minutes and 25 seconds.]

[Synchro is starting.]

Shortly afterwards, as always, Theodore's consciousness fell into darkness.

Chapter 127 – Life Is Timing (3)

The first sensation Theo felt when his consciousness awakened was the weight of the quill pen being held between his fingers.

He was writing something intently. The lightweight quill pen felt as heavy as a metal spear, and the area from his wrist to his elbow throbbed every time he moved. It was painful for Theodore who had yet to completely awaken.

Still, he calmly reached out with his senses.

Then... ‘This-is it a summoning magic formula?’

The hand, which wasn’t his own, was writing a summoning magic formula without resting. The writing speed was truly terrifying. This was evidence that he had more knowledge of summoning magic than anyone else.

Theodore was convinced after seeing it. The owner of these dried up fingers was Satomer, the best summoning magician in the modern age. However, Theo wasn’t given a chance to be impressed by that face.

“...No, no,” an unpleasant voice flowed from his throat. The voice, like scraping iron, sounded like it came from a patient with a serious illness. His phlegm contained blood, and he found it hard to breathe. Nevertheless, Satomer struck the desk with a weak punch and shouted loudly.

Kwang! The ink bottle fell, soaking the sheets of paper.

“This isn’t it...!” The magician cried out in a husky voice as he turned his laboratory into a mess. He kicked down the innocent chairs and threw ornaments made of glass. The unfamiliar body was throbbing with pain, but Satomer’s frustration was even fiercer.

Theodore couldn’t stop the body, so he had no choice but to watch.

The rampage lasted a few minutes. Then Satomer took in rough breaths and turned to look somewhere. There was a dirty mirror, but it was so dusty that it was hard to see his face unless he got close.

Normally, the surface would’ve been wiped with a wet towel, but the person in front of it was a magician.

“Clean.” The dirty mirror was cleaned with a single word, and the reflection of a middle-aged person appeared in it. He had distinctly pale skin and lips which were bitten repeatedly, with scabs covering them. His eyes looked like they had been unable to sleep for a few days.

‘The last summoning magician, Satomer.’

Looking at his appearance, Theodore was reminded that this man

hadn't lived over the age of 50. Satomer had a fragile body because he wandered around all types of places in the continent, accumulating fatigue and toxins.

If so, Satomer was already near death at the time he wrote this original book.

At that moment... "Kuk, kukuk, kukukukuk..."

The middle-aged man stared in the mirror with his terrifying eyes, then he laughed hysterically like he couldn't stand it anymore. Satomer laughed while staring at himself in the mirror, but Theodore had the impression that Satomer was looking at him. No, the gaze was intense enough that it wasn't just an illusion.

Unsurprisingly, Satomer talked to him first. "Kuhuhu, did you come to laugh at me?"

'Huh? Laugh?'

"Don't pretend you don't know! Do you want to make fun of this Satomer's summoning magic too?"

According to the records, the possibilities of summoning magic had long been cut off when Satomer was still alive.

The money and materials it consumed were huge, and there was no way to make any achievements. So, in the Magic Society, summoning magic had been treated like an uninvited guest. They

might not despise it, but the magicians had factions during gatherings.

Summoning magicians, including Satomer, had been unable to step into any factions. So, in the end, Satomer had left the magic towers, and summoning magic had ceased.

It might be quite unfortunate for Theodore, but that resentment had accumulated for many years and turned into a grudge.

Satomer continued to spit out cynical words, “I don’t know why you are here. You are a 6th Circle magician and young, much better than me who stayed at the 5th Circle until I died. Why do you want my knowledge? It is obvious that you want to mock me!”

Theodore wasn’t upset by the sarcastic remark. Instead, he felt a bit saddened by the hedgehog-like attitude.

Satomer had been a magician who walked the magic path he wanted until the end, yet he had only been snubbed by the people around him. It was a shame for Satomer, but Theo didn’t think Satomer’s life was meaningless.

Therefore, Theodore answered in a respectful tone, ‘That is a misconception, Senior Satomer.’

However, Satomer’s response became even more agitated. He made a hollow expression at Theodore’s words, pointing to his own face while muttering, “Senior? I am your senior?”

‘I can’t think of a proper title. If you are in a bad mood, then I can call you something else.’

“...That’s okay, what a funny guy.”

What was the reason for this reaction? Satomer spat at his own face in the mirror before sitting down gloomily in his chair. Then he sighed like a tired monk on a hard journey. He stared blankly into space, and Theodore waited patiently for him to open his mouth first.

Satomer continued looking with vacant eyes before speaking. As he recalled Theodore’s memories through Synchro, Satomer spoke Theodore’s name naturally.

“You are Theodore Miller?”

‘Yes.’

“What a blessed child. Reaching the 6th Circle in your early 20s, you are really overflowing with blessings. I don’t know why a person like you wants knowledge from a loser like me.”

His tongue was still sharp, but this time, it was directed towards Satomer himself, not Theodore. Theodore shook his head as firmly as he could. ‘Senior isn’t a loser.’

“Fuck, don’t try to comfort me just because I’m upset. I don’t want to hear it from a child whose hair hasn’t even fully grown yet.”

‘If you look into my memories, you will know that I am the owner of a grimoire.’

“What, are you showing off?”

Then Theodore’s rebuttal entered Satomer’s ears. ‘I asked the grimoire something before I came. I asked it why summoning magic is weaker than every other type of magic and if the summoning magic recorded in the legends is just fiction.’

“...Is that so?”

‘The grimoire had an answer. The reason why summoning magic doesn’t work properly doesn’t have to do with the system itself.’

Satomer was so concentrated on Theo’s words that his eyes watered because he hadn’t blinked. His eyes were paused in a scary way as the glass he held in his hand broke, causing blood to drip down. Satomer might pretend to be cool, but his essence was a magician. It might just be a fragment of the soul, but the human called ‘Satomer’ was a mage down to his bones.

So, Theodore told him the truth without holding back, ‘As the Age of Mythology came to an end, the barriers around the material world became stronger, making it difficult to borrow the creatures

and powers of other worlds. It was impossible to summon a senior rank a thousand years ago, and in your days, it was difficult to even summon a lieutenant.'

“.....”

Theodore couldn't guess what the response would be to his cruel answer. It was just that the road Satomer had been running on for his whole life had been broken from the very beginning. Satomer looked down at the ground for a moment, before looking up at the shabby ceiling and biting his lips.

Then he laughed in an unrecognizable way. “Ha, haha, hahahahaha...!”

‘S-Senior?’ Theodore asked with worry, wondering if Satomer had gone crazy.

“Yes, that’s it! That is why they didn’t answer my call! The world itself is the problem, so it is meaningless no matter how many times I fix the formula! The material world itself sucks! This damn timing! Uhahaha!”

Theodore was confused about whether this was insanity or joy. Would he react this way if the work he had dedicated his entire life to was all in vain? However, Satomer didn’t think so as the raw expression on his face disappeared.

Then he spoke in a pleased voice, “I wasn’t wrong! My research

didn't fail! My magic... My dream wasn't shabby!"

Satomer rejoiced sincerely. He had tried summoning magic until the end of his life but couldn't obtain anything. Satomer couldn't summon the existences he dreamed of during his childhood. So, the life of the man called Satomer was literally meaningless.

However, that wasn't it. His efforts were correct. The summoning magic he dreamed of did exist. It was simply that he couldn't overcome the powerful obstacle that was this world. So, there was no reason to feel regretful. The life's work of a magician was saved thanks to this enlightenment.

The magician with a strong pride, Satomer, bowed and expressed his sincere appreciation, "Thank you, Theodore Miller. I didn't know I would resolve my lingering attachment in this way."

'What do you mean...?'

"Well, it is okay if you don't know. It isn't easy to explain it with my mouth. Then let's resolve the problem quickly. There is little time left."

'Ah!'

It was as he said. Meanwhile, Satomer's room was filled with an unknown darkness which had already swallowed up half the floor. Theodore had the gut feeling that Synchro would end the moment the darkness touched Satomer's feet. It was proof that the time

limit of 40 minutes and 25 seconds was almost done.

Before that, Satomer said farewell, “Take whatever knowledge I have! With your brains, you might be able to get more use out of it than I could.”

‘Senior...!’

“I’ll give you one hint. If as you said, the barrier of the material world is blocking the summoning, a magician will have to break down that barrier or provide a separate doorway.”

However, breaking it down by force was out of the question. In order to be able to break down the barrier of the material world, a legendary grand master was needed. Even Veronica wasn’t capable of it, let alone the current Theodore. Therefore, Satomer was clearly trying to teach him about the second way.

As though Theo’s thoughts were correct, Satomer smiled. “You are still young. I wish I had a young brother like you, but I’m glad we met. If there is a god, their personality must be quite twisted.”

‘Seni...or....’

“Go, there is no point saying goodbye to a dead man.”

As Theo left Satomer’s body, Satomer’s voice echoed in Theodore’s ears, [Your body already contains a door that leads to another dimension. I don’t know where it leads, but if you use that

passage with summoning magic, you can call senior level summons.]

‘.....’

[Take the one who signed a contract with me. I forgot its name, but it will be pretty useful.]

The rough voice of the best summoning magician in the modern age, Satomer, faded into the distance. If possible, Theodore wanted to say thank you. What would Satomer’s response be to that? Theodore couldn’t help laughing at the thought as he was sucked in by an enormous suction power.

He was on the verge of losing consciousness when he heard a familiar voice,

[Synchro with the target called ‘Satomer’ has ended.]

[Synchro rate is 76.4%, there is no loss of proficiency.]

[Satomer has handed the coordinates of a contract over to you. If you want to contract with his summons, you will need to link the summoning spell while recalling the string of coordinates.]

[A new feature has been added to ‘Ring of Muspelheim.’]

Chapter 128 – Kargas' Underground Auction (1)

In the central continent, sunset was one or two hours behind the south and north, where the sun started to fall at 6 o'clock in the evening.

For that reason, Kargas' lively nights were short but intense. No one could deny that such geographical conditions contributed to the rise of the trade kingdom. It was sincere enjoyment when the sun shone, and once the moon emerged, there was more entertainment than any other country.

The trading kingdom of Kargas was this type of two-sided country. Just like how long shadows stretched out behind the radiant light, the subtle desires of people gathered in the back alleys of the bustling city.

The climate of the large border city of Sipoto, where a large quantity of people moved through, was no exception. No, in fact, the night prospered in proportion to the number of outsiders. Those who didn't set up signs during the day would start shouting throughout the city as soon as the sun went down.

Then there were those who gave seductive smiles and suggestive gestures to those passing by.

"The handsome fellow over there! It is a chance to get with a hot babe from the south for only 1 gold!"

“Hey, why are you picking up gum like that? Our store is full of beautiful girls from the north! The best service!”

There were those who aimed for the gap between that.

“A gorgeous half-elf beauty is waiting for tonight’s master! Only the first four will be accepted! One time is five gold!”

“Hey! What a shameful human!”

“Isn’t it five gold for an hour, instead of the whole night? Stop talking nonsense!”

Of course, sometimes there was a bit of fuss. However, the residents of Sipoto smiled instead of frowning, evidence that such an uproar wasn’t anything new. It wasn’t uncommon for drunks to hit a brick in the backstreets or for pickpockets to move among the crowds. In other words, this was the chaos of a main street.

However, the atmosphere of the night market was a little bit different tonight.

Ching! Ching! Ching!

Several heavily armed knights marched through the crowd with loud noises. An old man in an unusual outfit followed them leisurely. The knights, who had considerable skills, were escorting

him. Then as the entire area fell silent, it was like a lord was making an appearance.

However, it wasn't just that.

“Make way! Agent of the Orcus Company is coming through!”

There was a horse-pulled carriage moving through the road, creating a path through the citizens roughly with loud yells.

On one side of the lavish carriage, there was a flag of a hawk which symbolized the Orcus Company. This was considered one of the top three companies in the central continent! It was also said that the power of money the company could use was equivalent to that of royalty. Even the guards didn't dare restrain them, so the authority they had was obvious.

Additionally, a number of other bigwigs had appeared all over the city. A wealthy person exiled from the Austen Kingdom, a mercenary leader who led A rank mercenaries, nobles visiting from neighbouring countries... They were all well known figures in their field.

These people were those who came a long way to participate in the underground auctions, the hidden specialty of Kargas.

“What a spectacle.” However, Theodore ridiculed them with a cold face. “Driving a carriage in the middle of the city... The agent of a business company shouldn't be acting so stupidly.”

“Cough, hrmm, cough...!” Someone started coughing at Theo’s sharp words. Theodore didn’t like the reaction, so he looked over and asked, “Are you afraid someone will be listening? You are the branch director of the Information Guild.”

That’s right. Right now, the King of Mice, who was the head of the Sipoto branch, was accompanying Theodore. However, Gibra’s appearance was different from what Theo had seen underground. Theo didn’t know what method was being used, but Gibra’s height was now similar to Theodore’s, while and his skin colour was similar to everyone else’s.

It seemed like an impossible disguise because Gibra had been so unique.

The seemingly ordinary middle-aged man, Gibra, replied in a reproachful voice, “Employer, the Orcus Company isn’t just a group making money. You should be careful about any statements you make with your mouth.”

“What does that mean? Please explain it properly.”

“Uhh... The cost for the information is separate from the commission fee...”

“Tell me.” Theodore smiled as he played around with a gold coin. His attitude made the gold seem like it was just a pebble.

Gibra took it quickly, and after confirming it was pure gold, he decided to open his mouth. Five gold coins had already been consumed this way, but Theo had no dissatisfaction because Gibra gave valuable and steady information.

Gibra delivered the information using an aura technique which eastern warriors used. It was called Sound Transmission.

[Don't answer and just listen. This information isn't something I'm sure about. Otherwise, it would be worth at least 10 gold.]

Simultaneously, Theodore nodded naturally.

[The Orcus Company was founded just 27 years ago, so it is still new. There wasn't a solid background or a great deal of business talent.

“.....”

[But in less than 30 years, it has grown to be one of the top three companies in the central continent. Even if they got lucky, that growth is beyond common sense. So, our guild decided to send elites to dig out the information.]

It was definitely as he said. A common company growing to become one of the top three in the central continent within less than 30 years...? It was impossible unless the god of luck was at their door.

Theodore thought of more questions after knowing about the Information Guild's actions. Maybe they planned to expand their power by discovering the Orcus Company's secret.

However, Gibra's expression sunk heavily. [None of them returned. They were elites who could at least escape even when the opponent was a master, but none of them came back. After that, we didn't accept any requests from the Orcus Company.]

“...Did you decide to give up?”

[Just the direct investigation. The indirect investigation continued. And we realizing an amazing fact.]

Theodore couldn't help squinting and realized that Gibra was sweating slightly.

[All the people who persecuted the Orcus Company or who stood in their way are dead. It wasn't due to assassins. They died because of a sudden illness, an accident, or were betrayed by the people around them. In the meantime, the Orcus Company easily got what they wanted.]

“Is there any evidence?”

[Not at all. If there was evidence, would we remain quiet? They would've paid a price for all of the dead.]

In the shadow world, loyalty was absolute. Members who didn't

feel loyalty toward their organization wouldn't last long.

There were different motives behind the loyalty. Logically, it wasn't a question of good and evil but giving back what they had received. Indiscriminate violence was part of the nature of humans. The Information Guild was relatively moderate, but they couldn't escape from feeling like this.

However, Gibra said that retaliation was impossible.

‘...Orcus Company, I have to remember that.’

It might be groundless, but Theodore felt a strange sense of anxiety inside him.

People who had been abandoned by their family and friends, had suddenly become ill, or had encountered an incident... At first glance, they seemed unrelated, but Theodore knew of one possibility which could link them.

Thousands of random illnesses, inviting misfortune such as a lightning strike from the dry skies, and confusing the hearts of others... they were all acts which the Magic Society had declared as taboo.

‘Black magic.’

The magic system had mostly disappeared after the necropolis of the warlocks had been subdued a few centuries ago.

In principle, if Theo suspected information about the possible existence of black magic, he should inform the Magic Society and arrange an investigation team. However, the present Theodore was an invisible person hiding secretly in a distant country. He wasn't in a position to communicate with an investigation team or the Magic Society.

Theo could only hope that this foreboding feeling wouldn't come true.

*

After Gibra's story about the Orcus Company, the two of them walked through the city wordlessly. Some people felt the uncomfortable atmosphere and carefully avoided them. The unnatural silence continued until they reached the gambling casino which contained one of the northern auctions.

This was when the two people neared the entrance,

"You're here." A man intercepted their path and greeted them with a polite attitude.

Unlike Theodore who didn't know who the man was, Gibra responded as if he had been waiting for the greeting. "You're on time, Akan."

"Yes, Branch Director."

Then Gibra turned to Theo and said, “I haven’t introduced you yet. This guy is Akan, a member of the Sipoto branch.”

“Ah, yes.”

Regardless of whether he knew that Theodore was the employer, Akan bowed and treated Theo as politely as he did Gibra.

Akan didn’t look even 30 years old, but since he was a member of the Information Guild, it was meaningless to grasp his identity with just his appearance. The pair became a trio, and they approached the casino.

Then a security guard blocked the three of them. “I’m sorry. Today, we are holding a special event at our casino and won’t accept those who aren’t invited.”

Akan walked forward without any hesitation. “Ha, do you know who I am?”

“Huh? T-That...”

“That’s okay. I can tell that you have a dull head, and I will need to make it obvious to you.”

This was a pride which went beyond arrogance! The appearance of the polite guild member had completely disappeared. It seemed

like he actually was an important member of a business company. The guards became nervous at the attitude of Akan, who was big and using rough movements.

Theodore admired the change in Akan, who seemed like a real actor. ‘Indeed, this is the Information Guild.’

The man called ‘Akan’ was an excellent scammer who could disguise himself and trick the eyes of others. If Theodore had been in the position of the security guard, he would definitely have been deceived. Akan’s behaviour was perfect without any flaws.

Within a short amount of time, Akan pulled out an object. It was the item which Theodore had handed him in advance, the mark of the Polonell Company.

“Now, if you have eyes, look! Do you dare to doubt my qualifications after seeing this?”

“...T-The Polonell Company?”

“Hah, you’re making another mistake.”

“Huh? M-Mistake?!” The guard’s body shook at the words. It was obvious that he was uneasy.

“Even though you know my position, you are still blocking the way. Is this a challenge to the name of the Polonell Company?”

“Ah, no! T-that’s not it!” The guard quickly cleared the way while bowing at a 90 degree angle. “I’m sorry! Have a good time!”

“Tsk, be careful next time.”

“Yes! I will keep that in mind!”

There was no inspection performed for Theodore and Gibra, and the two people followed behind Akan’s big steps. The security guards at the front door had seen the suffering of the first security guard. So, there was now no security guard who dared block the three of them.

Gibra chuckled as they crossed the threshold of the northern auction house. He pointed to the stiff behaviour of the guards and said, “How was that, Employer? Wasn’t it fun?”

“...Certainly. You do as much as you receive.”

“Huhu, it isn’t over yet. You will be much more surprised by the end of the auction.” Gibra’s disguised face smiled.

Step, step.

At a corner of the casino, the steps of the three people walked past the security guards and down the stairs to the underground area.

There was a such a vast space hiding under the casino that Theodore made a surprised expression as he calculated the underground space. It was an area which could comfortably accommodate a thousand people.

The sight which was beyond his imagination didn't end there. This was a special place in the Kargas Kingdom—an underground auction house. The three people descended a few dozen meters before the true face of the auction house was revealed.

“...Hah.” Theodore was forced to stare blankly as he arrived at the entrance.

He didn't know that this type of space would be hidden in a city which wasn't even the capital. ‘No, I knew but didn't realize it.’

Seeing it with his own eyes was completely different from hearing the information from Gibra. Dozens of colourful chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and from the floor to the pillars, nothing was shabby. All the luxury and debauchery of the city seemed to flow into here.

The bottom of the auction house was alive and breathing. A masked man, a man in a robe, a woman in a dress, a man in armour, a man sipping from a glass of wine...

There was a whirlwind of human desire raging before the magician. It was a desire completely different from the magicians who pursued truth and the causes of various things.

A faint dizziness welled up inside Theo.

“Hey, Employer. What is it?”

“...It’s nothing.”

Theodore took a firm step forward into his first experience with human desires. The one who had created a storm in Meltor was now entering this rich country.

“Let’s go.”

The curtain rose on the first day of Kargas’ underground auction.

Chapter 129 – Kargas' Underground Auction (2)

Once again, Theodore was a model student. When other students had been going out after school, drinking and meeting friends, he had stayed in the library and stuck faithfully to his duties as a magician.

He had never stepped foot into a tavern or entertainment house out of curiosity. In that sense, this place was an unknown experience for Theodore.

In the center of the auction house, a gentle-looking middle-aged man raised his hand.

[No. 176, 50 gold has come out! Is there anyone else? After 10 seconds, the item will be awarded to customer No. 176!] It wasn't loud, but the voice of the host resonated through the wide auction house.

This was because the necklace around his neck was enchanted with 'Voice Amplification' magic. The artifact transformed a small whisper into a loud shout, allowing the auctioneer to speak for hours without worrying about a hoarse neck.

However, there was no choice about his busily moving eyes.

Despite the crowd around him swarming like ants toward a cake, the host cried out in a cheerful voice, [Yes, No. 238! A bid of 60

gold! Any more? There are still three more bidding opportunities!]

The bidding method of the underground auction wasn't too different from other auctions. Participants had a sign with their number and would raise it showing they wanted to bid, then they would raise their fingers to indicate the bid amount to the host.

However, this place was outside the boundaries of the law, so the rules of the underground auctions weren't exactly the same. Gibra whispered to Theodore in a tense tone, "The underground auctions have additional rules that don't exist in ordinary auction houses."

"Additional rules?" Theodore asked with a strange expression.

He knew about the ordinary rules, but he didn't know there were additional rules.

Rules and morality were no use in a lawless place like this, and those gathered at the auction house knew this better than anyone else. Would they concede to new rules being added? Theo couldn't understand it.

Gibra smiled bitterly at his question and replied, "As Employer said, when the underground auctions first began, all sorts of struggles occurred. Making a bid in order to raise the price or colluding with others to increase the burden on the competitors... There were even cases of using poison or assassins to reduce the number of participants."

“How common.”

“Well, yes. It was 30 years before this auction when a major incident occurred.”

Theodore’s ears pricked up at the mention of a large incident. This wasn’t an ordinary person but the branch direction of the Information Guild on the central continent, the ‘King of Mice.’ In other words, it would definitely be a major incident and not exaggerated.

Unsurprisingly, Theodore found it hard to maintain his expressionless face at Gibra’s next words.

“To sum it up, a member of the royal family was killed.”

“-Huh?!”

“Come now. It is an open secret, but don’t make a loud sound. There are those who hate hearing about what happened.” Gibra took a drink from a passing servant and drank from it before explaining.

At that time, the underground auctions had been a lawless place, so it had been rare for people to reveal their identities. Kargas’ 4th Prince, Musica, had found out about the auction house and entered disguised. He’d been able to conceal his identity as planned, but it would’ve been better to reveal it.

At the very least, he wouldn't have received a glass filled with poison.

“Since then, there have been a few more stringent rules in the underground auctions. Be careful of touching an opponent when you don't know who they are.”

“Hah, this place is still standing after that?”

“Fortunately, he wasn't the heir to the throne but the 4th Prince. If he were the heir, all of Sipoto would've been accused of treason.”

The 4th Prince might have died, but the amount of money the Kargas Kingdom earned through the underground auction was too great. It was enough to conceal the fact that a member of the royal family had been killed and to execute the assassin. The king of Kargas saw more value from the underground auctions than one of his useless sons.

Theodore was able to accept this based on his understanding of the Kargas king. Thus, this was the origin of the unnatural rules in the underground auctions.

Then Gibra changed the topic as he pointed to the next auction item. “Oh! Employer, over there. It is today's first original book.”

“...Indeed.”

“Huh, just forget about what I told you. It has already happened,

so there is no point wasting time worrying about it.”

Theodore smiled at the words. “I understand. Then let’s focus on the auction.”

*

The special rules of the Kargas underground auction were like this:

1. The minimum bid starts at 90% of the market price.
2. Participants may increase the bid by at least 10%, and it can’t be over 100% of the minimum bid amount.
3. One item listing may be bid on 10 times.
4. Each participant can bid five times per item.
5. Each participant can bid up to 50 times.
6. The winning bid can’t exceed the the minimum bid price by 10 times.

In some ways, they were better than the rules of a general auction house. The sellers were able to sell the item at least at the market price, and buyers were able to bid without making it a price

competition.

It would be difficult to set fair rules in an auction house where collusion often occurred. Therefore, participants of the underground auctions often hired professionals. In order to not fall for any tricks, hiring a professional for auctions was the best way to go about it.

Theodore quickly arrived at the same conclusion. ‘...It is tricky. I read a few books about auctions, but it isn’t something that an amateur can get involved in.’

Despite his genius brain, he would find it hard to compete with experts in the field since he had no experience.

This was especially the case if he was going against the auctioneers of Sipoto who knew the rules and trends of the underground auction houses better than anyone else. If Theodore was participating in the underground auction by himself, it was clear he would’ve wasted a lot of money.

However, Theo had a different purpose, so he hired someone who was better than some auctioneers.

[No. 381 has won the original book [Applications of Lightning Arrows] for 50 gold! My sincere congratulations!]

Akan’s resourcefulness didn’t just end with acting. He was someone with skills worthy enough that Gibra had chosen him!

Akan easily beat another professional auctioneer and won another original book for Theo.

Just like the other four original books they'd bought in this auction so far, this one didn't have a 'Rare' rating, but it wasn't a bad profit. If this continued, Theo would be able to obtain more than 20 original books by the time the auctions ended.

“Hahaha! How is it? It wasn't a waste of money to hire us.”

“Yes, truly wonderful skills.”

It might be patronizing to say something like this, but Gibra was clearly in a good mood.

Servants brought [Applications of Lightning Arrows] to Theodore, who placed it in his inventory. He felt a little bitter about hiring three agents at 10 gold per day, but this was enough to show him that the money was worth it.

Theo had simply wanted an assistant from the Information Guild, so this was a pleasant surprise.

At that moment, his right temple tickled from someone's gaze.

‘Again.’

It was a little bit annoying, but Theodore suppressed the emotion

and met the gaze calmly. There, a fat man was staring at Theo with a heated expression. The fat man's body reminded him of Professor Balloon from the Bergen Academy.

According to the Information Guild, he was the nouveau rich 'librarian' called Coulson.

"Ah, he doesn't operate a real library. He doesn't like reading books. He just likes collecting books in order to prove his status. He made a collection with all the books he bought, giving him that nickname. Well, if he thinks it will damage him then he will hand it over."

However, Theodore had directed Akan to buy as many original books as possible, so Akan had taken all of them from Coulson. However, Theo didn't feel the least bit guilty. He didn't buy books to read but to live. As a magician, he disliked fools who placed a value on information.

Coulson hurriedly turned head away from the cold light in Theo's eyes. Theo's wasn't the type of spirit Coulson could dare go against. Theodore turned away from Coulson's unsightly appearance toward another person.

'The only real contender is that man.'

The man had white hair and a white beard, along with so many wrinkles on his skin that he looked like tree bark. Despite that, the old man's posture was as straight as a pine tree, and the intensity in his gaze wasn't any less than that of a young man

The nickname given to him by the Information Guild was ‘Old Books Maniac,’ and his name was Heinrich. He was a scholar who would read books until he died. Although he didn’t hoard books like Coulson, Heinrich never backed down when it came to getting a book he wanted.

This meant that he was willing to spend as much money as it took. It was an image which Theodore didn’t hate, but it made it hard for him. Theo looked at the upright profile of the old man and turned his head away.

The sound of the cart carrying the next sales item tickled Theodore’s ears.

At that moment, the host cried out, “Oh, No. 107! No. 107 has increased the bid by 100%! The minimum bid for this item is 20 gold, so from now on, you will have to bid over 42 gold!”

The Old Books Maniac, Heinrich, raised his sign faster than anyone else. A few people who had already visited the auctions reluctantly gave up after seeing Heinrich’s action as it meant that Heinrich’s obsession was great.

It was common sense that they would have to pay five times the price if they competed with the old man who wouldn’t give up.

However, at that moment...

“N-No. 381! 100% has been bid again! 60 gold!”

Theodore’s agent, Akan had raised the sign. It was beneficial to withdraw and allow Heinrich to gain the book, but he couldn’t refuse his employer’s instructions. That’s right. It was Theodore Miller himself who put in the second 100% bid.

“Akan.”

“Yes.”

“You must buy it. The budget for the item is 200 gold, so I will allow you to go up to that limit.”

Akan’s eyes showed that he couldn’t understand, but he just nodded shakily. The money was coming from Theodore, so the Information Guild wouldn’t receive any damages. Gibra tried to stop him, but Theodore couldn’t resist buying this original book. It was natural since the item was meaningful for him.

The title of the original book was [Introduction to Elemental Magic II]. It was an elemental magic theory book written by Myrdal Herseim. If Theo bought the original book, he would be able to talk to Myrdal again.

Furthermore, the fragment of soul from a sage was worth a few times more than others. It was an item he absolutely couldn’t miss.

“N-No. 107 has come back with 100% again! Now it is 80 gold!”

From here on out, it was war. The old man's fierce gaze stared at Theodore. The young magician would never give up, so he also stared back with powerful eyes.

The bidding war at the northern auction house began.

Chapter 130 – Kargas' Underground Auction (3)

“The current bid is 80 gold! A bid by guest No.107!”

Beneath the surface of the host's calm facade, he was completely bewildered. It was because he had never experienced such a fight for an original book.

He didn't know about the past when there had been no duplication magic, but now that copies were scattered all over the world, the value of the original books was forced to fall. Only the wealthy wanted original books to decorate their libraries. However, that wasn't enough for the bidding war between the two participants to go so high.

The price of 80 gold, which was more expensive than jewellery, made the agent of the Information Guild hesitate. However, Akan gripped the sign and looked at Theodore, who nodded without hesitation. It was an expression that showed his determination to acquire the item without caring about profit or loss.

Akan closed his eyes and spread out all 10 fingers.

“Yes, 100 gold! 100 gold! Guest No. 381 has bid 100 gold, and the countdown will start again! 10 seconds remaining!”

The host and the audience, who initially had no interest in original books, were now excited about the sudden prosperity.

To put it bluntly, the northern auction houses were smaller than the ones in the other areas. So, the limitations of miscellaneous goods such as jewellery were clear when compared to weapons which could be traded at high prices. Rare artifacts might appear occasionally, but most of them were usually shown at the auction on the last day. For that reason, it had been a long time since the auction houses in the north had competed with bids over 100 gold.

Theodore glanced at the old gentleman sitting far away. ‘Will you follow? It has already passed 100 gold... Will you offer more than this just to read a book?’

To be honest, Theo was skeptical. If he just wanted to read the book, there were many copies on the market. It was strange that a scholar, not a magician, would spend 80 gold on this book. Theo didn’t know the old man’s purpose, but it seemed like the old man had a strange commitment to original books.

Unsurprisingly, the old man hesitated for a moment before lifting his sign. However, the bidding amount was different from before. It wasn’t 20 gold but 10 gold, half his other bid amounts.

“No. 107! 110 gold, this time the bid has increased by 50%! I am really curious about this sale now that it has already exceeded today’s maximum bid price!”

The reactions of those watching the host were divided in two. There were those sorry about the fact that the 100% bidding hadn’t continued, while the others were interested in Theodore’s group.

Theodore's eyebrows twitched faintly as eyes gathered on him. No, it wasn't because of them. It was because of the look in the eyes of the old man, Heinrich, as he looked at Theo.

What would he do now? Those eyes seemed to be asking.

“Yes, No. 381!”

Theodore's 10 fingers were spread wide open as he held up the sign.

“Once again, a 100% bid! It is now 130 gold! An original book has never sold for this much before! I can assure you that it hasn't happened in the last 10 years!” The host's mouth expressed his excitement.

A bid of 130 gold was uncommon in the eastern or southern auction houses. He was certain that they would fall short of this amount. With excitement in his eyes, the host looked at No. 107, Heinrich. Even if it stopped here, it had already exceeded his expectations. However, a person's greed was endless.

Unfortunately, the overflowing greed couldn't be rewarded. Heinrich bowed to Theodore before placing the No. 107 sign on his lap. It meant he wouldn't bid anymore. The host swallowed his regret as he saw this and counted down. Understandably, there were no more participants who bid over the 130 gold.

“The winning bid! The original book, [Introduction to Elemental

Magic II], written by Myrdal Herseim has been awarded to Guest No. 381 for 130 gold!”

There was a small round of applause in response to the loud voice. The sound was partly out of gratitude for the entertainment provided, as well as mocking Theodore for spending 130 gold. However, Theodore didn’t respond. No, it would be more accurate to say he couldn’t respond. The joy of obtaining the book he wanted crushed all of weak vibes of unpleasantness.

[Introduction to Elemental Magic II] had finally entered his hands.

[Introduction to Elemental Magic II]

[This book describes the four elementals in more detail than any other book. It is a book written about the relationship between a magician and elemental, as well as how to manipulate the power of the elemental. The author, Myrdal, has been called the greatest elementalism of the century. He is the only one who has succeeded in calling an elemental ruler.

* Your understanding is high. (87.5%)

* This magic book is rated ‘Precious.’

* When consumed, the proficiency of ‘elemental magic’ will increase.

* This is the original copy which was personally written by the author. When consumed, the elemental affinity which suits you will be opened. There is a low chance that you may form a contract with an elemental.

* You are immature as an elemental. It is recommended that you increase your capabilities before consuming it.]

Theodore was delighted as he checked the information window. He had obtained a way to contact Myrdal in a place he'd never thought of. It might take a while until he could consume it, but it was only a matter of time.

The mysterious magician, Myrdal, who had contracted with an elemental ruler, was literally a living legend. 130 gold for an opportunity to contact him was really a pittance.

After putting it into his inventory, Theodore shifted his gaze.

‘Thank you very much.’ He looked at Heinrich and bowed respectfully.

According to Gibra's information, Heinrich's assets slightly surpassed Theodore's. A few generations ago, Heinrich's family had been a noble family in Kargas who built up their assets, unlike others who squandered it.

Nevertheless, the old man had nicely given up on this book. Had he seen something in Theodore's eyes, or did he not think it was worth 200 gold? The reason was unknown, but it was clear that Theodore had won [Introduction to Elemental Magic II] thanks to Heinrich taking a step back.

“Heh.” Heinrich grinned and nodded.

Then Theodore had the thought that he wanted to be like that old man when he was older. As he gazed at the image of the undaunted elderly man, the auction continued.

Was he imagining it? The atmosphere of the auction house seemed lighter.

*

After gaining [Introduction to Elemental Magic II] on the first day, Theodore moved steadily through the auction houses.

The agents employed by the Information Guild could buy the books, but there was no guarantee there wouldn't be a special book like Introduction to Elemental Magic II. The auction experience was also more interesting than he'd thought it would be.

Of course, the profit from the first day didn't come again. Aside from that, it was mostly smooth. The number of original books being sold was fewer than it was supposed to be, but he still collected over 20 books from the three auction houses.

The vast majority of them were ‘Common’, but there were two ‘Rare’ ranked original books mixed in. It was a big jackpot considering it hadn’t even been a month since he’d left Meltor.

‘Well, I didn’t buy all of them.’

The two competitors Theo met on the first day, Coulson and Heinrich, competed with him several more times at other auction houses. Although he conceded several unnecessary books to Heinrich, who had given him Introduction to Elemental Magic II on the first day, he always competed in a bidding war with the sleazy Coulson. It was money Theo had brought to use anyway, so he didn’t hesitate to bid.

The result was that 23 original books were now in his inventory.

“Kuooh... Employer, what are you thinking about doing with them? It is a principle not to ask about the purpose of the commission, but I am curious.”

“It is a secret.”

“Uhh, I guess I’ll have to do a follow up later...”

There were pros and cons of having Gibra and Akan watch him closely.

Theodore had calmly spent a few hundred gold at the auction houses. He had given up on a few items and suffered enormous damages on others. So, it was bound to make anyone who knew money curious.

The people of Meltor knew this clearly, but a magician's sense of money was different in many ways. Theodore couldn't free himself from this aspect of a traditional magician.

In the end, Gibra folded his arms and grumbled, "Nevermind, I don't know what else to say. Anyway, it looks like our request is roughly finished, so what do you think?"

"Isn't there still one day remaining?"

"I told you. On the last day of the underground auctions, a big auction will be held. There won't be any small sales of things like original books. Why bother attracting the eyes of those high up?"

If someone who knew the situation heard this, they would nod their heads. The information of the Information Guild's branch director was always accurate. The people participating in the big auction were the bigwigs in Sipoto, no, Kargas. They had the power to break someone if they were offended, and Theodore shouldn't attract their attention since he was concealing his identity.

Thus, it was the right choice to skip it. However, Theodore worried about it for a moment before shaking his head. He couldn't explain it logically, but his gut instincts were telling him

that he shouldn't miss this auction.

“No, I will participate.”

It was a type of sixth sense. After obtaining Umbra and the Ring of Muspelheim, Theodore's senses had already reached a high level. He had Alfred's sensory perception and an amplified sensitivity. So, his intuition was already like taking one step into the future. If his intuition said it was correct to do this, then it was most likely right.

Theodore asserted firmly to the still concerned Gibra, “You don't have to worry. There isn't anything I would buy from the big auction, and it is dangerous to scratch the nerves of the bigwigs.”

*

The very next day, Theodore collided head-on with the Orcus Company.

Chapter 131 – Duel Bid (1)

Theo didn't want to cause any unnecessary disruptions either. He had a reason for stepping out. Actually, it was because his opponent was the Orcus Company. Regardless of the cause and process, Theodore had done something irreversible as a result.

The agent of the Orcus Company, who made even the Information Guild step aside, had declared war.

Theodore felt sweat flow down his spine.

‘Damn... If only I hadn't come here today...!’

He couldn't close his eyes once he knew. Theodore sighed as he looked at the ‘item.’ It was an average white gold item, which looked like one of the many sold at ordinary stores. The necklace, silver jewellery with a red jewel hanging from it, was the source of the commotion.

The name of the necklace was ‘Charlotte's Necklace.’ It was a relic famous for being worn around the neck of Charlotte, the last princess of a kingdom destroyed hundreds of years ago. Why had the necklace caused Theodore to do such a reckless thing? Now, one would have to look back in time to find out the reason...

...Back to exactly 30 minutes ago, when the atmosphere had been calm.

*

[Then 8...9...10! No. 64! Guest No. 64 has won 'Heart of the Lake' at a bid of 800 gold! Congratulations! This jewel has finally found an owner who matches it!]

A huge amount of money was mentioned casually. 800 gold... That was enough money to buy a few small estates. It was a world which couldn't be understood by a young master from the countryside.

Theo thought he had collected a lot of money while living as a magician, but it was nothing compared to the people gathered here. It would've cost all of Theodore's money just to bid on 'Heart of the Lake' which had just been won.

Theo couldn't help sighing deeply. Gibra glanced at him and asked, "Huhu, how is it? Didn't I say it was better not to come?"

"Did you mean this?"

"Well, halfway." Gibra nodded before continuing, "Employer, think about it. Those guys have too much, so that in itself is unpleasant. The watches on their wrists, the clothes they are wearing, their words and actions... it all seems designed to mock us for being poor."

"...That." Theodore stopped breathing for a moment. He was conscious of the deep-rooted inferiority that he had forgotten

about.

Theo had suffered a lot at Bergen Academy. Not every student had bothered him, but Theodore had hated all of them. He had hated those who were born with a talent he didn't have but wasted their lives by lazing around.

Now that wealth was swirling about in front of him, Theodore was silent as he found common ground in an unexpected place.

However, the host suddenly raised his voice, [Dear customers! As half the items in this auction have found an owner, we will give you a moment to breathe! This is from the distant past, a legacy of a kingdom that was destroyed for an unknown reason!]

As he stretched out both arms, the host looked around like he was trying to make eye contact with all the audience members. Satisfied that majority of the guests were interested, the man pointed to the object on the stage.

It was a square object covered by a piece of cloth, and there was probably a glass box inside. The host skillfully pulled away the cloth.

Then at that moment...

–Hoh? Gluttony woke up from its sleep.

‘What, is it a big deal again?’

–Very interesting. User, it seems that luck has been following you around these days.

‘Luck? That necklace?’

Gluttony agreed with Theo.

As the host revealed the silver necklace in the glass box, Gluttony continued talking in a relaxed voice, –That is an impressive item, so make note. The princess of Antioch... Charlotte’s Necklace is a special cursed item intended for one country.

‘C-Cursed?!’

–The necklace transforms any spirits nearby into ‘specters’ and ‘banshees.’ In the hands of a skilled necromancer, it can demonstrate the power of a national treasure.

Then Gluttony showed Theo the information window about the necklace.

[+16 Charlotte’s Necklace (Accessory)]

[This is a necklace left behind by Charlotte the last princess of Antioch, a kingdom destroyed by a sinister mind. It is a seemingly simple accessory, but the curse contained in it is

fearsome. It curses those who are still alive, and any spiritual body with even a little bit of attachment will be turned into powerful evil spirits. However, the seal left by a saint is blocking that power.

- * The rating of this necklace is 'Treasure.'

- * When consumed, a very large amount of magic power will be absorbed.

- * When consumed, it can cause serious damage to the mind.

- * When consumed, 'Antioch's Curse' will be applied.

- * When consumed, the digestion time will be 11 days.

'Dangerous!' Theodore noticed the terrible nature of this cursed necklace in just a moment.

Magicians learned from childhood that there were many things in this world they couldn't see. Just because they couldn't see it, didn't mean it wasn't there. Due to this, Theodore was immediately aware of the dangerous nature of the necklace.

There were countless ghosts roaming around this material world. Of course, most of them couldn't be seen nor could they inflict harm on people. However, those who were deeply drawn to evil in life were reborn as things like specters and banshees.

Such beings were classified as non-corporeal creatures on which physical attacks were effective. They were tricky enough to require aura users or magicians of at least the 4th Circle, but they weren't a big problem because there weren't many of them.

However, this necklace could cause a disaster!

Regardless of whether he knew about the crisis, the host began the auctioning off Charlotte's Necklace with a casual expression.

[Then I will start! I told you this was to help you take a break, right? As such, the bidding for this item will begin at 30 gold! In other words, the maximum bid is 300 gold! It is a preserved old relic, but it wouldn't be bad to buy it as a souvenir!]

300 gold was a huge amount for the common people, but the majority of those gathered were the richest people on the continent. Some nodded at the host, while others whispered sweet words into the ears of the girls they brought with them.

However, there was an unexpected bidder. The agent of the Orcus Company, who hadn't showed any interest in any item from the start of the auction, raised his sign.

[N-No. 133 has bid by 100%! Therefore, the current bid is 60 gold!]

The crowd didn't care about the words of the host. The people gathered here had considerable power, but they couldn't ignore

the name of the Orcus Company. Additionally, this was the first 100% bid at the auction today, so it was tantamount to a declaration. If someone bid in such a situation, it would be accepted as an unspoken declaration against the Orcus Company.

Unsurprisingly, Theodore was bound to hesitate as well.

‘Damn, coming out here. Orcus Company...!’

If someone other than the Orcus Company had bid, Theodore might’ve given up on the necklace.

The necklace contained a dangerous curse, but according to the information window, it couldn’t exert its power due to a seal. The person who bought the necklace wouldn’t imagine that it had any abilities, so it was likely to be used as ordinary jewellery.

However, the Orcus Company was suspected of being involved in black magic, so Theo couldn’t just let the agent win the bid. If a disaster arose here, Theodore wouldn’t be able to forgive himself when he could’ve prevented it.

Before that, he asked Gluttony one last thing, ‘Hey. What did you mean by that necklace is lucky for me?’

–Have you already forgotten? In the dungeon created by the host of Death’s Worship, I ate the specters.

‘Ah.’

It was a memory Theodore had forgotten. He recalled the evil spirits that had entered the cramped passage and the information window which had floated up after Gluttony ate them.

[The user still hasn't unlocked the function yet.]

The more he thought about it, the more the matters were tied together. As he thought of the relationship between 'vessel,' 'specter,' and 'Charlotte's Necklace,' Theo's brilliant mind instantly gave him an answer. He understood why Gluttony told him that 'luck' followed him.

'Make evil spirits with the necklace and feed them to Gluttony.'

The process of capturing souls in original books was several times simpler and easier to eat. It would be inefficient to find and eat specters and banshees. However, the efficiency would reverse if he got his hands on Charlotte's Necklace.

Theodore took a deep breath and raised his right hand, which clutched tightly onto the sign with his participation number.

[N-No. 472! Guest No. 472 has also bid 100%! The current bid is 90 gold!] The host stuttered with surprise. He hadn't thought there would be someone who would bid against the company.

Fortunately, no one cared about his mistake. The gazes of all the auction house guests were focused on the agent of the Orcus Company and the young man who stopped the agent's winning bid. Theodore could feel the gazes pouring in from every direction.

The Orcus agent was staring up at him from an oblique angle, with a faint red light glowing in his brown eyes.

*

As a result, the auction house placed the two bidders in a solitary room.

It was a rule of the Kargas auction: The winning bid can't exceed the the minimum bid price by 10 times. In other words, it wasn't uncommon for there to be joint bidders. There was a separate way to solve it, but this incident was a special case.

The auction had advised them to settle it through conversation, if possible.

"...So, what do you want?"

"Huh?" Theodore was surprised by the question.

The agent raised his eyebrows and said, "I investigated a little bit while on the way here. Your name is Theo. You're a 4th Circle magician from Meltor's Magic Society. Didn't you come to Kargas to meet distant relatives? You got a plaque from Bear of the

Polonell Company, and you are a very promising young man.”

“You’re overpraising me.”

“Bah, it isn’t a compliment. I said it so you will understand what I mean.” The agent didn’t want to waste time acting politely and asked, “How much do you want? No, I will give you the item you want. Of course, it is on the condition that you yield the necklace to me.”

“Umm.” Theodore realized the misunderstanding.

The agent didn’t know that Theo was actually aiming for the necklace. He thought it was just a bait for Theo to get something else he wanted.

Indeed, that was a more realistic possibility than the actual truth. Aside from the fact that the necklace was old, it was just an ordinary accessory. So, it was senseless to go against the Orcus Company and bid 300 gold for it.

The agent took Theo’s response as a positive answer. “By the way, you are truly bold. Daring to make this type of bargain at your age. You aren’t a magician but a genius trader-”

“I’m sorry,” Theodore interrupted the agent’s words. “I need that necklace.”

The atmosphere froze with his one sentence. The agent’s gaze

became cold while his hands twitched like they itched to grab something. However, after the momentary response, the agent calmed his shaking body and opened his mouth to speak. His voice carried a different tone from before. "...I see. Are you saying that you won't withdraw the bid?"

"Yes, you heard correctly."

"How bold. Truly bold," the agent murmured before lifting his head.

His reddish brown eyes seemed even deeper, perhaps because of his mood. No, it wasn't Theo's imagination that the colour changed. Instead of reddish brown, the agent's eyes had become the colour of a full red, like the colour of blood.

The agent stared into Theodore's eyes and declared, "This is my last bit of advice. Let go of that necklace."

Simultaneously, a light sparked in the agent's eyes. Red eyes... They had been known as demon eyes in the past, possessing the power to deceive or exert a special power.

However, it was useless today. Gluttony, who had fallen asleep again, snorted at the gaze which hindered its sleep. In the Age of Mythology, the number of monsters who had been able to overcome Gluttony's mental defenses could be counted on three fingers.

As the red eyes tried to penetrate Theodore, the greedy grimoire spoke condescendingly, –How trivial. Even using the evil eyes.

Then it kicked the agent's presence out.

“Kuaack!” The agent suddenly shrieked and covered his eyes.

“What happened?!”

“-Don't come near me!”

Theodore, who was unaware of the struggle within himself, had approached to give support, but the agent chased him away.

The agent's actual eyes were okay, but it was the first time he had received a shock in the spirit world, making him greatly upset. To think that his demon eyes didn't work, and there was even a retaliatory mental blow? Additionally, the young man acted like he didn't know what was going on.

The agent wanted to get out of this place, so he screamed instantly. “It can't be helped! A duel bid! Three days later, I will fix your cocky attitude!”

“That-Why all of a sudden...”

“I no longer have anything to say to you!”

After saying that, the agent ran out of the room. It was because he couldn't understand what had happened and it didn't seem like the young man would release the necklace.

‘In any case, I'll win if it's a duel bid.’ It would be delayed for a few days, but the necklace would eventually enter the agent's hands, so there was no need to rush.

He was going to kill that person. The agent's face distorted as he walked down the passage with a rough gait. On the other hand, Theodore was meeting up with the waiting Gibra.

“W-What happened?” Gibra asked in a small voice due to his anxiety.

Theodore smiled at him and replied, “It is a duel bid! The agent has left.”

“What!? Employer, have you really lost your mind?! I clearly told you that you must not accept a duel bid!”

A duel bid was an additional rule of the Kargas underground auction that only applied when an item reached the maximum bid. The two sides would pick warriors to participate in a duel, and the winner would obtain the item.

The problem was some of the rules set for the duel bid.

“Employer, I know that you are a good fighter, but you can't

participate in it yourself. Why accept the duel bid?”

“Well, it is something that I need to obtain.”

“That isn’t it! Going against the Orcus Company... What sort of lunatic warrior would accept your offer? If you are thinking about me, then please stop. Participating in the duel bid wasn’t part of the commission.”

Gibra might sound heartless, but it was a line he couldn’t cross. Theodore had commissioned the Information Guild to obtain information of the sale goods and purchase the original books. There was nothing about risking themselves to go against the Orcus Company.

However, Theodore’s complexion stayed the same. In the first place, he had no intention of nominating Gibra. He already knew the person he wanted to hire for the ‘duel bid.’ Theo dismissed Gibra’s worries. “There is no need to worry. I have already decided on a warrior.”

“What, is that true?”

“Yes. I’ll have to send him a message, but he will meet us sooner or later.”

Gibra couldn’t help feeling curious. As branch director of the Information Guild, he couldn’t repress his curiosity and asked, “Cough. So, who is it? He will need to be a great warrior.”

According to rumours, the Orcus Company had a monster who could cut down huge trees with a blade as well as kill an ogre with his bare hands.

Rumours tended to get exaggerated, but no one doubted the skills after the person broke a knight a few years ago. It was a person entirely covered in black armour, so their face and voice were all unknown. However, it was obvious that the Black Knight would be the one participating in the duel bid.

Even though Theo didn't know the rumours, he was confident that the person he picked would be able to win against the Black Knight. Amidst the wide lands of Sipoto, Theo picked his strongest hand.

Without looking back, Theodore spoke in a voice which was filled with a strange nostalgia, "The leader of the 'Wandering Wolves' mercenaries, Randolph Clovis."

It was a name he'd found while exploring Sipoto a few days ago. Randolph was the top-notch swordsman who had broken through thousands of undead at the Miller Barony.

If Theo hadn't known of Randolph's presence, he might not have accepted the duel bid. There had also been the encounter with Randolph's sister Rebecca, so the siblings seemed to be deeply involved with Theo in many ways.

Theodore declared confidently, "He isn't a master, but he will

surely win against the Black Knight.”

Chapter 132 – Duel Bid (2)

Most of the guests who visited for the specialty of Kargas, Sipoto's underground auctions, often left at the same time.

This was one of the reasons why the auctions were located in a border city; it was so they could take illegal routes to quickly return home. No matter how superior the border guards were, they couldn't chase foreigners from other countries across the border, giving Kargas justification for closing their eyes.

However, this year, there was an extra three days added to their schedule. It was because the agent of the Orcus Company and the unknown young man had caused a stir with the 'duel bid.' The distinguished guests and famous people from various countries expressed an interest in it.

"A duel bid? How many years has it been?"

"It was probably five years ago, when Duke Soldon took on the king of mercenaries and won the elixir."

"Ahh, this is the first time since then."

"This is an agent from the Orcus Company. It will be fun."

The small uproar which had occurred in the auction house spread all over Sipoto.

Some laughed at the recklessness and foolishness of the young man, while others bet on the duel bid in hopes of reversing their lives. The result was decided from the beginning. Everybody thought this, and some expected wouldn't gain much money.

Then after three days, the day of the duel bid arrived. The place where the duel bid would take place was the location of the central auction house. The number of audience members had decreased considerably from the day of the auction, but still, many had arrived and were seated.

Those with money had drinks and women at their disposal. What they were lacking was thrill, so they came to enjoy the sight of another person bleeding. Some of them raised their voices.

“Ohh...! The black armored man standing next to Agent Isaac is the famous Black Knight!”

It was as they said. The Black Knight's body was covered entirely in black armor so that not one piece of skin could be seen. It was so creepy that some found it burdensome to even look at him. The Black Knight stood proudly beside Isaac, who was sitting on a colourful chair. If the Black Knight were standing in a corner of a palace or mansion, he might be considered an elaborate decoration.

The crowd gulped and drooled over the Black Knight.

“Indeed, I feel a great dignity exuding from him.”

“I don’t see any gaps at all.”

“...It might be my imagination, but he doesn’t feel alive.”

While some people were evaluating his capabilities and atmosphere, others said...

“I would like to see him without his armour. There is no doubt that his face will be handsome to match his dignity.”

“Countess Dale, there is no guarantee the Black Knight is a man. Maybe it could be a woman.”

“A woman over 190cm?”

“Among the barbarians in the south, it is said that such women are common.”

“Oh, my! Really?”

They discussed his appearance, body, and origin. Although it might seem uncomfortable, the Black Knight just stayed silently by Isaac’s side. The silence made him feel like an executioner waiting to deal the fatal blow.

It was said that he’d killed two ogres with one slice of the sword. It was said that he was the owner of a fist with enough power to break a rock. It was said that he was a slaughterer who had killed

hundreds of enemies alone.

All those rumors were true. Isaac smiled inwardly as he looked sideways at his Black Knight. The knight was strong enough to kill an ogre in one strike, to break a rock with his bare hands, and to annihilate hundreds of enemies alone. The list of terrible things he'd done was extensive. For whomever came out to fight him, it would be a public execution.

Then someone's cry entered Isaac's ears, "He's coming! That guy!"

'It seems like he found a warrior,' Isaac scoffed inwardly and looked in the direction of the voice.

This was the confidence of the Orcus agent who believed in the Black Knight and wanted to see the bidder die. Of course, he couldn't kill the bidder here, but it was possible once they went outside the city. Isaac's eyes darkened at the thought and turned to face Theodore.

Theodore confronted the Orcus agent without any hesitation, "It has been three days. Agent Isaac."

"...You didn't run away. I suppose you have the talent for surprising me more than just once."

"I don't think this is the end of the surprises."

“No, it ends here.” Isaac’s voice was indifferent. It was a voice which didn’t care what the other person was talking about. To him, Theodore and his companions were already dead. The Orcus agent would cut off the head of the idiot who had accepted this proposal and then send the rest on their way.

The notary felt the atmosphere and stepped back. “T-Then we will start in two minutes. Agent Isaac, your warrior is the Black Knight? Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“I understand. Then who is Theo’s warrior?”

Theodore stepped back and called out for him, “It is your turn from here, Captain Randolph.”

“...Ah, I have to suffer under you again. You aren’t planning to decrease the price by half this time?”

The man with golden hair had scars all over his face and body, proving that he didn’t live an easy life. The two falchions at his waist swung smoothly in their leather sheaths. They were the items he’d obtained during his adventure with Theodore at the Miller Barony. His two brown eyes, wild like a wolf’s, gazed sharply at the Black Knight.

However, the Black Knight didn’t respond to his killing intent.

“This piece of tin is my opponent? What a strange guy.”

“Ah, warrior? What is your name...?” The notary asked.

“Oh, excuse me. My name is Randolph Clovis. I am a warrior hired by Young Master over here.”

“Ah, thank you.”

After confirming the designation of both warriors, the notary began to explain the rules of the duel bid.

The warriors hired by the bidders would participate in the duel bid, and the warrior who collapsed first would lose. If both warriors couldn't fight, the right to abstain would be given to the two bidders. The warriors were literally the swords of the bidders.

With each believing that their warrior was stronger, the two bidders settled into the audience to watch the duel bid.

The stage had a radius of 30m from the center, so it had a diameter of 60m. The footsteps of a peak swordsman would be able to travel from one end to another in two or three steps. In other words, it was a stage with no room to breathe.

“Ha, this is my favourite place. It is cheap compared to the Colosseum in Andras, but it is nice to have no place to run away.”

“.....”

Unlike Randolph, who revealed his teeth like a beast, the Black Knight remained silent and pulled out his sword.

“...You?”

There was no liveliness in the Black Knight. Randolph’s eyebrows twitched as he felt something strange from the figure. Randolph had never seen the Black Knight before, but his movements seemed familiar. It wasn’t the swordsmanship or footwork, but Randolph couldn’t help feeling uncomfortable.

Additionally, it was true that the opponent was unresponsive to Randolph’s killing intent. Any swordsman who had reached this stage would be sensitive. Randolph’s killing intent was enough to make even a sword master gather power at their fingertips.

A living person couldn’t suppress a response—

...No, wait a minute.

“Perhaps?”

Randolph had a suspicion and raised his senses. If he focused the distribution of aura properly, his sense of hearing could temporarily hear even a needle dropping onto sand. His hearing was so sensitive, but he didn’t hear the Black Knight breathe at all. There was no inhalation or exhalation, or signs that the Black

Knight was holding his breath.

Randolph became sure of the Black Knight's true identity.

[Young Master, is it because of 'that'?]

[...An undead?]

Randolph communicated with Theo by using Hidden Voice, a technique which secretly transmitted sound by silently vibrating mana. Theodore's face hardened as soon as he heard the words, after which he sent back a reply with message magic.

During the clash against the elder lich, Randolph had taken down the undead made from his ancestor. It wasn't the senior undead, the 'death knight,' but it wasn't much different. This meant that Randolph's intuition was reliable.

Then Theo had two choices. Theodore could storm into the fight and reveal the identity of the death knight facing Randolph. If successful, it might be able to trace the relationship and prove that the Orcus Company was dabbling in black magic.

However, that method was too risky. If they failed to defeat the Black Knight, it was likely the Orcus agent and the Black Knight would escape from Kargas, and the Orcus Company would then use their power to hide.

'What should I do? What is the best choice in this situation?'

Theodore started thinking frantically.

There were only dozens of seconds left until the duel began. There was no room to think too deeply, so he should rely on his intuition. Should he believe in Randolph's victory and wait, or defeat the death knight together and expose Agent Isaac?

It was Randolph's voice which ended Theo's troubles. [Hah, I'm caught again. It is a problem that I accepted the moment you told me about my sister.]

[Randolph...]

[Well, it's okay. I owe Young Master, and this way, I can repay the humiliation of the past.]

Randolph's falchions emerged from the sheaths at his waist. A blue aura flowed around the edge of the blade, like a beast's fangs aiming for the neck of the opponent. This terrible aura was incomparable to that of a year ago! Despite the considerable distance between them, Theodore's neck was tingling.

It was a warning given by his sixth sense!

'Don't tell me, Randolph has already...!'

Before Theodore's speculation could be completed, the flag in the notary's hand descended toward the ground, signifying the start of the duel bid. This was a dance of death which wouldn't stop for a

moment until one person was defeated.

Once the duel began, Randolph's swords moved like lightning bolts.

Kiiiiing-!

Space was severed, with the two streaks of blue slashing through the air like it was butter and arriving before the Black Knight at a terrific speed.

Randolph's movements were awfully fast. Even Theodore's enhanced vision, which was superior to aura users, couldn't keep track of it. During the past year, Randolph's strength had increased, and the speed of his lightning sword was already close to the speed of light.

However, the Black Knight didn't panic and swung his greatsword.

Kuoooong...

A colorless aura covered the sword, causing the atmosphere to distort from the slight pressure flowing from it. The important thing wasn't speed but the endless destructive power coming from the sword.

If Randolph's swords seemed like lightning, then the Black Knight's was like a landslide. The strong sword versus the fast

sword...

Once they collided, a thunderous sound rang out.

Chapter 133 – Duel Bid (3)

Kururung...!

There was a large shock wave. If the destructive power from the two swords had been pushed to one-side, the audience sitting in that direction would be crushed like a frog hit by a stone. The the body of the lightning-fast swordsman, Randolph, bounced back.

This was evidence that the Black Knight had the advantage in power.

‘No, it can’t be helped.’

Theodore watched the duel with sober eyes. It was different if it were a low ranked undead, however, the Black Knight that Randolph was facing now was a senior undead, the death knight.

The body had several times the physical ability of a living person, and it didn’t feel any pain. In a simple struggle of strength, it could compete against a cyclops. It was also possible for the Black Knight to destroy a wall with his bare hands.

Randolph realized this as well after directly experiencing it with his body.

“Huuuu...”

Confronting the opponent in a competition of strength was pure suicide. Randolph had to accept that his opponent had the advantage in power.

In the first place, dual swordsmanship wasn't a technique designed to compete with strength. The advantages of having two swords was the ability to use multiple combinations of sword techniques freely.

Randolph took a deep breath and his appearance distorted.

“What!?”

“D-Disappeared...!”

No, Randolph hadn't disappeared. It just meant that the speed of Randolph's movements surpassed the eyesight of the audience. The speed of acceleration was so extreme that it made Theodore's eyes hurt!

The aura overflowing from Randolph's blades drew blue lines in the air, like comet trails. Then Randolph's swords once again turned into lightning bolts which smashed the Black Knight from all sides.

Kakang!

As sparks flew, Randolph's falchions scratched the Black Knight's arm and peeled off the surface of the Black Knight's shoulder like it

was potato skin.

Kakang! Kakiing!

Randolph attacked again. His next stab scratched the edge of the Black Knight's kneecap. Even the solid armour couldn't endure the sharp aura, causing metal fragments to burst out. However, it didn't end with just one or two. 10 times, 20 times, 100 times, 1000 times...

Huuung!

The Black Knight was tough too. He swung his sword around him and endured Randolph's encirclement. One hit of his would kill Randolph. Randolph was a swordsman who only focused on speed. His body danced gloriously like it was on the edge of a reaper's scythe. A single mistake would send Randolph to hell.

“O-Ohhh!”

“It is really amazing...!”

The audience let out low sounds of admiration. They had expected it to be a casual entertainment, a one-sided slaughter, but the fight surpassed their imagination. Confrontations between swordsmen were usually dry. Iron and iron would collide steadily with one another until one side found a crack in the other's defense. It was rare to see a proper fight between aura users.

No, rather than rare, it was more accurate to say it couldn't be done.

‘Fools. If I hadn't been here, don't you know that you would've died five times over already?’ Theodore sighed as he looked around while fending off the shock waves.

He could tell because he had encountered master level people many times. Right now, both existences in front of him were almost at the level of a master. Neither was a complete master, but they were still dangerous to ordinary people.

Shock waves continued to occur as the high-density auras collided with each other. They were strong enough to turn rocks to dust. This wasn't a phenomenon which the weak could watch. Theo wanted to release the protective shield and just focus on watching the duel bid, but a catastrophe would happen if he did that.

In such circumstances, Theodore was forced to endure patiently.

“Hah, such a great ability...! Employer, where did you find that swordsman?”

On the other hand, Gibra was stunned by the abilities of the shabby mercenary. He'd thought his employer had just hired someone who was his acquaintance, but the mercenary was actually on par with the Black Knight!

Gibra was a powerhouse in Sipoto, but he could never win against the Black Knight or Randolph. The even more shocking thing was that he had failed to identify Randolph, despite seeing such a powerful figure.

Theodore answered in an evasive manner, “I won’t tell you.”

“W-What?”

“Just keep watching.”

Theodore turned away from Gibra’s bitter expression and continued watching the duel. A death knight was something only high-level necromancers could create with black magic. Randolph’s expression was grim as he faced the disadvantageous odds.

Like a lie, the flow of the match headed in Randolph’s favor. Therefore, it wasn’t difficult for Theodore to see that... ‘He isn’t at the master level yet. If Randolph had awakened Aura Ability, this fight would already be over.’

Aura Ability was a miracle exclusive to sword masters which could even transcend magic. Somebody could cut through space, another could control gravity, and somebody else could remove one’s spirit. If there were 1,000 sword masters, there were 1,000 types of abilities. A person would be judged as a sword master based on whether they awakened this ability or not.

If Randolph was a complete sword master, this fight wouldn't have dragged out for so long. The Black Knight would've lost his head and collapsed onto the floor 10 minutes ago. However, the death knight wasn't in optimum condition either.

'If I didn't see it, then I might be eager to run out and interfere... but I don't think this bastard will be a help to Isaac.' Theodore laughed as he looked at the Black Knight.

The Orcus Company would become the target of the entire continent if it were known they were mixed up with black magic. It was why three of the death knight's advantages were sealed: the undead's immortal resistance; the white aura which symbolized death; and the black magic which was naturally added to senior undead.

Now, with such a huge penalty, Randolph's incomplete power was enough to win the battle!

"...Please, Captain Randolph."

Randolph had the advantage, but it would be best to win this duel in the cleanest way possible.

This way, Theodore could obtain Charlotte's Necklace and block the Orcus Company. Theodore, who didn't like his burden being carried by another person, formed a fist as responsibility and impatience intertwined together.

10 minutes after that, the winner of the duel bid was decided.

*

Kakang!

Randolph's tactic was extremely simple. He moved continuously at a super fast speed, accumulating a small amount of damage, while his constant attacks weren't fatal enough to cause death. However, if he focused on attacking and defending himself as his two swords and the Black Knight's greatsword clashed, he wouldn't be able catch the massive greatsword with his falchions.

Meanwhile, the Black Knight's plate mail had turned into a rag. However, when asked if the offensive was effective against the Black Knight...

"Stupid, you are the one wearing yourself out," Isaac muttered with a smile as he read Randolph's intent.

Unlike a human, the Black Knight didn't have the concept of fatigue. No, the accumulated damage was of no use because the Black Knight didn't bleed. The only places where the regenerative power was restrained were the parts which couldn't be hidden, like the arms and legs. However, the skeletal muscle covered in armour could always regenerate.

So, it wasn't unreasonable that Isaac would have a ridiculing expression on his face.

However, Isaac's relaxed face distorted when he noticed an unexpected situation.

Woojik!

Once again, Randolph's swords struck, and the Black Knight's breastplate broke off in big pieces. It was effective. The plate mail had been struck continuously and reached its limit. Of course, the Black Knight's flesh was fine, but that wasn't the problem.

"N-No. This can't continue...!" Isaac turned pale as he noticed the situation one step late.

Obviously, the death knight was an undead. The body with white skin like a corpse lay underneath the armour, and anybody could recognize the colour. What if Randolph's sword stripped off all the armour? No, what if the helm broke? Rumours that the Orcus Company was associated with a warlock would spread everywhere.

It was a situation which he needed to stop no matter what.

[God of Death, knight who serves Thanatos!] Isaac hurriedly sent a message to the Black Knight. He wanted to entrust it with autonomous action as much as possible, but the death knight couldn't be revealed to the public.

[Kill him as soon as possible!]

Randolph was a swordsman who had no talent except for running away, so Isaac believed the death knight could cut him down without difficulty if all his power was used.

However, Isaac overlooked one thing. The tactics of a death knight, a first-rate swordsman when he had been alive, weren't something a warlock should be meddling in. If the death knight's ego was still intact, he would've snarled at the foolish command.

Unfortunately, the death knight was an undead who followed commands, and Isaac was a warlock giving the command. According to the command, the Black Knight raised his greatsword above his head. The pressure of the sword, which had been defending intently, suddenly reversed its direction. The air became heavier as pressure was emitted from the death knight's head and shoulders. The pressure became a few times more terrible than before.

"...Indeed, just a tin can." Randolph laughed at the foolish judgment.

Kakiing. Randolph's arms moved at an eerie rate and chopped out.

This was a skill which couldn't be used if the Black Knight had continued the defense from a while ago. Randolph took advantage of the mistake that Isaac, not the Black Knight, had committed. The perfect defense was disrupted, creating a fatal gap.

Any swordsman would accept that gap pleasantly.

“-Rain Sword.”

It was the name of the pair of swords Randolph had obtained from the elder lich’s dungeon, which had originally belonged to his ancestor, Adolf of the Clovis family. Randolph now reproduced the technique which had been lost in the void for two centuries.

He used Thunder Stroke, in other words, triple lightning strikes. The first one was a straight thrust.

Chaaeng!

Randolph’s left sword turned into a lightning strike. It was aimed at the fatal points like the brain and heart, even if the fatal points were blurred for a death knight.

The Black Knight responded by reflexively lowering the greatsword, but he was a beat too late. The falchion had arrived before the claymore and retreated.

The second strike was a diagonal split.

Since ancient times, the most powerful technique had been a diagonal slash. The drawback was that it was a simple trajectory, and there was a big gap after it was completed. So, it was hard to use unless you were sure that you could hit the target.

The blue lightning strikes aimed in succession at the Black Knight's neck.

Kwakak! Kwaduduk...!

Even so, the Black Knight blocked the strikes. The greatsword in his right hand blocked the left sword, while his left hand blocked the sword aiming at his neck.

Of course, the price of doing that was disastrous. The death knight's index finger was cut off, and Randolph's blade went right into the death knight's wrist, tearing it from the forearm. After shattering the arm with aura, the falchion smashed against the Black Knight's elbow.

Randolph grinned at the horrific defense and said, "There is still one remaining."

It was a possible technique for a dual wield swordsman. Blocking the enemy's weapon with one sword while striking at the weak point with the other... A third attack didn't exist in normal swordsmanship.

The third strike was a horizontal slash.

With rapid acceleration from a stopped state, the left sword, which had stopped after finishing its role of blocking the greatsword, suddenly moved. The big sword, which had been thrown far out, had yet to return. This meant there was no way for

the Black Knight, who lost his right arm, to stop the incoming attack.

Indeed, without any resistance, Randolph's aura blades bit into the defenseless sides of the Black Knight, cutting from both ends!

Randolph's blow, which couldn't be blocked or avoided, eventually split the body of the Black Knight into two pieces.

Chapter 134 – Duel Bid (4)

The tense match ended in an instant. Randolph's trio of lightning strikes had been fast enough to be invisible to the audience. Even the last blow, done from a standstill, had been so fast that an afterimage remained.

“V-Victory!” The voice of the notary rang out one beat later.

The two swordsmen were still standing on the duel stage, but anyone who had seen the previous scene nodded in agreement. Then a frightening sound was heard. Chwaaaak!

Randolph's falchion dug into the right side of the Black Knight, before emerging on the left. There was no one who didn't understand the meaning of that. It was thick plate mail, so this meant the body hidden inside had been sliced in half.

“D-Dead...?!”

“What? Didn't he only strike twice?”

“My eyes could only see one...”

There was no way to survive from being cut having one's waist cut through completely. The upper half hadn't fallen off yet, but as soon as it did, there would be a fountain of blood. Everyone except for three people were convinced of the Black Knight's death.

‘Now, how will you get out of this?’ Theodore questioned as he stared at Isaac.

This much damage wasn’t enough to kill a senior undead, a death knight. He had suffered quite a lot of damage from the almost master level aura, but the skull, where the death knight’s soul was stored, was still intact.

The Black Knight could keep fighting if it so desired. Of course, from now on, Randolph would have a one-sided advantage. If Isaac judged all of this rationally, there was only one conclusion he could make. Unsurprisingly, he reacted as Theodore expected.

“...Dammit! Attendant!” Isaac shouted, rising from his seat.

Then his attendants rushed to cover the body of the Black Knight, who still hadn’t collapsed, with a rug. Isaac’s intention was to end this situation before someone pointed out that no blood was flowing out from the knight’s body.

Theodore knew this, but he didn’t want to challenge it and make the situation bigger.

[Hey, Employer.] At that moment, Randolph, who had lost his opponent, walked toward Theodore. [Are you going to leave it alone? Isn’t this a chance to expose what that agent is?]

[Well, your words aren’t wrong.]

However, Theodore didn't choose that option. It was possible to claim a connection between the Orcus Company and black magic, but that was just cutting off Isaac's path of escape.

Would a rat cornered by a cat bite back? However, the problem was that Isaac wasn't a rat.

[The risk is too large. The death knight hasn't lost strength yet. There is no guarantee that Isaac only has one Black Knight. Additionally, you probably spent a lot of energy in that duel, Captain Randolph.]

[Umm, I can't deny that.]

[It is better to take a step back. I've attained the item I wanted, and I don't know how they will react if I accuse them.]

It was a realistic point. Although there were no apparent injuries, Randolph's physical condition wasn't good since he had used aura without a break.

If the death knight was in a position where he no longer had to hide his power, then Randolph would face a more unfavourable battle without an Aura Ability. Additionally, both Randolph and Theo were dead if one more death knight emerged.

The gamble was too risky, so they should be satisfied with this much.

[...Che, it can't be helped. I understand.] In the end, Randolph stepped back.

Theodore's words were correct, and Randolph was also worried about the actions of the cornered Isaac. So, Randolph descended from the duel stage and placed his falchions back in his sheaths while staring at Isaac. Despite his shabby clothing, Randolph was the winner.

‘The skirmish was won, although it was a close call.’

By tacit agreement, the duel between the two bidders ended.

*

The attendants of the Orcus Company carried the body of the Black Knight away, while the spectators, who enjoyed the exciting spectacle, vacated their seats. The result was obvious, so they had no interest in the following announcements.

The notary, who watched the two swordsmen compete fiercely a while ago, looked between the two bidders and declared, “The 57th underground auction, the duel bid for ‘Charlotte’s Necklace,’ has been won by Bidder Theo’s representative, Randolph Clovis. Therefore, the winner of this duel bid is Theo. Do both of you recognize this result?”

“I recognize it.”

Unlike Theo, Isaac didn't answer immediately. "....."

"Agent Isaac?" The notary asked him one more time.

Then the answer fell from Isaac's heavy lips, "...I recognize it."

Isaac's bloodshot eyes showed that he didn't like this ending. If a passing child saw the scene, they would burst into tears from fear. His expression was dark, but there was something else it contained which incited a feeling of fear.

However, the notary's declaration wasn't over yet. "In accordance with the rules of the duel bid, the price for 'Charlotte's Necklace' must be paid by Agent Isaac. 300 gold please."

Crunch.

Isaac made a loud noise before pulling out 300 gold and handing the gold over to the notary. It seemed like he wanted to lash out at the notary, but he maintained his patience. This was a common sight for the notary... The losing bidders always screamed or glared angrily at him.

The notary turned to look at Theodore with a weak expression and said, "With this, the duel bid is over. Theo, 'Charlotte's Necklace' is now yours."

After that, a box was placed before Theodore. Just like the first time he saw it behind the glass box, this was the necklace which

contained the curse. Charlotte's Necklace... If it entered the hands of a warlock, it would be able to demonstrate the power of a national treasure. After a moment of hesitation, Theodore held the necklace.

However, at that moment...

"Think well."

Agent Isaac's red eyes were staring at Theodore and Randolph with dark emotions flashing in his eyes. This was a warlock who was suppressing the urge to kill both of them right now.

"If you take the necklace like this, one day you will pay for it. It is too late for you to regret it."

Theodore didn't ignore him and nodded. "Those words are correct."

The confused Randolph and Isaac listened until the end, expecting there to be something more. However, Theodore laughed and smashed their expectations. "You should've just let me win the bid. Didn't you suffer big damages because of the duel bid? I am thankful for the lesson that you taught me."

"You cheeky fellow!" Isaac finally reached the limits of his patience and turned away. His reaction proved that Theodore's words had stabbed him. The Orcus Company's budget was huge, but Isaac would be responsible for the 300 gold he lost.

The notary joined Theo and Randolph in giggling at Isaac's embarrassed retreat.

“Kuhat, this is pretty interesting for a half price commission. That agent's face became as red as tomato.”

“Kukukuk, who wouldn't?”

“Huhu, it is fun to laugh.”

The two men, who savoured the victory, started to talk seriously after the notary left.

Randolph, who had experienced the death knight's combat power directly, asked Theodore with an unexpectedly serious expression, “Young Master, what will you do from now on? Is the Orcus Company's black magic at a scale we can handle?”

“I have to inform the Magic Society,” Theodore replied without any hesitation.

Even if Randolph was almost a sword master and Theo was a 6th Circle magician, it wasn't a problem the two of them could afford to deal with.

The Orcus Company was one of the top three companies in the central continent, and they used taboo black magic. There were all

sorts of ways for the warlock to increase the strength of their warriors, so it was better for a national force to be mobilized.

Fortunately, Theodore remembered that he had a liaison. “I will leave a passphrase for an information source of the White Tower. It might take a little bit of time, but the Magic Society will send an investigation team to survey the Orcus Company within a fortnight.”

Randolph felt assured and laughed as he knocked on Theodore’s shoulder. “As expected from Young Master. You don’t have any gaps.”

“That isn’t true. To be honest, it was a mess.” Theodore sighed at Randolph’s praise.

This wasn’t a false humility. It was by chance that Randolph was in this city, and he hadn’t expected the opponent to be a death knight.

The operation had been full of holes from beginning to end. If Randolph had lost this duel, Isaac would’ve acted to confine him more thoroughly. Numerous possibilities had joined together to give Theodore this victory.

So, Theo couldn’t say that it was due to his own skills.

When Randolph saw Theodore’s gloomy expression. He quickly changed the topic. “Well, at least we won. Isn’t that right? You

must've gone through some hard times. Let's have a few drinks and exchange some of the stories that have accumulated."

"...I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that isn't possible."

"Eh? How come?" Randolph was confused by Theodore's grim facial expression.

"We will leave as soon as the sun rises tomorrow. We can't rest easily after poking the Orcus Company."

"I shattered that piece of tin, so isn't it okay for a few days?"

"No, that isn't the case."

The fearful thing about a necromancer was the strength of the undead. An undead which was not completely destroyed would be restored to its original state once it had enough time and black magic power supplied.

If a living person was supporting it, the death knight would be able to recover from the damage Randolph had dealt it in just a few days. There were all types of limitations in a duel, but the undead could exert all its power in a raid in the middle of the night.

This meant they had to get out of the city before the death knight recovered.

“Hoo, then are we just going to wait in the inn tonight? Then it can’t be helped.”

However, Randolph’s grumbles changed Theo’s mind. Randolph was a great warrior, so maybe the Orcus Company wouldn’t act so easily. Couldn’t Theo afford to exchange a few drinks with the one who had brought him the difficult victory?

Theodore made a decision and stated, “Come on, guide me.”

“Huh? What?”

“Didn’t you want to have a few drinks? Perhaps you don’t know any taverns?”

“No, Young Master just...”

Theodore shrugged at Randolph’s expression and walked ahead. “Aren’t we leaving tomorrow?”

Randolph understood Theo’s curt words, and a big smile emerged on his face. He had been born as the child of a prestigious family, but his nature was of a wolf who loved freedom. Now, he would relieve his throat which was dry from the hot fight.

“Okay, then will Young Master be paying?”

“Of course. Thanks to the 300 gold saved today, you can drink

until you pass out.”

“Kuoh... As expected from Young Master!”

At that moment, Gibra who had been waiting in the distance interrupted them. “Cough! E-Employer, can I join as well?”

Theodore laughed. It was quite awkward to see him acting like this despite his two-meter-tall size. Frankly, Gibra had watched from a distance ever since Theo accepted the duel bid. However, he didn’t turn his back on Theo even to the very end. Despite being from the backstreets, Gibra kept his loyalty to Theo.

“I will buy for you too because you didn’t run away in the end,” Theo said.

Then Gibra, who normally looked at others with a threatening expression, smiled brightly and cheered, “Ohh, thank you. Employer is truly magnanimous!”

“What, this person was hired by Young Master as well? Then we have one more friend to drink with.”

“There is a lot to talk about! You must’ve suffered in the meantime.”

The two people, united by their stories about Theodore, walked through the streets of Sipoto.

They had entirely different appearances and voices, but the conversation between the two people was quite good, as their involvement with the stormy Theo acted like the mediator between them. Therefore, the alienated Theodore just laughed and followed behind the two gossipers.

‘...This is a good way to end the day.’

It wasn't efficient, but he couldn't enjoy life if he always pursued efficiency.

Theodore thought about Charlotte's Necklace in his pocket and placed his left hand over it. Soon after, it was placed in a blank space. This was the [Inventory] that not even a legendary thief could steal from.

With a more relaxed mind, Theodore decided to enjoy the night of fun.

Chapter 135 – The Goal Is The Port (1)

As the sun rose the next morning, Theodore watched the horses get attached to the carriage in preparation to leave.

The two horses naturally had luxury pedigrees. It wasn't comparable to the limited express carriages of the big companies, but it was the best that individuals could afford. He would've been able to obtain it if he used the Polonell Company, but that would mean exposing their tracks.

It was natural for Theodore, a foreigner, to be extra careful.

‘...It won't mean much if they've already found me.’

Fortunately, there were no signs that the watchdogs had caught up yet. However, Theo had to hide until he left the gates. Until then, he focused his senses carefully. This was how Theo knew about the shadow that had appeared behind him while he was stroking a horse's mane.

It was affected by the angle, but the shadow was extra long.

“Good morning. Have you come to say goodbye?” Theo looked back to see the gigantic Gibra standing there with a shrug.

Last night, Gibra had drunk more than half of the tavern's casks, but his complexion was just as good as that of a master level aura user. A common person would have to lie down for a week, or they

may have even died on the spot.

Gibra nodded and opened his mouth to speak. The commission was over, so his tone was the same as when they first met. “Well, something like that. I would’ve just sent you off, but the request this time turned out bigger than I thought.”

“Do you have useful information?”

“It is called the after sales service. Be thankful.”

Theodore was interested and listened obediently.

“You said that you don’t have a designated destination right now?”

“Yes, I was supposed to stay longer.”

It was now an old story, but Theodore was originally planning to spend at least three months in Kargas. However, there was the variable called the underground auction, where he had clashed with the Orcus Company.

Of course, the original books he collected were more than expected. He had expected to be stuck here for a few months, but he exceeded his target slightly and gained an unthinkable extra income. From now on, it was time to worry about the backlash caused by the jackpot.

“If possible, go to the east.”

“The east?”

“Yes, the east.”

Theodore made a vaguely puzzled expression. Then Gibra explained, emphasizing the reason, “The base of the Orcus Company is to the southwest of the central continent. Therefore, its influence is particularly strong in the south and west, while it is weaker in the east. You will be able to breathe easier if you go the coastal kingdom.”

“Thank you for teaching me, but is it okay for Gibra to be giving me this after sales service?”

“No, I think this is just right.” Gibra was pleased that a blow had been dealt to the Orcus Company. “There have been a few times when my jaw dropped open, but it was a fun request.”

Theodore noticed that Gibra had his own ulterior motives, but he could also tell that Gibra’s answer wasn’t a lie. It was because Theo’s developing senses were gradually improving his intuition. It was also true that Gibra’s advice was helpful.

So, Theo bowed sincerely. “...Thank you.”

“I hope to see you at a later time. I will collect a few original books and sell them to you for a high price.”

“Yes, then next time.”

After the short goodbye, the two men turned their backs to each other. They might meet again, or they might never meet again. Everyone in the world knew this fact, but they continued to move on with a vague expectation.

As Theodore climbed onto the driver’s seat, Gibra entered the much more familiar back alleys. Then Akan appeared from where he had been waiting in the shadows.

“Thank you for the good work, Branch Director.”

“Right.”

The positions of the two people were the same as always. Gibra walked first, while Akan followed behind. They had been working together for several years, so Gibra could tell that there was something suspicious in Akan’s stride. It wasn’t difficult to guess the reason for that.

“Akan, are you curious about why I helped ‘him’?”

“T-That... I’m sorry.”

“There is no need to be sorry. It is natural to be curious when thinking about it. The Empire’s intelligence network has placed a bounty for information about ‘Meltor’s Hero,’ so why did I miss the gold coins lying before me?”

The atmosphere of the alley cooled as soon as those words, ‘Meltor’s Hero,’ were mentioned. The power of the Information Guild might not stretch to the northern continent, but they were the best information guild in the central continent.

They was no reason why they wouldn’t hear about the reputation of the hero, who had rescued a high elf from slavery and created the alliance with the neutral Elvenheim. They were also aware that the Andras Empire would pay a lot of money for information about him.

Nevertheless, Gibra had kicked away his chance.

“Well, I would’ve gained a lot of gold if I sold the information. The empire is filled with barbarians, but they aren’t ones to break their promises. Perhaps it is true that they will give the gold.”

“Then why...?”

“Hey, Akan,” Gibra’s chilly voice interrupted, “We are rats in the gutter, but we are still rats that live in the gutters of Kargas. Earning a few extra gold coins isn’t worth risking the whole country. If we sell this information to Andras, we will become enemies of Meltor.”

“.....”

“The Andras Empire is a country that has no interest in alliances. Our help is only worth a few gold coins. Once we are thrown away, the armies of Meltor will come down to the central continent.”

Once that happened, they were screwed. Unlike the north which had experienced war for hundreds of years, the central continent was weakened by a long period of peace.

They only had one or two master level people, compared to the north which had more than six or seven. Meltor and Andras... either one of them was a power the central continent couldn't afford going against. However, more than anything else, Meltor wasn't a warmonger like the Andras Empire.

The grace he was giving Theo now could be paid back for an expensive price later. It wasn't about a personal favour to Theodore Miller. These thorough calculations were Gibra's real intentions. He had expected Akan to have some reservations, so Gibra had come to this alley.

“-So, you can't be left alive.”

Akan's body fell to the ground. He died before he even noticed the black dagger stabbed in his neck. This was the remarkable ability of the man assigned as the branch manager of Sipoto, the 'King of Mice.'

As he looked at the face of the man he'd killed with one attack, Gibra muttered, "...You are competent, but you are a cheap bastard. I know that you won't be able to keep your mouth shut in the face of gold."

So, Gibra killed him. He pierced his the neck of his subordinate, whom he had known for several years, to prevent the possibility of this information leaking. As always, there was a bitter aftertaste. Gibra spat out a mouthful of phlegm in attempt to shake off the bitter taste.

He couldn't reverse what he had already done. From now on, he could only look forward.

Today's investment would be returned several times over in the future.

*

Without knowing about the murder that had just taken place, Theodore's carriage ran aggressively out of the city. Theodore, sitting in the driver's seat, was in the midst of drawing something.

"30 degrees on the right... 42 degrees on the left again... add a triangle to the hexagon and a pentagram to the circle..."

To outsiders, it would be mumbling with an unknown meaning, but any magician would be surprised to hear it. Theodore's mumbled words were dozens of equations and hundreds of

arithmetic operations being completed. It was also done during the rough carriage ride. There were more impacts than there would be when riding in a high class carriage, but Theo didn't feel any nausea.

Instead, he successfully completed his calculations. "Okay, this is done."

With satisfied eyes, he looked down at the magic circle he drew in minutes. It was a magic circle used to call a summon, which he pulled from Satomer's absorbed knowledge. Originally, this spell required an offering which would act as a catalyst to summon something, but Theodore didn't need to have one. It was because of the 'contract' handed over by Satomer.

One drop of blood was enough for the call.

Wuuong...!

There was a bright light as the drop of blood fell. Light flowed along the magic circle drawn on the parchment, and as mana flowed near it, a gate was created which the summons could access. After signing the contract, he could just call the summons by using its name. However, this process was inevitable since he wasn't the contractor yet.

Eventually, all the preparations were over, and Theodore recited the name of the summon.

“I call you as your name contractor, the crow who thinks-”

It was the summons he’d gained from Satomer.

“Your name is Hugin!”

Simultaneously, something black emerged from the magic circle. A few feathers fluttered as the wings staggered, and a crow soon rose up before Theodore’s eyes. Theodore looked at it with admiration, then the crow’s beak opened. Was it going to cry out like an eagle? Theo was filled with expectations.

After a moment, the crow called Hugin cried out, Kyaack-!

“.....?”

Kuwaaack-! It was a small cry. Theodore, who had been expecting a lot, let out a long sigh, while someone appeared at the sound.

“Hey, Young Master. What was that sound? It sounded like a drunk person was vomiting.”

“...Over there.”

“Eh? A crow?” Randolph’s expression changed the moment he heard it was something Theodore had summoned. It was because the crow didn’t fit Young Master’s image at all. He covered his mouth while he hunched over like he had cramps.

“P-Puah. I laughed very well. I didn’t know you could summon such a thing.”

“I thought it was time to do so.”

Theo could feel some of the frustration that Satomer had felt all throughout his life. As Theodore felt like he was chewing shit, Randolph sat down beside him. For an aura user who was close to a master, nausea was a distant story, and he had no interest in reading books like Theodore.

After a minute of silence, Theodore opened his mouth first. “... I’m sorry I got you caught up in something so annoying.”

“Hmm?” Randolph looked over at the abrupt apology.

“You became enemies with the Orcus Company because of me. If I hadn’t done this, you wouldn’t have to run away-”

“Stop there, Young Master.” It was a fair apology, but Randolph shook his head firmly and denied it. “Do you think I did this just to help you? I had my own thoughts when I decided to follow you. So, you don’t have to feel sorry for a decision I made.”

“But...”

“No, I wasn’t honest. I actually am fortunate to be accompanying

Young Master.”

‘Fortunate?’ Theodore’s eyes became bigger at the unexpected answer.

Randolph became the enemy of a warlock and even fought against a death knight. Still, he was sincere. He was genuinely delighted that he got to meet Theodore again. It might be the intuition Randolph got when he found his ancestor’s swords in the Miller Barony.

Fun things always happened around this person.

“I regained the heirlooms and trained my skills for a year, but I couldn’t get that feeling of urgency or improvement from that time. Then I met Young Master and experienced a fight that made my blood boil. It has been a long time since my hair stuck up like that.”

Randolph realized it while colliding with the death knight. His stagnant skills had started to experience a breakthrough in that fight. The back of his neck cooled as he moved around the boundary of life and death. It wasn’t easy to meet these types of opponents.

That was why he had decided to accompany Theodore. It was in order to reach the master level shimmering in front of him.

“This is a journey to complete my sword. So, don’t worry or feel

sorry, Young Master.” Before Theodore could reply, Randolph changed the subject. “By the way, where are we going now?”

Theo laughed at the clumsy method and replied, “I am thinking about going to the east. The influence of the Orcus Company is less in the Soldun Kingdom, so we can breathe and sort things out there.”

Theodore needed a break now. He had obtained more than 20 original books and needed to experiment with ‘Charlotte’s Necklace.’ If he arrived at the coastal kingdom in the east of the continent, he would be able to secure some time.

However, Randolph’s expression changed subtly at Theo’s words. He looked at Theodore uncertainly before muttering, “Well, will it turn out that way?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the meantime, wherever Young Master goes, incidents happen. I don’t think Soldun will be an exception...”

Theodore had no choice but to smile wryly. “No way... I have to believe that won’t be the case.”

“Is that so?”

The two men sighed and looked at the broad grasslands of Kargas.

If they maintained this speed, they would be able to leave the Kargas Kingdom and cross the border of Soldun in a week. As to whether the Orcus Company's hands would reach them by then... there was such a bet.

Chapter 136 – The Goal Is The Port (2)

However, on the first night of his departure from Sipoto, Theodore had no choice but to admit his prediction was wrong.

The first one to recognize the presence wasn't the almost master level swordsman, Randolph or the 6th Circle magician, Theodore. On the roof of the carriage, the crow, Hugin, cried out as it discovered something strange on the horizon.

Kyaack-!

