

Great Mage 291

Season 2 Chapter 51

The moment he heard that, Lukas' heart became cold. It was as though someone had poured water on a raging bonfire.

At that moment, he felt like the thin thread that connected him to Neil Prand snapped.

He looked at Neil.

He'd thought that Neil wasn't evil. It was just that his beliefs were a bit twisted and his devotion to humanity had deviated.

He'd thought that it wasn't hopeless. That the twisted beliefs could be corrected, that one day, he would treat every human in the world like he did the Americans.

But now, he wasn't so sure.

He'd thought that Neil hadn't changed much, but he was wrong. Neil had changed. He'd become much more extreme and biased than Lukas could have expected.

He wouldn't just protect North America. He would *only* protect North America. The difference between the two was beyond description.

It was only after letting go of his guilt when he was able to look at Neil Prand objectively.

He had already grown rotten.

There were no longer any traces of the young, intelligent American boy whom Lukas had saved.

“Do you even need me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It seems that you’ve already found someone to replace me.”

As if on cue, the faint sound of laughter could be heard from the office. The reception room seemed to be soundproofed, but the laughter was still able to pierce through.

This was proof of just how loudly he was laughing.

“Where did you find that man?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is your connection to him?”

“I can’t say.”

Neil evaded all of his questions.

Lukas moved his head slightly and looked Neil in the eyes.

Neil didn’t avert his gaze, and they remained in that position for a few seconds.

“You can’t control Letip.”

Neil’s expression didn’t change at those words. He remained as unflappable as ever.

But he clenched his fists beneath the desk.

‘As expected.’

He created the Hunter Association. He took the seat as President of the Association. And now, he had become a person who would never have to look up to anyone else.

Neil knew that his position was hundreds of times stronger now than it was when he was younger.

He wasn't the only one who thought so, either. The hundreds of thousands of hunters in North America could bear witness.

And it wasn't without results. North America had managed to create a haven with perfect peace and security over the past few decades, and Neil Prand had contributed the most to this.

Nevertheless.

Even though he stood at the pinnacle of humanity, the distance between him and the being in front of him was still unfathomable.

It was as if to say no matter how high he climbed, he would never be higher than the heavens.

"He can't be called North America's power. You met him by chance and somehow managed to convince him to stay with you."

"I'm curious as to why you would be so presumptuous."

That statement was basically an acknowledgement of Lukas' words.

Lukas had already known this, but it was better to get confirmation instead of continuing under an assumption. And Neil's attitude had already given him the confidence to continue.

"If you could make Letip work with you, you wouldn't have avoided my question. In fact, you would have brought it up even before I asked. To make your deal sound more convincing."

Or to show off.

In all honesty, Lukas was certain that if Neil had been able to acquire the assistance of a transcendent being as strong as he was, he never would have made an offer in the first place.

“...”

So he was saying that his refusal to answer was admittance?

It was then when Neil realised how tense he was. After all, he would never make such a mistake normally.

Neil nodded.

“We didn’t find him. Letip came to us. He showed up about a week ago in California. And as soon as he arrived, he destroyed the entire area.”

“The damage?”

“No one was hurt or injured because there was no one nearby. Only a few surveillance towers and other buildings were burnt to ashes. After receiving the report, I checked the videos and realised that he was like you.”

Those words made Lukas a bit uncomfortable.

“So you persuaded him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe my persuasion worked. As you said, I can’t control him. However, Letip likes American culture. In all honesty, it’s a bit strange. He seems to fundamentally be the same as you, but unlike you, who’s emotionless, he seems to be true to his desires.”

Letip wandered around as he pleased, ate food he liked, and even slept with women he liked.

This wasn’t a bad thing for Neil since he wanted Letip to have as many connections with this land as possible.

“ ... ”

Lukas had a different thought after hearing Neil’s explanation.

“I’d like to hear your answer now.”

Lukas looked at Neil once again.

Now that he thought about it, he had made a similar offer to him before they separated in the past.

'Master, become North America's protector. If you and I work together, we could create the most perfect Anti Demon Barrier. We could make the strongest fortress in the world that would never collapse.'

He had said this with an earnest voice and desperate expression.

And Lukas gave the same answer he'd given to a young Neil Prand.

"I refuse."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Neil's breath became hitched for a moment. He closed his eyes as if to calm his fluctuating emotions.

Then, with his fists clenched once again, he spoke in a strained voice.

"I see."

When Neil opened his eyes again, he'd returned to the same unflappable persona from before.

"In that case, our negotiations have come to an end. I will prepare the portal for you, so please leave."

“Are you really going to do nothing?”

“Yes. I don’t care what happens to Eurasia.”

This was spoken with blunt honesty.

All Neil wanted to do was protect North America and the people who lived here.

“No.”

But Lukas didn’t accept his words.

“You will do everything you said.”

Neil paused and looked at Lukas when he heard that.

“And one more thing: I brought two disciples with me. They are unpolished gemstones, so I’d like for them to experience the curriculum here in America. I’m sure it will be a great help to them.”

Lukas said those words in a casual manner as though he expected them to happen.

Neil's expression turned cynical.

"I have no obligation to do that."

"Neil Prand."

Neil became speechless for a moment as Lukas called him by his full name.

"You should be the human who knows me best in this world."

"...that's an unexpected statement."

He forced himself to respond.

"It's already been several decades since I traveled across North America with you, and if you were intelligent, you wouldn't have forgotten."

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you think I said those words thoughtlessly?"

The table creaked unpleasantly, and Neil shuddered slightly as a strange pressure resonated from Lukas.

“I’m going to get angry.”

The topic changed once again.

Neil felt like he should say something, but his lips felt like they were glued together.

“Maybe it’s because a lot of things happened recently.”

Lukas thought about the European hunters.

Those who fought on the fiercest front and had to risk their lives every day. They knew how difficult their task was, and they knew that it wouldn’t be strange if they were to die the next day.

And yet, they did not shirk away in fear. Instead, they accepted their obligations without giving it.

Each and every one of them was a hero. The hunters in the other regions could be safe because of the European hunters.

“North America might be safe now, but that might not necessarily be the case if Europe disappears. You might be able to prevent the Demon’s invasion now. However, what about 20 or 30 years ago? If Europe had given up fighting or got destroyed earlier, wouldn’t the Demons have crossed the ocean to reach you?”