Thanks to the summoning magic, the image which Hugin saw was burned onto Theodore's retina. Simultaneously, Theodore closed the book he was reading and shouted at Randolph who was in the driver's seat, "Randolph, stop the carriage!"

"What? Why?"

"Hurry!"

Randolph sensed Theo's urgency and tugged at the reins. Thanks to the well-trained horses, the speed of the carriage reduced without any impact, and it stopped 30 meters from the point where it had first started to decelerate.

Randolph tried to ask about the sudden order, but there was no need as immediately after that, the ground near the back axis of the carriage began to shake.

Ku ku ku kung...!

“W-What, this feeling?!”

“-Mitra!”

Unlike the confused Randolph, Theodore had a helper who could let him know the underground situation. The little girl appeared at Theodore's feet and asked, [Deo, you caw?]

‘Yes. I'm sorry, but can go you straight into the ground? I need to know what is going on.’

[Yes! I noe!] As always, the girl replied with short words before diving into the ground with her distinctive hoing.

‘...Okay, there are two of them.’

As Mitra dug into the ground, the presence of two beings entered Theodore's mind. One was ‘Hugin's eyes,’ watching something on the horizon. The other was ‘Mitra's vision’ which had just entered the ground.

His mind was confused by the two scenes, but Theo kept his composure. It was thanks to his mental training to handle Umbra. Eventually, the source of the shaking ground was revealed.

“No way. Sand worms?!” The name emerged from the lips of Theodore, who was in shock.

Sand worms were a type of insect monster which lived mainly in the desert. Their bodies were several dozen meters long and were capable of quick movements because their weight didn't match their bodies. However, their skin was soft, so they couldn't move in places where there was hard ground. The ones Mitra was showing Theodore, ignored these constraints.

Kududuk! Kududuk!

The sand worms continued advancing despite the rocks, gravel, soil, and sand rubbing against their skin. They didn't care about the blood which poured down occasionally or their internal organs which sometimes fell out from scratches on their body. It was a wound which living sand worms wouldn't have been able to endure.

“Undead. Using zombie sand worms as a means of transportation... Isn't this quite creative?”

It was as he said. A zombie sand worm could move anywhere under the surface of the ground, no matter how painful the journey was. According to some researchers, a sand worm could move at a speed which was equal to 60km/h. Furthermore, it could run without feeling any fatigue because it was an undead.

This way, it wasn't unreasonable that the followers had caught up with Theodore. As they arrived at a point just ahead of the

party's carriage, the movement of the sand worms caused a tremor which was close to a small earthquake.

The sand worms broke through the surface of the ground, causing blood to soar and splatter.

Kuuuuoh...!

It was a frightening roar. Of course, Theodore and Randolph weren't scared of sand worms, but they couldn't prevent their expressions from changing into shocked expressions after seeing the sand worms' appearance.

This was because undead started pouring out of the body of the sand worms.

[Kill... them...]

[Living... but...]

[Die... together...]

Contaminated with black magic power, the bodies were already closer to metal than biotissue. This was the intermediate-ranked undead which could reproduce some of their original physical abilities and skills. They mumbled, so that meant there was some intelligence remaining.

Which kingdom had they been soldiers of when they were alive...?

In their formation, the skeleton soldiers, armed with armor and spears or swords, started advancing toward Theodore. This wasn't the chaotic assault of a corrupt group but a corps with proper tactics, and there was someone controlling them from behind.

"Sheesh, this type of offensive is annoying," Randolph grumbled as he moved forward.

"Then I'll increase the number of allies."

"Eh?"

Theodore tapped his index finger instead of answering.

Clack! There was a sharp sound as the bracelet around his wrist sparkled. The bracelet was the artifact created by the Yellow Tower Master and borrowed from Kurt III. Six living armors suddenly appeared around Randolph, who laughed and twisted his double swords as he felt their incredible presence.

"Ohh, then this is a different story."

Going from one to seven, the total sum of combat power itself hadn't changed much, but the advantage wasn't light as it reduced the pressure of being surrounded.

Randolph's role was to act as Theodore's escort. It was the magician, not the swordsman, who played the protagonist in these types of battlefields. The essence of Theodore's ability as a magician was to dominate the battlefield with overwhelming magic power.

"Please escort me well, Captain Randolph."

Theodore pulled out his staff, which he had never used before.

*

Kaack!

With an eerie sound, the neck bone of five skeletons were severed. They were reinforced with black magic, but they still couldn't endure Randolph's aura.

He wielded his two falchions like he was jumping into a flock of sheep. Any shield or armor hit by his weapons were broken and scattered into pieces. It was impossible for intermediate-level undead to resist Randolph's aura.

As a result, over 100 skeleton skeletons were turned into grey ash.

However, that wasn't all. The six living armors Theodore had

summoned were quite successful. The poison infesting the skeleton soldiers' weapons were made of black magic and only affected the living, so the living armour blocked the undead army from reaching Theodore by becoming a steel wall.

“...Isn't this flowing along easier than I thought it would?” Theodore muttered as he raised his staff.

‘Memorize. All Slots Open. Fire Ball Sixfold.’ The magic was invoked without speaking. If another magician was here, they would be foaming at the mouth.

Theodore's fire magic, enhanced by his high sensitivity and max fire attribute affinity, was already beyond the standard of the circles. There were six fireballs, each one having the power of a 4th or higher level circle. Additionally, he received the assistance of a staff which he didn't normally use.

The undead fell apart under the catastrophic bombardment.

—————!!

In a second, charred bones became ashes, and those in the center of the explosion were destroyed by the fire. It was the result of pure destructive power. There were only six rounds, but the scale was enough to shake the entire battlefield. If it were ordinary 3rd Circle magic, a skeleton soldier would be able to endure half a dozen of them.

However, Theodore's eyebrows twitched when he saw the result.

‘What the hell are these guys? Why are they so weak?’

If the warlock in the distance heard Theo's mumbles, he would be shaking in shock. The skeleton soldiers the warlock led were the remains of the elite army of an old kingdom. It was an army strong enough to compete with senior undead such as the death knight or dullahan.

This was a force much stronger and more capable than the corpses Theo had previously encountered at the Miller Barony.

‘No, is it just my perspective that is different?’

After all, Theodore was 10 times stronger than he had been at that time.

Kwaang! Kwang! Kwaang!

He simply shot fireballs at 10 second intervals, but the number of undead was rapidly declining. The sight of the skeleton soldiers collapsing like scarecrows in the rice fields must be a nightmare for the maker.

The stalemate was increasingly pushed as gaps appeared between the countless soldiers. The headcount might seem unlimited, but in the end, all warlocks had a limit.

Not long after that, Randolph had nothing to do.

“Ah, Young Master is still absurd.”

The skeleton soldiers were destroyed faster than those emerging from the sand worms. Thus, the front line was pushed back, and the need to protect the front of Theodore disappeared. Randolph just watched mournfully as fireballs shot at the enemy constantly.

However, it was at this moment that...

Ku ku ku kung...!

Another sand worm suddenly soared up behind Theodore. It was different from the other sand worms; this one was meant to be a ‘ghoul’ instead of a ‘zombie.’

“What?!”

Therefore, the reactions of Randolph and the living armour were late. The speed of the ghoul worm, which was better than its physical capability in life, was comparable to a killer whale in the ocean.

The snout of the worm opened, and a warlock in black robes popped out. “-Kuhuhu! You weren’t alert, you fools!”

Randolph was able to realize it right away that the warlock standing in the distance was a fake, while the real one had hidden in order to catch Theodore unaware. He stepped forward, but the black magic spell was completed several beats faster.

“Evil spirits from the abyss, slay him...!”

The black magic curse, Doom Wight, summoned wraiths which couldn't even be compared to specters or banshees. The warlock had formed the curse by gathering at least 10,000 spirits. This was a mass of malice which could kill any living creature just by touching it. The most frightening thing about it was that defense magic or physical resistance was no use against it.

The fatal drawback was that despite such a high cost, it was a disposable thing which could only be used once.

‘Dangerous!’

The moment that the reddish black magic power sprang up like lightning, a drop of sweat rolled down Randolph's neck.

‘...That son of a bitch was watching Young Master's abilities.’

Theodore had torn apart the undead army with fireballs and showed no signs of fatigue despite the constant bombardment. The warlock had seen this and didn't hesitate to ambush Theodore. He then prepared a spell dangerous enough that he was certain he could kill Theodore. Was it possible for Theodore to survive this

surprise attack?

Of course, it was.

“Was this why you wanted me to wait?” Theo muttered.

Had Theo gone crazy after seeing the impending death before his eyes? The warlock scoffed when he heard Theodore muttering to himself.

-That’s right. I was waiting for this.

However, Theodore was talking to someone else. With Alfred’s sensory perception and Mitra’s detection ability, very few things could surprise him. Nevertheless, there was a reason why he had waited for the warlock to reveal himself and allowed the warlock to complete the spell—Doom Wight, a black magic spell composed of ‘evil spirits.’

It meant...

“Eat.”

It meant this was Gluttony’s prey.

Chapter 137 – The Goal Is The Port (3)

Of course, the Doom Wight wasn't so common as to fall under the same standards as other evil spirits. It was an evil spirit made from thousands of souls and refined to be full of malice. Despite being a disposable summons, it was difficult to survive against the Doom Wight unless the other person was of the master level.

Unfortunately, the Doom Wight encountered the wrong person.

Jjeok.

The tongue emerged from the hole in Theo's left hand with a creepy sound. The image of terror, Doom Wight, was astonished to see the greedy tongue. Beyond the greedy tongue was the abyss, the storage place of the grimoire which ate grimoires, where Death's Worship was kept. Anything which fell into the category of magic was a gift for it to devour.

...Krr.

Forgotten emotions were revived in the evil spirit which had been born for the sole purpose of slaughter. It was the primal feeling which prey felt when they were about to be eaten. The evil spirit's instincts understood that it was facing a predator, a being on a higher tier of the food chain.

‘Fear.’

Kiaaaaaaaaaa—! The shadow retreated. It continued retreating desperately, even refusing the warlock's command. However, a magical force was tying it up. If not, it would've escaped to the horizon at lightning speed. As a shadow without any impurities, it knew exactly the risk that it was facing.

Goblins and ogres...?

Orcs and dragons...?

Ants and elephant...?

There was no analogy which the despairing Doom Wight could use to express the difference. As Gluttony looked at the fearful Doom Wight, it praised the evil spirit's quick reaction.

–Hoh, you can grasp what is happening? You are better than a flea. However, that enlightenment can only make you unhappy.

A flea wouldn't understand what was going on, but the beast who grasped the hierarchy would be the one who felt fear. The Doom Wight was tied down by the warlock's orders and couldn't even run away.

Gluttony ridiculed the Doom Wight before stretching out its tongue.

Kwack!

The tongue captured the miserable Doom Wight.

[You have consumed the Doom Wight, a collection of grudges.]

[Your vessel has become slightly fuller.]

[Gluttony has removed the curse left in the Doom Wight.]

“...Hah.” Theodore could only smile as he watched.

His senses had given off a wild alarm, indicating that it was dangerous with his current capabilities. Despite that, the Doom Wight had been taken care of in one bite, making Theo wonder about Gluttony’s limits.

However, Theodore’s surprise was nothing compared to that of the person who had summoned Doom Wight, the warlock.

“W-What? What happened to my Doom Wight?!” The warlock was panicked, as he had lost his treasure for nothing. He stared at Theodore, even forgetting to flee. However, the warlock didn’t know what a big gap that meaningless action of his had caused.

Theodore gazed at the warlock with cold eyes and flicked two

fingers.

Piing!

There were two flashes of light, and the warlock's thighs were pierced.

“Kuaack!”

A fool who didn't have much practical experience in the field wouldn't be able to endure this. The warlock lost the ability for both of his legs to function, causing him to fall to the ground. It was a bonus that his forehead was injured as he struck the hard ground.

The ghoulish worm belatedly responded to its master's pain, but Theodore's casting was faster. He cast a large fire attack magic which could crush even large monsters.

‘Blaze Burst.’

Unlike ordinary magicians, he didn't need to chant, and the formula calculations ended 10 times faster due to Theo's intelligence. Theodore completed the 5th Circle magic in just a few seconds.

Kukukung...!

This was the masterpiece of his teacher, Vince Haidel. The fire pillar emerging from the ground turned a part of the ghoul worm's body and head into ashes.

It wasn't a damage which could be sustained by an undead, even a ghoul undead. Fire magic which completely killed biological tissue wasn't fatal to the undead, but Theodore's output was several times higher than normal.

Hence, the ghoul worm lost half of its body in an instant and collapsed.

Kuwuonq.

The ground shook intensely, causing the warlock to regain consciousness. The warlock quickly tried to move his body, but,...

"Where are you going?" Randolph's double swords were placed at the warlock's neck. If the warlock tried to chant even one syllable, the swords would cut his carotid artery.

Theodore might've intended it, but Randolph had been caught off guard and his employer almost paid for it. So, Randolph was reflecting on his mistake, making his swords seem more eerie than usual.

Theodore checked the boundary and then approached.

"What the hell are you?" The warlock asked first. "I don't know

what you did, but you annihilated a Doom Wight. You are also a 5th Circle magician at this age. A person like you can't live in obscurity!"

"...You seem to be misunderstanding something," Theodore replied coldly to the question and kicked the thighs of the warlock which had been hit by Magic Bullet. There was a loud sound and blood trickled down.

The warlock was struck with terrible pain! His face distorted at the damage dealt mercilessly to his wound.

"K-Kuooooock...!"

However, Theodore didn't stop at just one kick.

Bam!

The warlock moaned as the pain continued. It was to the extent that blood had flooded down his thigh and covered Theodore's shoe. Theo looked at his shoe before glancing at the warlock's distorted face.

"My role is the questioner, and your role is to answer. Do you understand?"

"...Don't make me laugh."

“What?”

The warlock should've been in significant pain, but he just sneered as he alternated looking between Theo and Randolph.

“This body is a warlock who explores death and indulges in pain. Do you think I will open my mouth because of such flimsy torturing...? You might have skills in magic, but you are still a kid.” The taunting words contained their own confidence.

Warlocks would suffer from severe torture when captured in order to find out the names of other members of their organization. Therefore, warlocks were methodically trained to handle torture, including a procedure which allowed the nervous system to tolerate magic attacks.

So, even a professional torturer couldn't open this warlock's mouth.

Theodore also knew this fact. Subjugating warlocks was one of the duties of a war mage. He knew that torture magic had been made useless by warlocks long ago. Warlocks had a technique which nullified torture by paralyzing their nervous system, and they could ignore pain below a certain level.

“Kuk.” However, Theodore laughed at his confidence. “Hey.”

“...W-What?”

Theo mourned the misfortune of the warlock he caught.

“Have you ever heard of Separating Muscles, Reforming Bones?”

*

According to Lee Yoonsung, who had been born in the East, this technique hadn't originally been used for torture.

Unlike in the continent where all sorts of recovery magic and potions were developed, there was no way for the east to heal wounds rapidly in the East, causing detailed research on the human body to be carried out. The research was on the bones, muscles, nerves, and how mana flowed through the blood.

Separating Muscles, Reforming Bones was a treatment based on that type of knowledge.

Separating Muscle meant literally separating the muscle fibres, while Reforming Bones meant mixing up the framework.

It was a technique which loosened the muscle fibers and restored broken bones to their original states. This technique was for treating the internal wounds which weren't seen on the surface, and it became a must for any healer in the East to learn.

‘There was one drawback that couldn't be improved.’

The technique caused truly terrible pain. The pain which occurred when muscles and bones were affected wasn't at a level that anyone could endure. Therefore, when Separating Muscles, Reforming Bones was used, it was common to use an anesthetic medicine or to paralyze the spinal cord in order to make the patient unaware of the pain.

However, there were those who exploited the technique maliciously.

“—————!” The warlock couldn't even scream. Whenever Theodore's fingers twisted the warlock's muscles, the warlock's body would spasm. Only a weak breathing flowed from the warlock's vocal cords to his mouth.

It was a 'humane' torture because it was treating the victim.

“Ah, I stabbed the wrong place.”

“—————?!?”

Of course, fatal mistakes could happen in the process. Fortunately, the warlock's insides didn't break. The unfortunate warlock trembled with a tearful face and runny nose.

After just 30 minutes, the warlock gave up all resistance.

“Agent Isaac sent you?”

“...Yes, that’s right.”

“You are just the person sent in advance, and there is still a team to come?”

“...Inde...ed.”

“What is the name of your organization?”

“...I... don’t... know.”

It didn’t take long to finish the questioning. The warlock answered whatever Theo wanted to know after Separating Muscles, Reforming Bones was used. Whenever he hesitated, Theodore would raise a finger, and the warlock would reply in a flash.

Furthermore, the warlock, called Oldun, was of a low rank and didn’t know much about the organization.

Theodore asked one final question, “The black magic you used last time, can you use it one more time?”

“...Doom... Wight... Is that correct?”

“Is it a spell that calls evil spirits?”

“Yes... but... it’s disposable... magic...”

If so, he couldn’t use it again. Theodore aimed his finger at the warlock without any hesitation.

Piing!

There was no way for the tortured warlock to avoid it, causing his body to lie down neatly. Theodore didn’t stop there as he burned the body with fire magic. A necromancer might be able to find out information from any body parts left behind.

Randolph clicked his tongue as he watched from the side. “Hah, I didn’t know Young Master would use such a cruel method.”

It was true. Torture gave mental pain to the person doing the torturing, as well as the one being tortured. Theodore wasn’t born with that type of desire in him. Still, he hadn’t hesitated to torture and kill the unknown person.

In this sense, he had grown. However, Randolph couldn’t help feeling some regret as he remembered the past.

Theodore shook his head with a wry smile. “Randolph, do you know the 10 Commandments of the Red Tower?”

“What? Of course, I don’t know.”

“Then I will use this opportunity to tell you a little bit.”

The 3rd commandment of the Red Tower was that trash could sometimes be recycled, but human trash was generally not recyclable.

The Red Tower’s 8th commandment was that a good warlock was a dead warlock.

The Red Tower’s 9th commandment was that the method of death didn’t matter as they were still going to die.

Randolph shook his head with a stunned expression. The Red Tower was famous among the mercenaries, be it for good or bad reasons. However, he hadn’t imagined such drastic guidelines. It was fairly crude, but it wasn’t a bad creed for Theodore to follow.

The atmosphere was tense, so Theo changed the topic. “They still don’t know my identity but sending out these troops... It seems like the Orcus Company is quite big in the organization.”

“I think so as well. This warlock might’ve fallen easily, but they aren’t simple opponents. We can’t ignore it if these guys come on a daily basis.”

“That’s right. So, I was thinking...” As Randolph waited, Theodore pulled out a map. He unfolded it on a flat spot in the carriage and pointed as Randolph came to his side. “We need to

change our destination.”

Randolph looked at the point where Theo’s finger had stopped at.

“Ramos?”

“Yes, it is one of the few port cities in Kargas.”

“...Ah, I understand. Rather than sticking to land, we should take a ship?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Randolph grinned as he understood what he was seeing. Theodore almost smiled while rolling up the map.

The undead were vulnerable to sunlight as well as to the sea. Unlike under the ground where not many predators existed, there were all types of fish and marine life in the ocean. Additionally, the strong waves would apply pressure to the bodies of the undead.

By using the simple method of going by sea, Theo could tie up the hands and feet of those using methods of transport like the sand worms.

Randolph was convinced and climbed into the driver’s seat instantly. “Then which direction is Ramos?”

Theodore gauged the distance before opening his mouth to say, “If we run all day and night... we will probably arrive in a day.”

“Okay, a day is good.” Randolph gathered the reins of the two horses and started the carriage with a look of excitement. The plains, which had been filled with the undead a while ago, now only showed faint traces of the zombie worms.

“Hiyah!”

This time, the carriage moved forward without any interruptions. They headed toward the horizon where nothing was visible yet, as the rush for the pursuers to catch up soon began.

Chapter 138 – Unusual Passenger Ship (1)

Since ancient times, cities had flourished nearer to the center of the country and declined as they moved further away. Of course, some cities close to the border had a strategic value, but Ramos wasn't one of them.

Nevertheless, Ramos had a geographical advantage. It was part of the coastline called a 'cape,' a terrain which stretched from land to sea.

It was a port city. Yes, Ramos was one of the few port cities in the middle of the wide central continent. The area was too narrow to be used as a strategic point, but there were no problems with transportation using the sea route. Furthermore, it was also famous for being a shortcut to the eastern part of the continent.

For these reasons, Ramos evolved into a level comparable to that of other metropolitan cities, despite being on the edge of the kingdom.

The day began in its usual manner.

“Hey, the youngest! Open the door at once!”

“Yes! I understand!”

The youngest guard assigned today, Hanson, ran toward the pulley controlling the gate.

As with any city, Ramos controlled any night time admissions by locking the gate. It was a considerable distance from the habitat of the nearest creatures, but there was no harm in being careful. Then in the morning, the gate would open as the sun rose.

Dururuk...dururuk...

Hanson arrived at the pulley and started opening the gate with his thick arms. The walls weren't very high, so the gate wasn't that big, but a few soldiers were supposed to open the gate together. Yet he was being asked to open it on his own. This was the hazing style of the Ramos guards.

“Kuoong...!”

Unsurprisingly, Hanson's face flushed red, but he couldn't open the gate. However, he had considerable strength for a human who couldn't use aura. The senior guards, who were watching him, whistled as they were startled that a fairly good newbie had entered.

But that relaxed expression didn't last long.

“Uh, who is coming from over there?”

“What? How long until they arrive?”

“They’re coming soon. Based on the dirt, it is a small but pretty high-end carriage?”

The guards watched the horizon from the walls every day, so their eyesight was similar to that of a good hunter. They noticed the presence of a carriage coming from the western horizon and quickly determined the identity of the approaching carriage.

It was okay up to here as it wasn’t rare for guests to come early in the morning. However, the problem was that the speed of the carriage was more than imagined.

“W-What? Why is it so fast?!” The veteran guards belatedly noticed the seriousness of the situation and hurried down the wall.

A high-end wagon meant the guest was a noble or from a top business company. It wasn’t a situation where they could be late because they were hazing the newbie. Hanson, who was already exhausted, kept turning the pulley firmly with his seniors.

Durururuk...! The gate opened at a super fast speed. Shortly afterwards, Theodore’s party stopped in front of the gate. The guards, who had passed through the crisis, became nervous again as they saw the carriage.

“H-Heok!”

“Blood marks...?!”

It was impossible to find the original appearance of the carriage, which had been shiny at the time of purchase. The carriage looked as if it had passed through the middle of a battlefield. This was natural. Theodore turned away from the surprised guards toward the forest they had just passed through. There were still thousands of undead inside.

‘Dammit, it was much more annoying than the first night.’

After killing the warlock who attacked first, Theo had been vigilant but hadn’t seen any shadows at all.

To be hidden from Hugin’s detection, the other warlock must be hiding a few kilometers away. In the meantime, their purpose of trying to stop the carriage had been revealed. It was why the enemies only used low grade undead, unlike on the first day.

In the end, Theo and Randolph gave up on fighting the undead and just concentrated on breaking through.

Flop.

Finally, one of the horses started foaming and collapsed to the ground.

“...I am really sorry.”

Theo had repeatedly used Haste and fatigue recovery magic on the horses, which meant the aftermath was terrible. The other

horse was just barely standing. It would've died as well if it had run a little longer. Theodore used simple magic to bury the horse that died. Then he turned towards the nervous guards.

Theo had a convenient means of not having to answer any questions.

“I am from the Polonell Company.”

The sentence and the plaque were enough to make the Ramos guards step out of the way.

*

“We will split up here.”

“Yes, I'll see you at the port later.”

After entering Ramos, the two of them split up according to their roles. Randolph would dispose of the wrecked carriage and remaining horses, while Theodore would see if there were any ships heading toward the Soldun Kingdom.

‘I hope we can leave today.’

He had entered the city somehow, but that wasn't enough to stop the Orcus Company from attacking. Theo and Randolph could only shake off the rabble... It would be hard if two senior level undead

like the death knight appeared.

The Doom Wight had been taken care of thanks to Theodore and Gluttony, but it would've been fatal for Randolph if he had been alone. The force behind the Orcus Company was much stronger than expected, so he needed to escape that power as quickly as possible.

However, the answers Theodore heard weren't optimistic.

"There are no ships left?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but they are all booked..."

It was a mistake Theodore made because he had never seen the sea or a ship in his life.

"It will be similar even if you ask another shipping company."

Basically, all the ships were booked. There was an obvious limitation to the number of guests a boat could hold, and it was difficult to show flexibility, unlike traveling over land. Moreover, he was looking for a ship heading to another country.

There were occasions when there was a vacancy, but luck wasn't on Theodore's side this time.

He was talking to Belf, a member of Luere Shipping.

“During this period of time, most ships are going to the south or north, so there are only three ships heading to the Soldun Kingdom. If you book now, you will probably have to wait a month.”

“Even for someone from a top company?”

Belf eyes narrowed as he saw the mark that Theodore held.

“Oho, you are from the Polonell Company.”

However, Belf didn't hesitate to shake his head. Despite Theodore's status or money, there were really no places left.

On the sea, the Polonell Company's name didn't play a big role. The Polonell Company's influence was mainly based around the land routes to the north, which meant it didn't have as much influence in the distant areas on the Central Continent. Ramos was among them, since it mainly operated via the sea.

Theodore bit his lip at being blocked in an unexpected place.

‘If I can't get a ship here... do I need to obtain a carriage and run to the western border? No, it is tough due to the time spent here. I also need a carriage good enough to break through the undead's siege... Should I go into hiding?’

He was cornered. Theodore recognized this fact and looked at the floor with a grim expression.

Although he had the knowledge, brains and experiences of several great people, Theodore was still young. Veronica would've overcome this adversity with her strength, while Vince would've booked a ship in a port city from the very beginning.

It was at this moment that...

“Umm... Did you say you are called Theo?”

“Ah, yes.”

“As I said, it is impossible with a normal ship. However, it might be possible with a special ship.”

The depressed Theodore scrambled at those words. “Special ship?”

He could pay no matter how much the extra charge was. Thanks to the duel bid, the money he'd spent at the underground auction wasn't that big. However, instead of explaining the implications, Belf placed a finger to his lips. “However, there are two conditions.”

“What are they?”

“First, you must agree to maintain the confidentiality of the ship. You will know the secret after boarding.”

“...I understand.”

Theodore wanted to complain, but he wasn't in a position to be picky. He needed to fend off the pursuers and arrive at the Soldun Kingdom. As long as he could achieve his purpose, Theo didn't care about the surprise.

Belf then told him the second condition. In some ways, the condition was what Theo had expected.

“Then I need a deposit.”

“Do you mean I have to pay extra?”

“No, not that.”

Theodore looked confused, making Belf smile and whisper loudly, “Is there someone in the group other than Theo?”

“Yes, two people including me.”

“Then 20 gold is required. If you pay 10 gold each, you will know why eventually.”

Did he mean the rest of the money would be collected after boarding? Theodore tried to ask, but Belf was adamant that he couldn't explain any more.

‘Che, it can't be helped.’

Due to his circumstances, Theo had to take a submissive attitude. In the end, Theodore accepted Belf's offer. He handed over a few gold coins and received two boarding passes. Thanks to the bronze mark of the Luere Company, it was difficult to make counterfeits of the boarding pass. Perhaps this wasn't a one-time thing.

“I will arrange a room for two people. The departure time is this evening.”

Theodore looked down with a worried expression and asked Belf something he had almost forgotten, “How long will it take to get to Soldun Kingdom? I heard that we can arrive as early as four days.”

“Ah, I'm sorry. My explanation is late.” Belf scratched his head at the question before replying, “The ship makes a little ‘detour,’ so it will take more than a week. Do you have any urgent business?”

“...No, it is okay.” Theodore thought for a moment before putting the two boarding passes away. The most important thing was getting rid of the chasers from the Orcus Company, not arriving at the Soldun Kingdom quickly.

The advantage of going by sea was that he didn't need to be

worried about raids from the warlocks. The zombies, ghouls, and other low level undead couldn't withstand the pressure of the sea currents or the sea creatures.

However, Theodore was skeptical about the special nature of this ship.

‘Let's meet Randolph and tell him the news.’

Theodore left the Luere Company and headed toward where Randolph would be waiting. As the leader of a mercenary group active in the central continent, Randolph might know the secret.

Chapter 139 – Unusual Passenger Ship (2)

“Hmm... I’m sorry, but I’m not sure.”

However, Theodore’s expectations were burst. Randolph had been active as a mercenary on the central continent for nearly a year, but he didn’t know anything about the secret ship.

Randolph gave his reply with a frustrated expression while eating his grilled fish. His stomach was empty after the two day pursuit, so he was transforming this fish into energy.

Randolph chewed one more time before continuing to speak, “I certainly came to the central continent earlier than Young Master, but the scope of my activities wasn’t that wide. At best, I moved from the midwest to the center of the south? I never went close enough to the east to see the coastline.”

“...I see.”

“Well, even if I was active in the east, it is unlikely that I would know this information. Based on Belf’s story, it seems to be a pretty secretive ship.”

Randolph laughed as he drank his cup of beer, stating that the job of a mercenary wasn’t one where they would be trusted with anything confidential.

It was natural. Mercenaries were those who would kill someone

for a few gold coins or throw themselves onto a battlefield they had nothing to do with. Those types of mercenaries had no sense of belonging and would regard secrets as nothing more than a contribution to their well-being. Who would want to share secrets with people like that?

It went without saying that merchants were well aware of this habit.

“We’ll just have to see,” Theodore muttered while putting down his empty plate.

No matter what trap was hidden on the ship, both of them needed a way to get out of Kargas quickly.

Come to think of it, it had only been two days. As soon as they left Sipoto, they had been attacked by undead on a nightly basis, and Theodore and Randolph had barely gotten any sleep. It was clear they wouldn’t last much longer while traveling by land.

Regardless of the trap, it was like child’s play compared to what they were facing, so the opinions of the two people were unanimous.

Jingle.

“I ate well.”

They paid for the food just as the sun was setting. It would soon

be the departure time Belf mentioned.

Thanks to that, Theodore didn't have to wait and moved straight to the marina. The distinctive fishy smell of seawater tickled their noses as they got closer to the sea. It was a new experience for two people who had lived on land all their lives.

Theodore kept moving as he looked at the number on his boarding pass.

'This is Number 3... If it is Number 5, we have to go a little further.'

Fortunately, there were signs all over the marina, so they didn't get lost. The two people soon arrived at Bay 5, in front of the ship indicated on the boarding pass Theo purchased from Belf. Then their mouths dropped open.

"...Young Master, isn't this pretty big?"

"...It isn't just big."

The ship was enormous. Unlike the military ships which required agile movements, passengers had more value the larger they were. That was because they could hold more guests and facilities. If this was the case, the ship in front of them would be considered one of the best in the industry. What was the 'secret purpose' of this ship? Theo felt a burning curiosity about its purpose.

Despite being unable to think, the two of them approached the ticket inspector at the entrance to the ship.

The inspector asked them in a blunt manner, “A passenger?”

Theodore answered with his boarding pass, and the inspector stepped aside after examining the contents, indicating they could go inside the ship. Theo and Randolph crossed the plank connecting the ship to the pier and entered the enormous passenger ship with worried expressions.

Randolph grumbled at the unfriendly treatment, “What, there isn’t a guide for such a big boat? Aren’t they going to let us know our room?”

“Is it really like that?”

“Eh?”

Theodore looked at the number engraved on his boarding pass. There was a three digit number which wasn’t the boarding date or departure time. In this situation, it was likely to refer to only one thing—their room number. Thanks to the indoor maps placed all over the ship, Theodore could easily find their room, Room No. 306.

Randolph stepped forward first in case there was any danger and opened the door. At the same time, he let out a sound of

admiration, “Ohh.”

Theodore belatedly looked inside and had the same reaction. ‘I truly can’t believe this is a ship.’

Some of the famous passenger ships in the Soldun Kingdom had banquet rooms inside, but that wasn’t the case in Meltor, where shipbuilding wasn’t very developed. However, what about the interior of the room before them?

There were luxurious sofa beds and furniture made out of wood which wouldn’t be easily corroded by the sea breeze. A chandelier hanging from the ceiling didn’t use real fire, but was a magic light which could be turned on and off by pulling a string.

The ship was several times more luxurious and functional than those in the northern continent. However, these differences were inevitable.

The two powers in the north, Andras and Meltor, couldn’t afford to develop their shipping businesses. In the past, they had tried to make ships to enter each other’s territories, but the ships were sunk by the harsh currents. Moreover, they had developed small merchant ships and fishing boats, but they weren’t able to invest more due to the wars.

“Phew, I feel better now.” Randolph looked around the room before falling down on the couch. This meant there was nothing that could be a problem. It was the same with Theodore. He used Hawkeye to examine the ship, but no issues were found.

However, Theodore still felt suspicious. "...It is too plain."

"Huh? Isn't it good if it is plain?"

"No, it is 'too' plain." Theodore shook his head and rejected Randolph's words. "I thought this would be a pleasure ship, a gambling ship, or even a smuggling ship. Those are the only reasons to operate a ship secretly. Rather, this is just a passenger ship."

Nevertheless, this ship was too plain, but it wasn't in a particularly good or bad way. Theodore was able to confirm this because he used vision penetration magic on the whole ship.

The guests in the rooms were all dressed, and their behaviour wasn't frivolous. They were nobles, or at least nouveau riche. If so, there should be something on this ship which could squeeze their wallets.

'No. I looked around a few times and such a facility doesn't exist.'

There were no places for gambling or parties. The structure of the guest rooms and dining rooms were completely faithful to its function as a passenger ship. Apart from the guests, only the crew were on board.

Theodore knew that the world wasn't so clean, so he couldn't let go of his doubts so easily. However, Randolph's way of thinking

was a little different. “Well, why don’t you think about it later?”

Just like magicians, mercenaries had their own rationales.

“Besides, there is no one on the ship who can threaten me or Young Master. There is no point worrying about the problem with no answer.”

“...Aren’t you too relaxed?”

“I am a mercenary. Young Master’s head is part of your assets. You should use this time to have a break.”

Randolph’s words were a mess, but in the end, Theodore was convinced. As he said, there weren’t enough clues to reach an answer. It wasn’t too late to make a judgement after seeing the ship for a few days. Right now, it was time to recover from the chase which had lasted two days.

‘...I’ll close my eyes this once.’

Theodore climbed onto the fluffy bed and closed his eyes as he felt the shaking of the ship. The sound of people shouting and rowing indicated that the ship was about to depart. It also meant they had escaped the Orcus Company’s pursuit.

Chwack...chwack...

As he listened to the choppy sound of the waves, Theodore fell asleep.

*

A few days passed by.

Unlike the doubts which Theodore had on the first day, the passenger ship continued its voyage. There were no disruptions on board, and the others guests spent their time walking around the deck or in their rooms.

At first, Theodore was busy looking around. However, his expectations were soon defeated and he started to study. He had reached the 6th Circle, but Theodore hadn't had the chance to learn many 6th Circle magic due to being chased.

‘If possible, I wanted to learn space magic first but...’

Theodore looked at some of the stacked books with unhappy eyes.

The difficulty level of space magic was beyond awful. He hadn't expected to reach the same level as the White Tower Master. However, just learning to travel long distances like Shugel would require staying in a room for years and raising his proficiency at calculating space magic.

He didn't know if the White Tower Master had written any

books, but right now, Theodore's understanding wasn't good enough. The only source of comfort was that the expansion of his vessel was going smoothly.

“...Hmm.”

At that moment, Randolph opened his eyes from where he was meditating in a corner. On the first day, he had rested without thinking. However, after that, Randolph hadn't missed a day of training.

He had already become a master in terms of swordsmanship and physical abilities, so the only task remaining was to awaken his Aura Ability. Randolph had kindly explained that meditation was required to gain an image of that ability.

However, today's meditation had no results.

“Damn, it is visible but not visible. I felt like I can almost reach it if I stretch. However, I really don't like meditation,” Randolph grumbled as he loosened his muscles which were stiff from sitting.

The two of them had never left their room since the moment the ship departed until to now. Meals were called to the room, so apart from when they went to the bathroom, they only trained.

Randolph finished his grumbling and finally looked at Theodore.

“Ah, that reminds me Young Master.”

“Huh?”

“You seem to have learned an interesting martial art since the last time I saw you. Do you want to have a quick spar? It will be a light one with just bare handed fighting.”

“Umm...” Theodore thought for a moment, but he also felt a stiffness from being stuck in one place. He placed a bookmark in the book he was reading before responding to Randolph’s suggestion.

“Then let’s do it lightly.”

Chapter 140 – Unusual Passenger Ship (3)

As he answered, Theodore's legs spread to the proper interval, balancing his center of gravity so that he could move from side to side as he wanted. The expression in Randolph's eyes became serious as he looked at Theodore's reaction, one which only a skilled person could show.

He had noticed it during the chase, but Randolph once again realized that Theodore was completely different from one year ago. In the tense atmosphere, Randolph took the first step.

“Go.”

His fist stretched out as his voice faded away. Even if he didn't use aura, the physical abilities of an aura user was a weapon in itself, allowing him to break bones if his fist made contact. An ordinary person couldn't even see the afterimage, but fortunately, Theodore wasn't an ordinary person.

Bang!

Theo's arm formed a semicircle as his fist also stretched out. It was a high level Shift Energy technique found in the eastern continent which emphasized 'firmness' and 'domination.'

‘...I couldn't get rid of everything. He's faster than I expected.’

Theodore shook his palms and prepared for the next attack. It

was twice as fast as he'd expected. He wanted to raise his palm to defend, but Randolph's next fist came before he could do so.

The dual wielding swordsman, Randolph Clovis, was as fast and sharp as his swords. He punched and prodded at any gaps.

Bang! Pit! Paang! Bang!

The fist and palm hit each other, causing the air between them to explode. As Theo's palm moved away, his fingers swelled, and a few drops of blood fell, causing a spot on the floor to turn red.

Understandably, it was Randolph who was superior in this confrontation, while Theo was just sufficiently maintaining a defense. A swordsman wasn't just about using swords. Rather, the body needed to be trained as much as possible to handle aura. A body which had been trained for decades was truly terrifying.

Randolph wasn't an opponent that a year's worth of training could beat.

'No, what is this shameful situation?'

However, it was Randolph who was bewildered by the situation, not Theodore.

In fact, he was going to teach the dangers of melee combat by suppressing Theodore with his first attack. A magician who had learned a little bit of martial arts naturally couldn't compare to

someone who had been professionally trained in close combat.

However, he hadn't expected for his first attack to be blocked and to then exchange a few blows. Randolph looked at his employer with a frightened expression. 'Where did he pick this up?'

There was no explanation for it. The human body rarely improved rapidly, even if it went through systematic and rigorous training. Some of those who had a hereditary lineage would occasionally inherit their ancestor's superior abilities, but this wasn't the case with Theodore.

There must've been an extraordinary opportunity for Theodore's poor body from last year to grow like this. However, that wasn't the only reason Theodore was difficult to deal with.

Paang!

His palm moved at the correct timing to deflect Randolph's fists. Theodore's moves were never wrong, as if he had done this more than a hundred times. Additionally, He didn't get caught by Randolph's feints.

Randolph tried all types of feints, but Theodore filtered out the real and the fakes, defending against the real one. Randolph didn't know, but it was because Theodore's sensory perception was so sensitive.

'Amazing. There is no chance of winning in a close combat

match.'

However, like Randolph, Theodore was also shocked. Despite Lee Yoonsung's physical abilities, his martial arts, and Alfred's super sensory perceptions, Theo was only able to maintain his defense without counterattacking.

Of course, it would be different if Theo used Umbra and other means, but Randolph hadn't even used his aura yet. At this moment, Theo realized that a close combat match with a master class was reckless.

Randolph had achieved his goal, but he continued to swing his fist unconsciously. He predicted that this confrontation wouldn't end so easily.

Tak.

Then at the next moment, Randolph retreated three steps and formed a fist. It wasn't impossible for Theodore to anticipate the retreat, but the retreating movements were too quick. This was the strength of a person who dominated 'speed.' Randolph could fight at any time and withdraw at any time.

"It is admirable. You are a magician. Becoming like this in a year... you truly are a genius. I grew up hearing that I was a genius, but I'm nothing compared to Young Master."

"...You are just complimenting me."

“No, this isn’t enough. If you were born in the Andras Empire, isn’t it possible for you to become the youngest of the Seven Swords?”

Randolph didn’t know about the grimoire, Gluttony, so the only reason for the incomprehensible achievement was Theodore’s talent. Of course, Theodore smiled bitterly because he wasn’t actually a genius and yet Randolph just thought he was being humble.

Randolph blamed the unfair world with a few words before forming two fists. His right fist was raised to his shoulder, while his left fist moved down to his waist.

Jjirak. Theodore felt an extreme sense of caution. It was impossible to understand the meaning of it, but his senses were giving him the maximum level of a warning.

“Fortunately, I still have something to teach you.” Randolph smiled when he saw Theodore’s stiff response.

Then Randolph moved.

..Paang!

The sound was one beat late. By the time the sound was heard, Randolph’s fists had already reached in front of Theo’s eyes, and there was no time for Theodore to react to the attack. If Randolph

had intended to kill Theodore, Theo definitely would've stopped breathing right then.

Theodore couldn't move his feet. Pure physical power against trained martial arts... the winner and loser were decided in a moment.

“Well done.”

“Good work, Young Master.”

It was a phenomenon which couldn't be understood, but Theodore didn't forget his courtesies at the end, and Randolph accepted it. However, the question wasn't resolved. Theodore's eyes looked like those of a beast demanding an explanation, causing Randolph to stutter.

“W-Well, I had a thought. It was truly correct.” Randolph's cryptic words scratched at Theodore's nerves.

“What did you think? And why were you right?”

“I found out what Young Master is lacking.”

Theodore listened quietly. He had absorbed Lee Yoonsung's experience, but it wasn't perfect. Randolph was close to being a master, so his advice would definitely be helpful. As Theodore calmed, Randolph's expression turned serious.

“The basics are good. You know how to distinguish real attacks from fakes, meaning your discerning eye is better than that of ordinary knights. You won’t be easily caught by a surprise attack in a melee.”

“...Then?”

“The problem is what comes next. Since you only know the basics, you don’t have an answer when a technique like the one I used at the end shows up.”

Theodore silently accepted it. Randolph’s last technique was literally ridiculous. It was a technique using an aura user’s massive physical abilities and couldn’t be easily understood. Randolph called it ‘Hidden Meaning.’

“Well, the name varies. Whether it is ‘Hidden Meaning’, ‘Vision’, ‘Secret Technique’, or ‘Mystic Arts’... the important thing is its nature, not the name. It’s a decisive martial arts blow that can only be demonstrated after faithfully accumulating the basics.”

Randolph drew his swords and took on a posture to deal a deadly blow that didn’t show any errors.

Kakiing!

The blow couldn’t be seen. The acceleration wasn’t even shown as Randolph’s blow broke a ball of dust in the air into two pieces.

This was the swordsmanship of the Clovis family, at one time a member of the prestigious Seven Swords of the Empire.

Randolph put the swords away without any boasting and said, “I don’t know who taught you martial arts, but if you have time, you should learn the rest. Otherwise, you won’t be able to beat ‘real’ people in close combat. Of course, Young Master is a magician, so there is no reason to do that.”

“...Thank you.” Theodore bowed respectfully.

The knight’s and magician’s paths were different, but advice to reach the next level was always useful. After thanking Randolph, Theodore was left to ponder about something he had forgotten about—Transmission.

To put it bluntly, eating the book ‘Battle Song’ was getting in the way of Theodore’s Battle Song. The synchro rate was high, but his physical abilities were low, which meant he failed to reproduce even half of Lee Yoonsung’s skills. It would take a few more years if he wanted to search his memories and pursue those afterimages.

However, the story was different if he could fully absorb the soul with Transmission. It would be like with Alfred, where Theodore could use all of his abilities. The words Gluttony had spoken also proved the possibility.

–Transmission isn’t normally used in that way.

In the past, when Alfred's soul had been absorbed, Theodore had almost died. However, according to Gluttony, there seemed to be a more modest way of using Transmission. Anyway, it was necessary for Theo to keep in mind the expansion of his 'vessel' as he started thinking about new possibilities for Transmission.

Then at that moment...

[Deo!] The childlike voice ringing through Theo's head got rid of his thoughts. The refreshing voice belonged to the ancient elemental Mitra, who was contracted with him.

'Mitra? What's going on?'

[Here baba!]

'Huh?' Theodore turned his head and found the party involved.

"...Mitra, don't bother Hugin."

The girl with light brown skin and hair like ripe wheat stood on the head of the crow.

Of course, the girl was Mitra and the crow flapping his wings was Hugin. She was an independent entity, but Mitra's essence was still an 'earth elemental.' Her range of action was limited on a ship crossing the sea.

[Fwen!]

Therefore, Mitra made a new friend with wings.

Kyaaaack!

...Of course, it was unknown if her friend was thinking the same thing.

‘I’m sorry. I’ll feed you well later.’

Theodore looked at Hugin with sad eyes before turning to Mitra, who had called him. She might’ve called him to play as usual, but it felt like that wasn’t the case today.

Mitra’s eyes flashed as she spoke again, [Deo! Here baba!]

“Huh? Aren’t I looking at it now?”

[Eung? No! Not see it!]

‘What is she saying?’ Theodore was perplexed by her words, and Mitra suddenly banged against Hugin’s head.

[Bwack sail! Bwack sail!]

Kuwaaaack!

It might not seem like it, but Mitra had the power of an intermediate level spirit. Not long after, the flying Hugin let out a cry, and ‘Clairvoyance’ was invoked. Simultaneously, the horizon appeared before Theodore’s eyes. Theodore was confused by the sudden sight but he had already experienced this several times, so he focused his senses calmly.

There had to be a reason Mitra was showing him this landscape. Unsurprisingly, Theodore peered out with a pinched face.

“...Black sails.”

Those who didn’t know the sea might say that the colour of the sails didn’t matter. However, the sailors would scoff at them.

The color of the sails revealed the purpose of the ship. White represented passenger ships and domestic trade vessels, blue represented international trade vessels and ships carrying delegations, while other colours symbolized the military vessels of various countries.

However, there was a colour that didn’t belong, and it was the black sail symbolizing ‘sin.’ There was only one type of ship which flew a black flag—a pirate ship.

There weren’t just one or two but five. A passenger ship which had abandoned mobility and combat power in order to raise its size wouldn’t be able to go against them.

“Randolph, arm yourself right now.”

“I already am.”

As a veteran mercenary, his movements were truly fast. He armed himself the moment the words ‘black sails’ came out. The two equipped men left the room instantly. Theodore continued using Clairvoyance while walking to the deck with Randolph. As the faint smell of seawater and perfume entered his nose, there was a sense of discomfort.

‘...Why didn’t I get a warning?’

His senses detected all ‘enemies’, including things like ‘evil’ and ‘spirits’, so why hadn’t it noticed the existence of the pirate ship? No, it still didn’t give off any discomfort despite Theodore realizing the situation. This was a first for Theodore who had gone through many difficulties.

However, his question would disappear in the near future.

Chapter 141 – Pirate Archipelago (1)

Rattle.

As the two people ran onto the deck, there were passengers who didn't know the situation yet. If a battle occurred, it made no difference if they hid inside or outside. However, Randolph and Theodore couldn't understand the nonchalant faces of the weak.

The black sails of the pirate ships were approaching them from the horizon.

“What, did they come as a group?” Randolph looked around with a confused expression.

‘...Rather, the atmosphere is strange.’ In contrast, Theodore doubted the whole situation.

It was because his sensory perception was silent and the reactions of the surrounding passengers were consistently strange.

The pirate ships were already close enough to be seen by the other passengers. Despite this, the passengers on deck were still busy chatting among themselves while eating snacks and drinking. Meanwhile, the way the two of them were looking around made them seem like hillbillies.

Under these circumstances, the pirate ships continued approaching, and with the wind blowing, the ships were close

enough for arrows to fly. If the pirates shot arrows from this position, the deck of the passenger ship would quickly become bloody.

However, arrows didn't come flying, and Theodore heard a voice calling from behind, "Hey, Young Man!"

He looked back and saw a middle-aged man smiling strangely at him. Theodore kept an eye on the pirate ships while cautiously asking the middle-aged man, "...Did you call me?"

"Yes, you are stiff. I'm guessing that this is the first time you and your companion have been on this ship."

"That's right."

"Hahaha! I knew it. People who visit this ship for the first time are always confused by this situation. Pirate ships suddenly appear, but the other passengers don't react at all. People will naturally be confused!"

Just like a fool playing with knives, the middle-aged man chuckled. However, Theodore and Randolph didn't laugh and continued to gaze at him with cold expressions. Thinking the two people were angry at him, the middle-aged man exclaimed hurriedly, "Oh, I don't mean that you are stupid!"

Theodore ignored his excuses and asked, "Then that means this is related to the secret of this ship?"

“T-That’s right. I guess I’ll explain.”

The middle-aged man was pushed by the pressure of the two people and opened his mouth while sweating. It wasn’t a direct pressure, but the tense atmosphere of a 6th Circle magician and [master level aura](#) was more than ordinary people could endure.

The author previously states that everything about Randolph is master level, except for the fact that he hasn’t awakened the Aura Ability. So the author just calls him master level when it comes to things like this.

Rather, the middle-aged man was quite good to endure that slight pressure as he started the story.

“Simply put, this isn’t a passenger ship but a cruise ship.”

“Cruise ship?”

“That’s right. While it is true that the final destination is the Soldun Kingdom, the destination on the way is a little special.”

The middle-aged man regained some strength as he mentioned its name—the Pirate Archipelago. A group of islands which didn’t belong to any country got this name after pirates settled on them. It was off the east coast of the Kargas Kingdom, and a few days northwest from the archipelago was the Solun Kingdom. Those who existed within the boundaries of the law didn’t know about this lawless land.

“Pirate Archipelago? In the end, it is just a base for pirates.”

It was as they said, but the middle-aged man didn't accept it. “Then there would be no reason for the ship to visit it.”

The middle-aged man, who identified himself as a merchant of the Rommel Company, explained the reason. Perhaps it was his hobby to add some atmosphere or because he was shaken by the pressure of the two men, but his voice had a foreboding tone as he told the story.

‘Hrmm, I got involved in something more complicated than I imagined,’ Theo thought.

If the man's explanation was correct, the Pirate Archipelago only started this ‘tourism industry’ 50 years ago.

The islands, which had originally been uninhabited, became a gathering place for refugees and outlaws from various countries. Among them were once promising swordsmen and criminals known for their superior dexterity. As they lived together in one place, they turned into a big force and became pirates to make up for the barren soil and scarce animal husbandry. They were villains who raided private houses on the coast, fishing boats, and merchant ships in order to feed their families on the island.

However, the Pirate Archipelago face an unexpected demand. As a lawless zone located on the outskirts of the law, it was charming to some people. Those who dealt with prohibited goods and those

who weren't satisfied by money alone started to change the Pirate Archipelago.

“It was the birth of a whole new form of entertainment.” The middle-aged man clapped and nodded. “You can enjoy all types of luxuries and things that are prohibited, such as forbidden merchandise or slaves from foreign countries. It is literally the island of pleasure.”

“Yes, so...”

Was this the cause of the heated atmosphere? Theodore looked at the passengers with sunken eyes and sighed. The pirates weren't enemies but guides who had come to take the tourists to the Pirate Archipelago. No hostility was felt so his sensory perception remained silent. Theodore's eyes narrowed as he grasped the situation.

‘Should we turn this upside down?’

Before that, there was a man who expressed this thought.

[Young Master, should we do something?] Randolph's Hidden Voice growled like a beast, clearing Theodore's head.

Theo glanced at the middle-aged man who had gone to join the others and shook his head.

[That isn't possible. According to him, this ship and the pirates

are in cahoots. There aren't many people who don't know the situation, and there is no guarantee any of them will join us. More than anything else...]

[More than anything else?]

[There is no way to survive if the ship sinks from the fighting.]

'Losing' wasn't something the two people worried about. It might be arrogant, but the they were entitled to think that. If they didn't worry about the damage, it would take a short time to sink six ships into the ocean.

However, there was bound to be disapproval from the captain if they asked to move to the shore after that. This was why Theodore avoided a battle at this point. Randolph knew this, but momentary passion had clouded his eyes.

Theodore whispered to him, [Just endure it for now. There is a proverb from the East that is used in situations like this.]

[What is it?]

Before answering the question, Theodore stared at the people in the distance. His keen hearing picked up all the words they spoke, despite the distance in between. The captain of the passenger ship and the leader of the pirate ships... It was a mutual brotherhood that was disgusting.

Theodore gazed coldly at them and replied, [Go into the tiger's den to catch the tiger.]

*

After the captain and pirates finished their greetings, they returned to their respective ships and connected unknown chains to the passenger ship. Then the five pirate ships turned and started to pull the passenger ship in one direction!

‘What the hell is this?’

Even Theodore, who didn't know much about ships or navigation, thought it was ridiculous.

There were five pirate ships, but the weight of the enormous passenger ship far exceeded the sum of all five. It was said that the burden was reduced by buoyancy, but then it would be better for the ship to move on its own.

In the end, the pirate fleet pulled the passenger ship.

Chwack...chwack...

The wind blowing into the sails slowly added speed to the six ships. The ships increased in speed as they escaped from the heavy waves. 5 knots to 10 knots, 10 knots to 15 knots... It didn't take long for them to reach full speed, and this was with the large passenger ship attached to them!

“T-This is ridiculous!” Theodore was shocked by the incomprehensible phenomenon and approached the front where the chains were connected. Randolph followed behind, but Theodore forgot about him.

‘Perhaps there’s some weight reduction magic on the chains?’

This question caused Gluttony to poke out its tongue. Despite the tongue sweeping the surface, no information popped up. In other words, this was a pure chain with no magic. However, Theodore kept searching without giving up. If these chains were ordinary, something else might be the cause. A magician’s curiosity blazed in his eyes.

‘Perhaps?’

How long did he ponder for? Then Theodore’s eyes finally noticed something. The pirate ships pulling the large passenger ship with the chains looked like galleys, and they were showing an uncanny pace.

‘Gluttony.’

-...Bothering me to work as soon as I wake up.

‘Stop complaining. If you stretch out your tongue, can you reach that place?’

–Hmm? Gluttony glanced at the pirate ship and replied in an excited voice, –It is a little dicey, but I can just reach it.

Simultaneously, Theodore stretched out his left hand.

‘Appraisal!’

The red tongue quickly popped out from the hole in his left palm. It was a bold attempt, but no one could see it properly. The waves were constantly breaking, creating water vapour and limiting visibility. The tongue stretched downwards from Theodore and succeeded in touching one of the pirate ships.

The information window Theo had been waiting for popped up.

[Pirate Ship No. 17 (Ship)]

[This is a galley built six years ago. It was made by excellent craftsmen from materials which are strong against sea breeze and salt, giving it a long life and high durability. Due to the weight reduction and strength enhancement spells engraved on the surface, it is 30% faster than normal galleys. However, the worth of this ship is due to the ‘divine protection’ on it.

* This ship is rated ‘Rare.’

* It can’t be consumed. Please reduce the size. You can eat it if you separate the areas where magic is engraved.

* When consumed, the digestion time is 55 minutes and 17 seconds.

* When consumed, the proficiency of weight reduction spells will increase.

* When consumed, knowledge of 'navigation' will be acquired.

* The blessing of an unknown existence is hanging on it. The ship will gain additional acceleration, and the wind and waves will always be favorable toward it.]

‘...An unknown presence!’

Theo didn't care about the other information as he gazed closely at the ending words.

Frankly, the weight reduction magic or strength enhancement magic wouldn't increase the speed of the ship that much. The secret of the speed was something which couldn't be comprehended with Gluttony's Appraisal, due to 'someone's protection.'

‘Indeed, we are going somewhere strange.’

Even though there was a demand, a large-scale lawless zone like the Pirate Archipelago was bound to experience some damages from this tourism business. Regardless of how many benefits there were, the planners always needed to be alert to the emergence of variables which couldn't be controlled. It was now that the reason finally showed itself.

There was a deterrent that the central continent couldn't touch easily. Just 'who' was the one who blessed the pirate ship?

'I was avoiding trouble and then this appeared.'

Maybe the place they were heading to was more dangerous than the warlocks of the Orcus Company.

Chapter 142 – Pirate Archipelago (2)

Two days later...

Without knowing about Theodore's anxiety, the five pirate ships proceeded smoothly through the waves. It was at a truly terrifying speed. The pirate ships with the unknown 'blessing' always had their sails inflated with wind from behind, and the hard waves never stopped them.

Theodore clicked his tongue as he watched.

'Even the famously quick ships of the Soldun Kingdom wouldn't be able to catch up with these pirate ships.'

It was obvious for a sailor, but the speed of the ship was determined by environmental factors rather than the performance of the ship itself. This meant it was difficult to advance in a headwind or against strong waves, even if it was a good ship. On the other hand, a cheap ship might be able to move faster if it was carried by the wind and waves.

However, these pirate ships moved while maintaining the optimal conditions. It was different on land, but he could see that these ships had the absolute advantage on the sea. This wasn't a speed that human ships could catch up with.

Randolph also realized this despite not knowing much about sailing, as he approached Theodore and muttered, "Hah, it is ridiculously fast."

“You can tell?”

Unlike land which had many indicators, it was hard to determine speed on the sea. There were no trees, hills, or slopes. The only thing which could be seen from the deck was the horizon stretching out in every direction.

However, Randolph didn't hesitate to nod and reply, “The wind pressure, position of the clouds, the sun and angle of the light... Any number of factors can be used as a guideline.”

“Indeed.”

A veteran sailor could do it, but Randolph was a monster who was half a step away from human standards. His senses were overwhelming despite the lack of experience.

In fact, he was right. It was now five days after departing Ramos and two days after encountering the pirate ships. Nevertheless, the distance they passed in these two days was much further than during the first five days of travel. Using simple calculations, it meant they had sped up by more than two and a half times.

If his calculations were correct, they should shortly arrive at the destination.

“...Eh?”

At this moment when Theodore's expectations had risen, a strange sight was visible on the horizon. It was the sea fog which was notorious for being a reaper in the reef areas. This wasn't a phenomenon which would normally occur in the middle of the ocean, but the crew's response was swift.

"Bring down the sails! Hurry!"

"Stop the oars and wait!"

"Reduce the speed! Leave the anchors alone!"

As the crew members ran around the busy deck, the fog approached at a rapid pace. It felt like the fog was a person approaching them. While Theodore was shaken by the eerie illusion, the six ships entered the fog at roughly the same time.

Chill.

At that moment, Theodore's intuition shook violently.

'T-This isn't a fog...!'

It just had the shape of fog, but not a single drop of moisture touched his skin. This was a fog which couldn't be removed by wind and wouldn't change even when heat was applied.

The fog was a type of boundary line, a ward which wouldn't

allow uninvited guests in. Theodore realized it was why the pirate ships were dragging the passenger ship with the chains. Speed aside, it was a necessary way to pass through the enchantment.

Otherwise, the passenger ship would've drifted aimlessly through this fog, never to be seen again. Theodore thought that this fog might be the ultimate barrier protecting the Pirate Archipelago.

“...Young Master, have you come to another dangerous place?” Randolph also realized this, and the always present smile was missing from his face.

Even the master level aura was useless in this fog. He might be able to break through with aura, but it would be a huge challenge. Additionally, they might be able to overcome this fog, but could they overcome the creator of this fog? Theodore dropped the odds to below 2%.

While the two people were tense, the fog lifted.

“Ohh, that place....?”

“It has been a long time...!”

The passengers on the deck burst out with delight. Some passengers admired the view of the Pirate Archipelago they had only heard about, while others were glad to be back. The Pirate Archipelago, an entertainment on the sea which some people

would never know about...

The island of sin and pleasure.

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The procedure to enter the Pirate Archipelago was surprisingly orderly.

“Line up in the order of boarding.”

A muscular man wearing a tightly fitted suit greeted the tourists politely. The cutlass hanging at his waist was threatening, and tattoos covered his body. Of course, he was nothing more than a clown compared to Theodore’s and Randolph’s strength.

“Still, this is pretty good.”

“Yes, he is at the level of a first class mercenary.”

The individual skill of the pirate was quite good despite his appearance. In a one-on-one duel, an ordinary knight would be quite pressured. If this man was used to greet tourists, the elites must be composed of very talented people. Nobody dared make a fuss for fear that their necks would be slit.

Soon, it was time for the duo to get off.

“It is a 10 gold admission fee for each person.”

The 10 gold Belf mentioned would be used here. Theodore pulled out 20 gold, including Randolph’s share, and placed it on the man’s rough palm. Then the man grinned and bowed down politely. His palms were rubbing together like he had ulterior motives.

Unsurprisingly, he started to speak instead of moving out of the way.

“Welcome! Is this your first visit to the island?”

“That’s right.”

“Then what do you think about taking a guide? If you add 1 gold, I will introduce you to a nice guide!”

‘A guide...’ As a visitor to the island, Theodore thought about whether he needed one.

They didn’t come to this island for a special purpose, but it was true that they were unfamiliar with this place. It wouldn’t be too bad to bring along a guide who could explain everything. Additionally, the cost of 1 gold was too light for him.

Ting.

A gold coin was lightly flicked from Theodore.

“Oh, I received it well! Let me call someone over!”

The man grabbed the gold coins at a fast speed and took the two men somewhere else. It was an alley not far from the harbour where the ship was docked. There were shabbily dressed boys and girls sitting down and laughing. As soon as the man approached, the kids jumped up.

However, the man shouted without looking at them, “Jack! If you don’t pop up in 10 seconds, I will hand it over to someone else!”

A cheerful voice was heard in return, “I’m coming now!”

Simultaneously, a boy jumped out of the crowd. He used light movements to climb down a wall like a monkey and landed before Theodore’s group. He had dark skin covered with soot and bright eyes that shone with a wisdom beyond his age. Clearly, he wasn’t an ordinary boy.

“They are guests who have just arrived. Your share is 50% as always, and you will receive the payment as soon as the guidance is done.”

“Yes, thank you!”

The man handed the boy named Jack over to the duo and headed back to the harbor. The rest of the children sat down, leaving only

Jack standing as he looked between Theo and Randolph. Unlike his mischievous eyes, he bowed carefully and politely introduced himself, “Hello! Please comfortably call me Jack. I will guide you anywhere you want to go.”

“...Yes, please do it well,” Theodore accepted the greeting lightly.

He hadn't expected the guide to be a child.

Jack probably noticed Theo's hesitance as he spoke up in a confident manner, “I was born and raised on this island. It will be difficult to find someone who knows it better than me. Is this your first visit?”

“That's right.”

“Then I will do the whole tour. If there is a place you want to stop at, just tell me!”

After saying that, Jack started walking in front of them with a nimble gait, a gait which seemed to belong to natives of this island.

At first, the two of them followed with strange expressions, but they soon realized the boy's proficiency. This skill wasn't possible for just being on the job for a day or two. He must've worked as a guide in the archipelago for at least a few years.

The first place Jack directed them to was a casino.

“This is the place where the greatest amount of money comes and goes from our Pirate Archipelago. There is a total of 17 casinos.”

As they crossed several bridges, there was the sound of gold coins rubbing against one another, as well as the smell of alcohol, tobacco, and perfume.

Dealers were interacting with guests in half naked attire. Most of the cupboards in the bar were filled with alcohol, and there were drunk people on the ground, while others were caught trying to cheat.

It was like a depiction of the outskirts of a civilized world.

Jack glimpsed the expressions of the two men and started explaining, “Of course, this isn’t an ordinary casino. Unlike the casinos on land, there is no limit to the pot, and things that aren’t readily available outside can emerge as prizes. However, in the case of cheating, you will have to pay back 10 times the amount as a penalty.”

“What if you can’t?”

“...It is like that.” Jack pointed to a homeless man without any arms.

It was obvious that arms used to be there, so both arms must’ve been cut off in exchange for cheating. The rules of the world were

bloody, but this place was completely ruthless as it was beyond the boundaries of the law.

However, the two of them didn't show any signs of wanting to enter the casino, so Jack moved on with a sad expression. Although it was less than the casinos, there was one place which received a lot of tips.

“I guess both of you aren't interested in this.”

However, what about the next destination? Jack gave a wicked smile.

“Hehe, then let's go see my sisters. Both of you are handsome and chiseled, so everybody will like you.”

The Pirate Archipelago wasn't called the island of pleasure for nothing. The prostitutes gathered from all over the continent were just as plentiful and high quality as those on land. There were beauties from the North, the Center and the South.

It was the instinct of rich men to pursue power and women. The Pirate Archipelago aimed at this, so it was natural to visit the beauties if they were men.

Randolph's nose couldn't help twitching when he heard it.

Bam.

At that moment, Theodore hit him lightly.

“W-What?”

“If you head in the wrong direction, I’ll tell Rebecca.”

“Heok!” Randolph restrained himself, and his expression became as dignified as his master’s.

Theodore smiled before opening his mouth to say, “No, I don’t want to go to the brothels.”

“Huh? Ah, no. Then where do you want to go?”

“I want to know about a special place.”

‘Special place?’ Randolph and Jack both cocked their heads at the cryptic words, then Theodore opened his mouth.

“Where is the ruler of this island?”

Chapter 143 – Pirate Archipelago (3)

Jack looked at Theo with surprise.

“T-The ruler?”

The boy’s reaction was good for his age, but he wasn’t lucky today. Randolph and Theodore read the falseness in Jack’s voice.

In actual history, the war hero, Alfred Bellontes, was recorded as a ruthless person when it came to questioning prisoners. Theodore had inherited the experience of such a great man, so his eyes saw that Jack was hiding something.

However, it was too early to startle the snake in the bush.

“Is the question that surprising? This is like a village, so wouldn’t the Pirate Archipelago have a boss? I don’t think the pirates would have a democracy.”

This was why Theodore took a step back. The guide was just a boy. The amount of information which could be obtain through forced means was limited. It was better to gather clues from the story than pushing through haphazardly.

“Oh, that is what you meant.”

“It is my first visit, so I have a lot to ask you. I’ll give this to you if

you answer me.” As Theo spoke, he pulled out two five gold coins, making Jack’s eyes shine.

Jack’s worries didn’t last long. This was the Pirate Archipelago, an island of outlaws who ignored law and ethics. In this place, the most important thing was power. Those who had more power, either through violence or power, would have the upper hand. The tip of 10 gold was absolutely fascinating for a boy who had been born and grew up on the Pirate Archipelago.

Jack’s lips parted slowly, “...Should I tell you?”

As if he was holding great information, Jack put on an exaggerated expression and looked around.

Theodore nodded. Then the boy started to whisper, “There are a few people on the island who behave as if they are kings. First, weren’t you guided by some pirate ships when you came to this island?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see a man with one eye, who is wearing accessories made of human skulls?”

As soon as Theo heard the description of the skull ornaments and eyepatch, a scene flashed in his mind. The man who had been chatting with the captain of the passenger ship fit that description. Jack noticed his expression and nodded.

“‘Captain’ Virtus, that is what the islanders call him.”

Jack seemed hyped up by the story as he continued in an excited tone. According to the boy, there were four people on this island who had full authority. Apart from the captain who led visitors here, the island was divided into three zones. The lips of the boy, who smelled the scent of money, moved in a quick manner.

Red Light District’s Queen Bee, ‘Queen’ Maeve.

Godfather of the Casino, ‘Gold Toad’ Todd.

Stolen Goods Big Spender, ‘Thief’ Lupian.

Each one was responsible for one axis of the Pirate Archipelago. They had thoroughly divided their roles and areas, so they didn’t get into conflicts with each other. It was a fairly orderly structure for a lawless zone. Well, if this order hadn’t existed, the island of criminals would’ve already collapsed.

“How interesting,” Theodore whispered before flicking a gold coin. “But that isn’t all, is it?”

“Huh?”

“Even if the people you described are in balance, that is only the story for the present time. It would be strange for there to be no

conflicts when the four organizations were being established.” As he rolled the remaining gold around between his fingers, Theodore met Jack’s greedy eyes. “Is there perhaps someone on top of those four people?”

Theo finally got to the main point. He had invested nearly 30 minutes of listening to a useless story for this reason.

The story of the four criminals was good, but it wasn’t what he needed. From the very beginning, Theodore had been wondering about the identity of the person who had created a barrier around the islands and achieved the paradise of criminals.

“T-T-That...” Jack followed the moving gold coin with his pupils before closing his eyes. Perhaps he knew nothing, or maybe he was unable to speak. “I-I don’t know.”

Was it up to here? Theodore was about to put away the gold coin with a regretful heart when...

“B-But! I will tell you everything that I do know!” Jack called out half a beat later, in a desperate attempt to stop Theodore’s hand.

*

“One gold for a single room and two gold for a double room per day. If it is a special room, one gold is added to each one.”

The innkeeper looked at the two people with a greedy expression

as he rubbed his palms together.

It was a few times more expensive than accommodations on land, but this was the listed price for the Pirate Archipelago. Anyway, it wasn't that overpriced for visitors to the island. Randolph's eyebrows twitched at the absurd amount, but Theodore handed over the gold coins without any objections.

The two of them were able to get two rooms, where they would be staying for the next 10 days. Randolph took off his heavy armour in the room and spoke first, "So, Young Master, what are you doing to do now?"

"I'm not sure." Theodore smiled wryly at the question and sat down on the bed.

It might've cost 10 gold, but the information he got from Jack was worth the cost. He didn't know about Jack, but both Theodore and Randolph thought so. There was a legend which the four zones and rulers of the Pirate Archipelago had in common.

"It is a problem if there really is a 'sea god.'"

Sea god... If a church had heard it, Theodore might be accused of blasphemy.

Jack had never been there, but the island at the center of the Pirate Archipelago seemed to have a temple dedicated to the sea god. In the end, it was nothing more than a rumour which floated

around. Nevertheless, both of them sensed it.

The sea god was the true ruler of this island.

‘If the sea god created that fog... we can’t afford to go against it.’

Theodore had encountered several master class and legendary brings in the past, so he guessed it easily. There was only a little bit of power left in the fog, but his whole body had gotten goosebumps.

The sea god had control over the sea. As for how much strength it had, the present Theodore couldn’t even imagine. It was an ability that was the exact opposite of a magician, who produced results efficiently. This was a limitless power which could twist reality.

“...It is just a guess, but I don’t think the opponent is a human.”

A human with such power wouldn’t use it in such primitive ways. Just the fog covering the Pirate Archipelago exceeded the magic of an elder class magician. Theodore wasn’t of a common standard, but he wouldn’t be able to endure half of it.

In order to maintain the fog so naturally that it was like breathing, a minimum of eight circles would be needed.

Randolph accepted Theo’s assumption without questioning it. “I think so as well. I have seen a few of the empire’s Seven Swords from a distance, but the presence on this island is from an entire

different category.”

“The whole island seems to be its realm, so the environmental conditions are disadvantageous to us. It isn’t something we can face, even if we combine our powers.”

“Right. Then what do we do?”

Theodore shrugged. They didn’t come here with the tremendous mission of subjugating the Pirate Archipelago. It was just a coincidence since they were running away from the Orcus Company. There was no reason to recklessly go against an opponent they had no animosity with.

“Our top priority is hiding from the Orcus Company. I don’t think they can chase us to the Pirate Archipelago. Well, anyone who does chase us will be blocked by the fog.”

If he looked at it differently, this island was a fortress. No uninvited guests could wander through the fog, so there was no need to reveal their identity. The presence of the being which ruled the island was scary if it was an enemy, but it was reassuring for those in hiding.

“It is a rational choice. I understand.”

Of course, Randolph might be tempted to call Theo’s choice cowardly. However, Randolph was a mercenary, not a knight.

Rather than risking his life in a meaningless battle, he would step back and wait. Just like in the case of the elder lich, it was unknown if there was an exit, so there was no point gambling. He didn't have a hobby of crawling toward death.

The two men finished their consultation and entered their rooms.

Theodore, whose mind had been busy racing, started breathing calmly. The choice of fighting the sea god was dismissed, so what should he do with this time?

‘My goal of escaping the Orcus Company’s hands is achieved.’

At least, as long as they stayed in this Pirate Archipelago. It would also take some time for the next cruise ship to arrive. Based on Jack’s explanation, the cruise ship stayed for around 10~14 days before leaving for the original destination. Theodore thought about what he could do during this break.

“Gluttony.”

This was a chance to find out more about the ‘Transmission’ feature.

–You called. As always, the voice came from the hole in Theo’s left palm.

“You spoke to me last time about Transmission.”

–Um.

“You said that it is different from what I went through with Alfred, and that there is a process. Gradually assimilating the soul, or something like that.”

Gluttony had only quickly mentioned it, but Theodore’s extraordinary memory recalled every moment of that time, without missing a single detail. In the end, Gluttony answered the question.

–Yes, that’s right.

“Teach me how to use Transmission. This is a question regarding your function, so it doesn’t count as a question and answer.”

–...Okay.

Theodore carefully listened while inwardly suppressing his delight.

–First, ‘Transmission’ is my 4th stage function. It was designed as a means of using ‘Overwrite’ more efficiently. If the author’s soul is loaded, you can use that ability to absorb the soul.

He knew this much. After using Transmission on Alfred, Theodore had suffered terrible pain as the soul was absorbed. If

Superbia hadn't attacked, there might've been a chance of his ego collapsing and he would've died. Soul fusion was a dangerous and unstable act.

However, according to Gluttony, it wasn't originally like that.

-As you've experienced before, mixing the souls directly is a great risk. So, there is a separate process in Transmission.

"Process?"

-Yes. That process is called a Quest.

As Theodore rolled the word 'quest' around in his mouth, Gluttony continued explaining.

-User can talk to the authors of the eaten original books and absorb the fragment of soul by solving the desires that they've left behind.

"...In other words, do something for them?"

-That's right. If you want, you can ask them their wishes right now by calling 'Lee Yoonsung' or 'Satomer.'

-Who do you want to call first? Gluttony asked.

Theodore replied, “The author of [Battle Song], Lee Yoonsung.”

Chapter 144 – Pirate Archipelago (4)

There were only two choices, but Theodore had a reason for his decision.

It was because using Transmission on Lee Yoonsung, when he had high proficiency with Battle Song, would be more efficient than using it on Satomer, whose knowledge he had just recently accepted. Of course, the existence of the Hidden Meaning technique which Randolph showed him on the cruise ship also played a role in this decision.

Gluttony's voice responded to Theodore's request.

–I understand.

At the same time, a notification was heard in Theodore's head.

[Hidden feature 'Transmission' has been activated.]

[Confirming the request for a Quest, and calling the object name 'Lee Yoonsung'. Reviewing the quest... Success, object name 'Lee Yoonsung' has approved your call.]

[He will temporarily be synchronized with the user's consciousness.]

Theodore's vision turned black before the system's voice was cut off. He prepared for the usual loss of consciousness, but the situation was different this time. Everyone would be confused to see the black landscape around him, but Theodore was accustomed to this and waited calmly.

Unsurprisingly, particles of light started to gather before him. At first, the light just took the shape of a man before his distinct features appeared. He had an eastern appearance which looked different from the other people on the continent.

"It has been a while," Lee Yoonsung greeted Theodore with a smile. He hadn't expected to meet Theo again, so he welcomed Theodore without concealing his joy.

"Yes, it is great to see you after a long time," Theodore also responded with a welcome expression.

When he called Alfred, the situation had been so urgent that he didn't have a chance to say hello. However, Theodore would've liked to have a discussion with Alfred, who was a senior who had lived a few generations before him. Wasn't it a situation that any magician dreamed of?

The two people chatted briefly before naturally cutting to the chase. It was quick since both sides knew of the matter. Lee Yoonsung pointed out his intentions first. "I know the current situation. You will release my unfulfilled wish, and I will give everything to you."

“...That’s right.” Theodore was silent at the blunt words before replying.

Although ‘Lee Yoonsung’ was already dead, Gluttony’s Transmission meant the permanent disappearance of the Lee Yoonsung standing before him right now. He couldn’t even imagine what it was like to be a lingering presence with regrets weighing him down.

“If so, please ask.”

Therefore, the cool answer was unexpected in many ways.

“Are you serious?”

“Hey, I thought you wanted it. Didn’t you come here to ask me? In any case, the human ‘Lee Yoonsung’ is already dead, so there is no point in lingering,” Lee Yoonsung advised him with soft eyes, causing Theodore to smile humbly.

Lee Yoonsung’s face was tranquil even when discussing his own demise. Then he reluctantly expressed the regret that he, Lee Yoonsung, had when he died.

“I want to go back home.”

“Do you mean...”

“The Baekun Mountains, my birthplace.”

Theodore couldn't help sighing. Going back home was a fairly simply wish, but in Lee Yoonsung's case, the distance was the problem. According to his memories, the Baekun Mountains were located on the east side of the continent. It was too far for a sea journey, so it meant crossing half the continent.

This was a journey which would take at least a year.

Although Lee Yoonsung didn't show his emotion on the outside, he scratched his head with a distressed expression and started talking. “I'm sorry, but this is something I can't change. I want to make it as easy as possible, but Transmission wouldn't work like that.”

“Ah, of course.” Theodore had guessed it, but he couldn't help clicking his tongue at the harshness of the grimoire. If he could compromise with the contents of the quest, Lee Yoonsung would've passed everything over to Theodore for barely nothing.

However, Gluttony had set the quest as the real inner wishes, so Theodore was forced to do it, regardless of the difficulty.

‘Hah, it would be a simple matter if it was Alfred or Satomer.’

Then he would be able to carry out the quests on the way back to Meltor. The difficulty compared to Lee Yoonsung was like the difference between the sky and the land.

Lee Yoonsung noticed Theodore's inner discouragement and knocked against his shoulder. "I'm sorry to have such a foolish regret. If it isn't easy, just forget about it. A dead person shouldn't be grabbing the ankle of a living person."

However, a flash went through Theodore at those words. Lee Yoonsung called Theodore his benefactor, but the reality was the opposite. Without Battle Song and the increased physical abilities, Theodore would've died in the fight against Superbia.

The worst thing was that Lee Yoonsung was saying that his 'Transmission' request was too difficult. Wasn't Theodore forgetting the kindness bestowed upon him?

Theodore reflected on his own ugly self and opened his mouth to say, "I will listen to your request."

"Hmm?"

"I can't be sure when, but I will surely bring you home to the Baekun Mountains."

Lee Yoonsung was surprised by the declaration but nodded silently. He could feel the weight in Theodore's voice. With one more bow, Lee Yoonsung thanked Theodore and then disappeared into light.

The thick darkness descended once again.

–Shall we move onto the next one? Gluttony’s voice broke the silence.

“Next?”

–There is still one person, Satomer. His quest is remaining.

“...Yes, call him.” Theodore accepted in order to check all the quests.

Then he heard the notification about asking for permission.

[Confirming the request for a Quest, and calling the object name ‘Satomer’. Reviewing the quest... Success, object name ‘Satomer’ has approved your call.]

Satomer’s emergence was no different from Lee Yoonsung’s. The light gathered in the air and the shape of a person appeared in front of Theodore. The person had disheveled long hair and messed up robes.

His appearance was exactly the same as in Synchro, and it seemed as if a cold voice would ring out at any minute. The man who looked like a wraith at first sight was the peak of the modern summoning magician, Satomer.

As always, he spoke in a cynical tone, “Calling me so quickly... I

only just handed over my knowledge, and you want to know the rest already?”

“Senior.”

“I know the story, so let’s get started.”

Satomer suddenly sat down and stared at Theodore with red, bloodshot eyes.

A person with a weak heart wouldn’t be able to face his gaze. However, Theodore noticed that his gaze was different from before. The frustration, which had filled him like sharp broken glass, had disappeared.

Satomer observed Theodore for a moment. Then with a smile, Satomer opened his mouth to speak, “Che, it’s hard to focus my eyes right now. This is all because of you, cheeky young junior.”

“Yes?”

“It’s okay if you don’t know. How is Hugin? Are you using him?”

‘Hugin.’ The moment that Theodore thought the name of the crow...

Kyaack?

All of a sudden, Hugin popped out of thin air. This was Theodore's consciousness, so any contracted beings could access it. However, Hugin wasn't the only one called to this mental world. Mitra, the girl who had fallen asleep on Hugin's back, raised her voice out of confusion from the sudden summoning.

[Heeeng?! Bwack sail, where? Bwack sail!]

It was okay if she just raised her voice, but the confused Mitra also tightened her legs around Hugin's neck.

Kuwaaaack!

Hugin struggled, casing Mitra to tighten her grasp on his neck. It was a vicious cycle of repetition. In the end, Mitra, whose eyes had turned into whirlpools, fell to the ground and then Hugin fell next to her. It was a comedy between an elemental and summoned being.

"...Well, he seems well."

"...Yes, really well."

The two men exchanged a look before looking in another direction. In an attempt to revive the broken atmosphere, Satomer coughed a few times before going back to the main point.

"Hmm, my regret... you've guessed it right?"

Theodore's face sobered. The foolish and tenacious dream of the summoning magician, Satomer... He had spend his whole life trying to do one thing. Now that desperation was handed over to Theodore.

Theodore nodded heavily and revealed the wish which was difficult for Satomer to say.

“The summoning of a senior summons, correct?”

“Yes, exactly.” Satomer clapped playfully.

The starting point of this madness was the illustration in a book he'd read in his childhood. It was an image of a summoning magician who called an ice giant to deal with a lightning magician. That summoning magician was an existence who had lived in a previous age. However, it had set off a fire in Satomer's heart, a fire intense enough to burn until it became ashes.

“It is okay if it is just once. If you can call a senior summons just once, I am fine with dying. After all, I didn't succeed until the end, but you can do it.”

“Can I succeed?”

“Of course. You inherited my whole life's knowledge and have a part of me in you. No, I am part of you.”

There was nothing he could do, so Satomer couldn't help feeling bittersweet.

In the end, it was like this. He was transferring to another person something he couldn't do himself. Satomer was really ridiculous and unsightly. However, Theodore didn't laugh at all as he nodded firmly.

“Yes, I will succeed.”

“...Y-Yes. Thank you?” Satomer was at a loss in front of that firm determination. He wasn't familiar with this type of atmosphere, so he changed the topic hurriedly. “By the way, you seem to be in a strange place.”

“Huh?”

“You are in someone's ‘domain.’ If it is the middle of the sea, the viable candidates are a kraken, megalodon, or sea serpent.”

‘Domain’ was an unfamiliar word, but Theodore immediately examined all of Satomer's knowledge.

High ranking existences which could crush this world and transcendent beings who couldn't be compared to ordinary monsters... The beings that lived in ancient times were said to have a domain. The dragon, famous for being the strongest species, also had a ‘domain.’

Theodore felt a sense of incongruity and asked, “Sea serpent...?”

“Ah, it is a dialect. It is a title for those without wings. In other words-”

...A blue dragon, or a sea dragon.

‘...Ah!’

At that moment, the puzzle pieces scattered in Theodore’s mind merged to form a completed picture. The structure of the Pirate Archipelago couldn’t be maintained under normal circumstances. The ruler of the Pirate Archipelago, the sea god...

The existence of the dragons which have ruled since long ago...

There was a name Theo had found by chance from an old legend in the library. It was the name of an evil dragon who had taken on the guise of a mermaid to seduce sailors into shipwrecking and was capable of calling tsunamis.

“Sea dragon, Aquilo...?” Theodore spoke in a trembling voice.

Chapter 145 – Sea Dragon Aquilo (1)

Sea Dragon Aquilo...

In this era, only a few people remembered the name. However, sailors who lived on the sea once dreaded even speaking this name.

The sea serpent, a monster who could create a huge wave with a wave of its tail and who governed storms... Some people referred to it as one of the two disasters of the sea, along with the kraken, but they were actually in entirely different categories.

“Blue dragon?!”

“Yes.”

Randolph raised his voice after being informed of this fact, and Theodore replied in a calm manner.

From the beginning, ‘sea serpent’ was just a title. In the minds of ordinary people, a dragon was a monster that flew through the sky with two wings, not a swimmer in the sea with a long body like a snake.

However, the dragon was never a species distinguished by the presence of wings, so calling it a serpent was nothing more than ignorance. They were the strongest species of the material world and the rulers over natural laws!

In particular, the sea dragon, Aquilo, was the most notorious among the blue dragon clan, ruling over the sea since a long time ago.

Based on archaeological records, it was an adult dragon that would've lived for at least a thousand years. The last time it appeared had been 150 years ago, when it woke up from a nap and wiped out a fleet from the Soldun Kingdom.

‘I’ve looked up the name in the library a few times, but it is never a good thing.’

Back when Theodore lived in the academy’s library, he had read thousands of books, regardless of their type.

Among them, there had naturally been books containing legends and folktales about the continent. The name Aquilo had appeared only a few times, but he hadn’t forgotten it. His fingers were lacking if he wanted to count all the actions in his memories.

Sweeping away a port city because their tribute was a few days late...

Killing a wandering minstrel because his lyrics were unpleasant...

Sinking a fishing boat because the number of fish had reduced...

In addition, the number of ships sunk and people killed was as

numerous as the stars.

However, despite the tyranny, Aquilo couldn't be properly killed. Surrounded by the vast reaches of the sea, which was much more spacious than the land, Aquilo's power became exceedingly powerful, making it almost invincible in the sea.

“...In other words, we must absolutely never touch it.”

“Yes, I think so as well.”

The opinions of the two people, who would be regarded as strong in every part of the world, coincided without any errors. When considering the general power of an adult dragon, it was said that two masters were needed to equal it, and three were required to kill it reliably.

Even Veronica complained that she couldn't be certain of victory in a one-on-one match, so it was impossible for a 6th Circle magician and half-master swordsman.

After deciding on a stance of non-aggression, Randolph opened his mouth first. “Hrmm, so we should stay low during our remaining time here?”

“Yes, we can't get involved in any situations.”

Theodore examined the knowledge he had recently absorbed from Satomer. It was in order to confirm the concept of ‘domain,’

which was still unfamiliar to him. According to Satomer's knowledge, the 'domain' of a dragon could also be called their lair, a place where they stored collected treasures and nested.

'Perhaps the fog surrounding this island is a type of alarm system.'

The fog was the boundary of Aquilo's domain, and it controlled the people who could enter. No one could go in and out without Aquilo knowing.

The two people were more likely to cause a fuss if they stole a boat and tried to escape. The safest and wisest choice was to wait for the day when the cruise ship returned and they would leave for the Soldun Kingdom.

Yes, Theodore's conclusion was undoubtedly reasonable.

However, he overlooked one thing. It was a mistake he made because he hadn't fully comprehended Satomer's knowledge.

Satomer had told Theodore in the mental world that the Pirate Archipelago was Aquilo's domain. So, from the very beginning, the existence of the two people had already caught the notorious dragon's eyes.

[...Hrmm.]

Was Theo imagining it? For a moment, a chill ran down his

spine.

*

Five days passed since then.

Despite the tension on the first night, the two of them stayed at the inn without any problems. The passenger ship would come back in 10 days, so half the time had already passed. Perhaps their policy to stay as invisible as possible was viable.

Randolph and Theodore became deeply involved in their training while enjoying their peaceful days. As Randolph swung his sword in the yard, Theodore read books in his chair.

Tak.

Theodore finished reading a book and closed it.

“Eat, Gluttony.”

Then he threw the book he was reading into the air, while at the same time, the tongue protruded and caught the book.

[‘Thunderbolt from Dry Skies’ has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[You have acquired 6th Circle magic, 'Thunderbolt.']

[By acquiring top ranked electric magic, the proficiency of lower ranked electric magic has increased.]

As the waves of knowledge flowed as usual, Theodore closed his eyes and focused.

Having Gluttony's ability to acquire knowledge and proficiency was fraudulent but the efficiency would be low if Theodore wasn't motivated to learn. However, the always sincere Theodore was able to bring out the power to the maximum.

Theodore opened his eyes with a faint smile.

'Okay, half the books I've brought with me have been digested.'

He had brought many 6th Circle magic books with him when he left Meltor. In the meantime, his progress had been slow since he hadn't had a lot of time to read books. However, his performance during these five days was comparable to that of a few weeks or a month.

Some magic books would take more time because they were difficult to understand, but he was confident that he could learn them all in three months.

However, the most important thing to solve was the issue of his

vessel, which had a time limit.

“...Should I use this during my stay on this island?”

Charlotte's Necklace was the treasure grade artifact which turned all ghosts into powerful evil spirits. Theo had obtained it after the duel bid with Isaac, but he had never used it once. The saint's seal, which had turned this necklace into a mere accessory, still hadn't been released.

Theodore looked at the necklace before placing it in his inventory with a sigh.

‘Stop. There is no need to increase the risk factor.’

A large scale magic event like summoning evil spirits could trigger the dragon's aggression.

He needed to keep this in mind. His opponent was the notorious sea dragon, Aquilo. It was the tyrant of the sea, who killed people for minor reasons and sank thousands of ships. Just like how children smiled when stepping on ants, the lives of humans were just like worms to a dragon.

Theo had to remember that the Pirate Archipelago was Aquilo's palm, so disaster could be found at any time.

—Like right now.

[Deo!] At that moment, Mitra, who had been sleeping in the warm sunlight on the window, shot up and screamed.

Before Theodore could question her, his sensory perception let out a large alarm. His back was frozen cold, and his hairs stood up like they were bristling. He had experienced a chill like this before.

It was when he dived into Laevateinn's flames and when he collided with Pride in the past. In other words, the owner of this presence was a monster on the same level!

‘What, a bottle of water?!’

As Theodore hurriedly prepared for battle, the colourful bottle of water sitting in the room moved. To be precise, it was the bottle's contents. ‘Water’ filled up the room.

Chwaack.

The water emerged from the bottle and produced a surreal sight. Regardless of whether it pulled the water in the air or gathered it in small lumps, the water quickly grew to the size of a person. The water became more and more like a person, until it changed to the image of a beautiful mermaid.

“Senior elemental, a naiad...!”

The naiad, a senior elemental which couldn't be summoned unless the summoner was an elf elemental, spoke calmly, [That is correct, human with Arv's blessing.]

Normally she wouldn't be speaking, but in this situation, she opened her mouth first without any signs of embarrassment.

[From now on, I will pass on 'Her' words.]

Before Theodore could ask, another voice was heard.

[-Hello?]

It was sweet enough to melt his ears, but cold enough to cause a chill down his spine. This wasn't the voice of a human. It embraced pure desire without any moderation. The voice whispering into his ears was enough to turn any man or woman into a horny monkey.

Theodore barely held onto his rope of reason and replied, "It is nice to meet you, Ruler of the Sea."

There was no question about the identity of the other person. Theodore politely greeted the uninvited visitor. No, she was the master of this place, so he might be the uninvited person. Sea Dragon Aquilo, the being who dominated the sea for thousands of years, scanned Theodore up and down.

Then she continued speaking in that sensual voice, [First,

welcome to my island, Boy.]

“It is a very sudden welcome.”

[Ahaha, you are saying that, but you don't seem very surprised? You look young in terms of your face, but you seem to have accumulated many experiences.]

Thus far, it was still okay. Theodore didn't feel any animosity in her voice. Was it mere curiosity? Or was she killing time? Either way, he needed information. Theodore was barely able to open his mouth before the gaze conveyed through the naiad.

“...I'm sorry, can I ask why you are looking for me?”

[Hrmm, is it so hard talking to me?]

“Honestly, it is quite burdensome.”

Aquilo's voice cut off for a moment.

[Ahahaha! You, you are too honest! I don't hate such a personality, but shouldn't you be careful from now on?]

–I might accidentally kill you.