This wasn't even an assumption. It was a guarantee.

Lukas knew the Demons' tendencies.

If they had captured Europe, they would have immediately turned to the humans in Asia and North America.

The other regions were able to recover from the initial attack and build defense lines at the expense of Europe.

In other words, every human in the other regions owed Europe.

"And yet, the European Headquarters has become a mess. Not at the hands of the Demons or Demon Beasts but their fellow humans."

"Many people were injured or killed."

Nina Rednikova.

Lukas had saved her when she was only a little girl.

He'd found the little girl in the ruins of a city, and she'd always looked up to him like he was her saviour.

Lukas taught and told her many things. And many of the things he taught her were legends of humanity.

He'd wanted her to be proud. He'd wanted her to know just how amazing humans were. And to do that, he told her stories of the many human heroes he encountered in his journeys around the multiverse.

When Nina heard these stories about heroes, she always became excited as one would expect a child to be.

Then she would confidently say that she would be the same one day.

Every time she said this, little Nina's eyes lit up like the stars in the sky. She'd wanted to change the world, drive the Demons away, and restore peace.

And now, Nina, who'd gotten her eyes gouged out by her own kind, sobbed bitterly and said, 'I hate humans more than the Demons'.

"Does it look like I have no emotions?"

Anger finally appeared in Lukas' voice.

This was Neil's biggest mistake.

Lukas' emotions had been worn away over time, but they were still there.

“You made a deal with the Demons. You committed an act that was no different from selling your own people, and that’s not all. I’m certain that you were the one who sent Vaches Bondarenko, one of the bosses of the Red Mafia, after me. And I can guess why. You probably heard that I killed the Demon Duke. And you wondered whether I could kill not just the Demons but also humans.”

As Lukas continued to speak, Neil’s expression slowly grew paler.

He was a hunter who stood at the pinnacle of humanity, but he knew he couldn’t afford to anger the being in front of him.

Moreover, Lukas was right.

Neil knew that Lukas couldn’t use his power recklessly.

That’s why he’d been confused. He’d heard of the great hunter escape in Europe. And that the escape involved the death of a Demon Duke.

It wasn’t hard for him to learn of the death of the Demon Duke.

Because the Demon who died was none other than Duke Sandro... the one who had been doing business with North America in the shadows.

But it was impossible for those hunters to kill Duke Sandro, even for Lee Jong-hak, who was the strongest among them.

So Neil dug into the information of all of the hunters who escaped and soon learned that Lukas had been a part of it.

If it was the Lukas Neil knew, then he could definitely kill a Duke.

That fact made his heart shake.

As far as Neil knew, Lukas' strength was restricted. And he knew it was true because he had personally seen Lukas sit on the sidelines while countless humans died.

And yet, Lukas had killed a Demon Duke.

Anxiety surged in Neil's heart.

Were his restrictions gone?

Was it possible that he could now use his incredible power as he pleased?

After having this thought, Neil immediately used his connections in Europe to hire Vaches Bondarenko.

He thought that the rough and powerful mafia would be able to provoke Lukas. And by looking at how he dealt with Vaches, he would be able to get a clue.

Everything Lukas said was right.

Neil had wanted to know if this being in front of him could not only kill Demons but humans as well.

“You have a biased perspective, but I still thought that you were a necessary talent for humanity. In fact, you showed even more potential than I initially anticipated. But if you were to turn your back on your own kind, then those facts would no longer matter. Because I would not see you as a human anymore.”

The anger in Lukas’ voice was clear.

“And I don’t hesitate to kill such people.”

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“...I...”

The moment Neil was about to respond, someone knocked on the door before opening it. It was a handsome young man.

He bowed his head politely to Neil.

“Pardon my intrusion, President.”

“What is it? I’m sure I said that I had important business this evening.”

Neil's cold voice made the young man's expression stiffen a bit.

"I'm deeply sorry. It's an urgent matter..."

"An urgent matter?"

"Yes, sir."

The young man nodded before glancing at Lukas. It seemed it was something that couldn't be discussed in front of outsiders.

Neil pondered silently for a moment before standing up and saying.

"Can I put this on hold for a moment?"

Lukas nodded.

He might have been delaying giving him an answer, but it didn't matter. In fact, it might even be better to take a break for a while.

Neil left the room immediately, and the young man turned to observe Lukas for a moment.

His expression wasn't very good. Perhaps he thought Lukas' attitude to the President was too impolite. Or maybe he was suspicious of his identity.

It could have been both. But Lukas didn't care since it didn't matter to him anyway.

Ignoring his gaze, Lukas fiddled with the kettle on the table in front of him. There was coffee mix there, too.

The young man kept staring at him with an incredulous expression for a moment before following Neil.

Lukas plugged in the cord for the kettle and turned it on. When the water began to boil, Lukas poured the coffee mix into a cup on the table before pouring the water into it.

The sweet scent soon filled the entire room.

At almost the same time that Lukas lifted the cup to his lips, the door opened once again. There was no knock this time.

It shouldn't have been Neil. After all, he didn't think the important matter could have been dealt with so quickly.

And as expected, the person who opened the door was a middle-aged man wearing a biker jacket and jeans. It was Letip.

He opened the door, but he didn't enter the room. Instead, he just leaned against the doorframe and looked down at Lukas.

Unlike the time in the elevator, there was faint interest in his eyes.

It seemed he had heard his conversation with Neil.

"What is your goal?"

"Salvation."

It was an unexpected question, but Lukas responded naturally after taking a sip of his coffee.

Letip's expression became a bit strange.

"And after that?"

"After? There is no such thing. My goal has no end."

There were many more universes than he even dared to count. Even at that very moment, countless universes were created or destroyed. And there were even more humans.

Lukas' journey would never end.

Even if he won the 'Great Game' and became a Ruler, he would continue to save humans. And even if he returned to his home world, he would eventually leave.

"Hmm. That won't last very long."

"What?"

Letip shook his head.

The small spark of interest in his eyes disappeared. Before he turned around and left, he left a seemingly meaningful message.

"Too bad. Too bad."

* * *

As they stepped onto the elevator, the young man spoke to Neil.

"We received a message from our agent monitoring the Top Three."

Top Three.

Neil's expression hardened slightly because of the weight of that title.

"What did it say?"

"It is top secret... So you'll have to read it personally in the Intelligence Agency's Office."

While it was unlikely, there was still a chance that someone could have been eavesdropping on the two of them in the elevator.

Neil nodded once before looking at the elevator indicator as his thoughts drifted off.

He couldn't help but think about Lukas' proposal.

'Maybe I'll accept his offer.'

He wasn't giving in to Lukas' threats because he was afraid. While it was true that he'd been overwhelmed by Lukas' aura before, he would not have been able to sit firmly in the position of President for so long if he could be moved just because of threats.

'He has no intention of killing me.'

Lukas was facing Neil as the European Hunter 'Frey Blake'.

This was something that almost everyone in the headquarters, including Joanna, was aware of.

If Neil died or went missing, the 'Frey' would be the most likely suspect. This would cause not just Asia but also America to become hostile with Europe.

That's why he didn't think that Lukas, who came here to save Europe, would do something so reckless.

Of course, there was the possibility that he would retreat now and make his move later. As far as Neil knew, the security of Pilsky Tower meant nothing to Lukas.

However, if he had room to maneuver, Neil was certain that he could come up with some kind of countermeasure.

When the opponent was someone like Lukas, you couldn't face them with force. Luckily, Neil already knew what his principles and goals were.

Nevertheless, he felt it would be best to accept his offer because he didn't want to completely fall out with Lukas.

As for the other reason.

'There are people in North America who support Lukas.'

He was talking about people like the President of the European Branch, Nina Rednikova. As far as he knew, the President of the Venezuela Branch and the Canada Branch were the same.

If more than two Branch President-level figures chose to rebel...

'There might be a civil war in America.'

While it was unlikely, Neil would not ignore the possibility.

Ding-

The elevator stopped. When the doors opened, Neil was immediately hit by a stale smell.

Dozens of gigantic screens filled a dimly lit room. And dozens of people were busy processing information from all over the world.

This was the Intelligence Agency's Office.

"I apologise for disturbing you during your meeting, Mr. President."

A man in a white suit bowed to him as he entered. This was the Intelligence Chief, Martin.

“How much were you told?”

Neil shook his head.

“Just that there is a report about the Top Three. Which of the three is the report about?”

“The Strongest.”

Beep-

As he said this, Martin gestured to a monitor.

On the screen, someone’s blurry appearance could be seen.

It was a man with grey hair and a gloomy aura.

The place in which he was standing looked as if a storm had swept through the area. It was probably a city that had been captured by the Demons. But now, the man was the only one in the image who was still moving.

Around him were at least a few hundred corpses that appeared to be Demons and Demon Beasts.

“That many demons... Don’t tell me...”

Martin nodded and confirmed Neil’s thoughts.

“He hunted them alone.”

“At this point, I truly wonder if we really are the same kind.”

“If we weren’t, then he’d have no reason to hunt the Demons so fervently. But that’s not all.”

The image on the screen moved as it zoomed in to show a specific spot.

It was the corpse of a Demon, or, at least, what was left of it. The only remaining part of the Demon was its head, which was still larger than an adult male.

The Demon’s six, blood-red eyes bulged like they were about to pop out of its head.

“This Demon...”

“This is Duke Krodis.”

“Duke...!”

Shock spread across Neil’s face.

Humanity had only managed to defeat Dukes twice in history. So it was natural that Neil was surprised.

“Exactly, Mr. President. I don’t think I need to explain whom he killed. Now, I can say without any shadow of doubt. That this man is the strongest human being in existence.”

Martin said these words with great emotion as he stared at the man on the screen. Awe and fear were clear in his gaze.

“Because he hunted a Demon Duke on his own.”

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After saying those words, Letip left the room. No, he left the Pilsky Tower entirely.

Lukas didn’t try to stop Letip, but he couldn’t help but feel bothered by his words for some reason.

Just as he lowered his cup and sank into deep thought, something mysterious happened.

The shadows in the room began clumping together before rising to form the shape of a person.

It was the mysterious black-robed man.

It was the old spirit who roamed this planet, the God of Heaven and Earth who had lost his authority. He looked at Lukas for a moment before opening his mouth.

[It's been a while.]

“Right.”

Lukas agreed with him. It truly had been a while since they last met.

The figure's black robe fluttered despite there being no breeze.

[I heard a rough explanation of the general situation.]

“From whom?”

[God.]

It seemed God had approached him as well.

“What did he tell you?”

[Sorry. But I can't tell you that.]

“...”

[I probably won't appear in front of you for personal business in the future.]

“Is that what God wants?”

[Yes. I have become a witness for the upcoming Great Game.]

Lukas' brows furrowed at those words.

[And before that, I came to give you a last hint. That is all I was allowed to do.]

“A hint?”

[...you should be aware that it is possible for mortals to become transcendent beings. There are people in this universe who have that potential. Potential to become an Absolute like you.]

It was an unexpected statement, but Lukas nodded after thinking about it.

In fact, it was natural.

The more chaotic the world, the more likely it was for heroes to be born in it. And this world had already reached a stage where calling it chaotic was not enough.

However, 'having the potential' and 'actually doing it' were completely different things.

Lukas, who was a mortal who transcended and became an Absolute, was well aware of this.

'However...'

Since coming to this world, he had not met any being with this potential. Even Neil, the greatest transformer he knew, was not good enough to pass the threshold to become an Absolute.

As if noticing Lukas' thoughts, the mysterious man opened his mouth.

[I interfered.]

"...you interfered?"

[I deliberately made some adjustments in order to prevent you from meeting them. I didn't want you to interfere with their growth. No hero is born without suffering. And they didn't fail to meet my expectations.]

The mysterious man paused for a moment before continuing in a clear tone.

[Keep an eye on the Top Three. They are a clue. If you are vigilant, you might be able to trick the laws of the world and use the Absolutes' External Force without restriction.]

“...”

[This is all I can tell you. I sincerely wish for your victory, Saviour of Humanity...]

After saying those words, the figure of the mysterious man dispersed into shadows once again.

At the same time, the door to the room was opened without a knock. This time, it wasn't Letip.

“Sorry for being late.”

Neil, who was unable to completely suppress his emotions, said those words as he sat at the table.