Theodore was soaked in a cold sweat. It wasn't a threat or

warning, but just that Aquila was really worried about killing Theodore... Just like accidentally crushing an ant under her foot. Fortunately, Aquilo didn't put that declaration into action.

She chuckled before answering Theodore's question, [Okay, I'll tell you simply. In three days, a festival to worship me will be held in the heart of the islands. At that time, I want you to come with your companion.]

In the first place, a veto didn't exist. Theodore nodded and replied, "...I understand."

[You are smart as well. If you asked one more question, I would've cut off your head,] Aquilo said before turning off the naiad's summoning.

The shape of the mermaid distorted, and the water slowly fell to the ground as the magic power was cut off. While the water soaked the wooden floor and carpet, Aquilo's voice could still be heard.

[Then I'll be waiting in three days.]

After that, she added a fearsome warning.

[Boy, if you don't come, I will kill you.]

Chapter 146 – Sea Dragon Aquilo (2)

“Look, I’m right,” Randolph spoke grumpily while wearing a mithril alloy breastplate, gauntlets, and leggings, and carrying his falchions. He was fully armed as they were facing an opponent who the death knight couldn’t even compare to.

“First a warlock and now a dragon... When I’m with Young Master, I can meet all types of existences.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. As I said before, this is my choice, and I’ve always wanted to see a dragon at least once.”

Randolph grinned and shook his head at Theodore’s apology. For a warrior, facing death always raised a master’s level. A person who turned away from it wasn’t qualified to be a master.

Three days had passed, and it was time to visit Aquilo. The duo desperately prepared countermeasures. They armed themselves with the highest level of equipment on the island, as well as magic scrolls and consumables.

However, Theodore’s brilliant mind was well aware of the odds.

‘Even if we fight 10 times, it would be lucky if we won once.’

Despite everything the two people had done, their odds of victory didn't exceed 1%. Gluttony had given him information about 'Dragon Words' and prepared a secret destruction word, but there was no guarantee it would work properly.

If possible, it was best not to fight. Theodore realized this again and gulped.

"Well, don't be too nervous." At that moment, Randolph knocked on his shoulder and said, "Isn't a dragon famous for its fickleness? There is no point worrying about things with no answers. So, just think about it after we meet her."

"...Surprisingly, you can sometimes say good words."

"What are you saying?!" Randolph, who had given him good advice, raised his voice.

On the other hand, Theodore suppressed his anxieties. The vicious being had an 'unpredictable' nature, so it was impossible to guess her actions. He had been preparing for the last three days, and now, he would have to face her head on.

Theodore opened his mouth with a faint smile. "Then let's try it once."

Randolph laughed at his aggressive words. "Okay, let's go!"

With more intense speculation and determination than ever, the

two men left the inn.

*

The Sea God Festival.

It was a festival held once a year on the Pirate Archipelago. Even the rulers who separated the islands into four zones didn't dare set a schedule, and Theodore quickly guessed the reason.

‘It is probably on Aquilo’s whim.’

The four rulers were all a smokescreen. The true owner of the Pirate Archipelago was Sea Dragon Aquilo, and the four rulers were peasants who managed the islands according to her commands. It was just his guess, but this Sea God Festival might’ve been decided three days ago. Shortly after talking to Theodore, she had prepared a place to lure him in.

He was convinced after seeing this bustling scene.

“Hey! You bastard, where are you looking?”

“Don’t make such a fuss when I am looking straight ahead!”

“What? Do you want to fight here?”

In the narrow marina, people were arguing, and there were sometimes fist fights.

Unlike the other islands, the center of the Pirate Archipelago where the Sea God festival would take place wasn't connected by bridges. So, people had to move to the center island by boat. It was natural that there weren't enough boats compared to those who wanted to participate in the festival.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Theodore and Randolph didn't need to take part in the struggle for boats.

“I've been waiting for you, Theodore.”

“I've been waiting for you, Randolph.”

While people were struggling over boats, two people emerged from amongst them and approached Theodore and Randolph.

The hull was decorated with gold, and the flag depicted a dragon on a black background, the symbol of the Pirate Archipelago. It was a privilege which couldn't be enjoyed by normal executives or people from the outside.

‘Don't ride it... I can't choose that option.’

Theodore raised his eyebrows before climbing onto the boat. He didn't want to stay in a place where he had attracted attention, but he realized three days ago that it wasn't good to oppose Aquilo.

Randolph climbed onto the other one, and the boats started moving with the current. As soon as the boatmen moved their oars, the gold boat moved through the water.

Chwaaak! Chwaaak!

Their hands were very skillful. The boatmen moved the oars with several times more skill than those in the other boats around them.

‘No, to be accurate, it isn’t normal.’

However, Theodore could see that his boatman’s eyes were shining blue, meaning he was controlled by Aquilo’s ‘Dragon Fear.’ In addition to that, they had the divine blessing, so it was natural that they excelled. Additionally, the casual use of Theodore’s and Randolph’s real names was proof that they were under Aquilo’s control.

After a while, hundreds of boats gradually gathered at the central island. When the party’s boat arrived, Theodore and Randolph gulped as they saw the altar of sacrifice to the sea god.

“T-This...!”

“...Amazing.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say there was a mountain of gold piled up in front of the altar. There were gold coins, jewels,

trinkets, weapons, and even food that could be eaten year round stacked up like dry leaves.

As the two people were impressed, the boatmen spoke at the same time.

““The Sea God Festival refers to the day once every year, when half the goods in the Pirate Archipelago are offered to the sea god. The greater the offerings, the better the blessing.””

“W-What?”

“...Once a year.”

Unlike the confused Randolph, Theodore reexamined the explanation and asked, “Then how many years has the Sea God Festival been held?”

““Including this year, 52 times.””

Disbelieving expressions appeared on their faces. If this had happened for 52 years, how much gold and treasures were piled up in Aquilo’s lair?

There was a reason why a dragon slayer quickly made a fortune. Some dragons liked to receive tributes like Aquilo, while others would plunder them. Most dragons enjoyed their lairs being decorated with rare pieces.

One million gold? 10 million gold? Maybe there was 100 million gold inside the lair. Theodore couldn't help feeling breathless, despite having no greed for riches. The rumour that a kingdom used up most of their assets to hunt a dragon wasn't so farfetched after all.

'Human greed has no end, and they always repeat the same mistakes.'

Theodore sighed as he saw the greed in the eyes of the spectators. Maybe this was Aquilo's intention. For a dragon who loved blood and destroying things, this was enough to induce a punishment.

Waaaaaah-!

In front of that lavish landscape, the authentic Sea God Festival started. Nearly naked dancers shook their bodies in front of the gold, silver, and treasures, while the spectators cheered them on. The combination of gold, alcohol, and naked beauty was enough to seduce any male eye.

Only Theodore looked around with an unconcerned look.

Shortly afterwards, he heard the voice he'd been waiting for.

[Ah, I'm bored. It has been decades since I started this, so I'm becoming bored.] The voice whispered directly into Theo's mind. It was a sweet poison which melted his senses like when he first

heard it.

“...Aquilo.”

[Can you relieve my boredom?]

Simultaneously, Theodore's boat started to slowly change directions. Only the current flowing around Theodore's ship moved in the other direction. Maybe it was because the flow was so calm, but Randolph still hadn't realized that Theodore was moving away.

No magic power could be felt, so it must be the inherent power of a dragon who controlled natural phenomenon. Theo didn't resist as he asked, “Didn't you ask me to come with my companion?”

[It doesn't matter if you want to come together, but I might feel a little worse.]

“...I will go alone.”

It was what he'd expected in the first place. So, Theodore accepted it without any complaints. His policy was to avoid a fight if possible, and he didn't want to drag Randolph into this. Anyway, there was nothing to lose in trying. It was right to try conversing first, until Aquilo showed that she wanted to become enemies.

Chwaaaaak!

Before long, Theodore's boat was pulled through a crack in the cliff. The water depth became shallower, and eventually he reached the shore where the boat couldn't move anymore. The boatman put down the oars and pointed inside the cave. "Enter."

Theodore stepped onto the land instead of responding to the boatman.

'Um, this scent?'

A curious scent coming from the cave tickled his nose, but it wasn't toxic. Theodore calmly walked inside while clearing the scent with magic. Stalactites grew everywhere, making it seem like a natural terrain. However, the torches stuck on the wall at regular intervals were unnatural.

'I'm getting closer. In the next 10 steps...'

He reached the epicenter of the scent. The moment that Theodore thought so and took a step forward...

Chill.

His feet touched the ground, and his five senses started screaming. It was an inevitable death. There were no gaps to escape. He didn't know what attack was coming, but Theodore Miller would die here.

Even with his nerves accelerated to the extreme, the attack was too powerful and fast to be seen. Additionally, it was small. The attack was smaller than a coin and similar to a grain seed. It was like Alfred's Magic Bullet, but it wasn't a magic projectile.

However, the attack reached before its identity could be discovered.

Puk!

It punched straight through Theodore and continued in a straight line into the wall. The attack was so strong that it only stopped after penetrating half a stone wall that was tens of meters thick. It wasn't a power which could be defeated by 6th Circle defense magic.

However, Theodore survived that blow.

'A water droplet shot at ultra-high pressure...?'

Theodore's neck was sweating as he barely escaped the crisis. Then he saw Umbra shining on his right arm and realized how he'd survived. If Fluidization had been delayed even a little bit, the attack would've gone through his skull, leaving only a dead body behind.

He might've been able to do something if the water bullet was made with aura or magic power, but the pure physical damage would've dealt a blow that he couldn't endure. In some ways, this

could be called superiority.

...Hah, the one with the complete advantage was waiting. Theodore scoffed at his own judgment and glared into the dark room beyond. This was the epicenter of the strange fragrance, which also contained the one who shot the water droplet at him.

“Ara, you survived?” The terrible voice filled Theodore’s ears. Theo barely managed to ignore the instinct which was telling him to bow his head and lick this woman’s feet.

“...Can I ask for the meaning of that attack?” Theodore’s blue eyes shone as he prepared to rip his teleport scroll.

However, Aquilo replied to Theodore’s question in a voice of deep boredom, with absolutely no hostility felt at all. “It isn’t a big deal. I am fickle in many ways, so I decided to act like this.”

“Like this? A surprise attack?”

“No. I wanted to attack once to see if you would survive or die. You did very well avoiding it. I honestly never thought you could avoid it, so you’re more interesting than I thought.” Aquilo flicked her fingers as she gave the terrible reply.

Clack!

Then the beads attached to the room lit up, making the dim cave brighter. Naturally, Aquilo’s appearance in the darkness also

became clearer.

“Uh!” Simultaneously, Theodore’s body stiffened.

With hair as blue as seawater, fluorescent eyes which glowed with a bewitching light, two horns which sprouted from between the blue hair, and gorgeous white shoulders which were exposed by the luxurious cloak... Any man would be forced to feel lust, including Theodore.

He had met a few beautiful women before, but none of them were those who oozed ‘femininity’ in order to seduce men. Aquilo was stunning, even with her chest to lower body covered by the long cloak. Even the extravagant gold accessories, which could seem tacky, were nothing but subtle decorations for her.

As she held a strange looking pipe in her mouth, Aquilo faced Theodore with gently curved eyes.

“-Now, let’s start the story.”

Chapter 147 – Sea Dragon Aquilo (3)

Aquilo first sucked the pipe with her pink lips and blew out white smoke, before lifting her index finger.

Did she mean for him to come closer? The vigilant Theodore approached cautiously, and Aquilo waved her fingers with a whimsical smile. He reflexively lowered his posture, but his senses didn't warn him this time.

Jjejejeok.

The air suddenly froze and turned into the shape of a chair.

“This...!” Theodore turned to Aquilo with astonished eyes, causing her to laugh and raise her pipe. The ability to dominate the natural world itself, a power only given to a dragon, was just demonstrated.

“Sit there. It is a bit cool for humans, but isn't it better than standing?”

“Thank you.”

He quickly sat down on the ice chair. It was a little chilly, but the magic power in Theodore's body immediately shook off the cold. As a 6th Circle magician, his body wasn't ordinary anymore. However, Aquilo just stared at him and casually threw him a question. “Boy, who on earth are you running away from?”

“...Huh?” Theodore’s eyes widened at the words.

“It was around three days after you arrived on my island...? Some idiots touched my ward. There was no way it was a punitive expedition... So, I went out and checked.”

“Yes.”

“Do you call it a ghost ship? Yes, those guys were riding on it.”

‘Ghost ship,’ Theodore’s face distorted at those words. Land people dismissed it as superstition, while sailors just thought of it as an unlucky vision. However, in reality, it was neither. A ghost ship was an undead formed from the souls and ship of a wreckage.

‘The last record of its appearance was more than 100 years ago...’

It was hard to obtain the materials because it required a purely maintained wrecked ship, and the creation process was extremely difficult. For that reason, it was a type of black magic found only in the magic tower’s records. Yet a ghost ship was being used to pursue Theodore...? Maybe the ‘Charlotte’s Necklace’ he acquired was very significant to the Orcus Company, or the forces behind the company.

Theodore barely managed to reply in an indifferent manner, “So, what did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I killed them.”

Theodore was at a loss for words and gulped. Aquilo’s white skin turned red as she recalled the bloody memories of that day.

“In the beginning, someone tried to negotiate with me. So, I grabbed him and killed him. First I twisted his limbs, pulled out his eyeballs, and then pierced his ears so that he would be quiet.”

“.....”

“When he tried to run away, I grabbed him and cut his legs off. Then he surrendered. He dared to act so freely? These bastards dared to sprinkle black magic in my domain? I chopped him up and fed him to the sharks.”

‘Creepy.’ Goosebumps emerged all over Theodore’s body as he stared at those blissful eyes.

He couldn’t even feel happy that his trackers were wiped out. The person in front of him was the incarnation of violence, an executioner and slaughterer. He would rather fight against the warlocks, since dealing with a sea dragon was literally suicide.

Then Aquilo’s eyes turned to him, “I heard your name from that bastard.”

Those guys didn’t help him even while dying. Theodore couldn’t help cursing the Orcus warlocks. It was Theodore who had

attracted the ghost ship to Aquilo's domain. Whether it was deliberate or not, a dragon wasn't the type of person to be mindful of this.

As expected, there was a glint in Aquilo's eyes.

"So, I tried to kill you because I was annoyed..."

Was it coming? Theodore's calves were completely ready to move. He would be in the palm of her hand, but he needed to try and live as much as possible. However, his determination was meaningless as Aquilo just smiled.

"You smell."

"...Huh?"

"Your smell, smell." She giggled and glanced at Theodore with delighted eyes. It was a seductive gaze which made his heart sink. "A fresh young girl."

"...?" Theodore cocked his head at the words.

"An innocent high elf."

"...!!"

“Finally... the hateful smell of the red clan.”

Aquilo’s tongue swept across her lower lips. She looked like a snake before its prey, so Theodore got a vague chill. As Theodore was confused by the unknown mood, Aquilo leaned her upper body toward him. And...

Huuu~ She blew smoke out of the pipe and into his face.

“Ack!” Theo reacted too late. He hurriedly stopped breathing in, but it was inevitable that he inhaled some smoke. His senses were silent, and Aquilo just looked at him as she waited for his reaction.

Shortly after that...

Ping!

A wave of dizziness swept over him. Theodore looked between Aquilo and the pipe she was holding with trembling eyes. Then Aquilo lifted the white pipe at his unspoken question.

“This? It is just a drug. From my standpoint, it is just like drinking alcohol... but for you, it is a type of stimulus?”

It was as she said. Theodore soon felt his body turning hot like a fireball. No, it wasn’t a fever. Due to its effect, his nervous system was a mess. He tried to get up from the chair, but his arms and legs were caught by the ice chair.

“Don’t be so nervous. You will soon be pleased.”

Aquilo put down her pipe and slowly got up from the chair. Then the cloak decorated with gold flowed down to the ground.

“...Heok!”

Theodore’s eyes reflexively widened before he closed them. The body which had been covered by the long cloak was revealed under the bright light. Thus far, it was okay. He was a little nervous, but he was old enough not to be overcome by the sight of a woman’s underwear. However, Aquilo’s attire was more than that.

“So naive.”

Even the sound of her laughter made him dizzy. Theodore kept his eyes closed, but he could hear Aquilo’s footsteps. Her white and bare feet stepped on the damp ground, as a tail covered in blue scales extended behind her. There was a shark fin-like protrusion on the long snake-like tail.

The white legs which the tail stretched from... and above it...

‘Damn!’

He desperately tried to shake off the sight, but his attempts were in vain. Before Theodore could calm himself, Aquilo’s footsteps

stopped in front of his chair.

“I would like to take something away from them,” Aquilo whispered and sat on Theodore’s lap without any hesitation.

Flinch.

Oddly, he couldn’t even move a finger. He gulped as he felt the weight and soft texture of her thighs. Was this fearsome stimulation really because of the effect of the drug?

“Hey, aren’t you curious?” Like a female praying mantis during breeding season, Aquilo asked Theodore coyly, “If I take away your virginity here, what faces would those females make? Will they be angry? Or will they resent you? Ahh, either way, it is fine.”

“...Why...?”

“I told you. I’m...”

It felt too good as she bit Theodore’s ear gently.

As a shiver went down his spine, his hand couldn’t help going up to her chest. The movement was so natural that it was like he had done this many times, despite actually being unfamiliar with it. Apart from the paralysis of his body, Theodore had no experience with this, so he couldn’t resist.

Aquilo overpowered him in an instant and finally reached out her fingers. Theodore suppressed a gasp as he grasped the destination of her fingers and groaned, “T-There...”

“Don’t worry. Just leave it to me.”

“No...”

“Yes,” Aquilo whispered in a mischievous voice. Then the moment her fingers were about to reach its destination...

Slap!

There was a sound, and Aquilo’s fingers were thrown back.

“...Eh?”

The immobile Theodore couldn’t stop her fingers, but Aquilo’s stunned gaze soon found the source.

[No!]

A small brown-skinned girl with wheat coloured hair was staring at her from Theodore’s belly.

“...E-Elemental?”

[Deo no want you! Bad hands!]

“You can express your emotions? You, are you an ancient elemental?”

As Aquila became distracted by Mitra, Theodore realized that his body had recovered from the paralysis. He was puzzled about how such a strong drug was removed in a short period of time, but Theodore quickly found his answer.

‘The bud of the world tree!’

The bud growing from Mitra’s hair was from the seed of the world tree, a tree which had the ability to cleanse the world of hazardous substances.

It was no wonder that the detoxifying ability worked on Theodore who was in contract with Mitra, the elemental who used to be Mother Earth. If he had summoned Mitra from the beginning, he wouldn’t have been paralyzed by the drug.

However, he didn’t have time to waste on such regrets.

Snap.

“Eh?!” Aquilo was confused when her shoulders were abruptly grabbed by Theodore. There was no need to answer her unspoken question. Theodore faced Aquilo’s fluorescent eyes while ignoring the texture underneath his hand.

“I don’t intend to intervene in your display of affection, but I don’t want to be in this relationship with you.”

Aquilo stared into his eyes before laughing. “Even when your body is reacting like this?”

“...You are attractive.”

“But you still don’t want to?”

“Yes.”

Theodore had no idea what Aquilo felt at the decisive rejection. However, there wasn’t an unpleasant expression on her face, so he could think about it later. Aquilo looked at him strangely before laughing and getting down from his lap.

Then she clicked her tongue and said, “Well, okay. I don’t want to hurt my pride by forcing you.”

Theodore felt deeply relieved and sad, two contradictory emotions, as he watched Aquilo return to her chair.

He was able to stand up to her in the end, but hiding behind his calm face was a desperate emotion. If Mitra had delayed even a little bit, this might be carved as a black mark in Theodore’s history.

The moment he was trying to get rid of his tension...

“...What, another bastard?”

Aquilo's angry voice resonated through the cave.

*

“Ah... Why is the Sea God Festival on the day when I have to patrol?”

“Who isn't annoyed? Dammit.”

On the outskirts of the Pirate Archipelago, two pirates were patrolling on the first day of the Sea God Festival. It was a miracle time which occurred once a year, when pirates could freely enjoy alcohol and women at will. However, they couldn't enjoy it because they had to waste time patrolling.

A red-hooded pirate muttered, “Do you want to boast about your conquests again?”

The blue-hooded pirate replied with a sigh, “Of course. Wouldn't you?”

“Ha, shit!”

They were afraid of their boss' harsh axe, so they couldn't disobey. Yet they couldn't bear it, so they looked at the sea in the distance. The two pirates smoked the tobacco they had sneaked out and complained about their misfortune.

They didn't know that this would be the end of their lives. The waves moved in a strange way, and 'something' emerged, destroying the heads of the two pirates.

Kung!

There was a huge noise, but this outlying area wasn't popular except for patrols.

Grrrr...

There was a growling sound, and a bizarre-looking monster appeared.

It had six fins, five tails which rippled through the water, and limbs which grew on thick and tough skin, like those of land creatures. In spite of the dark night sky, its eyes emitted a faint light, like those of deep-sea creatures.

However, that wouldn't be the case from now on.

Creak, creak...

After coming from sea to the land, the creature reconstructed its characteristics and form to suit the environment. The unnecessary fins and tails were removed, while the skin turned into a thick leather. Horns sprouted from its head, and its luminous eyes pierced through the darkness.

-...It stinks.

The creature's mouth looked like gills, and a low frequency voice which humans couldn't hear emerged.

-This... the smell of a dragon...

The eyes of the monster accurately captured the center of the Pirate Archipelago, where the festival was being held. To be exact, it pinpointed the location of the cave on the outer parts of the Sea God Festival.

The reason he had come to the sea from a distant land was because he smelled a delicious dragon.

Chwaaaak!

Six wings sprouted from its back. The wings of a wyvern, gryphon, and several other creatures were stored in it since flying was a convenient way to travel. In the form of a monster which didn't exist anywhere else in the material world, the grimoire of sin that ate life landed.

This was the moment when the usurper of creatures, Pride, appeared again.

Chapter 148 – Along With The Dragon (1)

Aquilo and Theodore took the boat back to the altar, where the festival was in full swing.

The belly dancers captivated the audience with their aggressive dance, while there was smoke blowing everywhere, from the opium being lit in light concentrations. It would be difficult to maintain reason in a place like this.

However, the ugliness of the area couldn't be hidden.

‘Even so... there is no chaos.’

Theodore eyebrows twitched as he looked around and clicked his tongue lightly. It was as he said. The prostitutes were already brought onto the surrounding boats, and drunkards were sleeping while tangled together.

On the other hand, Aquilo watched the humans with a satisfied expression. However, her eyebrows raised when she found a ship approaching them. What idiot dared to block her way? Aquilo raised a sharp nail at the end of a white finger and waited for the right moment to slice the person.

“Young Master!”

However, the man who jumped onto their boat stood beside Theodore. He held two swords, and the aura flowing from the

blades seemed like they could cut through the darkness. Randolph sighed with relief when he saw Theodore, who had disappeared from his eyes for a while. His warrior's instincts had predicted death.

“Aha, is he your companion, Boy?”

Aquilo recognized Randolph's identity and put her nails away. The red lips on her white face seemed like cherry blossoms in bloom. Randolph lost his spirit for a moment at the smile, but his trained mentality meant that he quickly recovered. She might superficially appear as a beautiful woman, but...

‘Dammit, I’m not a match for her.’

Randolph felt himself quickly getting drenched in sweat. Unlike magicians who pursued ideas, a warrior's ability to determine strength was unmatched. His senses, which had been trained for many decades, were screaming that no matter what, he shouldn't fight her.

“...Damn, I want to hit you.”

However, Randolph didn't put his swords away. Rather, his two eyes stared straight at Aquilo. The surprising thing was Aquilo's reaction. She ignored Randolph, who had been prepared for battle, and manipulated the ocean currents to guide their boat to the center of the festival.

Then she climbed onto dry land and licked her lips.

[Stop.]

Simultaneously, everything became static. The hundreds, maybe thousands, of people stopped moving.

This was ‘Dragon Fear,’ the ability of a transcendent species which allowed them to dominate those below them. It didn’t mean much to Theodore and Randolph, but the merchants and pirates couldn’t resist.

However, shortly after that...

-It’s coming.

Theodore perceived its presence before anyone else. Gluttony warned him, but this was the second time today that his senses let out a howl of warning. The size of the warning was equal to or greater than that of Aquilo’s surprise attack. The biggest problem was that this presence was somehow familiar.

‘No, I distinctly remember this presence... Can it be...?’

Theodore stiffened while trying to figure out the identity of the intruder. If his guess was correct... it was possible the uninvited guest had come for Aquilo, not him. There was nothing to base his speculation on, but it might be considered reality when thinking about the ominous warning.

Like right now...

Kuuong!

The ground formed a pit as something landed from the sky, and six fluttering wings caused dust to rise up. In front of the expressionless Aquilo, Pride of the Seven Sins revealed its heinous appearance.

-I found you.

When Theodore saw it, he became nervous.

‘Dangerous. Even more than last time...’

Gluttony heard his thoughts and agreed.

-5th stage. This time, don’t even try to fight it.

‘What? Already?’

-That’s right. I don’t know what Pride ate, but it has already unlocked the 5th seal. That swine.

A Seven Sins grimoire with the 5th seal released...! When Pride had been at the 4th stage, Theodore had been helpless until

Veronica arrived. Now, it was even stronger? Theodore gulped and carefully looked at the confrontation between two monsters.

‘How much stronger is it?’

Gluttony hesitated for a moment before replying.

–Now, even if that woman called Veronica comes, the odds are fifty-fifty. No, it is probably around 40%.

‘This is just stage 5?!’

Theodore barely managed to maintain his expressionless face as he screamed inwardly. The last time, Theodore had to use Transmission to borrow Alfred’s power. Now, Pride had released one more seal and could fight Veronica equally? If Theodore was currently five times stronger than that time, then Pride was 10 times stronger.

As another piece of the Seven Sins, Gluttony replied like it was natural.

–Of course. For the Seven Sins, releasing the seals is the process of returning to our ‘original state’... If you reach stage 6 according to Pride’s standards, you can slaughter an ancient dragon by yourself.

“...Crazy.” Theo couldn’t hide the astonished cry which emerged from his mouth. The ancient dragon was already mostly gone from

the material world, but a 6th stage grimoire could defeat it. If so, what was the 7th stage, and what would Pride be like at that point? He couldn't imagine such a horrible future.

However, Theodore wasn't given any more leeway.

–We meet again, Gluttony's monkey.

“Uh!”

Superbia's head didn't need to turn around as an eyeball appeared on the back and stared at Theodore. Perhaps it had known he was there from the beginning. It glanced at Theodore and wriggled its blade-like projections, as if it wanted to kill him right here.

However, the response came from a different direction.

“What, do you know this thing?” Aquilo smoked her pipe and spoke while pointing at Superbia. She seemed mild-mannered and friendly, but there was a sharp look in her eyes. Aquilo was certain that Superbia wasn't an easy opponent.

Theodore kept up his vigilance and nodded slightly. “I do. It is an unfortunate relationship.”

“Hrmm, then this guy is chasing you as well?”

The answer came from elsewhere.

–No, I have no interest in a monkey. [Pride,] Superbia, spoke while gazing at Aquilo with hungry eyes. Of course, only Aquilo and Theodore could hear its low frequency voice, but Randolph felt an unpleasant sensation every time it spoke.

–Young sea dragon, I will ask you something. [Pride] Superbia's super low voice rang out. –My purpose is completion. Are you willing to join this noble purpose and be reborn as the perfect creature?

Aquilo's answer was clear. “Many dogs are noisy these days.”

It was instant. Aquilo spoke in a way which didn't suit her beautiful lips and stepped forward. Veronica, a quarter dragon, was able to display the body of an aura user. Then how strong was a pure-blooded dragon? The question which Theodore couldn't answer was resolved in front of him.

Kwaang!

The origin of the blow was the tail. As soon as Aquilo twisted her body, the fast-waving tail became the strongest whip on the planet. However, Superbia, who was hit by the blow, wasn't normal either. As half of its body burst, it used the repulsion to push its body back into the strong currents.

–Kuhu, huhuhu...! Refusal, I see!

As Superbia laughed at her, Aquilo was astounded.

“You want to go a round with me?”

Superbia wanted to face the sea dragon in the sea? Even the gold clan, the so-called strongest dragon clan, avoided fighting Aquilo at sea. Aquilo didn't hesitate to jump into the sea currents after Superbia. It wasn't the shadow of a woman but the long shadow of a huge snake moving through the waves.

Randolph held his double swords and looked at Theodore.

“I don't know really know what is going on, but... Young Master, what are you going to do?”

“I'm not sure.”

Theodore looked at the shadows of the two monsters who had disappeared into the sea, and inquired inwardly, ‘Gluttony, can Aquilo defeat Pride?’

–It is impossible, Gluttony replied immediately, without any hesitation. –The dragon's power would be sufficient if Pride was still stage 4, but after reaching stage 5, the odds are 0%. There is no means for a sea dragon to kill it.

‘Even if the sea dragon is fighting in the sea?’

–Pride’s combat power doesn’t depend on environment. You should remember since you fought it once.

Certainly. Theodore couldn’t deny it and stopped speaking. Pride’s ability meant it could instantly create a shell which reflected Magic Bullet and could endure 5th Circle fire magic. There were many creatures which were strong in the sea, and Superbia’s immortality wasn’t something that a sea dragon could beat.

In the end, Theodore was forced to make a difficult decision. “I’m going.”

“Are you serious?” Randolph was stiff, unlike his usual self. “I don’t know what it is, but this isn’t something we can afford to get involved in. It is like shrimps interfering in a fight between whales.”

“Well, I can’t deny it.” Theodore shrugged. “But I have an unfortunate relationship with that creature. If that dragon is defeated, the creature will surely come to kill me. It is better to fight with the dragon to beat it.”

“However... no, even if you win... can you trust in the wicked dragon?”

“A wicked dragon is still a dragon. Perhaps it will pay back the favour.”

He had already made a decision. Theodore's face was showing that. The one struggling now was Randolph. Randolph followed Theodore with the desire to become a complete master, but he had never imagined contending with a dragon or monster.

How could Randolph fight an opponent that he couldn't win against? Did he have to risk his life just because Theodore helped him find the heirloom swords?

As he hesitated, Theodore spoke to him, "Captain Randolph, thank you for everything in the meantime."

"...What?"

"All old debts have been repaid, so you can leave me here. It is enough."

After giving his farewell message, Theodore ran in the direction of Aquilo. He ran by using the boats as stepping bridges. Using acceleration magic and physical strengthening magic, Theo soon disappeared from Randolph's sight.

Randolph simply stared dumbly in that direction. "....."

After Aquilo disappeared, the influence of 'Dragon Fear' gradually lifted and people started making noise again around the confused Randolph.

“...Hah.”

Randolph had received consideration from someone younger than him. Whether Theodore realized Randolph’s hesitation or not, his intentions were good.

“...Damn, dammit. This sucks!” Randolph scratched his head in a rough manner as he shouted loudly, surprising the people around him. His wounded pride, disappointment in himself, worry for Theodore, and fear toward the dragon and unknown monster mixed together.

Kang!

Then Randolph grabbed his two falchions and ran over the boats like Theodore had done.

‘Ah! This bastard!’ Complaints came from behind him, but he didn’t hear them. Randolph ran toward the battlefield of monsters.

“Damn! It sure came without warning!”

The clear sky was now filled with dark clouds, and strong gusts of winds blew over the previous silent sea. Today’s fighting promised not to end peacefully, as one swordsman entered the storm of his own volition.

Chapter 149 – Along With The Dragon (2)

The sea dragon, the so-called blue dragon, was known as one of the biggest among the dragon species.

It had a streamlined body more than 50 meters long, with a horned head and a powerful tail. On average, they boasted a thicker and more elongated body than that of adult dragons, who were typically 40 meters long. Clearly, there was a reason why the red clan, famous for their strength, couldn't face them in the sea.

These dragons gave up aerial wings and chose the sea. They developed a large size as well as sharp claws. Their fins and tails could endure the strong currents.

The speed of Aquilo, the water dragon who was so thoroughly specialized for underwater, was faster and more flexible than an arrow shot on land. Every time the smoothly curved tail moved through the water, she traveled a few hundred meters and emitted an intense shock wave.

[I caught up.]

Aquilo smiled cruelly as she caught sight of 'Pride.' She had sensed it on land, but she couldn't help feeling something ominous from the creature. It had reconstructed itself to be more efficient, with the feet of a mollusk and a wide tail like a squid.

Aquilo observed it for a while before opening her mouth, [Hrmm, should I just check it after I kill it?]

It wasn't a false confidence. She had lived for over a thousand years and had never missed a kill. Yet this insignificant thing dared to come unauthorized into her domain? She couldn't forgive it. As anger bubbled in her body, the water around her was sucked into her mouth.

This was Aqua Breath.

Water sprayed out with ultra-high pressure became a weapon in itself, and it was sharper than any sword. It had the strength to crush a thick ore to pieces. Theodore had barely survived just one drop of water, so this was serious.

Chut———!

A thin, solid line shot out from Aquilo's mouth. The prerequisite for the propulsion was that the narrower the output, the stronger the pressure would become. She exhaled for 8 feet, and it turned Pride's bizarre body into a sophisticated puzzle piece.

Even a body made from adamantium wouldn't be able to survive this! It wasn't surprising that even with the traits, Pride's body was rendered into dozens of pieces. This was a scene of blood and flesh scattering instantaneously. However, Aquilo sensed that Superbia was still alive.

She muttered in a small voice, [You, a slime?]

–You are foolish, but you noticed quickly.

One piece of Superbia which had been cut off confirmed it. The body of a king slime...

A king slime was an S rank slime which occupied the southern swamps, and common attacks rarely worked against it. The slime's weakness was that it had a 'nucleus.' So, in order to get rid of it, she needed to destroy the whole body at once with huge firepower. It was unfortunate since Aqua Breath only exercised absolute power at one point.

–Now, it is my turn, Superbia declared as it restored its body in an instant.

‘Kraken’s tentacles.’

Before Aquilo could prepare, Superbia's body expanded and transformed into another form. Attached to the surface of the thick eight legs, there were suckers filled with poison where one drop could poison an adult male.

It was called a nightmare by seafarers in legends and was one of the two disasters of the sea, along with the sea serpent.

[Kraken!?!]

The eight tentacles stretched out swiftly and wrapped around Aquilo's confused body. It wasn't just the outward appearance.

Aquilo felt pressure on her scales from the poison.

She was the strongest in the sea, but she wasn't invincible. When she fought the kraken occasionally, a few of her scales would melt. Additionally, the megalodon's skin was sharp enough to penetrate a dragon's rugged hide.

However, she was never inferior.

Jijjik! Jijjik!

The tentacles around Aquilo's body swelled up. No, they were trying to tear her apart. However, the tentacles were unable to cope with the power of a sea dragon, so the mollusk's flexible body started to rupture.

Chwaaack!

Finally, Aquilo tore apart the kraken's tentacles. The dark water became so brightly lit that all the fish fled desperately.

[...Okay, this is finally a fun entertainment.]

Superbia wasn't an easy opponent, so she would start killing it sincerely. As Aquilo thought so, the sea water stirred and a wall of currents surrounded the whole area tightly. This was the sea dragon's innate ability to dominate the water. Despite the complete disappearance of an escape route, Pride scoffed.

–This will be the last play of your life.

However, Aquilo didn't have an answer. For her, the enemy was an object to be defeated, not a person to talk to. The fight had already begun. As Aquilo rushed into the waterway she had made herself, Superbia created the teeth of a megalodon.

There was a huge shock wave! The impact of the collision was so much that it even created a tsunami, as one of the rulers of the sea and a Seven Sins entered the battle.

*

Kururung!

Despite there being not a single drop of rain, thunder struck down. The water shook ominously as vibrations transmitted from far away reached the harbor, creating high waves. Theodore, who used magic to float above the sea, measured the echoes of the shock waves and immediately calculated the location of the epicenter.

“Over there.”

Aquilo and Superbia were on the bottom of the sea approximately three kilometers from the coast. Theo didn't know in whose favor the fight was flowing, but it was on a scale in which he couldn't intervene.

One side was an adult dragon whom even Veronica would struggle with, while the other was a Seven Sins grimoire with the 5th seal released. It was a battlefield from which no one but a master could return.

–Are you really going? Gluttony asked Theodore. –Stop now, User. Pride is an emotional being, but it is one of the Seven Sins grimoires. It won't slaughter you for unnecessary things.

“Can you be sure of that?”

–...No.

Theodore smiled and shrugged at the uncertain answer.

“Well, that's right. And even if I survive here, is there any guarantee I won't meet it again? If it becomes even more powerful than now, the world tree won't be able to stop it... The safety of Ellenoa and Elvenheim will be at stake.”

–.....

“So I have to end it here. If it appears stronger next time, it won't be something that people of this era can handle.”

Gluttony remained silent. The user's survival was always of the highest priority, but it realized that Theodore's words made sense. It was a gamble to fight here, but it would be checkmate if they fought again. Pride could reach the 6th stage by eating the sea

dragon. By then, even if the continent formed an alliance, they would be wiped out in a week.

‘Seems Gluttony is easily convinced by the far-sighted view...’

Theodore, who convinced Gluttony with just a few words, stared calmly at the sea.

Aquilo’s tail would occasionally soar up, and red blood sprayed like a fountain, turning the water red. The aftermath of the two monsters’ fight beneath the surface of the water was tremendous, reaching three kilometers away.

Theodore grabbed his pounding heart, which felt like it would burst, and looked down at his left hand.

“...Is it possible?” It was a weak voice but Theo couldn’t help it.

Before facing Aquilo today, Theodore had desperately worked out measures to deal with a dragon and had obtained his own results. However, he had no time to practice it. Modern magic wouldn’t work, so he had to pin his hope on ancient magic, which he had never attempted before.

At that moment, someone’s voice reached his ears.

“Hey, Young Master! It isn’t fun if you fly alone!”

Theo already knew who it was without looking back. No, he was afraid of what his expression would be like. So, he replied without looking back, “What are you doing here Randolph? You can really die!”

“Didn’t I tell you? It doesn’t matter!”

Randolph’s level meant he could clearly see it... the struggle of the monster in the sea and the hell-like landscape they were now involved in. Yet Randolph still declared that they would go together. That loyal goodwill was such a heavy burden. Theodore opened his mouth and enchanted Randolph’s shoes.

Then he spoke in a testy voice, “Now you can even run around on the water. Of course, the surface will be different, but you can easily compensate for that.”

Randolph took one step at a time on the water, feeling delighted at not falling through the waves.

“Oh, this is good!”

He could walk on water if he utilized aura, but it was good to save energy and not have his concentration divided by the technique. As expected of a master level aura user, Randolph walked on the waves easily. It wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t that different from his usual form.

However, there was no more time for the two of them to talk.

“This...!”

“Be careful, Young Master!”

Jjejejeok...! Jjejejeok...!

There was no warning as the waves froze, and the warm air became freezing cold like they were in a glacier.

It was a chill reminiscent of the 7th Circle Blizzard. Theodore and Randolph stood next to each other and used their power to resist. A normal person would immediately have their muscles and blood frozen over.

The sudden chill meant his eyelashes were frozen, but Theodore easily removed the ice from his eyelashes and opened his eyes.

“The sea...!”

It was all ice. The famous frigid landscape of the north was spread out before them.

From the coast to the horizon, the whole area was frozen white. The seagulls flying in the sky fell down. They were so deeply frozen that no water emerged when Randolph placed the tip of his sword in one as a test.

The one who created this landscape...

Ku kwa kwa kwang!

Penetrating through the thick ice like it was a thin wooden board, a dragon with blue scales rose to the surface.

However, she didn't have her usual unblemished and beautiful appearance, as her body was a wreck. Her scales had been melted by poison, and her skin had been torn by teeth. These wounds couldn't heal, and blood flowed from them.

Who could push Aquilo so far in the sea? As if to answer that question, Pride's grotesque body appeared on the glacier.

"Let's go!"

If Aquilo collapsed, they were dead. Pride wasn't an opponent that Theodore and Randolph could face. Theodore flew in the sky, while Randolph ran on the glacier. A distance of three kilometers wasn't particularly far for two people whose speed was accelerated to the maximum, but they couldn't help sweating from the intense nervousness.

Fortunately, Aquilo still resisted violently.

Kwaang!

Pride was struck by the long tail and pushed deeper into the glacier, but then it pounced at Aquilo and gouged her with sharp claws. This was probably a fearsome trait from another creature. As Theodore moved closer, he calculated the distance and prepared the magic which would be most effective.

However, there was still a big gap between them.

[Kuack, this chimera bastard is trying to intimidate...!]

As Aquilo prepared another breath attack, Pride saw an opportunity and its claws flashed.

Superbia used an unidentified poison. It was a poisonous solution capable of melting a dragon's scales and muscles, and Aquilo couldn't even guess its origin. If this poison hit her heart, brain, or spine, it would be a wound that could endanger her life.

Aquilo, who sensed her defeat, closed her eyes.

Kurururung!

Then lightning struck with a thunderous sound and shattered Pride. It was the 6th Circle lightning magic, Thunderbolt!

Theodore had used 'Memorize' to create seven Thunderbolts, so it was inevitable for even a master to suffer serious injuries. The seven thunderbolts struck the unprepared Superbia, stopping its nervous system momentarily.

Then in front of Aquilo, a red cloak fluttered down.

“You will probably tell me not to interrupt,” the magician, who had inherited one of the Seven Sins, spoke as he thoroughly prepared for battle. “But Aquilo, I have a previous appointment with this creature.”

Chapter 150 – Along With The Dragon (3)

Superbia, who had been hit by Theodore's Thunderbolt, was quicker to recover than Aquilo. The majority of the traits Pride had armed itself with were still unknown, but its red eyeball blazed angrily.

This was already the second time. Pride recovered its flesh and started growling.

–You again, Monkey.

The air was tense, but Theodore just looked over with a nonchalant expression.

“Hah, it is so funny.”

–What?

“You are the one who fled, and now you've come back. Once again, I should be the one saying that, not you.”

At those words, the thick ice beneath Superbia's feet broke. Superbia lost control of its strength for a moment, crushing the thick ice floor. This was 'Pride' of the Seven Sins, so Theo provoked its arrogance by mentioning that it had fled in the past.

Unsurprisingly, Superbia's dozens of eyes were now all

concentrated on Theodore, not Aquilo.

–Pretentious monkey! The loser on that day was you, not me! If that female monkey hadn't come, your body would've become part of me by now!

An intense fury swept over Theo, but unlike in the past, he wasn't shaken this time. No, he looked at Superbia with cold ridicule.

“Do you think there is any point discussing ‘what if’? You might boast about all the species you’ve usurped, but in the end, you are just a weak chimera.”

–...You.

Once water boiled over, there would be nothing left. Likewise, the monster's patience had run dry.

It changed from an underwater form to one suitable to fight on land. The kraken's eight tentacles turned into thick and tough horse legs. Its skin resembled a hard shell, and the fins became several layers of wings. Oddly enough, the form was very similar to the one Theodore had faced in the past.

A centaur's lower body, a storm locust's wings, and a spriggan's acceleration ability...

After restructuring itself with these features, Pride declared in a

mocking voice, –Don't think this is the same as last time. You are no different from the gravel on the street.

“Your brain is worse than I thought.” Despite the warning from his senses, Theodore raised his finger and gestured for Superbia to come near. “Do you understand what I am saying? Don't think I will let you flee like last time.”

-...How impertinent!

Finally, Superbia's patience broke, and it ran across the frozen ground with a loud cry. In response, the ground cracked like a spider web. Superbia's assertion that it was different from last time seemed to be true, as its acceleration exceeded Theodore's reaction time.

There was no room to evade, and blocking it would cause serious injuries. In this crisis situation, Theodore accepted the fearful blow without any defenses.

-What?!

However, Superbia was the one who received a surprise. Theodore's defenseless body turned semi-transparent, and the attack passed through it!

Kakang!

At that moment, Randolph wielded his two falchions and aimed

at Superbia. It was his trademark high-speed attack. In other words, it aligned with the saying that there were always gaps in the defense to exploit.

‘Clovis Two Swords Style.

Special Hidden Meaning Technique.

Thunder Claws.’

This wasn’t an opponent Randolph could go easy on. He sensed this and used his Hidden Meaning technique without any hesitation. Dozens of strands of aura emerged from the blades like thunderbolts.

Kwarurung!

It was a bombardment instead of a surrender, and the attack crushed Superbia’s ribs and heart. This type of wound would take longer to recover from than a single, neat wound. Additionally, the combined attack of the two people wasn’t over yet.

“Release!”

Randolph retreated, while Theodore’s translucent body returned to its original form. Theodore, who avoided the attack with Fluidization, had prepared the magic needed for this situation.

‘Memorize.

‘All Slots Open.

‘Triple Blaze Burst.

‘Triple Fire Strike.

‘Spell Fusion: Explosion.’

The fusion magic converged six fire attack spells into one. It was overkill when used against humans but lacking if he wanted to kill Pride.

“Strike Flare!”

It was a menacing swirl of magic power! The heavy spirit of magic power and flames hit Superbia’s upper body, which hadn’t finished regenerating yet.

Kwakwakwakwa!

The sound of the attack shook the heavens and earth. Along with the loud roar, the frozen land shook and cracked.

The widespread melting of the ice caused the water to become unstable, and the seawater underneath evaporated, leaving only

salt behind. This was the greatest firepower that the current Theodore could produce.

However, the monster at the center of the heat survived.

–...Annoying.

The thick water vapor was lifted by the sea breeze, revealing a shape Theo had never seen before.

–A monkey managed to do this to my body?

‘Pride,’ Superbia, glanced between the two humans with annoyed eyes.

It had golden eyes like a wild beast and white hair like a snowstorm. Unlike its previous ugly appearance, it now looked beautiful. However, Theodore and Randolph couldn’t help taking a few steps back. This was because they sensed enormous power was hidden within this form.

‘Werewolf...?’

–No. Gluttony, who had remained silent after the battle began, denied Theo’s speculation. –That is a species called Ulfheðnar.

‘I’ve never heard of it.

-Of course not. It is the species that exterminated the beast king, Fenrir. The werewolf that you just mentioned is a subgroup of the Ulfheðnar. It is similar to the relationship between the elves and the Arv.

‘A top species!’ Theodore’s eyes filled with astonishment.

They were an ancient species who some said had the power of a god, unlike the modern species’ descendants who had lost all of their origins. The high elves only inherited some of the Arv’s powers, but they were able to cause miracles. So, what was the power of this top species?

‘Gluttony, what is the ability of the Ulfheðnar?’

-Um...

‘You don’t know?’

-I know. But it is ambiguous to explain.

As Gluttony was choosing his words, Superbia lifted both fists with a body which had completely regenerated. Theodore reflexively lowered his body as Gluttony’s ridiculous ability came back.

-There is no special ability. It is just merely strong.

“What?”

Simultaneously, there was a white flash, and a deafening sound rang out.

—————!

Theodore couldn't grasp the situation and frowned.

“Cough!”

Suddenly, Randolph fell to one knee and coughed up blood. Both his hands were still holding the falchions, but it was like he had stepped into a furnace. Superbia, who was in its original spot, clapped and praised Randolph.

—You are better than expected, Monkey. There were 36 strikes from the top, bottom, left, and right, so it is impossible for monkeys to catch up to this speed.

Theodore was shocked as he understood what had happened.

‘This is ridiculous...!’

When he observed closely, there were traces of something having moved across the surface of the ice. Pride and Randolph, the two beings had an incredible exchange of speed.

‘Merely strong.’ Theodore finally realized what Gluttony meant. All the physical abilities were above the realm of a master, that was a Ulfheðnar!

Randolph used Hidden Voice to send the shocked Theodore a message.

[Young Master, please handle the healing magic.]

[Where are you hit?]

Randolph pretended to lift his right arm naturally, but Theodore was forced to gulp when he saw it. Blood was dripping out from the fist mark on the mithril alloy breastplate which Theodore had enchanted with protection magic before they left.

[I was struck lightly in one place... but three ribs are broken. I won't be able to endure a second direct hit.]

Randolph advised that he would be more comfortable if his ribs were healed. The wolf was able to deal a deadly blow to someone who had master-level aura and wore the highest quality armor.

“...It's coming!”

The two people gathered up their strength as they watched Superbia.

At the very least, they had to hang on until Aquilo recovered enough to return to the front lines. That was the only prerequisite for their victory. The red cloak and double swords started to move against the white flash.

On the outskirts of the thrilling battlefield, Aquilo was staring blankly at the backs of the two people.

*

Kwaang!

Once again, Randolph blocked an invisible kick and fell far away. His right wrist was dislocated, his left clavicle fractured, and even his hip joints were dangerously creaky.

“Kuheok...!”

Had it been 5 minutes, or maybe 10 minutes? Maybe it wasn't more than 30 seconds.

After Superbia transformed into the Ulfheðnar, the battle flowed one-sidedly against the two men. Despite concentrating on defense, their wounds were getting bigger, and scars were starting to form despite the recovery magic.

‘Thunderbolt!’

Theodore's thunderbolts struck the glacier, but Superbia wasn't hit by any of them. The wolf, Ulfheðnar, was a species capable of avoiding thunder. The speed of lightning magic wasn't comparable to sound, but Superbia's movements seemed to go beyond the walls of physics.

Superbia leisurely raised its claws as it walked forward one step at a time.

–Do you see your deaths nearing?

“You're a dog talking nonsense!”

–Hmm, the wolf definitely belongs in the mammals category with dogs.

This guy was saying hateful things. Theodore and Randolph were feeling hopeless and beginning to despair, and Pride didn't miss this moment.

–I'm tired of this. The appetizer ends here.

In an instant...

Superbia moved so quickly that neither Theodore or Randolph could perceive it. The story might've been different if the injuries and fatigue hadn't accumulated. However, Theodore had said it first, 'what ifs' were just the excuses of a loser.

–Die.

The claws of the Ulfheðnar, which were more powerful than aura, headed towards their necks.

Randolph made at least 15 calculations, but he realized that all the countermeasures conceived would lead to a ruthless end. It was the same for Theodore. He could avoid the attack with Umbra, but the moment Randolph fell, there would be no one left to protect Theodore.

It was a checkmate, the desperate moment of life or death. Therefore, it wasn't them who saved themselves, but a helper from the outside.

[лед (Freeze).]

The world stopped. Theodore realized it the moment he heard an unknown language spoken clearly.

It was magic which calculated the natural laws and changed the flow. If so, this power was the peak of a magician. The true power of a dragon was to change the existing flow and give commands above the natural laws.

The body of a top species was locked inside the glacier!

“-Ahh, this thing is really hard to kill,” Aquilo muttered with a pale face, changing back from a sea dragon to a beauty. “But this will be able to hold it for a while.”

She patted the trapped Superbia a few times before looking at the two people who were barely breathing. No, to be precise, she looked at Theodore’s face and smiled.

“Boy, you are more than I thought.”

“Huh?”

“Did you come to fight on the premise that I will help you?”

Theodore closed his mouth at the words which pierced through him. However, Aquilo didn’t seem offended as she giggled at him. She hadn’t struggled like this even when wiping out a high fleet. When fools came to try and subjugate her, she had laughed merrily.

However, now, she was cornered by a monster and saved by humans.

“Hoo... This is the first time I’ve felt this way.”

It wasn’t good or bad. She was just angry that someone had intervened in the game, and the pride of a dragon didn’t allow her to bow her head first.

Aquilo sent Theodore and Randolph a strange look as she sucked on her pipe and pondered for a moment. Then she decided to act in an improvised manner as always.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” she said to Theodore while blowing out white smoke. “I’ll follow your instructions as much as I can. But do you have an idea of how to take that monster out? The power of my breath failed to kill it.”

“...I’ve thought of a way.”

However, there was no time to explain it as the mass of ice had begun to crack. They would die if she refused or tried to escape, but Aquilo replied surprisingly easily.

“Okay, then what do you need me to do?”

“I need time.”

At least 10-15 minutes. Randolph couldn’t hold on for five minutes alone, but it might be possible if Aquilo’s support was added. Every minute and second was precious. Aquilo accepted the request. Then as the ice broke, the second round would soon begin.

During this gap, Theodore invoked the method he had prepared, “Activate Overwrite.”

The system responded to the user's will immediately.

[The C Rank 'Overwrite' has been triggered!]

[Please select the author you want to overwrite. (Available people: 2)]

The martial artist from the east, Lee Yoonsung... Or the best summoning magician in the modern age, Satomer...

Confronted with these two choices, Theodore chose one without hesitation.

[Object name 'Satomer' has been loaded into the user's body.]

Chapter 151 – Along With The Dragon (4)

It was the summoning magician, whose luck didn't follow his extraordinary talent and enthusiasm, Satomer.

The magician who had explored all corners of the continent responded to Theodore's call. While his consciousness was called from inside Gluttony, Pride managed to escape from his ice prison and roared in anger.

This was the howling of a top species from the forgotten period, Ulfheðnar!

■■■■■—!

The weakened glacier collapsed. Seawater rose through the cracks in the ice like paddy rice fields, and fish with busted guts floated on the surface of the water. Theodore, who was floating with magic—no, Satomer frowned at the sight.

‘This is confusing. Why did you call me? Wouldn't the eastern martial artist, Lee Yoonsung, be more helpful than me who was always stuck behind a desk?’

It was a legitimate point, but Theodore answered differently.

–I want you to review something.

‘Review? What are you say-’

Satomer stopped talking. Once ‘Overwrite’ was used, he could read Theodore’s memories and share their knowledge and power. It was the reason why Alfred had been able to fight immediately in the past. So, Satomer soon found the memory of the ‘trump card’ Theodore had developed, and he shook, thrilled by what he saw.

–Senior, is it possible?

Satomer laughed at Theodore’s prudent question.

“Ku, kuha, kuhahahaha!”

–S-Senior?!

Theodore’s summoning knowledge had all derived from Satomer. He lacked in proficiency and application, but there was no big difference when it came to the breadth and depth of his knowledge.

So, if Theodore decided it was possible, Satomer would probably come to that conclusion as well. Satomer looked over Theodore’s plan a few times before laughing like a madman. Then he praised Theodore,

“Kuahaha! Damn guy! You are a damn genius! You are really a terrible person to be so smart!”

While Theodore remained surprised, Satomer nodded.

All the necessary supplies were already prepared, this body was several times richer in power and sensitivity, and there was even the 'door to another world' on his left hand... If Satomer tried 10 times, he could succeed all 10 times without any worries.

Then he raised his magic power and shouted to the party, "I'm starting! Don't let anything interrupt me, no matter what!"

-What are you trying to do? The first person who reacted was Superbia, who had previous experience with Theodore. It quickly bypassed Aquilo and Randolph, trying to strike Theodore directly. However...

"Hello. Where are you going?"

Kwaaaaang!

Superbia was hit by the tail of Aquilo, who had a speed comparable to Superbia. It was difficult for an Ulfheðnar to shake off a dragon's speed. Moreover, the situation was different from before.

The front and back defense areas were covered, so both people could respond more promptly than before. The collaboration of the dragon and sword master created a defense line which was more robust than when they'd been on their own.

Therefore, Satomer could fully concentrate on the summoning magic.

“「Open, door to the blazing world-」”

He started chanting a summoning spell. The center of the magic circle was completed in just a few seconds as the best summoning magician of the modern era started to show his true value.

“「Knock knock knock three times, turn once, open the door to the burning world. I will be your master.」”

–F-Fast...!

“「Flame that burns the world, death that scorches the world, dragon that calls destruction. My voice is over 1,000 years old, and I call on you. I command you to follow my will.」”

Theodore was more surprised than anyone else.

The spells weren't just mere words, they were the result of high-level formulae calculations. Those which crossed a few bars were classified as complex strategy magic and were at a level that required a group to perform, not an individual.

However, Satomer's spell was at a level of computation which surpassed strategy magic. No, this had already surpassed the

concept of computing.

Theodore was able to tell because they shared the same body. From Satomer's childhood to death, the formulae and calculations of summoning magic had been as familiar as breathing. It was a level of effort which could only be reached at the end of a long period of obsession.

As he thought this, something emerged from the ground before his eyes. This was the holy domain of the best summoner of the modern age. Satomer's super-fast spell casting couldn't be done by anyone else, including Theodore.

“「Offering!」” The ‘Ring of Muspelheim,’ the red mark on the back of his left hand, started burning as Satomer roared. He held out ‘Charlotte's Necklace’ in his right hand as the sacrifice.

“「The people who have lost their country, knights who have lost their monarch, and dead men who have lost their lives, set fire to those grudges. Set to rest those who have fallen into purgatory.」”

It would be a lie if Theodore said he didn't regret it. However, he was prepared to use this necklace as a sacrifice. The warlocks of the Orcus Company were after it. Theodore was convinced that it was due to tracking ‘Charlotte's Necklace’ that they had found him so far in the sea.

Hwaruruk!

‘Charlotte’s Necklace’ was burned, and the mark on his left hand glittered like it was satisfied. It meant the offering was accepted. In other words, the summons would answer him. Now, he just needed to open the door by calling the name of the summons and supplying the magic power, then it would be finished. No more calculations or chanting were required.

At that moment, Satomer realized something.

‘Hey, this will fail.’

–?!

Satomer realized it first, a variable which was overlooked before as he had never gotten this far previously.

‘I will use a simple fishing analogy. The magic spell is the fishing rod, while the offering is the bait. Of course, the goal is a fish. Then what about the fishing line?’

Theodore thought about it and quickly realized the right answer.
-...The summoner?

‘That is the correct answer. To be precise, it is your soul.’ Satomer continued to explain, ‘The fishing rod is perfect. The fish has eaten the bait, and the only thing left is to pull up the fishing line...’

–Is it not possible?

‘It is only a bit, but you are lacking strength. If you pull it in this state, the line will break and the magic will fail. Apart from the failure, your soul that is used as the fishing line won’t be safe either.’

Satomer finished the explanation and grinned.

[Object name ‘Satomer’ has requested to complete his quest. Reviewing the status of the quest and the current situation in response to the target’s unexpected request...]

[I acknowledge that object name ‘Satomer’ has a reasonable request.]

[The completion of the quest is confirmed. I will begin the transmission of object name ‘Satomer’ in 30 seconds.]

It was what he had been hoping for, but Theodore shouted in an urgent voice, –What does this mean?!

‘What? It is what you wanted and what I have to do.’

-...Don’t make me laugh!

Theodore had a good head. He could guess why Satomer had

asked to complete the quest and why the system accepted. The strength he was lacking for the fishing line would be covered by Satomer's soul.

However, unlike Theo's convinced mind, his heart couldn't admit it. Satomer had wasted his whole life and now even lost the dream he had tried to achieve after death! As a fellow magician, Theodore couldn't accept that despairing ending!

–This is your wish! You didn't give up until you died! Don't lose it now! Don't turn away. You should watch until the end!

Even if Theodore succeeded in the summoning magic, Satomer wouldn't be rewarded for that success. Theo couldn't accept such a conclusion. Satomer replied with the same cynical tone as always, 'Kuk, acting like this, you look like a loser again.'

–Senior!

'Shut up. It is already done. Rather, you should look at what's in front of you.'

Front? Theodore looked away from his inner self and saw the scene before him.

Kwaang!

Randolph crossed his two swords and barely prevented the attack. However, his wrists and knees shook as if they were going

to break. It was evidence that they were already at their limit. Even Aquilo was in jeopardy, like a candle facing a storm.

“Heok...! Heeeok...!”

Randolph’s shoulders shook as he struggled to breathe. Even a top class swordsman couldn’t control his breathing while the relentless barrage from Superbia continued. There was no difference with Aquilo, who struggled to block him.

“Ack!” Aquilo screamed and hurried away from the sharp teeth.

Her beautiful blue scales were red from her blood, and there were no unscathed areas on her body, from head to toe. Even her lips were bloody. How long would they last? She seemed to be muttering something that Theo couldn’t hear.

Satomer, who shared Theo’s vision, nailed in the last wedge.

‘Boy? Aren’t they fighting that monster to protect you?’

With the fate of his colleagues on the line, Theodore couldn’t say anything more. Additionally, the end of the 30-second grace period was in sight.

Satomer spoke with a sincere expression, ‘Don’t worry about me. Think about the living, rather than the dead. My wish is almost completed. Didn’t I tell you? It is good even if I die. It is time to put your words into actions.’

-...Are you satisfied with that?

‘Satisfied? Of course not. I never managed it from my birth to my death.’

As Theodore’s face distorted from the cynicism, the 30-second grace period ended.

[Starting Transmission with object name ‘Satomer.’]

-Ugh!

‘Senior!’ Theodore cried out reflexively and noticed that control of his body had been passed back to him. He admired the high perfection of the magic circle formed and listened to the ever-diminishing voice of Satomer.

-Anyway, I did everything. From the chant to the magic circle... I taught you, didn’t I?

‘That’s right.’

-Then it is enough. In the end, wasn’t the one who succeeded in this summoning magic... me, Satomer...? My regrets, my dreams, this inferiority, this ideology, I have given it all to you...! I can

even throw my life away.

As evidence of his determination, Satomer didn't feel regrets as his soul was being absorbed. Rather, this attitude was strengthened. Satomer stared at Theo, who was a junior caught up in a fate that Satomer couldn't enjoy, someone with a rich bond to fate.

For the promising but still young Theodore, he spoke, -I'll leave it to you.

This was when the best summoning magician of the modern era gave up his role of to the protagonist.

-Summoning magic, new achievements... I'm handing it all to you. The honor... realize it.

“...Yes, it is an honor.”

-If you understand... call, it, now.

With some exceptions, summoning magic was always done by calling the name of the entity the person wanted to summon. As Theodore tried to move his lips, the remnant of Satomer cried out, -Call!!!

At the same time, Theodore shouted loudly, “「Come, Fafnir!」”

It happened in an instant. The moment ‘it’ appeared, the world started burning. ‘It’ was a sacred dragon made of white fire.

The night retreated, and the darkness fled. All the clouds in the sky evaporated, and the sea level lowered faster than the frozen sea could melt.

The sky became as bright as daylight, almost burning the eyeballs, while some of the fishing boats near the coast melted away. The cool seawater bubbled up like lava, and the swimming fish died without knowing anything.

The amount of time elapsed was exactly one second.

As Fafnir descended to the material world, the radius of three kilometers was turned into a fiery hell.

This was the existence which burned the original world trees in the Age of Mythology and transformed the Red Plateau into a land where no life could live. Fafnir was the strongest trump card Theodore had prepared.

‘.....!’

Some might say it was nonsense, but they couldn’t make any noise because there was no air to vibrate.

Aquilo looked up at the white dragon in the sky with damp, fluorescent eyes. The enormous light and heat emanated from Fafnir's scales, making it an area which normal humans couldn't live in. It was the ancient dragon which could even kill her!

Knowing its potential, Aquilo desperately cut off all heat and tried not to be noticed.

“The great dragon god floating in the sky, please ignore this beautiful girl.”

“.....”

If Randolph was awake, he would be laughing after hearing the prayer. Luckily, he was dragged into Aquilo's hands and lost consciousness. However, did her prayer enter the ears of the gods somewhere in the universe?

Exactly two seconds after Fafnir was summoned...

『Target picked, extermination begins.』

Fafnir's glowing white eyes looked down at something floating on the sea. Half of the glacier, which had been used as a fighting ground, had melted away. Superbia had transformed into a marine life, just like when it fought Aquilo.

-D-Dammit...! Superbia thought despairingly as the situation reversed.

Chapter 152 – Along With The Dragon (5)

Splash!

The moment Superbia sensed that this was an opponent it couldn't face, it chose to run away without any hesitation.

As part of the Seven Sins, Pride aimed to be the culmination of all living things. For someone who pursued the peak of life, 'survival' was an absolute necessity. Due to that, it could throw away its pride.

As someone said, one's will to survive was always strong.

While Superbia flew through the water, it muttered in order to soothe its wounded pride. –Don't think that this is enough to win over me, Gluttony's monkey! Your ability means you won't be able to summon it for a long time. As soon as the dragon disappears, I will kill you!

Surprisingly, Superbia's prediction was reasonable. Superbia's intuition couldn't be overlooked after existing for tens of thousands of years and experiencing countless battles with other grimoires, knights, and magicians.

It was like Superbia said. Without the special offering of 'Charlotte's Necklace,' Theodore wouldn't be able to summon Fafnir for even one second. The necklace, which contained the souls of a kingdom, allowed that primordial monster to be summoned for seven seconds at most.

Now, the time remaining for Fafnir was four seconds.

–Kuhuhu, let’s see if you can catch me with that huge body!

Superbia’s speed was staggeringly fast after shifting into many marine traits, as it managed to move hundreds of meters in a few seconds. Fafnir looked down at the surface of the water and chuckled in a mocking tone.

Speed and strategy, everything was meaningless before it.

『Obliterate.』

The fire dragon took a deep breath.

It took one second for the endless heat to converge. Then it took another second to process the converged heat into the form of a ray. Lastly, it took one second to check the position of the target and aim.

In the Age of Mythology, this was the breath which burned the original world trees, and even transcendents were reluctant to face it. The light, which was like a ‘laser,’ seemed to erase the world. Fafnir, Muspelheim’s incarnation, used the strongest means of attack available to it.

—————!

It wasn't a flame but a small supernova. The small supernova penetrated through the air resistance and pierced the surface of the sea faster than lightning. The seawater evaporated before the ray reached, and the water exploded from the heat, stirring up a small tsunami. This was merely the aftermath of the disaster...

And it only targeted one being.

-N-No...! This attack...!

As it split into hundreds—no, thousands of pieces in one second, Superbia's senses warned it of absolute death.

It had stockpiled countless lives and amounts of energy, but this ray was outside of the norm. The destruction rate overwhelmed its regeneration speed, and the destructive power surpassed its accumulated energy.

Pride realized that it couldn't survive and screamed.

-I, how can a monkey do this to me-!

It cried out before being erased by the ray.

-Kua...a...ahh...hhhhh...!

After one or two seconds, Superbia's terrible regenerative power

soon reached its limit. All of the energy stored in its cells was exhausted. Once this function was stopped, there would be nothing left.

Kukukukukung...!

However, the flash which burned Pride didn't stop there. The intense light ray pierced through the water pressure toward the bottom of the sea. The sleeping undersea volcano woke up, and seismic waves spread out, upsetting the ecosystem of the distant ocean. When comparing it to chess, it was like shattering the chessboard with a hammer.

The monstrous dragon ended the situation with one attack and declared in a languid voice, 『Extermination complete, returning.』

It disappeared just as quickly as it appeared. After the seven-second summoning of Fafnir was finished, the darkness which had fled over the horizon returned to its original position. The outside air pushed into the vacuum, and the hot atmosphere calmed down.

“You did it, Senior.”

As his ragged clothes flapped, Theodore stared up at the sky with a weary look. There was no voice to reply to him as Satomer's soul had become part of him and would travel forward with Theodore. He felt a small sense of comfort if he thought like that.

As soon as he realized that everything was over, Theodore's

consciousness cut out like a broken rope.

Huuk-

There was no magic power left to keep the magic spell going, so the young man fell from the sky. The winner of the great battle was caught in a rare gentle touch by the sea dragon, Aquilo.

“...Huh, you have done something ridiculous,” she murmured in an astonished and weak voice.

Aquilo cooled down the area using the power of a sea dragon, but it would take a few more days for it to return to the normal temperature. Additionally, the water which had become too salty due to the rapid evaporation had to be restored, as well as the ocean currents which had become messy due to the seismic waves.

Aquilo started sweating as she looked down at Theodore and thought inwardly, ‘Boy, did you prepare this magic to fight me?’

There was no way he could have prepared this disposable battle magic so quickly. Aquilo thought for a moment about snapping Theodore’s neck, before sighing to herself.

Regardless of the circumstances, these two people had saved her, and she owed them a life debt. A dragon’s pride was high, so she couldn’t tolerate doing such a cowardly act. In the end, Aquilo laughed as she looked at the brightening horizon.

“Doesn’t this mean I almost died twice in a day? It was an interesting day. More so than my 1,000 years of boredom.”

This struggle had involved a being from the Age of Mythology, which had ended before she was born. Today’s fight was memorable even for the dragon who had lived close to 1,000 years. Aquilo, who ruled the sea, laughed pleasantly and turned away from the sun.

Three shadows were cast under the light of the rising sun.

*

Theodore felt relieved the moment he woke up from a deep sleep.

A magician could threaten a dragon, so he had considered the possibility of being killed by the vigilant Aquilo. Fortunately, she had decided to leave him alive.

‘...This place?’

The bed was so comfortable and luxurious that he couldn’t help feeling sleepy as he touched it. He still hadn’t recovered completely, so he wanted to fall asleep. However, Theodore had to check something beforehand.

“Gluttony.”

–You woke up, User. As always, a blunt voice welcomed him.

“You don’t need to give a greeting. Rather, what happened with Pride?”

Theo had been able to see its annihilation due to sharing Fafnir’s senses, but he didn’t know Pride’s fate. A Seven Sins grimoire had extraordinary and bizarre abilities, so there was a possibility it could survive after being hit by Fafnir’s laser.

However, Gluttony dispelled Theodore’s worries.

–Totally destroyed.

“Are you sure?”

–Not even one cell remains as it was all melted. At the very least, it will take 1,000 years for Pride to reappear in this world.

Theodore was puzzled by the words.

“This world? No, if Pride was completely destroyed, how can it appear again?”

–Hmmm, a lock has been released. I will explain within the allowable limits. Gluttony made a dubious sound before explaining, –First, the grimoires don’t exist in this world. Both me and Pride, our bodies don’t exist in this lower dimension. In order

to enter this lower dimension, we need a control unit that minimizes our function and size.

“So... there is a separate body?”

-That's right.

Occasionally, there were vague terms, but Theodore concentrated on the main facts that he understood from the explanation.

According to Gluttony, the bodies of the Seven Sins lived outside this dimension in a place where no life lived. They dispatched separate bodies to a number of dimensional systems. This world's Gluttony was just one of the many separate bodies which were scattered.

Then a question suddenly popped into Theodore's head.

“Why will it take 1,000 years to come back? It can just send another separate body.”

-It is simple. There is a finite number of separate bodies. The number of dimensions contemplated by the Seven Sins is indefinite, and the number of bodies sent was also close to limitless. In the rare case that a separate body is destroyed like it is now, it will take around 1,000 years to restore it.

Theodore asked again with a cold face, “Then is it impossible to

completely block it from this dimension?”

–It is impossible, Gluttony replied immediately, without any hesitation. –The body that lives in the outer dimension is a 7th stage divine entity which draws information and power from the inexhaustible dimensional system. You will only become part of the mountain of dead bodies.

“So, it isn’t an area that I can touch.”

–That’s right. User did well as a resident of this world. As of now, focus on your own work.

Theodore shook his head at the strange method of praising him, but he sensed someone was approaching. Unlike Randolph’s sharp presence, she stood in front of the door with the magnificent presence of tsunami.

Aquilo didn’t knock on the door as she spoke in a loud voice, “Boy, you’re awake?”

“Lady Aquilo.” Theodore’s nervous reaction was funny.

Aquilo couldn’t help smiling and pointing that out. “What, last time you called me by my name, but now... Why are you saying ‘Lady’?”

“...Aquilo.”

“Yes, doesn’t this feel friendlier?”

Theodore felt tense leaving off the honorific, but Aquilo was pleased. She sucked on the pipe as always, then after taking a breath, she continued speaking.

“By the way, Boy, how is your stomach?”

“Stomach? Why all of a sudde-”

“You know, you were sleeping for three days.”

Grrr, Theodore’s stomach confirmed it. The sound was loud enough to be heard beyond the door. Theodore blushed and dropped his gaze. “.....”

“Ahaha! Don’t be shy. Isn’t this natural for humans?” Aquilo laughed and turned around. Before leaving through the doorway, she said a few more words, “Your companion has woken up as well. Bring him down to the dining room. Tell him to dress appropriately.”

“...I understand.”

“Kilkil.”

As the sound of Aquilo’s laughter faded into the distance,

Theodore sighed with relief. Randolph was also safe, and Aquilo had no hostility toward him. Theodore's knees weakened, and he sank onto the bed as he realized he had escaped from a major crisis.

He had won against Pride.

“I paid back your enemy, Seniors.”

Reminded of the members of the Magic Tower convoy who had sacrificed themselves so that he and Ellenora could escape, Theodore closed his eyes in a moment of silence for them. The scars left behind on his body and the throbbing of his circles were part of his mourning.

Then Theodore finished the moment of silence and got up.

‘Let's go.’

It was time to directly experience the return of the dragon's grace, which had been heard about in many legends and from heroes.

Chapter 153 – Tell Me Your Wish (1)

Kkiiik.

Theodore discovered a familiar face when he opened the door. Both of them had sensed each other, so they weren't greatly surprised. Bandages covered half his skin, but Randolph talked as cheerfully as always, "Oh, did the naughty and oversleeping Young Master finally wake up?"

"Meanwhile, Randolph can easily run around," Theodore spoke with in admiring voice as he examined Randolph's body.

It was as he said. After receiving Lee Yoonsung's knowledge of the human body, Theodore's diagnosis was more accurate than that of a normal healer. The noticeable injuries would take at least one month to heal. When including the injuries which weren't visible, it would take at least three months of recovery. The evidence of the survival for life and death was inscribed on Randolph's entire body.

However, Randolph nodded with a satisfied expression. "Of course. I've gained some profit from this battle, so how can I lie down and forget it?"

"Profit, surely not...?" Theodore asked with a surprised face, while Randolph laughed like he had been waiting for it.

"Well, it has only been half a day since I caught sight of it," Randolph spoke casually, but the meaning of his words was never

light.

There was only one thing which would count as profit. It was the prerequisite to being a sword master—awakening the Aura Ability!

Randolph, who had been relying on his powerful aura and physical abilities, had finally stepped into the realm of transcendence. The fight with Superbia had acted as a catalyst, and another master had emerged into this world.

Theodore admired Randolph's achievement, "Congratulations. Now you are a complete sword master."

"It is complete, but if I want to use it perfectly, I'll need to train for a few years. Well, it is nothing compared to when I was wandering around aimlessly."

However, Randolph couldn't hide his joy as he chuckled and knocked against Theodore's shoulder.

If he had been practicing alone, it might've taken him five or maybe 10 years. Even though he might've gone through several dangerous situations, this achievement was the result of his relationship with Theodore. The last fight with Superbia had made it possible for him to accumulate dozens of years of experience.

After a short moment of chatting, the two people went down the stairs together.

“By the way, where is this place? No matter how I look, it doesn’t seem like a dragon lair,” Theodore asked.

“Ah, she said that this is a villa. It is on an island on the outskirts of the Pirate Archipelago. It is an area that the pirates can’t enter.”

“Villa...”

Well, a dragon didn’t have to sleep in a cave. Theodore understood the explanation and looked around the interior. It wasn’t comparable to the Sea God Festival, but the paintings and decorations seemed expensive. Rather, it was similar to Earl Bergen’s mansion which he had visited in the past.

However, the crucial difference was the owner’s presence. As soon as they stepped into a long corridor off the stairs, a clear voice rang in their heads, [This way.]

It was a voice which surpassed ‘space.’ It was very different from the words which were transmitted in the form of a ‘voice.’ Theo couldn’t understand the principles, but as soon as they heard her, the structure of the mansion was fully engraved in their minds.

‘Surely this... Is it Dragon Words?’

The dragon’s language was the power to shorten dozens of pages of information into a few syllables. Numerous magicians in the past had tried to recreate this system, but there had never been a single successful case. Theodore’s curiosity as a magician was

boiling, but now wasn't the time.

The duo soon faced Aquilo at the terrace of the villa.

“Welcome. Is this your first time in a villa?”

They were lost for words as they saw her smiling faintly under the afternoon sun. Unlike before, she hid her two horns and tail, so she just looked like a beautiful woman. If there was a title of ‘country’s top beauty,’ she would be one of the most powerful candidates on the continent.

Aquilo raised a finger toward the two people.

“Don’t just stand there, sit down. I’ve prepared things in my own way, so let’s start the story.”

As Theodore and Randolph sat in the chairs, people emerged from the villa while carrying something.

‘This...?’

They were steaming hot dishes with delicious scents. Theodore hadn’t eaten in three days, so his mouth naturally started salivating. It was a type of dinner he had only seen when eating with Kurt III. The servants finished setting out the lavish meal, and Aquilo smiled while raising her glass.

“Cheers!”

Thus, the infamous dragon’s luncheon began.

*

Some people might’ve been suspicious about this luncheon, but Theodore didn’t think so.

Anyway, she had plenty of time to kill him in the last three days. So, there was no reason to use an unsightly method like poison. That’s why Theodore reached out toward the prepared dishes without any hesitation. He carefully ate a bit of the meat, and...

‘...Uh, isn’t this really delicious?!’

It was comparable to a dish made with the skill of the Meltor royal chef, and it wasn’t simply due to good ingredients. This was a dish that a first-class chef had to cook with the finest ingredients. It was gourmet cuisine which a person needed to pay dozens of gold coins for one table of food. Theodore looked at Aquilo with a surprised expression and was amazed again.

She had the most perfect table manners out of anyone he had seen so far. The location of the tableware was perfect, and no sound was made as she expertly used the knife. Her mouth had no dirty stains nor drops of sauce, leaving the napkin untouched. A dragon was faithful to their basic needs, and food was one of those.

Theodore marveled at her elegant appearance and continued to eat. Sometimes, the sound of tableware banging could be heard, and the three people's meals ended after an hour.

Clang.

As the owner of this place, Aquilo was the first to put her utensils down. "Hrmm, it was pretty good. Does it suit your taste?"

Theodore nodded without any hesitation. "It was really good. This is the level of a royal palace."

Randolph said, "I haven't experienced that, but the food was really impressive."

Their reaction was satisfactory, which caused Aquilo to smile and clap her hands several times. Shortly afterward, the people from inside the villa removed the empty plates and placed fragrant tea before the three people.

Then Aquilo turned towards the two men. "Then let's settle the debt I owe the both of you."

It was now starting for real. Theodore couldn't help holding his breath as he waited for her to speak.

"The dragon clans have different inclinations. It is emotions for the red clan, wisdom for the gold clan, life for the green clan, purity for the silver clan... and like me, the blue clan puts emphasis

on interest.”

It didn't mean that she liked to obtain benefits. If she was gracious, she had to receive something in return. If she owed someone, she should pay them back. Repaying back any debts was the nature of the blue dragon.

This was the reason why Aquilo took a tribute from the Pirate Archipelago in return for her protection.

“The two of you saved my life. My own strength helped me overcome the crisis, but the debt I owe is still heavy. I can't pay back my life with half the gold on this archipelago.”

Then she raised three fingers.

“One for the swordsman, and two for the boy.” Aquilo looked rather regal as she made the pronouncement, “I will give you three favors for your grace toward me. If you want, I can even pass over sovereignty of this island.”

The two men looked at each other and came to a silent agreement, causing Randolph to open his mouth first.

“I don't care about this island. Rather, I need a sword.”

“Sword?”

“My swords were completely broken in the fight against the monster. If you have any good swords, can I receive two? That is what I want to ask of you.”

He looked at his two falchions with a bitter expression. There were large cracks like spiders webs in the center of both swords, and they looked like they were going to collapse at any moment. Randolph had barely regained the heirlooms from the Miller Barony along with the techniques inside it, but his inexperience had caused them to break. If he had fought with the integrity of a master, his swords wouldn't have broken.

However, Aquila had an absurd expression on her face. “Two swords? Are you serious?”

“You can't?”

“A dragon owes you a life debt, and you ask for two swords?”

She looked outraged at Randolph's words but soon exerted her power.

[пространство (Space).]

Simultaneously, dozens of swords suddenly poured out. These were all famous swords. They had value as antiques but were also in an excellent state for practical use. A few masterpieces from the dwarves hidden deep in the mountains were included. Looking at the happily jumping Randolph, Aquilo sighed with a sad

expression on her face.

“Take everything that is there. Wouldn’t it be annoying if the value of my life is only worth two pieces of scrap metal?”

“R-Really?”

“No, I’ll give you armor as well since yours broke. Pick your favorite one.”

Aquilo snapped her fingers and shiny armor poured out. Randolph’s head was hit by the heavy rain of metal, but he didn’t feel any pain as he hugged the pile of armor. Theodore and Aquilo couldn’t help laughing at the sight before they looked at each other.

The two remaining favors belonged to Theodore. ‘Don’t disappoint me this time’ was expressed in Aquilo’s eyes as Theodore took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

He said, “First of all, I want you to dismantle this Pirate Archipelago.”

“Hrmm?” Aquilo made a strange noise as she stared at Theodore. Sensing the strange atmosphere, Randolph looked up from his armor. Theodore’s request meant destroying the vast supply of goods Aquilo was receiving. The pirates’ tribute equaled to hundreds of thousands of gold every year, so wasn’t this huge damage?

However, Aquilo was surprisingly calm.

“I’m sorry, but that isn’t my responsibility.”

“Why?”

“I organized the Pirate Archipelago into this structure, but the pirates have been living here since then. I don’t have the right to do that unless you ask me to kill everyone or to destroy this island.”

Indeed, Theodore was convinced by the explanation. Aquilo emphasized that her ‘right’ and her ‘power’ were of two different regions. It was possible to destroy the Pirate Archipelago, but the ownership of the island and the residents’ rights couldn’t be handed over by her.

However, Theodore was able to figure out another way to dismantle the Pirate Archipelago.

“If so, I want you to take back your blessing. Is that possible?”

Aquilo smiled as she confirmed it. “Of course. That won’t be hard.”

In some ways, this favor was crueler. Theodore chose it despite knowing this fact. Until now, the Pirate Archipelago had been able

to move freely in the sea due to the blessing of the sea dragon, Aquilo.

The pirate ships which lost their power could now be defeated by the military. It was natural for them to lose their lives once the blessing was gone. After all, criminals should be judged by the law. The fate of the pirates was decided.

“Now, what is your last wish, Boy?” Aquilo whispered as she cupped his chin. The blue hair hanging over her white skin naturally attracted attention, but Theodore was too busy thinking. The last wish was for real. It was his last chance to receive something from her.

The magician, who held this opportunity in his hand, spoke carefully, “The last thing that I want...”

Chapter 154 – Tell Me Your Wish (2)

In a short period of time, many choices crossed Theodore's mind as he closed his eyes.

‘What is the best thing to ask from Aquilo?’

Original books? ...Dismissed. He didn't know if she had any rare original books, and Aquilo didn't seem like someone interested in magic books. After making such a request, he might cause a disaster such as all the libraries on the continent being plundered by a dragon.

Smashing the Orcus Company... dismissed. The identity and structure of the organization behind it were still unclear. Not everyone who belonged to the Orcus Company would be warlocks, so innocent people might be crushed along with the company.

Should he demand a large amount of assets? ...On hold. Getting gold coins for a dragon's grace was a bit sad.

Then Theodore came up with a good idea. It was difficult for him to make the decision, so he should leave it to the opponent. At the very least, the dragon wouldn't cheat or deceive him when paying back the favor. Their pride didn't tolerate such acts.

“-Give me what you think is most valuable among what you own.”

It was an ambiguous favor. What was Aquilo's most valuable thing? It might be a rare ornament or perhaps beautiful jewelry. In a sense, it was a gamble for Theodore. Aquilo's eyes widened with amazement, before her expression changed into that of an unknown emotion.

“Boy, are you serious?”

Theodore was curious about her reaction and asked, “Is it okay?”

“Hrmm... No, well, if that is what you want.” Aquilo bit her lips and shook her head. Then she rose from her seat and used her long finger to beckon toward Theodore.

“Okay, come closer. I'll give you what you want.”

Why did her voice sound bewitching, like a devil's voice? However, he was the one who brought this up. Theodore rose from his seat and stood carefully in front of Aquilo. He was only a few steps closer than before, but his body was tense now.

At that moment, Aquilo's hands wrapped around his shoulders.

‘What...?!’

It seemed like a light hold, but the force was so strong that he couldn't resist! However, he didn't feel any risk toward his life. So, Theodore didn't struggle as Aquilo looked into his eyes. As her breath reached his nose, Theodore unconsciously stopped

breathing.

Her stunning eyes and aroma caused him to feel dizzy. It couldn't be helped since she looked like she was going to lick his face. Theodore had never seen a basilisk, but he felt like being petrified by it would feel like this. Theodore's body stiffened as Aquilo's lips neared.

She whispered in a low voice, "Don't be nervous. There might be pain at first..."

Shortly after that, Theodore felt a painful sensation at his neck.

"Ack?!"

She had bit his neck. Before Theodore could accept the situation, Randolph yelled agitatedly at the muffled groan, "-What are you doing, Dragon?"

Blood flowed from the bitten area, but Theodore wasn't just surprised at the pain. Randolph pulled out a sword one beat later, but a voice stopped him.

"S-Stop!" The urgent voice was coming from the bite victim, Theodore.

"What? Young Master, aren't you being attacked right now?"

“No. This isn’t an attack.” Theodore tried to explain but couldn’t help falling silent in the end. It was because cold energy was coming from the area where Aquilo was biting. No, the feeling was like some type of magic power liquid.

The beautiful woman continued biting the young man’s neck, and the bizarre confrontation soon came to an end.

Smack. Aquilo’s wet lips made a sound as she let go.

She licked her lips which were red with Theodore’s blood and nodded with a satisfied look.

“It went well. There was no rejection, so this might be surprisingly good.”

“...What did you pour in?”

“Huh? It is my blood, of course.”

“What-” In contrast to Aquilo’s calm reply, Theodore looked down at his body with surprised eyes. Aquilo’s blood, a dragon’s blood, had been injected into his neck. Whether it was true or not, he was able to discover something around his collarbone. It was a tattoo which shone blue like Aquilo.

“This?”

“Blood mark.” Aquilo explained in a drowsy voice, “Among everything I possess, this is the most valuable thing. It is the only thing that fits the criteria, apart from myself.”

Theodore might’ve saved her life once, but it wasn’t enough to make Aquilo his possession. So, Aquilo adjusted the reward according to the conditions proposed by Theodore.

“Boy, can you use summoning magic?” Without waiting for Theodore to reply, Aquilo continued, “If you think you need my help, you can call through the blood mark. I’ll help you unconditionally once. I will leave it to your discretion, okay?”

“...Do I have any other choice?”

“Ahaha! Well, you don’t have to use it. There are a few other effects, but you can look at those yourself.”

She playfully concealed the abilities, but unfortunately, Theodore had Gluttony’s Appraisal ability. When Aquilo glanced away, the tongue emerged from Theodore’s left hand and brushed against his neck. Simultaneously, the familiar information window appeared.

[+14 Aquilo’s Blood Mark (Imprint)]

[This is an imprint using the blood of the sea dragon, Aquilo. As the number of clan members declined, the dragons

attempted to make more kin with their blood. This blood mark is the result of that attempt. The attempt to create more family members failed, but the act of granting a blood mark created a linked relationship. If the relationship with the partner of the blood mark becomes hostile, it will naturally be destroyed.

- * The rating of this imprint is ‘Treasure.’

- * The user’s water affinity will significantly increase.

- * The user will be given the ‘Sea Dragon’s Blessing.’

- * It is possible to summon the sea dragon, Aquilo.

- * The conditions of use for ‘Dragon Words’ isn’t met. (1/2)

- Own a certain amount of dragon’s blood. (0)

- Understand the system and principles of Dragon Words. (X)

- Once all of the above conditions are met, it is possible to use Dragon Words three times a day.]

At first, he read the information window with calm eyes, but he soon started shaking. Affinity with water was a natural effect because she was a sea dragon, but the aspect of ‘Dragon Words’ was an entirely different matter.

If he could learn how to use ‘Dragon Words,’ the value of this blood mark just skyrocketed. He was also given the right to call an adult dragon, a being equivalent to two masters. Theodore’s eyes were stunned at such a huge jackpot.

All of a sudden, Aquilo extended her hand outside the terrace, toward the horizon where the fog created by her power was located.

[отмечен (Vanish).]

With one word, the fog in the horizon started to return to Aquilo.

It was the end of the barrier which had protected the Pirate Archipelago for decades. As requested by Theodore, she took back all the privileges she had given to the Pirate Archipelago. The same was true of the ships docked at the harbor. The pirate ships would now have to go through the water with their own skills.

After finishing a series of things in a few minutes, Aquilo shrugged and looked at the two men.

“It is finished. Now, this is no longer my island. So, I’m going to move my lair.”

“...The Pirate Archipelago is completely over.”

“I guess so.”

An attachment might form when one stayed somewhere for decades, but Aquilo showed no signs of that. Rather, she was a notorious dragon and felt good about abandoning the pirates. For her, the pirates were just ants who gave her tribute. She could discard them at any time and collect more.

Aquilo agreed before rummaging through her space.

“Here, some change.” She threw out a pouch. Theodore grabbed it reflexively.

Then she smiled and turned away. “All three requests have been granted.”

The two men watched on as Aquilo climbed onto the terrace. Then she said goodbye in a playful manner, “Then bye!”

Aquilo jumped in a parabola toward the distant sea. The duo watched with absurd expressions as she changed into a dragon in midair and then moved away at a rapid pace which they couldn’t follow.

After that, Aquilo never returned to the Pirate Archipelago.

“Hah...” Theodore watched with a bemused expression before opening the pouch. Randolph approached and looked over his shoulder, before crying out, “Heok!”

They were forced to swallow their breaths.

*

The next day, the passenger ship arrived, and Theodore's group departed for the Soldun Kingdom. Thanks to Theodore's 'Sea Dragon's Blessing', the speed was well above normal, and the two people were able to reach a coastal city in the Soldun Kingdom in less than a week.

Ah, what happened to the Pirate Archipelago after that?

It understandably collapsed.

The four rulers panicked as they learned that their blessings had been removed. Soon, those with ambitious eyes tried to take control of the island, and the peacefully coexisting Pirate Archipelago became filled with blood and death.

The pirates split into four factions according to the four rulers, each seeking their own way to live. Some returned to their usual work of raiding. Others returned to land and hid in the shadows.

However, either path didn't make much difference in the end. The pirates couldn't show the glory of the past and were killed by the army. Meanwhile, those who returned to land couldn't hide their nature and were caught as criminals.

It was the end of the Pirate Archipelago, once called the paradise of criminals and the land of pleasure.

One year had passed by since then.

Chapter 155 – One Year Later (1)

The representative port city in the Soldun Kingdom, Piris...

It was the only international port on the continent which had ships traveling directly to the east continent, and it was the lifeline of the coastal kingdom. Therefore, the power of Marquis Pirus was unique, since he was in charge of this crucial port. There were jokes told about how the birds would tremble and fly away from him.

However, even Marquis Piris had to be polite today. It was because the guest who visited the mansion was the crown prince, the next king of the Soldun Kingdom, Elsid.

“Glory to the descendants of the Great Wave King! Marquis Piris, David El Piris, greets the crown prince.”

“It has been a while, Marquis. I’m sorry to come so abruptly.”

The crown prince had the lemon colored hair and sea-like eyes which were passed through the Soldun royal family. He had the same color scheme as that of a prince from fairy tales, making many young females unable to sleep at night. Although he was only 26 this year, he was destined to be the next wave king of the Soldun Kingdom.

Marquis Piris advised him with a difficult expression, “Forgive me, Your Highness. But didn’t I tell you to come here stealthily?”

“It can’t be helped,” Elsid sighed and shook his head a few times. “As soon as I left the royal palace, Duke Cornwall’s men chased me. If the escort knights hadn’t blocked them, I wouldn’t have been able to hide my tracks.”

Marquis Piris gritted his teeth, and his eyebrows twitched. Then his brown eyes filled with uncontrollable anger. “Cornwall... That traitor will surely...!”