Lukas could easily tell that he was feeling troubled. He couldn't help but wonder what happened.

“I've decided to accept your proposal, Lukas.” (TL: It should be noted that Neil is speaking formally now, but I felt it would be strange for him to say 'Mr. Lukas' so just keep it in mind)

Lukas wasn't surprised because he'd expected Neil to make this choice from the start. But from the way things were looking, that wasn't the main point Neil wanted to talk about.

He took a moment to calm his ragged breath before speaking in a slightly urgent tone.

"I will listen to everything you said. All I ask is for you to accept one request."

"Request?"

Lukas couldn't help but make a strange expression when he heard Neil's next words.

"Please investigate the Top Three."

Top Three.

This name was now mentioned by Neil mere moments after he heard it from the mysterious black-robed man.

In fact, Lukas knew a bit about them. He knew that they were better than anyone else when it came to hunting Demons and that they all had legendary achievements that most hunters could never even dream of.

However, Lukas had never met them before, nor did he know what they looked like or what abilities they had. He didn't even know which, or how many Demons, they killed or what their legendary achievements were.

This was because Lukas didn't attach much importance to public information. He only made judgements based on what he saw with his own eyes.

It was possible that Neil realised this fact as well because he continued in a much calmer tone than before.

"The Top Three... is a shadowy group whom we rarely talk about. The low-ranked hunters know basically nothing about them, and there are even a few higher-ups in the association who believe they are fake heroes created by the association."

Fake Heroes.

Lukas understood what he meant.

Some of the heroes who made names for themselves during war actually had the ability, but there were countless other 'so-called' heroes who were created simply through false rumours and support from the government.

There were numerous reasons for creating such figures, but the biggest reason was to stop the population from losing morale. Soldiers felt greatly comforted knowing that such a hero was on their side.

The list of achievements made by the Top Three was incredibly absurd. And because of this, realists regarded them as heroes created by the association.

“But the Top Three is real.”

“...what do you mean by asking me to investigate them? Since they’re hunters, they should be under your influence.”

“They are not hunters from the association. All three of them either have their own independent forces or prefer to move alone. So naturally, I have no control over them.”

As he said this, Neil frowned. It seemed that he didn’t like the fact that the cards known as the Top Three weren’t in his hands.

After a moment, he took out a bunch of documents that he’d brought with him and handed them to Lukas.

“This is all the information we have about them. Would you like to read it?”

Lukas received the stack of papers and browsed through them slowly.

The names, ages, nationalities, abilities, main areas of activity, and supporting forces of the Top Three were described in detail.

But it was their titles that drew Lukas’ attention.

The Strongest Hunter.

The Saint of Salvation.

And the last one.

[The Black Witch.]

Lukas froze for a moment.

* * *

Purple hair that stood out especially at night and an ever-present mysterious smile.

She'd always looked at him with that mysterious smile.

...There were other characteristics that he could list, but his other memories were blurred.

Her eyes were as beautiful as her hair, her soft voice, and her gentle movements.

Only these words remained in his mind, not the memories that accompanied them.

That fact made Lukas feel depressed.

'In this world, there is a being from your homeworld.'

Then he remembered God's words.

There was only one being from his home world.

Lukas looked back at the documents again.

He couldn't help but think of the woman who had given up everything for him and who was still waiting for him even now.

But he soon shook his head.

It couldn't be her.

She'd said that she would make amends for her crimes.

She'd said that she would create a world so beautiful that Lukas would come to love humans again, even if he lost his humanity or came to hate humans.

That promise was her conviction. And he didn't think she would break it.

Of course, there were other possibilities.

For a moment, Lukas couldn't help but think that it wasn't her who'd broken the promise but himself.

“ ... ”

Lukas slowly read the information about the Black Witch.

<Shroud of Night.>

That was the name of the group led by the Black Witch.

In fact, this organisation, which was nothing short of a clandestine society, seemed to be the most secretive and mysterious of all the humanmade groups.

Its size, the location of its main base, and the key figures in the organisation were all a mystery.

“Among the hunters, there are many talented individuals who are supposedly part of 'Shroud of Night'. But they are all incredibly good at hiding their tracks, and we have never been able to catch their trail.”

“Does the association recognise the existence of Shroud of Night?”

“As I said, there are many of them. And... we fundamentally shared the same goal.”

Although Neil said these words carefully, displeasure still spread across Lukas’ face.

Now that he thought about it, Lukas felt like there was something he had to make clear.

“Do you intend to continue dealing with the Demons?”

“...”

“Don’t tell me you think you can coexist. They are called Demons for a reason.”

At the end of the day, nature preceded reason.

The race of Demons was fundamentally incompatible with humans.

Neil must have known that, for he nodded.

“Yes. I know.”

Then, he seemed to think about something for a moment before he finally lifted his head and spoke.

“We will stop dealing with the Demons. After all, Duke Sandro is already dead, so there is no longer a reason to. On the other hand...”

Neil’s tone became serious.”

“What do you think about my request?”

Season 2 Chapter 54

Psh.

Lukas splashed tap water on his face, the coldness of the water sending tingles through his skin.

But his mind was still unfocused as if he was sleepwalking.

He’d accepted Neil’s offer. After all, Lukas also needed to gather information about the Top Three.

If he had the support of North America, including Neil himself, then it would make that task much easier.

In other words, it could be said their interests coincided for this matter.

'Three.'

This was one of the hints God had given.

It was clear now that it was referring to the Top Three. The mysterious man had basically said so.

If he kept his eyes on the Top Three, he'd get a clue as to how to trick the laws of the world.

Were the Top Three humans?

And what did they have to do with 'Hybrid'?

It seemed he'd only be able to answer these questions after meeting them in person.

Creak-

He turned off the faucet before looking at the mirror.

He saw a young man with grey hair and cold, sunken eyes. 'Frey Blake', a man created from a vague memory.

Unlike other appearances, it was one he was attached to.

It was also his favorite appearance when he had to be someone other than 'Lukas'.

Suddenly, a strange thought appeared in his head.

“ ... ”

Was this what this face looked like originally? He couldn't tell.

His memories were hazy. As if they were covered in dust.

It was at that moment when Letip's words resounded in his head.

'That won't last long.'

Was that referring to Lukas' mental state? And if it was, what did he know about him?

And for what purpose did he enter this universe?

He didn't know. Lukas couldn't help but feel that there were many things he didn't know.

But there was one thing that Lukas knew.

He didn't want to turn Letip into an enemy, much less Sedi or Nodiesop.

Lukas left the bathroom and returned to the 125th floor.

It wasn't hard to find Leo and Min Ha-rin. They were both sitting in a spacious lounge not far from the elevator, perhaps in an effort to help Lukas locate them more easily.

Joanna, on the other hand, was nowhere in sight.

“ ... ”

Lukas looked on as his disciples whispered amongst themselves, completely oblivious to his presence.

They were stuck together, squirming and giggling like a real brother and sister.

“ ... ”

It was strange.

Looking at them made him feel like the dark clouds in his mind were dissipating.

‘Disciple.’

Children who would continue to carry on his legacy. They were Lukas’ future.

This fact somehow filled him with relief.

Right.

Even if Lukas were to disappear, his cause would continue.

It was decided that Min Ha-rin and Leo would stay in North America. At least until Lukas finished investigating the Top Three.

They seemed to have a bit of interest in North America’s curriculum, but they expressed faint dissatisfaction at Lukas’ orders.

They whined that they would rather go with their Master.

“At your current level, you would only be a hindrance.”

So Lukas bluntly pointed out the problem.

Min Ha-rin had barely reached 3 stars, and Leo was still incorporating the Warrior King Fist into his own martial art.

It was hard to say if either one of them would be useful at this point.

As for their training, Neil had promised to give them his full support, so there was no need to worry. There were many outstanding hunters in North America. Perhaps their rate of growth would be even faster than Lukas expected.

After thinking this, Lukas couldn't help but look forward to their next meeting.

Currently, he was heading towards the portal in a limousine. He leaned against the soft red seats, lost in thought.

He would probably have to meet all three of the Top Three.

The first person he would meet had already been decided.

It was the man referred to as the Strongest Hunter. His name was Kran.

It was probably an alias as his real name, last name, and nationality were all unknown.

There was no special reason for choosing him. It was simply that it wasn't difficult to meet him, unlike the Black Witch, whose true location was always a mystery, and the Saint of Salvation, who even Neil, the President of the Hunter Association, would have difficulty meeting.

Except for the fact that he was in a rather dangerous area.

Kran was, at the same time, the most exposed and the most mysterious of the Top Three.

The association said that of the three, they knew the most about his power, abilities, hunting techniques, and location. But on the flip side, they knew nothing about his past.

The document stated that he was obsessed with hunting Demons and that his mindset was so extreme that he wouldn't hesitate to kill whoever stood in the way of his goal, even if they were a fellow human.

'He's currently active in Africa.'

It was a place that was often called hell, or the Land of Death.

Naturally, the Demons there were stronger than in other places.

And it was there where Kran had single-handedly hunted a Demon Duke.

He had made an achievement that was unprecedented in human history.

“...Africa. Hah.”

In front of Lukas, a woman let out a sorrowful sigh as though the sky was falling. It was said in a soft whisper that might not have been heard usually, but they were currently in the relatively small interior of the limousine, so her voice easily reached Lukas' ears.

This woman was none other than Joanna.

Lukas had also been surprised to see her. He wouldn't have expected her to be the one to accompany him. This woman was the guide Neil prepared for him.

Of course, she was one of the few 7 star Wizards in North America. So she wasn't lacking either as a guide or as a combatant.

What was important was that she felt extremely uncomfortable around Lukas. Even now, her brows were furrowed and her lips were slightly pursed.

'...this is so awkward I'm gonna die.'

Joanna grumbled inwardly while stealing glances at Lukas. She'd realised that he was an extraordinary person, but she never thought he'd personally go to meet the Top Three.

Moreover, he was going to Africa of all places.

If it weren't Neil's orders, she would never, ever have accepted it!

Unfortunately, Neil was not swayed by her beauty, whining, or discontent. No, above all, she didn't want to make Neil feel she was incompetent.

Joanna forcibly pulled herself together. Since she had already been given this task, she would perform it perfectly and win Neil's trust.

After clearing her throat, she opened her mouth.

"When we go to Africa, there are some humans you should be as wary of as the Demons and Demon Beasts."

"Who?"

"Gray Sun."

When Lukas stared at her blankly, Joanna couldn't help but cry out in shock.

"You don't know them?!"

"This is my first time hearing about them."

"Oh, my God."

She didn't expect him to be clueless about something like this. She couldn't help but feel a wave of anxiety flood her entire body.

This might have been a bigger crisis than she initially expected.

"...it's a criminal organisation active in Africa. Originally, it was just a relatively large organisation, but after the advent of the Demons, it grew explosively just like the other mafia organisations."

"..."

"You're a European Hunter, so... hmm. You know the Red Mafia, right?"

"Yes."

Joanna breathed a sigh of relief. It was like she had finally seen light in a dark world.

"The size of Gray Sun is estimated to be about five times that of the Red Mafia. It is an incredibly large organisation. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say one in every ten people you meet in Africa are a part of Grey Sun."

There were countless criminal organisations in Africa, but most of them were affiliated under the influence of the Gray Sun.

Ironically, in order to survive in Africa, where the influence of the association is limited, one has to go under a criminal organisation, whether they like it or not.

When Lukas nodded, Joanna continued.

“Most of the members are just cannon fodder, but you should be careful of those who have sun tattoos on their forearms. They are the Gray Sun’s officers, who have combat capabilities comparable to that of Titled Hunters.”

Depending on how many suns overlapped on their arms, the rankings of the officers differed.

Those who had three overlapping suns had strength comparable to top-ranked Titled Hunters. Joanna could not guarantee whether she’d be able to win against two or three of them.

After hearing her words, Lukas nodded.

“Understood.”

...Did he really?

Looking at Lukas, who didn’t seem bothered at all, Joanna couldn’t help but feel doubt.

‘But... he is stronger than me.’

Season 2 Chapter 55

* * *

Looking at his unconcerned attitude, she couldn't help but think back to the experience she had with him last time. It felt like it was all a dream.

The Lukas now, who was currently staring blankly out the window, didn't exude any of the pressure she'd felt at that time.