Since ancient times, the Sodun Kingdom had been subservient to the other kingdoms due to its unique geographical nature. It was difficult to grow crops along the coast, and the population of the Sodun Kingdom wasn’t enough to keep troops at the borders of the other countries.

It had only been half a century ago when trade with the east continent first opened up, but the nobles with interests in other kingdoms were busy keeping the Soldun Kingdom’s prosperity in check.

Duke Cornwall, who had relatives in the Kargas Kingdom, was the most prominent among them. He even dared to track Prince Elsid’s actions.

“Well, let’s stop with the unpleasant story. There is nothing we can do right now. Don’t we just have to do what we can?”

“...Hoo, Your Highness’ words are correct. I was too excited.”

Despite the prince's words, Marquis Piris' face was still flushed. Duke Cornwall's actions always made the loyalists angry. Prince Elsid knew this and was thankful, but the story they had to discuss right now wasn't about the traitor.

"Rather, Marquis, what about 'that'?" Elsid whispered in a low voice.

"Please be delighted, Your Highness. There was a big profit," Marquis Piris replied with a small smile.

Some of the loyalists, including the crown prince, had been pushing this plan for 10 years. Now, they had finally achieved something.

It was impossible for the people of the Soldun Kingdom to overcome these adverse conditions with their own strength. The bordering states of the Kargas Kingdom and Lairon Country were busy suppressing them, and the only area with no obstacles was the south, where there were swamps as a barrier.

Therefore, the people of the Soldun Kingdom turned their eyes to the continent beyond the sea.

"I have received a promise from a famous family of the Western Xia region in the east that they will move to Piris."

"Finally!" At the welcome news, Elsid's face brightened like a

rising sun.

If he couldn't grow seeds, then he would import them. Fortunately, the Soldun Kingdom had tremendous financial power to make up for its lack of military power. They promised a noble title, fertile land, gold, and valuables.

“They are the Baek Family, and they were a prestigious military power in the Western Xia region.” (Baek= Bai in Chinese spelling. They seem to be a Chinese family, but since the rest of the family members' names are in Korean, I chose the Korean spelling of the surname).

“Hoh, a prestigious family is migrating?”

“Yes, I investigated it.” Marquis Piris recounted the contents of the report, “30 years ago, there was a battle with the central regions. The family took responsibility for the defeat and resigned from the military. The place the Baek Family occupied was taken by other families, and now they are economically and politically isolated.”

“Indeed, our offer would seem quite attractive.”

“That's right. It is said that head of the Baek Family is bringing all his family members and belongings to Piris. They will probably arrive today or tomorrow.”

Elsid couldn't help forming tight fists. Due to the kingdom's

weak military power, they had been forced to rely on foreign ships.

However, the humiliation ended here. On the eastern continent, the power of martial arts had evolved as the level of magic declined. If two warriors were at the same level, the one from the east would be stronger. If there were two people from the country, one would be a sword master.

It was the same for the Baek Family migrating here.

“In the east, a sword master is called an expert.”

The master of the Baek Family, Baek Jongmyung, was an expert. It was unknown as to why he had been punished in the Western Xia region, but he was literally worth an army of thousands.

The Baek Family had 100 skilled aura users, including a sword master. This was enough power to change the balance toward the crown prince's favor, even if the troops of Cornwall and his allies were to combine.

“...You did a really great job, Marquis. I will never forget your hard work.”

“It is only natural, considering my role in the kingdom, Your Highness. Your words are enough. The important thing is what will happen from now on.”

Elsid nodded at his loyal subject. “Of course. It is my duty to

embrace them as my own people and to forge them into the Soldun Kingdom's sword."

The young prince once again vowed that the kingdom wouldn't remain weak in his generation. For that goal, he would spend as much as was needed. He gazed at the sunlight coming through the window, before looking at the marquis again.

"That reminds me, what about giving them that mansion?"

"Huh?"

"That one. It is a bit expensive, but it is a decent chateau. It can build up their pride, as well as fit everyone that will come." Elsid made the suggestion after looking back through his old memories.

The mansion that he'd seen in the past was perfect for this purpose. It was a well-built mansion, but the location wasn't very good. There was the drawback of it having been built on a hill, and the surrounding areas were all mansions, making the price jump exponentially. This was enough to make the interested people sigh and back off.

However, it was a different story if it were given as a gift to someone. It couldn't be sold anyway, so it was better to use the mansion to make a good impression. Since they were warriors, living on a hill wouldn't really be a disadvantage.

However, Marquis Piris showed a strange reaction. "Hrmm, well,

that is...”

“Huh? What’s the problem?”

Marquis Piris was silent for a moment before explaining with a grim expression, “The mansion Your Highness is talking about has already been sold.”

“Huh?” Elsid failed to hide his disbelief. “Wasn’t the price 1,000 gold? Who was insane enough to buy the mansion at that price? According to kingdom law, even if the price was lowered, wouldn’t it have been at least 800 gold?”

“It wasn’t lowered. The person paid 1,000 gold on the spot.”

Therefore, Marquis Piris had sold it without any hesitation. He shrugged with a bitter smile. Indeed, from his position, an unused mansion was a wasteful expense. So, it was natural to want to quickly dispose of it.

Elsid didn’t know how he felt about this as he clicked his tongue. “Tsk, they are a big spender. A noble?”

“Yes, perhaps. He didn’t say it with his mouth, but his actions show it.”

“Actions?”

Marquis Piris nodded and explained, “He is escorted by a person who seems to be a bodyguard. Even though I am not an expert with swords, the bodyguard seems unusual. The buyer seems to be a person hiding his identity.”

“Hmm... It happened around one year ago. How has he been living?”

“There are occasional visitors, but he rarely leaves the mansion. Ah! He is famous for purchasing original magic books at an expensive price, around three or four times the normal price? So, sometimes people come from foreign countries.”

As the prince worried about it, the marquis remembered the names of the two people.

“The young man who bought the mansion is Ted, and his bodyguard is called Adolf. Those are their names.”

“Ted and Adolf...”

It was common to find three or four people with the same names from the villages in the north and central parts of the continent. If so, these names were likely pseudonyms. As Elsid stared at the hill where the mansion was located, he decided it was necessary to visit it at least once.

A variable had appeared out of nowhere, and it was unknown if it was good or not. It was something he couldn't fathom at all.

*

Kkiruruk-kiruk kiruk-

As always, the seagulls cried out from the sky as the wind carried the scent of the sea.

“The weather is good today,” Theodore muttered as he looked at the thick book on his desk and then patted Mitra, who was crouched in a flowerpot.

A year had passed since he’d left the Pirate Archipelago, and he was more mature than before. Theo’s face had matured early due to undergoing various hardships, and a mysterious depth was found in the magician’s clear eyes.

Mitra was snoring while sleeping. [Horororong...hororong...]

Theodore smiled at the cute snoring and thought back to his days in the Soldun Kingdom.

Since Theodore and Randolph left the Pirate Archipelago, there had been no one pursuing them. So, in the past year, Theodore and Randolph had focused on improving their skills. Randolph trained in his awakened Aura Ability while Theodore researched on how to reach the next level.

‘My progress isn’t bad, but...’ Theodore looked out the window with a dissatisfied expression.

There were many things he’d gained during this time, but it would still take more time to reach the target area. Gluttony had said half a year would be enough in the future, but it was inevitable that he would feel nervous with the deadline approaching.

Right now, Theodore was facing the wall of the 7th Circle, the master’s wall. He only needed one more step to escape from the confines of a mortal. It was a transcendent area which couldn’t be easily overcome, even with Gluttony’s power.

“I have one and a half years.”

Almost half of the three-year deadline, which Myrdal had given him at the world tree, had passed.

Of course, there was a lot of room left due to all the original books he ate. However, the fundamental solution was for Theodore to become a master. A master went beyond the limits of the ‘natural vessel,’ so there would be no need to worry about his vessel overflowing.

“Hah...”

However, if it was as easy as it sounded, the continent would be covered in masters.

Theodore sighed and closed his eyes, falling into his inner self. He focused on the circles inside his body. A magician could diagnose their body, just like a warrior could do so with aura. The circles soon appeared before Theodore.

Like sophisticated machinery, the six circles turned together. The seventh circle only had the outline formed and was sitting idly. Theodore just couldn't figure out what was lacking.

‘An opportunity is needed.’

Ultimately, he needed a decisive opportunity to overcome this stagnation.

Chapter 156 – One Year Later (2)

Of course, it wasn't that Theodore hadn't done anything this year. He'd written down pieces of wisdom, and the amount of information he'd received from Gluttony's 'question and answer' was really huge. Additionally, he'd gained a lot of knowledge about inefficient magic and Dragon Words.

However, this wasn't much help in breaking through the wall of the 7th Circle, the master wall.

At the time, Gluttony had given this advice, –User might've already realized this, but 'master' isn't an area that can be reached by steadily climbing stairs. You must redefine your world views and destroy your own limitations.

A magician who lived a long time ago said this: If the process of advancing from the 1st to 4th Circle was like climbing a staircase, then the journey from the 4th to 6th Circle was like climbing a sheer cliff.

In that case, what did the wall of the 7th Circle and the master level look like? Theodore still remembered the explanation. It was from a book placed in an unpopular corner of the library.

<The transcendent, so-called master, contains an inherent power which is beyond mortals. It is the act of breaking down limits and destroying the shackles that confine destiny. Something that can't be reached with natural talent... That is also a shackle. If you are reading this book because you want to become a master, you can't

walk or run. Instead, you need wings.>

It was common sense that no matter how far away a destination was, one could eventually get there by walking or running. If a person kept climbing up a mountain, they would eventually reach the peak surrounded by clouds.

However, it was meaningless for a magician to use hard work to reach the master level. A master could fly without wings and breathe underwater without gills. They were transcendent beings who could do impossible things.

An ‘official’ way to reach such an area didn’t exist. Theodore was looking back through his memories when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Theodore, are you inside?”

“...You already know, so just come in.”

Wasn’t Randolph a master swordsman with a perceptual ability which stretched out over kilometers?

As soon as Theodore’s permission was given, Randolph opened the door and shrugged. “I thought you might be doing something important. Don’t magicians hate people entering their space without notice?”

“It isn’t just magicians who hate it, though...? Anyway, what is

it? I thought you would be training in the backyard at this time.”

“Ah, someone came looking for you.”

Theodore recalled sensing someone approach his wards. There weren't any hostile emotions, so he had forgotten about it... Randolph must've helped them directly. As Theo looked over with questioning eyes, Randolph took out a letter covered with ornate decorations.

“He asked me to deliver a letter to the owner.”

“...Marquis Piris,” Theodore murmured as he looked at the seal on the envelope. He was in a strange relationship with the ruler of this territory, Marquis Piris. They were neighbors who didn't have a close relationship with each other.

‘In addition, my identity hasn't been revealed.’

Marquis Piris didn't know the identities and histories of Theodore and Randolph. The reason for this strange relationship was that Theodore had bought the mansion at a high price.

After seeing them spend 1,000 gold without hesitation, the marquis couldn't deal with the two people without caution. A hidden noble from another country might bring disadvantages to the whole Soldun Kingdom.

Theodore had easily provided the 1,000 gold. It was something

which wouldn't have been possible without the pouch Aquilo had given him.

“I didn't think he would come this year...”

Maybe there was an unknown variable. Theodore was filled with such speculations as he opened the seal of the letter that Randolph gave him. He slowly read the excellent handwriting and raised his eyebrows. “...He will visit tomorrow afternoon? And he will bring guests?”

Marquis Piris' polite words showed caution. Theodore knew there were still some of the marquis' men patrolled around here, so what was this visit for? Maybe somebody else was behind it. Many speculations crossed his mind, leaving a few possibilities behind.

This was impossible to refuse. What justification did he have for refusing Marquis Piris' visit?

Theodore put down the letter with a small sigh. “I should prepare to meet the guests.”

He felt some discordant notes in the previously peaceful Piris.

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The next day, Marquis Piris arrived at noon, which was the time written in the letter sent.

Prince Elsid, who was interested in the people with unknown identities, accompanied the Baek Family who had arrived last night. It was possible to rely on their skills with the sword, and Baek Jongmyung was fluent in the language of the continent.

Baek Jongmyung wanted to look directly at the place where they would be staying. As the chateau came into view, Baek Jongmyung's mouth dropped open with admiration. "Oh...! Indeed, it is magnificent enough to be our home, just like Lord Piris promised."

"Do you like it, Master Baek?"

"Yes. The mansion is luxurious, and it is surrounded by spacious gardens and hills. Moreover, the feng shui is very good."

The marquis and Elsid didn't know what feng shui was, but they sighed with relief.

A martial artist in the east was similar to a nobleman in the west, and a sword master of a family was equivalent to a marquis or a duke. Baek Jongmyung had to move due to difficult circumstances, but it had been a long time since he had been treated as an ordinary person.

Elsid spoke to him in an informal manner, "That is a relief. I will take back the mansion and give it to you, so let me finish the preparations."

“Yes. Thank you for Your Highness’ generosity.”

Inwardly, Elsid felt bitter as Baek Jongmyung maintained a polite and formal attitude. If Elsid had one or two more military retainers like this sword master, the kingdom wouldn’t be in this state.

The current Soldun Kingdom was a battlefield between the loyalists who struggled to defend the kingdom and those who were loyal to the neighboring kingdoms, trying to suck everything out of the Soldun Kingdom. The determination to give this house to Baek Jongmyung was firmly established in Elsid.

Suddenly, Baek Jongmyung stopped moving.

“Master Baek, what is it?”

“...Hoh.”

As the marquis’ question entered one of his ears, Baek Jongmyung looked at the outskirts of the mansion with an admiring expression.

Then he started to explain the reason for his reaction to the confused people around him. “Well, there is an excellent mage in there. I have seen a considerable number of mages, but I’ve never seen one capable of making such wards. This is truly the western continent.”

“Mage... Are you talking about a magician?”

“Yes. I don’t know who it is, but I’m impressed.”

Elsid and the marquis looked at each other with perplexed expressions. A sword master was praising the magician staying in the mansion?

According to the report, there were only two people staying here. A young man called Ted and his bodyguard. According to the laws of elimination, the young man called Ted must be the magician...

However, the two people in question appeared before they could come to a conclusion. The main gate was opened, and a young man with black hair walked out. “Welcome, Marquis Piris.”

Behind the young man was a blond swordsman, who stood in a prepared stance. It was proof that the swordsman hadn’t taken the job just because of money. Just as the marquis was about to greet them...

“Hah! This is literally a sleeping dragon!” Baek Jongmyung’s sudden cry attracted everyone’s attention. Baek Jongmyung looked at the two people with truly admiring expressions. In contrast, Theodore’s face stiffened slightly.

The strong always recognized each other, and the three powerhouses perceived each other’s strengths the moment they

faced each other. Baek Jongmyung observed Theodore and opened his mouth first to say, “One is an incredibly strong mage at such a young age.”

Then he looked at Randolph and cried out, “The other person is an expert! My views of the world has broadened today.”

At that moment, a heavy silence fell over the seven people. The two people who had come with Baek Jongmyung were amazed at his praise, while Marquis Piris and Elsid needed time to grasp what he was saying.

Only Theodore, Randolph, and Baek Jongmyung could perceive each other’s skills and anticipated how the situation would flow.

“...Wait!” After a short moment, Elsid regained his spirit before anyone else, as befitting of a prince. His eyes were still shaking with confusion as he asked Baek Jongmyung to confirm again, “Master Baek, are the words you just spoke... the truth?”

Elsid’s eyes were begging to hear that it was a lie. However, Baek Jongmyung heartlessly told him the truth, “Yes, that’s right. You should be friends with them, rather than enemies. They are strong people, so you shouldn’t face them as enemies.”

“...This is nonsense.” Prince Elsid, who finally embraced the ridiculous situation, shouted as he looked at the two men, “Why is a sword master hiding like this!?”

His reaction was natural. A sword master wasn't just a strong and strategic weapon treated as the pillar of a nation. They were also assassins who could cut off a king's head.

For this reason, Meltor always had Veronica or Blundell stay by the king's side. The presence of a sword master in Soldun, which had no such precautions, was no different from a grim reaper's visit. So, it wasn't unreasonable for Elsid to reply like this.

However, Theodore and Randolph stood with calm faces as always. They were prepared to fight, but the easterner didn't show any hostility towards them. The young man, who seemed like royalty, was flustered, but he didn't show any signs of wanting to fight either.

'It is better to settle it with a conversation than a groundless fight.'

Royalty and a sword master... The two guests were more than he'd anticipated, but Theodore calmed his mind. This wasn't much compared to the turmoil which had occurred a year ago.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think this is the place for this conversation." Theodore casually suggested, "As Marquis Piris said earlier, how about we relax and talk in the mansion?"

Chapter 157 – One Year Later (3)

Elsid's group also wanted to sort out the confusing situation, so they accepted Theodore's proposal without raising any objections. However, unlike Baek Jongmyung and his two children who were looking at the mansion, Elsid and Marquis Piris were busy thinking about the unexpected situation.

This was because the plan they had thought of in advance would no longer work.

‘What should I do in this situation?’

The awkward atmosphere continued as the group walked through the front door and into the mansion's reception room.

Following Theodore's direction, Elsid sat down and worried about what to say. He had planned to question the two people whose identities were unclear and then buy back this mansion. However, the opponents were much bigger than he had imagined. One was a senior magician praised by a sword master, while the other was a sword master who could be a marquis in any country.

However, Marquis Piris managed to calm his mind.

‘...No, it makes no difference even if they are bigger than I thought. Piris is our territory. No matter what status they have, they need to bend down in the presence of the crown prince!’

He didn't know why these people were hiding here, but it didn't have anything to do with his task. After that, he spoke to the two people on behalf of the crown prince, whose status had yet to be disclosed.

“First of all, I would like to apologize for the sudden visit, Sir Ted.”

“No, Marquis Piris. This territory is Marquis Piris'. As guests, we shouldn't disrespect the owner.”

“I appreciate your understanding.” Marquis Piris' eyes shone. “However, before I get to the point, I would like you to identify yourself. If I am the master of this land as you said, shouldn't I have a right to know the secret?”

“They are fair words,” Theodore said, nodding politely, “If this was a year ago.”

“C-Cough!”

It was a sharp admonishment. Theodore had previously spoken such golden words, and now he was saying this? It was a truly sarcastic remark.

Marquis Piris coughed a few times with a red face before continuing, “Please understand that many things have changed since that time. I wouldn't have accepted the deal if I had known your companion was a sword master.”

“Umm.”

“Today’s topic isn’t for me to say. This person here...”The marquis paused. Then Elsid nodded, giving him permission, and so the marquis continued, “He is the next king of the Soldun Kingdom, Prince Elsid.”

If Marquis Piris thought that his disclosure would make the duo panic, he was mistaken. Theodore’s and Randolph’s expressions remained calm.

“It is great to meet Your Highness.”

“...It is good to meet you, unknown guests.”

Elsid’s greeting showed he wanted them to give up their identities, but the duo stayed silent. It meant they wouldn’t speak up even if the opponent was a crown prince instead of a marquis.

Elsid understood the meaning of their silence and frowned, but it was difficult to pursue it at this stage. They weren’t opponents he couldn’t overpower through force. However, his national power was divided in half due to infighting. The crown prince couldn’t afford to increase the number of enemies.

Theodore grasped his feelings and changed the subject, “Then Crown Prince, why are you visiting this humble place?”

Then the marquis replied on behalf of Elsid, “There is a story behind it, but I want to buy back this mansion.”

“This mansion?”

“That’s right. It is hard to find a suitable residence for Master Baek here, with this mansion being the only candidate.”

To be honest, he didn’t want to pay the price, but he had to take a big loss now. While the marquis vowed to reduce the damage somehow, Theodore made a strange expression and said, “How much were you thinking?”

“The same amount of gold that you originally paid?”

“Then I see no benefit in this.”

Theodore still had a lot of gold left, so he intended to profit from something other than gold. In order to achieve that purpose, the marquis and crown prince had to owe him something. They would be deeply indebted to him if they refused his request.

However, Marquis Piris’ mind wasn’t as good as Theodore had thought.

“...There is no benefit... Can you really say so?” The marquis asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know your identity yet, but haven’t you spent a year in Piris?”

The marquis was advising Theodore to be satisfied with a little gold in exchange for having hidden him and Randolph for a year. In the first place, it was a loss for the marquis to buy it at 1,000 gold. Marquis Piris might’ve retreated because he couldn’t use coercive means, but he couldn’t tolerate more damage to his funds. The marquis was determined not to give way any further.

Despite reading these signs, Theodore laughed slightly. He didn’t intend to get anything from Prince Elsid and Marquis Piris from the very beginning.

“Well, Lord Piris’ words make sense,” Theo remarked.

“Then...”

“However, I have a few conditions.”

Before the marquis could protest, Theodore turned to Baek Jongmyung and said, “These conditions are for the one who will become the owner of the mansion, not the prince and the marquis.”

“Hrmm? Me?”

“Yes, I would like to ask for three simple things.”

Simultaneously, Theodore raised his fingers as he began to explain the conditions. The flow of the story naturally switched to Theodore and Baek Jongmyung, with the marquis and prince becoming spectators. In fact, Theodore had no interest in them at all.

“First of all, we are going to leave here quite soon. I hope you will let us stay until that time.”

“That isn’t a problem. Rather, I am excited at the chance to develop a relationship with natives of foreign countries.”

“I am thankful for your words.”

Theodore was afraid there would be opposition from the prince or marquis, but they didn’t move as expected. The best thing was for Theodore to leave this kingdom quickly, but the next best thing was for them to be able to keep an eye on Theodore.

If Theodore and Randolph stayed at the mansion with Baek Jongmyung, a sword master who was equal to them, then it would be less likely for the prince and the marquis to miss Theodore’s trail. If Theodore couldn’t be controlled, keep him in a visible place and monitor him.

Theodore had accurately perceived that choice. Then Baek

Jongmyung, who calmly accepted the first condition, prompted Theodore to say what was next. “Now, Sir Ted! Please tell us the second condition.”

“The second thing that I want to ask...”

As soon as the condition flowed from Theodore’s mouth, everyone in the room looked at him with a surprised expression. Only Randolph, who had been with Theodore for a year, laughed with an understanding expression.

Baek Jongmyung also accepted the strange second condition.

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“-Hoh, you were hiding such a good place!”

Baek Jongmyung looked around the area with admiration. There was a vacant lot with a 100-meter radius on a flat area under the hill.

Additionally, around the boundaries of the empty space, there was magic to alleviate any impact and block off noise, as well as hallucination magic which tricked one’s gaze. This was why Marquis Piris hadn’t discovered their skills despite keeping surveillance of them.

Rather than being pleased by the explanation, Baek Jongmyung just stood in the empty lot. The sword at his waist and his clothing

which didn't obstruct movements were preparations for the second condition.

Prepared to fight at any time, Baek Jongmyung stared at Theodore and asked, "Umm... By the way, are we really going to do it in this vacant lot?"

Theodore replied without any hesitation, "That's right."

"But this place... It is advantageous to me, no matter how I think about it. I don't mean to demean your skills, but isn't it hard for a mage to deal with a warrior in such a narrow space?"

The second condition proposed by Theodore was a spar with Baek Jongmyung. Everyone had been confused by Theo's words as it wasn't a knight but a magician who was challenging a sword master. As far as they knew, a magician who hadn't reached the 7th Circle couldn't fight against a sword master.

...That was if he was a typical magician.

"Master Baek," Theodore replied with an expressionless face to Baek Jongmyung's concerns, "You know mages, but you still aren't aware of what a 'magician' is yet. I appreciate your concern, but you shouldn't treat me so lightly."

Over the past year, Theodore had tried many ways to break his limits. In order to develop new magic and master existing ones, he had frequently sparred with Randolph, who was a sword master.

Theodore hadn't been able to come to terms with aura's mobility, but he had figured out other things.

At first, it had been hard to last for 10 minutes while using all his skills, including Umbra. However, that duration gradually increased. 10 minutes increased to 20 minutes, 20 minutes became 30, and so on, as he gradually increased the number of conditions.

These conditions ranged from fighting without using Umbra's powers, sealing the magic of a particular attribute on that day, or not using the features of Gluttony. In this harsh year, Theodore's odds of defeating a sword master had increased to nearly 45%. This meant that if the Aura Ability was sealed, even a sword master couldn't be sure of winning.

"Both of you, please greet each other!" Elsid, who had become the referee due to his status, looked between the two of them and confirmed the rules again.

"Master Baek, you can't use your Aura Ability."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

"Sir Ted, you can't use wide-area magic that is over half the size of this space."

"Yes, I'm aware."

The magician from the west and the warrior from the east looked

at each other. Of course, wide-area magic could overcome aura's mobility. However, a special concession was given since this was just a friendly spar.

Despite Theodore's warning, Baek Jongmyung wasn't vigilant.

‘Sir Ted can't do anything at this distance... It is best to subdue him moderately.’

The stereotypes which existed on the continent couldn't be removed with just a few words of warning. If mages could only attack from a distance, that meant a warrior had a lot of room if they didn't give the mage time to chant a spell.

As Baek Jongmyung's hand reached for his sword, Elsid's clear voice rang through the air, “Then I will start!”

However, at that moment...

It started! As the last syllable was heard, Theodore's fingers moved.

“Um?!”

It was a blue flash. Baek Jongmyung's eyebrows raised as he saw the flash of light heading toward his forehead. His senses, which were beyond human standards, instinctively recognized that Theodore's flash was extremely dangerous.

The flash wasn't just fast. If it hit Baek Jongmyung's body while it was in a defenseless state, the flash would have the power to wreak havoc on his body!

Kakiing!

Of course, Baek Jongmyung was a sword master and managed to cleave the magic bullet into two pieces. The shine of his blade was beautiful as it split the flash of light apart. However, the person who produced the scene was stiff. It was because the repulsive force transmitted through his palm was quite strong, despite the good amount of aura he used.

That said, that wasn't the only problem.

‘Kuk, I was caught!’

Despite the unpredictable nature of this attack, Theodore fired off another Magic Bullet straight away. The blue flash of light emerged continuously like a comet, giving Baek Jongmyung no room to breathe. He worried about what the result of the attacks would be.

“-It is up to here!”

However, Baek Jongmyung wouldn't be qualified as a master if he was caught by an attack like this. Baek Jongmyung's sword moved at a terrifying speed, creating a storm which aimed for the

Magic Bullets approaching him.

Kakiing! King! Kiiing— Kakiing!

The Magic Bullets were deflected into the ground and trees, creating deep holes. Five times a second—no, ten times... or maybe a little more than that. It was a sight which would cause anyone to shudder, but Theodore continued casting, ‘Memorize. All Slots Open. Sixfold Thunderbolt. Spell Fusion: Keraunos.’

Lightning emerged from his right arm.

Kwarururung!

It exploded from the sky without a loud roar, hitting Baek Jongmyung who was concentrating on defending against the Magic Bullets. The lightning bolt could turn a huge tree into charcoal instantly, and it was twice as strong as what he had used to surprise ‘Pride’ in the battle one year ago.

The ground melted from the blow, and the people watching couldn’t help gulping.

Then a voice rang out, “...Indeed, Sir Ted’s words were right.”

Baek Jongmyung walked out from the epicenter of the attack. He was a mess, but he didn’t have any wounds. Theodore had expected this. He had used it several times against Randolph, but he never had this much fun.

“Maybe I am out of touch with what a ‘magician’ is. I just received a great lesson.” Baek Jongmyung laughed with a bitter expression and raised his sword. The unsmiling face was proof that he recognized Theodore as an ‘opponent,’ not a ‘sparring partner.’

“Then, this time I will teach you what a ‘warrior’ is.”

Chapter 158 – One Year Later (4)

As he spoke, the aura around Baek Jongmyung burned even further. However, Theodore didn't move.

Unlike his opponent who was only accepting it now, Theodore had anticipated this situation from the beginning. Catching Baek Jongmyung's feet with Magic Bullet... and launching a surprise attack using Memorize... Theodore had done these things, but he had never thought they would work.

‘Surprise attacks don't mean much to a sword master.’

It was true that he had sparred many times with Randolph, but a sword master was literally a grim reaper.

Their response speed was different that of from normal aura users. Just like how one's body would shrink back when it touched something hot or cold, a sword master's aura had already reached the area of spinal reflexes. They could prevent ambushes even while in a deep sleep, and a lightning strike would be prevented with minimal damage.

A sword master's aura was for offense and defense.

Setting aside their Aura Ability, their combat power with pure aura was extremely threatening. High attack power and defense, excellent mobility, and overwhelming endurance... there were no weaknesses.

Kakiing...

At that moment, Baek Jongmyung's blade moved like a wave. Seeing it, Theodore muttered unconsciously, "...Soft sword?"

"Oh, so you know it. I heard that it isn't often used in the west, so you have great knowledge," Baek Jongmyung replied with an admiring expression.

However, Theodore would've thought it was just a strange swordsmanship if it wasn't for Lee Yoonsung's memories. With a strong and resilient metal, the sword was capable of creating trajectories with a unique flexibility. A master could use it to deal fatal blows from any angle.

Regrettably, Lee Yoonsung had no experience fighting against it.

"Then let's get started," Baek Jongmyung spoke as he rushed forward first.

The sword in his right hand moved like a whip several times, with the sword's acceleration creating afterimages. Theodore had only experienced Randolph's straightforward sophistication, but this was fundamentally different.

Pit! Blood splattered out.

Even with the help of his sensory perception, Theodore got injured. Baek Jongmyung had swung from a distance which the sword couldn't reach Theodore, but a line of blood was still drawn on Theodore's cheek.

Once a whip struck, it would become as hard as a mace. Similarly, the power of the curved sword was launched at Theodore's face!

‘Indeed, this technique...!’ Theodore stopped breathing while inwardly admiring it.

At a close distance, it was faster and more powerful than Magic Bullet. The snake-like orbit was difficult to read, and it wasn't a technique he could cope with, even with his senses. Above all, it wasn't a technique which ended with one or two hits. Instead, the attacks poured out like rain.

No, it was like a snake with hundreds of heads.

Ping!

The protective magic he used as a shield was pierced like it was a piece of cloth. Defense magic which shielded his whole body wasn't good against a single-point attack. However, if he reduced the defense area, a mistake of a few millimeters would lead to a fatal injury.

‘I can't block it. I should avoid it.’ Theodore was out of breath as

he activated, 'Battle Song. Sonata of Speed. Vivace.'

Battle Song strengthened his overall physical abilities while the others enhanced his mobility. His speed had temporarily increased by 50%, so he was determined to find a breakthrough. Unsurprisingly, the light in Theodore's eyes soon started to see some of the orbit.

'...This much is enough!' Simultaneously, Theodore took a step forward.

"Hmm?" The advance was surprising, and Baek Jongmyung looked at Theodore with a confused expression.

The magician's robes were filled with holes, and blood flowed from his wounds. So, why was he advancing? It was an action beyond bold recklessness. However, unlike his thoughts, Baek Jongmyung didn't slow down his momentum. He had already paid a price once for carelessness. He wouldn't be taken by the same thing twice.

The storm of swords swallowed Theodore.

Kwakakakak!

The gravel was scraped away, and a few weeds scattered like dust.

Even a knight with full plate armor would be torn to rags by the

whirlwind, let alone Theodore who was wearing robes. It was a terrible sight which caused the spectators to not want to see the results.

“T-This...!”

“Sir Ted...!?”

However, the two sword masters didn't panic. Randolph was familiar with Theodore's skills. Meanwhile, Baek Jongmyung cried out unknowingly, “Good!”

It was an evasion that even the attacker admired! Theodore and the swords had danced gloriously at a speed which couldn't be followed by ordinary human eyesight. He had avoided the attack, but it wasn't simply because he was fast. It was because he had used Lee Yoonsung's foot movements. Theodore danced between the vortex of blades.

Shortly after that, Theodore's turn finally came.

‘An eye exists in any storm.’

Unlike the violent outskirts, the center of the turbulent force was calm.

Of course, swordsmanship and a natural phenomenon couldn't be seen in the same context, but there were similar aspects. It was necessary to maintain the torque at certain intervals in order to

generate the acceleration. This meant the power of the torque wouldn't be exerted if Theodore approached close to Baek Jongmyung.

It was certainly true in theory, but who would want to try it against a sword master?

“-Spell Fusion.”

A person insane enough to do so was right here.

‘Memorize. All Slots Open. Triple Blaze Burst. Triple Fire Strike. Spell Fusion: Strike Flare.’

At that moment, Theodore's fist became hot enough to melt iron.

Kwaaaaang!

There was a massive explosion. The fire spread quickly as Theodore flashed over to the other side. Baek Jongmyung's clothing was almost destroyed, and despite defending with aura, there were shallow burns on his skin.

Without paying any attention to the pain from his wounds, Baek Jongmyung spoke, “...Truly amazing skills, Sir Ted.”

In this limited battlefield of a vacant lot, a magician could go against a sword master...? It was a situation where his Aura Ability

was sealed, but that wasn't an excuse. If they competed with equal abilities, he might've become a chunk of charcoal sooner. Additionally, the opponent who had driven him to this state was in the early-20s, mid-20s at most.

Baek Jongmyung spoke to Theodore who emerged from the fire, "More than anything else, that footwork is from a famous martial arts family. If you don't mind, can you tell me where you learned it?"

Theodore thought for a moment before answering, "I happened to run into a kinsmen of the Lee Family and was taught, but he is deceased now."

"Lee Family... that isn't a family from Western Xia."

Baek Jongmyung wanted to converse this more on this subject, but Theodore refused to open his mouth. Although Baek Jongmyung was sad for a moment, he quickly found what Theodore was lacking.

"Sir Ted is comfortable with the martial arts taught to you, but you haven't yet mastered it."

"Yes, it is still immature."

"Huh, that isn't the right word. There are many juniors in my hometown, but I've never seen someone like Ted. I once again realized that the world is really wide."

Baek Jongmyung squeezed the sword in his hand and released his stance like he thought it was over.

However, Theodore wasn't satisfied yet. He was in front of a strong man who could refine his nerves to the limit, giving Theodore a stimulus which wasn't possible while sparring with Randolph. This experience with a master was worth more than 1,000 gold.

So, Theodore made a reasonable compromise. "As Master Baek said, I haven't mastered this technique yet. But I do have one skill I haven't tried before."

"...Uhh, that is regrettable." As expected from a warrior, Baek Jongmyung knew the meaning of Theodore's words and placed strength into the hand holding his sword again. It was a request to renew the fight. Baek Jongmyung wouldn't decline. No, in fact, he wanted to see more of Theodore's skills.

As expected, Baek Jongmyung nodded readily.

"Then shall we end this by competing with one last skill?"

"It is a good idea."

The two men exchanged a promise and retreated at a reasonable interval.

‘Good, this is enough.’

It was still unusable in practice, but it was possible in a situation like this. As it was mentioned several times, a magician was strongest when they had secured a safe distance and time. If this were a normal battle against a warrior, for a magician, the probability of winning would be less than half.

However, what if the magician was Theodore Miller? The odds of the opponent winning would fall to half, or less than half.

Theodore did one last check and closed his eyes silently. It was a technique that couldn’t be used without concentrating.

‘Answer, door to Muspelheim.’

There was no need to open his mouth as the red tattoo on his left hand started to move under his glove. A dimension of fire where the density of mana was different from the normal world opened up, and the flames of Muspelheim filled his entire left arm.

Then he moved his consciousness from his left hand to another place.

‘...This is still a little tough.’

The Blood Mark of Aquilo, the dragon who used to rule the Pirate Archipelago, wriggled in response.

It was a beautifully moist and cool aura. The dense energy which came from the dragon was so enormous it was like something sticky was stuck to Theodore's skin. His concentration was shaken by this feeling, and Theodore grumbled before continuing to focus.

His left hand contained Muspelheim's flames, while his right hand contained Aquilo's cold mana from the dragon blood. The yin energy and yang energies, two contrasting energies, formed in his hands.

Aquilo's cool mana and Muspelheim's flames struggled against each other. Even Theodore, who constantly trained his mind, couldn't hold it for long. In this state, even opening his mouth was grueling.

“-I'm going!”

“Yes!”

As Theodore barely managed to speak, Baek Jongmyung raised his aura.

Baek Jongmyung sensed that this power was unusual. The hairs on his body rose whenever he felt a threat to this life. He was being warned by his decades of training that this skill couldn't be stopped entirely with aura defense.

“Huhaha! My blood is boiling for the first time in a long time!”

The jubilation of a warrior... The power coming from Theo was enough to threaten Baek Jongmyung. As Baek Jongmyung's mouth formed a smile, both of Theodore's hands moved forward.

‘Focus, focus, focus, focus, focussssss-...’

Blood flowed from Theodore's nose while his hands moved in a semicircle. A year had passed after defeating Superbia, and during that time, he had developed this method of protecting his life. This time, instead of draining away, the power was pulled inward.

The red and blue mana tangled together, creating an attack which could never have been seen before.

—————!

A flash burst out.

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Kurururung!

There was an earthquake, and the spectators standing in the distance stumbled. The two children, whom Baek Jongmyung had brought, were able to straighten their bodies, but Elsid and Marquis Piris could only regain their balance after holding onto a nearby tree.

“W-What the hell is this...!”

With confused eyes, Elsid looked at the vacant lot covered in dust. Despite having retreated to a considerable distance as so not to get caught by the collision, the shock wave had spread out a few hundred meters and made them dizzy. He was inexperienced with masters and had never seen their skills directly.

Their bodies shivered from the struggle. Five pairs of eyes filled with contradictory feelings of surprise, fear, admiration, and interest as they looked at where the duo had collided. Was it perhaps in response to their gazes...? The dust was washed away by the wind, revealing the scene inside.

“Um.”

“Oh, the winner...”

“Indeed...”

As the five people watched, the two opponents faced each other with conflicting expressions. Theodore's exhausted body was barely standing, while Baek Jongmyung's sword was at Theodore's neck.

It was a scene where the winner and loser were clearly revealed.

The swordsman Baek Jongmyung, who had beat Theodore in the last attack, gave a long sigh and lowered his sword.

Then he declared, “This game, I have lost it.”

Chapter 159 – One Year Later (5)

Baek Jongmyung admitted his defeat with a feeling in his heart which he hadn't felt for a long time. He had been able to penetrate through Theodore's puzzling magic, but the means of producing the result was the problem.

His sword master's instincts, which penetrated through the unknown technique and the power hidden in it, meant he'd crossed the line without hesitation. Baek Jongmyung apologized to Theodore with a red and ashamed face, "I am ashamed, Sir Ted. I used a strong ability that was against the rules... I shouldn't have done it."

That's right. The fearsome blow which stabbed through Theodore's magic was 'Aura Ability.' This was the most powerful ability of a sword master, who fell behind a magician in terms of firepower. It was an unreasonable ability that went beyond tactical magic and the power of a god.

Magicians who faced it for the first time usually panicked or became traumatized by the sword master. However, Theodore didn't enter the standards of 'normal.'

'Master Baek's ability... Is it 【Penetration】or 【Breakthrough】? No, I can't be sure when only seeing it once...' Theodore was busy analyzing the abnormalities in the auras, rather than being angry at Baek Jongmyung's foul.

The audience watching them from afar might not know, but

Theodore, who had faced Baek Jongmyung's sword, had been able to see it clearly. The fusion of two magic powers had created an explosion, while a silver aura had broken through the center.

Despite the fact that both Randolph and Baek Jongmyung were sword masters, Randolph's power was completely different from this. However, for a magician, unknown facts about aura were exciting.

Thus, Theodore's answer to Baek Jongmyung was delayed by one beat.

"...No. Thanks to that, the spar could finish without a big injury, so I am thankful."

"However..."

"-Besides," Theodore said with a bitter smile, rejecting the objection, "Look around. If Master Baek broke the rules, I did as well."

Baek Jongmyung looked around with a bewildered expression before realizing what Theodore meant.

According to the rules which the two men had agreed upon in advance, Baek Jongmyung hadn't been allowed to use his Aura Ability while Theodore hadn't been allowed to use wide-area magic which affected more than half of the empty lot.

However, what had happened to the landscape after the last clash? The center where the two people were standing was relatively intact, but the shock wave had destroyed the ground, reached the forest outside the open space, and even a few trees were torn down.

Baek Jongmyung might have erased most of the magic with his Aura Ability, but the power was enough to affect the spectators standing far away from them.

As Theodore gazed down at his hands, he admired the power of the magic.

‘Is it still too dangerous to be used in practice...?’

This hadn’t been a proper magic spell but a blast caused by the repelling force of two high-density magic powers. It was a primitive application of magic power. The explosion wouldn’t have occurred if it had been at the level he’d thought about.

Yet this incomplete magic power was enough to threaten a sword master. If he could complete it properly, he had one more weapon against the master class. Theoretically, he could defeat the 5th stage Pride using this.

His right arm had become Blizzard by using Aquilo’s power, while his left arm had become Inferno by using Muspelheim’s power.

It circulated according to the concept of ‘Yin Yang,’ an eastern philosophy which referred to the combining of two opposing forces, amplifying the unique magic. Unlike the Fusion Magic which had already existed in the past, this was a new spell that Theodore invented.

Theodore was convinced that the completion of this unique magic was closely related to reaching the master level.

“Hahaha! Indeed, Sir Ted’s words are right!” Baek Jongmyung spoke with a much lighter expression. “Today’s confrontation is a draw! I am blessed to be able to face a mage of the west.”

“I am also honored by my confrontation with an expert,” Theodore agreed. Sometimes it was better to compete once than a hundred times. The two men acknowledged each other’s power and finished up with dignity.

Theodore covered his bare upper body with a cloak while Baek Jongmyung asked him, “With this, the second condition is over. Then can I hear what the third condition is?”

“Umm... The third condition...” Theodore fell silent instead of answering.

It was because Elsid and his companions were approaching them after discovering that the spar was over. There was no need to conceal it, but it was best not to get caught.

Theodore swallowed his words and said something else, “Master Baek, I’ll tell you after we return to the mansion. Today, there are other guests.”

“Hmm, I understand. It hasn’t even been three weeks, but I shouldn’t let my liege wait for me. Sir Ted, thank you for your deep consideration.”

Theodore blinked as he had suddenly become a thoughtful man, but there was no chance to clarify the misunderstanding.

Soon after that, he couldn’t talk to Baek Jongmyung due to the arrival of the crown prince’s group. It wasn’t bad to be remembered as a good person, but he couldn’t help feeling ashamed due to Baek Jongmyung’s humility.

The story with the crown prince ended more smoothly than he’d thought it would, and there wasn’t any friction.

‘...Perhaps watching the spar with Master Baek is the cause of that.’

It was an unintentional display of force, but Theo didn’t need to buy any favors from the prince. After the guests left, Randolph and Theodore had a heated debated about what had happened during the spar with Baek Jongmyung.

Then exactly three days afterward, the rest of the Baek Family arrived at the harbor and knocked on the door of the mansion.

Theodore, who had gone to Baek Jongmyung to present the third condition, was faced with an unexpected person.

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It was as expected from a warrior family. They had great strength, so the members of the Baek Family moved in quickly. The empty rooms which Theodore and Randolph neglected were quickly filled with exotic furniture, accompanied by bustling noises ringing out all over the interior.

Theodore listened to the noise and tilted his teacup. The tea that Baek Jongmyung gave Theodore was an impressive emerald green, and it emitted off an intoxicating scent. Theodore took a slow sip and was impressed by the tea. "...This is a good fragrance."

"It is called Longjing Tea. We only have a little bit, but it is worth giving to Sir Ted."

"Thank you."

Theodore had no knowledge of tea and thought it was simply expensive, but his thoughts were wrong.

Longjing Tea, one of the so-called four seasons, was divided into seven classes, with each one famous for the price gap. It had been different during the Baek Family's prime, but now it was hard for them to obtain. The cup of tea which Theodore had just drunk was worth dozens of gold coins. It showed just how much Baek

Jongmyung appreciated him.

As the air in the room softened and relaxed...

Knock knock knock!

A hard knock on the door strained the relaxed atmosphere. Baek Jongmyung sensed who it was and called out with a frown, “{Stop! Didn’t I say to not show up when I am talking with a precious guest?!}”

Just like there were official languages of the west continent, there were official languages which the east continent used. The language called Chinese was now emerging from Baek Jongmyung’s mouth.

It was a language which the central regions had created and spread, and it had permeated the entire east. Theodore felt uncomfortable at the strange pronunciation. However, at the next moment, the door opened without Theodore finding out the source of the discomfort.

“{Father!}” Beyond the door was a man. No, his face was young enough for him to be called a boy.

It was one of the two children who had come to the mansion with Baek Jongmyung a few days ago. The third son of the Baek Family, his name was—

“{No, Baek Dongil! You are too rebellious!}”

‘That’s right, Baek Dongil!’ Theodore was surprised to notice that he understood Chinese.

He had gained knowledge and experience with Chinese from Lee Yoonsung, but he had never actually used it. Perhaps he had digested some of the rich knowledge due to the Baeks. It was a knowledge he hadn’t needed until now. He used it while watching the scene in front of him.

‘Maybe there is more knowledge that is buried...’

Meanwhile, as he was analyzing this, the two people’s quarrel was becoming more violent.

“{Father, please listen to my request just once!}”

“{This guy!}” Baek Jongmyung’s incensed cry was enough to horrify a tiger.

However, Baek Dongil just shook his head. “{Don’t you know my humiliation at living like this! If you won’t allow it, just throw me away right now!}”

“{T-This...! You really are crazy! What will Sir Ted think of this situation?!}”

“{I will apologize directly to him!}”

Theodore didn't know what the situation was, but he could hear the urgency in Baek Dongil's voice. Baek Jongmyung was no longer angry as he let out a deep sigh and touched his beard. As soon as the argument stopped, Baek Dongil looked in Theodore's direction.

‘Huh?’ Was Theodore imagining it? He could find a trace of his past self in the boy's hair and eye color. The boy had blazing eyes which were filled with a desire and willingness not to lose. It was the face of those who tried many times not to fall into despair.

After looking at Theodore for a moment, Baek Dongil fell to his knees and bowed to Baek Jongmyung. It was a kowtow. In the east, this was regarded as something shameful to do and was only used when people saw the emperor.

Baek Jongmyung's anger soared at the sight of Baek Dongil.

“{Stand up!}”

“{Father! Please pass on my words!}”

“{Foolish guy! I never taught you to be like this!}”

“{That's right! You didn't teach me anything!}”

The squabble had started again. Theodore was worried he might

see a sword emerge. So, he opened his mouth and said, “{Both of you, that is enough.}”

The Baeks stopped with shock at his one sentence.

“{Sir Ted, this is our family’s... Huh?}”

“{I won’t give up until Father accepts... Eh?}”

Unable to accept the situation, the two people stared at Theodore.

“{Master Baek, I will listen to the story.}”

“{Uh, umm, I understand.}”

Baek Jongmyung was so amazed by the fluent Chinese that he nodded, unable to refuse. Theodore asked for Baek Jongmyung’s understanding first, before turning to Baek Dongil. Theodore looked at the frozen Baek Dongil and said, “{And Young Master Baek.}”

“{Y-Yes!}” A nervous answer emerged.

“{I don’t know what it is, but if you have something to say to me, tell me directly.}”

“{...Yes, I understand.}” Baek Dongil seemed to regain his composure as he stood up with a calmer expression. He turned away from his father toward Theodore and breathed for a while.

Kung!

Then he kneeled again and bowed. “{Please forgive my rudeness! I hope you will give me, Baek Dongil, your teachings!}”

“{Huh, this guy!}” Baek Jongmyung tried to stop Baek Dongil, but he was blocked. Theodore shook his head with a subtle expression. No, he was just calm on the outside. Inwardly, he was smiling with satisfaction.

‘Okay, things might be better this way.’

This could save him the third request, and in some ways, he might be able to get more.

Besides, he didn’t know if it was a coincidence or inevitable, but Baek Dongil’s request was similar to the third condition that Theodore had thought of in advance. An energy different from that of a ‘warrior’ was flowing from Baek Dongil. It was a third power which was similar to magic but not exactly the same.

This was an opportunity for Theodore to investigate that power.

“{...Raise your head, Young Master Baek.}”

“{S-Sir.}”

“{Let me hear your story.}”

Theodore controlled his expression, while a strange expression formed on Baek Dongil’s face. This was Theodore’s first encounter with a shaman!

Chapter 160 – Delicacy From The East (1)

The so-called shamanism was an eastern magic which could be called a subspecies and variant of the magic that had developed independently on the continent. Unlike the publicly known magicians, shamans rarely showed their appearance and were called the shadows of the civilized world.

For that reason, it had a mysterious image. However, Theodore knew of its essence.

‘It is only an average ability.’

The data was scarce compared to other systems, but there were countless records in Meltor of magicians who studied shamanism.

Someone had said, ‘It isn’t magic or aura.’

Someone else had said, ‘It is neither one nor the other.’

Someone else had also said, ‘It’s a mutation of primitive magic.’

Theodore Miller, a magician of later generations, shared those assessments.

“Young Master Baek, I heard that shamans build magic in the three dantians, rather than the heart like magicians. Is that right?”

“Yes, it is called the three-way loop.”

Theodore groaned at the cool answer. ‘Urgh, only the name sounds good...’

He knew the basic theories of shamanism, but what he heard from Baek Dongil was more shocking than that.

Shamanism was different from the western magic which had perfected the system of circles a long time ago. The three-way loop was nothing more than a modification of the aura method, which was the foundation of the eastern continent.

In other words, they had been putting together the wrong puzzle pieces from the very beginning. It was obvious that the efficiency of magic was bad when the training method was meant for aura users. As a comparison, it was like using a sword instead of a shovel to dig up the earth.

Additionally, the shamans acted independently in the shadows without appearing in society, so there was no one who could find out and share their error. They never knew they were going in the wrong direction.

Theodore had a sudden thought and asked Baek Jongmyung, “Master Baek, how are shamans received in the east? Not in the eyes of ordinary people, but from the viewpoint of warriors.”

Baek Jongmyung frowned while a thick cloud of darkness

appeared on Baek Dongil's face. Theo could guess just by looking at their expressions. Unsurprisingly, Baek Jongmyung coughed and shook his head. "Uhh, I can't say that they are very good."

"As I expected."

In retrospect, it was a question which Theo didn't even need to ask. Magic was something which explored the truth of the natural world, not something which people trained within themselves. However, shamans practiced magic in the form of martial arts. The possibilities of humans who could live for 100 years was finite, so it was inefficient to chase after both.

It was no wonder that in the east, the position of those with magic was falling.

"Excuse me, I can't help but ask."

Rather, Theodore couldn't understand why Baek Dongil learned shamanism when he was the descendant of a famous warrior family.

He had to wonder about the desperate situation which would cause Baek Dongil to ask to learn from a foreigner he didn't even have a proper relationship with. Moreover, why did Theodore see his past self in Baek Dongil?

After seeing Theo's questioning, Baek Dongil raised his gaze with a determined expression. Then he revealed the wound that he had

suffered for decades. “Sir, I can’t learn aura with this body.”

Normally, people thought that magic was an ability which depended on talent. However, in actuality, there was no system which didn’t depend on what people were born with.

If one’s muscle density and bone density weren’t high, it was difficult to endure the pressure from aura. Additionally, the strength of the blood vessels which aura flowed through was a problem which couldn’t be overcome. Moreover, there was also the issue of a person’s talent in swordsmanship.

Given the fact that Theodore, with his minimal magic sensitivity, had been able to reach the 2nd Circle, then aura could be called a wall of harsh talent. For some people, it was impossible for them to use it.

“It is called pulmonary vasculitis.”

It was a constitution Baek Dongil had been born with, in which parts of his blood vessels were blocked. It wouldn’t kill him, but it was a fatal flaw for someone who had been born as a descendant of a warrior.

He had decided to go on the path of a shaman to get rid of the stigma, but it was hard to even find magic books, let alone a proper mentor. When Baek Dongil felt like he was swimming on the ground, a light shone in front of him.

“Then one day, I was able to see a path.”

Seeing a magician whom his father praised...

This person had a strength which allowed a magician to face a sword master. It was a youthful and dignified appearance from someone who was only a few years older than him. That had been the moment when his notion that a shaman could never surpass a warrior had shattered.

Baek Dongil's heart beat wildly as he recalled the scene. He tried to regain his voice as he bowed to Theodore again.

“Sir! I don't dare hope to become your disciple. Please give me one lesson!”

“...I would also like to ask that of you.” Baek Jongmyung walked next to his son and bowed respectfully. Baek Dongil looked at his father with puzzled eyes.

However, Baek Jongmyung continued in a heartfelt voice, “He might be a foolish son, but he has a good head. It is fine while you stay in this country. In the name of the Baek Family, I will be sure to repay Sir Ted.”

“Father...”

A sword master, who was treated like a noble in any country, was bowing like this to Theodore.

In the meantime, Baek Jongmyung had only been a strict father. Therefore, Baek Dongil's eyes couldn't help turning red. To Baek Jongmyung, Dongil was a precious child, so he couldn't help feeling sick at his pain.

Theodore raised his hands like it couldn't be helped. "Phew... Please sit comfortably."

Shortly after that, he looked at Baek Dongil and said, "Young Master Baek."

"Yes."

"From now on, I will treat you as a magician and not a member of the Baek Family. Will you accept that?"

Theodore's voice was firm, causing Baek Dongil to respond in a trembling voice, "S-Sir! Does this mean..."

"It is too early to be pleased. There are many different parts between shamanism and magic. I will teach you a few things that you need to know."

"I will do whatever you tell me!" Baek Dongil's eyes shone as he responded. Now, he thought he could be one of the pillars of the family, even if he couldn't use aura. Of course, such a pillar was useless to Theodore.

“I want you to bring all the books about shamanism that you have collected so far. If you have anything related to shamanism in your luggage, bring it to my room. The sooner the better.”

“I understand, Sir!”

“And one more thing,” Theodore sighed like it was burdensome and decided to correct the title, “Stop calling me ‘Sir.’ I’m not used to it, and it is burdensome.”

“Yes, then what should I call you?”

“Speak to me comfortably.”

Baek Dongil pondered for close to five minutes before the honorific emerged from his mouth, “Then what about Big Brother?”

“...Why don’t you think about it some more?” Theodore sighed as he once again realized the thick wall of different cultures.

*

That evening, a few wagons headed to the annex where Theodore was staying. They contained goods brought from the east. The wagons with an unusual appearance were filled with musty books, scrolls, and unknown objects. Theodore grinned at the sight.

‘Okay. Isn’t this just as much as the materials piled up in the warehouses of the magic towers?’

As expected from the Baek Family. They had once been a prestigious member of their country. The rich family had fallen, but they had tried to save as many things as possible.

Even if more than half of these items were garbage, the other half would be sufficient profit. Most of the magic tower’s books on shamanism were basic books or were interpreted from the view of a magician. There were no opportunities to touch original books about shamanism.

“Brother, I’ve brought everything you told me to!” Baek Dongil dragged the last wagon and approached Theodore.

Although Baek Dongil couldn’t use aura, he was a descendant of a warrior, so he had trained his physical abilities. He had pulled the wagon quite a distance, but there was no rough breathing.

Theodore nodded, smiling at Baek Dongil’s puppy-like attitude which sought his praise. “Yes, well... Where should I start?”

Thus far, it was okay. Theodore was nervous as he picked up a book from the wagon.

It was an old-fashioned silk-bound book. The faded letters on the covers showed how much time had passed and how many hands it had passed through. First, after making sure that the contents

could be read, Theodore took a deep breath.

He concentrated on his left hand which was holding the book.

‘Appraisal.’

Theodore looked to the front as he felt the tongue emerge from his palm. He waited for the usual information window while hoping that Gluttony’s ability would work. His expectations were rewarded.

[Nine Rulers Magic Book]

[-This is a book about the spells recorded in the grimoire, ‘Pobakja.’ It explains the concept of nine laws. This law is a guideline which exerts its power by making nine types of markings, enhancing the power of shamanism, and exerting great power on the body. It is sometimes referred to as ‘Hexagonal Stockpile,’ and the efficacy can be different depending on the order in which it is made.

* You have no understanding. (0%)

* This magic book is rated ‘Rare.’

* When consumed, the proficiency of ‘Nine Laws’ will increase greatly.

* It is an original book written by the author, but the soul has become weathered after many years. It can't be a target of Overwrite, and the fragment of the soul can be absorbed without 'Transmission.'

“Oh...!”

Theodore couldn't suppress the exclamation. The magic book he'd picked up without any thought turned out to be an original book. It was also of the 'Rare' grade, which he had only been able to find a few over the past year. The author's soul was too weathered, but it was still a good profit.

At that moment, a thunderbolt flashed through Theodore's mind.

“Dongil.”

“Yes, Brother.”

“How are books reprinted on the continent? Apart from ordinary books... things like books on shamanism.”

Then Baek Dongil answered with a curious expression, “Reprinted?”

“What?”

“Isn’t it usually the case that such books are kept hidden from others? It can’t be helped if it is a desperate situation, but there is usually only one copy.”

Theodore reflexively covered his mouth as he got the answer he’d wanted.

Duplication magic didn’t exist in the eastern continent. Moreover, it was a closed structure where knowledge was only shared with one’s disciple and blood relatives. Unlike the western continent where simple magic could be learned, the magic of the East was hidden.

Perhaps all the books in these wagons were—

“...Original books.”

After one year, there was the emergence of a variable which might knock down that thick wall.

Chapter 161 – Delicacy From The East (2)

“It took more time than I thought...” Theodore mumbled before setting down the thought.

This was because the language was unfamiliar, despite having received Lee Yoonsung’s knowledge. It took him three or four times longer than usual to finish reading.

Furthermore, it was common for the magic books to use not only Chinese characters but also special languages such as Sanskrit and Urdu. They were languages which Lee Yoonsung didn’t know.

So, Theo had no choice but to learn from the beginning.

‘Well, it has been a long time since I’ve studied this way.’

It had been around the time when he entered Bergen Academy. He remembered his desperate days of spending all night studying over paper.

Theodore recalled the memories as he replaced the worn down pen. Over the past fortnight, he had used more than a dozen ink cartridges. If it wasn’t for recovery magic, he would’ve got a stress fracture in his wrist.

If Theodore had to study like this, what about the warrior’s son?

“B-Brother...” A faint voice called out from the desk next to Theo. Like Theodore, dozens of books were piled up in front of Baek Dongil, who had a dark stubble.

Baek Dongil was in the same predicament as Theodore. Along with runes, which could be called the basics of a magician, it was necessary to raise his skill in the common language to the level of a local. Additionally, there were the mathematics and geometry skills needed to calculate the magic formulas.

However, Theodore was a cruel figure when it came to studying.

Clack!

There was no chanting. Healing and Refresh, the two spells which were triggered with a single tap of his fingers, wrapped around Baek Dongil’s body. The combined magic which healed physical fatigue and mental fatigue was really effective.

“Are you okay now?”

It was as Theo said. The dark circles under Baek Dongil’s eyes lightened up, and his throbbing fingers, sore from hours of use, felt lighter. However, the accumulated tiredness was still the same, causing Baek Dongil to look at Theodore with a sullen face.

“Uhh... I still can’t get used to this feeling, despite experiencing it a few times.”

“It is still just a shortcut. This is already the eighth time, and the gap between recovery spells is getting smaller... It is a little early, but we will end it here for today.”

Magic was limited when it came to recovering the body. If recovery magic was used repeatedly, the effect would decrease. Additionally, the body which received the excessive magic power in a short period of time would become temporarily resistant to magic.

Of course, people from the magic tower would've collapsed from dizziness at least 20 times already. However, their physical bodies couldn't be compared to Baek Dongil, despite him still being a beginner.

Once Theodore's permission was given, Baek Dongil got up from the seat he had been stuck in for hours and grumbled, “Urgh! But Brother, do I really need to learn this official language? Can't Brother teach me instead of reading the books?”

“No, that won't work,” Theodore firmly rejected the idea.

Theodore had faithfully accumulated his knowledge, so he knew that such a narrow viewpoint wouldn't work.

A person who used a shortcut for a comfortable path would have their ankle grabbed one day by the insincere attitude. This method might seem insufficient now, but it wouldn't be easy to forget the words.

For magicians who pursued infinite wisdom, oblivion was the worst enemy. A person who couldn't find a path through their own will would eventually wander in silence.

“You can't forget to set up the foundation of a pillar just because you're in a hurry. As a descendant of a warrior, don't you know what happens to a person who neglects the foundations?”

“T-That...” Baek Dongil stammered at the sharp words.

This made Theodore pat his shoulder and smile. “I understand that your heart is urgent. Is it because I will leave this country soon?”

“...I have nothing to say.” The boy dropped his head with a red face, embarrassed because his inner thoughts had been exposed. It was a situation where he had a time limit regarding his teacher, and his young age meant he couldn't calm his mind while knowing this.

Theodore knew Baek Dongil's mindset, but teaching him that would be the worse answer. So, Theodore stated in a quiet voice, “Dongil.”

“Yes, Brother.”

“I am teaching you as asked, but I can't be a true mentor.”

Baek Dongil's eyes shook slightly at the words. He replied in a

heavy tone, “I-I see. It has only been a fortnight, but... starting at my age and expecting great achievements...”

“No, that isn’t the point.”

“Huh?” Baek Dongil raised his head at Theo’s decisive voice. He stared earnestly into Theodore’s blue eyes and gulped.

“Your skills are quite excellent, but I’m not a good teacher. You have an abundance of power but are still immature. I can only tell you the path that you should take.”

“.....”

“Magic isn’t something that can be learned in just a few months. If you do it that way, you won’t be able to get a glimpse of it, from birth to death. Are you going to walk along that path?”

After listening to him, the cloudiness returned to Baek Dongil’s eyes. It was the so-called heart demon. Could it be due to the accumulated discipline built up in him since childhood...? Baek Dongil’s eyes eventually cleared up as he continued listening to Theodore speak.

“Obviously, the amount of time during which I can teach you is short. However, there are many magicians, and some of them are suitable to be your teacher. My role is to build up your foundations for when you meet that good mentor.”

“...B-Brother.” Baek Dongil lowered his head with shame after hearing the truth from Theodore.

It made a lot of sense. How could he impart great knowledge to Baek Dongil, who hadn't even reached the threshold of a beginner? It was obvious that Baek Dongil wouldn't understand even if he was taught. Once he accumulated his basic knowledge, he could learn under another teacher or enter an academy.

Baek Dongil had an enlightened expression on his face. He was too embarrassed to be overly grateful, but the atmosphere was too heavy to remain silent.

Theodore noticed the atmosphere half a beat later and rose to his feet. “Let's start again tomorrow at noon. Until then, review what you've studied and have a good rest.”

“Yes, Brother! I'll finish it thoroughly!” Baek Dongil responded vigorously, before looking at the stack of books on Theodore's desk.

Baek Dongil hadn't finished learning the official language, but Theodore was already reading the magic books by himself. Baek Dongil was quite confident in his studying ability, but his pace was much slower.

“By the way, Brother is really awesome. You must've received a lot of praise from your elders since you were a child, and you were definitely called a genius right?”

“...No.” Theodore smiled bitterly as he spoke of his old nickname, “In the academy, I failed three times and was called a dunce.”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Maybe it is one of the reasons why I am teaching you. You resemble my old self.”

Baek Dongil couldn't say anything as the unknown past flashed before Theodore's eyes. Theodore patted Baek Dongil on the shoulder again before turning away from him. Then the door closed without a sound, with only the faint echo of footsteps in the corridor.

The memories were like faded watercolors.

*

After finishing the study session with Baek Dongil, Theodore had a quick meal and then returned to his room. The sun was setting in the western sky, turning it a reddish color. Normally, it would be time to feed Gluttony and spar with Randolph... but not today.

Theodore looked at the book before him and muttered, “...In the end, it is this one.”

A fortnight wasn't a long time. In the meantime, Theodore had only gotten a high degree of understanding with three or four

books of shamanism. There was the [Nine Rulers Magic Book] he picked up on the first day, but Theodore was drawn to another shamanism book.

He cheered when he first saw the information window.

[Art of Onmyōdō Treatise]

[-This book explains the magic system based on the theory of yin and yang. The author divided the world into yin and yang, as all things maintain balance and harmony when interacting with each other, such as water and fire. The author's understanding of the laws of nature has reached an advanced state, but the author was murdered by ??? (can't be determined).

* Your understanding is very high. (96.9%)

* This magic book is rated 'Precious.'

* When consumed, you can learn 'Art of Onmyōdō.'

* When consumed, understanding of magic attributes will greatly increase.

* This is an original book written by the author. However, since he wrote six books, his power is divided into six. Even so, the fragment of soul inside this book is powerful and maintains

an individual ego.

‘It is best to eat this book.’

The prudent Theodore judged that [Art of Onmyōdō Treatise] was the most useful book for him right now.

This idea grew, instead of diminishing, as he slowly read through the ‘Art of Onmyōdō Treatise’. Art of Onmyōdō was the technique of combining two incompatible powers. Learning this would give Theodore a solution to his unfinished spell. He could batter at the master’s wall, possibly destroying it.

Theodore made the decision and stretched out his hand, dragging the magic scroll into his hands. The scroll was worth at least a few gold, but Theodore tore it without any hesitation.

Puhwaak!

Simultaneously, a light burst out. The light wasn’t attack magic or secondary magic. It was a special spell which produced an object with the same shape and weight, as long as certain conditions were met. Theodore had created a copy of the scroll.

As two versions of the same book appeared, Theodore picked up the copy and placed it on his desk. This was done with the consent of Baek Dongil which he had obtained in advance.

‘Well, to most people, there will be no difference between the original and the copy.’

There might be some financial differences, but it was a penny compared to how much money the Baek Family had. Therefore, Baek Dongil had easily accepted the request.

“Okay, this is finished.”

His preparations were over. Theodore then sat on the bed without hesitation and aimed his left hand toward [Art of Onmyōdō Treatise]. In this situation, only one sentence would emerge. “Eat, Gluttony.”

The red tongue immediately swallowed the book, as if it had been waiting.

[‘Art of Onmyōdō’ has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[Your perception of magic attributes has greatly increased.]

[Accepting the proficiency of ‘Art of Onmyōdō’... failed.]

[An original book has been consumed. The synchro rate with object name ‘Abe no Seimei’ is being checked... Blocked. Abe no Seimei has refused to sync with the user. You can try to force a sync using the permissions of a user, but it is not

recommended.]

“W-What?!”

Synchro was refused! Theodore was shocked because he had never experienced this before. Not only was synchro denied, the task of absorbing the proficiency of ‘Art of Onmyōdō’ had failed. It was like the original book had blown up. Fortunately, the system wasn’t done yet.

Once again, it was the first time Theodore had experienced this type of message.

[Object name ‘Abe no Seimei’ is asking for a conversation with the user. Would you like to accept?]

“Before that, I want to ask something.”

Rather than responding to Abe no Seimei’s request, Theodore wanted an answer for this unprecedented situation. Gluttony was strictly confidential about hidden functions or certain information, but it didn’t care much about the functions which had already been revealed.

Unsurprisingly, it replied in a blunt voice, –Do you want to ask why the synchro was rejected?

“Of course. So far, you’ve never mentioned it.”

–To be precise, it wasn’t that I hadn’t told you, but more like I couldn’t.

An ordinary person might ask for more, but Theodore stopped and thought about it.

It wasn’t that it hadn’t, but that it hadn’t been able to. In other words, the authors of original books didn’t have the ability to do so. Then how did the author called Abe no Seimei have this ability?

To confirm his guess, Theodore opened his mouth again and asked, “Abe no Seimei. Is he special?”

–Special... that word isn’t wrong. Simply put, his spirit is high.

“Spirit is high?”

–That’s right. He wasn’t fully transcendent, but he was close to the end of a mortal existence. The strength of such an existence can’t be completely subdued. You could connect with Myrdal because he accepted the connection.

Theodore groaned slightly. It meant that among the authors he had met so far, Abe no Seimei was possibly stronger than a master. This might be an existence comparable to the great elementalists,

Myrdal.

In the end, he was encountering such a monster in an original book about shamanism.

Theodore declared to Gluttony with a determined expression, “I will accept Abe no Seimei’s request.”



Ellenoa



Chapter 162 – Delicacy From The East (3)

The system responded to his permission.

[After confirming the user's intention, object name 'Abe no Seimei' will be called. Checking the communication connection... Success, object name 'Abe no Seimei' has approved the two-way communication.]

[He will temporarily be synchronized with the user's consciousness.]

Simultaneously, the voice disappeared, and darkness covered Theodore's eyes. It was a darkness which didn't tolerate the presence of life.

Theodore looked around the darkness with a feeling of déjà vu, and he soon figured out the cause of the darkness. It was the same as when he heard the 'quests' in the Pirate Archipelago. Maybe this was the only space where he could converse with the authors.

As before, light particles gathered in front of him. Abe no Seimei... This was the appearance of an existence who couldn't be handled even with Gluttony's 4th seal released.

'Based on only the physique... It is hard to know.'

Theodore looked nervously at the shape which was gradually forming from the light.

He estimated that the figure's height was 170cm, but the gender couldn't be discerned. It was difficult to judge because the eyes were male while the jaw was feminine. Shortly after that, Abe no Seimei's form was completed.

The hem of his sleeves went down to his thighs, while his long hair, which flowed from underneath the strange hat he wore, had a black shine like ebony. He was wearing white clothing similar to a robe, with red cloth woven in. It was clothing that Theodore had never seen in any literature.

However, Theodore could only calmly observe Seimei up to there.

Ping-

The moment that he saw the last part of Seimei's form, the nose, an unfamiliar dizziness filled Theodore's mind. Seimei had pale white skin and bright golden eyes. Apart from the cultural difference, it was a beauty which anyone would admire. However, Theodore felt an inexplicable sense of hostility.

“Urgh.” Theodore gritted his teeth as he was filled with the desire to attack.

Meanwhile, Seimei's eyes widened with surprise. “Ho, an

interesting power is protecting you.”

Of course, it was obvious that something was causing this hostility. As Theodore stared at Seimei, he tried to suppress his boiling magic power. “You are Abe no Seimei?”

“That’s right,” the onmyōji, Abe no Seimei, said with a nod as he opened the fan in his hand. “This body is a 2nd generation onmyōji leader, originally Tsuchimikado Abe. I am Onmyōji Seimei.”

Theodore replied with a bleak expression, “I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“Hrmm, you are someone who can’t read the atmosphere. In this situation, it is reasonable to agree enthusiastically.”

“I don’t know who you are, but I don’t like feeling like this. Can you explain?” Theodore couldn’t think about the atmosphere due to the hostility he felt.

However, Seimei countered Theodore’s doubts calmly. “I was just playing a small trick. The hostility isn’t coming from me but from yourself.”

“Myself?”

“To be exact, it is coming from your neck.”

‘My neck?’ Theodore touched his neck and was surprised to feel a cool chill pouring out. It was at the place where Aquilo had injected her blood. The mark which remained there was shining blue. This was a phenomenon Theodore had never experienced before.

However, unlike him, Seimei seemed to already know the situation and wasn’t confused.

Seimei said, “Dragon of the west, a strong proprietary feeling. A female?”

Dragon’s blood itself created a powerful magic resistance. Theodore’s own magic power wasn’t affected, but it was conscious of any magic from the outside. However, Aquila’s blood mark was reacting more than that. It was showing an extreme hostility toward Seimei.

Theodore concentrated on the mark on his neck.

‘I know you are helping me, but just relax,’ he consciously suppressed the blood mark.

Theodore managed to calm his head and looked at Seimei again.

Seimei was a man with the beauty of a woman. It was different from Ellenoa’s neutral charm. Seimei transmitted the beauty of both sexes. Perhaps due to the mood, the silhouette of Seimei’s face looked like a fox.

Theodore opened his mouth with a wary expression, “Was that why you called me?”

“No, it was just a prank,” Seimei spoke with his fan covering his mouth. “The real test will begin now. This is why I called you. If you fail to live up to my expectations, I won’t be able to give you ‘Art of Onmyōdō.’”

“What is the reason for the test?”

“I’ve already experienced that there is nothing as dangerous as giving strength to an unqualified person.” The playful atmosphere was gone in an instant, with Seimei’s voice showing his seriousness.

As Gluttony had said, Seimei had almost reached the end of a mortal existence, so his pressure pushed heavily on Theodore’s shoulder. The pressure was high even in comparison to back when he faced one of the Seven Swords of the empire.

The great onmyōji declared in a majestic voice, “If you really want my ‘Art of Onmyōdō,’ you must first get the recognition of this Seimei.”

A fragment of a soul in the original book was going to test Theodore...?

Theodore was dumbfounded, but Seimei’s words did make sense.

Gluttony's power, 'original books predation,' was a magic which defied comprehension and could reproduce the magic without any errors. As a person who had made a name for himself in his era, it was natural for Seimei to want to verify the person desiring that knowledge.

"Is it an art that you have to be careful about transferring?" Theodore asked with a cautious attitude after guessing the reason.

"Huh? It isn't a dangerous technique," Seimei answered. It was a surprising reply. Theodore was bothered by it, but Seimei fanned his face and continued. "Well, your words aren't entirely wrong. I don't know about anyone else, but it is extremely dangerous in your hands."

"...What do you mean?"

"According to its name, the Art of Onmyōdō is a method of harmony between yin and yang. Therefore, the interaction with harmony will be amplified in accordance with the power of the opposing forces." Then Seimei pointed his fan at Theodore and continued to say, "I don't know how you obtained them, but there are two enormous types of forces twisting in your body. One is the flame of extinction that burns the heavens and the earth, while the other is the blood of a sea dragon. If you can properly control them using the Art of Onmyōdō... your strength will be enough to destroy a country."

Indeed, Theodore couldn't deny the eerie words. The power of the two opposing forces joining together had been proven in his spar with Baek Jongmyung.

If Theodore could threaten a sword master with an incomplete version while still at the 6th Circle, what about after reaching the 7th Circle and completing it? It might evolve into a magic which could literally destroy a mountain.

However, what if the person who acquired such magic was evil? No, even if they weren't an evil person, it was still risky. This was a power huge enough to disrupt the balance.

Seimei urged him to answer with cold eyes. "Now, what will you do? Will you accept this test?"

Should Theodore accept it now or postpone it until later? There was a choice to not accept it. Theodore was troubled for a moment about the two roads ahead of him. He could wait until he released Gluttony's 5th seal, ignore Seimei's test, and force the synchro. Of course, there was also the quest, and his relationship with Seimei would become a mess.

'...Backing off isn't a good choice either.'

His intuition had evolved over time and through several crises.

The words he spoke to Baek Dongil had meant something. Theodore couldn't reach his goal if he stuck to a comfortable road or took a shortcut. This was also true if he backed away. The trial wouldn't wait for the challenger, and there was no law that the opportunity would always be there.

So, Theodore believed in himself and stepped forward. “The test, let’s start it straight away.”

“-Ohu.” Seimei smiled, folded the fan, and touched his lips with it. “Young men are excellent at recognizing opportunities! I thought you would step back here.”

“There is no need for flattery.”

“Huh, is that so? Are you pouting?”

Theodore could easily tell that Seimei was guarded against him. Perhaps it was due to the two powers inside him, or for other reasons. Either way, the current Theodore could do only one thing.

Being straightforward was the best option. The right answer was to say that he would break Seimei’s test. It was meaningless to step back against the already vigilant Seimei. Theodore’s declaration was the right answer as the playfulness was erased from Seimei’s face.

Then Seimei said, “Good. Then let the wind bring the trials!”

Wuuong-

A wind started blowing over from somewhere. This was the spiritual world created by Gluttony where the laws of physics

didn't exist, so the 'wind' was indeed an unnatural phenomenon.

The pitch black space filled with color, and the landscape turned into a ridge which Theodore had never seen before. Pink petals rubbed against his cheeks, and the sun appeared in the new sky. It was hard to imagine this was just an illusion.

‘This... Is this a landscape Seimei created?’

Seimei's voice entered the nervous Theodore's ears, 「This Abe no Seimei is most interested in judging people according to the virtue of 'Heaven, Earth, and Human.'」

“Heaven, Earth and Human...?”

「The heavens, the earth, and people. You will know the meaning when you take my test.」 Seimei then started the test with a loud and dignified voice, 「Chapter 1, I will start with the 'Human' test.」

In response to that, a system message popped up.

[You have accepted the request of object name 'Abe no Seimei.' The difficulty of this stage is quite high. If you fail or give up along the way, you can't challenge it again.]

[Test of 'Heaven, Earth, and Human: Human chapter' will start in 30 seconds.]

[Success Reward: Skill ‘Art of Onmyōdō’, Seimei’s recognition, and you can see some information related to ????.]

[Failure Fee: Failure to acquire the skill ‘Art of Onmyōdō’, Seimei’s quest is not available.]

[Test of ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human: Human chapter’ is starting.]

Vince Haidel



Chapter 163 – Heaven, Earth And Human Test (1)

As Theodore looked reflexively at the information window before him, Seimei started to explain the ‘Human Test,’ 「It is good to devote yourself to training every day. However, if you can’t use that power to protect people, it is just a meaningless disaster like a typhoon or flood. In the Human Test, I will look back on the lives you have saved before.」

“The lives I have saved...?”

「The value of life can’t just be assessed by men and women. Using the most equitable and reasonable standard, as well as considering your age, I will take 10,000 lives as the bottom line. 」

10,000 lives...! It was easy to say, but that was a number which made up an army. Besides, it wasn’t simply helping them but saving their lives. This made the difficulty rise to an absurd level.

Seimei said he considered Theodore’s young age, but in the end, it was an attempt to make him give up the test. However, Theodore nodded without a single sign of agitation. “I understand.”

Seimei was confused by the calm answer. 「...You’re going to accept this condition? 」

“Does that mean you are overcharging me?”

「O-Of course not...」 Seimei muttered in a voice filled with embarrassment. Just like how a gambler with high odds of winning was cautious against bluffs, it seemed like Seimei became reluctant due to Theodore's unwavering attitude.

However, Seimei denied his suspicions. Saving that many lives... it was a miracle only possible for heroes of the Age of Mythology. Perhaps that unusual calmness meant Theodore had already inwardly abandoned the 'Human Test.'

Seimei guessed this and spoke again, 「I understand. From now on, I will go back through your life and count the number of lives that have been saved! 」

Simultaneously, the technique of 'Causality Mirror' was used. This was top-level shamanism which had been practiced long ago, and it was used to gain insight into the past. It was incredible that it could be reproduced after Seimei's death.

“Ah.” Theodore realized that he was on a familiar hill. He looked around involuntarily, then he heard Seimei's voice, as if confirming his conjecture.

「Oho, this is your hometown. 」

It was as Seimei said. The Miller Barony, the place where Theodore had grown up, was spread under his feet. However, it wasn't the peaceful landscape where wheat grew during the harvest season. It was a battlefield where living corpses tangled

together with people.

The scene where the undead had attacked, filled with the smell of blood and death, was still vivid in his mind. The struggle with the elder lich was reproduced right before his eyes.

Seimei quietly contemplated until the memory ended, then he settled the results according to the 'Human Test.'

He spoke in a voice which wasn't filled with any surprise at the presence of the elder lich. 「It is a fight against the black magic that summoned the undead. You did a considerable amount of work with the help of others. There are over 100 people in the village, and you prevented the aftermath that would've happened next... Okay, that is 1,000 lives.」

Seimei acknowledged that Theo had saved 1,000 lives. The result was limited due to the mercenaries who had helped defend the village, as well as two people who had aided him against the elder lich.

It was a large number, but when thinking of the quota, Theo had only filled 10%. Nonetheless, Theodore accepted the result without any objections. "Well, it is a reasonable number."

That said, this wasn't the only incident.

「Hrmm, then let's go to the next one.」 Seimei was slowly becoming more uncomfortable. He had been sure the quota

couldn't be filled, but his confidence was shaken after seeing Theodore's innocent face.

Then the causal scene changed. It became a dark alley, the stronghold of thieves. This was the outskirts of Bergen, which Theo had infiltrated in order to rescue the captured elves. The series of circumstances that Theodore remembered flowed before their eyes.

Piing!

As soon as Theodore's Magic Bullet destroyed the head of the thief, the world stopped again.

「You are like a typical hero, rescuing the long-eared family who had become slaves.」

“Long-eared family? Is that what you call the elves in the East?”

「Their ears are long. I admit that it isn't a good name, but an easy to understand name lasts for a long time. 」

Soon after that, Seimei came to a conclusion, 「I will count this as 100. 」

“I understand.”

「Hrmm.」

It was a brief response. Seimei felt a strange feeling rising in his stomach at Theo's dull answer. He had expected to be questioned about the number '100,' yet why was this youth acting like this? However, Seimei pushed his irritation down and headed to the next memory.

The confrontation with the legend ranked grimoire, 'Laevateinn,' was reproduced.

「Hah...」 Seimei cried out in a loud voice for the first time, unlike his usual taunting or playful tone.

He was an onmyōji, so he could see how dangerous these flames were. Theodore had literally saved the world in this fight. Even if it wasn't the world, it couldn't be denied that Theo had saved all the elves living in the Great Forest. Additionally, the lowest estimation of that would be in the hundreds of thousands.

Needless to say, Theodore had surpassed Seimei's 'Human Test' with this one fight.

「...This... I have to admit it! 」

The Causality Mirror wasn't simply a recollection of the past but a top-level magic which looked at all the associated people. Thus, Seimei was forced to give a passing grade for Theo's heroic actions.

It was worth more than 10,000 lives, even with the help of the

high elves, the help of the elemental ruler, and the cooperation of Theodore's fellow magicians. Furthermore, there were still events left to see. However, Seimei thought it was sufficient and stopped the technique.

Then he spoke in a clear voice, 「Young man from the West, are you a protagonist who emerged from a heroic saga somewhere? 」

Theodore tried to speak, but he couldn't. It wasn't a question asking for an answer. So, instead, he realized it was Seimei's sincere compliment. Then the system messages announcing the end of the 'Human Test' appeared.

[You have passed the 'Heaven, Earth, and Human: Human chapter.']

[The progress at the current stage is 33.3%.]

[Step 2: Go to the 'Heaven, Earth, and Human: Earth Chapter.']

At the next moment, Theodore realized he had returned to the original space. Nothing was visible except darkness. He could only see Seimei, who was looking at him with a peculiar expression.

“Honestly, I'm amazed,” Seimei remarked.

“.....”Theo didn't respond.

“A young man who saved so many lives is standing before me. I was confident in my own time, but maybe that was self-conceit.”

The young man who had called Seimei’s soul in an unknown way... His identity might be suspicious, but... instead of failing, he had passed the test. Perhaps this encounter was an opportunity to solve the problem that Seimei himself couldn’t solve. Seimei gazed at Theodore with deep eyes.

If this was the case, then he would verify the possibility with the other two tests.

“I will explain this test.”

If the ‘Human Chapter’ tested the ‘responsibility of a person with power,’ then the ‘Earth Chapter’ tested the virtue of ‘not being overwhelmed by one’s own strength.’ There was nothing as ugly as senseless violence, so strong patience was required for the ‘Earth Test.’

“The ‘Earth Test’ is to confirm your faith in yourself and the patience to not succumb to temptation. Is it possible for you to stand upright in front of the temptation that you have faced?”

Everyone faced their own temptations, and their lives were determined by whether they gave in or resisted it. Childhood dreams faded into faint memories, and it wasn’t uncommon for a boy who dreamed of becoming a righteous knight to end up as a thief for a few gold coins.

It was said that mountains and rivers wouldn't change in 10 years, but people always changed. The path chosen by people would change according to their choices. Rather than words, actions were what defined a person.

Theodore looked at his last 20 years and stood upright. "Yes, I can do it."

He couldn't say that he had never looked up at the sky in shame, but he hadn't lived a shameful life. In a sense, this might be a privilege of the young. The passing years were short, and the youthfulness meant they were faithful to their inner hearts, rather than worldly desires.

Seimei nodded at the sure answer and pointed to Theodore's head with his fan. Then he made a simple gesture with his other hand and said, "Path of Five Desires."

*

Theodore screamed without any sound, "—————!"

It was only a short time in reality, with approximately five seconds passing since Seimei had cast the spell. However, during those five seconds, Theodore experienced at least 50 years of life.

He was expelled from Bergen Academy and retired to the country.

He agreed to the black market's dealer's proposal and entered the world of back alleys.

He ran away from Ellenoa.

He couldn't stop [Laevateinn].

He fell to Aquilo's temptation and became her possession.

Of course, not all the memories remained. Like dimly shaded twilight, they were remnants of a long time ago. Theodore experienced the opposite side of a fork in the road, the one he hadn't chosen.

There were lives which ended tragically and lives in which he lived peacefully. There was also a life in which he grasped enormous wealth and a life during which he was surrounded by beauties. He experienced a life where he returned home and quit magic, and a life marked by enormous achievements on all continents.

Seimei watched all of it and briefly commented, "Indeed, an eventful life."

It was a life which seemed to be a sheer cliff. If Theodore had given up even once, he wouldn't be standing here now. In an era where people were scrambling to be heroes, someone had reached here with a normal body.

Seimei had a feeling of admiration for Theodore. Then he threw a joke at Theodore, who was mentally exhausted. “By the way, I have something to ask you, regardless of whether you pass the test or not.”

“.....”

“Do you have a problem of sexual dysfunction?”

Tok, it was the sound of someone’s sense of reason snapping.

Chapter 164 – Heaven, Earth And Human Test (2)

Kiiing-!

Theodore couldn't stand it anymore, and Magic Bullet burst out from his fingertip. The power of the flash was now enough to penetrate 6th Circle defense magic. In fact, it was such a perfect surprise attack that even a sword master's aura might be delayed by one beat.

However, it didn't do any good against this target.

“Whoa, whoa. Don't be so angry. Calm down. Is this a story that can't be discussed among men?” Seimei said.

He'd gotten rid of Theodore's Magic Bullet without leaving a trace.

It wasn't simply blocking or deflecting it. He had destroyed it completely. The 7th Circle magic, Dispel, couldn't exceed the casting speed of Magic Bullet, but Seimei's hand gestures had plenty of time to spare. Theodore's head cooled down instantly after seeing the incomprehensible phenomenon.

Seimei seemed to realize Theodore's tension as he spoke to Theodore in a smug tone, “Your body doesn't have any physical problems, so it needs to be approached from a mental point of view.”

“Does this have anything to do with the Earth Test?”

“Uhuh! Young man, that question is really stupid!”

Theodore was sick of Seimei’s voice, but Seimei started to rave about the meaning of the ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human’ test.

“Men are yang, women are yin. The Art of Onmyōdō is also about the harmony between man and woman, so why are you ashamed? You shouldn’t have such an attitude!” Seimei’s loud voice expressed his pride of being an onmyōji.

However, Theodore didn’t even raise an eyebrow as he responded in a calm voice, “So, what do you want to say?”

“Which female suits your taste the most?” The dignified onmyōji actually asked such a question. “Is it the girl with the silver hair who napped in the carriage? The quarter dragon who always enjoys skin contact with you? The long-eared family member who has a charming atmosphere, or the sea dragon who bit your neck?”

“What the hell are you saying now—”

“I am curious about why you continue to ignore their affection.”

When Seimei finished talking, Theodore’s face stiffened like he was made of wax. Seimei’s words pushed at a topic which Theo

had been avoiding unconsciously. Theo's mind wasn't prepared for it.

However, before Theodore could speak an excuse, Seimei spoke with narrowed eyes, "Don't think of any excuses. The 'Path of Five Desires' technique is a spell that grasps the desires dwelling within humans, so I already know."

"D-Damn bastard...!" Theodore was dismayed at having his inner thoughts read, but there was nothing he could do against Seimei. His opponent was a monster with unknown depths, who had destroyed Magic Bullet with a wave of his fan and created an illusion which felt like 50 years.

So, Theodore chose to breathe calmly. Seimei wouldn't have brought this up for no reason. Theodore's two anger-filled eyes sank deeply.

'Why did I ignore them when I know their hearts?'

Theodore already knew the answer. He just didn't want to face it. Maybe it was because he had seen the other possibilities during the 'Earth Chapter,' so he could now look at his weakness with a clear eye.

"...I wasn't ready yet."

"Ready, that is also a silly answer." Seimei, however, snorted and denied the answer. "You can't always be prepared in life. There is

no guarantee that 1,000 years of peace won't be broken tomorrow. How much does a man need to prepare to accept a woman's feelings? What are the necessary qualifications?"

"That..." Theodore closed his mouth at the words.

After hearing 'qualifications,' an insidious snake rose in his heart and whispered negative thoughts.

Theodore was from a humble noble family. He had just happened to stumble upon a grimoire and wasn't actually suitable for the women who shone brilliantly.

So, he had been constantly running away. He had tried to fill up his self-esteem by becoming stronger every day and telling himself that there was no time to waste on love and feelings. He had believed that he could someday face these emotions when he had become stronger.

"Hrmm, I guess you can see a little bit now." Seimei smiled when he saw the eyes of the young man become blurred with impatience.

"...Seimei."

"What is it?"

"How do I act from now on?"

“Of course, I don’t know.” Seimei tapped his temple with his folded fan and smiled. “Well, you don’t have to worry about it right now. You have faced it in your unconscious mind, so you will be able to deal with them more honestly in the future. A man who died a thousand years ago can’t give advice about love affairs today! My friendly advice ends here.”

Why was it that Theodore was no longer angry after seeing Seimei’s facial expression?

Perhaps it was because a problem which had been lingering in Theodore’s mind was now resolved because of Seimei. Or maybe it was because he had become accustomed to Seimei’s talking style? Either way, this conversation was worth it.

Theodore’s complexion returned to normal, and Seimei continued to speak, “Now, you have obviously passed the Earth Chapter.”

Just like the ‘Human Test,’ several system messages emerged.

[You have passed the ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human: Earth chapter.’]

[The progress at the current stage is 66.6%.]

[After 30 seconds, you will automatically enter the third stage ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human: Heaven Chapter.’]

‘The Heaven Test...’ Theodore looked at the sentence and worried about what it would be like.

Since ancient times, the sky had symbolized grandeur and profound meaning. According to Lee Yoonsung’s memories, the emperor of the middle kingdoms in the eastern continent had called himself, ‘Son of Heaven.’

Unlike during the previous two tests, Seimei looked dignified and solemn. His low voice rang out through the darkness-covered space, “Finally, you will take the Heaven Test.”

Seimei opened his fan, but he didn’t explain what the test would examine. Instead, he said, “You will have to realize the meaning of the Heaven Test yourself. If you can’t see the essence of the test and reflect on it, you will never pass.”

“The meaning of the test... and its essence?”

“That is all I can say. Please, I hope you will succeed.”

The 30 second grace period was over.

[Entering the 3rd stage ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human: Heaven Chapter.’]

Once again, Theodore couldn’t feel anything before he was

thrown into an unknown space. It was a space surrounded by white walls with windows, but there was no entrance.

As a test, he shot a few Magic Bullets, but they didn't penetrate through the floor. The walls were the same as the floor. It wasn't a space he could break through with simple destructive power.

‘It is impossible to escape through my power. What type of test will occur in this place?’

Then at the moment when Theodore was going to look around again...

Chobeok.

There was the vivid sound of someone's footsteps.

“Eh?” Theodore's eyes reflexively widened before surprise, and curiosity covered his face. In this white space, her red hair would be noticed a few kilometers away. Perhaps it was just an illusion of Veronica based on Theodore's memories, but he couldn't help feeling pleased.

“Tower Mas..ter?”

Indeed, but that was until he saw the face revealed behind her hair.

Chill.

The moment he met her eyes, Theodore felt a chill go down his spine.

Her eyes were like transparent glass beads, and there was no emotion in her face. This was something he had never seen in the 'real' Veronica.' As Theodore stiffened with discomfort, the fake Veronica moved.