...But that thought in itself was a bit terrifying.

"In any case, I look forward to working with you."

"Yes. I also look forward to our cooperation."

At that moment, the limousine smoothly came to a stop. They had arrived at the portal.

As she stepped out of the car, Joanna made a silent prayer.

She hoped their mission would end soon.

* * *

On the African continent, which had become a lawless zone, the only place where some manner of security was maintained was West Africa.

This wasn't because the hunters were successfully defending it or that they had managed to suppress the Demons.

It was simply because the Demons weren't interested in that area.

The place that Lukas and Joanna headed to was the country which had formerly been the Republic of Congo.

The Congo Branch of the Hunter Association left a very dirty impression. The building, which could barely be called a hideout, was on the brink of collapsing, and it was so dirty that it was clear that it was not being properly managed.

The surrounding area that could be seen from the dusty windows was even worse. It felt like it was a city where zombies lived.

Only depression and resignation could be seen on the faces of the people walking down the streets.

Maybe it was because they had just come from North America, but the atmosphere was so gloomy that they could feel it on their skin. It felt like they had gone to an entirely different dimension.

"..."

Joanna stared out the window with a blank expression on her face. She looked as if her soul had left her body.

While Lukas wondered about her reaction, someone approached them.

“Are you the hunters from America?”

It was a black man with a red tattoo on his face, and from his physique, it was easy to guess that he was either a Martial Artist or a Swordsman.

Joanna, who came back to her senses, let out a soft cough.

“I’m Joanna Goldberg, a hunter from America.”

“And who is the man beside you?”

“Frey Blake.”

“Hmmm...?”

Judging from his attitude, it was clear that he had never heard of Lukas before.

The man turned to look at Joanna again, and after observing her face for a moment, he nodded.

“Welcome to the Congo Branch. I’m Destin, the Branch President. I’ve already heard the details. Although it might not be much, I will give you my full support.”

“Thanks.”

Seeming to have escaped her previous daze, Joanna replied with her distinctive, haughty expression.

“Let’s not stand and talk. Follow me.”

After saying that, Destin turned around and started walking with large strides. From his actions, it was clear that his personality was just as blunt as his appearance.

While following him, Joanna glanced around.

‘...I didn’t expect it to be this bad.’

This wasn’t the first time she’d been assigned a mission in another region. However, she’d only ever been to relatively safe, clean cities. She’d never been to Europe or Africa, where the Demons were most active.

So this was her first time seeing a city that was on the frontlines.

And although she'd heard the rumors and read the reports, it was different from seeing it with her own two eyes.

As they followed behind Destin, they encountered several Congolese hunters.

When they passed Destin, they all nodded their heads a few times. But for Lukas and Joanna, the outsiders, they didn't seem to be the least bit interested.

During their short walk, they encountered two types of hunters. Those who had sharp auras like unsheathed blades that could cut at any moment, and those who looked incredibly depressed and hopeless or were struggling with conflicting emotions.

When they finally arrived at the President's office, she was surprised once again.

It was dirtier than any bathroom in the North American Branch, and smaller than any room in Joanna's house.

"Sit wherever you like. I'm sorry, but I don't have any refreshments to give you."

"Th-, that's fine."

"That's good then."

Destin sat down on a couch that had bits of cotton sticking out. The dim light in the room highlighted his tired face.

“...I heard you guys are planning to go to Egypt.”

The place where Kran was staying was near Egypt. And it seemed that he would be staying there for a while.

This was because he had to recover from the damage he'd taken during his fight with the Demon Duke.

In other words, after that period, he would leave for another region without hesitation. From the patterns that he'd displayed so far, he would go looking for new prey.

So they had no time to lose.

“I was given a rough explanation of the situation. And I think it will be a fight against time. Have you thought about a means of transportation?”

“No.”

Egypt was about 3,000km from the Republic of Congo, their current location.

To go on foot would be absurd.

‘I could greatly reduce the time taken if I used magic, but...’

It would inevitably attract attention.

There were countless Demons and Demon Beasts in Africa, and Lukas could not kill them because of his deal with Sedi.

If he used high ranked magic and drew in powerful Demon Nobles, things would become annoying.

That was why he planned to go to Egypt without the assistance of magic.

Sometimes, using mundane methods was the best solution. Of course, it would still take some time. After all, there wasn't much public transportation in Africa currently.

Destin pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it before saying.

"If you went on foot, it would probably take a year. Personally, I would recommend using an army truck, since it's good at traversing unpaved roads as well as flat lands. And it has enough space to store gas as well as food. You would even have enough space to sleep in."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Mi- army truck..."

When Lukas nodded as though that was reasonable, Joanna's expression became a bit bleak. For her, who was only used to using limousines or other luxury cars, the thought of traveling in an army truck was an unknown world.

"Of course, that won't solve all of your problems."

Destin let out a mouthful of smoke.

"You would rarely encounter high ranking Demon Nobles unless you enter North Africa, but there are still countless Demons Beasts. Well, their combat power isn't much of a threat. It wouldn't be much of a problem unless they came in a swarm. The problem is the other guys."

"The Gray Sun."

Lukas said the name he'd heard from Joanna.

Destin nodded.

"Exactly. This area is still fine, but as soon as you leave, you'll be entering their territory."

And they would just watch an army truck pass through their territory.

Destin's gaze turned to Joanna.

“Besides, with how good looking you are, they might jump out with shining eyes when they see you.”

“Mmm...”

Joanna narrowed her eyes.

She normally liked being praised for her good looks. But if the other side was the Gray Sun, then it became a different story.

It was obvious that if she was ever captured, she would experience something indescribable.

“I can help you find the safest route, but it would be impossible to avoid them completely all the way to Egypt. So you should think of a contingency beforehand.”

“...”

“The army truck will be ready in the morning. We’ll also provide you with as much food, water and gas as we can. As well as sleeping bags, cooking utensils and daily necessities. If you need anything else, please feel free to tell me.”

* * *

The territory of the Republic of Congo was once covered in red soil, but now, the soil had mostly turned black, or in other words, the land had died.

Even though it was midnight, the weather remained grim. Dark clouds filled the sky and a nasty scent drifted in the air.

“Aren’t you gonna get some sleep?”

He heard a voice from behind him.

Without looking back, he knew that it was Joanna.

She pursed her lips slightly when Lukas didn’t respond, but continued anyway.

“What are you doing here? I don’t think getting hit by dusty winds is a hobby of yours.”

“I’m just standing.”

“Hmm. You didn’t even eat, did you?”

“Yeah.”

“...well. That’s smart. The rice here is the worst.”

It seemed she had eaten. And judging from her expression and tone, it was worse than not eating at all.

Joanna glanced at him and seemed to shrink into herself a little.

Lukas knew that she didn't have a very good opinion of him. So she must have a reason for coming to him and talking about such trivial things.

And just as he expected, Joanna finally broached the main topic with a cautious voice. However, her words took Lukas by surprise.

"Hey. Is President Nina okay?"

Lukas turned to look at Joanna. She was looking into the distance with a faint glimmer in her eyes,

"Do you know her?"

"A bit."

"...she's not dead."

"Can't you give me more details?"

Joanna spoke in an exasperated tone. Nevertheless, when Lukas didn't respond, she let out a sigh.

“I’m not asking with any bad intentions. I was just asking because I was worried.”

“Why are you worried about her?”

“Can’t I be worried about a fellow hunter?”

“...”

“...dammit. Seriously.”

Joanna straightened up before turning to look at him.

“It’s because I adore President Nina.... She is my hero.”

“You know her?”

“I don’t really know her. Well, we met a few times, but I doubt she remembers me. It’s just that I have a lot of respect for her.”

“...”

“She’s one of the most famous female hunters. She’s amazing. Nina Rednikova, Leader of the Iron Blood Division. There are even fan clubs and those who go to the frontlines just to be her shield.”

‘I’m a member of the largest fan club.’

Joanna added in her head.

Fan clubs.

Lukas made an expression as though he wasn’t sure whether to laugh at that remark, but when he looked at Joanna, he realised she was serious.

She was telling the truth.

“Her condition is serious.”

“Ah...”

“But I believe that she can overcome it. That’s what everyone who knows her, including me, thinks.”

Nina was probably in the worst situation she’d ever been in in her life. It wasn’t just her physical injuries.

It was no exaggeration to say that her will had shattered. And the vast majority of humans became useless or even ended their own lives when their will was broken.

But Nina wouldn't do that.

She would take advantage of the pain and become even stronger than before. Lukas believed in her.

'However, it will be hard on her own.'

Lukas had been seriously contemplating Nina's rehabilitation, and he was willing to do whatever it took to help her get better.

Right now, finding the clue from the Top Three was his main priority, but he intended to return as soon as he was finished.

Joanna nodded once before turning to look into the distance again.

"Have you ever been to Africa before?"

"Yes."

"Are the other places like this too?"

Was that all she wanted?

Lukas frowned slightly.

Joanna's attitude was different from when they first met. Perhaps she felt more familiar with him since they came to such a dangerous place together.

Lukas looked around. He could understand what she meant just by looking at their surroundings.

Despair, darkness, poverty, hunger.

This city seemed to embody every facet of the dark side of humanity.

"No."

"Then..."

"It will be worse than here."

"Ah..."

Not just Africa, but in Europe as well. Especially in France, where the Demon King resided. The environment had become so toxic that no other creature could withstand it.

And North Africa, where Kran was, was filled with high ranking Demons.

Unlike here, where the association and hunters were active, it wasn't strange for survivors to suddenly die the next day.

Perhaps Joanna had never been on a mission to the frontlines.

"They could go to America."

Lukas turned to look at her at those words.

"America does not reject those who come to us. I don't understand why people continue to live in such dangerous places."

"You don't know anything."

Lukas didn't answer.

Instead, it was Destin, who was standing behind her.

"What did you say?"

“They are not fools. If they could’ve moved to America, they would have done so already.”

“They can.”

“America only accepts hunters.”

“Huh?”

“North America does not accept citizens without power or skill.”

Joanna’s pupil’s shook violently at those words.

“Th-, that’s not true. We accept at least a few thousands civilians every year...”

“That is limited to hunters’ families and close friends.”

Destin sneered as he continued.

“The people you see are the ones who don’t have any connections. So we can’t even get out of this cursed place and set foot on American soil.”

If they left, then all the civilians in this place would die. Either at the hands of the Demons, or their own kind.

Season 2 Chapter 56

Early in the morning on the next day, Lukas walked down the main street in the city.

Beneath the slowly brightening sky, there was barely anyone walking around the dirt-covered city, causing it to feel like it was an abandoned city.

It was a stark contrast from Manhattan, America, where he'd been just a day before.

That city and this city. There shouldn't have been such a large distance between them. They were both places humans lived in.

"You're up early."

It was Destin.

Lukas didn't sleep a wink, but he nodded instead of telling the truth.

"I woke up earlier than expected."

"Hmm. You weren't in your room, so I came to look for you. And I couldn't knock on the door of a lady sleeping."

Destin didn't seem like such a polite person, so Lukas was a bit surprised.

Upon closer inspection, he realised that Destin's eyes were red. His hair was a mess, and his body was covered with the scent of cigarette smoke. He'd probably stayed up all night.

He spoke in a tired voice.

"All the preparations are complete, so you can leave when the sun is up. I also got a map for you. It's old, so it might not be completely accurate, but it's better than nothing."

When Lukas opened the map that Destin gave him, he found that there was a detailed route to Egypt, and it included the danger zones and places they could rest. It looked like he had filled out the additional information on the map himself.

Lukas was surprised.

Unlike what he'd initially thought, Destin was a man who did not neglect his duties.

"It would be better to move only when the sun is up. I'm sure it's the same all over the world, but it's particularly dangerous to travel in Africa at night."

This advice was given with the Demons and Demon Beasts in mind, so Lukas nodded in thanks.

Then, Destin looked at him with a slightly suspicious gaze.

“Are you the attendant of that woman named Joanna?”

“Huh?”

“Or maybe you’re her manager...”

When Lukas only stared at him blankly, Destin shook his head.

“It seems I was wrong. My apologies. I’ve heard that American hunters have them because of their busy schedules.”

When he heard that, Lukas couldn’t help but think about the suit-wearing man who he’d seen beside Joanna the first time they met. Of course, he wouldn’t be there now.

“But you don’t seem to be an American hunter.”