It was a pure coincidence that he avoided the first attack.

Puhwaak!

Then one beat later, Veronica's fist punched out, and Theodore's body flew back. It combined the physical abilities of a quarter dragon and magic. Theodore reflexively adjusted his position, but he didn't have time to do anything. He had miraculously avoided the first attack, but the fake Veronica was already punching again.

The blow was like the sky was falling down.

Kwarurung!

Fake Veronica's fist broke through Theodore's four-layered defense magic and two desperately reinforced arm guards, and crushed Theodore's head. It was absolute strength. Theodore's death was decided the moment her fist hit his head.

This was Theodore Miller's first death.

*

“...Ack?!” A sound flowed out.

Theodore touched his broken skull and realized that he was alive, rather than dead. His attached arms and legs moved smoothly, and there was a stinging pain when he pinched his skin. The vivid sensations made him realize his survival.

Theodore looked around again with confused eyes.

‘This is still the white-walled space, so what was that? Was it a mere hallucination? Or the Heaven Test?’

His head, which had been broken by the fake Veronica, was completely intact. However, the memory of his death was vividly clear. He had been vigilant, but there was an overwhelming difference in skill. So, he couldn't think of it as just an illusion.

Seimei hadn't given Theodore any advice. Theodore didn't know the intentions of the test, and he couldn't pass if he didn't understand it. However, before Theodore could realize anything, ‘he’ appeared.

“...Blundell, is it your turn?”

Meltor's Blue Tower Master, Blundell Adruncus, stared at Theodore with an expressionless face. Rumour had it that he could break an ogre's wrist with one hand, but this time, he was facing Theodore.

Just like the fake Veronica, Blundell didn't say anything as he pointed his staff at Theodore. That was the end.

“Ah...?! Aaack!”

Death came to Theodore before his senses had reacted. Before Theodore could even scream, his vocal cords dried up. His blood, bone marrow, and bones dried up and shattered. Dehydration was Blundell's best attack. It was a cruel spell which took away all water, which was the foundation of life.

The more fearful thing wasn't the power, but that Theodore hadn't noticed the activation.

‘T-This is ridiculous...! Mana, it didn't mo...ve...’

His sensitivity had been stretched to the limits. He could hear the sound of a needle dropping into sand and see the concentration of dust in a dark cave. Nevertheless, he hadn't been able to notice when and how Blundell's magic had worked.

This was Theodore Miller's second death.

“Heooooook!”

Theodore breathed out as soon as he appeared again. The skin which had dried up before was just fine. He recalled the terrifying horror of all the moisture in his body evaporating.

First, it had been Veronica and then Blundell Adruncus. They were the two magicians who were considered to be the strongest in the Meltor Kingdom. Theodore was on the threshold of the master level, but he couldn't challenge them. If he fought a hundred times or a thousand times, he would die a thousand times.

Theodore looked down at his hands, realizing the difference between him and a master.

‘No, not just that. My physical condition is also a bit strange.’

When Veronica's fist had descended toward him, Theodore had wanted to escape using Fluidization. The strong physical attack wouldn't be able to strike his spiritual body. However, Umbra didn't work for some reason, causing Theodore's defense magic to be delayed by half a beat.

It was also true for when he'd been murdered by the fake Blundell.

It was strange that when Dehydration was used, his sensory

perception hadn't predicted the crisis in advance. Then he looked back and realized it was pure coincidence that he had avoided Veronica's first attack. It hadn't been due to his warning system.

However, even so, the disappearance of Umbra and his sensory perception was fatal. He didn't know what the 'Heaven Test' was, but he was lacking some of his abilities. Sweat flowed down Theodore's forehead.

"Damn, this is a little dangerous."

His voice didn't reach Mitra, the Ring of Muspelheim was sealed, and there was no reaction from Aquilo's blood mark on his neck. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Theodore's actual combat strength had fallen by more than half. In addition to that, all of Gluttony's functions, including Memorize, were tied up.

The enemies who had appeared in this space had been monsters that far exceeded Theodore's best state. The third person was no exception.

"...You are wearing a mask here as well, White Tower Master."

It was the best space magician, White Tower Master Orta. Even in this spiritual world, he was wearing a white robe and mask. No, maybe it was because Theodore didn't know his face.

The 7th Circle magician who had defeated a sword master, presumably one of the Seven Swords of the empire, and cut off one

of the sword master's arms... How long could Theodore stand against him?

The cruel answer was exactly five seconds.

Chwaack!

He was able to avoid the first attack thanks to the experience from his many battles, but it was up to there. There was no precursor as the space was divided. White Tower Master Orta used an attack which ignored physical defense.

17 space cracks were used successively, slicing Theodore to pieces like a carrot.

‘Crazy... How can I go against these monsters...?’

Theodore had a hunch as he greeted his third death. If the condition for passing the ‘Heaven Test’ was ‘fighting and overcoming,’ then there was no chance that Theodore Miller would pass this test.

Chapter 165 – Heaven, Earth And Human Test (3)

The fourth one who appeared was Aquilo. The ruler of the ocean, she emotionlessly created a coin-sized hole in the middle of Theodore's face. Who was the fifth person? It was Randolph Clovis. Theodore still remembered the two swords slicing his neck. The sixth time he died was because of Pride's claws, and the seventh death was when he was torn apart by the arrow of Elvenheim's guardian, Edwin.

He didn't continue counting after that.

‘Now, how many times... have I been killed...?’

10 times, 20 times... At the very least, it was more than his body could count. The face of the opponent changed every turn, but he always died a meaningless death.

The manner of killing Theodore was truly diverse. Some people were close to him, while there were others whom he had a hostile relationship with. They never spoke a word of greeting and attacked him with dull expressions.

Understandably, the result was 100 defeats. Those who appeared in this space were some of the hardest people to fight, especially in a situation where his hands and feet were bound. Moreover, Theodore had faced them at least 100 times.

Theodore stared at the new enemy before him with dark eyes.

“Randolph.”

The sword master was holding his double swords in a familiar stance.

This was the third time. With a weary look, Theodore updated the number of times Randolph had appeared in front of him. This space didn't seem to only embody 'enemies' from Theodore's memories, nor did it invite anyone stronger.

No, even if he'd met them, this space seemed to exclude people whose abilities he didn't understand. As evidence of that, the members of the empire's Seven Swords, Pan Helliones and Lloyd Pollan, didn't appear.

‘The order of appearance is random or irregular, but the number of people is 11. They are all people who can beat me.’

Despite experiencing death more than a hundred times, Theodore was still calmly thinking of answers. There was heavy fatigue in his eyes, but his spirit was too strong to stop him from thinking.

Shortly after that, Theodore thought of something and waved his right hand. Simultaneously, Randolph's double swords headed toward him.

Chwaack!

This time, it was Theodore's neck. Theodore glared as his head separated from his body. It was Randolph's super-fast Aura Ability which Theo couldn't avoid, even if he used Umbra. As Theo realized what had happened, he grumbled bitterly at the pain he wasn't used to. 'If I move even a little bit, will it start?'

At the next moment, Theodore stood in the white space again.

"....." He barely suppressed a scream.

Theodore confirmed his next enemy with bloodshot eyes. It was the beauty, Veronica. Theodore hadn't moved yet, so she just watched him from afar. Of course, his life would fly away once he moved even a finger. It was valuable time for Theodore to take a break from dying.

Theodore needed to think. He needed to think of a way to achieve victory. However, Theodore trampled on that hope. 'It is impossible.'

Regardless of whether he challenged it a hundred times or a thousand times, it was impossible. If he continued to challenge with the 0% chance of winning, he would lose everything. Additionally, Gluttony and some of Theodore's bigger abilities were sealed, leaving Theodore as a 6th Circle magician with excellent abilities. There was no chance for him to beat a master.

‘I am still helpless against brute force.’

Theodore thought he had become much stronger in the meantime, but he still couldn’t escape the days when he had been stuck in the academy’s library.

This was his fate. These were the clutches of violence which he couldn’t escape with hard work and effort. He had died more than 100 times while searching for breakthroughs, but there was only one solution left in Theodore’s mind.

It was to declare that he gave up on the ‘Heaven Test’. Even the great shaman, Seimei, wouldn’t be able to stop Gluttony. Theodore’s power had been sealed before the ‘system’ accepted this test. However, if he gave up on this test, he would be able to escape from the cycle of death that Seimei created. Theodore could avoid pointless deaths.

Instead, he would fight in a situation where he could win. He didn’t need to fight when he couldn’t win.

‘What a poor way of living.’

Theodore exhaled and said cheekily to Veronica in the distance, “Let’s do it once more, Tower Master.”

She might be a fake created from his memories, but the ‘strength’ which Theodore perceived didn’t differ from reality. Maybe it due to his taunt or the way the system was set up, but...

A red comet flashed, crossing the gap of several hundred meters in seconds!

‘The timing is the same.’

It was a straight fist filled with confidence in her strength. In eastern magic, it was taught that softness suppressed strength. However, even softness would be torn away before such power.

If Theodore tried to avoid it, his posture would be ruined by the shock wave and his breathing cut off by the subsequent attack. Theodore had fought with Veronica three times and had been killed in such a way.

However, in this confrontation, he didn’t flee from her fist.

Kwaang!

The sound was extremely loud when their fists met. It resonated through Theodore’s fist, not Veronica’s. It was the result of countering Veronica’s fist with no errors. Even if Theo didn’t have the help of his sensory perception, his learning ability and experience meant he would succeed.

However, what was the meaning of this counter? This was Veronica’s body, which was at the level of steel without any strengthening magic. Once 8th Circle magic was added to the human body, he would be smashed into dust.

Indeed, the left arm which Theodore had used to counter the attack had already turned into bloody dust up to the elbow.

“Che, only one attac...” Theodore said as his head was smashed again. Puhak!

It might simply be his imagination, but he seemed to see a slight smile on Veronica’s red lips before he died.

*

He didn’t think anymore. He didn’t worry anymore. He would no longer back down.

After Theodore formed such a resolution, his deaths occurred a few times faster than before. He didn’t last long, but he struggled to win anyway.

Peeok! In the end, he managed a punch to Randolph’s hateful face.

Chwaaaaak! A thin slice was cut off from Aquilo’s tail.

Hwaruruk! He burned a few strands of Blundell’s beard and smudged the White Tower Master’s robe with dirt.

Theodore quit running away from the power he couldn’t match

and repeatedly fought back. Even if he couldn't win and died, he didn't stop. He didn't fight to win. He just fought. Theodore wished he could win, but it didn't matter if he couldn't. Life was always filled with unreasonable force and trials. He wouldn't be able to escape them if he didn't fight.

‘One more time.’

It might be a meaningless struggle, but Theodore fought on.

‘Once again.’

He would've quit the academy a long time ago if he were the type to give into despair. Unfair talent, unfair fate... Human's lives weren't fair, and a person should realize this. Theodore's steps would only slow down if he despaired. The heavens ignored any complaints, and talking to someone... even that effort might be meaningless.

‘Not... yet!’

He still had to try. Those who didn't stop moving their feet until the end of their lives were entitled to say ‘fuck you’ to the heavens. Adapting to fatalism was the role of a priest, while it was the fate of a magician to explore the world and deny a certain life. The ones who resisted until the end was examples of magicians.

However, Theodore was soon forced to stop. It was due to the ‘monster’ who appeared when his number of deaths surpassed 200.

“Isn’t this a little too much?” Theodore didn’t want to sound weak, but anyone watching this situation wouldn’t be able to blame him.

With white scales which glowed with a bright light, it was the apostle of destruction...

Fafnir.

The being who had erased the 5th stage Pride in a single blow appeared before Theo. Since this was a spiritual world, there was nothing to be burned by its heat. However, it was obvious that Fafnir would use the ‘laser.’

Meltor’s magicians—no, all the magicians in the world wouldn’t be able to defend against it even if they concentrated their defense magic together. This was a death which couldn’t be resisted.

‘Well, I will try it once.’

Theodore would die anyway. When else would he get a chance to attack an ancient classed dragon? Theodore rotated the six circles to the maximum that his heart could endure. The difference in strength... he knew it better than anyone else.

Even so, he prepared to fight.

—————!

As the light of destruction was about to strike its target...

「It is up to here.」

The world stopped.

Jjak jjak jjak!

Theodore heard the sound of applause ring out from somewhere. He released the almost completed defense spell and looked in that direction. There was only one person who could intervene in this situation. It was Abe no Seimei, the one who had created this space which had killed him endlessly.

That damn person was clapping. “Brilliant.”

“...Do you not want to see my unsightly corpse anymore?” Theodore asked coldly.

Unlike Theodore’s cold tone, Seimei said with a genuinely admiring expression, “It isn’t unsightly.” Then he continued, “The Heaven Test is a trial that reveals how a person copes with a fate that can’t be fought. ...To succumb, compromise, give up... or decide not to stop resisting until the end.”

That’s right. As Abe no Seimei said, the Heaven Test presented

opponents and situations where Theodore couldn't win. He'd competed with monsters with his bare body, and he'd constantly experienced the trauma of death, wearing down his spirit.

The essence of a person would be revealed in circumstances where they were pushed to the edge of a cliff. When faced with true despair, it turned out that he had the proper qualifications to be a hero.

In that sense, Theodore was graded with 1,000 points out of 100.

“You pass, Theodore Miller. I will give you some gifts, as well as the knowledge you want.”

“What...?”

The system messages popped up before Theodore could get a reply.

[You have passed the ‘Heaven, Earth, and Human: Heaven chapter.’]

[You have completed all stages perfectly.]

[The proficiency of the skill, ‘Art of Onmyōdō,’ has been adjusted to the highest level. In order to avoid conflicts with your existing circles, I recommend a gradual absorption.]

[‘Ring of Muspelheim’ and ‘Aquilo’s Blood Mark’ have been integrated. ‘Artificial Yin and Yang’ has been formed. The power of the two imprints are stronger than before, and they will respond more obediently to the user’s will.]

[The user’s capacity has expanded through an unknown intervention. Confirming mental power... Confirming amount of magic power... The conditions for ‘Transcendence’ has been met, it will be fulfilled.]

[After 20 seconds, you will sleep for 168 hours.]

“What does this mean?” Theodore was perplexed by the bewildering message windows.

Seimei waved his fan and replied happily, “Well, I just helped balance it. You showed me something nice after a long time, so I should do something good.”

“Please explain properly!”

“Can I explain it all in 20 seconds? Just think about it while sleeping.” Seimei’s words weren’t wrong.

There was a limited number of words which could be spoken in 20 seconds, and Seimei’s knowledge would be more metaphorical descriptions. Additionally, Theodore’s mind was exhausted from

dying hundreds of times. His hand stretched out to try and grab Seimei, but his knees collapsed.

‘D-Dammit...’

As Theodore’s consciousness faded, Seimei’s voice sounded like a mountain echo, “I hope someday you will be able to grant my request. But maybe you’ll need 10 more years, huhahaha!”

“.....”

“I will give you one more piece of advice.” Seimei’s playful tone was gone, and the last advice he gave engraved deeply into Theodore’s mind. “If you go to the eastern continent, never approach the capital in the center. If you have to go, only try it after you have reached full transcendence.”

Before Theodore could respond to the advice, the heartless voice of the system broke the communication between Seimei and Theodore.

[From this point onward, you will sleep for 168 hours.]

Chapter 166 – The Road Home (1)

“Sir Adolf, please look after Brother.”

“Yes, I will do it well.”

As usual, Baek Dongil left Theodore’s room with a grim expression, while Randolph sighed at his retreating back. Randolph was fond of Baek Dongil’s sincere learning attitude and polite character, but the repeated visits were annoying. However, he couldn’t stop Baek Dongil from coming.

Therefore, Randolph suffered from his uncomfortable position in the middle.

‘That reminds me. Including today, it has been a week.’ Randolph thought about the date and then looked at Theodore, who was lying in a nearby bed.

Randolph had been the one who found the unconscious Theodore, and he had also been the first to notice the situation. Theodore didn’t have a fever or cold sweats, so it might seem like he was sleeping. However, the reality of it was different.

Back then, Randolph had looked at the unconscious Theodore and instinctively recognized the situation.

This was the period of transition to go beyond the master’s wall!

A mortal body and spirit couldn't handle the power of a transcendent. Therefore, mortals who reached the realm of a master had to evolve their body and mind to the level of the transcendent power.

The term 'Physical Change' referred to the phenomenon in which an imbalance in the body was rectified and raised beyond its innate limits. It was a bonus that all the wastes hidden in the body were removed.

Randolph recalled what he had experienced at the time he'd gone through the same thing and thought that the magician's transitional period was rather modest.

"It was a wrong judgment," Randolph said as he squeezed Theodore's wrist lightly and immediately made a serious expression.

His serious expression was due to the vortex of power swirling inside Theo's body, exactly like it had been on the first day of the transition. The flow was so wide and powerful that Randolph couldn't intervene, despite being a sword master. It was impossible to calm it down from the outside.

Randolph had to wait until the owner of the power, Theodore Miller, could control it himself. However, the biggest problem was if the attempt failed. What if the terrible power Randolph sensed burst out of Theodore's body? The mansion would be shattered, and the damage might reach the faraway town. It was a different type of waste material.

Randolph smiled as he glanced at Theodore's still sleeping face.

'Is Theo is special, or magicians are always like this?'

Of course, Theodore's case was special, but Randolph had no way of knowing this.

However, despite knowing the risks, Randolph didn't leave Theodore's side. He believed that he could stop the crisis or that Theodore would overcome this trial. It was a myth, but in the Andras Empire, the greater the crisis during one's transition, the greater the potential.

If that was the case, Theodore would be reborn as an unprecedented master.

"...Well, it might just be my delusion." Randolph found it funny and laughed as he rose to his feet.

From morning to night, he stayed by Theodore's side. This meant he couldn't even eat properly. Randolph headed to a nearby kitchen in order to drink a glass of water. The duration of time he spent there was three minutes at most.

Soon after Randolph left the kitchen, he grabbed the doorknob of Theodore's room and felt an unknown thrill enter his body.

A sword master's keen senses noticed the before and after change in the room. The unstable flow of mana, which had been like a typhoon, had completely calmed down. If so, there could only be one cause.

‘The transition is over.’ Randolph gulped before turning the doorknob.

Theodore had either successfully crossed the wall to become a master, or he had been blown apart. It was only after the door opened that he found out which result it was. Then the door opened.

“-Ha, haha,” Randolph couldn't help laughing.

This was because Randolph's concerns were moot, as ‘he’ stood there.

His two eyes contained more depth than before, and he was standing on his own two legs without shaking. After passing through the boundaries of a mortal, Theodore Miller had finally returned.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Theodore spoke to the blankly staring Randolph. There was a faint smile on Theodore's face accompanying his simple words of apology. “It took longer than I thought it would.”

With seven roaring circles, it was a declaration that another

master had appeared in the world.

*

His body hadn't changed dramatically like aura users. However, he'd slept for a week, so his stomach was understandably empty.

Without telling anyone first, Randolph placed bread and soup from the kitchen in front of Theodore. If he told people that Theodore had woken up, their surroundings would become extremely noisy. As Theodore had just completed the transition, he needed to rest.

Of course, Theodore appreciated the care.

"Thank you," he said a short thanks and started moving his hands.

He ate the bread and sipped the soup, gradually increasing the volume of the food. Theodore's body, which had starved for a week, absorbed the nutrients like rainwater permeating dry land.

Randolph looked at Theo's ravenous appearance with narrowed eyes. 'It is definitely different.'

There was no visible change in Theodore's body, but the storm raging inside him had completely subsided. The pressure, which would cause anyone who could sense mana to feel nervous, was now out of sight.

Somebody might think Theo was weak, but Randolph's sword master instincts were warning him. Even if Randolph fought his best, he would be unable to predict his victory. This was evidence that a 7th Circle magician was an existence who could match a sword master.

In the end, Randolph couldn't repress his curiosity and asked, "The 7th circle, is it completed?"

"...I'm not sure. It is too ambiguous to call it completed yet."

"What? Ambiguous?" Randolph's eyebrows raised at Theo's vague answer.

Theodore swallowed the soup and continued with his answer, "The number of my circles has grown to seven, but the criteria for a master level magician isn't just the number of circles."

"Then what else do you need?"

"It is just how like a master aura user needs to awaken the Aura Ability. Magicians have something called 'Sorcery' and need to develop their own unique attributes."

Theo said it was similar to Aura Ability, but it wasn't that big. Just like how sword masters had their own specific characteristics with aura, magicians focused on their specific attributes. The White Tower Master's unbelievable space magic and Blundell's

water control were based on ‘Sorcery.’ Theodore had realized it after reaching the 7th Circle. His ability to analyze magic itself had improved.

‘Somehow, I couldn’t do it even if I ate the original book.’

Theodore had thought he would be able to do space magic or water control magic, but he now knew it would’ve failed.

When he thought about it, he realized it was natural. It was no wonder that Theodore couldn’t understand the essential principles of the magic considering he didn’t know what Blundell’s ‘Sorcery’ was.

Additionally, that wasn’t the only part that was different from aura.

Theodore looked at Randolph and continued to explain with a smile, “Sorcery is different from the Aura Ability that can be used straight away. The 7th Circle is the minimum condition, and I need to study Sorcery from now on.”

“Aha, I see,” Randolph said as he took in the explanation.

From the perspective of Eastern philosophy, it could be summarized as ‘epiphany’ and ‘gradual study.’ Aura Ability was an ‘epiphany,’ while Sorcery was a ‘gradual study.’ Sorcery was something which could only be learned by accumulating the right procedures and efforts. Theodore, who had only just arrived at the

7th Circle, was still unable to use his own unique attributes.

However, Randolph smiled cheerfully and knocked on his shoulder. “Well, it is true that you went beyond the wall though! It is late, but welcome to the realm of a master.”

“If I’m late, then what is Randolph?”

“Ah, are you already acting like this? This young guy is really behaving badly.”

It was a joke but Theodore’s expression brightened. As Randolph said, the wall to the 7th Circle was very high and crossing it meant one thing...

Theodore had escaped the deadline of three years! Within half of the time limit that Myrdal had given him, Theodore had escaped from the confines of a mortal. The future of being crushed by his own power had disappeared.

‘It’s sooner than I expected, but it is okay to return to the north.’

In any case, ‘Sorcery’ couldn’t be completed in a day or two, and the intellectual properties accumulated in the Magic Society would be more efficient for his research.

He had overcome the deadline, which had been his original purpose, so wasn’t it better to return to the safety of Meltor to conduct the rest of his research? Around the time that Theodore

was eating the last of his bread.

“Ah, there was a letter for you.”

“Letter?” Theodore turned his attention back to Randolph.

What letter? Who would know about them to send a letter here? Randolph handed him the envelope and replied, “Gibra. It has the name of the guy from Sipoto on it. I guess their title as ‘the best information guild’ isn’t for nothing.”

“Gibra... Indeed, there would be no one else.”

In retrospect, everyone else who knew about him were enemies, except for Gibra. No, he couldn’t conclude that Gibra was an ally. However, Gibra was the only one who could send him a letter. The best information guild in the central continent would definitely be able to figure out his tracks.

Now, Theo was curious and wary about why a letter would be sent to him.

Tear. Theodore tore open the envelope and pulled out the sheet of paper inside. He looked at the contents for a while, then he burned the letter and envelope. Randolph guessed that Theo intended to conceal the existence of the letter.

So, he asked, “Is it something that shouldn’t be known to others?”

“There is nothing wrong with being careful.”

Simultaneously, Theodore spread Silence magic around the two of them. It was rare for eavesdropping to escape the notice of a sword master, but this spell was to block that rare possibility from happening.

“It’s news related to the Orcus Company. Meltor has received my message and dispatched investigators to search for clues in the central continent. Due to that, the Orcus Company has shifted its base from the south-west to the east.”

“Uhh, the timing isn’t good.”

“That’s right. I think we should keep in mind the possibility of seeing them near the Kargas border.”

The power of the two men was significantly higher than when they had fought in Sipoto, but it still wasn’t very wise to fight against unknown opponents. They were enemies who had chased Theodore all the way to the Pirate Archipelago. It was fortunate that the enemies had angered Aquilo. Otherwise, it would’ve been a struggle on the sea.

If they had a death knight and ghost ship, there might be other hidden cards such as a master.

‘...I have to return home.’

Was it fortunate that the Orcus Company was moving to the east now? Theodore calmly calculated his speed, position, and the path to Meltor before sighing. Gibra's letter wasn't entirely trustworthy, but it was difficult since he had already seen the contents.

In any case, he had to act carefully to avoid any traps. Theodore thought about the right answer and soon made a decision. He stacked the empty dishes in a pile and got up. Then he said, "We will leave in a week. I have to finish off the work I have left here and then ask Master Baek for one last favor."

As Theodore headed for his room, he had a hunch about something. The time of the suspicious magician, Ted, would end here. From now on, it was the turn of Theodore Miller, the young hero of the Meltor Kingdom.

Theodore's heart grew anxious at the thought of seeing the faces of some people, and he hastened his footsteps. It was time to return to Theodore's homeland, Meltor.

Chapter 167 – The Road Home (2)

It had been a week since then.

The news about Theodore's group leaving was immediately relayed to Marquis and the crown prince, making for an easy farewell. After all, they didn't like the fact that two strong people were hiding in their country.

The only people who felt regretful about Theodore and Randolph leaving were the Baek Family staying at the mansion.

"A week has already passed," Baek Jongmyung, the expert of the Baek Family, said to them with a dark expression.

One was a nice man who guided his son, while the other was a friend he had dueled and drank with a few times. There might be a large age difference between them, but Baek Jongmyung socialized with them like they were friends. He mourned that Theodore's scheduled departure was this soon.

Looking back and forth between Theodore and Randolph, Baek Jongmyung said, "...As Sir Ted requested, I will manage the annex where the two of you stayed. Can I ask for the reason?"

"A guest shouldn't bring bad luck to the owner," Theodore responded with an answer that was difficult to understand. However, Baek Jongmyung was accustomed to this way of speaking, and he soon realized Theodore's meaning.

“Hrmm, you have opponents that are that strong?”

“I don’t think Master Baek and the Baek Family should go against them.”

Baek Jongmyung would have hit anyone else who said it, but he smiled at Theodore’s words. When they first met, Baek Jongmyung hadn’t known Theodore’s depths. Now, it would be even harder for Baek Jongmyung to gauge if he could win against Theodore. However, the seldom rude Theodore was currently advising him not to dig into this issue? This was enough to prove that it was dangerous.

Baek Jongmyung nodded with a heavy expression. “Haha... There is a saying in the East about a frog in a well. I am sorry that I can’t return your favor, despite being an expert.”

“It is nothing. Thank you for the help,” Theodore said.

“You’re thanking me? Please don’t be so humble. I owe you a great deal for putting up with my son.”

Baek Jongmyung called to Baek Dongil, who was standing silently behind him. Theodore was curious about why Baek Dongil wasn’t speaking, but he soon figured out why. It was because the boy’s eyes were completely wet, glimmering like the light from a chandelier.

“B-Brother.” Baek Dongil choked up. He turned red like a tomato and coughed a few times before barely managing to face Theodore. “Thank you for listening to my shameless request!”

Then he bowed down with his hands clasped together. Baek Dongil was giving thanks for their relationship, rather than grumbling about the short teaching period or sudden parting.

He had received a foundation of basic knowledge over the past week, but he didn’t completely understand it yet. A period of intense self-learning was necessary when a teacher had to leave. As the loser of a warrior family for many years, it was natural for Baek Dongil to feel regretful. However, Baek Dongil’s pure heart meant he didn’t hesitate to express his sincere gratitude.

It was why Theodore had decided to teach him. Theodore saw his past despairing state in Baek Dongil’s endless efforts, but his mind wasn’t twisted by it.

“Dongil.”

“Yes, Brother.”

“The foundation that I’ve taught so far is a prerequisite for becoming an apprentice magician in the Meltor Kingdom, the most developed kingdom of magic in the continent. A more efficient learning system doesn’t yet exist on this continent.”

It was as Theo said. Meltor’s Magic Society, unlike other

organizations, shared their research achievements and knowledge.

Their curriculum, which had been developed through history, boasted the best efficiency and rationality on the continent. Anyone who graduated from an academy in Meltor with just a diploma could teach at an academy in any other kingdom.

However, Theodore didn't dwell on his past diploma anymore. He told Baek Dongil, "If you keep following my teachings, you will be able to reach the required level within the next year."

Fortunately, Baek Dongil's mana sensitivity was several times better than that of the old Theodore. If Baek Dongil built up the right knowledge and repeated the training, it would be easy for him to reach the 3rd Circle. The 4th Circle might be possible if his family provided adequate support.

Perhaps by that time, the level of magicians who could teach Baek Dongil in the central continent would be hard to meet. As Theodore thought about that day, he said, "I am ashamed to reveal it only now, but my name is Theodore, not Ted. And my surname is Miller."

"Theodore Miller?"

"Yes."

If Baek Jongmyung or Baek Dongil had any knowledge about the north, they might feel surprised or even angry.

However, they just blinked at him, and Theodore stood up. Now everything in the Soldun Kingdom was resolved. He had used duplication magic on original books about shamanism, regained 1,000 gold, and formed a close tie with a budding magician.

“One day, if you encounter a ‘wall’ that can’t be broken down by your own strength, come to Meltor’s Magic Society and find me.”

Baek Dongil didn’t know that this relationship would be the Baek Family’s most valuable treasure after coming to the Western continent. After Theodore and Randolph said a simple farewell and left the room, Baek Jongmyung and Baek Dongil stared at each other with confusion for a while.

Baek Jongmyung opened his mouth first and said, “...Huhu, this is truly entertaining.”

“I-Is that so?”

“I reprimanded you for something that seemed frivolous at the time, but it seems you were right.”

Baek Dongil didn’t understand and replied eagerly, “Yes! I think so as well!”

This caused Baek Jongmyung to hit his head while saying, “This brat! You cheeky fellow!”

Baek Dongil was a fool who had only grown up slightly under Theodore, so he uttered, “Ah! What are you saying, Father?”

Despite the argument, smiles spread across the faces of the two men, and the story spread through the Baek Family.

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“You must think a lot of that kid.”

“He is polite and bright. If he grows up without becoming twisted, he will definitely be a good magician.”

After stepping out of the mansion they had been living in for over a year, Theodore and Randolph took the time to pause for a moment. The two of them were intending to travel a long distance, so Theodore kept most of the goods, including food, in the ‘Inventory.’

As the export of artifacts was the major economic base of Meltor, this meant the management of logistics and distribution of goods was strict. So, Theodore used his power to avoid his goods from being noticed.

“...Okay, there doesn’t seem to be any problems,” Theodore commented. Then he used an extremely convenient magic which he had been preparing for the past week.

‘Mass Teleport.’

It was space magic which allowed a large number of people to leap a long distance, and it wasn't impossible now that Theodore had reached the 7th Circle. Randolph had been informed about the magic in advance, but he couldn't help admiring the convenience.

“I thought we would go through the sky instead of the land or sea, but I hadn't expected space magic. Magicians really are capable of anything.”

“Well, it isn't easy.”

It was just as Theodore said. He was able to compose this magic after gaining enlightenment, but it was just like he'd already guessed before. His aptitude for space magic wasn't good. Theodore calculated the formula and flow of mana perfectly, but 'Mass Teleport' was unsteady, and it took three attempts to calm the instability.

This magic was now simple and stable, but traveling as far as the White Tower Master was just a distant dream. Theodore stared at the magic circle and sighed. 'Hah, there is no attribute as convenient as space magic...'

Unfortunately, it was a magic which Theo didn't suit. Apart from the space magic abilities gained from 'original books predation,' it wasn't compatible with Theodore Miller. While Theodore was grumbling inwardly, Randolph came up to the magic circle and asked, “Where is our destination?”

“Sipoto in the Kargas Kingdom. At my level, I can’t move much further than that.”

The White Tower Master could fly from Piris to beyond Meltor’s border, but it wasn’t something which could be imitated with ordinary space magic. Thus, Theodore created a ‘Mass Teleport’ with the best results.

Moreover, although it wasn’t a match for the White Tower Master, Theodore’s magic circle was huge for his level. He could move from Piris to Sipoto in the South-Eastern continent, which meant he could arrive at the border of central continent immediately. Even if he moved by the shortest path by land or sea, the minimum time required to cross that distance was a fortnight.

Theodore finished the final checks, stood in the center of the magic circle, and infused magic power to the power source.

Then he cried out, “Mass Teleport!”

Simultaneously, there was a flash of light as the magic activated, and the forms of the two men dissolved like ice in heat.

There was a wave of dizziness which he couldn’t get accustomed to, even though he had already experienced it a few times! Theodore endured the uncomfortable sensation and transmitted the coordinates of the destination.

He felt a headache pierce his temples during the process, but

space fatigue boasted the worst difficulty. The discomfort disappeared just as suddenly it had appeared.

“Phew!”

“Huoooh...!”

Theodore exhaled, while Randolph grabbed his head because of the dizziness. Theodore was familiar with this, so he looked around.

They were in a wilderness area, with sand and wind tickling Theodore’s nose. This wasn’t the first time he had seen this landscape, so Theodore was convinced of the success of his space magic. This was the outskirts of Sipoto, which he had set as the destination for Mass Teleport.

Dding-

At that moment, Theodore experienced a sharp pain in his mind.

“Ack!”

It wasn’t the unpleasant feeling of space magic, but a pain which came from a warning. Theodore grasped the reason with his logic, not intuition, and smiled bitterly.

In a sense, it was like growing pains. Using space magic, which he

had never used before, led to an unexpected side effect because Theodore's vessel had disappeared when he reached transcendence.

The vessel was a restraining device which limited the contents, but it was also a safety device. Being capable of infinite possibilities was a double-edged sword.

‘That is why I have to fix it with Sorcery.’

While Theodore worried about the unexpected enlightenment, Randolph shook off the dizziness and approached him.

“Theo, will you prepare to move again in Sipoto?”

“...I think so, but not now.”

Theodore hadn't chosen Sipoto as the destination for Mass Teleport just because it was within range.

He wanted to talk to Gibra again, who had found out where they'd been staying and sent a letter to them. Theodore didn't know whether Gibra offered information on the Orcus Company for a favor, or if there was some hidden trap. He wanted it to be due to personal feelings, but it was foolish to want a favor from the information world.

Theodore recovered his consumed magic power to a certain extent and opened his mouth to say, “I will go and see Gibra.”

Even if Gibra was plotting something, he wouldn't be expecting their arrival with space magic.

The presence of the White Tower was openly revealed in Meltor, but space magic was difficult to see in real life, and there were those who doubted its existence. Theodore had used 'Mass Teleport' and cut down their expected arrival time by nearly a dozen days.

It was the best way Theodore envisioned that would overwhelm Gibra's expectations.

Chapter 168 – The Road Home (3)

The Sipoto branch of the Information Guild, which the ‘King of Mice’ ran, was one of the best in the central region. It was located on the outskirts where there were few people. Theodore had to find the markings, but it wasn’t so hard to retrace his past steps. People came and went as he crossed through the maze-like alleys like they were his home.

It was good until Theodore and Randolph found a shabby door at the end of a road. A familiar smell rubbed at their noses.

“This...!?”

“...It is the smell of human blood. It is very thick.”

Theodore and Randolph prepared for battle simultaneously, as they stared past the half-open door.

Randolph had a lot of battle experience, so he could tell that the Information Guild’s hideout was filled with dead humans. This smell of death meant there were at least dozens, perhaps hundreds, of bodies.

The two men carefully approached the entrance of the Information Guild.

“Let’s double check before entering.” Theodore took one step inside and scanned the area with detection magic. Waves of magic

exploded from his palm and headed inside the Information Guild's hideout. The waves bounced back and forth like a bat's ultrasound while searching for a survivor.

However, the magic soon disappeared, and Theodore's expression stiffened. "Everyone is dead. At least, there isn't anyone moving inside."

"It is literally a massacre. The sun hasn't even fallen yet, so the killer sure is a bold person," Randolph remarked.

The guild's hideout was out of sight, but it was impossible to kill all these people without garnering attention. Randolph raised his two swords in preparation for an unfamiliar situation and stepped forward with Theodore.

Then the passage Theo had walked through a year ago appeared before them.

Hwaack.

The last time, he hadn't used light magic in order to avoid provoking the guild. However, he now used a few drops of magic to illuminate the surroundings. If he looked at the differences from the last time he'd been here, there was a heavy smell of blood, as well as holes in the left and right walls of the passage.

Theodore looked around and spoke to Randolph who was walking in front, "They were killed using the element of surprise,

so the killer must be pretty talented.”

“I don’t think it is like that,” Randolph disagreed with Theodore. “This way, Theo. Take a closer look at these bodies.”

“What?”

It was a sword master who was pointing this out, so Theodore followed Randolph’s advice without saying anything further.

Theodore broke the wall where Randolph pointed at, and bodies rolled out to his feet. The bleeding from the bodies was so severe that there weren’t any parts of the floor or ceiling which were not reddened.

However, Theodore frowned as he noticed the commonalities between the bodies.

‘The bodies of the information guild members—’

“Why do they look like this?”

Their faces were smiling or contained other normal expressions. Theodore wasn’t familiar with sword injuries, but there were no humans who could keep the same expression from before they were stabbed in the heart or head. However, all the corpses looked like they didn’t even know they had died.

“This is an extremely dark sword.” Randolph looked at the cuts with a serious expression.

He was confident in his speed, but was it really possible to kill dozens of people like this? In particular, when there were so many people residing in concealed spaces... No matter how fast his sword was, could he reproduce this scene?

“No, not even a legendary grandmaster could do this.” Randolph went over the situation many times in his head and still found it impossible. It was a hard task even for a considerably skilled person. This wasn’t the type of thing which could be done without the help of ‘Aura Ability’ or magic.

The two people continued past the strange corpses. Shortly afterward, Theodore was able to see it. In the place where he had first encountered Gibra, Theo could see a body so ‘dismantled’ that it was difficult to tell the body was human.

“...Torture,” Theodore stated.

“.....”

Twenty fingers and toes were rolling around on the ground. The places where the eyeballs should be were empty, and the skin was completely peeled off. The reason why Theodore and Randolph were even able to identify the dismembered corpse as Gibra was because of his unusually large build.

It was surprisingly painful for Theodore to discover the death of the man he had once known. Then Randolph frowned as he examined the terrible sight and muttered, “This is familiar.”

“Huh?” Theodore asked.

“I remember. It was what I learned about torture at a knight school in the empire. First, cut off the last part of the limbs, then take the vision to make the body more sensitive. Lastly, deal pain by slicing away thin parts of the skin. It is famous for being very effective.”

It was a torture style from the Andras Empire! In the end, Theodore felt like a thunderbolt had struck his head. The corpses and the Andras Empire’s torture method... This was a real moment of enlightenment as he recalled two facts which were deeply buried in his memories.

“No way... The empire’s Seven Swords?”

“What?! The empire’s Seven Swords—” Randolph responded to Theo’s words and forgot to lower his sound. However, Theodore had no time to explain to him. It was something he’d heard from the White Tower Master in the Great Forest. An unknown sword master, presumably one of the empire’s Seven Swords, possessed a ‘concealment’ ability.

Clang.

A red crystal necklace, which was a primitive amulet, appeared in Theodore's palms.

[+5 Tail of a Defeat Loser (Accessory)]

[This is an artifact created using the body part of a person presumed to be one of the empire's Seven Swords. The body part was cut off directly by the White Tower Master. The red crystal looks like a jewel, but it is a special product created by refining a part of the sword master. It also contains a tracing function. This artifact is designed to trace the 'target' within a 30km radius and will guide the owner to the coordinates.

- * This necklace is rated 'Rare.'

- * When consumed, a small amount of magic power will be absorbed.

- * When consumed, the residual aura will inhibit magic power circulation.

- * When consumed, the proficiency of 'tracking magic' will increase.

- * Please note! It contains blood with a high concentration of aura. This artifact will have a negative effect on the user.]

Once Theodore confirmed the artifact's information window, he poured magic power into it without checking Randolph's reaction.

This amulet had been created with the arm of the sword master whom the White Tower Master had defeated in the Great Forest, and it was used as a tracker. If this artifact responded, the identity of the other party would become clear.

Theodore invoked the artifact.

Huuuuuuong!

It met his expectations as red light started to scatter. The red light struck the ceiling, walls, and floors, as well as the two people in the room, before drawing a map on the left wall. The depiction of the terrain was so perfect that it could be sold at a map store for an expensive price. This feature was possible due to the space magic of the White Tower Master.

As Theodore looked at the map, he muttered with a dumbfounded face, "This... It's a place outside Sipoto?"

It wasn't the outskirts but an area outside the walls, where wild winds blew the sand. There was a blinking blue light at the center of the map which showed the location of the sword master.

Then at that moment...

"Eh?"

“What is it? I will let you find out.”

Randolph was grumpily complaining by Theodore's side, but Theodore didn't give Randolph a chance to respond.

For a moment, the blue dot disappeared from the red map. In other words, the sword master being tracked had used his 'Aura Ability.' No matter how efficient the ability, it would consume mana quickly. There was no sword master who would use it in unnecessary situations.

This meant the target was now in combat.

“If it's not the Information Guild, then who is he fighting against?” Theodore's doubtful voice resonated within the room which smelled thickly of blood.

*

Around 10km away from the King of Rats' branch of the Information Guild, there was a man who revealed himself as someone who knew Theodore. Bill Parent, a full-time warrior of the Orcus Company for a few years, looked at the person before him.

‘Who the hell was this person?’ He tried to shout out.

However, Bill couldn't say anything. Just as he tried to open his mouth, his head was already rolling onto the hot sand. He was dead the moment he met the unidentified man, but Bill Parent died without even realizing it.

The last five people were no different. Six wary aura users were turned to corpses instantaneously.

However, the masked sword master was disgruntled. "Che, these trash were bait."

'Bait?' He didn't waste any minutes cheering at the success of the perfect assassination.

However, in response to the masked man's words, a few shadows rose up from the sand-covered ground. The shadow who seemed to be the leader asked the masked person, [Who are you? Why are you attacking us?]

"I've been asked that question a number of times, but you don't need to know," the masked man replied coldly. "You knew I was coming anyway."

[Hulhulhul... There have already been three raids today. You caused a commotion twice and thought we wouldn't know about it...?]

"No, I expected you to know. I just thought you would be smart enough to withdraw. I'm sorry." Despite the creepy voice coming

from the shadow, the masked man continued with his mocking, “I don’t know why you are waiting after being attacked twice. Did you prepare a means to deal with me? Or do you intend to give me the information I want?”

[...It is information regarding the whereabouts of ‘him.’]

“Yes. If you listened to my request from the beginning, two of your groups would’ve been fine. You inflicted this on yourself.” A white aura arose from the blade of the masked man as he said, “The winner is strong, and the loser is weak. I am stronger than you. Therefore, I have the right to take away your lives.”

It was the law of the jungle. He sounded closer to a beast than a human as he pointed his blade at them. This was the power of the aura of a sword master. The space, where the edge of the sword was pointed toward, split in two, with the sand and wind being divided in half as well.

“So, tell me. Where is Theodore Miller?” The masked man asked.

The magic power holding the shadows together became shaky, and their shape faded before becoming clear again.

The masked man had an imposing presence which was enough to shake the shadows’ magic power! What an unbelievable monster. The opponents might’ve peed their pants if they were real people instead of shadows.

However, the lead shadow wasn't daunted and ridiculed him.

[Stupid sword master. The realm you've reached is helpless in the face of true death... Yes, you want to prove the legitimacy of the 'law of the jungle...?']

“That's right.”

[The strong and the weak... I will teach you the values that are above that.] The lead shadow, a warlock of the Orcus Company, sentenced the masked man to death in a lighthearted manner, [I will turn that sword into scrap metal! From now on, worship death!]

Chapter 169 – The Road Home (4)

The sun completely disappeared beneath the western horizon. The wilderness was a few kilometers away from the city. Torch light didn't exist in the area, and it seemed darker than ever. This was a dark curtain which distorted the laws of nature and corrupted life. A normal human would collapse if they were within the vicinity of this power.

However, a sword master was a monster who exceeded the standards of life.

“Who would be afraid of the babbling of a magician?” The masked person—no, Hyde the 6th Sword of the empire raised his sword as his emotions started to boil.

His hatred for magicians and the humiliation he'd suffered in the forest... these feelings burned more intensely instead of diminishing over time. Hyde didn't even think about distinguishing between warlocks and magicians. This hate wouldn't diminish until he destroyed the magicians who ruined his honor and his master's plan.

Shortly afterward, Hyde's body disappeared like it melted in the air.

[Hoh...! Is this your ability...? Interesting,] the lead shadow spoke with admiration, but it smiled like it was confident of victory.

There was no audible sound nor visible shape. Furthermore,

there were no signs that anything had even existed in this area. Was there any way for the shadow to beat this absurd power? How could it survive the sword master who was a perfect assassin?

Hyde scoffed at the shadow. It might be possible for one of Meltor's tower masters, but how could a warlock detect Hyde's sword?

[There.]

However, Hyde's confidence was broken as dozens of dark lightning bolts struck around his feet. Each one was of the 6th Circle! It was a power which couldn't be completely blocked by a master class.

Surprisingly, most of them were blocked, but Hyde's mask was charred.

"This lowlife, how dare you?!"

[Stupid... Do sword masters suffer from side effects such as the brain turning into muscles?]

The rest of the shadows chuckled and joined in ridiculing Hyde.

Paduduk!

Hyde, who was being ridiculed by the warlocks, jumped forward

and aimed for the lead shadow with a distorted face. He would show this garbage why they were nothing compared to Meltor's tower masters.

[Think about it, foolish sword master. This space is already my territory... It is a watercolor painting I've painted. The paint is black magic, and the canvas...]

“So what?”

[Don't you understand what I'm saying? Your ability means you don't show up on my canvas. Since nothing is felt, that 'blankness' exposes your position.]

Hyde's expression froze at the end of the shadow's words. So, Hyde was being perceived because he was 'completely' hidden? It was a blind spot he hadn't thought of.

However, he soon recovered his composure and laughed at the warlock who had arrogantly told him the reason. If the warlock could figure out his position on this canvas, it would be enough if he just left the canvas or tore it to pieces.

“Fool. Why would you teach me this? I will just get out of here.”

[Now you know a little bit, that was the correct answer.]

“...Was?” Hyde asked with an ominous feeling. It was past tense.

Simultaneously, the shadows burst out laughing in the distance. There was a reason why they had kept their distance and taught Hyde the weakness. The lead shadow had explained all of that in order to bind Hyde's feet.

[Kuhuhu! It is already too late, Sword Master!]

At the same time, a red squiggle appeared at Hyde's feet, exploding without giving him a chance to react.

_____.

All sound died. Light was swallowed. The sand was tinted black, and even the stars in the sky were hidden.

The completely impenetrable darkness was the fog of the dead zone, which could be found in the depths of the Demon World. It didn't harm warlocks at all, but it was extremely threatening to other life in the physical world.

A normal person wouldn't last for even a few seconds, but a sword master could somehow survive. However, he would get corrupted and turned into a sword demon by the power of death.

The lead shadow called Holsten, who was one of the top five executives in the Orcus Company, sighed with relief. He had been dominating the situation with a relaxed expression, but he would've missed the chance if Hyde had been a little more aware.

[I was laughing, but your ability really is intimidating.]

If Holsten hadn't been prepared in advance, he might've really been killed by Hyde's sword today. From the door of the abyss to the barrage of darkness, the number of sacrifices consumed for this trap was 5,000 people. Thank goodness it was a success. All of it would've been for nothing if he had failed to catch Hyde.

The creation of a corrupt knight, unlike a death knight, was worth using 5,000 sacrifices if it could use all its abilities.

Holsten continued speaking, [This is one step closer to our long-awaited...]

Their expansion of power was delayed due to Meltor's disturbance, but the harvest this time would be large enough to overturn it. Hyde was a sword master specializing in assassination! The methods of using him were as numerous as the stars in the sky.

However, at that moment...

Kiing! A small hole breached the absolute darkness.

[What?!]

Alas, this shocking situation was only the beginning. A storm of

aura blades sliced at the darkness, scattering light. Then Hyde's white aura emerged. No, it wasn't his aura. Unlike the other shadows, only Holsten, who was close to a master, could infer the identity of the force. However, even if it was likely, Holsten couldn't admit the possibility of it.

[This unbearable power! No, this is impossible!]

The nemesis of magic, the power of a people who had left the material world long ago...

[Divine power is a remnant from a previous age!!] As Holsten cried out, the white light, which had no color, tore through the darkness.

The abyss door was shattered, and the warlock controlling it died on the spot, while the rest of the warlocks coughed blood onto the floor. Their circles were destroyed, the nerves of their bodies broken, and their brains burned... It was a feast of those who had fallen to ruin.

[K-Kuaah... Why... What... This...!] Only Holsten managed to remain sane, and he maintained the shadow magic, even when his body had been turned into a mess. As a reward for his patience, Holsten was able to see 'it' in Hyde's hand. It was a silver sun in the shape of a sword.

“In the face of true strength, your tricks have little meaning. Emerging from the shadows you always hide in is the reason for your defeat.”

[T-That sword...?]

“I don’t know,’ is what I would like to say. But I’ll teach you specifically, so you will know.”

As the wind swept through his empty left sleeve, Hyde focused his power on the sword in his right hand. Then in response to Holsten’s question, Hyde went on to speak the name of the sword which Andras’ prince, Fermut, had given to him. It was an unbelievable symbol from the Age of Mythology.

“Cry, [Claimhb Solais](#)!” (Spelling provided by author.)

TL: I know that ‘Claimhb Solais’ isn’t the common spelling, which is why I specifically left the above author’s note, as I chose to keep the author’s spelling. Stop hounding me about it ><

Hyde spoke the name while pushing the brilliantly shining silver blade deep into the sand.

Kiiing...!

The power which could transform the user’s aura into a new force and shatter all magic... The power of the past which no one had ever escaped from... It was the divine sword of the tribe of the gods, the divine sun sword. (Tuatha Dé Danann)

In the gap created by the backlash of destroyed magic, the god-sword emitted a horrific white flame.

*

The silver sun came up.

Theodore and Randolph, watching from afar, had the same thought about the wondrous sight.

Until a little while ago, the area had been locked in an ominous darkness. The sun had sunk in the west, and unexplained black magic had been used. Then the stars had disappeared, and the world had fallen into darkness. In this place, the warlocks had exerted several times more power than usual, making even Theodore feel a sense of crisis.

‘At least, until the silver sun rose.’

Randolph leaned against a rock, while Theodore looked down at the necklace which had shattered.

It wasn't just the necklace. The bracelet Theodore had borrowed from Kurt III and other minor artifacts had shattered as well. Even the tracking necklace designed to chase the sword master had also been turned to powder.

“Why are all the artifacts broken?” Theodore muttered in his original appearance of black hair and blue eyes.

There was monetary damage, but he didn't have an excuse for it. He sighed as he placed the debris of broken artifacts into his inventory. It wasn't just the bracelet made by the Yellow Tower Master but also the device they'd been using to chase the unidentified sword master. Now, the two of them could choose to fight or run away without meeting him at all.

Then at that moment, Gluttony abruptly woke up.

-User!

Its shout pounded Theodore's head, making him feel taken aback.

'W-What? What happened?'

-Why is 'that' here?

'That?'

In this situation, there was only one thing Gluttony could be referring to. It was the mysterious sword pouring out a silver light. Theodore was curious about its identity, so he couldn't miss this.

'What is that sword? Teach me if you know.'

-How ignorant, impudent, and shameless! Harsh words poured out of the rarely agitated Gluttony. -It's one of the four treasures

of the tribe of the gods, the sword of the sun god. It's the silver arm, the sword worn by the god-king, Nuada Airgetlám. This is the sword that slays all magic!

‘A god-sword... the sword of the god-king? Really?’

–Do you think I wouldn't know that silver light? It might be in the hands of an unqualified person, but this god-sword is the nemesis of a magician!

It was great that Gluttony had called a sword master an ‘unqualified person,’ but Theodore's head was hurting from something else. This was a vestige of history, a relic of the Age of Mythology which had almost been lost in the Dark Age... It was a sword used by the king of the tribe of the gods!

This sword removed the powerful dark magic and also neutralized all the artifacts. It was an admirable power.

‘...But this is this, and that is that.’ Theodore quickly made calculations in his head.

The sword master was hostile to him and was equipped with a formidable weapon. Theo wanted to overpower the sword master with the advantage of numbers, but unexpected variables changed his choice.

The influence of weapons and tools during a master level battle was limited, but a god-sword was a strategic weapon for a sword

master. The other person was a sword master who specialized in assassination, and he held a divine sword, making him a threat to Theodore.

Theodore thought up to here and made a decision, ‘Okay, let’s go back instead of fighting.’

It might be tempting to neglect this danger and fight the sword master here, but this was a gamble which also involved Randolph’s life. There was no reason to deviate from his original purpose of returning to Meltor or to risk both their lives with unnecessary fighting.

“Randolph, go back to the...” As Theodore made a calm decision and turned back to Randolph, a light filled his vision. His eyes narrowed as aura pressure touched his skin.

Kakang! There was a loud sound in the air.

“There!” Randolph stared at the space 5cm behind Theodore and struck with his sword.

It was a fast-paced action. Despite Theodore’s vision being enhanced by Battle Song, Randolph Clovis’ sword was only a blur.

Kakang! King! Kakang!

From a straight line to curved line, a curved line to a straight line, a straight line to a curved line... As the ray of light moved

from top to bottom and left to right, the invisible sword hit it precisely. The swords collided many times at a dizzying speed.

Randolph took two steps back, and his two swords moved in a diagonal line, while something transparent appeared before him.

Then the enemy revealed his appearance. It was the face of the swordsman whose pride was scratched for the second time today, after Holsten the warlock.

“It is a little annoying. A guy with this level of aura is in the neighborhood and even saw my attacks?”

Gray-brown hair was revealed between the torn mask and cloak, while the scars on his body proved the harshness of the life he lived. This was a person with the talent and hard work which allowed him to rise from a low status to the position of a sword master.

It was the moment when the empire’s 6th Sword, Hyde, finally found his target.

Chapter 170 – Claimhb Solais (1)

“Tsk.” Hyde then took off his mask and cloak, which had lost their meaning, and stared at Theodore’s group in front of him. He’d wanted to handle the witnesses, only to encounter another sword master. Additionally, during their short exchange, he could tell that the opponent’s level wasn’t lacking.

However, instead of frowning, Hyde smiled. “This is great. It is the first time I’ve encountered an ability like yours, with the freedom to quickly strike in every direction. But it is a shame that there is an imbalance in the swords you have now.”

Randolph was shocked to hear the words, but he couldn’t deny it.

This was because Randolph was already aware of the weakness Hyde pointed out. There were various combinations of dual wields such as a long sword and a short sword, a light sword and a heavy sword, and so on. However, the Clovis twin swordsmanship was based on using two swords which were perfectly matching in weight and shape.

But the swords which corresponded to that standard were never common. The swords which Aquilo had in her treasure chest were famous, but there was a slight gap in Randolph’s swordsmanship because of their individuality. The shape and weight of his current swords were somewhat similar, but the center of gravity was off.

“And...” Hyde turned his gaze from Randolph to Theodore.

Theodore, whose disguise necklace had been broken by Claimhb Solais, had returned to his original appearance. One year had changed his appearance and physique, but it wasn't enough for him to look like someone else.

After the surprise attack, Hyde's eyes shone as he muttered, "I've finally found you, Theodore Miller."

The wind around the sword master stopped blowing.

"I thought the rat in the back alley was messing with me... If I had known this, I would've made his death easier," Hyde spoke in a loud voice which seemed like an animal's growl.

However, compared to a year ago, Theodore had entered a different realm, and he didn't shrink back at Hyde's daunting atmosphere. 'The rat in the back alley,' reminded Theodore of Gibra's broken body.

So, Theodore went on to say, "A sword master who is proud of his torture methods. But shouldn't rat be a nickname for you, since you only know how to hide?"

Hyde laughed, "Hah, this magician has a sharp tongue. Should I make it so you can't speak?"

"You are the trapped rat who ran away when one of your arms was cut off." Theodore's last words were crucial.

“...Hoh.” Hyde’s playful voice became cold.

Wuooooong!

There was no wind blowing, but his grey hair rose up. It was aura pressure. Aura flowed naturally from the pores of Hyde’s body. This was different from when people used their auras consciously. The sword master had become intensely emotional and triggered this unconsciously.

‘The intimidating feeling has increased almost two-fold... He is still bruised from his defeat in the Great Forest,’ Theodore realized.

Despite being overwhelmed by the terrifying presence, Theodore watched Hyde without stepping back. Extreme emotions increased one’s power, but it adversely affected one’s movement accuracy and ability to think calmly.

However, the thing that Theodore really paid attention to was the changed form of ‘Claimhb Solais.’ The sword of the god-king, Nuada, changed from a silver sword to Hyde’s left arm.

‘Gluttony.’

–Um.

As Hyde was lost in his boiling anger, Theodore quickly asked Gluttony, ‘You said before that the sword master is unqualified?’

-That's right. A sword master might be great in this age, but he isn't qualified to be the master of the god-sword, Claimhb Solais.

'If so, does that mean there is a limitation to the god-sword and he can't use all its functions?'

-I understand the intent behind your question.

If Hyde continued using the same abilities he showed before, the two people had no chance of winning. Sweat dripped down Theodore's face as he looked at where the warlocks had been. The ground was melted down like the crater of a volcano.

Fortunately, Gluttony denied the worst possibilities.

-The same firepower won't be available for a while. However, that left arm is almost impervious to magic. Even 7th Circle magic won't be able to penetrate the god-sword's resistance.

'Then is there a chance for the two of us to win against him?'

-If it is two against one, the odds will be over 70%. The biggest problem is another function of Claimhb Solais.

There was another function? However, the moment he was about to ask Gluttony again, the silent Hyde opened his mouth.

Hyde said, "...No matter how I think about it, dealing with both of you will be disadvantageous."

He was a ghost among the Seven Swords of the empire, someone who had trained in blood since childhood. Hyde's senses realized that there were two masters as his opponents. Although he had been arrogant with the warlocks, he wasn't confident that he could beat both Theodore and Randolph.

Hyde knew this and drew the sword hanging at his waist. "Becoming a master in a year... My master's insistence on naming you as a target of extermination was correct."

Theodore shook his head. 'Master? He must be referring to the emperor of the Andras Empire. No, then he would say, 'Your Majesty'...'

However, Theodore's thoughts didn't last much longer. Instead of the god-sword, Hyde drew a different sword and pointed it at the two people. The blaze of a high-density aura turned the surrounding air into a haze, showing off an alarming presence.

Theodore and Randolph adjusted their postures accordingly.

"I'll play with you a little later, nameless swordsman," Hyde stated.

Randolph scoffed at Hyde's words. "What? Do you think to deal with us one by one?"

“I’m afraid so. You are a great swordsman, but I have to put my duties first. I will fight you after taking the head of this magician.”

“How funny-” Randolph tried to refute it.

However, Hyde’s left hand suddenly shone as a shout emerged from his mouth, “「King of the Tuatha Dé Danann, show the dignity of Nuada Airgetlám in this fight! The unbreakable god-sword, forbid the enemy Theodore Miller from escaping!」”

Simultaneously, the light burst out.

“———Uh!?”

It was the tradition of ‘blinding eyes with a brilliant light’ from the Age of Mythology. This was the third power given to the sun god-sword, Claimhb Solais. The magic which blocked light, the magic which called darkness, all of it was nullified as those in the area were forced to cover their eyes.

Theodore, Randolph, and even Hyde couldn’t be free of that influence.

Randolph cursed, “Damn...! What the hell is this damn light?”

Then as the silver light covered the ground and sky, Randolph was finally able to raise both eyelids. The sight of the sword master

was still blurry, but it was only for a short while. Shortly after that, the whites of Randolph's eyes became bloodshot, and he exclaimed, "T-Theodore?!"

Randolph's reaction was natural. He'd closed his eyes from the start of the flash for literally just a moment. However, when Randolph looked again...

His companion of a year, Theodore, had disappeared along with one of the empire's Seven Swords.

*

Nuada Airgetlám, the famous 'Silver Arm Nuada' of the Age of Mythology...

According to the records found in some ruins, he'd broken through a myriad of demonic undead corpses alone in order to defeat the demon king, Balor. He'd killed all creatures in his sight and turned the demon army back into corpses.

However, one thing had been needed to achieve that feat. It was 'Claimhb Solais,' the god-sword eternally etched with the spell of the sun god.

Even if Nuada had broken through the demon army and faced Balor, it would have been useless if Balor had fled. In order to block such possibilities, it had been necessary to force the opponent into a 'one-on-one battlefield.'

Hyde pointed to his left arm with a proud face. “This battlefield is a space created with the power of the sun god. We can’t escape until one of us dies.”

Unlike Hyde, who was leisurely explaining this to him, Theodore jumped back reflexively.

His opponent was a sword master. Theodore was relatively flexible with how far away he needed to be from his opponent, but his opponent was formidable. Using an interval of 50m, Theodore quickly measured the width of the area. Then he shot out a wave of magic power and looked at the results.

The area was narrower than he’d thought. Theodore calculated the result of the detection magic, and his expression hardened. There was a radius of 100m, and the error range was around 3m. It was a large space, but it wasn’t enough for a magician. A sword master could go dozens of meters in one step, so the diameter of 200m was too narrow.

Theodore grasped the problem.

While taking a defensive stance, Hyde laughed at him, “Hah, now that cheeky face has lost its composure.”

In the end, it was like this. The natural fate of a magician was to fall before a swordsman.

He had lived his whole life with a sword in his hand and covered in blood. Hyde was a murderer raised specifically by Prince Fermut. He was a rare type of monster who placed commands above fame.

Even so, Theodore didn't hesitate to fire back. "What did your master do when your arm was cut off? You are only strong due to the god-sword. I've overestimated the Seven Swords of the empire."

"Shut up."

"Your master is also rather funny. Giving you that god-sword... Doesn't he know it is like giving pearls to a swine?"

Theodore didn't know which keyword poked Hyde's anger. However, after Theodore finished speaking, he was able to see something blazing in Hyde's eyes. It was hatred, a terrible emotion.

"...Okay. This is the end of your chattering, Magician," Hyde growled. Then his aura started to swallow up his body. Color, sound, and everything else were erased, until only his voice tickled Theodore's ears, "I will kill you in a special way."

Those words couldn't be misunderstood, especially when Theodore thought about Gibra. If Hyde caught him, Theodore really would have thousands of pieces of his flesh peeled off. Hyde's precise knife control meant Theodore wouldn't die quickly, and terrible pain would be inflicted until the end.

However, Theodore suppressed his fear and shouted, “Inferno!”

If he couldn't determine the enemy's position, then he would just sweep away all the possible locations. The 7th Circle fire magic, previously compressed by Veronica into the form of a sword, swept through the battlefield.

Chapter 171 – Claimhb Solais (2)

The decisive battle began, with the flames flickering like they were being blown by the wind. The atmosphere suddenly heated up, and it felt like the world was burning red. As the sand and gravel on the ground melted, Theodore looked around hurriedly.

‘The completeness is somewhat lacking, but...!’

Any magician who heard this would be in disbelief. This 7th Circle magic was a strategic magic which burned at one point when the user placed it in focus, but it could also be spread widely.

Theodore had just reached the 7th Circle, so it was impossible for him to cast it so quickly. Therefore, it was necessary to have ‘something’ which made the impossible possible. It was Artificial Yin and Yang, the key to this unprecedented speed and the secret he’d obtained by passing Seimei’s test.

[+? Artificial Yin and Yang (Imprint)]

[It is the result of ‘Aquilo’s Blood Mark’ and the ‘Ring of Muspelheim’ circulating to form the shape of yin and yang. The two forces of fire and water embody the idea of amplifying each other’s strength without opposing each other. The affinities of both attributes have risen to the limit, and the existing abilities are inherited. Additionally, the imprints have the ability to rotate and generate magic power independently of the user’s circles.

* The rating of the imprint is ‘Legend.’

* The abilities of 'Aquilo's Blood Mark' have been passed down.

* The abilities of 'Ring of Muspelheim' have been passed down.

* Understanding of water magic and fire magic has greatly increased, reducing the casting time of magic. Ignores attribute damage that is below the user's level, and halves it if it exceeds the user's level.]

This was a fraudulent combination of power! The Ring of Muspelheim and Aquilo's Blood Mark were undeniable abilities, but the result of the combination was more than that. In the past year, Theodore had completed the 7th Circle and maximized two attributes! This was how Theodore was able to complete Inferno in just seconds.

However, leaving that aside, Theodore's choice was right. If he couldn't figure out Hyde's hidden location, it was best to make use of this limited space. It was necessary for Hyde to defend from the flames of Inferno by using aura. Otherwise, he would be completely eradicated.

Therefore, the area where the fire storm was interrupted would expose the enemy's location. Theodore desperately concentrated all five of his senses on watching the flow. A result soon fell into his hands.

'Inferno's flow is disconnected in that place... It should be... Eh?'

...Three steps ahead of him?

“-Kuk!” Simultaneously, his sensory perception trembled.

Theodore hurriedly moved his head backward, while several strands of his bangs were cut by something sharp. It was a surprise attack which was no different from the swing of a reaper’s scythe.

However, his sensory perception warned him of the successive attacks which occurred immediately after that. The blade that descended toward Theodore’s head scratched the edge of his clavicle. Then it aimed at his heart. As it missed, the blade descended, heading for his calves. The slash aiming to behead him just sliced the air instead.

Theodore had unusually agile footwork for a magician. Alfred’s senses and Lee Yoonsung’s martial arts had saved Theodore’s life.

‘W-What the hell is going on?!’ Theodore was full of questions, rather than fear, as the blade passed over his head.

Even if a sword master’s defense was great, this situation was impossible. This was one of the best attack magic of the 7th Circle, so a fatal blow couldn’t be avoided with the usual density of aura. However, what was this situation? Hyde was moving freely within the flames, like he wasn’t affected by Inferno at all!

Gluttony read Theodore’s mental state and answered naturally,

–The reason is obvious.

‘What?’

–Claimhb Solais is a sword that symbolizes ‘light’ and ‘fire,’ so it is natural to give the user resistance to those attributes. The person might be unqualified, but it has joined as part of his body.

‘...Hey! You should’ve told me that first!’

Theodore, who had just avoided the sword by raising his chin, was distracted by Gluttony. He wanted to yell at Gluttony for a few hours, but regrettably, he couldn’t.

If this current situation continued, he would die without even touching Hyde. Inferno didn’t have an effect, so that meant all fire and light magic were sealed. Theodore’s power would’ve been sealed completely if he were a typical Red Tower magician.

However, he still had one more main attribute. This crisis was an opportunity for it. Theodore recalled a method and waited for the opponent to move one step closer.

「инейштормовой (Frost Storm)！」 He spoke in a language which couldn’t be imitated with a human voice. These were words which allowed a dragon to rule over the laws of nature.

The fact that Theodore could already use Dragon Words was proof he hadn’t been playing around during this one year. Aquilo’s

Blood Mark, amplified by the synergy effect of 'Artificial Yin and Yang', immediately changed the fire storm into a frost storm.

At the center of the storm was Hyde, who was right before Theodore!

“What, this is...?” Hyde’s voice expressed his surprise and frustration. However, before he could say anything, the frost storm slammed into his body.

Jjejeok. Jjejejeok! Jjeok...!

The melted ground froze over, and the sight of frost on the lava-like ground was fantastic.

Theodore admired the power of the frost storm as he looked around at the all white battlefield. He could produce the same scene using 7th Circle Blizzard, but Dragon Words relied solely on nature instead of his magic power. The strength and efficiency simply couldn’t be compared.

Even a sword master with a god-sword had to avoid being directly hit by this.

“...Truly, the empire was right to point you out as an enemy.” The sword master Hyde was amazed and moved far away.

According to his research, the young man in front of him was still in his early 20’s. If Theodore continued to grow like this, Meltor

might soon have a third 8th Circle magician. It was a crisis which the Andras Empire had never experienced before.

Hyde thought so as he looked down at his left hand, which still hadn't vanished. The arm of silver which blocked all magic, it was the sword his master had given him. If it wasn't for Claimhb Solais, the frost storm would've frozen half his body and decreased his combat strength. Theodore's trump card was terrifying. Moreover, unlike Hyde's prediction that he would be overwhelming Theodore in close combat, Theodore had avoided all of Hyde's attacks without a single critical hit.

"Cough." Blood emerged from Hyde's mouth.

Despite the favorable factors, Hyde had failed to heat up properly. No matter how he circled his aura, there was no way to escape from the cold. His left arm was fine, but the mobility of his right side was two or three times lower than usual.

If this were an ordinary mission, Hyde would've retreated. However, it wasn't, so he gripped his sword with a determined expression. This was due to his loyalty to Fermut, his sense of duty as one of the empire's Seven Swords, and his intuition as a warrior.

"I have to kill you here," Hyde declared.

He realized that it would be impossible to kill Theodore later if he didn't do it now.

On the other hand, after calling up the frost storm, Theodore was worried about how to attack the opponent.

Theo had used Dragon Words, but the storm didn't deal any fatal blows to Hyde anywhere on his body. It had hit Hyde, but it wasn't at a level to interfere with the continuation of the battle.

Theodore frowned as he took off his torn robe. 'Damn, he isn't someone who will fall for the same technique twice.'

It was a serious issue that Hyde hadn't fallen down from Theodore's previous counterattack. Theo had thought that a crisis was a chance, but he would just be stupid if he tried to do the same thing twice. The tactic of using Dragon Words as a surprise attack was over.

However, it was difficult to find a strong magic to use when Hyde's left arm would just neutralize it, especially while the sword master was being more careful.

Let's compare the power Theo had left to what his opponent had.

Theodore only had two uses of Dragon Words remaining. His odds of winning in a close match was less than 1%. The duration of Frost Storm was around five minutes. He had plenty of magic power left, and his wounds were ordinary.

Meanwhile, Hyde had his left arm which neutralized magic and

the Aura Ability.

“Tsk, in the end, that damn arm is the problem.” Theodore thought of a few tactics and then clicked his tongue as he realized he was stuck because of Claimhb Solais. The left arm was a void since it could neutralize any magic. Wide area magic couldn’t penetrate the opponent’s defense, and single-point magic would be blocked. If long distance and short distance attacks weren’t enough, then there was only one answer left.

“Would a hit and run attack while maintaining a medium range work?”

To be honest, it was crazy. Theodore could combine Battle Song and Lee Yoonsung’s martial arts, but it wasn’t enough to match the sword master in front of him. It was impossible for him to challenge Hyde unless he had Veronica’s physical abilities.

Theodore planned to keep a ranged spell around his body so that he could know the opponent’s position, as well as using magic to strengthen his body. His magician’s brain was working overtime.

“Okay, I’m beginning.”

However, this was only possible for Theodore. It was possible due to his natural calculation abilities, Gluttony’s function, and his experience. Taking into account Umbra’s abilities, he could avoid death a few times.

Theodore narrowed the scope of Frost Storm and wrapped it around his body, then he took a few steps forward.

“...Are you thinking something cheeky, Magician?” Hyde noticed Theodore’s movements and raised his sword. He was waiting for Theodore to expose a gap that he could dive at. His eyes resembled those of reptiles who thought of humans as their prey.

Theodore just laughed when he saw Hyde’s expression. “Let’s see. Are you great enough to even say that?”

It might be a bit cruel to Hyde, but it was true. During Abe no Seimei’s test, Theodore had faced stronger and more dangerous opponents than Hyde. Veronica had overwhelming strength, while Blundell used unimaginable magic. Orta had killed him without even moving a step, while Theo’s acknowledged Aquilo’s and Superbia’s power.

In comparison, Hyde’s only strong point was the god-sword. Theodore had high odds of winning if he was careful.

Baduk.

As Hyde noticed this truth, more blood dripped from Hyde’s lips. However, this blood wasn’t coughed up from the throat but blood which emerged as his teeth were broken. He growled out between tightly closed teeth, “-Kill.”

“Let’s try something new,” Theodore said the words and took on

a unique posture.

With one palm above and the other below, his two palms symbolizing the heaven and the earth framed Hyde between them. This was the Above and Below, Heaven and Earth stance. It was a stance to pull out as much harmony as possible.

What happened immediately afterward might be a coincidence or maybe even inevitable. Hyde raised his left arm and his sword, while Theodore gathered magic power in his both hands. The feet of the two people moved in perfect synchronization.

Chapter 172 – Claimhb Solais (3)

Huk.

First, Hyde's appearance disappeared along with his presence. It had been briefly disturbed by Frost Storm, but his Aura Ability was second to none. Moreover, the effect of his ability had nothing to do with his condition, so Hyde's presence didn't leave even a speck of dust.

Even so, Theodore laughed. 'Still, it isn't perfect.'

As expected, Hyde revealed a bit of presence due to the impact of Frost Storm. The slight hint of collarbone was proof of the crisis. Theodore could get a few clues and then move his body in response to the warning of his senses.

Right at that moment, the hairs on Theodore's neck stood up.

Shayak.

He took half a step backward just as the air in front of his neck was cut. It was Hyde's sword, or perhaps his aura blade. Theodore spread all 10 of his fingers before him.

Pipipiiiiing-!

There was a bombardment of Magic Bullets. The transcendent

blue lights, far beyond Alfred's original version, shot out 10 times. It was impossible to see this barrage as random shots. In fact, a few of them headed toward Hyde's body and vanished. It wasn't possible to damage him properly, but it did reveal Hyde's body.

‘Okay, it works!’ Theodore smiled and formed a fist as his shooting worked.

In fact, Magic Bullet was excellent against melee experts such as sword masters. It was good at close range, but it was difficult to hit the target when the distance was too far. Although it wasn't that bad, it was ambiguous to use as his main force.

However, this situation was different. Magic Bullet was very efficient when it came to magic power and was capable of firing it continuously. A 7th Circle magician could pour it out like a shower.

Pipipipipi-! The blue light poured out. The light emitted from his fingertips was more fearsome than beautiful. There were approximately three or four bullets per second...? No, maybe even more than that. The light rays were being poured out at a rate of close to 50 times per second, making it appear like a meteor shower.

Gravel and dirt sprang up as the light touched the ground, leaving blue afterimages behind. This wasn't like the war hero's skill, but the power of Magic Bullet was truly awesome. However, Theodore's opponent was a sword master who surpassed even a past hero.

The concept of this technique had been devised by someone weak, so a sword master could easily trample on it.

Pit!

Suddenly, blood poured from Theodore's body.

“Kuok...!”

Theodore was half a beat too late. He had been struck off guard due to the enemy's boldness of attacking while receiving damage from Magic Bullet. Fortunately, his bones and nerves were safe. However, there was still blood pouring from the deep cut.

He quickly used healing magic while retreating a few steps, before he started shivering. It was proof that Hyde's position was near. The edge of the blade had gone through Frost Storm and tickled Theodore's ribs.

Simultaneously, Theodore bent his waist back unconsciously.

Swik!

This was an avoidance method from the East which wouldn't be possible to use if he were wearing heavy armor. His folded upper body was now parallel to the ground and completely avoided the sword.

It was an unbelievable reaction which even surprised himself, but Theodore stood upright again and kicked with his right foot.

Ppak!

It was a perfect hit. Although it wasn't enough to break the Aura Ability, a few drops of blood fell onto the ground.

Thanks to Battle Song, Theodore's strength was already equivalent to that of an aura user. This meant the power of his kick wasn't much different from a hit by a mace. Even the body of a sword master would receive a shock which would cause a nosebleed.

However, Theodore instinctively understood that although it felt like he had the momentum, Hyde had actually used this to take one step closer to Theodore.

“-Thunderbolt, cry!” Without distributing any mental power to chanting, Theodore's short chant summoned seven bolts of thunder.

‘Sevenfold Thunderbolt.’

This wasn't the ‘lightning spear’ which concentrated power on one point. Instead, it poured out thunderbolts toward the spot where Hyde was!

Kwarururung-! The sound of thunder was deafening in this enclosed space.

Theodore stared at the spot where the thunderbolts struck as there was a part of the ground which wasn't melted down. He had to watch carefully in order to not miss the movements of the sword master in the center.

However, Hyde didn't move immediately. Instead, he bent over.

"...Kehup!" The damage seemed to be great this time as Hyde coughed up blood. The blood was a dark red. It was a color which proved the impact had reached his intestines even though he had defended with aura.

A lightning spear could be invalidated with the god sword, but there was no way to block all the thunderbolts. Theodore, who was trying to estimate the situation, got a sense of enlightenment.

'Hey, haven't I become stronger?'

The battles he previously experienced had been much more severe and dangerous than this current battle. Umbra hadn't been used yet, and he didn't have any serious wounds. Additionally, his response had been really fast a while back.

Funnily enough, Theodore's power was maturing during this battle. With Alfred's Magic Bullet, Lee Yoonsung's martial arts, his own magic, the Artificial Yin and Yang, and Dragon Words... This

wasn't a hasty battle of survival but one he could actually win.

This was a sense of enjoyment which couldn't be felt in battles against stronger opponents. Confidence made Theodore's movements even more violent.

"Ugh-!" Hyde had yet to recover from the damage, but he was receiving a bombardment of Magic Bullets again. One hit wasn't fatal, but it was annoying and cumbersome. However, the consumption of aura was too extreme to block all of them.

Hyde's combat style which maintained the Aura Ability made this an issue. His aura was gradually drying up, and it wouldn't be long before it ran out.

"...Don't make me laugh!" Hyde roared.

However, a sword master was a sword master. Hyde used his left arm as a shield and broke through the Magic Bullets coming from the front. A few hit him, but his aura defense was still intact.

Hyde managed to draw near, but Theodore avoided Hyde's sword. It passed by his temple, and he countered with a punch to Hyde's body.

Chaaeng! Theodore's punch was blocked by Hyde's silver left arm.

However, this wasn't a constraint as Hyde swung his sword with

his other arm which wasn't tied up. Clearly, Hyde's body was different from a human's. Sensing that this wouldn't work, Theodore widened the distance again. No, the moment he tried to...

Hyde screamed with a demon-like face, "The light that drives away evil...!"

At that moment, a bright light emerged from Hyde's left arm. It was a small light compared to when he had wiped out the warlocks or created the battlefield, but it was clearly the light of divine power.

This was the nemesis of magic. Before Theodore could take action, 'it' burst out. Argenteous Brilliance.

This was the type of brilliance which had defeated Balor when used by Nuada Airgetlám. There was no attack power at all, but Theodore was a magician and the light seemed to be stripping away at him.

'...No, it isn't just a feeling!' There was knee-jerk amazement in Theodore's eyes. As soon as Argenteous Brilliance was activated, all magic on his body was lifted. Frost Storm, which had been created with Dragon Words, completely disappeared.

It forcibly canceled a 7th Circle magician's spell made with Dragon Words...?

Chill. At that time, Theodore had a foreboding of death. He'd lost Battle Song which enhanced his physical abilities, as well as Frost Storm which allowed him to read and block Hyde's attacks.

A minimum of two seconds was needed before he could return to his previous combat state. He needed to hold on for two seconds in front of a sword master!

'Eh?'

Before freezing with terror, Theodore's body had moved freely.

Jjeok!

There was a strange sound. It was the sound of Theodore's martial arts hitting Hyde's body. Anyone watching this battle would call it a last hurrah. A sword master's aura defense couldn't be crushed by the fist of a human.

"...Eh?" However, Theodore was forced to make a questioning sound. "Why?"

Theodore wondered why his fist was fine, as well as why there was no blood on his skin. Why had Hyde taken a few steps back from the punch of a magician? It was such an unimaginable situation that Theodore even forgot to prepare for battle.

This was a moment when the magician showed many gaps because he couldn't understand the phenomenon. However, Hyde

couldn't even move his body, let alone stab at the gaps. Shortly after that, Hyde's face revealed the reason.

“Kuheok! Kuk, kuhuup...!”

Hyde's sword pointed downward as blood flowed down. It was nothing compared to the blood dripping from his lips. Additionally, the taut skin of a man in his 20s shriveled like he was an elderly man, and the size of his body decreased. It was like Hyde had aged dozens of years in an instant.

In a situation that nobody could believe, Theodore discovered the answer to the phenomenon which was happening to Hyde.

‘...I see. Is that the price for using the god-sword?’

-It seems like it. Gluttony was also convinced about the reason. -I wondered how an unqualified being had this power, but now I know why.

‘Explain.’

-It isn't a big deal. It connects to the lost part of the body and has access to the source of life. By consuming the life force of the user, the god-sword is activated. No matter how much vitality a sword master has, he can only use it a few times.

Theodore nodded. Hyde looked terrible. It wasn't merely aging. His life force itself was being sucked out. Perhaps a normal human

wouldn't be able to tolerate it. Theodore briefly made a sympathetic expression before continuing to ask Gluttony questions.

‘Look at his status and make a decision. How much longer can he last?’

–Hmm. Gluttony observed Hyde through Theodore's eyes and said, –His life is deteriorating. Using anything more is impossible. It won't be long until he dies.

‘Damn.’ Theodore gritted his teeth because he wanted to end this fight here. From this point on, Theodore was in a better position, but Hyde wasn't prepared to lose yet. So, Theo couldn't be careless before it was over. His senses warned that something was approaching.

Unsurprisingly, Hyde stood up again. “...Up to... here.”

As a sword master, he couldn't be unaware of his body's condition. Hyde realized that this place was his grave. The god-sword, Claimhb Solais, would kill him. Perhaps it was a great honor for him to die here. The life which had started in the slums would end with the god-sword.

Hyde smiled and threw the sword in his right hand to the floor.

“What are you doing?” It was an act of surrender, but Theodore asked anyway.

“Fighting with my sword... ends here. Too bad. My strength can't reach you.”

Before Theodore could reply to Hyde's words, Hyde grabbed his silver left arm. Then he pulled it like he was pulling the sword off.

Kiing!

It was a sight which seemed like a lie. Theodore thought so as Hyde held the silver sword in his right hand. The blade, Claimhbh Solais, shone bright silver with Hyde's vitality as fuel.

“Glory to the future of Andras...” Hyde said as he grabbed firmly onto the light which had wiped out the Orcus warlocks and set it up as a sword.

Then he roared, “Theodore Miller, I will take you with me!”

Chapter 173 – Claimhb Solais (4)

Hyde's eyes were bloodshot, and his solid muscles had long since dried out. Nevertheless, he was determined and aimed at Theodore without any hesitation. He didn't care about dying and wielded the silver sword without stopping.

Despite having only seen it from a distance, the force of the god-sword was clearly marked in Theodore's memory.

‘Damn, I wanted to avoid this situation,’ Theo cursed inwardly.

Hyde's determination to perish together was confirmed in his stance and blows. Although Hyde couldn't reverse the battlefield with a change in attitude, the weapon he held was crucial in this situation. In exchange for his vitality, he could now use all of Claimhb Solais's strength.

Hyde was much closer to death, but his final blows contained the flames of a sword master. At the minimum, it was the same amount of force he'd used to wipe out the warlocks. In this enclosed space, Hyde's sword pointed at Theodore with the aim of killing him.

Hyde stopped and the light around him became increasingly stronger. It was probably Hyde's remaining vitality being turned into a brilliant power... and Theodore wondered if he could interfere with it.

Piiii-ik. At 10 meters before Hyde, even Magic Bullet lost power

and faded away. Claimhb Solais invalidated magic. So, as Magic Bullet got closer to the light, the structure of its magic was broken down, and the magic scattered.

Higher level magic might work, but Theo didn't have enough time to cast it and stop the blows. In many ways, Claimhb Solais was a very annoying weapon.

Theodore sighed, "Hoo, it can't be helped since it has become like this."

Despite the frontal confrontation, he closed his eyes.

'I've come up with two ways.'

He could either strike from the front while taking a hit or avoid it. The god-sword couldn't be avoided using a normal method, but Theodore had an 'abnormal' method.

That was to use Umbra, the national treasure and the dimensional fragment which allowed its owner to jump into the astral dimension. Theodore would be able to avoid the incomplete power of the Claimhb Solais if he used that ability.

...No, wait a minute?

A lightning bolt flashed through Theodore's head. "Ah!"

‘It’s possible.’ The knowledge which had accumulated over the past year in the sharp senses and soul of the magician called Theodore Miller confirmed that the ‘magic’ could now be completed.

Theodore hit on the final key to completing the magic. He looked down at the Umbra pattern on his right arm, as well as the two magic powers circling around his body. Then he naturally stretched out both hands. He didn’t know why, but this posture was the best.

‘The flames of Muspelheim.’ The flames responded to Theodore’s call and flowed like lava from his heart.

All the blood vessels it passed by turned hot like they were melting, but Theo didn’t bat a single eyelash. The magic power flowed through his blood vessels and turned his right hand completely red.

‘Aquilo’s Blood Mark.’ Similarly, Aquilo’s ice cold magic power emerged.

In contrast to his right arm, his left arm was an ice cave. The coldness obscured some of the senses on his skin. In fact, a thin layer of frost had formed on the skin of Theodore’s left arm, and it turned pale, as if it was frostbitten.

The red right arm and blue left arm...! These two incongruent colors were the same as the Yin and Yang symbol in the Eastern continent.

Wuuuuuuu.

As the artificial Yin and Yang were formed, a powerful magic storm started to stir in Theodore's hands. This was a co-existence which couldn't be maintained. It was a miracle which was impossible without the aid of 'Artificial Yin and Yang' Theodore had received from Abe no Seimei's Art of Onmyōdō.

So far, he had experience with these. However, from this point forth, it would be a new horizon beyond the limit. If this was a balance which couldn't exist in the material world, he would drag it to another world.

“Dimensional Leave.”

Among the many abilities of Umbra, this was the top-level ability which Theodore could maintain for only 10 seconds. It caused the area around Theodore's hands to enter an immaterial dimension. Thus, the incomplete magic had reached the next stage.

According to the theory of Yin and Yang, the world was now in Theodore's hands. A perfect red and blue sphere came into formation. It was the shape of an egg which held a world. The shell of a world which was born to break. This was an imperfect world which could only exist for a moment due to Umbra's Dimensional Leave.

However, that alone was enough. The moment that Theodore's magic was completed, Hyde also struck with the god-sword.

“Burn here, enemy of the empire-!” Hyde roared.

A ray of silver light stretched out from the god-sword like a small sun. The power of the god-sword, which soaked up the last vitality of the sword master, was incomparable to before. It was more than the power he'd used to annihilate the warlocks; this power could possibly even kill a dragon.

Then why...?

Strangely, Theodore felt calmer than ever. As an unexpected stillness filled his body, Theodore decided to name the magic floating in the palm of his hands. A famous novelist had used this name for an egg which existed to be broken.

Theodore recalled the name from his past and muttered, “Abraxas (ABPAΣAΞ).”

As he whispered, the world broke...

And light was born.

*

It was too magnificent to be called an explosion but powerful enough to wreak havoc. Claimhb Solais and the great magic, Abraxas...

The collision of such power normally only seen in the Age of Mythology filled the space made by the god-sword, and it caused cracks to spread like spider webs. The aftermath of the confrontation was enough to cause this space to collapse.

If victory leaned to one side, the balance would tilt, and the space would soon collapse. The storm of light was pushed in one direction. Then amidst the light which human eyes couldn't see through, a sharp scream of metal rang out.

The light which filled the area diminished, and the shockwaves subsided.

“...Is it over?”

The man, who was left alone on the battlefield, lifted his eyelids. The color of his eyes was dark blue. It was a color which couldn't be confused with Hyde's off-white eyes. Indeed, Theodore Miller had fought against the god-sword, Claimhb Solais, and won.

He looked around the empty space and found something. “This...”

The sword which had lost its user, Claimhb Solais, remained in the place where Hyde had just been standing. Hyde's body itself couldn't be found in the vicinity. Theo wondered if Hyde had been blown away by the aftermath of the shock, or if he had turned into ash after having his vitality sucked out.

Either way, it was a disastrous end for one of the empire's Seven Swords.

Theodore narrowed his eyes at the thought.

‘Hyde and the god-sword...’ Theo had a lot of questions regarding Hyde’s master. ‘Anyone who knows how to use the god-sword wouldn’t have passed the sword on without being aware of the side effects. But even if he did lose an arm, why sacrifice a sword master in this way? From my point of view, it is difficult to understand.’

Who was it? Maybe Hyde knew about this and accepted the price. However, as Theodore ruled out the possibilities, he got a bad feeling. A person who could use sword masters as consumables, and who had obtained a treasure from the Age of Mythology, the god sword, Claimhb Solais...

Theodore felt like that person would be more troublesome than the Ocrus Company.

The moment that Theodore was in distress...

Kiiiing...!

The god-sword, which was stuck in the ground, started to shake and cry out loudly. Theodore didn’t know what was happening, so he couldn’t help but take a few steps back.

Then Gluttony yelled roughly, –Don’t back off, User! If you let it go, the god-sword will return to its master!

“What?!” Theodore exclaimed with surprise.

Gluttony explained hurriedly, –It is the same as a grimoire! The independence of its ego is a bit lower, but the god-sword is equipped with the instinct to go home! You have to make a decision before this space completely collapses!

Currently, the god-sword couldn’t move because of this space, despite having created it. However, now that Hyde was dead, the battlefield would soon disappear, and the sword would return to an unknown person.

Theodore might’ve won against Hyde, but the risk of the god-sword was too great. It might’ve been hard to win if Hyde hadn’t already used some power to annihilate the warlocks. Theodore made his decision and hurriedly asked Gluttony, “What can I do? Perhaps you... Can you eat the god sword?”

–No, I can’t eat it. The power of magic is completely opposite from divine power. You can use the sword, but I can’t absorb it. It may be possible in Stage 7, but it is meaningless to think about that at this time.

“Then what can I do?”

–Think about it.

Theodore's eyes widened at the next words.

–You were in the same situation once before!

That advice was crucial, and Theodore's mind instantly came up with a solution. Back then, during the elder lich's assault on the Miller Barony... How had he sealed the grimoire of necromancy which he couldn't afford to eat?

“Open Inventory!” Theodore cried out.

At Theodore's cry, Gluttony's tongue moved immediately. In the space which had begun to collapse, a gold light filled the sky at the same time as when Gluttony's tongue wrapped around the god-sword completely.

Would the god-sword be sealed first, or would the space collapse first? Before Theodore could witness the result of the struggle which had started out of nowhere, Theodore returned to the area around Sipoto.

“Eh?” He uttered.

The landscape was different from the dark sky of the battlefield, so Theodore realized that he had returned to the wilderness. In fact, he'd returned to the spot where he had been standing right before Hyde had used the power of the god-sword.

“...Theo? Is that you?” Randolph’s voice entered Theodore’s ears.

“Randolph? Have you been waiting here?” Theodore asked.

“Of course. I was going to wait at least three more days,” Randolph spoke in a bragging tone.

However, Theodore understood that Randolph’s words were true. If Hyde had won the duel and returned here, he would have to start a second round with the furious Randolph. Theodore felt a lump of emotions rise up to his throat and let out a small sigh.

After reuniting with Randolph, Theodore finally realized that he had defeated one of the empire’s Seven Swords.

Theodore looked down at his left hand. ‘...It is somewhere in here.’

Claimhb Solais, the god-sword which had been about to return to its master, had eventually been captured by Gluttony’s tongue.

It occupied a corner of Theodore’s inventory, along with ‘Death’s Worship.’ Theodore might not be able to absorb it, but there were many ways in which he could use the god-sword. It could be used as a sacrifice to summon ‘Fafnir’ or be used against the upper ranks of the empire.

He didn't know the identity of its former master, but someone would be in a lot of pain from losing the god-sword. Theodore laughed at the thought.

Randolph looked at him curiously and asked, "What, do you feel that good about winning?"

"Well...your words aren't entirely wrong. It feels much better than I thought it would."

The battle had been against one of the empire's Seven Swords, the ones who had defended the Andras Empire and killed the people of Meltor. So, as a magician filled with patriotism toward the Meltor Kingdom, it was natural for him to feel a sense of accomplishment from the victory.

He had acquired the god-sword and won against a sword master. Moreover, Randolph's words made Theodore further aware of himself.

Randolph waited for him to completely calm down before saying, "Then shall we go back to the town? Trackers from the Orcus Company might appear... Well, I can handle them though."

"In the East, they call this a win by default when everyone else has dropped out."

"Ah, that's right. There was such a thing!" Randolph clapped as he was reminded of the proverb.

“Then let’s return to town. We will rest quietly before teleporting back to Meltor.”

Theodore pretended to be fine, but Abraxas was a magic which transcended Theodore’s limits. Even if it had succeeded perfectly, his 7th Circle couldn’t help being affected.

He had been able to catch a glimpse of the magic through a momentary epiphany, but it was impossible for that to happen again. Theodore had used such great magic, so it was impossible for his body to remain unaffected.

However, Randolph was silent for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I’m sorry, but I can’t go with you.”

“Huh?”

“This is where we will part ways. I will be going to the Andras Empire, not the Meltor Kingdom.”

Theodore knew Randolph wasn’t going to seek the vacant seat of the empire’s Seven Swords, so he opened his mouth with a questioning expression and asked, “That... why?”

“My sister is still in that country.”

Theodore was startled as he understood Randolph’s words. “Are

you planning to take her away from it?”

“Yes. I am familiar with my Aura Ability and am now a master as well, so I can take care of her. Isn’t it thanks to you? I came along to repay the favor, but my debt keeps growing.”

Randolph had a noble character, which was unlike his rough appearance. This was the face of a man who knew grace but didn’t turn away from his duty. Theodore was speechless, causing Randolph to continue speaking, “Is it okay if we become political exiles in Meltor? At the very least, I should be an earl. How about it?”

“...I will take care of it.”

“Hey. This is between us, yes?”

Theodore smiled at Randolph’s mischievous attitude. They spoke like this, but they both knew the truth... the fact that a sword master wouldn’t be below an earl, and that asylum wasn’t as easy as it sounded.

Still, the two men jokingly exchanged words until the end. They stayed for three days in Sipoto, before saying goodbye to each other early in the morning.

Chapter 174 – Return to the Magic Tower (1)

The Northern continent was somewhat different from the Central and Southern continents which were tangles of countries and civilizations.

As for the sword empire, Andras, and the magic kingdom, Meltor... These two powers could take pride in being the strongest in the Northern continent due to their conflict which had lasted for hundreds of years.

‘The history of mankind is war.’ According to one prominent historian, the war which had lasted for centuries had continuously developed the two powers.

There were the seven sword masters which represented the empire, the Seven Swords, and the four tower masters who guarded the Meltor Kingdom. In the other continents, it was enough for them to have one or two masters. However, the North had a total of 11 masters.

On average, there would be an all-out war at least once a century. Having experienced full-scale wars, the Northern continent was vastly different from the Central region which had lived through centuries of peace. As such, the military power and patriotism of the two Northern countries had been trained over many generations.

This meant that Mana-vil, Capital of Meltor, had a thorough defense system.

“...Indeed, there is no way to hide secretly.” Theodore, the young man wearing a dark hood, was amazed as he watched the walls in front of him.

He knew that the walls of Mana-vil were covered with magic to prevent teleporting, but the completeness of the magic couldn't be ignored. This was magic which had been personally set up by White Tower Master Orta. No one could pass through the wall set up by someone who was considered as the best in the continent at space magic.

Theodore took his eyes off the wall and looked up at the sky. It looked like nothing was happening, but upon reaching the 7th Circle, the landscape before Theodore's eyes was different now. There was a gossamer thin web of magic power. This was detection magic which enveloped Mana-vil in the shape of a hemisphere.

‘I can't enter unnoticed if I fly, so the remaining method is...’

...To go through the ground.

The only way was to enter through a tunnel below the wall. Moreover, Theodore had an excellent helper when it came to the earth environment. While avoiding the eyes of others, he scooped up some dirt and whispered to the soil on the palm of his hand, “Mitra.”

At the very moment that he whispered, the dirt on his palm molded into the shape of a girl. The girl, Mitra, with a large bud on

her head, looked up at him with a sleepy expression.

[...Heeeng?]

“Oh, you were sleeping. I’m sorry.”

Mitra had a confused expression, but she soon giggled as Theodore patted her head. She looked at him with shining eyes and asked, [Deo, you caw?]

“Can you pass underneath that wall there? Please find out if it is possible.”

[Hoing!] It probably meant that she understood. Mitra gave her distinctive cry and jumped off his palm.

The girl moved through the earth, and Theo’s mind was soon filled with images of soil, gravel, and roots. The scenery which Mitra looked through passed by in a fleeting manner, causing Theodore to feel slightly dizzy.

Putting aside her innocence appearance, Mitra’s cognitive abilities were lacking in many ways when compared to intermediate elementals. However, her cognitive abilities were enough to achieve Theo’s purpose.

[Hoeeng... Deo, sowwy!]

‘What? What’s going on?’

[Here, strange block. Can’t go.]

There was a wall which Mitra couldn’t go through? This meant there was no path to sneak into Mana-vil. Theodore suppressed his thoughts and told her, ‘No, thank you for the help. Go and get more sleep.’

[Yes, I noe...]

Theodore felt no further connection as Mitra returned to the elemental world. He looked at the wall again and sighed. ‘No space movement, no flying in the sky, and no moving through a tunnel.’

If he entered through the front door, he would have to prove his identity. So, he had been looking for a back door, but there was no way for a 7th Circle magician to break through Meltor’s defense system.

‘Hu, should I try the checkpoint...?’

Then at the moment when he was about to join the line of people...

“-W-White Tower Master!”

“What? What about the tower master?”

“A white robe and white mask! It really is White Tower Master Orta!”

“No way! Why is he...!?”

Suddenly, the crowd of people started to mutter amongst themselves about the White Tower Master, who was at the peak of space magic. The mysterious Orta had revealed himself.

The marquis and dukes might have the power in other kingdoms, but the real authority in the Meltor Kingdom belonged to the tower masters. So, naturally, they were people who were difficult for the public to see.

The Yellow Tower Master was known not to engage in any external activities, while the White Tower Master was a mysterious figure.

‘White Tower Master? Why is he suddenly at the front gate...’ Theodore had a surprised expression on his face.

The White Tower Master was considered as a hidden sword of the Meltor Kingdom. From assassination to intelligence, he was in charge of all the shadowy tasks. He wasn’t someone who would appear at the main entrance without a purpose.

However, Theodore soon realized Orta’s purpose. Orta’s eyes which gazed through the two holes in the mask were paying

attention to Theodore.

“Guard Captain, I want to ask something of you,” Orta called out.

“Yes, Tower Master! Whatever you say!” The guard captain promptly responded to Orta’s call.

He was a citizen of the Meltor Kingdom, so he was well aware of the status of the tower masters in the kingdom. Orta’s position wasn’t low enough to ‘ask’ something of a mere security guard.

“I will guarantee the identity of the man standing there. Can he skip the checkpoint?” Orta asked.

“Huh?” The guard captain looked at Theodore and stuttered, “I-It isn’t a big deal.”

“Thank you.” After receiving the permission, Orta glanced at Theodore, who understood the meaning of Orta’s gaze.

This was a person whom a tower master had pointed out, so the people paid close attention. However, they didn’t dare stop someone involved with White Tower Master Orta. Thus, Theodore was able to pass Mana-vil’s rigid checkpoint and enter the capital.

“Ah...!” He exclaimed as he saw the high-rise buildings which pierced the clouds.

They were rare sights in other countries. Particularly, this was an unforgettable panorama which couldn't be seen in the Central continent. As Theodore walked before him, Orta greeted, "It has been a while. A year has passed?"

"Yes, it has already been that long."

"I can tell. You have gained a lot of experience in the meantime. Becoming a master when you're not even 30 years old... His Majesty will be amazed."

Indeed, the fact was now revealed.

Theodore looked at Orta's back with admiration. The number of circles was the same, but the other person had experienced all sorts of things as Meltor's pillar. So, Theo's seven circles were exposed to Orta just by looking at his body.

"Well, it is hard to explain during a short amount of time," Theodore responded.

"I want to hear about it." Orta's white mask looked at Theodore and said, "The suspicion that the Orcus Company uses black magic, did you raise it?"

"Ugh."

"Don't panic. It is different in the South, but the White Tower has many information sources spread in the Central area. Most of

the places you passed through have been identified.”

Theodore nodded at the explanation, before suddenly looking to his left and right with a surprised expression. ‘Is it okay to talk about classified information in the streets?’ However, that concern faded when he saw the distorted space around them. ‘W-What type of magic is this...?’

This wasn’t simply blocking off sound. It was like everyone passing by was unaware of the two of them. No, some people even passed through Orta’s and Theodore’s bodies. It was a type of space magic, but the principles behind it were incomprehensible. Theodore realized this was why Orta had revealed confidential information without hesitation.

Orta was a 7th Circle magician who had a shield with unknown principles!

‘Is it a refraction or distortion of space?’ While Theodore was interested in the mysterious shield, the two of them arrived at the crossroad separating the royal palace and the magic tower. Theodore expected to go to the royal palace first.

However, Orta had a different idea and said, “His Majesty is currently in a meeting. Maybe it will end in the evening... Tell me now if there is any urgent business. Then I’ll try to get you a seat.”

“Ah, it can wait a bit. If possible, I would like to go to one place first...”

“Where is that?”

Theodore told the White Tower Master the location and received a positive reply. Unless he was someone with a house in Mana-vil, there was only one place for a magician to stay. This was a place which magicians of the continent named as a sacred place.

It was the magic tower.

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“There is no need to hide from now onwards.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

The magic shield had been maintained when they entered the Magic Society, but the two men only wanted to conceal that Theodore Miller had left this place. There was no longer the need to hide once they were in the lobby of the Magic Society, so the spell was removed.

Huk.

Theodore lowered his hood as the shield was lifted.

“Eh-?”

“W-White Tower Master!”

“Did he teleport?”

“Next to him... No way!”

The magicians in the lobby had varied reactions. Someone lost their place in the book they were reading, while another person tilted his head when he noticed the White Tower Master. Some of them also recognized Theodore, who hadn't been seen for over a year.

He was Meltor's young hero, the idol of magicians his age, the one behind the alliance with Elvenheim, and the one who had defeated a representative of the Andras Empire. His sudden appearance caused the atmosphere of the lobby to get heated.

“T-Theodore Miller!”

“What? The rumored person? Really?”

“He is the real hero...”

“He looks younger than I thought. How old was he again?”

It was fortunate that Theodore wasn't surrounded by them. With the White Tower Master standing next to him, no one dared to approach Theodore. The magicians were blinded by curiosity, but they were too afraid of the tower master. After all, Orta was the

one who had built his own space magic.

Orta ignored their chattering and asked Theodore, “Did you want to stop by your room? Or see someone else?”

“I’d like to see my master.”

“Vince Haidel, understood.”

Orta remembered Vince well. Excluding the existence of Vince’s disciple, Theodore, the number of 6th Circle magicians in the Meltor Kingdom amounted to less than 100 people. However, Theodore was soon forced to stop moving.

“...Theo?” A female voice called out.

She had flowing silver hair and clear blue lake-like eyes. There was a pile of books which seemed to have been dumped on the ground. However, she didn’t look down at them. She just kept staring at Theo with a blank expression.

It was an unexpected reunion with Sylvia Adruncus, who had matured a lot more than a year ago.

“It has been a while, Sylvia.” Theodore didn’t know what to say, so he could only smile bitterly at the eyes facing him.

Chapter 175 – Return to the Magic Tower (2)

It was nice to imagine getting a welcome. However, Theo's departure had been strictly confidential, so he hadn't been naive enough to expect a reunion while others were watching. No, it was questionable if Sylvia even knew of Theodore's actions.

While Theodore was filled with such doubts, Orta delivered a message to him using magic, [She knows. She is Blundell's granddaughter, so she can easily find out if she wants to.]

'Indeed,' Theodore agreed inwardly.

Blundell was a tower master, not someone else. So, needless to say, Sylvia could figure out the information related to Theodore. Of course, he was sure that Sylvia wouldn't leak the information, but there might be situations she couldn't predict. As such, Theodore wasn't sure how to start the story.

However, Sylvia was the one who moved first. "Theo."

"Y-Yes?" Perhaps it was because her tone of voice was different from a year ago, but Theodore's response to Sylvia's call was delayed by half a beat. Unlike before, Sylvia now had a clear and resonate voice.

As Theodore stiffened for no reason, Sylvia picked up the books she had dropped.

“It looks like your business is over.” Her voice was calmer than he’d expected. She bowed briefly to the White Tower Master and held her books as she asked Theodore, “Are you busy now?”

“...Yes, I think I will be busy until the evening.”

“I see.” Her tone was understanding. Sylvia smiled and headed toward both of them. Then as she passed by Theodore, she whispered, “I’m still not fully prepared, so I will see you later.”

Theodore turned to her at the strange words, but Sylvia was already climbing the staircase toward the Blue Tower. It was the opposite direction of the Red Tower, so it would be embarrassing to chase someone who had already said goodbye in order to ask what they meant.

With unanswered questions, Theodore and Orta climbed the stairs leading to the Red Tower.

The meeting with his teacher, Vince Haidel, was really quick.

During the year that Theodore had been gone, Vince’s private room had gotten a nameplate which was engraved with the symbol of a ‘Prime.’ Theo was surprised for a moment, but it wasn’t hard to understand why.

Thanks to restoring the language of the ancient Balcia Empire and its magic system, it wasn’t strange that his teacher would become a Prime.

“Master!” Theodore opened the door with a delighted voice.

“The— cough!” Vince spat out the freshly brewed cup of coffee that he had just started to drink. It was a meeting between a teacher and a disciple after one year, and this touching meeting began with coffee covering Theodore’s face.

“T-This... Theodore, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Fortunately, Theodore couldn’t get burned by the hot coffee as he was resistant to heat. He didn’t have the physical abilities of an aura user, but the body of a magician was different from normal humans in many ways.

Of course, Vince was very apologetic for getting coffee on his disciple whom he hadn’t seen for a year.

“Then let’s start the story.” After the fuss died down and new coffee was brewed, Vince opened his mouth first, “First and foremost, welcome back. I don’t see any injuries, but what about the problem we talked about before you left?”

“It is well above expectations.”

“That is a good thing.” Vince smiled brightly after being

reassured. The news that Theodore had gone on a journey was known to a few people, but only Vince knew that Theodore had a deadline.

Orta cocked his head, but he didn't interfere in the story between the two people.

Then the tale of Theodore's adventures began.

The raid during the crossing of the border to Sipoto, the plaque from the trading company, Sipoto's secret auction, the suspicion that the Orcus Company was using black magic... There was enough material to talk all day.

At first, the White Tower Master was listening indifferently, but he then leaned forward to listen more closely to Theo's words, making comments as the tale progressed.

"A death knight and ghost ship... I need to raise the warning level up by two stages."

"The Pirate Archipelago. I thought it was just a group of pirates. I never expected them to have a sea dragon behind them."

"The Soldun Kingdom is making a big move. Maybe there will be a civil war in the east of this continent..."

...It was the same pattern. There were a few minor things, but every single event was too big not to pay attention to. As the story

reached the peak where Hyde was defeated, the two older magicians forgot their dignity and clapped.

“Excellent! It is just my judgment, but these achievements are enough to give you the position of marquis,” Vince remarked.

“You’re overpraising me,” Theodore responded.

“No, it is hard to disagree with Prime Vince’s words. Reaching the 7th Circle at this age and defeating one of the empire’s Seven Swords? Even if you look through all of Meltor’s history, it will be hard to find another person like you,” Orta praised Theodore as well.

Theodore had no idea what to do hearing the praise from the two magicians.

Vince Haidel and Orta... Both of them were people who contributed to Meltor and had practiced magic far longer than Theodore. He didn’t want them to be displeased at the quick accomplishments of a junior, but he couldn’t see any signs of that on their faces.

Theodore embraced the feelings of intense joy and admiration, and he felt his heart beat faster.

‘I’ve met some really good people.’

Perhaps this sense of belonging was Meltor’s real power. They

didn't monopolize knowledge alone, taught their fellow magicians, and didn't have the envious mindset. It was like paradise compared to the Andras Empire, where there was a strict order between teacher and disciple.

“Ah, that reminds me, Master.” At that moment, a question about Sylvia popped into the mind of Theodore, who felt better. “I'm curious about what happened in the capital during the year I was away. For example, Sylvia was aware that I left...”

“Hrmm.” Perhaps this a heavier topic than Theo had thought, as Vince groaned before opening his mouth to say, “Okay, let me explain what I know.”

The story that emerged was more than Theodore had expected. Sylvia had found out about Theodore's departure a while after he'd left. Then she had stayed in her room for a week. A week later, her change had begun quietly.

Sylvia would read books all day or practice in the training rooms. She had become quieter but more violent than ever. As she immersed herself in magic, she didn't even care about her body being hurt.

It wouldn't have been a big deal for someone else, but Theodore's departure had caused changes in Sylvia. She had more talent and aptitude than others, but she had grown up without knowing desperation.

Even with Theodore, she just had the childish desire to compete

with him. However, now, Sylvia had changed her perception of magic away from ‘playing.’

“You’ve already noticed it, haven’t you?”

“Yes, definitely.” Theodore nodded as he recalled the shock of that moment. “She has already finished the 6th Circle.”

Sylvia had a shocking and frightening talent. Theodore had struggled, even while using the cheat, Gluttony. The ‘wall,’ which was hard to overcome with even superior talent, had been penetrated by Sylvia after she had a change of mindset.

However, that wasn’t what Vince was trying to say. He looked at Theodore and declared, “That child wants to follow you.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes. Just like a chick who thinks of the first person it sees after hatching from its egg as its mother, you have become a presence like that to her.”

For the very first time in her life, she’d met a boy who could match her and who she’d gone on adventures with. It was natural for Theodore to become a big existence to Sylvia, who was like a blank piece of paper.

However, that boy had left and walked alone. The girl, unfamiliar with asking other people for help, then found her own

answer: because she was weak, she had become his burden. Therefore, Sylvia had decided to become stronger. She would become stronger than the boy who defeated her, or at the very least, enough to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

Theodore hadn't realized it until he heard these words. It was then that he finally understood what Sylvia meant by being 'prepared.'

As he drank his coffee while in shock, Vince nodded and advised him, "I won't ask you to meet her straight away, but you shouldn't forget this."

"...Yes, I will keep that in mind."

Theodore had already excluded 'qualifications' and 'age' as excuses. He emptied his cup as he once again realized his own immaturity that Seimei's test had shown him. It might be the atmosphere, but the aftertaste of the sweet coffee was slightly bitter.

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After finishing his story, Theodore was summoned to the royal palace at around 9 p.m. It might be because the afternoon meeting took too long, or perhaps it was to avoid the eyes of others.

Without daring to guess the reason, Theodore passed through the palace's central garden while the stars shone above his head. He walked over a hundred steps beyond the garden and arrived at his destination.

It was a place he had visited a few times in the past. The guard standing before the door recognized Theodore and spoke politely, “It is an honor. Go ahead and enter.”

Theodore lightly returned the greeting before taking a deep breath and entering. In general, the guards opened the door while calling the name of the person entering, but the nature of this meeting was a little different.

The guard didn’t need to explain how it was different. Theodore could tell as soon as the doors opened.

The Blue Tower Master, Blundell Adruncus...

The White Tower Master, Orta...

The minister for the military, Robert Alpenheimer...

And the minister of domestic affairs, Jerome Violeta...

Aside from Veronica who was absent for some reason, the main powers of the Meltor Kingdom were sitting around a circular table and staring at him. Of course, at the center was a man with purple eyes sitting on a gorgeous throne, Kurt III.

As the door closed behind him, Theodore bowed down to the king. “A Prime of the Red Tower, Viscount Theodore Miller greets

the Great Sun of Meltor.”

“You can stop bowing now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Theodore got up and met the eyes of a brightly smiling Kurt.

Then Kurt III spoke in a mischievous tone, “It has been a while, hero who left home. Where did you go and what did you go?”

“Thanks to Your Majesty’s concern, I have returned safely.”

“Is that so? But I don’t think you enjoyed a trip without any incidents. If you don’t mind, please tell your story to the people gathered here.”

“Yes Your Majesty... Ah.” Theodore’s expression changed as something popped into his head. “Before I start talking, I have to apologize to Your Majesty.”

“Hoh? For what?” Kurt III asked with a confused expression.

Theodore showed his blank wrist and apologized, “During a battle, I lost the bracelet that Your Majesty lent to me. Please forgive me for being inadequate.”

“Hah? That hard bracelet? How did you manage that?”

“It couldn’t be helped. I was fighting one of the empire’s Seven Swords.”

Despite his lighthearted tone, the atmosphere of the room changed immediately. Some of the people in the room knew this in advance, but the people who didn’t know were shocked. For Meltor, a battle with their greatest enemy, the empire’s Seven Swords, couldn’t end without any bloodshed. If so, Theodore standing in this place meant...

As everyone was filled with expectation and excitement, Kurt III raised his hand. “Okay, start the story from there. Regardless of when the incident occurred, I would like you to report in the order of most important.”

“I will follow Your Majesty’s words.” Theodore responded to their expectations by opening his mouth and telling his story, “It was just after I saw the devastation in the Information Guild...”

It was a story he had already told to the White Tower Master and Vince, so he was able to make the context more interesting. Sometimes furious, sometimes calm, the voice of the young man resonated in the room.

All of the Meltor Kingdom’s most important people were silent as the hero’s story was told...

And no one was able to open their mouths until the story was over.

Chapter 176 – Return to the Magic Tower (3)

“Don’t speak nonsense!” The minister for the army, Robert, banged his hand on the table and shouted loudly, “Prime Theodore’s accomplishments are enough to make him the new Red Tower Master! He reached the 7th Circle before the age of 30 and defeated one of the empire’s Seven Swords!”

“I can see that, Minister!” However, the minister of domestic affairs, Jerome, argued back, “I admit that his achievements are huge, but giving a Prime-level magician the title and estate of an earl might cause ripples in the currently stable political situation. We don’t know what the empire is planning, so should we be fighting internally?”

“What are you saying? The discipline behind this kingdom is to award merits and punish faults. Why should we not reward a hero just because of the nobles who are playing politics?!”

“Uh, this man is like this until the end!”

After Theodore had finished his story and received permission from Kurt III to leave, the remaining people had been in a state of shock. However, they then started a debate.

The people around the table were split into two groups. There were those like Robert who wanted to publicize Theodore’s achievements and give him a huge prize, while the other side led by Jerome thought it wasn’t a good time to publicize it.

It was very intense because neither side was wrong.

The person in question had managed to reach the 7th Circle at a young age and kill one of the empire's Seven Swords. Meltor couldn't be allowed to neglect this type of person.

Likewise, the opposition's opinion was also correct. Up till now, high ranking magicians hadn't been part of the social circle, nor did they cling to fame, so the nobles had never felt hostile or tried to oppress them.

However, that balance could be overturned with the appearance of Theodore Miller.

'It is a funny story because his merits are too big.' Kurt III laughed inwardly as he watched the debate.

His thoughts were closer to those of the minister of the military, but as the ruler of the country, he had to consider both sides. As Jerome said, the empire hadn't revealed everything yet, so Kurt couldn't make a decision which might be a seed for a feud.

"Stop," Kurt III spoke in a stern voice and everyone fell silent. Then he continued speaking, "I understand your opinions about Prime Theodore. The words of both the minister of the military and the minister of domestic affairs are reasonable."

It was as he said. In this world, it wasn't always the case that only one side was correct. It was common for both sides to be correct

and for him to have to pick one. Kurt III was devoted to the administration of the kingdom every day, so he was now accustomed to this.

He closed his eyes for a moment as he sat on the throne.

Then he opened his mouth and said, “Listen carefully!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Starting tomorrow at 9 a.m., invite Baron Dennis Miller to the city where he will become an earl. Once his heir takes over the title, Theodore Miller will become a marquis. It is the same for his estate. Before that, Prime Theodore will be treated as an honorary marquis. Understood?”

“I will follow Your Majesty’s words!” The other people stood up and bowed while admiring Kurt’s smart judgment.

In Meltor, ‘earl’ and ‘marquis’ weren’t just simple titles. They were the ranks where nobles could step into official affairs and discuss the administration of the state. What would happen if a magician of the 7th Circle who was also a famous person entered this position? The nobles might not have as much power as other countries, but they would unite in order to avoid losing more power. They would lead a counterattack against Kurt III’s strong power.

‘But it isn’t a problem to be concerned about now,’ Kurt thought

as he smiled coldly at the ministers.

Since Kurt's rule began, the forces of the nobles had continued to shrink, and the arrogant ones couldn't afford to do anything due to the conflict with the empire.

However, everyone in this room sensed it. The long war with the Andras Empire was nearing its end. The Meltor Kingdom would win and unify the north, or be completely defeated. Whatever the result, there was no way for the nobles to escape losing power.

Theodore was someone who didn't care about power or wealth, but he willingly accepted the noble title in order to move his family to the safe capital region.

“Okay, it has been decided. Prime Theodore will be awarded a prize, and the tower masters will take care of it. I hope you don't argue about the decision.”

“We will follow Your Majesty's will!”

From the minister of the military to the minister of domestic affairs, no one argued. In fact, Jerome was only worried that Theodore would cause unnecessary confusion in this country. He didn't actually want to hinder Theodore from getting a good reward.

The king smiled with satisfaction at the unanimous agreement. Then Kurt turned to Blundell and said, “That reminds me, Blue

Tower Master.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Blundell responded.

“What is the current state of the Red Tower Master? Has her border patrol finished yet?”

“It seems like it. Based on yesterday’s report, she will be back in a week.”

Veronica always seemed selfish, but she was actually quite sincere. Just as Blundell had done last year, Veronica was returning after touring the border with the empire. However, when Kurt heard the answer, a question came to his mind.

“White Tower Master,” Kurt called out.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Has this news entered Veronica’s ears?” Kurt meant Theodore’s return. Orta immediately understood and nodded. “Perhaps it has. I told my intelligence service that conveying the news to her was top priority.”

“This...”

“Hah...”

Blundell and Kurt sighed deeply at the same time.

“...I guess she will be back in three days.”

“This old man thinks so as well.”

The two men thought about how crazily Veronica would behave once she heard the news and looked at each other.

The news of the emergence of a new 7th Circle magician and the death of one of the empire's Seven Swords... how much of a storm would that cause? Additionally, it would become worse once Veronica returned to the capital.

They couldn't help getting a headache at the thought.

At that moment, Orta whispered in Kurt's ear from where he was standing next to the two troubled men. [Your Majesty, there was a request from the Yellow Tower Master.]

Kurt was confused by the sudden words and scratched his chin in a gesture to tell him more.

[It is a request for a meeting with Prime Theodore. How should I deal with it?]

“Hmmm.” This time, Kurt couldn't hide his confusion.

The mysterious Yellow Tower Master had kept quiet even when the owner of the throne changed a few times, so Kurt couldn't guess the reason for his sudden interest in Theodore. However, the Yellow Tower Master was different from the other tower masters.

Kurt didn't answer and nodded before raising his voice, "Everybody listen up."

As all eyes concentrated on him, Kurt firmly declared, "Apart from the promotion of Prime Theodore and Baron Dennis Miller, I will strictly prohibit everyone from approaching him for the time being. He is a hero who achieved a great merit. I want him to rest comfortably."

"I will follow Your Majesty's words!"

Orta understood the hidden meaning behind the command and smiled faintly. This was Kurt's answer to the Yellow Tower Master's request. It was the consideration of Kurt II, who stopped any meetings so that Theodore could rest comfortably for the time being.

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On the other hand, Theodore returned to his room after the meeting with the top people of Meltor.

"Hah, did I make any mistakes?"

He wasn't a hero who was good at talking.

Theodore had reached the 7th Circle, but he was still a young man in his early 20s. He couldn't be calm when facing the king and two tower masters. It was fortunate that he didn't stutter or stop talking while telling his story. Besides, what good was it to regret what had already happened?

Theodore relaxed slightly as he looked at the room he hadn't seen for more than a year.

“It's clean...?”

Someone had looked after it. Theodore had cleaned his room before leaving, and it looked exactly the same as back then. There was no dust on the bookshelves, while the bed had a fragrant scent like the sheets had been washed and dried in the sun.

He changed his clothes and lay on top of it without any hesitation, feeling like he could fall asleep right then. All the tension which had unknowingly piled up was being released.

‘I really am back.’

In retrospect, it had been an absurd adventure from beginning to end. He had encountered enemies as soon as he crossed the border.

There had been an unexpected windfall at the underground auction, and he'd poked the Orcus Company and its warlocks. Then he'd run to the Pirate Archipelago, stumbled across Aquilo,

and fought against Superbia.

What about the way back? Nobody could've anticipated meeting a sword master with a god-sword. Even with nine lives, it was a crisis during which he could've lost everything.

“...Ah.” All his tension was released as he lay down on the familiar bed, with his tired body feeling like it was melting into the bed itself.

From tomorrow, life in the magic tower would begin again. He had to meet Sylvia and look at the magic formulas, theories, and incidents which had newly developed in the kingdom. Even though he hadn't met her today, he had to say hello to Veronica...

However, Theodore's thoughts lasted up to there. His eyelids moved down slowly and covered his blue eyes. Then his breathing settled as he stopped thinking such complicated thoughts. The expressionless face, not suited for his age, relaxed as he fell asleep, leaving a sleeping Theodore that did fit his age.

[...Horororong...] Then Mitra suddenly appeared on his white pillow and snored while sleeping. She had been sleeping since leaving the Soldun Kingdom. Theodore hadn't realized it, but the leaves and stem of her bud were longer than before. An ancient elemental was different from ordinary elementals, and her 'growth' was still continuing.

Mitra groaned into the pillow as she slept. [Hoiiii...horong?]

It might be a coincidence, or maybe it was caused by her drool.

Wuuong...

The bud of the sleeping Mitra moved. It split in two, and something grew from the center. The seed of the world tree had been planted in an ancient elemental, and a flower was now growing from the bud.

However, the sleeping Theodore didn't know it yet.

Chapter 177 – Eye of the Storm (1)

Three days later, the news that Theodore had left his room spread through the magic towers. Only a small number of people knew about his true work, but the appearance of a hero who hadn't shown himself for a year was a hot topic of discussion.

He also appeared wearing the robe of a Prime, causing the topic to grow even more. Even Vince hadn't expected the news to spread at this speed.

“Theo, it has been more than a year since you returned from Elvenheim... Your fame seems to have grown larger. It is usually hard to get a booking here.”

“Yes. I didn't know it would be like this.” Theodore smiled bitterly as he looked around.

They were currently at a fairly famous restaurant in the capital, and all the tables around them were filled.

The customers were well-dressed, but the landscape of this famous restaurant was different from the usual. The attention of the customers was focused on two people. Well, to be precise, it was on Theodore.

Unfortunately, all that hard work was in vain. The combination of silencing and illusion magic around the duo made the customers feel like they'd been cheated. Hopefully, they would return to their idle chatter after not being able to hear anything.

‘Silence and Illusion. They are basic magic spells, but this type of application is only possible if the level is high.’ Theodore smiled and lifted his teacup.

It was difficult but not impossible to unfold the two spells simultaneously and convert them to his desired form. His magic power control had improved after reaching the 7th Circle, making this task easier.

Theo took a sip and placed his cup down. Then Mitra, who was chewing a few tea leaves, caught his eye.

[Hoong?] ‘What is it?’ Her eyes seemed to ask.

“No, it is nothing,” Theodore said.

He patted her wheat-colored hair, and she eagerly returned to chewing the tea leaves. She was cute enough to make people laugh, but there was no smile on Theodore’s face. It was due to the bud growing further on Mitra’s head. However, ancient elementals were so rare that even Gluttony had no useful information about them.

‘I can’t even find it in Myrdal’s knowledge.’

Even the contractor of an elemental king hadn’t been able to expect the ancient elemental to swallow a seed of the world tree. Theodore’s only hope was asking the high elves of Elvenheim.

As Theodore let out a small sigh, Vince suddenly spoke, “Well, it would be hard to even leave the magic tower if all your activities were known. It is a peaceful time, so your adventures will be very popular as entertainment among people.”

Theodore laughed in agreement, “Haha, Master’s words are true.”

However, he then shrugged humbly. He was glad to hear the favorable words, but he was also embarrassed. Wasn’t this like the stories in books? Someone who wasn’t yet 23 years old had received the title of ‘Hero.’

As if sensing Theodore’s inner shame hidden beneath his expressionless surface, Vince put his cup down and said, “By the way, I am ashamed as your teacher. I thought that someday you would jump over me... but I never imagined you would come back as a master.”

“That...” Theodore didn’t know how to reply.

In fact, there was no reason for Vince to feel ashamed. Theodore’s growth was literally ridiculous and impossible without the power of Gluttony. It was a pace impossible even for the best talents of humankind.

Vince was proud of his disciple who had surpassed him, but he was ashamed about his inability to teach Theo further.

“From now on, I won’t be able to solve any of your problems with my own ability. I know about the concept of ‘Sorcery,’ but it is nothing more than superficial knowledge. The number of people in Meltor who can teach you won’t exceed five fingers.”

They were the Tower Masters who had built their own specialties by repeating their endeavors after reaching the 7th Circle. Only they could help Theodore along his path. Fortunately, Veronica treated him especially well, so there would be no problem for him to seek guidance.

Vince thought up to there as he looked at Theodore with an equal amount of pride and sadness. His disciple had grown up to be a great magician. A fully grown eagle should be let loose to soar freely in the sky.

“It is time for your promise with that young lady. You should go before you are late,” Vince said.

“...Yes, then what about Master?” Theodore asked.

“I’ll have one more drink before leaving.”

“I understand. Then I’ll see you again in the evening.”

“Yes.”

Theodore rose first, while Vince looked at his departing back with calm eyes.

It was said that a hero was born in troubling times. According to that saying, Theodore would be caught up in an even more violent storm. He would be the one to decide the fate of the Meltor Kingdom in the Northern continent, with its hundreds of years of history.

As Theo's teacher, Vince prayed that the path before Theodore would be smooth.

*

'I feel glad to see this place,' Theodore thought as he placed his palms on the firmly closed door before him. The pair of doors was much thicker, and the patterns on it were more complex than the rest of the doors.

That's right. The place where he'd promised to meet Sylvia was Pentarium, the place where the finals of the Pupil Tournament was held.

Kukukung...

Somebody else had already entered this place, so the inside was already illuminated when the doors opened.

The Pentarium was empty, but the vastness of the audience seats could still be seen. It had been almost three years, but the scenery

of Pentarium hadn't changed much. When he closed his eyes, it seemed like he could still hear the cheering which had echoed in his ears.

However, Theodore stared ahead at what was before him. There was a girl standing in the middle of the main hall. Sylvia's blue robe and silver hair gave Theodore a sense of *deja vu*.

It was Sylvia's voice which made him return from the illusion of the past.

"Hasn't it been a while, Theo?" Sylvia called out. If her old voice had been like a clear bell, then it now sounded like a calm lake as it echoed through the main hall of the deserted Pentarium.

Was it because they were meeting in this place, or was it due to the two of them meeting after a long time? Either way, Theodore took in the strange atmosphere and called out her name, "Sylvia."

With a faint smile on her face, Sylvia started to talk. "I thought about it after Theo left."

It was the first time Sylvia had cared about anything other than magic. Unlike Theodore, who already had good relationships with other people before Sylvia changed, Theodore was Sylvia's first friend.

They'd fought with all their power at their first meeting. Then on their trip together, they'd fought the undead and elder lich.

They hadn't seen each other for a while, but Sylvia and Theodore had also fought together against 'Laevateinn.'

After that, Theodore had left. Theodore's departure had only been known to a few key people, including Kurt III. It was only after approximately three months that Sylvia had found out.

She didn't remember how many days she'd spent laying in her room.

Thus, she'd started thinking about it. Just like how she dealt with magic, she wrote things down and erased them until the right answer came out. No one had taught her that there were no right answers in human relationships.

"Why did Theo leave without saying anything?" Sylvia realized that he now stood in a different place from her. "I had forgotten. Friendship is a bond between equals."

She looked at his back which was much stronger than hers, and she felt despair. Sylvia thought that she couldn't be friends with him anymore if she didn't catch up to him. So, she read books every day and wielded her staff all day. She didn't give up until the fun magic became painful.

Sylvia looked down at the floor and said, "This place, Theodore was the same."

The final of the Pupil Tournament... It was the story of a boy who

had been inferior to her but fought without giving up. He had borrowed Gluttony's power, but Sylvia had been much stronger at the time. Even so, Theodore had been the winner.

Compared to him who worked so hard, she had realized that her pain was merely a child's tantrum.

"I want Theo to check it yourself," Sylvia stated.

"What?" Theodore uttered.

"If I am your friend or not," Sylvia said as she grabbed her white staff firmly. Her hands were sweating, and she felt a mixture of tension and excitement.

On the contrary, Theodore was confused. It was true that he wasn't sociable, but he at least knew that friends didn't have to prove whether they were qualified.

'How do I talk to her?'

If this continued, one of them would get hurt unnecessarily. It was reckless for her to go against a 7th Circle. Why was she so obsessed with becoming friends with him? Why did she want to fight? What was she trying to prove?

He wanted to ask her all these questions. However, Theodore remained silent. Unlike three years ago, Sylvia's eyes were shining and determined.

“...I have a lot to say, but I’ll postpone it until later,” Theodore said.

Then he shifted his weight back fluidly, and his body glided over the ground. As he slid smoothly like the ground was ice, Theodore managed to secure a distance of 30 meters. This was a distance where two expert magicians could aim magic at each other.

In other words, it meant he accepted to have the fight with Sylvia. “Come Sylvia. This time, you are the challenger.”

Sylvia smiled brightly. It was like the sun had emerged from behind some clouds. “Yes!”

Unlike their past fight, there were no spectators, but this was better. A battle between senior magicians was like a small natural disaster. The audience members would pay the fee with their lives.

Six circles rotated in Sylvia’s body at a terrifying speed, causing the magic power to stir in the tranquil main hall.

Huuuuong!

As Theodore rotated his circles, he admired her, ‘This is truly great sensitivity. Hasn’t she become much stronger than a year ago?’

Her control of the surrounding magic power was strong enough to be on a similar level with Theodore.

The Blue Tower Master's disciple, she truly was one of the geniuses who represented this era.

The magic power around Sylvia was converted into an attribute, causing frost to appear everywhere.

Jjeok, jejejeok.

The ground frosted over as the moisture in the air froze and drew an unknown pattern. Shapes and letters were made from the transparent ice, forming a large magic circle made of frost.

An exclamation of surprise burst from Theodore's mouth as he grasped its identity. "Drawing a magic circle with frost...?!"

This was an idea he had never thought about. It was common sense that frost was a precursor to ice magic, but to think that it was possible to further amplify the ice magic by drawing the magic circle with frost? Although this was an unconventional idea, Sylvia was proficient in it.

While Theodore was in shock, Sylvia's high-pitched voice completed the spell like she was singing, "Over the sky, under the sky! Blow unceasingly in the sky, Ymir's white fog!"

This was Sylvia Adruncus' unique magic.

“-Diamond Dust!”

Chapter 178 – Eye of the Storm (2)

The moment she spoke, a cold wind started blowing. Apart from the lethal force that the magic implied, the phenomenon which occurred was unbelievably beautiful. It was a glorious silver storm!

The white, snowflake-like particles glittered like crystals as they froze. Even a human with a strong vitality wouldn't be able to survive. Theodore would become an ice statue before he could even feel the cold.

“...This... Isn't it really amazing?” Theodore marveled at Sylvia's genius.

‘Using Blizzard and then the technique of Frozen Orb to compress the frost... There are at least five types of ice-making procedures being used in combination to create this... It would be difficult even for a Prime of the Blue Tower to do.’

This was a unique magic, but Sylvia had not designed or developed it. She had just combined existing magic formulas in a way that no one else had tried. It was similar to the magic fusion theory which Theodore had used to develop Volcanic Shell, but a few steps further.

Sylvia's ‘Diamond Dust’ overtook decades of research. It wasn't in the 7th Circle, but it was a magic which surpassed the 6th Circle! After Sylvia shouted ‘Diamond Dust,’ she pointed her shaking staff at Theodore and exclaimed, “Go...!”

The storm swirling above her staff followed her command. The movement of the high-density magic power condensed into a vortex which could be seen even by a person who didn't learn magic. Then it descended from the air toward the ground.

This storm which could freeze flesh and muscles descended toward Theodore, and—

Nothing happened.

Kurururung!

Theodore stayed still as Diamond Dust descended toward him, but he didn't even use defense magic.

“T-Theo...?!” A sharp scream burst from Sylvia's mouth.

It was a magic which a sword master couldn't be safe against when defenseless, and yet Theodore was defenseless?

Sylvia wanted to be acknowledged by Theodore, not kill him. Therefore, she received a huge shock. However, ironically, her legs didn't collapse because of her thorough training over the last year.

Unlike the robustness of her body, her face was pale white. The moment her mind was about to collapse like a perforated dam...

Puhwaak!

A red robe emerged from the storm. Theodore took off the robe, which was decorated with frost and icicles, and ran toward Sylvia. Unlike Sylvia, Theodore had calmly grasped the situation a while ago.

‘This is a power that can only be called a foul.’

It was the Artificial Yin and Yang. Half of it was supported by Aquilo’s Blood Mark, and the power derived from it was a natural enemy of water magicians.

[* Understanding of water magic and fire magic has greatly increased, reducing the casting time of magic. Ignores attribute damage that is below the user’s level, and halves it if it exceeds the user’s level.]

Sylvia’s unique magic was definitely amazing. ‘Diamond Dust’ was perhaps the best magic which could be achieved by a magician who hadn’t reached the master level, as it was in the boundary between 6th and 7th Circle magic.

Even a 7th Circle magician like Theodore had to be careful against it. He admired Sylvia’s talents and efforts which had created such a unique magic.

The problem was that the target of the magic was Theodore.

It might be different when using magic to mobilize physical

force, like the old Liquid Snake. However, the pure water magic phenomenon was blocked by the water resistance in Aquilo's Blood Mark. No matter how comparable to 7th Circle magic it was, Diamond Dust wasn't a 7th Circle magic.

He ran across the frozen ground and called out to Sylvia, who was losing control, "Sylvia!"

"Ah." Relief filled her eerily blank expression, and she held her staff like it was a spear.

She had already pioneered the staff techniques Blundell had taught her. It wouldn't be easy for a knight to find gaps in her defense to pierce through. In the finals of the tournament, Theodore had almost lost to that very staff technique.

'...No, it has changed from that time!' Theodore realized.

He was now 10 meters away from Sylvia. Simultaneously, a few ice spears floated around her, gleaming menacingly.

Kwa kwa kwak. Kwack! Kwa kwak! Kwack! The spears pierced the ground of the stadium in succession.

The strength of the spears, which had frozen at extremely low temperatures, was already above steel. Theo could defend against being turned into an ice statue, but it wasn't possible with physical force.

The spears aimed toward him. Sylvia was well-aware of Theodore's ability to use Battle Song with other magic tricks, so she didn't let him use it. However, the discipline carved into Theodore's body was incredibly sharp.

His ability to invoke Battle Song in this moment was amazing. Theodore easily pierced through the wall of rock aimed at him. The movement, however, was slow in comparison to Randolph's sword strikes or the water droplet Aquilo fired.

Kiiiiik!

Theodore's hand flowed lightly. An object moving quickly in a straight line was vulnerable to attacks from the side, like an arrow being deviated due to a gust of wind. The strike from Theodore's hand caused the staff's trajectory to change.

"Ah...!" Sylvia gasped.

As Theodore's fist aimed for that fatal gap, Sylvia foresaw the pain and couldn't help closing her eyes.

She could endure pain, but she was somehow afraid of looking at Theodore. Sylvia tried to reduce the impact by tilting her head backward, but Theodore had no intention of hitting her from the very beginning.

He touched his finger and thumb together. Yes, it was an action that anyone would've done as a child. Theodore's powerful flick

struck the middle of Sylvia's white forehead.

Ttaak!

“Kyak?!” Sylvia's legs loosened at the unexpected pain.

Perhaps it was due to the previous mental shock that the power behind the flick seemed like she was stung by a bee. Sylvia grabbed her forehead while feeling it was absurd. Theodore looked down at her with a smile and asked, “Have you calmed down now?”

“I'm angry!” Sylvia had been flicked during the middle of a serious fight, so she couldn't help complaining. “Forehead flick... Why...? I'm serious about this fight.”

“Ah, wasn't that obvious with the magic you first used? It was definitely amazing. I would've suffered if I didn't have a foul method.”

“F-Foul?! Theo, what foul?”

“I can't teach you that,” Theodore teased Sylvia in a mischievous tone while looking at her innocent face.

It might be due to Diamond Dust having no effect, or maybe she was surprised by the forehead flick, but a dark shadow appeared in her eyes. Theodore realized that it was finally the atmosphere for a talk and sat down beside her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Huh?” Sylvia’s blue eyes widened as he apologized.

“You were the one who always helped me when I was having trouble, so I’m sorry that I left without saying anything.”

“Theo...?”

“It was me, not you, who was lacking in the relationship between us. I didn’t do enough for you, compared to everything you did for me.”

Due to his bad memories of the academy, Theodore was reluctant toward the existences called ‘friends.’ Therefore, he hadn’t taken good care of Sylvia. He knew that he was her first friend, but he’d ignored how heavy a responsibility it was. He hadn’t been able to say goodbye, and he’d left without telling Sylvia anything.

Theo had left her alone... because his baggage was too heavy.

“I’m sorry, Sylvia,” Theodore apologized once again as Sylvia’s eyes stared at him. It seemed like all his pent-up feelings were being released. “In the future, I won’t leave without saying anything.”

“...Sob.” Tears formed in Sylvia’s blue eyes. As the tears fell

down her flushed cheeks, Sylvia jumped into Theodore's arms.

“Huaack, h-huaaang...!”

It would've been okay if she had been alone from start to finish. After all, a child left alone wouldn't know the concept of being together with someone.

However, Sylvia knew. She'd felt the warmth of being with someone, as well as what it felt like to share emotions and joy with someone who wasn't a family member. Along with a sense of fulfillment, she also felt a sense of loss.

Theodore patted her back and murmured, “Yes, I was wrong.”

He felt the front of his shirt was becoming wet, but he didn't know what to do. These feelings of warmth, moisture, and a soft texture were unfamiliar. Theodore hugged Sylvia on the floor of Pentarium. He thought that the sobs had stopped, but it was probably his mistake.

Then at least five minutes passed by.

‘S-So. How long should I be doing this...?’ Theodore's mind was confused from hugging a girl for the first time.

He had experience with Veronica, but it was a situation where she had always initiated it. He had never once held someone through his own will. Theodore also didn't know how to comfort a

woman who was crying.

At that moment, somebody's voice rang out from behind him, "Oho..."

A saying from the Eastern Continent fit this situation perfectly.

"I flew for three days and nights without sleeping, only to see you playing with this kid...?"

Speak of the tiger, and it will come to see you.

The woman, Veronica, revealed her presence behind Theodore and Sylvia.

"T-Tower Master...?!" Theodore exclaimed.

"Hrmm... You are still calling me Tower Master...?" Veronica remarked.

Theodore got an uncomfortable feeling when he looked at her. Sensing that, he let go of Sylvia and then rose to his feet. With her red hair flying around her, the beautiful woman looked like a literal flame. The fact that she'd flown for three days and nights sounded ridiculous, but the scent of the cold night air was coming from her disheveled robe.

Chiiiik! Heat spread from Veronica's feet, quickly melting

Sylvia's ice. No, the speed was closer to 'evaporation,' rather than 'melting.' Veronica didn't use any magic. It was just that the temperature went up when she was feeling agitated. So, the cold air warmed up as well.

Veronica's shoes made loud sounds as she walked forward and said, "I haven't seen you in a year, but this is much more than I expected..."

Theodore couldn't move his body. Just like a herbivore that froze before a predator, he stood still as Veronica's golden eyes stopped in front of him. She stretched out her white fingers and patted Theodore's cheek gently.

"By the way..."

Her fingers moved from his cheek to his ear.

"Why?"

Then her fingers descended toward his neck.

"Why is there a bad fishy smell coming from the body of my kid...?"

Veronica's fingers stopped at a certain point on his neck. She gently touched the area, which Aquilo had bitten, and simultaneously poured out Dragon Fear like a full dragon.

Chapter 179 – Eye of the Storm (3)

The standard saying was the ‘difference between the heavens and the earth,’ but this was more like the phenomenon where a beast growled at another beast. The words which Veronica whispered into Theodore’s ears caused a chill to go down his spine.

Theodore gulped and thought hard about it, ‘A bad fishy smell... Is it because of Aquilo’s blood?’

It was a completely unexpected problem. Just as Aquilo had noticed Veronica’s presence back at the Pirate Archipelago, it was likely Veronica noticed Aquilo’s presence on Theodore.

The red dragons and blue dragons had always had a thoroughly troubled relationship which stretched back to the ancient times. As far as these two clans were concerned, the invasion of each other’s territories was a declaration of war. Therefore, it wasn’t strange for them to be more sensitive to the other clan’s presence.

Additionally, there were the words Gluttony had said. It had said that most battles between the two dragons were usually seen when crossing from one territory to the other... or when their possessions were touched.

“Kid. Yes? Don’t keep your mouth shut.” Veronica’s grip on Theodore’s neck tightened as she gazed at him with blazing eyes. Unlike her singsong voice, the emotions in her eyes resembled magma which was about to explode.

Despite the fact that there was nothing hard to reveal, Theodore's mouth couldn't open. Did she notice Theodore's cautiousness?

Veronica grinned as Dragon Fear melted away, then her voice became sweet enough to melt Theodore's ears. "I'm sorry Kid. In the meantime, haven't you suffered?"

"Huh?"

"I know the importance of breaking through the 'wall' as a magician, but I also know that the process is never smooth. You went all the way to foreign countries, so wasn't it hard?"

"...That..." Theodore's eyes shook at the words.

He had stubbornly pushed himself with a steel-like mental power, but he wasn't an iron man who couldn't feel tired. Theodore had missed his home whenever he looked up at the different constellations in the sky. On the days when he didn't speak, he had longed to communicate with someone.

It had been a little better after Randolph joined him, but he had wanted to have a chat with another magician. However, the people he could feel this kinship with had all been in Meltor. Standing before him was Veronica, one of the people he had missed.

'Ah, I'm comfortable.'

Her affectionate voice and hot temperature interfered with Theodore's cool thinking. Veronica was a person who knew his pain and gave him comfort. Theodore gazed at Veronica and gradually relaxed. As if she wanted to maintain the momentum to the end, a subtle smile appeared on Veronica's face. "Yes, I know everything. How difficult it was for you, how hard you tried..."

"T-Tower Master."

"Theodore, you should call me, 'Sister'."

Theodore's heart thumped when he heard her call his name, rather than a nickname. Was this the dragon's voice which had attracted heroes in many myths and legends?

'Should I just tell her? It is hard to hide everything...'

He knew it wasn't wise to reveal everything, but he had the feeling of wanting to confess everything to Veronica. She had the hot emotions as a mixed red dragon, but she was also one of the tower masters who guarded Meltor. Veronica was mature enough to deal with it.

His vigilance almost collapsed as Veronica's voice entered Theodore's ears, "I know everything, so don't worry."

"That..."

At that moment, the magma bubbling inside her leaked out. "-

Where is the fish I should kill?”

An eerie atmosphere burst out from Veronica’s body. The innate aversion of the red clan toward the blue clan was stepping on the male called Theodore. If it wasn’t for the sake of their relationship, Veronica would’ve immediately flown away to kill Aquilo.

‘No, there is no way I can tell her.’ Thanks to that, Theodore barely regained his rational thinking.

He absolutely couldn’t let Veronica and Aquilo meet. If he brought Aquilo here, there would be a life-and-death struggle. Aquilo wasn’t his enemy, but neither were they in a mutually beneficial relationship.

As Theo hesitated to answer, the light of salvation appeared.

“Stop it, Red Tower Master.”

It was Sylvia. She ran forward and used her white staff to separate the two people. Then she stood in front of Theodore and stared straight at Veronica as she said, “You are burdening Theo right now.”

“...Hah?” Veronica uttered. This was different from when she talked to Theodore. Veronica didn’t calm down. Instead, her atmosphere became even harsher. “Young girl, why are you getting in between me and the kid?”

“I’m his friend.”

“Friend?”

“Yes, friend. The best.”

Veronica smiled strangely at Sylvia’s words and said, “Yes, you are the kid’s ‘friend?’ I understand.”

This time, Sylvia’s expression stiffened. It was an explicitly mocking taunt. Theodore, the eye of the storm, didn’t know it, but the two women had already become rivals. They competed with their positions, as well as advantages and disadvantages. Unlike men who just hit each other, this was the beginning of the nerve war called the ‘catfight.’

“Does Tower Master know anything about Theo?”

“What...?!”

“You are just the tower master.”

For the first time, Veronica’s face before had a blank expression before her harsh atmosphere returned. She was used to fighting with fists or magic, so this was a first for her.

Maybe it was due to the retorts, but the argument between the rivals, who were fighting over Theodore, became more heated.

This was the moment when the dangerous catfight was about to start.

However, the two women's fight stopped shortly before that.

“Veronica! Theodore! Sylvia! Are you in there?”

It was because a person's voice rang from outside the doors of Pentarium. As Theodore hurried to reply, a man entered and rushed before the two people. ‘Didn't this happen last time?’

Veronica thought the same thing as her voice filled with annoyance, “Why are you calling me when I've just returned?!”

“Hiik!” The Dragon Fear in Veronica's voice made the knees of the magician weaken. She was an 8th Circle magician and had dragon's blood, which created an ominous presence.

However, the more surprising thing was the response of the Magic Society magician. His legs quivered, but he still delivered the news to the three people in a trembling voice, “H-His Majesty called all of you...!”

“Me and the kid?”

“S-Sylvia as well!”

Veronica and Theodore were understandable. There were many

reasons why they might be called. After going beyond the wall of the 7th Circle, the magician was a pillar which supported the nation as well as a symbol of strength which was comparable to an elite army.

However, why was Sylvia summoned as well? The three people couldn't guess why and exchanged glances.

‘Phew, I’m saved thanks to His Majesty.’

In any case, Theodore narrowly escaped.

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Kwaang! The door opened roughly. Who would dare do such a thing in Meltor’s royal palace? Even the empire’s Seven Swords wouldn’t dare do such a thing. However, no one yelled at the culprit.

Veronica’s eyes were burning brightly as she kicked open the door!

“Your Majesty!” She roared.

As Theodore and Sylvia stayed back, Veronica snapped at Kurt on the throne, “Do you think I can travel like Orta? I flew all the way here! If I work without resting, of course I will be exhausted! In addition, what is this? Why is the chairman of the Magic Society here?”

“Hmm, it has been a while,” the chairman of the Magic Society greeted.

“It has been a long time since you left the central tower,” Veronica stated.

It was as Veronica said. The chairman of the Magic Society was different from the other tower masters.

The magic towers played an active part in the administration of the kingdom, and the chairman was a caretaker who always stayed in Meltor. He was an old magician who would help if war broke out, but otherwise, he put his own research first.

The chairman frequently didn't show up for big meetings, so today must be unusual if he was present.

“Now, let's sit down and talk.” Kurt declared.

“...I will listen.”

Kurt smiled bitterly as Veronica sat down. Once the three people who had entered sat down at the round table, Kurt rose from his throne. He said, “I would like to express my gratitude to you who have gathered in the middle of your busy day. I'll skip all the small chatter and let you know that the reason I've brought you in is to talk about the Magic Contest.”

“Magic Contest... Already?”

“It is a bit sooner this year.”

The event was held once a year in the Meltor Kingdom, and it was literally the greatest attraction in the North. It was a matter which had a great impact on the whole kingdom, so the king gathered all the top magicians in the kingdom to discuss it in advance.

However, the discussion about the Magic Contest was held periodically once a year, so there was no need to summon everyone. Kurt focused on the group and revealed the reason, “The Magic Contest this year will be more special than any other year.”

The same questioning gaze appeared in the eyes of all the magicians. The king continued, “I was contacted just last night. An ambassador from Elvenheim will come to announce our alliance at this year’s Magic Society.”

“A-Ambassador from Elvenheim!”

“Announcing the alliance?!”

The others asked with disbelief and confusion, making Kurt nod with a gentle expression before continuing.

“Of course. They don’t need to come to Meltor if they have no intention of announcing it. The present partnership would be enough. Doesn’t it seem like the North is going to turn upside

down?”

“...Fascinating.”

“Huhaha! There is no time to rest in my old age!”

White Tower Master Orta touched his chin, while Blue Tower Master Blundell laughed and pounded the table.

Until now, Meltor was the only kingdom remaining undefeated by the vast territory, population, and armies of the Andras Empire. Every so often, they fought back when a great magician emerged, but the roots of the empire’s pillars were never broken.

However, that story was only when both sides were fighting 1:1.

The alliance with Elvenheim and the emergence of a new master, who had killed one of the empire’s Seven Swords, meant that Meltor’s power had climbed to a point where they could compete with Andras.

The war which could last for hundreds, maybe thousands of years might be approaching its end.

“In fact, this discussion occurred last year, but it wasn’t accepted because the main party wasn’t there. It is Theodore Miller, not Meltor, that Elvenheim thinks of as their savior.”

Theodore bowed his head. “I’m ashamed.”

“No, there is no need to apologize. You returned with even more profit. You took down one of the empire’s Seven Swords and gave this kingdom another master. This meeting isn’t only to discuss Elvenheim’s delegation.” Kurt III paused for a moment before making a gesture.

The servant, standing silently behind the throne, approached Theodore with a box. It contained a symbol representing the Meltor royal family. The box was made of precious wood, and an unbelievable amount of magic power spilled from the seal on the box.

Theodore took it, and Kurt continued speaking, “Once the ambassadors from Elvenheim arrive, it will be hard for you to show any kind of credibility if you remain as a magician with no rank. So, I want to give you a worthy position as your personal reward.”

Kurt’s words weren’t wrong. As a 7th Circle magician, there was no one more senior than Theodore except for the tower masters and the chairman of the Magic Society. How could such a person be left without a title? It would clearly be a waste in such a situation.

“Open it.”

Theodore opened the latches of the box in accordance with Kurt’s instructions.

Slide. The lid of the wooden box slowly opened, revealing its contents.

It was a suit of clothes. There weren't enough decorations on the clothes for them to be robes, and it was too luxurious to be a combat suit. It was like shadows had been weaved together in order to make these clothes.

Theodore looked at the clothing and murmured, "...This?"

The gold pattern embroidered on the heart area was in the shape of an owl, the symbol of Meltor's tower masters. Theodore understood the meaning and looked surprised.

Then Kurt started to explain, "In anticipation of the war with the Andras Empire, I proposed the formation of a magic division consisting of the next tower master candidates. I got consent from all the tower masters except for Veronica, and the majority of state administrators have approved it."

Theodore's eyes widened as he grasped the situation, and Kurt nodded.

He clapped a few times before making an edict, "I will make you the head of the magic division, 'Quattro.'"

Chapter 180 – Eye of the Storm (4)

‘Quattro,’ was a word which meant the number ‘4’ and also symbolized the four magic towers. It was a division made up of the tower master candidates!

Theodore was now the head of a unit which would be the next generation of leaders of the kingdom, except for the king. Theodore rose from his seat and accepted the appointment. “I will do my best, despite still being immature.”

“I look forward to your work in the future, Captain Theodore,” Kurt III said while nodding.

Then Theodore sat down again. However, there were many differences from when he rose from that seat and when he sat down.

Although he hadn’t created a ‘Sorcery’ yet, Theodore’s magic abilities, cumulative accomplishments, and attainment of the 7th Circle were clearly too much for him to stay as a Prime. Theodore was already qualified to sit at the same table as a tower master.

For him to become the head of ‘Quattro’ was a suitable justification.

“It is decided,” Kurt III said. Then after some light applause, he calmed down the crowd and declared, “From now on, we will raise the authority of Prime Theodore to the same level as the other tower masters. He will be guaranteed the right to participate in

important meetings, and he can spend a portion of the budget allocated to the magic towers. He will also have free entry to the Zero Library. Are there any objections?”

““ ””

“Tower Master Veronica.”

After the crowd’s silent affirmation, Kurt turned to the still silent Veronica, who glared at him.

However, Kurt was accustomed to this and didn’t shrink back as he asked, “It has already been implicitly agreed, but do you accept Prime Theodore as the next Red Tower Master and agree with this decision? If you disagree, we can think about other ways.”

“No.” Regardless of whether it was a positive or negative acknowledgment, Veronica leaned back in her chair. Then she looked strangely at the box in Theodore’s hands and nodded. “I’m in favor of it. He is qualified and deserving of that type of treatment.

“Okay, it is a unanimous decision.” An expression of satisfaction filled Kurt’s face, then he looked back. “Chamberlain, send them in.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The chamberlain bowed and opened a small door in the corner. It was designed so the door could only be opened from the inside. This meant the door wouldn’t have been

opened if Theodore or the tower masters had objected to the position.

Then two people walked in through the side door. One was a man with brown hair and dressed in white robes, while the other person was a girl with blonde hair and dressed in yellow robes.

They were from the white and yellow towers.

Surprisingly, the patterns on their robes indicated that they were a Prime and a Superior. The male Prime seemed to be in his early 30s, while the girl, who looked the same age as Sylvia, was surprisingly already a Superior.

“I will introduce you to your colleagues, Captain Theodore.”

As Theodore expected, Kurt III introduced the two people as members of ‘Quattro.’ That meant...

“This is the tower master candidate for the White Tower, Prime William. This lady is the Yellow Tower candidate, Superior Para.”

‘I knew it.’ Theodore looked at the two people in turn.

Since there were people from the White Tower and Yellow Tower, that meant there was one tower left.

Unsurprisingly, Kurt pointed to Sylvia next. “As you know well,

Blue Tower Master Blundell's disciple, Superior Sylvia, was named as the next tower master. Unless she refuses, the four of you will work together as part of Quattro."

Sylvia had experienced Theodore's absence over the past year, so she couldn't refuse to work together with him now. One second after Kurt's introduction, she responded with prompt politeness, "Superior Sylvia! I will follow Your Majesty's words!"

Sylvia's voice was so loud that Kurt couldn't help stuttering for a while, "Y-Yes, I heard you."

He looked at Sylvia with a smile before the wooden boxes were also handed to the other three Quattro members. Just like Theodore's, these boxes contained black uniforms. However, there was no owl pattern on it. It meant that only Theodore was treated as equal to the other tower masters.

In any case, the leader of Quattro was Theodore.

'Hrmm, both of their skills seem fine.'

They were indeed the people who could become the next tower masters.

William was an elite magician who was already at the 6th Circle, whereas Para was only at the 5th Circle, but little magic power was overflowing from her. It was proof that her magic power control was very good.

Aside from Sylvia, Theodore looked carefully at the other two people. Soon his gaze turned back to Para.

‘...Eh?’

There was no doubt that she was a beauty. She was smaller than Sylvia, but it would be hard for any man to turn their eyes away from her in 10 years. She had ocher-like skin, hair that looked like gold dust, and eyes which shone like rubies.

However, Theodore felt an uncomfortable feeling soon after he faced the reddish eyes. At that moment, the expressionless Para smiled thinly. She placed a slender index finger to her lips and secretly whispered, “Shh.”

Without knowing what Theodore was thinking, Kurt thought that the four people needed time to get used to this and changed the topic.

“Captain Theodore.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“The remainder of your reward will be given by the Yellow Tower Master. I don’t know what is going on, but he wants to meet with you.”

“...I will follow Your Majesty’s words.”

He didn’t know why the Yellow Tower Master called him, but there was no point asking the king. Theodore bowed his head and complied with the king’s command.

Kurt finished giving out his instructions and got up from his seat. “Now, let’s continue the story of this year’s Magic Contest. The tower masters will each be responsible for their own areas, as it is every year. This time, there will be a lot of work to create an area where the delegation from Elvenheim can stay.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Prior to starting the full-fledged discussion, Kurt spoke to the Quattro members, “Quattro, you can leave now. Captain Theodore, you can participate in this meeting if you want. What do you want to do?”

“I...”

Now, Theodore had the right to participate in important meetings. If he wanted to, he could raise an agenda or refuse someone’s suggestion about Meltor’s largest annual event, the Magic Contest. Being able to participate in the meeting established him as one of the main powers of Meltor.

Theodore made his decision and opened his mouth.

In the end, Theodore didn't participate in the meeting. The other three members of his division walked out of the room with him and down the path towards the magic towers.

"What, you really left. Is it okay, Captain?" William, the brown-haired person in the white robe, asked Theodore as he walked. William was interested in why Theodore had left the meeting about the Magic Contest without hesitation.

"It doesn't matter. I didn't come to the magic towers for power, so it will be fine," Theodore affirmed.

"Ah, that is what I like hearing!" It seemed like William admired Theodore and praised, "Yes, this is a magician! It isn't about money or power! Quiet princess of the Blue Tower, what do you think?"

"Huh? Ah, yes," Sylvia uttered.

"Kya! Both of you are younger and more talented than me. My belly is a bit sore with envy, but you will be a good leader and colleague. Interesting." William chattered on with no interruptions for a few minutes.

Then the four people arrived at the crossroads which led to their respective magic towers. William left first, while Sylvia also had to head in the opposite direction of Theodore. However, she hesitated.

Theodore guessed the reason and soothed her, “Sylvia, are we going to act together from now on?”

“Yes...”

“I promise not to disappear without hesitation, and I’ll see you again later in the evening.”

“Yes, I understand.” Sylvia looked back at him a few times before eventually leaving for the Blue Tower.

‘...Then from here on out.’

Only Theodore and Para remained at the crossroads, and an unknown tension filled the space. In fact, Theodore wasn’t interested in the Magic Contest. However, he was wary of Para’s existence.

Theodore didn’t know what was the source of the discomfort. He had encountered many strong people before, but his intuition told him that Para’s true identity was unimaginable! In the unnatural silence, Theodore opened his mouth first, “What did you come to me for, Tower Master?”

He didn’t doubt it. Theodore trusted his intuition, which had saved his life many times. The image of the girl which made him feel uncomfortable... Her real identity was the Yellow Tower Master.

It was doubtful if the other tower masters knew this identity, but Theodore was certain.

“Hoh.” However, Para didn’t feel confused by the sudden inquiry. She faced Theodore with a strange expression of admiration and said, “Haven’t you changed a lot during the period when I didn’t see you? It is a difficult growth rate to maintain, even if you are the owner of a grimoire. Is this the glutton of the Seven Sins, Gluttony?”

“-What?!”

It was shocking.

Pak!

Theodore lost his soul for a moment, then he jumped backward as reason returned to him. His seven circles revolved as he prepared to attack the opponent at any time. The fear which tickled the back of his neck was different from anything he had felt before.

It was a horrible chill as all his secrets were revealed at once. This was dangerous, but how did the other person know about Gluttony’s existence? The identity of the other person didn’t matter to Theodore anymore.

‘Should I kill him?’

Even in the Magic Society, which collected knowledge, grimoires were rare. Theodore expected the masters of grimoires to be hunted and captured. Just like the case of the Miller Barony, there were many cases where grimoires adversely affected the world.

Of course, Theodore didn't know what would happen, but he wasn't reckless enough to make a bet on this gamble. However, there was someone who shouted before him.

-...You!

It was Gluttony's deep voice, which sounded as angry as someone from the bottom of hell. Gluttony's hatred and resentment exploded toward the unknown girl, -You dare to break the taboo!

Then Para nodded and bowed. "Taboo, what are you talking about?"

-Don't keep up your pretense! Gluttony's roar rang out through the crossroad. -Alchemy grimoire, Paragranum! An existence that violates its own nature and functions!

Chapter 181 – Paracelsus' Legacy (1)

It was like a bolt out of the blue.

The Yellow Tower Master, one of the symbols of the Meltor Kingdom, was actually a grimoire!

However, Paragranum wasn't surprised about having her identity exposed by Gluttony. Theodore, who was caught in a war of nerves between two grimoires, was simply astonished. The fact that he was encountering another grimoire besides Gluttony... This reality which went beyond his imagination shook his composure.

'What the hell is going on?' He gritted his teeth.

Theodore sent the grimoire on his left hand and the one in the shape of a girl irritated glances.

The presence felt from the girl wasn't great. The problem was that he couldn't guess what was inside. Why did she approach Theodore as a member of 'Quattro,' and why did she appear despite being aware of Gluttony's presence?

Additionally, he didn't know what Gluttony meant by 'taboo.' Theodore wanted to ask, but Gluttony was in an unprecedentedly confused mental state right now. Moreover, what was the reason for her status as the Yellow Tower Master?

“Kuhat, what type of atmosphere is this for a talk? I was interrupted the last time because of Veronica...” Unlike the cute appearance of the girl’s face, Para smiled bleakly and waved her arms. “It is good to see you, Boy. I am the Yellow Tower Master Norden and the grimoire, Paragranum, the last book left behind by the great alchemist, Paracelsus. That tongue is pretty wary, but this body is 10 times weaker than yours, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“.....”

“Well, you would be an idiot to just believe me. There is still a lot to talk about.”

It was a roundabout suggestion to change their location. This crossroad wasn’t a suitable location to share a secret because it was a place where people usually came and went.

‘Damn, is it okay to be dragged around like this?’

When Theo looked at the situation calmly, Norden didn’t feel like an enemy. Theodore’s feeling of discomfort toward her was a sudden fear of his secret being revealed, but his sensory perception had been quiet from beginning to end.

Theodore was well-aware that it was risky to rely solely on his senses, just like when he’d been attacked by Aquilo. In the end, his sensory perception was just an indicator, like a compass. It was reliable as well as unreliable.

In the end, it was up to Theodore himself to decide.

This was a situation where they both knew each other's secrets, but Theodore was nervous in comparison to the Yellow Tower Master's laid-back attitude. The initiative of the conversation had already passed over to Para.

"...Then where do you intend to continue this conversation?" Theodore asked as he was forced to take a step back.

"If you don't mind, how about my laboratory?" Para laughed and pointed to the top of the yellow tower. It was a place where no magician had stepped into for decades, maybe centuries. In that sense, the Yellow Tower Master was like an urban legend in this city.

The grimoire, Paragranum, had been hiding as a human for more than 500 years, at least since the completion of the magic towers. The two people began moving in the direction of the Yellow Tower.

*

'Gluttony.' As Theodore climbed up the tower followed the Yellow Tower Master, he used the gap to ask Gluttony questions, 'Explain the previous talk you had with the Yellow Tower Master. What is the taboo, and what is Paragranum?'

-Hmmm, I understand.

Did Gluttony think it was information that Theodore also needed to know? Gluttony confided the information more readily than Theodore had expected.

–As it said, Paragranum was created by the great alchemist Philipus Paracelsus. No alchemist surpassed him in the Age of Mythology, and the vulcans, the ancestors of the dwarves, regarded him as a wise man. Even the great blacksmith, Vulcanus, treated him as a demi-god.

‘...The creator of a grimoire.’

The dwarves were far superior to human craftsman when it came to dexterity and aesthetic sensibilities. Then what about the ancestors of the dwarves? The high elves only inherited a bit of the blood of the Arv, yet they were able to cause miraculous phenomena. Then the pureblood upper species must be the embodiment of miracles themselves.

However, the alchemist called ‘Paracelsus’ was someone who even the upper species paid their respects to. It was clear that he was far beyond the framework of a mortal existence. He was a presence that could create a grimoire.

–Paragranum is the grimoire created by Paracelsus.

Alchemy had continued to deteriorate since the Age of Mythology, so it wasn’t seriously studied in the current era. However, it was the base of the construction of Meltor’s magic towers, and it was still being researched.

The grimoire went beyond common sense, so Gluttony's words made frightened Theodore. The reason Paragranum contributed to the founding of Meltor approximately 600 years ago and the making of the magic towers was to establish a research base.

Of course, Paragranum herself might have a different reason. However, Theodore watched the actions of the grimoire and found that his conclusion was close to the right answer.

‘Then what does it mean by breaking the taboo?’

–Umm.

This question seemed a bit tough as Gluttony, who had been pouring out the explanation like a stream of water, paused for a moment. However, then it opened its mouth again.

–Every grimoire has a ‘purpose of existence’ imprinted from its creator. I collect magic, ‘Pride’ collects genes, and so on, so forth. All of our actions are meant to fulfill that purpose. Do you understand up to here?

‘Yes.’

–Therefore, a grimoire follows its own methods of action to achieve its purpose of existence. Autonomous movement, ingestion type, manual control type... They all have their own principles. In the case of Paragranum, it is a ‘manual control’ type

that requires a user.

But Paragranum doesn't have a master now. It created its own body and is pretending to be human. This is different from its purpose. Tools that deviate from their intended purpose are no longer tools.

They deviate from their 'purpose of existence' itself. That is the taboo for grimoires, Gluttony explained in a loud voice. –Simply changing its principles of action isn't bad. But books that violate their purpose become more and more erratic, and soon they will become wild.

It is a sin for a tool to deviate from its fate. It is a miserable end for a grimoire. Their ego will collapse, and they will disappear without achieving the purpose of their existence.

As Theodore had seen in the struggle with Pride and his own experience with Gluttony, grimoires emphasized intelligence and purpose above all else. So, this was an unacceptable result for them. At this moment, Theodore had a question. 'Eh? Then why does the Tower Master look fine? It has been 600 years since the taboo was broken.'

–I am also curious about that reason.

'...Is it dangerous?'

–There is a saying that you might wake up in the morning and die

in the evening.

‘I don’t like that!’

As the grimoire and its owner argued, the girl arrived at the top of the Yellow Tower and asked, “Did you hear an interesting story?”

“...!” Theodore’s eyes widened.

This caused Para to chuckle. “You probably asked about me. If you are a master, you would’ve released at least the 4th seal. You would’ve heard almost everything and wondered why I am fine after breaking the taboo.”

“...Do you have any mind-reading skills?”

“Perhaps. Alchemy doesn’t have that type of ability, but I have my own style.”

If so, that meant it was Paragranum’s fearsome intuition. She was able to infer about the conversation between Theodore and Gluttony. This wasn’t an opponent that Theodore could challenge with words. As Theodore filled with tension, Para stopped in front of the tower and said to him, “35 liters of water.”

“Huh?” Theodore uttered.

Without responding to Theodore's question, Para continued, "20kg of carbon, 4 liters of ammonia, 1.5 kg of lime, 800g of phosphorus, 250g of salt, 100g of potassium nitrate, 80g of sulfur, 7.5g of fluorine, 5g of iron, 3g of silicon..."

There were a few things in that list which Theodore knew, but some others he didn't. It was knowledge of science and civilization which would only develop in the future. This meant it was a monologue which Theodore didn't understand.

However, Gluttony was different.

-Is that the compound for one average adult human?

"Correct." Para grinned like she had been waiting and stripped off her robe. Theodore had seen beautiful women before, but he was impressed by Para's body, which had perfect proportions. Para waved toward her slim body and said, "I used fewer quantities when creating this girl."

-It isn't made from a human body.

"I can only create something from nothing. Using life that already exists is the domain of chimeras."

Theodore listened to the conversation between grimoires and couldn't hide his confusion. "H-Human body? You created a human body?"

“To be exact, it is a homunculus. This body is just a human imitation and will last 10 more years before dying. In other words, it is a failure.”

“...Why?”

‘Why was Paragranum trying to make a human? Why make a homunculus? Why was a grimoire doing this? Why live as the Yellow Tower Master?’

Many ‘why’ questions popped into Theodore’s mind. Ethical reluctance, curiosity as a magician, unpleasantness as a human, curiosity about the life that was created... Theodore couldn’t guess all the reasons.

However, Paragranum, who had watched many magicians for a long time, knew all of Theodore’s questions. The grimoire in the shape of a beautiful girl laughed eerily. “This is because of my purpose.”

The great alchemist, Philipus Paracelsus, had left the purpose to create a [human]. The [human] couldn’t be superior or inferior to humans.

Paragranum’s purpose was to create a complete human being. It didn’t matter if they were a beggar or hero, as long as life was created. This was the destiny given to Paragranum and the purpose of its existence. This was the path of truth that the alchemist, who had reached the peak in the Age of Mythology, pursued until the end.

“Thanks to that, I could rewrite my behavior to exclude users and enable solo action. There is no research as effective as imitating humans directly.”

One question was resolved for Theodore, but another question popped up. “Why did Paracelsus try to create a human?”

“According to the records of Creator Paracelsus, humans are the ‘allies of possibility’ and the ‘seed of chaos.’ Namely, a creature that can’t be anything but chaos. If I can create that possibility myself, there may be a way of reaching the truth.”

“That... it is a simple hypothesis.”

“Is that really the case? No, that question is worthless. Be it right or wrong, I still have to try.”

Chill.

After listening to Para, Theodore understood the madness inherent in the grimoire. The grimoire had wisdom from a time which humans could hardly imagine, and it could communicate with a high intelligence. However, it had the instinct to pursue its purpose, regardless of success or failure.

‘Don’t feel despair. Don’t give up. Don’t compromise. It isn’t possible or impossible.’ Para talked like a human, but her essence was thoroughly a tool.

Theodore shut his mouth. Then the Yellow Tower Master turned around and said, “My story is up to here, owner of Gluttony. Are you wondering why I brought you here and confided my secret?”

The tower master opened the door to the tower. The darkness inside flowed out smoothly and seemed to devour the cool air of the corridor. It incited a fear in Theodore that he couldn't understand.

Theodore barely overcame the tension and spoke, “There is something you want to ask.”

“Correct.” The Yellow Tower Master Paragranum reached out her left hand as she looked at him with a satisfied expression. Then she found something on the wall and bent it.

Click. A dull mechanical sound was heard in the darkness.

“Heok!” Theodore's eyes trembled in amazement.

The darkness cleared and an unimaginable sight appeared before him.

““Hello, welcome to my laboratory for the first time.””

There was something in the shape of a strong, young man. There was another thing in the shape of an elderly old man. Then there

was something else that looked like a cute little boy...

And yet another thing in the shape of a beautiful woman. There were people of different shapes floating in transparent glass containers. No, Theodore knew. They were all homunculus. Human shells that didn't have their own ego.

Theodore barely calmed down as he spoke in a quivering voice, "...How many people know this fact?"

"There is no one. If you weren't the owner of a grimoire—no, you wouldn't know if you weren't the owner of Gluttony."

"So, why did you come to me?"

They entered the room, and Para sat down on a chair in the middle of the bizarre room.

Then she looked at the still shaken Theodore. "As you can see, I can't get away from the city. Mana-vil can cope with just Veronica, but I can only move a short distance away. So, I want to do business with you, who have the skills and a shared secret."

"Business?" Theodore shook his head and almost scoffed. Did she show off her power in order to make a deal? However, Paragranum nodded and said with a serious expression, "Don't you have a lot of hidden secrets because of Gluttony? I can help you when it comes to this."

It made a lot of sense. Theodore had managed to avoid answering about the Great Forest, but he couldn't conceal Gluttony's existence forever. The fact that he had recently defeated Hyde, one of the empire's Seven Swords, had yet to be revealed to the public.

Theodore was convinced by the Yellow Tower Master and nodded. "...Continue."

"I need someone to move on my behalf, and you can get benefits while sharing your secrets. Isn't this a win-win situation?"

"What exactly are the benefits?"

"I have been waiting for you to ask!"

From Theodore's point of view, he couldn't help but ask. However, Para pulled something out like she had been waiting. It was a map. The map was outdated, but Theo didn't have any problem recognizing the drawings. It covered an area which coincided with the Meuse Desert, outside the Austen Kingdom.

Para pointed to a red dot on the map and said, "This is the place where the laboratory of my creator, Paracelsus, is hidden. If you go there with my homunculus, I will give you all of the legacy he left behind, except for the materials I need."

Chapter 182 – Paracelsus' Legacy (2)

The laboratory of the great alchemist of the Age of Mythology, Paracelsus...!

Theodore's eyes shook at the unexpected proposal. Traces of the Age of Mythology had been almost completely destroyed, except for some ruins. Some were concealed, while others had been damaged over time.

In this age, there were only a few relics and ruins left intact. A number of magicians would risk their lives to find a laboratory of an alchemist from the Age of Mythology.

'No, I don't know if the laboratory is still intact. The offer might be a trap.'

Theodore took a step back and carefully asked Gluttony, 'Hey, Gluttony.'

–What is it?

'Judge whether the Yellow Tower Master's words are authentic or not. Paracelsus' laboratory... Is that possible?'

–Um. Gluttony was silent for a minute before replying, –I can't be sure it exists, but it is possible. Paracelsus didn't settle in one place but traveled around researching. It wouldn't be strange if Paragranum, the grimoire he created, knew about the location of a

laboratory. A laboratory made by Paracelsus might last a few thousand years.

‘Is it possible that Paragranum is lying?’

–For a grimoire, the creator is like a god. It wouldn’t bring up the name if it was intending to deceive you. However, what is Paragranum looking for in the laboratory?

Theodore accepted Gluttony’s words. What did Paragranum need in the laboratory? As the old saying went, the bear would play while the owner earned money.

Additionally, there was a question of what Paragranum would do with the things found in the laboratory. Theodore had already had several encounters with grimoires previously. So, despite the fact that the Yellow Tower Master had contributed to Meltor for hundreds of years, Theodore was wary, well-aware of the dangers of a grimoire.

That’s why he hesitated. However, Paragranum opened her mouth first, “Are you wondering why I want to visit the laboratory?”

“...Honestly, yes.”

“I know what you are concerned about, but there is no need for it. I just need the Emerald Tablet and a few materials that I can’t acquire now.”

‘The Emerald Tablet?’

Before Theodore could ask what it was, Gluttony suddenly raised his voice, –Emerald Tablet?! It still exists?

“I’m sorry, but I can’t allow you to have it, Magic Eater. I need it until the purpose of my existence is achieved.”

–Are you going to waste that treasure on creating a human body? It is so foolish that there is no way to express it!

“Aren’t you a grimoire? What a thing to say.”

Either way, Theodore couldn’t understand what was going on at all. He quietly listened to the argument between the two grimoires and carefully interrupted once the quarrel subsided a little bit.

“So, what is the Emerald Tablet?”

–I can’t tell you at Stage 4.

“Tch, then it must be something pretty great? Is it dangerous?”

–It won’t cause a lot of human fatalities. It isn’t something meant for fighting in the first place.

“Then it is fine,” Theodore cut off the long story and turned toward Para, who was watching him and Gluttony with a strange expression. “What is included in the legacy that you will give me?”

“Everything else,” Paragranum responded immediately without any hesitation. “The golems, artifacts, magic scrolls... Ah, there is also something that Gluttony will enjoy.”

“What is it?”

“Creator’s original book, ‘Fairy’s Book’. It is useless for alchemy, but won’t it be very useful for you who have contracted with an ancient elemental?”

‘An original book from the Age of Mythology!’ For a moment, Theodore’s eyes filled with greed, and he barely managed to suppress it.

That said, it was a bit strange that an alchemist would write a book about ‘fairies.’ Perhaps the original book was written to be passed down to someone? However, that speculation was rejected by Gluttony.

-User, Paracelsus was an exceptional alchemist, but he was also a rare elementalist. I think that his book will, at a minimum, go beyond the ‘Precious’ rating.

‘Perhaps even more than that?’

-That's right. Maybe eating that book will release the 5th seal.

The values were sufficient. From Gluttony's 5th seal to the bud on Mitra's head, several problems could be resolved at the same time with this request. Although it was hard right now, a grimoire didn't have the limitation of a lifespan, so it didn't feel 'impatience.' It would just fulfill the request as soon as possible.

Then at that moment...

'Ah, wait a minute.'

One fact that Theodore had forgotten popped into his mind: the sand dragon, Desertio, dwelled in the heart of the Meuse Desert. At the epicenter of the drought affecting the Austen Kingdom, the ancient class dragon was waiting to die.

Paragranum replied to Theodore's unspoken question, "Don't worry. The laboratory is located on the outskirts. Additionally, you are a master, so you can withstand the weathering, even at the center."

-It is true. However, you can't stay for a long time.

It was hard to accept even with the two grimoires agreeing, but Theodore finally nodded.

There was no need to create discord with fussing. Instead, it was necessary to make this relationship as tight as possible. Moreover,

this wasn't an absurd request. There was no need for Theodore to feel uncomfortable since the promised price was reasonable.

Paragranum cheered after writing two contracts, "Good, then should I give you a prepayment?"

"What...?"

"Just wait a minute!"

Was the grimoire affected by its girlish appearance? Para cheerfully reached into a chest of drawers, pulling out a dagger and a strangely colored crystal.

Then she returned to Theodore and held out the two items. While gazing at him with her red eyes, she said, "Don't you have the appraisal ability? Pick one of these items. The other one will be given after the task is done."

"What is this?"

"Since I am the tower master, I can't just speak with words. Take it."

Theodore couldn't refuse.

'Just one time...'

He stretched out a hand, and Gluttony responded by pushing out its tongue. The items were a dagger made of a mysterious material and a crystal which shone with unknown colors. Almost simultaneously, two information windows popped up.

[+20 Azoth Sword (Magic Tool)]

[-A dagger that the great alchemist, Paracelsus, always carried around with him. The blade is of an unknown origin, with A Z O T H written on it. It symbolizes the beginning and the end. There is an empty place for a philosopher's stone to be mounted. In its complete form, Azoth forms the shape of a long sword, not a dagger. In that state, even a demon would submit to the power of the Azoth Sword.]

* The rating of this magic tool is 'Treasure'.

-Once the philosopher's stone is installed, it will be promoted to 'Legend.'

* When used, all alchemy processes can be omitted.

* (Can't be grasped with the 4th stage Appraisal ability.)

* (Can't be grasped with the 4th stage Appraisal ability.)

* Can't be destroyed by any means in the material world. Can't be consumed with the 4th stage predation ability.]

[+? Foolish Philosopher's Stone (Catalyst)]

[-This catalyst was created from records and is a near-perfect imitation of the 'Philosopher's Stone' from the Age of Mythology. It has the same shape and effect as the Philosopher's Stone, but unlike the stone which boasts a semi-permanent durability, this one is close to a consumable material. It is a catalyst which can convert all materials to a different material, depending on the standards. It is a treasure which Paragranum has completed after decades of trial and error.

- * The rating of this catalyst is 'Treasure'.

- * When consumed, a large amount of magic power will be absorbed.

- * When used, you can make the material that you want.]

"Wow..." Theodore's mouth dropped open when he saw the dazzling information windows.

'A legendary artifact could emerge?' He couldn't directly use the god-sword which Hyde had carried around, but it would be completely different if it was the tool used by Paracelsus.

The 4th stage Gluttony couldn't figure out half of the dagger's functions, but once the Philosopher's Stone was mounted on it, even a demon would submit. Demons were a species that once

ruled this material world. They were transcendent beings, and the dagger called Azoth was a treasure which could make them submit.

Yet Theodore was going to be given this treasure as prepayment...?

The Yellow Tower Master giggled at Theodore's baffled expression. "It isn't something that is really useful to me, but it is a great motivation for you."

"...One of the two, yes."

"I see?" A playful smile appeared on her face.

Theodore smiled wryly at Paragranum's scheming.

The true value of the treasures could only be revealed when both the Azoth Sword and the Philosopher's Stone were joined together. Of course, the Philosopher's Stone could transform a material into any other material, but it wasn't something that would appeal to Theodore, who had low skills in alchemy.

It was a blatant but effective scheme. Theodore impatiently held out his hand toward the dagger which Para was holding. Between the Philosopher's Stone and the Azoth Sword, Theodore's choice was right.

"The Azoth Sword first."

“Indeed.”

As if she had been expecting it, the Yellow Tower Master handed the Azoth Sword over to Theodore, while the Philosopher’s Stone was returned to the drawer. Then the Yellow Tower Master spoke to Theodore, “Okay, our deal has been established. Now, it is my turn to do what Kurt asked.”

“.....?”

“Why do you look so stupid? You should’ve heard that I would give you a reward.”

“Ah.” Theodore regained his sense of reality and nodded.

‘Then the Yellow Tower Master will guide you.’

It had been a while ago when Theodore had found out he was the captain of ‘Quattro’ and introduced to the members. In fact, it was hard for him to return to reality after talking about an alchemist from the Age of Mythology.

Theodore was reminded that the girl before him was the Yellow Tower Master, and he once again felt nervous.

Regardless of whether she knew his feelings or not, Para continued talking, “What do you want? You can take a book from

the Zero Library or a royal treasure. You can choose what you want.”

“Umm...” Theodore struggled for a bit before asking, “Not a national treasure?”

“You can, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Your body already has several large powers coexisting. They seem stable right now, but it would be dangerous if more power is added.”

Indeed, Theodore was convinced. If he hadn’t accidentally got his hands on Artificial Yin and Yang from the ‘Art of Onmyōdō’, the two powers might’ve exploded one day.

‘Ring of Muspelheim,’ ‘Aquilo’s Blood Mark’, ‘Umbra’... Additionally, Theodore had the ability to summon an elemental. Increasing his powers might be good in the short term, but it might have an adverse effect on creating his Sorcery.

It was literally just like the saying, ‘too much is as bad as not enough.’ Too many treasures would be difficult for Theodore to digest.

For a moment, he worried about choosing a national treasure, then he made a decision.

“Let’s go to the Zero Library.”

Chapter 183 – Quickening of the Northern Continent (o)

Flash!

There was a flash of light, and simultaneously, two people appeared inside the room. They'd traveled through space movement using the magic circle Veronica had used previously. In contrast to back then, Theodore opened the door with his own hand this time. Then he looked around like a gourmet with delicacies spread out before him.

‘It has been a while, but I don’t see anything different.’

Unlike humans who lived for a hundred years or so, the Zero Library was a place which had almost 500 years worth of history. So, the configuration wouldn’t change in just a year or two. However, Paragranum’s thoughts were a little different. “Hoh, the number of books has increased since I was last here. Was it 300 or 400 years ago? Well, this is a good collection.”

“300 years... In the meantime, you haven’t been here even once?”

“Of course not. For me, this knowledge has no value. It was much more interesting to create this place.”

Certainly, Theodore remembered that there were no alchemy-related books in this Zero Library. However, most magicians

would be interested in special magic, even if it wasn't their field. After all, there was ancient magic practiced externally or theoretical primordial magic which no one could explain. As such, there were many such rare books in the Zero Library.

The Yellow Tower Master had unfettered access to this library, but she had never once stepped in here for over 300 years. Indeed, this was the grimoire's way of thinking, which was different from a human's.

As Theodore thought that, he followed behind Paragranum who had moved ahead and looked around. Once he entered deeper into the Zero Library, the rareness of the books increased. After walking past the books near the entrance, they arrived at an area Theodore had previously seen.

“...Ah.” Theodore stretched out his hand when he saw a familiar red book.

[Hell Fire]

[-This book contains the method to summon a flame which exists in the Demon World, a flame that burns all matter. Once called, the flames of hell can't be turned off by using a normal method. The summon will be ended only when the user's power is exhausted or his life force is cut off. Burns from this magic are difficult to heal. The author of this book has hidden their identity.

* This magic book is rated 'Treasure.'

* Acquisition Conditions: 7 circles, affinity for fire magic is required.

* When consumed, 'Hell Fire' will be learned.

* When consumed, your ability in fire magic will increase greatly.

* This is the original that was directly written by the author. There is a very low probability of absorbing some of the author's proficiency.]

It was magic Theodore hadn't been able to learn in the past, but now Theodore was qualified to learn Hell Fire.

With the requirements of having 7 circles and an affinity with fire magic, apart from Veronica who had inherited the blood of a red dragon, there was no one more appropriate to learn this magic.

'Umm, it is definitely a magic I can use now.'

Theodore also had the 7th Circle fire magic, Inferno, which had a wide range of attack and could attack several enemies. However, it was limited when dealing with several strong people.

If a sword master was his opponent, it would be meaningless if the magic's attack power was lacking. It was a different story if the magic was compressed in some form, like with Veronica, but that was the realm of 'Sorcery.'

However, Hell Fire was powerful enough by itself. Even the 4th stage Superbia couldn't endure Hell Fire. According to records from the last war, Hell Fire was the magic which had killed a sword master.

Abraxas couldn't always be used, so this was a good choice to fill the void.

‘It is one of the options that I will consider.’

There were many magic books anyway. Theodore made a note of Hell Fire and looked at the rest of the books. Even if he had already chosen Hell Fire, there was nothing wrong with looking at the other books in advance. This didn't seem to be the last time that he could take a book from the Zero Library.

After several trials and errors, Para nodded as Theodore picked up two more books.

Theodore's list of options was as followed:

[Reverse Shadow]

[-This book describes the negative dimension which is adjacent to the material world, as well as dimension magic which deals with shadows. A shadow isn't simply a blank that appears on the other side of light. It is a mirror of the world where the boundaries of matter don't exist. Magicians who learn this magic can change the

existence of reality and illusions, making it possible to use the wielder's own shadow as an alter ego.

- * This magic book is rated 'Precious.'

- * Acquisition Conditions: 7 circles, needs access to the negative dimension.

- * When consumed, the proficiency of permanence magic will increase.

- * When consumed, understanding of the two dimensions is greatly increased.

- * This is the original that was directly written by the author. There is a very low probability of absorbing some of the author's proficiency.]

[Ultima]

[-This book describes cryogenic magic which can stop all phenomena of the physical world. It is no coincidence that Ultima, from the ancient world 'Ultimate,' has become the name of this magic. In the past, it was said that a magician used Ultima to freeze a dragon, only to die himself. This means that in order to perfectly use this, the 8th Circle is needed.

- * This magic book is rated 'Precious.'

* Acquisition Conditions: 7 circles, affinity for water magic (high) is required.

* When consumed, 'Ultima' will be learned.

* When consumed, your ability in ice magic will increase greatly.

* This is the original that was directly written by the author. There is a very low probability of absorbing some of the author's proficiency. The degree may vary depending on the level of the user.]

In addition to Hell Fire, there was a total of three books. Theodore was troubled for a moment as he debated what to choose.

'Fire, ice, or shadow... Their personalities are so distinct that it is difficult to obtain a clear standard.'

All of them were charming. Hell Fire which boasted the strongest power among 7th Circle magic, magic which controlled shadows, and ice magic which had killed a dragon... Despite Theodore's desire to take all three books, he took a few deep breaths and decided to think about it calmly.

First, Reverse Shadow.

‘It is ingenious to be able to control the shadows... but I don’t know how to blend it with other magic attributes. Furthermore, it is ambiguous since the level of difficulty is too high... It might take longer than a year to raise my understanding to a high level.’

It might rival or be even worse than space magic, which was known for its difficulty. Theodore looked at Reverse Shadow and put it down with a sad expression.

Then it was Ultima’s turn.

‘Ice magic that stops all phenomena... It’s quite attractive, but the 7th Circle is only the introductory stage. In order to use it, I need at least 8 circles. Right now, I can just barely learn it.’

It was a magic which required his water affinity to be near the peak. However, Theodore could learn it if he accepted Aquilo’s blood. The problem was the practical use, not the qualifications.

Ultima was ice magic which could freeze a dragon, but it wasn’t something that a 7th Circle magician could create. It needed at least an 8th Circle magician with water affinity. According to Theodore’s understanding after reading the book, Blundell was the only one who could use Ultima in the Meltor Kingdom

‘Finally... Hell Fire.’

Theodore had only one option remaining. He put two books down and looked at the Yellow Tower Master, who understood

that Theodore had made his choice.

‘Hell Fire.’

It was an obvious choice for a magician of the Red Tower.

However, Para looked at Theodore with a strange gaze and asked, “Do you have a reason for choosing that book? Hell Fire is a powerful attack magic, but it is difficult to control the size of the firepower, and it is inefficient when it comes to the amount of magic power consumed.”

“I know, but it is a risk I can afford.”

The amount of magic power consumed would be reduced by more than half due to Artificial Yin and Yang. Moreover, Theodore knew all about the disadvantages of Hell Fire. He had great expectations for its power because it was commonly used by a master to wreak havoc.

However, Para didn’t stop staring at him, so Theodore gave one more reason.

“...I am interested in the fact that the author concealed their identity.”

“I knew it.” Paragranum sent Theodore an unpleasant smile. It was horrifying that a non-human existence could perfectly mimic a human. Para seemed to sense Theodore’s disapproval and said in a

small voice, “Then can you tell me before you eat that book?”

“What...?”

Before the puzzled young man, the grimoire whispered, “The magician who created Hell Fire is...”

Para’s voice was so soft that it couldn’t be heard from nearby. However, Theodore’s eyes widened at her words.

*

At the same time, someone was listening to his subordinate’s report in the annex of the Imperial Palace.

“-The Meuse Desert?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The knight, wrapped in black from head to toe, prostrated himself on the floor and elaborated, “This is the report from No. 36 and No. 37. According to the archaeologist who discovered the archaeological site on the outskirts of the Meuse Desert, it is believed to have been built in the latter half of the Age of Mythology.”

“Did you start digging?”

“I tried, but it didn’t work. The exterior walls and door of the ruin is too strong. Ah, there is also a metal I have never seen before.”

“...Hrmm.”

Prince Fermut of the Andras Empire, the first in the line of succession, touched his chin with interest. (It said 3rd prince in an earlier chapter. Either the author made a mistake, or his brothers died and he jumped up the line of succession.)

If Meltor was filled with magic research, then the Andras Empire devoted themselves to the study of swordsmanship and developing the military. Yet this was a metal which the knights of Andras had seen for the first time? Perhaps it was the discovery of a new metal which hadn't existed previously in this world.

The value of the ruin jumped up by two levels for Fermut. These days, only bad things had been occurring. However, this report was enough to soothe his mood. This was a metal which a shadow unit made of peak aura users couldn't break through... How powerful would it be if it was forged into armor?

“...I will have a new weapon in my hand,” Fermut declared.

Then at that moment, a spiteful voice rang out, “It can fill the blank space of the god-sword.”

“Seventh... it's you.”

“I beg your pardon, Imperial Prince. You seem distressed that I spoke too lightly.” It was the imperial sword, Lloyd Pollan. He

smiled frivolously as always while mocking the prince for losing the god-sword.

As Fermut's face twisted with slight anger, Lloyd stepped back and bowed his head. "I have returned, Your Highness. I handled it perfectly, so please let go of your anger."

"...Impertinent fellow."

"Isn't that my charm?"

Fermut's eyebrows twitched irritably a few times, but he ended the story. Lloyd was a valuable tool for Fermut, who had lost his sword master, Hyde. It would be a shame to lose him just because of an argument.

However, setting aside Lloyd's value, Fermut had to maintain his dignity. Fermut turned toward Lloyd and said sharply, "This is a new mission."

"Your Highness." Wasn't it clear that Lloyd had just returned? The meaning of his unspoken words was obvious.

However, Fermut gave a different type of answer.

Kukukung...!

"Ack!" Pressure emerged, forcing Lloyd to fall to his knees and

bow his head.

This was real power, not a mere presence. It was a physical force which squeezed the bones of the sword master and bent it. The source of this pressure was Fermut, who had stretched out his hand toward Lloyd.

Once Lloyd was beaten down, Fermut said, “Shut up, bat-like fellow.”

Right now, Andras was divided into two factions. It was centered around Prince Fermut, who wanted change, and the emperor, who wanted to maintain the status quo.

To Fermut, who wanted to destroy Meltor and unify the northern continent, both his father and his father’s faction were nothing but cowards. Fermut had thought about it since growing up. Why didn’t the empire fight? If they were so powerful, why agree to a ceasefire?

Thus, Fermut tried to raise his own fire. He would cast the seeds of war over the entire Northern continent. However, his work in Elvenheim was foiled. The god-sword, Claimhb Solais, was also taken away.

So, Lloyd’s cheeky words were enough to break Fermut’s patience.

“Do you think I don’t know that you are seeing both me and my

father? You are playing both sides while seeing which one is more advantageous, how disdainful,” Fermut spoke spitefully.

“Y-Your Highness...!”

“I won’t tolerate any objections. This is a command.” Fermut’s eyes turned red as he ordered the prone Lloyd, “Go to the ruin in the Meuse Desert. I will be watching to see if you give up or fail.”

“T-That is the territory of the Austen Kingdom.”

“Are you afraid of idiots who can’t fill their stomachs because of a drought?”

“I’m just saying that we should move carefully.”

“Bah!” Fermut lifted the oppressive aura from Lloyd, leaned back in his chair and snorted, “Cowards always try to cover their fear by saying it is prudence. I am sick of seeing that. Go to the ruin. If you don’t, I will consider you as static.”

“...I understand, Your Highness,” Lloyd spoke more cautiously before disappearing. It was similar but different to Hyde’s ‘concealment’ ability. Prince Fermut sensed Lloyd’s departure and picked up a bottle he’d placed nearby. One drop had the same value as gold.

Kiing.

He used his index finger, opened the bottle and filled up the cup.

“It has already been 700 years since the founding of this kingdom... and the weather in Andras is decaying,” Fermut lamented with a grimace and looked into the cup. His loyal servant didn’t meet his expectations, and the god-sword he’d received had vanished. However, Fermut’s ambitions were blazing because of these adversities.

“I have to ascend to the top.” He drank the cup and mumbled as he made a promise, “The north will be unified in my generation.”

Chapter 184 – Quickening of the Northern Continent (1)

The Northern continent... This was a fact which people living there weren't really aware of, but people from other kingdoms thought that the North was closed off and gave off a dreary feeling.

It had already been hundreds of years since the two powers, Andras and Meltor, were at war. This was an environment which couldn't be compared to the Central area, where many kingdoms coexisted, or to the ambiguous south. The citizens' sense of patriotism, as well as distance from other countries, had to be strong.

However, it wouldn't be a problem if the north was just closed off.

The problem was that one of the closed-off northern powers was the most magically advanced kingdom on the continent, Meltor.

They were the leading magical civilization of this age. The Central nations were sensitive to advanced culture and money, so they couldn't ignore Meltor. However, it was also difficult to join hands with the Andras Empire.

"This time, the situation will change," Meltor's current king, Kurt III, spoke while looking around at the crowd.

There were tower masters and senior magicians. There were also

12 people of the court, led by the minister of domestic affairs. Additionally, there were people who were influential in the city. Unlike the nobles of other kingdoms, the leading people of Meltor were gathered in Meltor's palace.

There was only one reason why this gathering occurred every year.

“Starting today at noon, this year's Magic Contest will begin.”

It was a place where new theories and items developed over the past year could be shown; it was a paradise for magicians. The Magic Contest was an annual event held in the magic kingdom of Meltor.

While the contest was held, the checkpoints of the city would loosen and residents from other areas wouldn't hesitate to come here. This meant it would be a great event, but it was also a chance for spies from other countries to enter.

“Red Tower Master Veronica.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Veronica responded to the call. The red robe with a golden crest, the symbol of a tower master, fluttered because of her magic power even though there was no wind blowing inside the room.

“As always, the Red Tower is in charge of the capital's security. Thoroughly manage and punish any disturbances that occur in the

city.”

“As Your Majesty commands.”

Kurt nodded and opened his mouth again, “White Tower Master Orta.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The one who stepped forward this time was the White Tower Master Orta, in his white robes and white mask. Orta waited politely for his instructions.

“What happened to the reconstruction of the previous surveillance network?”

“We consumed five times more manpower and materials, and managed to expand the sphere of influence to all of Mana-vil. The consumption of mana stones is great, but there shouldn’t be any problems until after the Magic Contest ends.”

“Good. Don’t neglect to be my eyes and ears.”

As mentioned earlier, the Magic Contest was an important annual event for Meltor and a good way to hide spies from other countries. In order to break through Mana-vil’s surveillance system, Andras’ Shadow Knights were dispatched, but it was human folly to fail many times.

According to one legend, the number of secret agents who died at Orta’s hands had already exceeded three digits. This year, the song

of the unlucky spies would continue.

“Blue Tower Master, what is the weather like today?”

“It will continue to be clear, Your Majesty. The clouds will thicken three days later, but there is no chance of rain.”

“Are there any complaints about the water supply or anything else?”

“Either way, there is no problem.”

The conversation with the king was quick and concise. The reason for this was that Kurt III placed more focus on efficiency rather than formalities. Kurt never talked to one person for too long. He didn't speak longer than one minute, and the shortest time was 10 seconds. It was enough to confirm the instructions.

Therefore, Theodore's turn was quick to arrive.

“Quattro's captain.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Theodore stepped forward and raised a hand to the chest of the unfamiliar uniform.

This was Quattro's first mission since the formation of the magic division, so William's and Sylvia's eyes shook lightly from behind Theodore. Only Para could be found showing no interest if

someone watched her closely.

“I will place a slightly heavy burden on you and Quattro.”

“Please tell me.”

After hearing that it would be a heavy burden, they became slightly worried. Theodore could feel the two people behind him trembling as he listened to the king’s voice.

“Quattro, please listen to me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The remaining three people stepped forward and replied.

“You are to meet Elvenheim’s delegation, who will arrive at noon today, and bring them to the palace. They are VIP guests of Meltor, so ensure that there are few disruptions when guiding them.”

‘Welcoming the Elvenheim delegation!’

Two people were confused at the unexpected command, one person didn’t care, and another person was convinced by it. Understandably, the convinced person was Theodore. If he went to Elvenheim, he could meet directly with the senior elves and high elves, so he was the right person for this mission.

This was why Theodore raised his voice without any hesitation.

“On behalf of Quattro, we will do as Your Majesty commands!”

*

The four members of the magic division, Quattro, left the audience hall after receiving the order from Kurt. It was already almost noon, and they needed to prepare before meeting Elvenheim’s delegation.

“It was at the north gate?”

“Yes,” Sylvia answered instantly.

As they walked out of the palace toward the north gate, William didn’t seem to like the muted atmosphere and approached Theodore.

“Excuse me, Captain,” William said.

“Yes?”

“Have you and the princess been to Elvenheim once before?”

“Yes, we stayed for around two weeks.”

A few days after arriving, Theodore had gotten embroiled in a battle against a legendary grimoire. Thinking about the awful

burning pain from that time was enough to still make Theo shudder. While Theodore was engrossed in his bad memories, William didn't stop talking.

In retrospect, the next White Tower Master would've been a good candidate for the Elvenheim mission. However, he wasn't present.

Indeed, William complained while scratching his head, "Ah, I'm so envious! I wanted to go, but I was already on a mission. At that time, I really moved my feet to try and get there, but it was already solved."

"Was there some reason why you wanted to go?"

"...Captain probably doesn't know since you are popular, but all men dream of seeing elves once! Stupid normies!"

"N-Normies?" Was it a new magic term? Theodore was confused by the word which didn't make sense, when his robe was suddenly pulled. "Sylvia?"

"Don't worry too much. That guy is a little weird," Sylvia told Theodore.

William would've been hurt if he heard it, but he was busy imagining a beautiful elf. Turning away from William, who was laughing heavily, and Para, who was silent, Theodore and Sylvia started talking.

“Theo, who do you think will come?”

“Let’s see...” Theodore thought for a moment before offering a plausible answer. “It is pretty important, so I think a guardian will come.”

“Oh, the one who keeps calling Theo, ‘Benefactor’?”

“Or maybe Ellaim might come. It might be a person we don’t know, but it would be easier to send someone familiar. Maybe Sir Edwin will come?”

William suddenly interrupted the conversation, like he was interested in their words. “Guardian? What is that?”

“It is an expression referring to an elven warrior. The two we saw were both master level elementalists.”

“Oh, that is awesome! Is there any chance a high elf will come?”

Theodore frowned in response to William’s question. It wasn’t because he felt uncomfortable, but because it was an unexpected possibility, albeit not impossible. However, the possibility wasn’t high, so Theodore didn’t hesitate to shake his head.

“They can come, but it is almost unheard of. High elves are the center and pillars of Elvenheim. They wouldn’t appear just to

announce an alliance.”

“Is that so? I was looking forward to it...” William sighed with dissatisfaction but accepted Theodore’s words.

Then around 30 minutes passed by. The four magicians exchanged words and eventually arrived at their destination.

The north gate of Mana-vil was an inconvenient area for guests to enter through, so the number of guards was low. However, common sense was broken today as there were a huge number of guards.

“Stop! Please stop and identify yourselves.”

As the four people approached, a man dressed in armor stopped them politely. The strap hanging from the shoulder indicated he was the leader of the northern guards.

“I’m Theodore Miller, the captain of the magic division, Quattro.”

“Ah! It is an honor to meet our country’s hero!” The chief of the guards looked at him with a fierce joy and saluted.

In the meantime, Theodore’s name value had gone up beyond his imagination. Theodore returned the guard captain’s salute. “Did you receive the command?”

“Yes! I was ordered to follow the directions of Quattro and to help you with your mission.”

“Then I’ll ask for your cooperation, Captain.”

“Of course! Whatever you say!”

Thanks to the enthusiastic guard captain and his subordinates, Theodore was able to arrange the area much quicker than expected.

The roadside stalls were put away, arranged for people to stay away from this street. It was impossible for the measures they were putting up to escape the public’s eyes, but then it was Quattro’s turn to act.

Para, who hadn’t spoken a word the whole time, gave a command, “Build.”

She took out a staff from somewhere and pounded it on the ground. However, the following phenomenon was really different.

Kukukukukung...!

The air vibrated. Then the ground sprang up suddenly and turned into a greyish white wall, creating a border around the northern gate. It wasn’t simply a clump of soil. The hard materials

in the soil were picked out and rebuilt to the desired shape and strength. It was alchemy at a much higher level, so the magicians were forced to feel admiration.

“A-Amazing.”

“Umm.”

“Ohh...! That’s great, Yellow Tower Kid! You are still a little young, but this is no wonder why you are the candidate for the tower master!”

For the alchemist’s grimoire, Paragranum, this level of alchemy wasn’t difficult at all. Para ignored William, turning away from his loud voice. She might be cooperating with Theodore, but she had no interest in the Magic Contest or Elvenheim.

However, at that moment...

“Hey, why are you ignoring me... Eh? What is this?” William was grumbling at Paragranum’s blatant disregard when he suddenly asked a question.

“Hmm?” He asked as if he was talking to someone, then turned to Theodore and said, “Captain, they are almost here.”

“Oh, did the White Tower contact you?”

“Yes. It is a sound like an arrow, but you won’t be able to hear it if you don’t know how to listen. I’ll tell you how at a later time, so let’s talk about the message first.” William spoke like he didn’t know himself. “Is there no need to open the gates?”

“Huh? What are you saying?”

“I don’t know. Is there another entrance besides the gate?”

“That’s impossible. Besides, tha-” Theodore firmly shook his head when he stopped as he felt a sense of discomfort.

A few days ago, something about the walls had changed. Theo didn’t know what had changed, but his senses warned him that something had. He looked around at the wall and gate, and soon realized the reason.

‘The sky barrier... It’s turned off?’

In the present era, there were several sword masters who jumped tens of meters in one step, as well as magicians who knew how to use flying magic. Before them, the walls were nothing more than worthless structures.

Thus, the walls of the large cities in Meltor, including Mana-vil, were equipped with ambush magic to deal with enemy infiltration. However, the magic tricks on Mana-vil’s wall were currently turned off. No, strangely enough, it was only the magic near the north gate which was broken.

“Perhaps...” Theodore recognized the meaning and opened his mouth.

His blue eyes looked up at the sky. He realized that something was approaching in the sky filled with thick clouds, then the sun revealed its appearance.

It didn't take long for the members of the division to recognize their captain's abnormal behavior, and they looked in the same direction. Theodore was unable to see the details even while using Hawkeye, but the homunculus' eyesight exceeded that of humans and she grasped 'it.'

“Eh, a lotus?” As Para mumbled, the object expanded. No, it didn't expand but came closer. It blinked a few times and crossed a few kilometers every time. The faces of those who saw the unrealistic scene were staring blankly like fools.

Like Paragranum said, it was a lotus. It was large enough to be compared to a house, and the bud which hadn't bloomed yet flew through the sky.

“I-I-It is descending?”

“Yes, it is descending.”

Theodore responded to the stuttering William as he waited for the large lotus flower to come down. Despite its size, the lotus

landed quietly like it had no weight at all. There was no sound either.

No one opened their mouths. No one could speak. Everyone, including Quattro, watched silently as the large petals slowly opened up.

Finally, the lotus bloomed. Then an elf emerged amidst the petals. He found Theodore in the front and cried out, “It has been a long time, Benefactor!”

It was as Theo had half-expected. He smiled and exchanged greetings with Edwin, “Yes, it is nice to see you, Sir Edwin.”

This was a shocking sight, but he calmed down after seeing a familiar face. Yes, the first person he saw was Edwin.

“Um, I’ve heard a lot of stories, Theodore.” Ellaim, the guardian of the Great Forest who had struggled against the 2nd stage Laevateinn, appeared behind Edwin.

“...Sir Ellaim?” Theodore greeted Ellaim with a stunned expression.

There were two guardians? It was a sign that Elvenheim considered the alliance important, but this was still too much. Theodore looked at them and said, “Uhh, I didn’t know that two guardians would come.”

However, the two guardians looked at each other before Edwin shrugged and replied, “I’m sorry, but the two of us are just escorts.”

“Huh?” For a moment, Theodore’s mind blanked.

There was only one type of person who would need to be escorted by two guardians: the managers of the world tree, the Arv’s descendant. They were the ones who could summon the elemental rulers in the Great Forest.

It was the high elves. They were the blessings of life which caused buds to bloom on dead land, as well as produce fruits from withered crops.

“...My greeting is late.” A loud voice rang out from among the petals, and the surrounding people all paid attention to it.

Just like quenching a dry throat with cool water, the refreshing voice moistened their ears. Then the owner of the voice walked out from the petals.

She had light green hair which appeared akin to fresh vegetation. Her unfocused eyes gave her a mysterious atmosphere, while her white outfit revealed her simple yet feminine curves. Slender arms were revealed, as well as a curve to her chest which hadn’t been there before and a softly curved waist which hadn’t been seen before.

“How have you been?” Her gentle smile was like warm sunshine.

Theodore could barely speak her name, “...Ellenora?”

“Yes, Theodore,” Ellenora, who had become a full-fledged woman, smiled beautifully as she happily spoke his name.

Chapter 185 – Quickening of the Northern Continent (2)

Theodore's mind was still blank. The unreal beauty was similar, but it was very different from when she had been standing at the border between a male and female. If the previous Ellenoa seemed like a fresh leaf, the Ellenoa before him now was a blossoming flower. The acacia scent which tickled his nose seemed to be her body odor.

Despite facing a national VIP, Theodore couldn't open his mouth.

No, Theodore wasn't the only one. All the people around Ellenoa held their breaths, regardless of what sex they were. She had a beauty that gave off a sharp vitality. Her face shone like soft sunshine and naturally attracted the attention of the crowd.

If Paragranum hadn't poked him, Theodore would've continued staring blankly at Ellenoa.

"Ah! It is great to see you after a long time, Ellenoa. I didn't know that you would be coming here," Theodore greeted hurriedly.

"Huhu, I didn't expect Theodore to come and meet me." Ellenoa smiled gently at his embarrassed greeting.

Theodore didn't know why but there seemed to be something behind her smile. He couldn't stop his eyes from moving up and down. Softly curved lips, the white teeth between them, and the

slender fingers near her lips... It wasn't just the curves of the body which had changed. There was also femininity in her behavior.

This was also true for her gaze which stared straight at him. Her eyes were filled with solid trust and goodwill, which could make the recipient feel troubled.

Theodore barely managed to escape her gaze as he spoke to Ellenoa and the other envoys, "...Then we will move from here. Please tell me if you ever feel uncomfortable."

"Of course, Benefactor! Please look after us."

"I will gratefully accept this favour."

The two guardians bowed and naturally stepped behind Ellenoa. If their purpose was to escort her, they would stand on the left and right. However, Theodore didn't know the meaning of their current positions.

'Why are both of them standing in the rear?'

It was as if they were obstructions...

While he thought about it, Ellenoa's face flushed red as she approached Theodore's side. She was acting nervously like an adolescent girl. Her white fingers moved awkwardly before she took a deep breath and held out her right hand. It was a motion like she wanted to shake hands, but the meaning was different.

“Please look after me, Theodore.”

“Ah, yes.”

It was an act of courage for Ellenoa, but Theodore grabbed her hand without much thought. This was before Ellenoa could prepare her mind. “Ah...!”

Her palm, which had been made smaller by her feminization, was lightly caught in Theodore’s hands. She felt a rough texture and heat. Ellenoa felt the warmth being transmitted from her palm to the tip of her head. It might be different with another man, but Theodore was special. Ellenoa’s white face flushed completely red.

Theodore saw it and urgently pulled his hand back. “Ellenoa? Are you in pain somewhere?”

“Ah, it is nothing. I’m okay.”

“Your face is red...”

“T-This isn’t because I’m in pain...!” Ellenoa couldn’t say it was because he held her hand tightly, so she closed her mouth. However, Theodore nodded and didn’t ask any more. He thought she was burdened by the trip from Elvenheim in the heart of the Great Forest to Meltor.

So, he said, “I understand. My thinking was too short-sighted. I will move as quickly as possible so that Ellenoa can rest.”

“Yes, yes?”

Theodore turned away from Ellenoa and commanded, “Quattro and the guards! Open the path!”

He was a Prime magician who would become the next tower master, as well as an honorary marquis. Additionally, Theodore was the hero of the kingdom, so no one here could disobey his command.

At Theodore’s shout, the guards, William, and the others recovered from Ellenoa’s dreamy beauty and began moving. They were truly the elites of Mana-vil.

“Open the path! The direction is the royal palace!”

“Clear the road as quickly as possible!”

“This is the command given by Sir Theodore!”

Spectators gathered again, but Para used the perfect timing to unfold her architectural magic again.

“Create Wall.”

This was simple 2nd Circle magic which created an impenetrable wall. However, the magic was different from normal standards when coming from Paragranum. The range of the magic was from the north gate to the entrance of the palace. It was 3 meters in height, 0.5 meters in thickness, and made of granite. If she invested a bit more time and magic power, she could even build a wall for a small or medium-sized manor.

Kukukung...!

The walls stretched out on the right and left, blocking the gazes of the spectators and forming a clear path. It was a calculation ability which took into account the two guardians, Ellenoa and Quattro.

While the guardians admired the feat, Theodore looked at Ellenoa again. “We will head to the royal palace now. His Majesty doesn’t like any unnecessary formalities, so Ellenoa can rest soon.”

“T-Thank you...”

“It is nothing. Then let’s go.”

Ellenoa unintentionally deceived him about her condition and followed behind him with a small smile. Theodore’s hands helped her into the carriage. While doing so, Theodore could feel Ellenoa’s hand shaking finely in his.

‘...What?’ Theodore was puzzled.

Where was this ticklish feeling at his neck and wrists coming from? However, he didn't notice until he got into the carriage with Ellenoa. Sylvia had been watching their encounter with deep and cool eyes since the beginning.

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“I sincerely welcome you to Meltor, Forest Neighbours! I hope you will have a comfortable stay.” Kurt III raised his body from his throne as he spoke, revealing his passion.

Like Theodore, he had predicted the arrival of the guardians. However, a high elf, the pillar of Elvenheim, visiting Meltor personally...?

This was clear proof that Elvenheim had accepted the alliance with Meltor and was willing to join them against Andras. The people present had pleased smiles on their faces because they thought the same thing as Kurt.

However, that wasn't the only reason for their excitement.

‘She has become more beautiful after changing to a woman. Are all high elves like her?’

It was inevitable that Kurt III's eyes would be drawn to Ellenoa. The unfamiliar beauty was no different from the last time he had seen her, but her charm was incomparable. According to Theodore's report, Ellenoa had been neutral a year ago. So, what

had caused this feminization?

Kurt's eyes narrowed for a moment at the thought. He thought the flush on her face was because of the attention, but what if it wasn't? What if her face changed due to the person who accompanied her on the carriage?

Then it wasn't a matter of the staring eyes. Kurt hid his wily grin and pretended not to know anything.

"Lady Ellenoa."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You must be tired from coming a long way, so why don't we start the discussion tomorrow? I have organized a place where you can relax."

"Your Majesty, thank you for your concern."

As the dialogue flowed like water, he struck. "Additionally, you will be accompanied by Quattro when out in Mana-vil. Are you uncomfortable with that?"

"Quattro, do you mean..."

"I mean Sir Theodore's division, who brought you here."

At that moment, Ellenoa's eyes returned to Theodore. She stared at his side profile and briefly bit her lips. Kurt III was closely watching her reaction, so he didn't miss it. It was only slight, but it was clear that Ellenoa favored Theodore.

Unsurprisingly, she accepted the plan. "I am happy to follow Your Majesty's will, but what does Benefactor think?"

"I see. What does Sir Theodore think?"

"I will gladly accompany Ellenoa."

"Ah..."

When Theodore replied without hesitation, a small smile appeared on Ellenoa's face. No matter how many years she had lived, she had only recently become a woman. Only Kurt knew all the circumstances, and this made him smile.

A key figure in the alliance and the kingdom's hero... Wasn't this relationship a combination of politics and other factors? It was sufficient to use a slight deception. A young man with a strong heart and a girl blooming like a flower... It was obvious that a fire would light up if given a slight chance.

After that, the conversation quickly ended. Ellenoa and the two guardians were guided to their residence. Only Theodore remained in the room.

“Well done, Quattro’s captain. It is more than my expectations.”

“You’re overpraising me, Your Highness.”

“No, if it wasn’t for you, this situation wouldn’t have happened. Then I have one more request.” Kurt fiddled with the armrest and spoke to Theodore whose head was bowed, “This evening, there will be a banquet announcing the alliance with Elvenheim. I would like you to recommend the delegates, including Ellenoa, to participate in the ball.”

“This is politics.”

“That’s right. It may be hard for the guests who came from a distant place, but we have to make the most of this opportunity. I want them to enjoy the banquet as much as possible.” Then Kurt III’s voice rose as he ordered Theodore, “You will escort Ellenoa to the banquet. I hope you don’t refuse. Take care of her so that she has a good time in Meltor.”

“As Your Majesty commands!”

“Oh, I also have a present for you.”

“.....?” Theodore looked puzzled.

Kurt pointed outside the room and whispered with a smile, “Do you remember the fact that I gave your father, Earl Dennis, an estate near Mana-vil?”

“Yes, I am thankful for Your Majesty’s generosity.”

“I wasn’t aiming for your thanks. I know you have been busy and haven’t been able to go home. So, I sent an invitation and carriage so that your family can attend tonight’s banquet. They arrived an hour ago and are waiting for you.”

Theodore’s eyes widened at the words. As Kurt said, Theodore had been busy. In fact, Theodore hadn’t simply been busy. He had gone on a long journey and struggled with a sword master. Wasn’t it natural to think about his home while experiencing homesickness for Meltor? The faces of his mother, father, and little brother entered his mind.

Theodore was touched by the king’s meticulous care and remained silent. He wanted to speak words of appreciation but was worried an unpleasant sound would be released if he opened his mouth.

Kurt III rose from the throne like he sensed Theodore’s mood. Then he said, “Please go back now. I still have a lot of work to do, and there is nothing left to tell you. Understood?”

“...Yes, Your Majesty,” Theodore replied in a heavily subdued voice and exited the room at a faster pace than usual.

His father, mother, and brother...

His brother was still young, so he might not be present. However, it was sufficient to see the faces of his parents. There was only one place where people would be waiting in Meltor's palace.

Theodore was accustomed to the layout, so he didn't get lost on the way to the waiting room.

Voices could be heard from beyond the door. As Theodore heard his father's low-pitched voice and his mother's cheerful voice mixed with several others, Theodore unconsciously opened the door.

Clink. The door opened with only a slight noise as it was well oiled. The faces of his parents he hadn't seen for ages, the sight which Theodore looked forward to...

“Eh? You came sooner than I expected, Kid.”

“Theo, you came!”

Red and silver... The two beauties with different shades of hair color were chatting with his parents.

Chapter 186 – Quickening of the Northern Continent (3)

Veronica and Sylvia...

Theodore's mind went blank at the unexpected appearance of the two women. He didn't know why they were here chatting with his family.

No, he could understand if it was Sylvia, who had met his family before. The Miller family had no connections with a place like the royal palace, so they would feel comfortable in their own way with people they knew.

‘Then why is Tower Master...?’

However, Veronica was different. She was the leader of the Red Tower, responsible for the kingdom's fighting power. Although the nobles were weak, they were above everyone except for the tower masters. Yet even the dukes didn't dare raise their voices in front of Veronica.

Despite this, she was chatting calmly with the Miller family, who had been living in the countryside until not long ago.

However, Theodore's thoughts on this matter didn't last much longer.

“Let me hug you once, my son!” His mother saw him and hurried to embrace him. Fortunately, she was doing better than before, so the strength of her arms and body had increased. Still, why did she seem tiny compared to three years ago?

Theodore held his mother quietly and smiled inwardly as he realized why.

‘No, it is me who has changed a lot since the old days.’

It had already been three years since he’d met his parents at the Miller Barony. Since then, Theodore had gone through many things. That included acquiring ‘Battle Song,’ which made him taller and increased his physical abilities.

In these few years, he had grown big enough to look down at the top of his mother’s head. There had once been a time when Theodore couldn’t even make eye contact with her. However, he was no longer that boy who was always alone.

Theodore’s father, now Earl Miller, watched the emotional reunion and said, “It really has been a while, Theo.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t visited more often.”

“Uh, don’t apologize. In this world, what parent would hold onto the ankles of their child? It is also thanks to you that we can enjoy all the luxuries of the royal palace.”

“Pfft.” Theodore couldn’t help laughing at Dennis’ words. It was funny that his father, who always wore shabby clothes, now had a gorgeous robe covering his pudgy belly. His mother scolded his father sharply, but Dennis was still happy.

Subsequently, the atmosphere of the room became lighter. Theodore forgot his usual solemn expression, while Sylvia and Veronica couldn’t help smiling softly at the family’s affectionate feelings.

It was a side of Theodore which other people didn’t know well. The satisfaction of seeing this scene decreased the two women’s hostility toward each other.

“Ah, and Theo. There is one person who really wanted to see you again.”

“Huh?”

After his mother finished scolding Dennis, she turned back to speak to Theodore. It had been three years since she could meet her son. She was proud that Theodore played a big role in the kingdom, but as his parents, she and Dennis couldn’t help feeling a bit lonely. So, they came to Mana-vil and prepared a proper family reunion.

The person who wanted to see Theodore again was his younger brother, who had turned six this year.

“B-Brother,” a nervous voice rang out from behind the sofa where Veronica and Sylvia were sitting.

‘Ah.’ Why was it that the moment Theodore heard the voice, an unknown emotion filled his chest...?

The presence of Veronica and Sylvia had blocked his senses, making this a surprise. A young boy walked out from between the red and blue robes. He had the same black hair and blue eyes as Theodore.

Leonardo Miller, the spitting image of Theodore as a child, looked up at his brother with a wide-eyed gaze.

“...Leo?” Theodore called out.

“Yes, Brother Theo.”

“You have become bigger.”

It was awkward. Theodore had only seen his little brother once when Leo had been at the age of three. Then he hadn’t seen Leo again for three years. Leo was just a child, so there would be no surprise if he didn’t remember Theodore.

However, Leonardo knew. He knew that the person in the gorgeous outfit before him was his older brother.

“Brother!”

“Uh, don’t tackle me all of a sudden. It hurts.”

“Yes!”

Leo had heard a lot of stories. His brother who saved a beautiful elf, his brother who bravely defended their home, his brother who gained many merits... In Leonardo’s mind, Theodore was already a hero in a storybook.

The boy had a thought as he dug into Theodore’s arms. Theodore was his brother who was followed by beautiful women!

The sisters here were so beautiful that the women from Leo’s village were like pumpkins compared to them. Leonardo’s thoughts were still childish, but in some ways, it was an amazingly precise interpretation of the situation. Had he been born with a brain like Theodore’s?

Then Leonardo suddenly recalled the story about the banquet.

“Brother.”

“Huh?”

“Isn’t there a big party tonight?”

The word banquet was more suitable, but Leo was still six years old. Theodore smiled at Leo and nodded. That said, Leonardo had a good brain for a six-year-old. He was able to formulate a question based on what he'd heard from his parents while coming to the capital and from what he'd seen in the storybooks.

“Which sister are you bringing with you?” Leo’s innocent question shattered the unspoken armistice between the two beauties.

“...What?” Theodore uttered.

“I saw it in a book. A man and woman will go to a big party together and dance. So, I thought that you would go with one of these pretty sisters...”

‘No?’ Leo just shook his head with an innocent expression.

This was truly a surprise! Theodore started sweating nervously as he faced the cliff before him. He knew it was a question without malice, but it was fatal in this situation. Unsurprisingly, someone else spoke before Theodore could reply.

“Yes, Kid, who is your partner?”

“T-Towe...”

“Just call me, ‘Becky’. I introduced myself as your senior because I didn’t want them to be uncomfortable.”

‘Ah,’ Theodore realized. Veronica hadn’t revealed her identity. Therefore, the Miller family were able to talk to her with a relaxed atmosphere. They would’ve been stiff if they’d known that she was the Red Tower Master.

Veronica naturally grasped his left arm and whispered into his ear, “Yes, who will be your partner?”

“That...”

“You aren’t going to kick me away, are you? Yes?” Her hot breath and low voice tickled his ears, making him feel dizzy.

The similar heat coming from his left arm made him feel like he was melting. At that time, something cool wrapped around his right arm.

“No matter how rushed you feel, you shouldn’t cause him pain. Right Be-cky?” Sylvia dragged out Veronica’s nickname as she glared at her opponent.

Then she whispered in Theo’s ears, “Come with me, Theo. You shouldn’t go with a middle-aged woman like that.”

“M-Middle-aged...?” Veronica’s eyebrows twitched, but she soon recovered and launched a counterattack. “Hrnn, can you speak so proudly when you haven’t even grown up yet? This kid prefers women like me.”

“N-Not grown up...?” Sylvia gaped.

Veronica flapped her robe, revealing her sensual body. The clothing couldn't hide how voluptuous she was. Then Sylvia looked down at herself, but she couldn't see her natural beauty. However, she didn't know yet. She wouldn't know what Theodore's taste was unless he said it himself.

The two women reached the same conclusion and focused on Theodore.

“Theo, who is it?”

Theodore gulped and took a deep breath, feeling more tension than when he faced the empire's Seven Swords.

Of course, he would be happy with either of the women before him. However, he currently wasn't free to choose a partner. Kurt III had directly asked him to escort Ellenoa, and he couldn't ignore Ellenoa who had come to the distant Meltor.

“I'm sorry.” With that apology, Theodore refused both of them. “His Majesty has asked me to be Ellenoa's partner. I don't have a choice for this banquet.”

“Yes...”

“Hah...?”

Sylvia was devastated, while Veronica thought it was ridiculous. The two women had different types of beauty, and even their actions were the opposite of each other.

“...Yes, I’m sorry to ask something unreasonable.”

“It is nothing. I was glad to hear Tow-no, Becky’s suggestion.”

“Thank you for those words. Then I will go talk to him.”

“Yes... Huh?”

‘Talk to who?’ Theodore was unable to object and stayed silent until Veronica left the room. He could guess, but would she really do that?

“Oh...” Meanwhile, Sylvia squatted on her chair.

“Oh, my. Don’t be so upset.”

“But Mother...”

“Our Theo has been popular since the old days. Even back home, Julia next door..”

Theodore could hear it all. As his mother's words soothed the crestfallen Sylvia, Theodore gazed at Leonardo like he had committed a big sin. There was no malice, but Leo was the one who had created this mess.

However, his brother was still looking at Theodore with a bright expression, unaware of what he had done.

“Hah...” Theodore was exhausted before the banquet had even begun.

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Seven hours later, the entrance of Meltor's palace was wide open. The nobles, magicians, and foreign dignitaries let out sounds of admiration as they crossed the threshold.

“Ohh...! So, this is Meltor's royal palace!”

“From the pillars to the stairs and fountains, they are all magical products. I'm afraid to look away from anything.”

“It is a pity that I can only come once a year!”

It was as they said. In keeping with the title of Meltor the magic kingdom, the interior of the palace was covered with artifacts. There were living armor meant as alert devices to catch unauthorized intruders, as well as fountains to control the ambient temperature.

Most of the foreign guests were from the Central area, so they never enjoyed the use of such advanced artifacts.

In fact, the bleak North felt like another world.

The guests walked a few more steps while salivating with greed, and they soon arrived at today's ballroom.

There were so many guests that a temporary banquet hall had been made in the spacious front yard. The yellow tower magicians had used their architectural skills and had been able to complete it in one and a half days.

“T-This big building is just the temporary banquet hall?” Dennis had been in the capital for less than a month, so he couldn't hide the tremble in his voice.

A building which should've taken a year to construct was right before his eyes. What about the royal motifs and symbol of the magic towers carved on the walls? Even if a dozen skills sculptors were called, it would take at least a month.

For those who weren't accustomed to magic like Dennis, magic events of this magnitude were considered miracles.

Thus, Vince's words surprised him.

“Yes, that's right. It seems that the Yellow Tower has been working hard during the past few days. Usually, the construction

of a national building like this would take a few weeks or months.”

“Magic is truly great. Thanks to Professor, I’ve broadened my insights.”

“You’re overpraising me, Earl.”

As Theodore’s master and a Prime rank magician, Vince Haidel had volunteered to guide the Miller family. He had been planning to participate in the banquet anyway, and this task wasn’t too hard when it was the family of his disciple.

“We are lucky to be with Theodore’s master. Hahaha!”

“It is nothing. He is my student after all.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

The attitudes of the Miller family, who didn’t act like they were earls or senior nobles, was refreshing. Vince smiled softly as he saw where Theodore’s upright nature had come from.

After sharing a few words, the lighting of the banquet hall turned off, and darkness fell upon them. Then a beam of light shone on the podium. A pair of purple eyes gleamed in the darkness, as Kurt III, king of Meltor, stood there.

“Fill the cups.” Without speaking a single word of greeting, Kurt

held up his cup and gave an order. For some reason, his voice sounded worse than usual, but it added a sense of weight.

This was a charisma which didn't allow anyone to sneer. The participants of the banquet all took a cup from the tables. Then for a moment, the banquet hall was just filled with the sound of drinks being poured into cups.

Kurt waited until the last person was done before continuing.

“Today is a good day,” he said.

Why was it a good day? Hundreds of eyes filled with this question as they followed Kurt's gestures.

“Is it because today is the day that the Magic Contest begins? No, that is wrong.”

Their speculation was denied, and confusion appeared in the eyes of some people.

“Is it because we are enjoying good drinks, food, and song? Wrong.”

Kurt III completely dominated the atmosphere in the ballroom. No one could move their eyes from him or stop listening to his voice. A monarch required the ability to lead, and Kurt had been born as a monarch.

“Then why is today a good day?”

No one answered. He didn't want them to answer. The magic kingdom had been fighting with the sword empire for half a millenium. So, Kurt III's presence wasn't something that the nobles of the Central continent could go against.

Finally, Kurt III raised his cup and said, “Everyone might've heard about this. The story of the high elves who enrich the world and the hero of Meltor who rescued them!”

Someone nodded. Someone else looked down. Another person sighed. Someone's eyebrows twitched. Every person reacted differently, but there was no one here who didn't know the story. There were those who thought it was propaganda for Meltor, while others thought it was true but exaggerated.

Kurt III's charisma embraced the crowd, and the banquet hall started to heat up.

“Please bless us! Please be glad! Don't hesitate to raise the first toast to their beautiful reunion!”

Suddenly, the number of lights increased. The direction of the light was aimed to the left of the podium, and all eyes naturally shifted to that point.

...Once again, the world was silent.

No one could make a sound at the wonderful sight. Their lips parted, but no sound was made. Their eyes widened to the limit as they tried to engrave the miraculous sight before them into their minds.

The reactions of all those who saw Ellenoa were the same. The lighting illuminated her beautiful face, which had no makeup, displaying a beauty that was out of this world.

‘Remarkable... Well, I can understand their reactions.’ Theodore, who was forgotten by everyone, stared in amazement at Ellenoa’s profile in front of him.

With eyelashes which looked like dew would form on them, skin that seemed like sunlight would bounce off it, and hair which was like a fresh leaf... Wasn’t she a goddess of the forest which some ethnic minority served?

Theodore and Ellenoa were holding hands but it seemed like she could disappear somewhere. Theodore unconsciously opened his mouth and said, “Ellenoa.”

“Yes, Theodore.” She didn’t look back but smiled kindly as she answered him.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to ask you one thing.”

“Yes, you can ask me anything.”

“...Have you found a companion?”

He had previously heard it from Ellenoa's mouth. A high elf could decide to become a woman or a man, depending on the sex of their companion. The last time he saw her, she had definitely been neutral still.

However, Theodore remembered. Ellenoa's hands had felt thinner when they stood on the world tree.

...What if he wasn't mistaken?

“Yes.” Ellenoa's answer was clear. She was already a woman.

He had another question after the answer. No, Theodore already knew-

“He is right in front of me.”

Turning away from the crowd, Ellenoa's eyes shone brightly as she faced Theodore.

Chapter 187 – Quickening of the Northern Continent (4)

Kung.

He might be mistaken, but at that moment, Theodore heard his own heart falling. Ellenoa's eyes flashed with affection as she confessed to him. No matter how insensitive he was, he simply couldn't not understand this situation.

His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would pop out of his ribs.

Theodore forgot to breathe as he looked at her.

‘Ellenoa, me?’

It would be a lie if he said that he hadn't expected it. In retrospect, there were many reasons why Ellenoa would like him.

He hadn't stepped back when fighting against one of the Seven Sins, ‘Pride.’ She'd been able to tell how scary it was, despite having no experience with combat. Ellenoa wouldn't have spoken a word of resentment if he had abandoned her on the spot.

However, Theodore had fought against that nightmare-like monster.

Ellenora hadn't seen all of it. As soon as the battle began, she'd been blown away to a safe place by Theodore's magic and only joined the scene later with Veronica. When Ellenora saw the fight in the vacant lot, she had felt more desperate than ever before.

Theodore's scarred back had been revealed between his torn clothes. He had gritted his teeth and endured the terrible pain. The one soaked in his own blood, her hero...

Theodore had been far from being the winner, and he'd frowned with a serious expression.

The boy who had been injured and covered in blood...

Why? As she held onto the bloody body, Ellenora had thought he was lovely. He'd jumped into a fight which couldn't be won, just to protect her.

[From that day onwards...]

It had continued since then.

[I have been longing for you.]

Theodore heard Ellenora's sincere voice. However, it wasn't a sound spoke aloud. She spoke through the connection which had formed between them during Mitra's awakening in the past. This was a type of telepathy. It showed Ellenora's strong heart and soul.

‘...Honestly, I’m glad.’ Theodore accepted it honestly. He was glad about her confession.

The fact that someone like Ellenoa loved him, regardless of his surname. She was so cute that he wanted to pull her into his arms. Wouldn’t it be good if it was her? Apart from the story of their nations’ interests, what would it be like if he lived together with Ellenoa?

“I...” The moment that Theodore was about to impulsively reply...

Shh. Ellenoa shook her head slightly while placing a finger to her lips.

[Please don’t be in a hurry.]

Her clear eyes had already noticed the worries inside Theodore. She saw the responsibility and burdens he carried, and even his affection for her.

As she inwardly rejoiced over this fact, Ellenoa spoke in a calm voice, [It was my own choice to become a woman. I don’t want Theodore to feel burdened or responsible. If you want to be with me just because of those feelings, I will refuse from my side.]

“That...”

Those were words which he couldn't decisively deny. Theodore closed his mouth while Ellenoa smiled gently.

[One day, if you have decided to accept me, please tell me in a place where we are alone. I don't want to decide my marriage in a place like this.]

“Ah.” Theodore swallowed hard as he remembered the presence of the crowd.

They were engrossed in Ellenoa's appearance, but it wouldn't be strange if they protested how long this exchange was lasting. Theo didn't know why, but Kurt III was watching them with strange eyes and didn't show any signs of urging them on. Thus, Theodore walked out a few beats later than Ellenoa. This wasn't the time to share personal stories.

So, Theodore calmed his heart as he gazed at Ellenoa shining under the lights. Despite her words about responsibilities or burdens, he couldn't help unconsciously sketching out his life with her in his mind.

*

On the other hand, a beauty leaned against a table and muttered a complaint while holding her cup, “Ah, this is hard. It is bigger than I thou-”

It was Red Tower Master Veronica. Due to her notoriety in the North and Central areas of the continent, there wasn't a single person at her table. It wouldn't be beneficial if they said the wrong

thing to her and suffered massive damage.

That said, there was one other person present at her table today. With silver hair and blue robes, it was Sylvia who had the nickname of Princess of the Blue Tower. Sylvia didn't understand Veronica's words and asked, "What do you mean?"

"You don't understand? It means we have both fallen behind," Veronica replied casually as she filled her cup again.

However, the question in Sylvia's eyes didn't disappear, so Veronica explained with a grumble, "Do you know about the gender of high elves?"

"Yes, it depends on their decision."

"No, it isn't that simple. The pureblood Arv can change their gender at will, but the high elves are different. A decision on their gender is a promise of a lifetime. It is worse because she changed before hearing the other person's answer." Feeling irritated, Veronica stopped speaking and drank from the glass.

The high elves were just fragments of the Arv.

Due to that reason, unlike the Arv who could switch their gender as desired, the high elves were unable to change once they decided on their gender. In other words, after deciding to be female, they couldn't return to a neutral or decide on a male form if the other person didn't accept their hearts.

Most people would sympathize, but not Veronica.

“She is cunning.” Veronica put down her empty cup. “As you know, the kid is someone with a heavy sense of responsibility. He won’t back down or give up, even if it is difficult. Someone suffering because of him, he won’t forget it. Isn’t that right?”

“...Yes, definitely.”

“Well, that is his charm, but... will the kid be able to easily refuse the high elf’s courtship?”

‘No.’ Cold air flowed from Sylvia’s body as she thought of this answer. It was only for a moment, but it pushed away Veronica’s warm heat around the table.

Sylvia was someone with one of the best innate talents in the world, as well as a genius scheduled to become the next tower master. If Veronica hadn’t been here, the bottles at the surrounding tables would’ve frozen over. The two remained silent as they watched Theodore and Ellenoa for a while.

It was Sylvia who broke the unpleasant silence first. “Then Tower Master, will you step back?”

“No way.” Veronica’s eyes sparkled at the provocative remark. “I can’t do anything today, but I am going to move strategically. This is a saying. If you want to hold onto something for a long time, you

should obtain support?”

“You mean...”

“It seems like we have the same idea.”

The gazes of the two beauties moved from the podium toward Dennis Miller, who was applauding his son’s splendid appearance. Since Kurt III had assigned Theodore as Ellenoa’s personal partner, there was nothing the two beauties could do. They thought hard and got up from their seats.

As they walked in the same direction, Sylvia whispered, “Will this really help? It looks pretty difficult.”

“Huh?” Veronica turned her head and looked at the crowd in the center. The crowd was swarming Ellenoa and Theodore. Veronica’s eyebrows twitched as she saw it, but then shrugged her shoulders. “It isn’t to the extent that will give us trouble. Isn’t that right?”

“...I don’t agree. This alone might not help.”

“Kik, okay. Let me ask you something? Then what now?”

Fire and ice, the two contrasting colors and atmospheres walked shoulder-to-shoulder. The crowd parted as the two beauties headed toward the table where the Miller family were seated.

Meltor Palace's banquet had just begun.

*

At that time, Mana-vil's checkpoints were in full swing because of the crowds of people. Despite the reduced number of shifts, the fatigue continued to accumulate. However, the guards kept their eyes open with the physical strength they had trained from day one.

One of the guards questioned a visitor, "Did you come from Austen?"

"Yes."

"What is your objective in Mana-vil?"

"The drought is getting worse these days... I came to look for water artifacts."

"Ah, it is like that."

The great drought of Austen was a known disaster in the north. The nightmare of the whole kingdom drying up was called the anger of the desert god. In fact, when the guard saw that the visitor's skin was dried up in different areas, he pitied the visitor.

"If you look at the stores in the east, you might find what you are

looking for. The artifact stores in the center are expensive, and they don't sell daily necessities.”

“Ohh...! I really appreciate it.”

“It isn't a big deal. Then you can pass.”

The visitor from Austen thanked the guard and entered the capital with a wobbly gait. The guard watched his back view, but fortunately, the visitor didn't fall. Briefly, the guard mourned for the Austen people suffering from the drought, then he forgot about the Austen visitor.

There were too many things for one person to remember. However, the visitor was a little unusual. He walked through Mava-vil's front entrance, headed into an alley, and stripped off his loose robes.

“...This place should be fine. I will turn off the ability,” a voice spoke.

Then three more people appeared around the visitors. No, they were originally there. The visitor's ability simply hid their existence. It was Aura Ability, a miracle which even surpassed magic in certain areas. Being able to use it meant that one of the visitors was a sword master.

“Fortunately, we managed to enter. The famous checkpoints of Mana-vil are nothing before Captain's ability.”

“No, that isn’t it.” The sword master called ‘Captain’ shook his head.

“We didn’t go unnoticed because of that. If it hadn’t been for the Magic Contest, it would’ve been a lot harder. This is truly the kingdom that can compete with the Andras Empire.”

The sword master was a master of illusion, but he recalled that awful feeling he’d felt when he passed into Mana-vil. There was a scary magic which filled the air, as well as runes written on the walls and gates.

The method of deceiving the checkpoint without using any trickery was effective. If he’d tried to cross the walls, he would certainly have become a victim. As the atmosphere became tense, someone opened their mouth, “T-Then how will we move from now on? If we move around the city, we might be discovered.”

“Find the high elf.”

At the captain’s decisive answer, his subordinate murmured, “Really?”

“We definitely snuck into Mana-vil and did some bad things before, but we just have to beg for mercy before negotiating with Meltor.”

“Captain, begging is a little...”

“No, we have to beg,” Captain Mujak, one of the prides of Austen, declared in a firm voice. That’s right. The four of them had come to the capital of Meltor to beg for help. Of course, they didn’t want to, but it was necessary.

“Negotiating with Meltor is the secondary story. As long as we can receive the high elf’s help, I am willing to feed my pride to a dog.”

“C-Captain...!”

“We will confess our sins and beg for mercy on this urgent matter. If you have any pride, leave it here! You are Janissaries who devote your lives to the kingdom and the Sultan!”

The eyes of the Janissaries shook at their Captain’s loud voice. They were a little confused, but the patriotism and loyalty engraved deeply into their hearts overcame this confusion. The three Janissaries nodded and replied, ““For the desert sun!””

“Good! For our kingdom, let’s go!”

Soon after, four uninvited people emerged from the back alley and mixed in with the crowds of Mana-vil. Regardless of whether or not they could achieve their goal, that was something only time could tell.

Chapter 188 – Uninvited Guests (1)

The banquet, held in conjunction with the opening of the Magic Contest which took place once a year, finished successfully. Above all, the unexpected appearance of a high elf meant that people were able to receive an answer regarding the relationship between Meltor and Elvenheim.

The balance between the Northern powers was collapsing! If the people who came were just Edwin and Ellaim, they might've thought it was just a visit.

It was true that it had been hard to find elves since the founding of Elvenheim, but it wasn't so rare that people doubted the existence of elves. In several countries at the Center, the elven slave trade still hadn't disappeared. There were also tribes of elves who communicated with humans.

However, high elves were beyond that common sense. Those who saw the unfathomable beauty and power of life overflowing from the high elf couldn't help admiring her. The woman was the guardian of the world tree, a high elf whose existence had been uncertain.

The appearance of Ellenoa, who was like royalty, was proof that Elvenheim sincerely wanted to build a relationship with Meltor.

“It seems like the forces in the North will be greatly overturned.”

“We should go home and watch the situation for a while.”

“Andras and Meltor, which one would be more advantageous to side with?”

“There are many variables in this generation. From the participation of Elvenheim to the appearance of a young hero...”

For the non-magicians and dignitaries from other countries, the Magic Contest was no longer of great interest. It was possible that the war in the North, which had lasted for 500 years, could finally end.

Regardless of whether it was the sword empire or the magic kingdom that won, the Central continent would be swept away by such changes.

Someone thought this deadlock would continue.

Someone else said that both places would be destroyed.

Another person thought that Meltor would win.

Yet another thought that Andras would win.

People gathered and imagined the future. The future of the Northern continent, during the next few decades, would depend on how the key figures of this era acted.

The day after the noisy banquet, Quattro was divided toward the north, south, east, and west in order to guard the area where the Elvenheim delegation was staying.

Of course, the guard duty wasn't a big deal. Aside from them, there were dozens of veteran war mages stationed at the boundaries. They would be able to cope with any attack, even if the knights of Andras fell from the sky.

After all, even the tower masters were guarding this place.

Including Theodore and the two guardians, there were seven masters. No, if he included the Magic Society's chairman, there were eight. In such a situation, anyone would be torn apart if they tried to aim for Ellenoa, even if the opponent was one of the empire's Seven Swords.

Thanks to that, Theodore was able to think about last night's confession.

[Yes, he is right in front of me.]

Ellenoa's warm smile, like sunshine.

[I have been longing for you.]

The voice which was like drops of dew at dawn could still be

heard in his ears.

“Hoo...” Theodore’s face turned red at the memory, then he suddenly sighed.

At that moment, he had been too caught up in Ellenoa’s beauty to think about it, but now he couldn’t help feeling embarrassed. There had been several women who expressed their affection toward him, but Ellenoa was the first to confess her love directly.

High elves could only choose their gender once. At a crossroad which she might regret for the rest of her life, Ellenoa had chosen to become a woman without any hesitation. She’d made the decision with the hope that she could be Theodore’s companion.

‘...How should I answer?’

This was a significant matter which could change the landscape of the North. If Theodore and Ellenoa became companions, Elvenheim and Meltor would no longer be separate.

This combination of the next tower master and a high elf, the two of them would be the last knot in the relationship between kingdoms. Theodore didn’t know it yet, but this was why Kurt III had ordered him to escort Ellenoa.

However, things wouldn’t have changed, even if he did know.

It didn’t matter if the link between kingdoms was a matter of

great urgency which would determine the future of the North. To accept or reject... Theodore had a great responsibility to think about Ellenoa's sincere heart in making his decision.

So, he thought about his own feelings regarding Ellenoa.

"Hey."

He wondered if he wanted to live his life with her.

"Hey?"

...Or if Ellenoa would be happy with him. Theodore was thinking so hard that he didn't notice the person approaching him.

"Theodore Miller!"

"Ah." Theodore jolted with surprise and stared at the girl in yellow robes standing before him. She was a member of Quattro. However, in reality, she was the Yellow Tower Master and the puppet of the grimoire, Paragranum.

"I have been calling you. What were you thinking about?"

"...It isn't a big deal. Did something happen? You are in charge of the west entrance."

“Unknown people are approaching here.”

Theodore’s expression changed as he asked hurriedly, “What?! Did they pass through the boundaries?”

“They encountered several people, but there were no conflicts. I don’t know why, but I am the only one who can detect them.”

“Can you tell their level?”

“Yes.” Para closed her eyes before opening her mouth again, “One is master level, and the other three are skilled. You and my homunculus can somehow manage it.”

“Sword master... Is it one of the empire’s Seven Swords?”

“I don’t know. However, my logic circuit is denying that guess. The empire’s Seven Swords aren’t stupid enough to enter Meltor’s capital.”

That’s right. Theodore didn’t contradict Para’s words as he thought about this. The intentions of the other party were unknown, but it wasn’t the first time he had encountered a situation like this.

Theodore didn’t know who the opponents were, but he just needed to fulfill his mission.

Beep.

Before the encounter with the enemies, Theodore briefly infused magic power into the emblem at the front of his uniform. It was to call Sylvia at the north entrance and William at the west entrance. He told the remaining two Quattro members to come to where he was. Para said the two of them could handle it, but it was best to avoid any mishaps.

‘The two of them will take at least five minutes to arrive.’

Until then, Theodore and Para had to handle it somehow. Then Theodore started to see the ‘unknown’ people whom Para had talked about. However, he could determine their identities. “That... Aren’t they servants from the palace?”

Theodore had entered the palace several times, so he remembered the uniform. He looked back at Para with a questioning gaze, but she shook her head with an impassive expression.

“It is a disguise. I don’t know how.”

“Are you sure?”

“There is no one in Mana-vil who can fool my eyes. If you don’t believe my advice, I will leave the decision to you.”

As the two of them talked, the palace retinue was coming closer.

However, there were no worrisome signs. Moreover, Theodore's senses were silent, and his detection magic didn't find anything. Indeed, it would be ridiculous if Theodore easily revealed the disguise that even a grimoire didn't know how it was done.

Finally, the servants arrived before Theodore and Para, and bowed. "Excuse me. We have come to arrange the delegation's accommodation, according to His Majesty's orders."

"...Do you know who I am?"

"Huh? You're Theodore Miller, the captain of the magic division Quattro," the servant's answer flowed out naturally. The servant's breathing wasn't disturbed, and his eyes asked why Theo was asking such a thing. Theodore looked for a reaction to find fault with, but the servant just waited silently without saying anything.

At this moment, Theodore had to decide if he should follow Para's advice or send them along without a disturbance. Then Theodore made his decision and moved to the side. "You may enter."

"Oh, thank you. Glory to you, Quattro!"

"It is nothing."

The servants passed one by one. One step, another step...

Theodore could feel Para's gaze tickling the side of his face. The

servants walked past the road paved with square slabs and stepped onto the dirt path which matched the ecology of the elves. It was at this moment that...

Puk.

“No?!”

The legs of the servants became buried in the dirt. It wasn't just up to their ankles or knees. This was a phenomenon seen in tidal flats or marsh areas. The four men reflexively tried to pull out their feet, but the ground had hardened for some reason.

This wasn't a natural phenomenon. It was already too late by the time they realized belatedly. Then Keraunos fell from the sky.

— — — — —!! Sound filled the area. The air burst, and the ground, which had been hardened with Mitra's power, melted away. It was a disaster caused by magic. The eight thunderbolts focused on one point. Any human-sized creature would disappear without a trace.

However, Theodore and Para sensed it simultaneously.

“No effect?”

“No, it was blocked.”

As the ground boiled, the shadows of four people shimmered in the steam. The 6th Circle magic which was equivalent to the 7th Circle magic, 'thunder spears,' was aimed at the target. The effect range wasn't wide, but it would've been enough to sweep away the four men.

As to how the magic was blocked, that wasn't revealed until the steam cleared.

“...Cough!”

Blood flowed from the lips of Mujak, the man who had broken the thunder spears. He had blocked the magic attack using his aura he had trained for over 60 years. However, he couldn't erase the full power of the thunder.

No, it was more than that. Mujak mourned at the sight of his scorched black sword, which had been hand-crafted and handed to him by the Sultan.

“Cough. My sword... You dare to damage the Sultan's...!”

It was just an excuse to buy some time. He had been thoroughly pushed back in power. Mujak's eyes sunk because he realized this fact.

According to the infiltration report, this man was the young hero of Meltor and the girl was his colleague. Mujak had heard a lot of rumors, but he didn't know that the hero had become a master at

this age.

The risk was too big! The operation to meet the high elf had already failed. However, unlike Mujak's cool judgment, the heads of the other Janissaries were boiling.

“Captain! We have to hurry!”

“We will stay here and buy some time! Captain should go ahead!”

“Hurry before reinforcements come because of the noise!”

However, Mujak suppressed his men's hasty desire. “No, we failed. It is unnecessary to fight here.”

His subordinates weren't masters, so they didn't know. However, Theodore and Mujak had already grasped each other's capabilities. They were at a level to take each other's lives. If Mujak turned around, he would be killed instantly. Besides, there would be no effect if Para's body was killed, unlike the Janissaries.

Then the dynamics were crucially tilted with the arrival of the remaining Quattro members.

“Theo!”

“What is the uproar, Captain?”

Sylvia and William, the primary candidates to become the next blue and white tower masters, had arrived. The capacities of the two were already close to Prime ranks, so they could easily overcome the Janissaries whom Mujak had brought.

As Theodore and his companions formed an encirclement, Mujak realized the escape path was now blocked.

“Huh, so many excellent young people...”

It was unheard of in Austen, which was drying up because of the drought. Those with talent left for other countries, while only the powerless remained to rot. The sight of parents throwing away their children in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed was common, but why was Meltor so abundant?

“Why are the heavens favoring them!?” Mujak lamented while tightening his grip on the sword.

Puk. His melted shamshir fell down onto the ground. Theodore’s eyes narrowed as Mujak disarmed himself and raised both hands in the air.

“Hey, Meltor’s young hero,” Mujak called out.

“...What is it?”

Mujak ignored Theodore’s testy tone and replied, “This old man will admit to being guilty of an unauthorized invasion of Meltor’s

capital. I hope you will imprison us according to humane procedures.”

Chapter 189 – Uninvited Guests (2)

Clink.

There was a sound as the locks were engaged. The invaders from Austen had surrendered, so Para had brought out these locks. They were the so-called arm holders which restrained a person from the wrist to elbows. The material looked strange, showing that it wasn't an ordinary restraint.

“Is this perhaps adamantium?”

“Ri-ght.”

Para confirmed in an eerie voice that the metal, which resembled opaque ice, was just as Theodore guessed. It seemed to be something she'd made. “I created it in order to catch a master, but there was no time to use them on the battlefield. So, I left them in the warehouse, but now they can finally see the light.”

“...Well, I'm glad that it is useful.”

“Right? These things are also part of my role.”

Paragranum might describe it as useless, but it was a ridiculous tool which could even control masters.

Normally sword masters could tear apart steel handcuffs with

their superhuman physical abilities and aura. So, strong magic handcuffs would be ruined if they continued to inject aura. Even mithril would warp if a sword master used their power properly.

It was only possible when used with pure adamantium. Adamantium was difficult to handle, so it was rarely used. However, Paragranum had completed the restraints through some unknown manner.

Mujak's relaxed expression stiffened as he experienced the binding.

"Theodore!"

"Ah, yes."

At that time, a white tower magician approached him and issued an edict, "His Majesty wants to meet the intruders."

"I understand. Is there anything else?"

"No. You can take this transport to the royal palace."

"I will." Theodore nodded without hesitation. Even if Mujak was bound, he was still a sword master who had crossed the boundaries of the transcendent realm. So, Theodore couldn't feel relieved unless another tower master took over.

Theodore pulled on the chains a little rougher than usual.

Rattle.

Was it due to the shock...? A few drops of blood emerged from Mujak's mouth.

“Well, it is rough.”

“.....”

Theodore just spoke coldly without letting the chains go slack. For whatever reason, they were trespassers who had tried to enter Ellenoa's dwelling. It meant that Theodore couldn't welcome them kindly. No, it wasn't just that. Theodore soon realized that his emotions were boiling inside him.

“What brings you here?”

“Hrmm?”

“If you are from Austen, you should remember what you did in Bergen.”

Vince had told Theodore the identities of [Shackler], the ones disguising themselves as elf slave traders in Bergen. Thus, it was also possible for Theodore to know about the truth behind the Bergen incident.

Mujak closed his eyes with a bitter smile. “I don’t have anything to say. I won’t make excuses.”

“Your responsibility for the past won’t disappear. And I don’t want you to apologize to me.”

“That’s right. Treat me as you like.”

Theodore would’ve become angrier if the other person spoke empty words, but he couldn’t do anything against this attitude. Theodore dragged the chain and started to move forward roughly. After reading the unusual atmosphere between the two of them, the rest of the group followed.

Rattle, rattle.

In the end, the uninvited guests from Austen couldn’t even see the high elf’s face as they were dragged away.

*

“You went through a lot of trouble, Quattro’s Captain.” Kurt III, whose eyes had dark circles from the night before, watched Theodore’s group from the throne. He stared at the faces of Mujak and the Janissaries, who were the cause of the emergency gathering.

Kurt III spoke in a mocking manner, “You were the ones who caught the four uninvited guests?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“This doesn’t look good. They’ve arrived here, so loosen the restraints.”

“Huh? That...”

Theodore was surprised by Kurt’s instructions, but other people protested before he could reply. This place might be filled with senior magicians, but Mujak was a sword master who was strongest in a melee.

“Your Majesty, you can’t!”

“You can’t set those criminals free from their restraints!”

“At least tie up their legs!”

Kurt waved his hand at the crowd. “Stop.”

Simultaneously, somebody landed beside Theodore.

Kung.

Her red robes fluttered from the landing as Veronica emanated a terrifying presence. Her strength exploded from her. The

Janissaries fell down foaming as they received the full impact of Dragon Fear. Only Theodore and Mujak could stand in this area.

“If it is like this, are there any objections?”

Who would be able to go against Veronica? Nobody dared refute Kurt's words, and they fell silent. They couldn't say anything because none of them would dare to fight Veronica. Kurt received their implicit agreement and looked at Theodore again, who sighed and pulled out the key.

Clink.

Once the restraints were released, Veronica spoke, “Old Man, if you move without permission, I will kill you.”

“... Hu, how scary.”

“Keep looking forward. I will kill you if you speak nonsense. So, look forward.”

‘She's serious.’ Theodore was nearby and noticed Veronica's serious tone. Veronica would kill him if he took even one step. She would kill him if he spoke nonsense. The evidence that her threats weren't empty was her red hair which blazed like fire.

‘This is the Tower Master's battle readiness.’

At the time of the fight against Superbia, his consciousness had been fading, so he hadn't been able to see properly. However, Theodore now had a clear view of her eight circles revolving, and the pressure seemed to increase the gravity in this area.

That said, Kurt was still in control as he opened his mouth, "Then I shall listen to the excuses of an uninvited person. Your head will depend on whether you can persuade me."

Despite literally having a knife at his neck, Mujak wasn't shaken at all. "First of all, thank you for listening to my excuses, Your Majesty."

"Get to the point."

"I understand. Then I will tell you what is going on."

The guardian of Austen, one of the Sultan's most trusted swordsman, faced Kurt III with confidence. Behind Mujak was a dying country. Supply had fallen and people were starving, so he had come here to save them. Thus, something like madness shone in his determined eyes.

"Austen is currently dying from an unprecedented drought. Meltor's monarch, please have mercy on us, and give me rice and water for the suffering people."

"Is that all?"

“No. I know you don’t have to, but if it is possible, I would like to meet the Elvenheim guests who are staying in your country.”

“Huh, you truly have no shame.” Kurt smiled and stared down at Mujak, whose head was bowed. Mujak’s requests would only be given if Meltor was truly generous. However, as to the issue of them crossing the border without permission and breaking into the capital...?

It was clear that Mujak had other thoughts. Dozens of eyes filled with suspicion cut into Mujak. Then Kurt III raised the question that they were all wondering, “Why didn’t you just send a delegation?”

Mujak’s green eyes looked down, and he replied in a low voice, “I couldn’t do that.”

“Why?”

“I do not know why, but Andras’ shadows are present at the border of Austen and the Meuse Desert. Above all, I didn’t think you would accept our requests.”

“...How honest. Although you are still being impertinent.”

Andras’ shadows...

At Kurt’s cold words, the atmosphere started to change. After all, it was Austen who was behind the kidnapping incident in Bergen.

It would be uncomfortable in many ways for Elvenheim's ambassadors to face them.

That was why Mujak slyly had attracted their attention with his words about the Andras Empire.

“Is this bait? Let's see what you have prepared for us.”

“Think of it as a bargaining material.”

“Speak quickly, Austen's fox.”

After being urged to cut to the chase, Mujak pulled something out. Veronica became tense at his action, but Mujak didn't pull out a weapon or poison.

It was a leather scroll. In Austen, leather was used instead of paper due to the scarce amount of wood. It seemed that this leather scroll was the material Mujak had prepared for the negotiations. He didn't give an explanation as he opened the scroll.

‘...This?’ Theodore watched Mujak from right beside him. It meant he could see the contents of the scroll before anyone else. There were twisted lines and a mixture of symbols and shapes with unknown meaning. Shortly afterward, Theodore realized what it meant as his eyebrows twitched.

‘Is this a map of the Meuse Desert?’

This was a terrain which only existed in the desert. The terrain of large canyons and sandy hills helped guide the nomadic people over a long period of time. Still, it was difficult to draw a map of the desert, so Meuse Desert's map was a special item. A sophisticated map like this would sell for at least 100 gold. Perhaps it had been produced personally by the Austen royal family.

However, right now, the matter of importance wasn't the map. Mujak pointed to a red dot in a corner of the map and brought up a topic which meant Meltor couldn't sit idly.

“For some reason, the Andras Empire is controlling this desert area.”

“What is there?”

“Well, I couldn't get close. But the empire is showing a big interest and is digging in this area. It is a ruin which contains relics from a previous era. According to something I heard, it was probably built during the Age of Mythology.”

‘A ruin from the Age of Mythology!’ Kurt's expression hardened after hearing that. Most ruins of the Age of Mythology had been destroyed during the dark period which followed it, but the Andras Empire had found most of the ones which remained.

They didn't care about the knowledge of a culture from a previous era. Rather, they just wanted the powerful relics and destroyed numerous ruins in the process. It was a hostile kingdom

which had been at war with Meltor for at least 500 years.

“...You’ve brought something quite annoying. I appreciate the good faith report, but I know that isn’t the case.”

“Of course.”

At Mujak’s sly expression, Kurt couldn’t help gripping the armrests of his throne tightly. If he wanted, he could give Veronica an order to kill, and she would burn Mujak to ashes right away. However, an unexpected person interrupted the conversation right then.

“Your Majesty.”

“Huh? Quattro’s Captain?”

“Can I look at this map for a moment?”

“Of course. Tell me if you get any ideas.”

Having gotten Kurt’s permission, Theodore received the map from Mujak. It was because he felt a strong feeling of déjà vu from the desert map. In particular, the feeling came from the area where the red dot was located.

“Ah.”

It was connected. Theodore realized why he got a feeling of déjà vu when looking at that section of the map. He had seen a map of the Meuse Desert two times now, so he remembered it clearly. The second time was now, while the first time had been in the Yellow Tower. This was the location of the laboratory which Paragranum had boasted about with an expressionless face.

‘To think that they found it...!’

The ruins that the Andras Empire was trying to dig out...

It was Paracelsus’ laboratory.

Chapter 190 – Uninvited Guests (3)

“Quattro’s Captain, have you found something?”

It was a short moment, but Kurt didn’t miss the change in Theodore’s complexion.

Simultaneously, Theodore’s thoughts became complicated.

Aside from him, the only person who knew the existence of the laboratory was the Yellow Tower Master, so Theodore had to decide if he should disclose the information. However, if Theodore kept his mouth shut, Kurt III might be led to agree to Mujak’s conditions.

Unlike Austen, which wasn’t a threat, it would be fatal if the Andras Empire got their hands on the ruins.

‘I don’t like this situation, so I can’t stay silent.’

As long as the Andras’ excavation team occupied the site, he wouldn’t be able to visit it alone. Moreover, he didn’t like the tricks of the Austen Kingdom, which had tried to kidnap Ellenoa. So, this was a reasonable choice which would block both Andras and Austen.

Theodore made his decision and opened his mouth, “Yes, Your Majesty. I thought I remembered seeing it somewhere and realized I recently heard a story about these ruins.”

“Hoh.”

“What? S-Such a thing...!” Mujak’s face shook slightly. To think that the information Mujak wanted to use as a bargaining tool was already known? If Theodore’s words were true, this was disadvantageous to Mujak.

A pleased expression appeared on Kurt III’s face as he nodded. “Interesting. Continue.”

“Sorry, I won’t be the one telling you.” However, Theodore had no intention of assuming responsibility. “Can I leave it to another person from now on?”

“Hrmm? Can I ask why?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Theodore replied to Kurt’s question and turned to look at Para behind him. “There are differences, but I heard it from the Yellow Tower Master. So, I think that Superior Para, his disciple, is the right person to explain this.”

“The Yellow Tower Master? Is this true, Superior Para?”

Paragranum, a grimoire under the skin of a girl, her true nature peeped out for a moment, but she bowed politely like she understood the situation. “...Yes. Captain’s words are true, Your Majesty.”

“Give me the details,” Kurt said.

As Meltor’s finest watched, Theodore’s party member started telling the story.

“This is something my teacher told me sometimes. Alchemy, the magic that forms the foundation of the Yellow Tower, is a heritage from the Age of Mythology. They are teachings passed down from the great alchemist, Paracelsus.”

“The great alchemist, Paracelsus...”

“Yes. The alchemy of our Yellow Tower originates from Paracelsus’ teachings. That place should be where his legacy is stored.”

The moment she was about to explain the ruins on the map, the quietly listening Mujak jumped up. “Nonsense!”

At that moment, Kurt III shouted in an urgent voice, “Veronica!”

It was instant. Before Mujak could blink, flames emerged and wrapped around his neck. With Veronica around, even a sword master was at risk. The whip, made of hellfire, could kill him instantly. If Kurt III’s voice had been half a beat later, Mujak’s head would be rolling around on the ground.

Gulp. Mujak gulped as he realized how close he’d come to death. Veronica recalled Hell Fire just before it reached his neck. This

attack was just an advance notice that she could kill him if he moved.

Without missing a beat, Para continued speaking, “It is unbelievable but true. It is easy to prove after seeing the ruins.”

“...What does that mean?”

“The set of 300-meter-long ruins is a dome made of a silver-white metal. Even a sword master’s aura won’t be able to scratch the metal easily.”

“H-How do you know that?” Mujak couldn’t deny it because he had seen it directly.

A silver architecture built in the middle of the desert... It was a mystery which couldn’t be reproduced with the techniques of this age. This girl described it so accurately that it couldn’t just be her imagination.

“It looks like her words are true.” Kurt grasped the truth from Mujak’s reaction and grinned. “Now, this is the only information you’ve brought me about Andras. Don’t you think the price is much too low?”

“...What more do you want?” The cornered Mujak eventually lifted both hands. Aiding Austen would cost at least hundreds of thousands of gold. There was no way the information he had left could cover this price.

“Write a contract.” Kurt was grinning with a relaxed expression, but his eyes were like that of a ferocious predator. “You will escort Meltor’s investigation team to the site and not ask for any shares in what we find. Besides, doesn’t our Yellow Tower Master have the right of inheritance in the first place?”

“It is in Austen’s territory!”

“You can’t deal with Andras. Also, you seem to still be mistaken. This isn’t a negotiation.” With a cold voice and eyes, this was the monarch who ruled the kingdom. “If you can’t accept it, I will put the restraints on you again and lock you up. Then you can wait quietly until this is over.”

“Kuk...!” Mujak drooped his head because he had no way out. This situation was inflicted upon them by themselves, from their attempt to kidnap the high elf to their unauthorized entry into the capital.

Despite knowing that the conditions were unfair, Mujak was forced to sign a contract with Kurt. It was an ending caused by his recklessness.

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Mujak’s negotiations ended there. He signed the contract stating he would devote himself to the investigation team, then he was dragged out. Mujak wouldn’t be able to do anything until the investigation of the ruins was over.

The fainted Janissaries were also taken out.

“Phew, it is finally over.”

“I wanted to fight...”

Of course, everyone here was scared of being caught up in Veronica’s fight.

Soon after them, Kurt raised his hand and stopped the chattering. “Then I will select the investigation team to be sent.”

Since a conflict with Andras was inevitable, this wouldn’t be a typical investigation. As such, it was natural to recruit people with excellent combat capabilities.

“Veronica, you go.”

“Is it finally my turn? Indeed, I am better than Blundell in a desert.”

It was as she said. As a magician dependent on moisture, Blundell’s firepower was weakened in the desert. On the other hand, these conditions were good for Veronica. The heat of the desert would add to her strength instead of harming her.

However, Kurt’s words didn’t end there.

“Quattro, do you want to participate?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. If you send us, we will surely capture the ruins.”

“Good, go and investigate with Veronica.”

This was an opportunity to see a set of ruins from the Age of Mythology. Setting aside the artifacts Para was supposed to give him, he would be sorry to miss such an opportunity as a magician. Moreover, Andras had a debt to pay.

However, an unexpected topic was then brought up.

“Your Majesty, what about the guests from Elvenheim?”

“What about them?”

“According to Quattro’s captain, Lady Ellenoa’s two escorts are master level. So, perhaps we should seek their help.”

“No, we can’t.” Kurt opposed it right away and gave his reasons. “They are Meltor’s guests. We can’t ask them to fight for us because of this, and that desert is harmful to elementals. It would be impolite to ask them to accompany the investigation team.”

“Uh, you’re right. I was too short-sighted.”

The person stepped back with shame, while another person spoke up.

“Your Majesty, when will the investigation team depart? The Magic Contest has just started.”

“That’s right. Therefore, the enemies won’t think that we will move at this time. The team will head to the Meuse Desert as soon as the preparations are complete.”

“Yes, Your Majesty’s words are correct.”

Everyone nodded at Kurt’s words, and the emergency meeting ended there. They were tired from preparing for the Magic Contest and last night’s banquet, so their footsteps were quick in leaving.

Shortly afterward, only the Quattro members, the tower masters, and Kurt remained in the room. From here on out, the conversation wasn’t as serious.

Blundell stroked his white beard and spoke to Kurt first, “Five people. No, isn’t it six if we add the person from Austen? Your Majesty, is it okay with just six people?”

“Old Man, what? Don’t you believe in my skills?” Veronica scoffed.

“I would feel more relieved if you went alone...”

“What are you saying?”

Blundell was a man who looked foolish and carefree on the outside. However, Sylvia had joined the team, so he was worried that something would happen.

Theodore looked at the two great magicians with a tired expression. These two people were already closer to natural disasters than humans. Anyone caught up in a fight between the two would end up badly.

However, Veronica’s hand shot out like lightning and grabbed Theodore.

“Eek.”

“Since the kid is also a master, don’t we have enough strength? Isn’t that right? Old Man, say something!”

“H-He is still not fully a master...”

“Ah, he hasn’t learned ‘Sorcery’ yet.” Veronica remembered what she had forgotten for a while. Meanwhile, Theodore was distressed about still being in her grasp.

Fortunately, Veronica quickly let go and spoke cheerfully, “Well, the journey won’t take one or two days. I will teach you about

Sorcery along the way. It will be easier to understand coming from me than from Orta.”

“Cough, certainly, but...”

“Right.”

The other two tower masters agreed to let Veronica teach Theodore’s Sorcery.

Theodore didn’t know what it meant. Why was it better to learn from Veronica than Blundell or Orta? It was still an unknown conversation for Theodore, who only knew the concept of Sorcery.

At that moment, Kurt, who was watching them, opened his mouth, “Veronica, Orta.”

“Huh?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Tomorrow is the dawn.”

Kurt spoke suddenly, but the two of them understood the meaning of his words and nodded. Kurt III was looking toward the end of the war which had lasted for centuries, and this ruin would be a cornerstone of the fight.

‘It will be in the next 10 years, or maybe earlier.’

The long, long war between the Northern powers was reaching its end.

Chapter 191 – Around the Desert (1)

The Meuse Desert, located in the midwest of the continent and southwest of the Austen Kingdom, was highly notorious. The ‘Great Drought’ had irregular periods of huge sandy winds, bringing the famine to the entire central area as well as Austen.

In the early days of the Meuse Desert, it was only the size of three or four small estates. After hundreds of years, it became an ant pit which had taken half of Austen’s land. It was from that time onwards that it became known as the Meuse Desert.

In the founding myths of Austen, the one who killed the founder, and was eponymous with a disaster, had been Meuse. The people of the desert kingdom had begun to believe that a grudge held by the mythical creature was turning the earth dry. They couldn’t accept that this unreasonable disaster was merely accidental misfortune.

It was different to the saying, ‘disaster occurs when good luck changes directions.’

Thanks to the sacred nature of the Sultan, the people of Austen could fight against the drought as a type of ‘enemy.’ If the drought stopped for a while, they would say that they were victorious, and when the drought resumed, they would say that the evil spirits had risen again.

[It is a battle of patience! Fight for the Sultan!]

According to Austen's doctrines, warriors would die and go to heaven, where they would receive beautiful women and mansions. Therefore, the peasants, who were jealous of the warriors, were bound to fall for the lure.

It wasn't about fighting with a sword on the battlefield but about being able to go to heaven after death! Some fanatics even starved to death, despite having plenty of food and water.

This was Austen, a country which was barely breathing due to being distorted by piety. The Meuse Desert was also a refuge for those who considered the Sultan as a false god and wanted to avoid the noose.

Entry to the Meuse Desert, land of the evil gods, was prohibited. Therefore, there were no signs of anybody at the entrance. However, the situation was different today.

Flash!

A light abruptly appeared out of thin air where only hot sand, a burning sun, and dry winds were present. Naturally, the light which emerged from the air was Meltor's investigation team.

The Red Tower Master Veronica, the four members of Quattro, and Mujak appeared 30 meters in midair, but the party landed easily with no confusion. It would be ridiculous if strong people like them were damaged by a fall from this height.

Theodore and Mujak chose to strengthen their bodies, while the others used magic. Among them, Veronica was the last to arrive.

Kung!

Despite the sand piled up to her ankles, the landing was quite loud due to the object she was carrying. It was a carriage, the fruit of a collaboration between the White Tower and Yellow Tower. The four wheels of this carriage rolled with magic power instead of horses.

Mujak opened his mouth and spoke in a trembling voice, “W-We really moved here instantly... Meltor’s national power is hard to fathom.”

It was natural for him to feel fear. To think that it was possible to instantly teleport to the Meuse Desert in the midwest of the Central Continent, which was also Austen’s blind spot? This was an impossible feat without the White Tower Master. However, Mujak didn’t know this and felt like it was a demonstration that Meltor could destroy Austen anytime they wanted.

Then Veronica laughed cheerfully. “So, be careful okay? Rats can die without even knowing the cause.”

“... I will be careful.” It didn’t sound like a joke to Mujak, who nodded seriously. After all, Veronica was the one who had nearly killed him once. Thanks to that, the atmosphere became cold. His body was tied up by the Geass Scroll, but their relationship was bad, so he still couldn’t be trusted.

Theodore hastily found a topic which he thought would change this atmosphere. “How far away is the destination?”

“Um... wait a minute.” Mujak opened the map, touched it with his finger and finally gave an answer. “We should head straight to the south in a diagonal manner. Based on my pace, it should take four or five days, depending on everyone else.”

“Five days...”

It was both a long and short amount of time. Paragranum said that the ruins wouldn't be taken away easily, but he never knew what could happen. This meant it would be best to arrive as soon as possible.

At that moment, Veronica bluntly asked, “Wait a minute, five days?”

“That's right, Lady Veronica. Unlike other deserts, the Meuse Desert doesn't lose its heat at night, and it is impossible to move quickly. Considering our abilities, we won't be able to walk all night and day. Therefore, it will take five days.”

“But that's why I brought this heavy thing.” Veronica banged on the exterior of the carriage.

However, Mujak made a mocking expression. “Do you think that carriage will roll properly in the desert? Where are the horses or

camels to pull it?”

“It runs on magic power, so won’t it roll well?”

“Then will the wheels turn on the sandy ground?”

Indeed, Mujak’s words weren’t wrong. Theodore thought about it and thought that his point was valid. Right now, the sand was only ankle deep, but it would often go up to the shins. No matter how outstanding the performance of the carriage was, the wheels obviously wouldn’t turn.

However, Veronica didn’t accept it. “Hah, if there isn’t a path, then we should make it. Why do masters have to be obsessed with common sense? How funny.”

“What? What does that mea...”

Veronica ignored Mujak and inhaled in the direction they had to walk. It was a deep breath which sucked in all the air in that area. The wind and sand changed directions, and Theodore paled as he realized her intentions.

‘Surely this breath isn’t....!’

His temple throbbed with pain, and his body tingled. His experience with adversity instinctively moved his circles.

Jjejejeok!

Ice barriers rose in succession. One, two... As many as seven ice barriers separated the rest of the party from Veronica. The party was perplexed by the sudden magic, with only Sylvia realizing and joining in.

“Stop anything in front of me, Glacial Wall!”

Seven layers of the 6th Circle magic, Glacial Wall, surrounded them. It was a defense which could even withstand explosives activated on the inside. William didn’t understand what the two of them were doing and tried to speak. However, then ‘it’ began.

—————!!

An incredible heat wave emerged in the opposite direction of the ice wall. The heat moved faster than air could burn. Everything it passed turned into a vacuum, seeming more like the ray from the sun than flames. A flaming light swept down to the ground.

Dragon Breath broke the Meuse Desert into two. No, it just looked that way for a moment. The sand on the ground had completely melted down.

“.....”

“.....”

No one was able to open their mouth. It was the same for Theodore, despite him experiencing Veronica's breath once before. At that time, it had been shot toward the sky. The breath Veronica had displayed that time was incomparable to this one.

This breath stretched beyond the horizon. Beyond the melted ice walls, a few kilometers of ground had changed to look like lava.

What if Theodore were facing this blow directly? His defense would break, and he would die from this radiant heat. Even if he tried to avoid it, its speed was close to the speed of light. Like Theodore, Mujak's face paled as he imagined it.

While hiccuping, William whispered in a small voice, "C-Captain. I didn't do anything wrong, did I? Right?"

"...Maybe not, perhaps."

"Perhaps?!"

As William shook with fear, Veronica looked around at the landscape she created and said, "Isn't this good now? It will last at least 30 minutes, so let's board the carriage. I don't like the feeling of sand in my shoes."

The party looked at Veronica with absurd expressions as they realized why she had used the breath, but she just ignored them. After a moment, the blistering heat from the Dragon Breath

affected them belatedly, and they began to sweat.

Veronica waved from where she had already boarded the carriage. “What are you doing? Hurry.”

The journey of Meltor’s investigation team had just begun.

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The air in the middle of the desert was terribly hot. The sun shining down from the sky was burning, but the knights in black armor didn’t dare to rest. At the center, there was an impressive looking knight with a thin jaw-line.

He was the imperial sword, Lloyd Pollan. It was hard to guess that an imperial sword would appear at the ruins. The presence of a hard-to-handle person was a disaster for the subordinates. Even the Shadow Knights waited before him like rats before a cat.

“Hrmm, this really is a set of ruins from the Age of Mythology,” Lloyd said while looking around the site at the excavation work which couldn’t be completed.

He looked at the shape of the dome, the material which easily repelled knights of the empire, and the strange silver liquid flowing out of a tunnel. It was a trace of an old era which could rarely be found anywhere else in these modern times.

Sururung.

He subsequently pulled out the sword hanging at his waist.

“Step back,” Lloyd advised the people near him and gripped his sword.

The aura which emerged from him was different that of from regular aura users. Soon after, Lloyd’s sword was covered in a dark turquoise aura. It took time to gather his maximum power. His ability wasn’t related to destructive power, so this attack could be called pure strength.

Stab. Lloyd’s sword shot straight forward, like a lightning bolt. Kaaang!

However, the attack which could penetrate through dozens of layers of iron and a few layers of mithril only left a scratch on this material. It was amazing compared to the Shadow Knights who couldn’t even leave a scratch, but it cracked his pride as a sword master.

“...Indeed, this can’t be done through force.”

An obstacle which could withstand the power of a sword master wasn’t one that could be broken down with destructive power. The leader of the Shadow Knights asked from behind Lloyd, “I’m sorry for making you come all the way here, Sir Pollan. We will somehow...”

“No, don’t apologize. I was sent by the prince because he was

expecting something like this,” Lloyd mumbled as he watched his sword. “I don’t like it, but... I will respond to those expectations. Spoiled prince.”

It was a blasphemous remark, but the Shadow Knight ignored Lloyd’s words and focused on his actions.

Unlike the other Seven Swords who acted on the battlefield, Lloyd was similar to the Shadow Knights. He didn’t show tremendous destructive power nor did he possess superior combat capabilities, but he always succeeded in his missions.

Lloyd was the owner of an Aura Ability which allowed him to go through difficult situations like a ghost. The shadows watched the brightly colored aura and gulped. How much time had passed by...?

Lloyd, who was concentrating with both eyes closed, suddenly opened his eyes and stabbed the sword at a certain spot on the ground.

Pushuk!

Like the other places, a silver liquid sprang up. The liquid contained an awful stench and was highly poisonous, but Lloyd was already out of range as he pointed to the spot.

“Bury explosives at the point I just dug out. Not just one but many of them. This is the only way to open this set of ruins.”

“Yes, I understand! Everybody move!”

There were no objections. The Shadow Knights knew Lloyd well, so they followed his order faithfully. To them, it was disloyal to not follow the words of their superior. The loyalty of the Shadow Knights toward the empire was just as high as the Austen fanatics.

Lloyd watched their loyal appearance and muttered a few words, “There is a pretty bad possibility, but I can’t help it. I don’t want to die at the hands of the prince.”

Indeed, Lloyd was able to find a solution in any difficult situation. However, he knew that the solution wasn’t always good.

Chapter 192 – Around the Desert (2)

Kurururung!

The carriage followed the trail of Veronica's breath straight through the middle of the desert.

It was better than traveling through sand which went up to the height of an adult male's chest, but it was hard to say that the path was smooth when it had suddenly become melted igneous rock.

Despite bouncing over stones, and traveling up and down steep slopes, the carriage was still moving somehow. Fortunately, it wasn't bad inside the carriage. It was because there were all types of magic covering the carriage to prevent external shakes or shock.

Rather, there was an unnatural stillness. The landscape seen through the windows on either side of the carriage was just sand, while the people inside it didn't break the silence.

There was the great magician who was notorious in many ways, the Red Tower Master Veronica...

Meltor's four top prospects gathered together, Quattro...

And the guardian of Austen who had been captured by them, Mujak.

Mujak was guilty of unauthorized entry, so he wasn't in a position to speak first. Meanwhile, William and Sylvia found it hard to act freely in the presence of Veronica, their superior. Para never spoke unless she had to, and Theodore wasn't good at socializing either.

Therefore, there was only one person who could break this silence—Veronica. Veronica was bored and spoke in a husky voice, “Ah, it is too boring. And we have to continue for a few more days like this.”

She stretched out her legs while complaining. It was a considerable distance that they had to travel, even if this was just the outskirts of the Meuse Desert. As such, the expected arrival time was three days.

Veronica was bored after looking out the window for a while and spoke to Theodore, “Since I have to do it anyway... Shall I start the promised class on Sorcery?”

Theodore was surprised by the sudden offer and questioned, “Huh? In here?”

“Isn't it okay? The rest are still young, but they are tower master candidates, so they should learn it.”

“That's right, but...”

It was fine for Quattro to hear it. However, the problem was the

outsider, Mujak. What if a sword master learned something key about Sorcery? There was no reason to take the risk. However, Veronica waved off Theodore's concerns.

"It doesn't matter. The Aura Ability is different from Sorcery. No weaknesses will be revealed just from knowing the theory, and it is hard for people who aren't high-level magicians to understand."

"Then we will listen."

"Okay, pay attention. I won't tell you twice."

The others might not have seven circles like Theodore, but they were magicians who were more enthusiastic about learning than anyone else. With the exception of Para, the prospective tower masters focused their attention on Veronica.

As three pairs of eyes gathered on her, Veronica created a few fire circles in the air and started explaining. "I'm not sure as to the extent of your knowledge, but you know that a magician's circles are slightly different for each person, right?"

"Yes."

"They are the same as muscles and bones. Nutrition and discipline... Their composition and form will change with several variables and environmental conditions. Specialization in specific attributes is formed largely from the efficiency of magic power circulation. In special cases, it can deviate from the existing

magical system. Sorcery is a term referring to the phenomenon that is this change.”

Veronica’s index finger moved, and the circles tangled together, merging into a curious shape which was neither circular or spherical. They were dual spheres in an oval shape. At a dizzying speed, this soon changed into a cube, a triangular cone, a disc, and others shapes.

“No one knows what the final shape will look like. It depends on the inherited lineage, the method of training, the process of growth... There are too many variables for it to be determined. Regarding this part, I can say that it is somewhat similar to the aura ability.” Then Veronica joined her palms together. “If Aura Ability is waking a sleeping ability, then Sorcery is realizing that something inside has changed. Awakening and awareness are similar, but they mean completely different things.”

“Awakening and awareness...”

“Hmm, is it a little vague? If you take my case for example, I took an hour to realize my Sorcery.”

“A-An hour?”

The cries of three magicians resounded in the carriage. The difficulty of learning Sorcery was low compared to the Aura Ability, but that didn’t mean it was easy. Some people took a few months or even a few years. There was a record of a genius doing it in a week, so Veronica’s one hour was truly ridiculous.

However, she laughed like it was nothing. “Well, I didn’t tell you that to boast. I wanted to ask you something. What do you think ‘heat’ is?”

“Y-You are asking us?”

“That’s right. Heat doesn’t just have to do with being hot.”

The three magicians were troubled by the sudden topic. Paragranum, the grimoire who possessed a lot of knowledge about science, would be able to answer the question in more detail than anyone else. However, she didn’t reply because she didn’t feel the need to.

The three people thought about the concept of ‘heat.’ Then surprisingly, Sylvia was the one to open her mouth first. “Invisible fire, the force that moves the phenomenon.”

“Hoh, why?”

“Ice stops every phenomenon. Then heat must be the force that drives all phenomenon.”

“Proof by contradiction, it is an inspired approach,” Veronica remarked. Then she continued with a charming smile, “It is comprehensive, but not wrong. Yes, heat is the power to move phenomenon, a power that can’t be seen with the human eye.”

Then the next moment...

She added, “They can’t be seen with ‘ordinary eyes.’”

Veronica’s golden eyes were bright.

Humans couldn’t observe the phenomenon which was happening around them. However, having inherited the blood of a red dragon, Veronica broke the wall of the 7th Circle and stepped into this area. Her eyes could grasp the ‘movement of power’ and control it. She went beyond the boundaries and became the ruler of the superthermal realm!

The reason why she was capable of awakening the dragon blood, which was weak in her body, and exhibiting a strength equal to a pureblood was due to Veronica’s Sorcery.

“You know, my case is very special. A dragon’s bloodline has a greater impact on the circles than any other variable, so I was able to roughly guess the result of Sorcery.”

Even with numerous variables, a dragon’s blood was something which could survive the most challenging circumstances. Veronica had inherited the lineage of a red dragon and was also a genius of magic, making her the youngest Red Tower Master ever. What she could do well and what she wanted to do well...

These two perfectly matched elements caused Veronica’s growth rate to be unprecedented. It was why she could comprehend

Sorcery so quickly. In other words, this was what she wanted to tell Theodore.

“There is no need to be hasty. Take a look at yourself. Theodore Miller’s magic, Theodore Miller’s strength... You are more aware of the possibilities inside you than anyone else. Instead of trying to change yourself, look at yourself in the mirror and think.”

The advice of an experienced person was better than anything from a book. Theodore felt like he was on the edge of capturing a clue, so he didn’t hesitate to bow his head.

“Thank you, Tower Master.”

“...Don’t thank me. One day, you have an obligation to teach this to someone else.”

The essential principle of the Magic Society was to pass on their knowledge. Theodore smiled faintly as he was reminded of this. Maybe it was because his smile was charming, but Veronica’s cheeks turned faintly red.

Meanwhile, the carriage fell into silence again. However, this time it wasn’t awkward. This was a silence caused by the magicians thinking about the story on their own.

Theodore gazed up at the air and contemplated deeply.

‘My own magic...’

Theodore Miller slowly looked back on his 20 years of life.

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Exactly three days later...

Every time the road ended, Veronica would use Dragon Breath, and they would make their way again. Then the wagon, which had been rolling well without stopping, suddenly stopped. As the successor of the White Tower Master, William examined it but couldn't find any problems.

Mujak watched him and said, "It is no use. We will probably have to walk from here."

"Ah, there was that. I forgot." Veronica didn't wonder why they would have to walk and nodded easily.

As confusion filled everyone else's eyes, she pointed to the distant horizon and briefly explained, "I don't know why, but whenever there is a drought, the duration of magic is greatly reduced in the Meuse Desert. Artifacts like this carriage will stop working. Think of it like pushing magic power into a broken jar."

"Then we can't use secondary magic?"

"Spells like 'Battle Song' are okay, but 'Haste' will be blocked."

This was a troublesome terrain. Theodore wasn't the only one to think so, as William grumbled at the now obsolete carriage. Due to the nature of the White Tower, the carriage had cost an enormous amount of money to make.

“Damn, you know how much this costs...”

“Can't we take it on the way back?”

“It will be covered in sand and leave no traces in just an hour. It is regretful, but it can't be helped.”

It had been easy to travel up to this point, but it was now time to taste the harshness of the terrain. As soon as the six of them left the carriage, they were greeted by the sandy breeze. They triggered the magic on their robes, but sand had already entered the gaps.

Veronica's brows furrowed. “Damn Imperial bastards, making me come here...”

This was an irrational rage toward the Andras Empire, but no one was idiotic enough to point it out. They were fairly close to the destination, so Veronica didn't shoot a Dragon Breath. It was to save her magic power in case of misfortune or an unexpected event.

In this situation, there was one larger issue.

“Um... My detection magic isn't working. No matter how much

magic power I use, it doesn't go beyond 20 meters."

"It can't be helped. This is one more penalty." Veronica looked around with a hard expression after William tried detection magic. The sand wasn't at a constant height, which made their visibility limited.

First of all, the Andras knights were at the ruins, so this wasn't a good environment to approach in. Unlike the neutralized detection magic, aura was still working. At that moment, Theodore thought of a method.

"Can you wait a minute?"

"Huh? Do you have a method?"

"Yes, perhaps..."

The party stopped moving while Theodore concentrated. He was looking for the contract Satomer had given to him. This was the connection with the crow 'Hugin.'

'I would like to borrow Mitra's strength if possible.'

Unfortunately, it wasn't possible. Maybe it was because Meuse Desert wasn't naturally created, or it was due to the power of the sand dragon. Either way, this was an environment where elementals couldn't be called.

Fortunately, summoning seemed to work regardless of environment.

“Come, Hugin!”

As soon as Theodore moved his magic power, a crow popped out of thin air.

Kuwaaaack!

“A s-summon?” Veronica was surprised by this magic and examined Theodore. The effectiveness of summoning magic had decreased over the past hundreds of years, making it difficult to be seen now. When had Theodore learned summoning magic?

“Summoning magic... You have learned a fairly minor branch of magic.”

“It was by chance.” Theodore smiled wryly as he guessed her meaning. Was it because he hadn’t used summoning magic in quite a while...? Hugin was enjoying the sky after having not appeared in the physical world for a while.

‘Do you see this, Senior?’ Theodore briefly thought about that skinny face, the face of the summoning magician who had handed over all his knowledge and dream to Theodore. Everyone in this era remembered him as a loser, but he was the summoner who had managed to call Fafnir.

After the crow flew through the desert sky for an hour, Theodore was forced to fix his perception. He couldn't use Mitra's power, so he called Hugin as a substitute. However, it was far superior to what he had expected.

‘Indeed, it is bigger when the eye level is higher.’

Theodore shared the desert scenery with Hugin and soon discovered the reason.

Mitra's ability was moving through the ground, while Hugin could look down at the ground from the height of the clouds. The sandy winds of the desert couldn't reach that height. Unlike the party that could barely see 50 meters ahead, he could see a wide scenery.

Then something soon entered Theodore's eyes. It was four hours after the carriage stopped, just as the sun started to fall below the horizon. Something glowing in the opposite direction of the sun entered Hugin's eyes.

“Uh?!”

“Kid, what happened?”

At the front of the party, Theodore suddenly grabbed his eyes and Veronica hurriedly helped him. It might be due to the crow's

habit, which liked sparkling things. The silver which entered Hugin's eyes was difficult for Theodore to endure.

However, Theodore restored his balance and looked at the landscape again. There was a building which maintained its shape in the desert caused by the sand dragon, Desertio. Additionally, the radiant silver which hurt his eyes matched Paragranum's previous description.

The hemisphere shape, which was 300 meters in radius, protruded from the ground, and it was made of a metal that was hard to scratch with master level auras.

“I've found the ruin.”

The faces of the investigation team became tense at Theodore's words. They were glad to reach their destination, but they knew that people were occupying it. So, from then on, the party's gait became more cautious.

They narrowed the distance toward the scenery which Theodore had seen.

‘...There.’

The investigation team could see the outline of the ruins Theodore had seen from the distant sky. There was a flag with two swords flying. The flag symbolized the sword empire. The black knights from Andras were also patrolling the ruins.

“300 meters ahead, a patrol of Shadow Knights will pass.”

“How many?”

“There are 12 people on patrol and based on the barracks, there are 40 people in total.”

“It is a considerable amount. Isn’t the value of this set of ruins quite high?”

Unlike Quattro who had no experience, Veronica had run into them several times, so she knew the meaning of this number.

The Shadow Knights were the hidden swords of the Andras Empire, who committed all types of deeds in the darkness. The fact that 40 people had been sent to this distant desert was proof that these ruins had a lot of value.

However, shortly after that, Theodore’s expression hardened. “... One of the empire’s Seven Swords is present.”

It was a familiar face. With black hair and legs which were stretched out in a relaxed manner, this was the appearance of a knight who looked cunning. He was Andras’ 7th Sword, Lloyd Pollan.

Theodore Miller didn’t have a good impression of him. He was

the sword master who had found him in the royal palace and threatened to kill him at the end of the armistice.

“The 7th Sword, Lloyd Pollan.”

“What? That opportunist bastard?”

However, Veronica’s reaction was unexpected for Theodore.

“Opportunist?”

“Yes, it is strange. He never comes when there are traps, but if there is something to gain, he will appear like a ghost. Additionally, he never shows up on a battlefield where either Blundell or I are present. He is trickier than the 4th Sword.”

Therefore, Veronica’s eyes were blazing at this chance to kill him. It wasn’t just her but the others as well. Quattro had a great attachment to their kingdom, so they wanted to take this opportunity to shatter the power of the empire.

In the end, only Mujak and Para moved along with casual expressions.

“Okay, this hill is adequate.”

Before long, Theodore’s group arrived at a sand dune near the ruins containing the Andras team. It was a suitable place to

secretly monitor the Andras team. The approach of the six people hadn't been exposed yet.

“The Shadow Knights... It is my first time seeing them with my own eyes.” William looked over the sand dune and gulped. He knew about the special forces of the Andras Empire, but he didn't know he would encounter them in this way.

Sylvia couldn't help tightening her grip on her staff, while Theodore was staring at the man called Lloyd Pollan. At that moment, Veronica looked at the Andras knights and muttered, “But what are they doing now?”

The question soon spread to everyone. It was inevitable for the Meltor war mages to be curious about the strange actions of the shadows. A group of five people was digging at the ground, while another pair was burying something in the ground. Silver liquid was flowing from the large pits they'd made.

Paragranum was the first to notice their intentions.

“...Explosives.”

“What, explosives?”

‘I know that the Andras people are using all types of means, but even explosives?’

Veronica and the others turned to Para with surprise, but she

didn't pay attention to them. She continued muttering to herself. What was the Andras team doing?

On the contrary, there were several possibilities as to why they were laying down explosives. Should the Meltor group let it go or interfere? If they were confident of winning in a frontal battle, it was more realistic to choose the latter.

"If they are planning to blow it up, should I use my breath?" Veronica offered a radical suggestion.

However, Theodore considered it seriously. As Paragranum had described, the ruin wouldn't be broken by Veronica's breath. The Andras group, who hadn't grasped their approach yet, would be hit and burn to death without knowing. The explosives would blow up, and even Lloyd would find it difficult to survive. It was a chance to get rid of everyone with one attack!

However, the moment when Theodore was about to nod with agreement, there was a voice which interfered with the decision.

"No, you can't do that!" Paragranum, the grimoire in the shell of a girl, suddenly shouted at Veronica. Veronica stopped in surprise, just as the explosives burned up on the other side of the sand dune.

Kwakwakwakwa!

There was a massive explosion accompanied by a huge roar. The party wasn't prepared and quickly covered their eardrums, while

the sky darkened with smoke.

Kukukukung, the earth also trembled.

The ground shook like an earthquake was occurring. A great shock wave burst out, and the sandy field shook. Theodore barely recovered from the shock and instantly realized. ‘...No, isn’t the shaking lasting too long to just be the aftermath of the explosion?’

The impact of the explosion should’ve ceased already. So, why hadn’t the shaking stopped yet? This meant the shock wasn’t caused by the explosion but from something under the ground. Was it a coincidence or inevitable? Theodore looked at Paragranum for clarification.

Then he got his wish.

「Mercurius... woke up.]

Theodore couldn’t hear it because his ears were still ringing, but he read her lips.

Kukukukukung...!

Simultaneously, a white liquid emerged from underneath the ruin. Mercury had been placed beneath the laboratory for the purpose of stopping any intrusions. There was a large volume and it started taking the form of something huge.

This was an autonomous maneuver-type guardian that Paracelsus had created out of mercury. The name was Mercurius...

This was the name which had been given by the best alchemist in the Age of Mythology to a man-made embodiment of Hermes. The guardian didn't have a nucleus, which was the weakness of all existences with an indefinite form. It had the ability to multiply again and again, as long as there was a drop of mercury left.

Paracelsus's guardian appeared in the image of a snake and declared in a loud voice, 『This is Mercurius' 76th autonomous movement. It is due to an intrusion attempt without going through the procedures.』

Mercurius gazed at the Andras excavation team. 『Power annihilation..』

Although the sun had only fallen a little bit to the west, the serpent was big enough to cover the sun, casting a huge shadow. As the knights stiffened at the sight before them, Mercurius struck ruthlessly.

Its estimated length was tens of meters, while its estimated weight was several tons. Mercurius' body, which was entirely made of mercury, was a terrible mass weapon in itself. From top to bottom, left to right...

As the massive mass of mercury crashed into them, many Shadow Knights were crushed to death.

_____!

The simple movement wasn't enough to destroy all of Andras' barracks, but it did reach the sand dune where Theodore's party were hiding. Even the wind was an attack! Mercurius waved its tail lightly, but it was almost equal to magic of the 7th Circle.

“Waaack!”

“Uh!”

“This damn snake!”

Fortunately, Veronica managed to offset the wind pressure. Otherwise, the six of them would've been blown away. One scholar had said this, 'A massive mass is a power in itself.'

The six people hiding at the sand dune quickly thought about what to do next. There were still a few of Andras' Shadows remaining, while Mercurius was already moving its body for the next attack. If they didn't move quickly, they would be late.

“Yellow Tower Kid, why did you stop me?”

Didn't it seem like she was aware of Mercurius' existence? Five pairs of eyes stared at Para with reasonable doubt.

She explained in a matter of fact manner, “That is Mercurius, a guardian of the laboratory that Paracelsus created. Its entire body is made of mercury. If Tower Master had used your breath, this entire area would have become filled with poison gas.”

“Poison gas?”

“Even a sword master can’t escape from the poisonous influence of the mercury. Additionally, if it evaporates, it will just return to liquid again.”

It couldn’t be defeated. That was the common thought in the minds of those who heard the explanation. Veronica’s breath would only threaten the body. Even if it evaporated from powerful magic, it would just return to its original state. This wasn’t an opponent they could face.

They wondered why Para had omitted the mention of such a dangerous existence.

“But Mercurius is a defender who will only use force if people don’t enter through the door in a legitimate way. It is safer for us to stay back until all of the Andras group are dead.”

“...That would be reasonable.” Veronica nodded at Para’s explanation but then pointed toward something. “Though, isn’t it hard to leave this situation alone?”

The investigation team looked at where Veronica was pointing.

On the battlefield, the Shadow Knights were being trampled on like ants. Behind Mercurius, a man was trying to enter the laboratory through a drainage tunnel that had been exposed.

“Lloyd Pollan?!”

“Well, this is what happened. We can’t retreat now. That bastard is going in alone,” Veronica said and then looked at Mercurius, which was like a mountain.

Despite being a sword master, Lloyd didn’t hesitate to run away from such a monster. It might be different if his Aura Ability was focused on destruction... but Mujak’s ‘Illusion’ ability was just like an ant before Mercurius.

So, a magician was needed to deal with that mercury serpent. However, the person needed to be of the master level and able to cooperate with Veronica.

“Come, Kid. It is our turn.”

Chapter 194 – Mercurius (1)

Theodore's judgment was correct. There was almost no possibility of doing a general strike against Mercurius, which was like a moving fortress.

It was like how water would just split apart when cut. Mercurius didn't even have a nucleus which could be a weak point, so the right strategy to handle it would be to utilize a magician's high amount of firepower.

This didn't exactly mean that it would be advantageous.

"No way. Only two people are going to block that monster?"

"It isn't possible. It is too dangerous!"

"We'll go as well!"

Mujak, Sylvia, and William all opposed the Veronica and Theodore's opinion.

An 8th Circle magician and a 7th Circle magician were people who could sweep through the continent, but this monster was beyond ordinary standards. Since Veronica couldn't use fire magic, her combat power had dropped by half.

How could they leave the two people alone in such a situation?

Three people weren't convinced, with only Para agreeing.

“That is a good judgment.”

“What...”

“What are you talking about?”

Para didn't care about the reactions of the party and continued speaking indifferently, “Mercurius calculates the priority of its actions based on the mana of the target. The density of magician, who is of the 7th Circle and higher, is completely different, which means it will attack them with the highest priority.”

“B-But if its attention is on the Andras group...”

...Couldn't they sneak past like Lloyd Pollan? In response to the unsaid question, Paragranum calmly pointed out, “Everyone is dead. Look.”

It was just as she said. The trembling of the earth stopped, and the Shadow Knights had already been turned to blood. Every one of them had been an excellent aura user, but that hadn't been enough to deal with a legacy from the Age of Mythology.

This hadn't even been a fight. They had simply been slaughtered. Additionally, Mercurius was wriggling around while complaining about having missed Lloyd. Mercurius seemed to be looking for another target to destroy.

In this atmosphere where everyone seemed convinced, Para secretly called out to Theodore, “Captain, this way for a moment.”

“...?” He approached her reflexively

Then Para moved her mouth to his ear and said, “Don’t worry.”

“What...”

“I know how to enter, but that guy dared to break in? I assure you that the rude man won’t come out alive.”

“Oh, a trap?”

Theodore realized her meaning at once and Para nodded with a cold smile. For a grimoire, their creator was a god who should be cherished. For that dirty being to dare step into her creator’s dwelling, she couldn’t stand it.

“With the sub-master privileges, I can’t stop Mercurius, but I can control the laboratory’s security system. I’ll enter and capture him.”

“...Then I’ll leave it to you.” Theodore felt slightly sorry for Lloyd, who made a grimoire his enemy. Then Paragranum reached out at an angle which wasn’t visible to the others and pushed something into Theodore’s pocket.

“This...?” Theodore uttered.

“It is the thing I promised you. I wish you can hold onto it without using it, but it is there if you need it. I can just make it again.”

“Ah.”

‘The Foolish Philosopher’s Stone!’

Theodore nodded as he touched it and confirmed what it was. He had been worried about not having a means to deal with Mercurius, but this gift gave him another option. After Para finished speaking with Theodore, she moved away from him.

Then Veronica, who was watching them with strange eyes, spoke, “Now, shall we begin?”

It was time to face Mercurius, the artificial guardian.

*

Mercurius was an artificial guardian which had been inadvertently created by Paracelsus. Was it because the divinity of Hermes had been used? Or maybe its intelligence had grown after living in the world for so long. Paracelsus couldn’t return alive, but Mercurius was currently very angry.

It was because it had missed a small intruder right before its eyes.

『Mission performance, 98.2% progress... This is insulting. 』

Since Creator Paracelsus hadn't considered 'emotions' in his designs, Mercurius twitched around without knowing how to soothe the irritation inside it. Despite having been born ages ago, its mental age was still in infancy. It had been designed as a tool which couldn't move arbitrarily unless a trigger was pulled.

...Yes, unless someone pulled the trigger.

Kwaang!

A strong impact suddenly struck Mercurius' head. It contained a mighty power which could blow up thousands of gallons of mercury! Mercurius' head was turned the other way because of the blow, and stirring up a blazing emotion inside it.

It was being irritated by the enemy buzzing around its head.

『The 1st shot from the target, the means of use is 'force bound.'
7th Circle magic...』

Toward the south of the ruins, the sun was setting. With red hair and a red robe, Veronica raised her magic power to the maximum, dyeing her body in red. She used magic to float and then smiled at Mercurius. "Oh, there was an effect. I wanted to get close."

This smile unintentionally touched on Mercurius' nerves. 『Obliterate.』

Kurururu...

The massive weight crushed the ground as dust was kicked up and shaking occurred. The land seemed to be screaming every time the huge snake moved its body. Even Veronica couldn't help feeling impressed despite being accustomed to large-scale destruction.

It wasn't easy to go against Mercurius. After all, it weighed more than 13 times the weight of the same volume of water, and Mercurius probably consisted of more than 100,000 gallons, perhaps even millions of gallons.

The tail was a natural means of pure devastation.

“Kid!” Veronica stared calmly at the figure before calling out to Theodore, who was concentrating underneath her. “I'll leave all the ice magic to you! Freeze it when it comes!”

“Yes!”

“The rest of you will take advantage of that gap! Count it carefully!”

Mercurius made a lot of noise as it approached. Theodore ignored his increasingly pained ears and waited for Veronica to enter the full range of Mercurius' body.

At 600 meters, the dust was so thick that it was hard to get a sense of distance. At 470 meters, it was faster and more flexible than he thought. This might be difficult. At 320 meters, he analyzed the zigzag pattern that it was moving at. At 150 meters, his range overlapped with Mercurius.

‘-Now.’

In a situation where a hundredth of a second couldn't be missed, Theodore's concentration was fine enough to be threaded through a needle. This was a tactical magic which was 50 meters in radius and 100 meters in diameter.

Mercurius' body might be bent, but it was within Theodore's range of effect.

“Over the sky, under the sky! Blow unceasingly in the sky, Ymir's white fog!”

Theodore used the genius ice magic invented by Sylvia Adruncus!

“Diamond Dust!”

Within a limited range, the silver storm which was worse than Blizzard created a wall around Mercurius. It was different in scale

from that of Sylvia, who was only at the 6th Circle.

The cold crystals floated about like there was a blizzard, and they froze the mercury which had a much lower freezing temperature than water. Mercurius was surprised by the attack, since it had only been aiming for Veronica.

Jjejejeok...! Jjejejeok...!

Unsurprisingly, Mercurius tried to escape the trap. However, it was too late as more than half of its body was already frozen. It was frozen from its head to some of its tail. There was a frozen snake statue in the middle of the desert. The rest of the investigation team used this gap to pass Mercurius and quickly entered the ruins. Their distant voices were heard in Theodore's ears.

"I pray for your luck!"

"Theo, take care of yourself!"

"Try not to die, Captain! Tower Master should also be careful!"

They were very noisy. Theodore couldn't help laughing, then he met Veronica's gaze. It was a good blow, but the damage to Mercurius wasn't significant. Theodore, who had become accustomed to fighting beings from the Age of Mythology, sighed.

'This time will be quite annoying as well.'

Resignation filled his eyes as he saw the ice on Mercurius had started to melt. If Theodore calculated the magic power he used, it should've been frozen for another hour. However, Mercurius' magic resistance was so strong that it only lasted for three minutes.

If this was its response to ice, which should be its weakness, then the other attributes wouldn't be the answer either. Was it best to buy time until Paragranum secured the ruin?

As Theodore was busy thinking, Veronica attacked without worrying. The 1st commandment of the Red Tower was that the one who struck first had the advantage!

“Force Comet!”

The 7th Circle attack magic, which used force that combined all attributes equally, struck Mercurius' frozen body.

Kwaaaaang!

It was in a solid state where viscosity was weak, but the shock couldn't be completely absorbed.

Veronica's blow literally shattered its body. The body which was over 100 meters in length broke into pieces and scattered all over the place, along with the magic circle that generated Diamond Dust.

It was a power which was suited to be named as the god of destruction.

“Ugh! What are you doing suddenly?” Theodore scolded her as he hurriedly avoided the debris. He was almost caught up in that unexpected shock wave. However, Veronica was looking at the shattered pieces of mercury with a serious expression that was unlike her usual self.

“...Hrmm, such massive destruction is meaningless.” She sensed it.

Veronica had thought the timing of the previous attack was perfect, but it had no meaning. As if to confirm her intuition, Mercurius survived.

Huuuuuuong!

No, survival was a term for living things. The shattered fragments gathered in one place and merged together.

Was it turning into a giant snake again? It might’ve fallen into Theodore’s trap, but the flexible and strong body of a snake was an advantage. No defense magic or aura defense could endure the mercury’s weight of hundreds of tons.

However, their speculation was betrayed in an unexpected way.

“...Giant?”

“It seems like it.”

The shape didn't look too different from a human being, except for the fact that its two arms and legs extended beyond 50 meters. The two of them tensed as Mercurius transformed from a snake and into a giant.

Then at that moment...

Beondduk!

It was the eyes. They were eyes consisting of white corneas, white pupils, and white iris. Eyes had appeared on the giant's body. If that was all, Theodore and Veronica wouldn't be surprised. However, the problem was the number of eyes. They covered its body from head to toe.

“Wow, disgusting.” Veronica frowned at the unpleasant sight.

Meanwhile, Theodore's company woke up and spoke to Theodore, -It has reproduced the watcher, Argos, who has hundreds of eyes. It wasn't just nonsense that Mercurius had Hermes' divinity.

‘Gluttony, tell me what you know.’

–Argos is the name of a giant who appeared in an old myth. Thanks to the hundreds of eyes covering its body, it was an expert at watching. Then it was killed by Hermes, who was trying to obtain something Argos was protecting.

Gluttony briefly explained about Argus and analyzed Mercurius, who was about to move. It might not be Paragranum, but Gluttony had a lot of experience with the Age of Mythology and explained the situation.

–An artificial creature made with Hermes’ divinity... Fortunately, it can’t use caduceus’ strength. Indeed, if it could use it, Mercurius would be a god.

Then Gluttony spoke like it was interested, -Well, try to think of a method.

‘...No, is there anything I can do? Is this the end?’

–Can you afford to not be looking ahead?

‘Ahead? What is in front... Damn.’

While Theodore was listening to Gluttony’s words, the hundreds of eyes had turned toward him. The eyes on Mercurius’ body became red. Theodore didn’t know their function, but he had an ominous feeling. He felt a chill run down his spine as he jumped back. Simultaneously, Mercurius took a big step forward.

“-It’s coming!”

A giant and two magicians who could destroy a mountain with a fist... This was the moment when a legend began in the middle of the desert.

Chapter 195 – Mercurius (2)

Understandably, the priority of the attack was on Mercurius. The arms which stretched out from its massive body were dozens of meters long. Before the giant, the two magicians were nothing more than flies.

The silver body of mercury shook, and Mercurius soon began attacking with its big arms.

Huuung!

It was literally a whirlwind. Unlike the tail which had caused a sharp shock wave, the wind pressure caused by the blast was overpowering.

Floating in midair, Theodore and Veronica bounced backward. Due to the nature of flying magic which controlled airflow, it was impossible to stay in place against this wind pressure. No matter how well a captain steered a ship, it would be overturned by the power of the sea.

Theodore was pushed almost a hundred meters away and barely corrected his posture.

‘...Ugh, I never expected to experience motion sickness in a place like this.’

Was this the feeling of being caught in a storm at sea? This

concept of being pushed around to the right and left was unknown to Theodore.

“Wake up, Kid!” It was Veronica’s voice which woke him up from his dizziness.

Her voice was more urgent than usual, stirring Theodore into movement.

Huuuuong!

At that moment, the mercury arm, which was more like a pillar, brushed past Theodore’s feet. If the arm hit Theodore directly, his body would burst like a rotten tomato. Even with defense magic, it was a death blow.

Theodore grabbed his neck at the belated warning and hurriedly flew over to Veronica. Instead of reprimanding him, she nodded. “Kid, I guess you don’t have a lot of experience in air combat?”

“Yes, I’ve only experienced it once.”

“I knew it. How much aerial combat is there in this age?”

Theodore’s immaturity couldn’t be blamed. Even top magicians like Veronica didn’t have much experience in air combat. It was a bit harsh to ask for that of a young man who wasn’t even 30 years old.

Veronica had never fought against something the size of Mercurius while in the air. She couldn't use fire magic, and the opponent was an immortal monster.

“So, what should we do?” Theodore asked.

However, Veronica just laughed wildly and formed a fist.

Her eight circles revolved and pulled all the mana in the area into her fist. Even though they were both masters, her dominance was far beyond that of Theodore. Mana which couldn't initially be felt by human senses was forcibly materialized.

“Enchant-Force Meteor!”

This was the technique of converting magic power into physical force, followed by a few auxiliary spells.

“Striking! Amplification!”

The duration of the technique was significantly reduced in the Meuse Desert, but Veronica was a great magician who could hold onto it for a while. Theodore paled every time Veronica cried out a spell, and he felt a thrill as over 10 auxiliary spells were placed on her fist.

Her physical abilities already far surpassed a normal person

without the assistance of aura. Then what would happen if 8th Circle magic enhanced her physical power? Now, Veronica could crush a mountain with a fist!

Mercurius momentarily stiffened at the violent atmosphere which emerged around the red dragon.

“Die, you monster!”

Power burst from Veronica’s fist. It was a blow which contained pure force. Anyone who knew a bit of martial arts wouldn’t be able to breathe after seeing this.

—————!

The wind let out a loud sound as it was torn apart by the fist. There was an empty voice, and the enormous power turned into light. Veronica’s right arm was blocked by the mercury giant’s arm and went through without any resistance.

Then shortly after that, it exploded.

“-Ack?”

Once again, the two people were pushed back dozens of meters, reaching a place where the set of ruins looked small. Theodore’s robes flapped in the wind as he gazed at the mercury giant’s location.

“Heok!”

There was no upper body.

Mercurius’ 30 meter long lower body was still present, but its upper body had disappeared without a trace due to Veronica’s strike. Theodore saw it and recalled something a veteran had said. It was so unrealistic that he hadn’t believed it.

In the last war, Veronica had broken an enemy fortress with a fist.

‘...That was a true story.’

This power was enough to make a fortress fly away. Theodore inwardly decided to buy a drink for the senior whom he thought had been a liar. However, Veronica’s expression was dissatisfied despite the successful attack. Apart from fire magic, the previous attack contained the maximum power that she could use.

However...

Wuuuuuuu.

Something was emerging from Mercurius’ lower body. The regeneration speed was like the speed of a lizard’s tail growing back. Theodore frowned at the sight for a moment, before denying

his own judgment.

‘No, the volume has definitely reduced. It did have an effect.’

The original height of 50 meters was reduced to 40 meters. It meant that the amount of mercury forming Mercurius’ body had decreased. It might be possible to completely destroy it with three or four more blows.

“Tower Master.”

“Why?”

“That attack you just did, how many more times can you do it?”

Veronica gave a long sigh and replied, “If I use it once or twice more, I will be out of combat.”

“Hoo, this won’t work.”

“I never thought I would be in a situation where I run out of firepower.”

It was just as she said. Veronica had awakened the red dragon’s blood, so her firepower was a step or two above that of the other 8th Circle magicians. Even Blundell couldn’t surpass her when it came to combat power.

Now, only a 9th Circle magician would be able to match Veronica's firepower. As Theodore and Veronica were thinking, Mercurius started to show some movements.

Kururuk... kurururuk...

“Hah.”

“Dammit, this is another transformation.”

The reduced volume was gradually restored. 42 meters, 45 meters, 48 meters... Once Mercurius' body reached 50 meters again, hundreds of eyes appeared on its body and emitted a sinister light. A silver body and red eyes... When Theodore saw it, his senses cried out loudly.

“Tower Master!”

“Huh?”

As Veronica turned with surprise at his urgent voice, Theodore approached and hugged her.

“Eh? W-Wait a minute, Kid?”

“Hold your breath!”

“What?!”

Theodore’s right arm gleamed the moment that the hundreds of eyes on Mercurius’ body released a flash of light. The two bodies stepped away from this material world while a white flash emerged from Mercurius’ eyes and penetrated through the air and into the ground.

Flash!

The sand turned to silver. No, it was mercury. The sandy field touched by the light turned into a puddle of mercury. Some people would say that the scene was wonderful, but Theodore could only get an eerie feeling when he saw it.

“Conversion of material ray...? That is 9th Circle magic.”

“It wasn’t uncommon in the Age of Mythology.”

“How annoying. Magic resistance would be useless if hit by that, and poison will spread from that area.”

This wasn’t a curse of petrification. Instead, the blood flowing through one’s body would be turned to mercury, and one’s bones and flesh would be separated from the body. Theodore didn’t know that Mercurius had been concealing such a terrible weapon.

It was good that they had avoided the first attack, but how long could that last? Theodore felt sweat flow down his palms.

‘...I have no choice.’

The Azoth Sword was sleeping in the space in his left hand. Theodore might be able to break through this situation if he used it and the Philosopher’s Stone. It was regrettable to consume the treasure in this place, but nothing was more precious than his life.

The Azoth Sword left the inventory and entered his left hand.

*

Was it because the two magicians had successfully attracted attention...? The rest of the investigation team arrived at the ruins without any interruptions and entered the hole that Lloyd had hidden in.

Lloyd had entered approximately 10 minutes ahead of them. Given the speed of a sword master, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the difference had already exceeded several kilometers. However, that speculation was proven wrong shortly afterward.

“Hoh? You followed me quickly. I thought I would have more time to spare.” Lloyd Pollan, the empire’s Seventh Sword, appeared at the beginning of the passage like he had been waiting for them.

He cast an appraising gaze over Mujak, Sylvia, William, and Para and soon realized how they had gotten here.

“Indeed, you must’ve used two masters to bind that monster’s feet. You must’ve thought it was a priority to block me. How great.”

“....Why are you so relaxed?” Mujak stepped forward.

In this narrow space, sword masters had an advantage over magicians. It was true even if the other person was a 7th Circle magician. This was because it was difficult to use wide-area magic in this terrain, and there were a number of other disadvantages.

In the end, Mujak was the only one who could stop Lloyd.

“Andras’ dog, all of your men are dead. Aren’t you ashamed to crawl into this hole alone?”

“I should be asking you if you feel ashamed,” Lloyd sneered in reply. “What is a loyal dog of the Sultan doing attaching yourself to Meltor? You are like an old fox.”

“You...!”

“Well, the king of Meltor does have more prospects than an old man in the desert. It is a good decision.” Lloyd started clapping, causing Mujak’s anger to soar silently.

The fact that Mujak didn’t curse or act was proof of how angry he was. Before they could stop him, a turquoise aura surrounded his blade. It was an urgent situation. The Quattro members read the

atmosphere between the two sword masters and stepped back, while Mujak opened his mouth.

He growled, “Bark as much as you want. You will die here.”

“Hrmm, you still don’t understand.”

The two voices echoed in the air, and their owners disappeared.

Kaaang!

Ocher and turquoise, the two different aura colors collided with each other, causing a shock wave in the area. Thousands of years of dust was stirred up as the two swordsmen moved back and forth, leaving faint afterimages.

They slashed at the top, bottom, left, and right, while bending over to avoid their waist, neck, or heart being cut. They moved 10 to 20 times in the blink of an eye. Clearly, there was a storm of two swords in the narrow passage.

King! Kakang! Kak! Kiiing— Kaaang!

“Damn, there are no gaps!” William tried to give support, but he ended up shaking his head and lowering his outstretched hands.

The two masters were so fast that there was no room for magic. Was his experience that different from a sword master? He had

been treated as a prodigy since childhood, so this was the first time William had felt so helpless.

However, Sylvia casually stretched out her staff. “Wind, freeze.”

Frost Fog, a chill emerged from the end of her staff and wrapped around the two sword masters. This was an action which affected both people! William was astonished and tried to stop the magic.

However, he quickly understood her actions. “I see! You placed cold resistance on him in advance!”

Unlike Lloyd who didn’t have any magic defense, Mujak had the cold resistance which Sylvia had placed on him. Even if both of them were hit by the cold air, there was bound to be differences in the damage.

Unsurprisingly, Lloyd’s sword was delayed by half a beat, and he was pushed back by Mujak.

‘Now!’

The three magicians reacted at the same time.

Frost Spear.

Chain Lightning.

Gravity Bound.

Ice spears and a net of lightning bolts stretched out to Lloyd's location. The gravitational pull was just a bonus. These were attacks from the next tower master candidates, so it was impossible for their target to avoid serious injuries.

However, Lloyd's response was just like a god's. Lloyd took two and a half steps forward, with his body moving like a dancer's through the ice spears and lightning bolts. Then he penetrated through the net of lightning bolts, as well as through the center of the gravitational field, and moved his sword.

Pajjik!

Spellbreak was a stunning feat only possible for some people of the empire. It was the nemesis of magicians, used to break down the spells by inserting aura into the gap of magic. This was the power which had allowed them to fight against magicians for decades.

Lloyd sneaked through the linked attacks of the three magicians, but there was another person who blocked him.

The sword master, Mujak, appeared before Lloyd.

“-This isn't cowardice.”

Mujak's eyes blazed as he held his swords in a strange shape. This

was his 'Illusion' Aura Ability. It was useless for trying to break through something like Mercurius, but it was very effective when fighting against a human. Then Mujak used his special move which was capable of killing another master.

‘Mirage.’

Dozens of swords appeared in the empty space. They were illusions, but they became real blades the moment Mujak's aura filled them. Materialization of an illusion... This was the secret technique of Austen's guardian which had never failed him so far!

“...This...”

With that word, a shower of swords rained down on Lloyd.

Chapter 196 – Mercurius (3)

The reaction took place in a single moment. Against Mujak who had formed dozens of swords, Lloyd jumped forward without hesitation. The vivid turquoise blades shook like leaves in a sandstorm.

It was a phenomenon caused by being pushed by the great amount of aura released. Mujak's Mirage was a decisive skill which could deal dozens of attacks at the same time.

Kiiing...

The blades released sharp screams as the two swordsmen crossed each other.

“Cough.”

“Urgh.”

They both groaned, but the depth of their groans was different. Mujak stared with disbelief at the sword piercing his abdomen. This was a technique which had never betrayed him until now. It was an ability that gave him a one-sided superiority, allowing him to corner his opponent.

The pained Mujak expressed his doubts, “...Ho-w?”

His questioning eyes swept over Lloyd's body. There were a few wounds from 'MIrage' on Lloyd's body, but none of them were serious. Lloyd was the one who benefited from the dozens of swords and managed to damage Mujak. Mujak couldn't understand it.

Then Lloyd muttered, "An ability that makes swords real... it is a threat. If there were four or five more, I wouldn't be able to avoid a mortal wound." Lloyd let out a ridiculing snort. "This is a bad technique to use against me. I don't know if all the illusions can be materialized, but I have the ability to tell illusion from reality."

"Ugh..." Mujak groaned as pain shot up from his abdomen. How could he be defeated in this favorable situation? Blood emerged from between his lips.

However, unlike his mocking words, Lloyd recognized his opponent's capabilities. As proof, his usual relaxed atmosphere had disappeared.

'You aren't easy, master of the Central continent.'

It was too big a variable to overlook. Lloyd pulled out the sword that he had stabbed into Mujak. His aura flowed back to him. Then while his opponent was still recovering, he tried to kill Mujak. However, Lloyd couldn't achieve his purpose.

Kwakwakwak!

Ice spears and wind blades poured toward the place where he had just been standing.

“...Ah, I forgot about you.”

It was a mistake. Lloyd retreated a few steps with a bitter smile. Mujak coughed up blood after the sword was pulled out, but he wasn't dead. Lloyd looked at the magicians lined up on either side of Mujak and retreated with a shrug. “I am at a disadvantage against four people. I will stand down first.”

“What, wait...”

“I promise to meet you later.”

William's attempt at restraining Lloyd didn't concern him as he disappeared around the corner. Despite the injuries he suffered, he was still a sword master. He had a strength which far exceeded the capacity of the human body.

“Damn, we have to chase him before he heals...!”

“No, chase him later.”

“What?” William glanced at Sylvia after hearing her words.

“If we follow him without Mujak, the three of us will just be defeated. It is better to focus on healing Mujak here. We can just

track him and attack him again.”

“Uhh, your judgment is correct. You are also brilliant.”

“Che.”

His head might be too heated up right now, but William was also an outstanding figure. He understood right away that Sylvia’s words were right. So, before sitting down, he examined the passage a few times.

Then he used every detection magic that the White Tower had. “Hoo, it can’t be helped. Then the decision is easy.”

Mujak’s wound was deep, but fortunately, it wasn’t life-threatening. The combination of healing potions and healing magic placed him in a stable state. If Lloyd’s plan had been to tie up the feet of his pursuers, it worked out perfectly.

Mujak, who had unknowingly become a burden to his party, apologized with a heavy sigh, “Hmm, this old man has become a burden. I’m sorry.”

“No, you got injured.”

“I would be happier if I had cut off one of his arms... This just makes me mad.”

Mujak had pride in his own abilities, but the north had too many monsters. There was also Veronica, who could cut his head off as easily as peeling an apple. While Mujak was feeling ashamed, his eyes felt a strange sense of discomfort. He felt like a person had disappeared from among them.

“Um, I would like to say one thing if it isn’t impolite.”

“What is it?”

“T-That person isn’t there.”

The two of them didn’t see anyone when they followed Mujak’s finger. That’s right. The two of them couldn’t see anything.

“Where did the girl with yellow hair go?”

It was the sudden disappearance of the Yellow Tower candidate, Para.

*

Tak.

Lloyd moved quickly and slowed down as he noticed there was no one following him. He thought there would be at least one person, but no one had chased him. They were fairly good despite their young age, truly worthy of being called the elite forces of Meltor. If possible, he wanted to reduce the group by one person before he

was hit again.

‘It was quite a dangerous situation,’ Lloyd thought as he poured potions onto his wounds.

The higher the density of aura, the slower the recovery of the wound. These cuts from a master would probably take a month to heal completely. Mujak’s stabbed stomach was more severe, but it wasn’t a comforting thought.

“I am the winner only because he lacks practical experience,” Lloyd muttered as he continued walking. “It would’ve been different if he had turned it into a fight of attrition. I would have had no way to escape. No, I won because I provoked him.”

He analyzed the previous fight. This was Lloyd’s hobby and habit, and the basis for his tactics.

Lloyd’s win over Mujak was actually due to Mujak’s self-destruction. Instead of taking advantage of the favorable situation, he had blind faith in his Aura Ability. If Mujak had maintained the siege with the three magicians, it would have been Lloyd who was killed.

That’s why he had taunted Mujak until Mujak couldn’t endure it any longer. For the Janissaries, the Sultan was their idol, so insulting him would cause their minds to empty. The taunt had worked, creating a ‘chasm’ in Mujak’s perfect advantage.

This had been the winning factor. Lloyd was always faithful to his tactics, and the victory matched his abilities.

“...Hmm, the road still isn’t visible. Is there no way to break inside?”

He had been walking for several kilometers. No matter how large the ruin was, a doorway should’ve appeared by now. However, Lloyd couldn’t find anything. His Aura Ability was very useful, but he couldn’t see anything other than short-term results. It had told him how to enter the ruins, but he didn’t know how to break inside.

At that moment...

As if hearing Lloyd’s inner thoughts, a voice echoed inside the dark passage, “You are interesting. I never thought I would see a master with the ‘Pathfinder’ ability.”

“...Who?” Lloyd couldn’t determine the location of the voice.

He hid his annoyed expression and looked around warily.

The voice seemed to be coming from the other side of the passage, giving an intimate feeling. “It allowed you to know how to wake up Mercurius, find the tunnel, and see the illusionary sword. If so, it isn’t hard to understand. Pathfinder, the power of guidance, is the ability to see the conditional future.”

“...You, who are you?”

Unlike a magician, the essence of the Aura Ability was like another life. Some abilities were unavoidable, but there were those like Lloyd's which were hard to determine. So far, he had used his ability to overcome dozens of adverse situations and reign victorious over strong enemies. It was literally his joker, his last trump card.

However, this voice knew his secret! Fear filled Lloyd's eyes as he raised his sword. Reading someone's mind and manipulating their behavior, this was the natural enemy of those with abilities such as his.

As Lloyd trembled with fear for the first time, a seemingly adorable girl appeared before him. She said, “Don't be afraid, it has been a long time since I've had so much fun.”

“You...!”

The girl was one of Meltor's three magicians. Her presence was vividly clear now, unlike earlier when she had been hiding it. Lloyd raised his sword reflexively, but he was curious about the other person's true identity.

“Didn't you hear me ask who you were?”

“There is no reason to answer. You just have to listen to me talk.”

It was absurd. Lloyd grew speechless at the reply. Meanwhile, Para opened her mouth again and said, “At first glance, Pathfinder looks like a universal power, but it has a fatal drawback. Previous users of the ability were ignorant of the weakness and died.”

The ability to see the future was treated as a powerful ability in any age, and Lloyd’s Pathfinder was a type of ability which saw the future. It told him the way to accomplish his purpose in the form of a ‘road.’

He could make the impossible possible, as well as succeed when the probability was low.

However, Paragranum ridiculed his ability, “You are too short-sighted. You rode the ladder up but didn’t realize that the end is a dead end. You crawled into this set of ruins without knowing anything.”

“...Is that so?”

“Hoh?” Para was surprised by the reaction.

On the other hand, Lloyd held his sword with a cold and firm face. “Why are you saying such words when standing alone in front of me, Witch?”

“Witch... It has been a long time since I’ve heard that.” While facing the sword master, the 24-year-old Para smiled brightly at his provocation. The girl’s face was beautiful, and the declaration

which emerged from her pink lips didn't match her outward appearance.

“Where is your confidence coming from, Mortal? How dare you place your dirty feet in my creator's place? I won't kill you. Instead, I'll play around with you for 10,000 years.”

Chill.

It was the first time Lloyd Pollan had felt this type of chill. This was an evil which was outside the standards of humans. The sincerity of the grimoire, Paragranum, caused the sword master to freeze. This was enough to wake up the survival instinct he thought he had forgotten.

“Kuoh, waaaaack!” Lloyd screamed with terror and attacked with his sword. Mortals usually chose one of three options when facing death. They would give up resisting or run away, or they would struggle meaninglessly, like Lloyd.

This response wasn't worth a penny to Paragranum.

“In the end, you all have the same reaction. It isn't interesting-” She yawned like a girl her age and ordered, “「Identification code PRGRN3681214, space freeze.」”

The world stopped. As Lloyd took a step, the area 1 meter around him froze. This was 9th Circle space magic from the Age of Mythology. Lloyd's eyes carried an expression of shock as he

stopped moving.

Paragranum laughed at Lloyd's ridiculous frozen expression. Then while enjoying the power of the laboratory, she spoke, "You are like a child compared to my master."

".....!"

"Don't roll your eyes at me. 「Isolation.」"

Lloyd's fate was determined with those syllables. The frozen space containing Lloyd literally disappeared. He would now be stored in a corner of the lab's warehouse which was only known to Paragranum.

A necromancer would turn him into a death knight, but he would be a perfect experiment in an alchemist's hands. Maybe he would become a chimera or a homunculus. Para's smile was that of an alchemist.

At that moment, the giggling Paragranum turned her head. It was due to the sudden stoppage of the vibrations caused by Mercurius. Since she still hadn't taken full control of the lab, there could only be one cause.

"It is over."

It was only known to Paragranum, but the fight in Paracelsus' laboratory was over.

Chapter 197 – Mercurius (4)

While the party was engaged with Lloyd, a strong wind was blowing outside the ruins. The wind was coming from the oversized Mercurius. Due to the high density of mercury, Mercurius' weight shook the area, and the aftermath produced a vortex in the air.

It was literally heaven-and-earth shaking! The clouds in the sky had long since been torn apart by the vortex produced by Mercurius, and every time it took a step, the land would change. Was the desert god angry? Austen might call the sandstorm covering the sky a god and fear it, but Mercurius was more than that.

“Kuk, what is this sandy wind...?”

These were strong winds moving at more than 100km/hr. It was inevitable for it to carve off people's flesh and bones. Theodore threw off his torn robe and focused on maintaining his shield magic.

‘Damn, mercury is mixed in with the sandstorm. If I let go of the shield, I will be poisoned by it!’

The giant Mercurius was indeed a tricky opponent. The combination of its destructive power, its immortality, the ray of light from a distance, and the sandstorm was deadly. Without Theodore's senses and Veronica's mobility, Theodore wouldn't have lasted for a minute.

Chill.

Theodore felt a chill and immediately yelled to Veronica, “Tower Master, go up!”

“Up!” Veronica quickly embraced him, and wings of flames emerged from her back.

This was Wing Blaze, flying magic which could only be used by Veronica, who harmonized her dragon’s bloodline and magic.

Huuk!

At an unsurpassed speed, the two people flew from the storm and up toward the blue sky. As they exhaled, dozens of rays brushed underneath their feet.

In the beginning, Mercurius shot the rays of light at the same time. However, as the battle continued, the shooting pattern was becoming more sophisticated. As such, they had to move in different directions to evade the dozens of rays.

In addition to that, the error range shrank, and the rays kept getting closer to them.

“Isn’t this pretty dangerous?” Veronica, who was pushed to the edge, started sweating anxiously for the first time. The next strike

might actually hit them somehow. How long had it been since she'd fought something stronger than her? Her spine tingled with the sense of crisis that she had forgotten.

However, Theodore didn't shrink back as he muttered, "...2 minutes and 12 seconds. The error range is a minimum of 2 seconds to a maximum of 5 seconds."

"Huh? What?"

"The interval between the rays of light. I don't think it can shoot an unlimited amount of 9th Circle magic."

According to this calculation, they were safe for 1 minute and 58 seconds, but there was no time to spare. It would be a checkmate if they couldn't come up with a countermeasure before the next cycle.

'Checkmate.' Theodore thought of this word and reflexively looked down at the dagger in his hand. 'I have to use the Azoth Sword.'

He'd learned how to use the sword from Paragranum. Theodore just needed to attach the Philosopher's Stone to it and touch the target. In a sense, it was like the ray which changed anything it touched to mercury. However, compared to Mercurius, the possibilities of the Azoth Sword were endless.

The true power of the Azoth Sword was substance substitution.

The sword had the ability to convert the object which the blade touched into any substance desired by the user. This was a truly divine ability that Paracelsus had.

It was even possible to change worthless mud or bad iron to mithril, orichalcum or gold. Additionally, it was said that Paracelsus had used the Azoth Sword to supply the materials needed for his experiments.

However, there were limits to the power.

Theodore shared this knowledge with Gluttony, who calmly advised him, –Every substance has a corresponding ‘value.’ Even though they might have the same mass, the value of Substance A is different from that of Substance B. Changing a high-value substance to a low-value substance won’t be a big problem, But in the opposite case, it can throw causality off. He made the Azoth Sword and Philosopher’s Stone in order to resolve this reaction.

‘What exactly is a ‘value?’’

–An ancient civilization explained it as the concept of entropy. Just know that it is something like that.

Gluttony spoke to the master magician like he was a primitive person, but Theodore had to accept it. Theodore didn’t know alchemy, but he could tell that it was deep and complicated. It was a knowledge beyond the extremes of each field.

Therefore, Theodore brought it back to the usage of the Azoth Sword. ‘Then can you compare that value? Tell me if it is high or low, based on mercury.’

–Hrmm, okay. I was getting bored.

‘Okay.’

As he flew without Veronica’s arms, Theodore looked at Mercurius below him.

What substance should he change that monster into so that it would be less threatening? The Azoth Sword could only change it into a substance he knew. Theodore thought of a few candidates.

‘How about gold?’

–...User, did you become an idiot when I wasn’t watching? The density of gold is even higher than mercury. Do you want to increase its weight?

‘Ah, I see. A substance that can defeat it...’

Of course, it didn’t mean that gold was more threatening than mercury. It was solid at room temperature, and the gold giant could be easily melted. It would buy them some time to escape from this one-sided situation.

However, it wasn't a fundamental solution. The ray of matter conversion was threatening regardless of whether it was gold or mercury, and they needed to enter the ruins as soon as possible. He needed a substance which could neutralize Mercurius and wasn't burdensome.

Theodore worried about it before seeking an answer from Veronica.

“Tower Master, can you still shoot a breath?”

“I can do it twice more, why?”

“Please be prepared. I will make an opportunity for you.”

Veronica made a strange expression at his words, but she had no time to question him. It had already been 1 minute and 30 seconds since the last ray had been fired. There were 40 seconds left until checkmate, so she was forced to believe in him.

Veronica nodded at his earnest eyes. “Okay! I won't ask anything and just follow your lead.”

“Thank you!”

“What do I need to do?”

He described it briefly. Her eyes shone yellow, and the wings of

fire fluttered as she smiled excitedly. Then the arms which embraced Theodore, they let go-

Huuuuuuong!

Down he went. At a height several kilometers above sea level, a magician started to fall.

It was at a rate of dozens of meters per second. Thanks to the instant acceleration, Theodore realized that Mercurius' body was getting closer. At almost the same time, Mercurius' hundreds of eyes noticed his approach.

The moment that the gazes of the two beings met,

Huuung!

A pillar of mercury soared. Not one, but both arms aimed at the falling Theodore. The falling Theodore rapidly approached the fists. Against an attack which would turn him into a bloodstain, Theodore calculated the timing with wide eyes. He couldn't fail this reckless challenge simply due to an error of a few seconds.

Exactly two seconds later, a green light flashed on Theodore's right arm. It was Dimensional Leave. His body took one step away from this material world and pushed through the mercury punch. Not even divine power would have an effect against him in this state.

Theodore's gamble was completely effective. As a result of extending both arms, Mercurius was wide open and defenseless.

Kwaduduk!

Theodore stabbed the Azoth Sword into Mercurius.

“Ars Magna!”

This was the activation chant of the Azoth Sword. It was a term which referred to the feat wherein alchemists changed lead to gold. Paracelsus had arrogantly borrowed that term as the trigger word for this tool.

If someone could change worthless lead into noble gold, he would be able to change all the laws of the world at will.

“Become water, you sacred creature, Mercurius!”

At Theodore's order, the Philosopher's Stone attached to the hilt shone gold. Simultaneously, Mercurius melted. No, the statement of melting wasn't appropriate. Mercury was a liquid in the first place, so it was appropriate to say that it flowed down.

The 50-meter-long mass of mercury collapsed as water.

...And Veronica didn't miss this chance. The sky was red. It was fire magic which surpassed even 8th Circle magic, the red clan's

favorite Fire Breath.

Until now, she hadn't been able to use it because of mercury vapor. However, that mercury was currently water. As if to express such feelings, the breath burned up the wet sand with a fearsome momentum.

Roaaaaar-!

The fight against Mercurius came to an end with the scattered flames.

It was a battle ending which wouldn't have been possible without the Azoth Sword. The fight which deviated from common sense finally ended with the victory of the two magicians.

*

After the fight against Mercurius ended, the Theodore and Veronica barely managed to return to the ground. It was a battle which had lasted less than 30 minutes, but they felt a sense of stability from the ground.

It was thanks to the sand hardening from Veronica's breath.

“By the way.”

“Yes?”

Veronica, who was walking ahead, suddenly spoke to him, “Where did you get that sword from before? It has a completely ridiculous ability. Is it a mysterious national treasure that you received from His Majesty?”

“Ah, this is something that the Yellow Tower Master let me borrow.”

“What? Yellow Tower Master?”

Theodore changed it to being borrowed, but Veronica was more focused on the Yellow Tower Master than the Azoth Sword. It seemed like their relationship wasn't that good. As she tidied up her disheveled hair, she grunted in a mocking voice, “I don't know what that raccoon is thinking...”

The goal was to create a human being with alchemy! However, Theodore didn't answer her and just followed behind her carefully.

Moving past the Andras Shadows who had been turned into blood, Theodore and Veronica were able to enter the tunnel without any resistance. Then after taking a few steps, he sensed something. There were two people breathing calmly and one breathing roughly.

‘Three? Why only three?’

Mujak and the Quattro members should make four people. Before

the two puzzled magicians could speculate on the reason, the party who had entered the ruins first welcomed them. Theodore didn't know if the threat of Lloyd had disappeared, so he was still on guard.

“Theo! You're safe!”

“Oh, as expected of Tower Master! Did you kill that monster?”

“Kuoong... I am showing you an unsightly appearance.”

Sylvia and William were delighted, while Mujak smiled wryly. As Theodore grasped that a person wasn't there, so did Veronica, who questioned, “But where is that kid called Para? I don't see her.”

The expressions of the three people changed subtly. It was because Para had disappeared. They had been concentrating on Mujak's injuries and didn't know where she had gone. The two people, who arrived late to this indescribable atmosphere, looked around at the group, but there was no answer.

Then at that moment...

「Identification code PRGRN3681214, checked the sub-master's login. Five non-enemies have been approved for access. They will go straight to the waiting room in area B-13.」

The unknown language echoed in their minds. There was no chance to respond. Theodore and Veronica couldn't understand

the situation, then the five people disappeared. It was a forced space transfer which didn't require the other person's consent. Silence filled the space as the people disappeared from the tunnel.

Huuk...

The warm floor was the only evidence that people had been present here just a moment ago. Then as the dust rose up again, there was no longer anyone around.

Chapter 198 – Traces From The Age Of Mythology (1)

Flash!

The investigation team disappeared from the tunnel and appeared again in a strange room. There was a white floor with a lattice pattern, and lighting fixtures floating in the air.

The investigation team, including Theodore, responded swiftly. It was a space transfer which Theodore, Veronica, and the injured Mujak hadn't been able to resist. The five people quickly backed up against each other and looked around.

This was a ruin from the Age of Mythology. If it was a trap, not one of them could afford to be careless. However, that tension was scattered.

“P-Para?”

The girl, Paragranum approached them with a calm expression. “I’m sorry for the delay, Captain. It took some time to gain control of the laboratory.”

“...Please give a detailed explanation.”

“Yes.”

Theodore was aware of her intentions, and Para used the prepared excuse.

He couldn't help smiling bitterly as the grimoire explained, "Immediately after the engagement with the empire's Seven Swords finished, I was transferred to this lab by the power of this ring. According to Master's words, this is like a key to this set of ruins."

"It is the power of the ring that moved us here?"

"That's not it." Para hid the ring on her index finger and shook her head.

After all, an artifact which allowed 9th Circle magic to be used freely would've been designated as a national treasure.

"The carriage that we rode relied on the power of the magic crystals, and it isn't really a carriage. Likewise, this ring is just a vehicle to deal with the power of this laboratory. It is useless scrap metal outside this ruin." Para gave a contrived sigh. "Unfortunately, the authority given to this ring can't control Mercurius, and it is impossible to access some areas. However, I am able to open up the warehouse district."

"Okay, I got it."

Then Veronica, the head of the party, stepped forward and looked down at Para. Veronica was quite tall for a woman. Para.

whose body was smaller than average, had to look up to see Veronica's face.

Although Para was a highly intelligent grimoire who wouldn't slip up, Theodore felt an unknown tension.

"But Yellow Tower kid, don't you think there is a more important problem than this boring explanation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sure you don't know?" Veronica looked at Para's emotionless face and brought up a topic which no one else had mentioned. "Lloyd Pollan. Did you get rid of that rat?"

The rest of the party were suddenly reminded of Lloyd's presence. Maybe it was because they were dizzy from the sudden space shift that Sylvia, William, and even Mujak, who had been injured by Lloyd, had forgotten about him.

Of course, it was good to obtain the ruins, but there was a bitter taste from having missed one of the empire's Seven Swords. As Veronica was quick-witted, she noticed this. However, Para just smiled effortlessly. "Oh, that rude person."

She raised her thumb, and there was a loud sound. Simultaneously, an image appeared on the black wall. The party reflexively looked over, and their faces stiffened at the sight.

“This...?”

“...One of the empire’s Seven Swords.”

It was Lloyd Pollan. He was scowling until he met Para’s eyes. Unlike his brave stance, his eyes were tinted with fear. The unstable shaking of his eyes was enough to make the viewers feel an eerie chill.

Veronica was the only one who remained unshaken as she asked Para, “What is going on?”

“He seems to have triggered a trap while wandering around.”

“Trap? Is that what this is?”

“Yes, it is a trap which freezes that space. Perhaps even a grandmaster can’t get out.”

“...9th Circle magic is popping up like household items,” Veronica grumbled, and the others couldn’t help nodding in agreement.

Space freeze was the peak of space magic which even White Tower Master Orta couldn’t reproduce. In fact, it was only mentioned in old records. However, such a spell had been used as a trap? Did the creator think a dragon was going to invade or something?

“Can you turn it off?”

“I don’t have the authority.”

“Tch. It can’t be helped then. Anyway, it was an unofficial battle, and he is like a prisoner of war.” Veronica gave up.

Then Para erased the image on the wall and said, “There seems to be an accommodation area. Shall I guide you to it?”

“Accommodation?”

Veronica wasn’t the only one enticed by it. Theodore was tired from the fight in the sandstorm, while the remaining party members also wanted to rest. There was sand in their clothing, and their dry skin hurt. Furthermore, nobody wanted to keep looking dirty.

Sylvia raised a hand in agreement, and the rest soon followed.

Through the unanimous decision, the next move of the investigation team was decided. Veronica, Mujak, William, and Sylvia were moved through space magic, leaving only Theodore and Para behind in the room.

Theodore wanted to go as well and looked at Para, who whispered to him, “Wait for my call at night.”

Then her fingers moved.

Clack!

*

The laboratory of Paragranum's creator, Paracelsus, was a place worthy of being called a new world. Its principles were simple, but the unfamiliar facilities, plumbing, and food which was made with one button seemed like miracles, not alchemy.

Then shortly after Theodore washed in the unfamiliar facility and finished a satisfactory meal...

The grimoire, Paragranum, kept her words.

「Confirmed the sub-master's call, I will guide you from area D-1 to area L-21. 」

It was in the same unknown language as Theodore had heard in the tunnel. As soon as the voice finished speaking, Theodore's surrounding landscape changed.

This was compulsory space movement. Despite having experienced it once before, Theodore felt uncomfortable from the forced transfer. After all, it completely ignored the resistance of a 7th Circle magician!

If Paragranum had been harboring malice, Theodore wouldn't have been able to respond and would be stuck in a space gap.

“Why are you so tense?”

Theodore was surprised by the voice he heard come from behind him.

“...Paragranum,” he uttered.

“In this laboratory, I am equal to a grandmaster. You shouldn't be surprised by this.”

Grandmaster...! A grandmaster was a person who was closer to a god than a human, someone beyond the boundaries of mortals and transcendents. Theodore had already guessed this, but he couldn't help feeling wonder at Para's words.

While Theodore was feeling surprised, he soon realized that it was oddly dark. With his excellent vision, he was only able to see what was right before him. Yet, ordinary people wouldn't be able to see anything at all.

“It is too dark, can't you brighten it a little bit?”

“This is an area where light isn't supposed to enter. Well, it doesn't matter now.”

Soon afterward, a dim light came on. Then the shapes before Theodore and Para soon became clear. When the lights came on in full, Theodore didn't even look at Para.

“...W-What is this?”

His surprise was natural. There were green water tanks surrounding the two people, and horrible monsters and people sleeping in them. A six-headed snake, a three-headed dog, a centaur with wings on its back... There were dozens of water tanks containing disgusting things.

“Biological manipulation, chimera,” Paragranum answered the question as she stroked the glass wall of a tank.

Did she remember the days of studying with her creator, Paracelsus? Para looked through several tanks and shook her head. “It can't be helped. The corpses are all rotting and can't be recycled. How could Creator's chimera endure for thousands of years?”

“Thousands of years...”

“If they were alive, we could've unified the Northern continent with them. It is regretful as Meltor's tower master. No one would be left alive.”

They were terrible words. He might've laughed it off as a bluff if someone else had said it, but there was no reason for Paragranum

to bluff.

‘...Indeed, she is dangerous.’

Theodore shook away the creepy sensation of power and hastily followed behind Para. Even though he knew they were already dead, the monsters still seemed like they were alive. After moving past dozens of tanks, the landscape around them suddenly changed.

It was an application of space magic which Theodore couldn't even guess. However, he wasn't surprised by the change. Despite the fact that thousands of years had passed, items were neatly arranged on shelves.

“Let's see... What do I have to take...” Paragranum started to sweep up the things she needed from the shelves.

Her hands moved incessantly until she reached some oddly colored reagents and metals which Theodore had never seen before. It was a large warehouse, and she had filled about half her space bag.

“Oh.” Para suddenly stopped moving her hand and looked back at Theodore. “Here is the thing I promised you. The rest will be given a little later.”

She threw him a slab. Theodore hurriedly accepted the slab and asked, “This...?”

“As I told you before, it is the Fairy’s Book.”

This piece of stone was a book? He touched it with his left hand and whispered. There was a clearer way of finding out than asking Paragranum.

‘Appraisal.’

Gluttony’s tongue proved its effectiveness as always.

[Fairy’s Book]

[-This book explains the deepening knowledge of the elemental world, including the four major elementals and their utilization. The great alchemist and author of this book, Paracelsus, was the first to distinguish and name the four elemental spirits. He also tried to create artificial elementals based on the ancient elementals. However, the results of that experiment aren’t recorded in this book.

* This magic book is rated ‘Treasure.’

* When consumed, your proficiency with ‘elementals’ will increase greatly.

* When consumed, your understanding of the ‘four elementals’ will increase greatly.

* The soul of the great alchemist Paracelsus inhabits it. You must be at least the 7th Circle to eat this book. Even if the conditions are met, contact activities such as Synchrony might not be possible unless Paracelsus is interested.]

It had a 'Treasure' rating which exceeded the anticipated 'Precious' rating. Theodore's eyes widened in shock. The stone slab didn't seem like a real book, and the value of it was higher than he had expected.

'Maybe I really can unlock the 5th seal...'

Every time a seal was released, Gluttony revealed a great ability. From Memorize which could store magic in advance, Another which allowed parallel casting, and to Override which called the author of an eaten book, Gluttony's abilities were almost a foul.

What would be the function of the 5th seal? He shouldn't just depend on Gluttony's power, but he couldn't help feeling expectant. At that time, Para finished her work and called out to Theodore, "Theodore Miller! Take a look over here for a moment."

"What happened?"

"Can you lend me the Azoth Sword?"

Theodore handed the Azoth Sword to her without any doubts. If Paragranum wanted to seize it, he wouldn't be able to stop her.

However, he also wanted to know why she needed it. Paragranum received the Azoth Sword, took a deep breath, and shouted softly, “「Ars Magna! Open the door to your master!」”

Then she pointed the blade at a spot in the air.

Flash!

It was an unrealistic sight. The space in front of the Azoth Blade split in two. There was an emerald gleam in the cleaved space, and Para grabbed it with her left arm. Then Paragranum rummaged in the pocket before exclaiming, “I found it!”

The moment the grimoire pulled out her hand with blissful eyes, the cleaved space was covered up again. Theodore could understand because he had a better understanding of dimensions due to Umbra. The space which Paragranum had approached was impossible to open without the Azoth Sword.

‘Then this means that jewel...?’

Paragranum was holding an emerald in her left hand. Unlike jewels, this emerald cube had a perfect symmetry and didn’t refract light.

–Yes, it is as you guessed, the invisible Gluttony whispered. –That is the Emerald Tablet, the treasure from the Age of Mythology that all alchemists praised as the ‘Gate of Truth.’

Chapter 199 – Traces From The Age Of Mythology (2)

As Gluttony talked to Theodore, Paragranum's hands were moving while she held the Emerald Tablet. This thing had been a treasure even in the Age of Mythology. The value of it couldn't be determined in this age.

Even Theodore, who wasn't interested in alchemy, was briefly attracted to the glitter, but it was literally just for a moment.

Para stared at the Emerald Tablet in her arms.

“...I have accomplished my first purpose,” she muttered with a loud voice which was rare for her.

However, Theodore had a question as he looked at her back.

According to Para's actions, the key to this research facility and the dimension containing the Emerald Tablet was clearly the Azoth Sword. However, she had handed over such an essential item as a down payment? Not even a dumb human would make that mistake. A grimoire had an intellect surpassing humans, so she wouldn't make such an obvious mistake.

Theodore faced Paragranum and spoke in a more rigid voice, “Paragranum, I have something I want to ask.”

He was already 70% certain, and the remaining 30% wasn't really him being doubtful. However, he couldn't leave here without checking. After all, it was easier to deal with someone who was classified as an enemy, than someone who wasn't.

In any case, Para's dominance in this set of ruins was absolute. Unsurprisingly, Para acted like she knew his question. "I can already guess your question. Well, just speak."

"It wasn't a mistake." The remaining 30% disappeared as Theodore became convinced. "Why did you hand me the Azoth Sword? It isn't just the key to obtaining the Emerald Tablet. If this dagger is Paracelsus' favorite, it must be worth more than that. It can be used in several ways in this set of ruins."

"For example?"

"It is the key to controlling Mercurius."

This part was purely Theodore's speculation. It might be possible, but it wouldn't go toward a level beyond speculation. If Paragranum denied it, his speculation would end here. He had no evidence to back up his hypothesis.

Theodore's heart was hoping that Paragranum would laugh at his words. He didn't want to become hostile toward a monster who was equal to a grandmaster in this set of ruins. However, Para clapped and exclaimed, "Correct! As expected of Gluttony's host, you have a good head."

“You...!” Theodore was about to curse, but he barely stopped himself and lowered his voice, “Answer me. Why did you hand me the Azoth Sword?”

“Why do you mean? It was your choice.”

“That-”

That was true. Theodore was the one who had chosen the sword when presented with the option of the Azoth Sword or the Philosopher’s Stone. Even if Paragranum had induced it, there had been no compulsion which forced him to choose it.

Para looked at the temporarily speechless Theodore and opened her mouth again, “The Philosopher’s Stone or the Azoth Sword. At that time, I only respected your free will. As a result of your choice, you fought Mercurius. Life is continuously climbing the ladder, so I can’t have a companion who can’t endure it.”

Theodore immediately recognized the meaning of what had happened. “... Did you test me?”

“In a sense.”

“What if I had been killed by Mercurius?”

“Unfortunately, I would then have to do it alone. It isn’t a big deal for me to retrieve the Azoth Sword after securing this laboratory.”

Theodore heard up to here and gave up on understanding his opponent. Even if she looked like a person, she was still a grimoire. It would be fatal if he thought of her actions as those of a human.

Above all, he didn't gain anything from this stand-off. After confirming that Paragranum had no intention to fight, Theodore stepped back and changed the topic. As it happened, the excuse was in his hand.

“Do you have anything to say about this Fairy's Book?”

“Huh?”

“This slab.”

It was a slab with a dark shine and made of an unknown material. The Fairy's Book had been handed over to him as promised, but he didn't know how to read it. Paragranum understood belatedly and scratched her head. “Whoops, I forgot there are no more in this age.”

“How do I use this?”

“Grab any part and inject it with magic power. At your level... Yes, can you use 3rd Circle magic once?”

Theodore made an uncertain expression and poured the proper

amount of magic power in the Fairy's Book. Simultaneously, a dim light spread from the slab and eventually formed the shape of a letter. It was a strange and mysterious letter which Theodore had never seen before.

Then at that moment...

Piing!

A light suddenly shot up from the slab. No, the trajectory was too exact. The ray of light flew accurately toward the middle of Theodore's forehead. It exceeded the speed of light, and the light from the slab couldn't be avoided or blocked.

「Checking the user's magic power pattern. I will start. 」 As before, Theodore heard an unknown voice. 「From page 1 to page 50. Introducing the concept of the elemental world and the four elementals to the user.」

Knowledge from the Age of Mythology was forcibly entered into Theodore's brain.

“Urghh!”

As soon as 50 pages of knowledge were transferred over, Theodore held his temple due to the terrible headache. He had been prepared, so the sudden rush of information wasn't enough to make him unconscious.

However, this was several times stronger than what he had previously experienced. It was the pain he had felt when he consumed a large amount of books in a short period of time and the processing power of his brain had reached its limit.

Para saw it and grinned at him. “Ahahaha! As expected of Gluttony’s owner, you have a really good head. This is a primitive character used in the Age of Mythology which can compress dozens of letters into one character. Most people won’t be able to read the character and will have their brain fried.”

“So. how many characters are there in this book?” Theodore asked through the headache and she answered without hesitation.

“36 characters. Creator had a habit of storing 50 pages in one character, for a total of 1,800 pages.”

“... You should give me a warning beforehand next time.”

“If it makes you feel better.”

...She didn’t say she would. Theodore turned his gaze away anyway. Then Paragranum pointed to a shelf that was still half full and said, “Now, shall we handle the balance?”

She had promised to give him everything except for the Emerald Table and a few materials.

There were 33 kilograms of platinum, 65 kilograms of gold, and

300 kilograms of precious materials, as well as 182 bottles of various potions ranging from recovery to attribute resistance. There were also five 8th Circle magic scrolls and twelve 7th Circle magic scrolls, along with special items including two bottles of elixir and one Philosopher's Stone.

Lastly, there was a golem in the corner. Para pointed to the knight in full body armor and suddenly paused. She made a strange expression before looking like she got a good idea. Then Para turned toward Theodore with sparkling eyes and asked, "Hey, can I take that golem?"

"Is something the matter?"

"It's not like that. The ego has died a long time ago. I just recently got a decent material. I want to try remodeling it."

"Decent material? What... Ah." Theodore reflected on the answer and closed his mouth.

It was Lloyd Pollan, the enemy whom the grimoire had captured. Para planned to use him for her experiments. Even though he was an enemy, Theodore couldn't help feeling sympathetic. However, Theodore had no intention of going against the grimoire, so he turned his eyes away with a disgruntled look.

'It isn't worth quibbling over.'

Didn't Theo have to fight Mercurius because of him?

“Go ahead. I hope it isn’t too late.”

“Okay, I finally have something to do in the tower after a long time.”

Para didn’t hide her cruel joy as she laughed and pointed her finger at the items. This was just the remaining balance, but it was a huge amount. It wasn’t an amount which could be put in a box.

“How will you take all this? Ah, will you put them in your dimensional pocket?”

“There’s no need,” Theodore answered bluntly and held out his left hand. It was safer and bigger than the dimensional pocket, so the entry to the inventory opened in the palm of his left hand. The tongue was attracted by the pleasant smell and emerged, then Theodore gave it permission, “Swallow everything and put it all in the inventory.”

After thousands of years, the warehouse of Paracelsus’ laboratory was emptied.

*

After completing the secret deal, Theodore was returned to his room. The fluffy bed and books he had been waiting for looked exactly the same. There was only one thing which had changed. It was the new presence of the Fairy’s Book in the books in his inventory.

Theodore sat on the bed instead of the chair and sighed, “Hoo... My head still hurts. Gluttony, do you know about this slab beforehand?”

–I thought that it wouldn’t be a big burden for you.

“Then why didn’t you say anythin-No, forget it. You are a grimoire. I had forgotten.”

It was meaningless to blame it for something which had already passed, and grimoires didn’t feel sorry or apologize for anything. The grimoire would just be more careful next time and focus on the road ahead.

‘This is a primitive character? It is quite efficient.’

The Fairy’s Book had dozens of pages were stamped into one character, and the 50 pages of knowledge naturally became Theodore’s. He had done it once, and the understanding of this book increased to 2.7%. In other words, he had acquired understanding just by reading.

The ‘primitive characters’ on this slab was a technique which could change the concept of studying. However, it was a big risk to the user.

–Your reasoning is correct.

‘What?’

–The computing ability of humans in the Age of Mythology is superior to current humans. Therefore, learning using the ‘primitive characters’ was easier. However, as time passed, the functions of the brain deteriorated, and the ‘primitive characters’ were banned.

‘Humans have fallen behind technology... How scary.’

The technology from the Age of Mythology was tantalizing to present humans, but they couldn’t endure it. Theodore looked down at the slab in his hand. The stinging headache was still annoying, but he could ignore it if he focused.

As long as the act of reading was straightforward, he could have Gluttony eat the book before the next morning. Theodore could decide to not overdo it, or he could endure the pain.

He hesitated for a moment before pouring magic power into the slab. Although he didn’t want to be in pain, he didn’t like this situation either. Theodore was drawn in by Para’s intentions and had no power to resist.

However, no matter how great Para was, that wasn’t an excuse for powerlessness. Such an excuse wasn’t suitable for the owner of a Seven Sins grimoire.

Piing!

Just like before, a ray of light struck his forehead and knowledge flowed in from the Fairy's Book. The great alchemist, Paracelsus...

Theodore would see his face before the sun came up tomorrow.

Chapter 200 – Traces From The Age Of Mythology (3)

Despite being prepared, Theodore's reading of the Fairy's Book was never smooth.

Of course, the act of imprinting knowledge directly into his brain was familiar due to Gluttony. The 'Primordial characters' helped with comprehension while 'predation' increased proficiency, so the process of reaching the result wasn't much different.

The simple problem was the amount of information.

Crack.

Theodore throbbed with pain. His head had become cluttered and fuzzy several times, but he gritted his teeth and accepted the knowledge. There were 36 characters, for a total of 1,800 pages.

This was a treasure written by an alchemist of the Age of Mythology, so the difficulty of the contents was a given. In addition to that, there was another variable which Theodore hadn't expected.

'The more difficult the contents, the worse the headache is...?'

Gluttony realized what Theodore meant and replied, –Of course. The more difficult the knowledge, the more burden is placed on

User's brain. It is possible that you wouldn't be able to read half of this book if you didn't have Myrdal's knowledge.

‘Myrdal? Ah, since the elemental techniques is a common denominator?’

–No, because that guy is □□□□□ □□□... Gluttony's voice became broken. –Hrmm, it still isn't possible? It seems I can't reveal the information at stage 4.

‘Does another lock need to be released?’

–That's right. I thought it would be possible after you became a master, but it seems another seal needs to be released.

Theodore recalled some old memories. The first time he met Pride, it was Gluttony's choice which had saved him. Theodore wasn't qualified to argue with its choice. He would be able to find out about Myrdal once he unlocked the next seal.

Then Theodore focused on the next character. If he counted correctly, he had 15 characters remaining. Shortly after that, Theodore realized what that meant and couldn't help letting out an admiring sound.

“I have already read 1,050 pages...”

It was common to take a few days to read theories properly, even if it wasn't a different magic. Additionally, it was common for

alchemy to require knowledge from various fields. When thinking about the difficulty of the book written by Paracelsus, it would've taken at least two months to read 1,800 pages. It might take a year for a complete understanding.

Yet Theodore had read more than half of the Fairy's Book in just two hours. This absurd efficiency was due to the 'primitive characters.'

Theodore once again started reading the Fairy's Book. At this time, he didn't know that Gluttony was watching his greed for magic.

It observed Theodore and spoke to itself, -Yes, this is a quality suitable for my user.

This was the reason why Gluttony had chosen Theodore as its master.

With cold eyes, Gluttony continued to talk, -Your brain will continue developing in the long run. Repeatedly doing the same task and learning difficult information will cause you to develop. This luck that keeps on bringing adversity... Theodore Miller, you are the right user to be responsible for my last...

I hope that you will be consistent like this until the end.

*

By the time that the moon and stars started to tilt toward the

horizon, Theodore achieved the goal he desired.

[* Your understanding is very high. (99.9%)]

Theodore lay down and could barely confirm the information window. Apart from the headache piercing his skull, his body was burning up. It was the price for reading Paracelsus' Fairy's Book overnight.

'I-I feel like I'm dying...'

It wasn't physical fatigue but mental fatigue. Wasn't this a common expression in books? He didn't have the strength to even lift a finger. Theodore was a protagonist, so he didn't have time to relax.

He barely stretched out his left hand toward the slab which was on the bed. If he didn't have something to do right now, he would be falling asleep.

"E-Eat."

-I understand, Gluttony replied calmly and stretched out its tongue.

['Fairy's Book' has been consumed. Your understanding is very high.]

[Your proficiency with ‘elementals’ will increase greatly.]

[Your understanding of the ‘four elementals’ will increase greatly.]

[An original book has been consumed. Checking synchro rate with object name Paracelsus... Blocked. Paracelsus has refused to sync with the user. User can’t force synchronization with the target without permission. The other side holds a divinity.]

It was impossible to force synchronization! However, it wasn’t surprising that Paracelsus was a divinity holder. The creature he had created, Mercurius, possessed a divinity. This meant that Paracelsus, the creator, wasn’t a normal human being.

Theodore had known it would happen like this. He waited with a strained expression for the next message.

[Object name Paracelsus is interested in User. Would you like to accept the request for conversation?]

“...I accept.”

As always, the system asked for his permission.

[After confirming the user’s intention, object name ‘Paracelsus’ will be called. Checking the communication connection... Success, object name ‘Paracelsus’ has approved the two-way communication.]

[He will temporarily be synchronized with the user's consciousness.]

Simultaneously, the whole area became covered with a familiar darkness. It was the same as that incident with Abe no Seimei. This was a place where only Theodore and the author were allowed.

The familiar light particles gathered before him. Then the brilliant yet contradictory mass of light soon turned into a human figure.

‘The physique is similar to mine.’

The human figure's height was around 180 centimeters, and the body's build was quite good. There were no bulging masses of muscle like Blundell had, but functional muscles could be seen through the robe.

The man had a white beard and white hair. His robe was made of an unknown material, and the hanging ornaments were gorgeous. Magic power was clearly moving around him, but Theodore couldn't figure out its meaning.

The figure of the peak alchemist, Paracelsus, was revealed.

“Hrmm.”

As an elderly man, he had taut skin covered in wrinkles and was weathered like a tree. The specimen of a wonderfully aged magician stood before Theodore. Theodore tried to speak but felt his mouth being blocked by an unknown pressure.

Paracelsus' golden brown eyes were looking at him. His eyes seemed to reach into Theodore's bones and organs underneath the skin. No, it wouldn't be hard for an alchemist from the Age of Mythology to know everything about the human body.

After a few minutes, Paracelsus shook his head and muttered, "I don't know who you are, but you have good skills."

"T-Thank you."

"For your age. You should keep applying yourself."

If Theodore's peers had heard this advice, they would be foaming at the mouth. Theodore Miller had become a master in his mid-20s, and those with his growth rate could be counted on three fingers in the history of Meltor, regardless of his original talent.

Yet Theodore was just good 'for his age?' His peers would bite their tongues and die.

However, Paracelsus' rant had only just begun. "You aren't yet qualified to receive teachings from me."

Theodore was resolute, so he tried hard to listen to Paracelsus'

words.

“You haven’t developed your own magic, and you don’t have a great interest in alchemy despite coming to my lab. No, based on the Azoth Sword, you must’ve accompanied Paragranum. You are the owner of Gluttony. I thought they were cockily designed, but they are more advanced than I expected.”

“.....”

“The Fairy’s Book is used as a medium. If it isn’t for alchemy, then it must be because it is related to elementals? I can feel a connection with the elemental world... Is it an ancient elemental? The attribute is a land or forest.”

Theodore listened to Paracelsus’ words and felt an eerie feeling.

Unlike Synchro, which allowed the other person to look at his memories and thoughts, this was a meeting space. In other words, Paracelsus had determined these things by observing Theodore for several minutes.

Theodore felt like he was stripped naked in the middle of a snowy winter. He barely suppressed the tiny spasms he felt and conceded to the mysterious reasoning, “...It is as Paracelsus says.”

“Call it out.”

After Paracelsus spoke, Theodore whispered a name, “Mitra.”

There was no need to talk loudly or use magic. This wasn't the material world but a spiritual world. Mitra was connected to his soul, so he could bring her here whenever he wanted. There was a flash of light and a little girl appeared on Theodore's palm.

[Huuuuong... Deo?] The cute little girl with the flower bud on her head looked at Theodore.

However, Paracelsus reacted violently, "Demeter?!"

It was another name for Dmitra, the prototype of Mitra.

"Do you know her?" Theodore asked.

"It is impossible for me to not know! A god of Olympus and related to Hermes! The great and magnificent Mother Earth, to think I would see you again like this..." Paracelsus spoke with excitement before his voice sank, then he was looking at Mitra with a sad expression.

Theodore heard she had been an ancient god in the past. As such, Paracelsus remembered and mourned her. After waiting quietly until Paracelsus calmed down, Theodore then asked his question about Mitra. It was about the bud that was sprouting on her head.

"The seed of the world tree?"

“Yes, that’s right.”

“That seed germinated and made a bud...”

Be it because he had overcome his sorrow or if it was because of his curiosity as a researcher, Paracelsus observed Mitra from various angles. The fragment of Mother Earth, the seed of the world tree, and the ecology of an ancient elemental...

These three things were hard to determine, even for the best magicians. Nevertheless, Paracelsus opened his mouth after a ridiculously short period of time. He calmly came up with an answer about Mitra’s condition, “The divinity is differentiating.”

“Differentiating?”

“The reason why she is Mother Earth is simple. She possesses the divinity of the earth. The god of the forest, the god of rocks, and so on... They are all just subordinate gods of Mother Earth. The only god beyond Mother Earth would be the god of the sea or the sky,” Paracelsus explained. Then he tapped the bud on Mitra’s head and continued, “In other words, the material world is divided into three upper gods. Can this small body endure such a divinity? An ancient elemental that isn’t a complete god but just a fragment?”

“... Impossible.”

“Excessive power can destroy the owner. It is the same for this ancient elemental. A more powerful divinity will destroy the body

of the ancient elemental and her ego. Therefore, the ancient elemental found a way to differentiate the divinity.”

In order to remain as Mitra, instead of Mother Earth Dmitra, the seed of the world tree sprouted the divinity in different directions. At the end of Paracelsus’ explanation, Theodore looked at MItra.

She was gazing at him with clear and innocent eyes, without being aware of what Theodore and Paracelsus were talking about.

Subsequently, Paracelsus put an end to this topic. “An ancient elemental can change their appearance in response to the contractor’s growth. Since you have reached the 7th Circle, she will break away from the divinity of the earth and grow another divinity.”

“Then what will happen to Mitra?” Theodore asked.

Paracelsus replied, “The answer to that isn’t something you can get from me.”

Then the great alchemist, Paracelsus, declared, “When you have reached the boundary of a mortal, go once again to the world tree. At that time, there will be an answer waiting!”