“I’m a European Hunter.”

“Hmm. I see. No wonder you’re so calm while looking at this city.”

Destin’s tone softened slightly. Relations between Africa and Europe had always been strong.

This was because a feeling of camaraderie had developed between the two regions who had suffered the most damage due to the Demons' invasion.

In fact, the two regions would not hesitate to assist each other in emergency situations.

"Then I don't need to worry as much, and I don't need to warn you about the Demons. I hope you get good results."

Lukas nodded.

"Thank you."

* * *

By the time it had truly reached dawn, Joanna appeared.

She had a blank face, dark circles around her eyes, and her hair was a mess. She also trudged around like a zombie. It seemed that she had been tossing and turning all night.

Lukas felt that she had probably been thinking a lot about what Destin had said the night before. And in the end, she probably couldn't reach a conclusion. After all, it wasn't something that could have been thought over in one night.

Even her voice was cracked as she spoke.

“All the preparations are complete?”

“Yeah. Are you ready?”

“I am. Hum.”

Joanna suppressed a yawn as she responded.

The distance to Egypt was about 3,000km, but that was only when measured in a straight line.

It didn't take into account the mountainous or dangerous regions, rivers, or the weather.

Assuming that there were no unforeseen circumstances, it would probably take them a few weeks of consistent travel.

The military truck that they were going to use was larger and seemed to be more performant than they expected.

The tires were durable enough to pass through the rough wilderness terrain and the bed of the truck, which appeared to have been modified, and had plenty of space even after storing food, gas, and daily necessities. A small sleeping area, which took up most of the extra area, had been added.

These modifications made the vehicle feel like a camper instead of a military truck.

“It’s mainly used by hunters going on long-term missions. It’s much heavier and more durable than normal trucks, and it won’t roll over easily.”

“Thank you.”

Joanna nodded. It seemed that she was very satisfied with the truck’s specifications.

With a slightly haughty expression on her face, she climbed into the passenger seat.

“I’ll have to ask you to drive.”

“I don’t know how to drive.”

Joanna, who was buckling her seatbelt, froze.

“...what did you just say?”

“I have never driven a vehicle before.”

“...you’re lying.”

“I’m serious.”

“That... that doesn’t make sense...”

“Do you not know how to drive?”

“I do, but...”

Joanna looked at the vehicle and suddenly felt like crying. It wasn’t a ridiculously large vehicle, but it was still bigger than a 1-ton truck. Nevertheless, it was by no means something for a common 2nd-class license holder like her.

“Can you really not drive? Or is it just that you don’t want to drive?”

“Vehicles are rarely used in Europe. In the first place, there are only a few vehicles still in working condition. It’s the same here.”

It was Destin who answered for Lukas. Then he looked at Joanna with a slightly sympathetic gaze.

“This truck is one of only three vehicles in our branch. Perhaps you were dispatched to fill the role of driver from the start?”

Joanna suddenly closed her mouth at Destin’s words.

It was possible.

It was almost impossible for them to travel from Congo to Egypt using magic, which meant that they would have to travel using other means.

Considering Neil's personality, he certainly would have taken that into account. And if he knew that this guy couldn't drive...

'Did the President really send me here to be a driver?'

When this thought appeared in her mind, she couldn't help but make a pitiful expression.

But that only lasted for a while. In the end, she resigned herself and trudged over to the driver's side with drooping shoulders.

This was the fate of a subordinate.

Just as Lukas was about to step into the passenger seat, Destin spoke.

"I think you're stronger than that woman."

Lukas turned to look at Destin. At that moment, he wasn't displaying any of his power. And very few people who saw him in this state would say those words.

Perhaps Destin had come to this conclusion because he was unable to feel any power from him. This showed that either his perception had reached the level of a master or that his sixth sense was dozens of times better than wild animals'.

“Watch out for Gray Sun. I don’t know how strong you are, but in a sense, they are more dangerous than a Demon Duke.”

This advice contained decades of experience that had been engraved into the bones of a hunter. Naturally, it shouldn’t be taken lightly.

Lukas nodded.

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Please be careful. And I wish you all the best.”

* * *

The truck sped through desolate lands.

To put it bluntly, the ride was terrible. This was especially true for Joanna, who was used to traveling in luxury vehicles.

It was fortunate that the roads that had been built decades ago were still maintained, but even that would disappear once they left Congo. Then they would encounter truly rugged terrain.

'I have to adapt to this as much as possible before then.'

As she thought this, Joanna sighed.

The vehicle's interior was stiflingly quiet. She didn't know what to say, but Lukas didn't seem to have any intention of breaking the silence.

Complex emotions created by dissatisfaction at being made to drive, the pressure of driving such a large truck, and her own insecurities made it impossible for her to open her mouth first.

Perhaps, over time, Lukas would eventually say something first.

Or, at least, that's what she thought, but that man didn't say anything even as sunset approached.

'...even a statue would have been better company.'

Joanna shot an irritated look at Lukas, who was beside her.

She was very famous amongst the American hunters. Her natural appearance, the way she spoke, her excellent magical skills... And above all, Joanna knew how to make all of those virtues stand out. That last part was the key point.

In order for American hunters to gain recognition, they had to have some skill in the entertainment industry. In America, hunters weren't just Demon hunters; they were also celebrities and stars. They were obligated to meet the expectations of the people.

And among the hunters, Joanna's popularity was particularly high.

Even the most snobbish hunters would become docile in front of her. But Lukas didn't change his attitude for her at all.

'Say something!'

She shot Lukas a fierce glare. This time, she didn't do it from the corner of her eye. Instead, she glared at him openly.

Joanna made a solemn vow to not say a single word until Lukas opened his mouth.

Perhaps her earnest desire(?) reached the heavens, for the sun finally went down and Lukas spoke.

"Let's stop here for today."

"..."

Of course, it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

Season 2 Chapter 57

Lukas was looking at the map he'd received from Destin.

Seeing that he didn't pay any mind to her at all, Joanna sighed and looked around.

The place they stopped at appeared to be an abandoned city. And from the looks of it, this place had been abandoned for at least 10 years.

Nevertheless, she felt it was better than just the open wilderness.

Creak-

When she stopped the car and turned off the engine, a heavy silence seemed to fill their surroundings.

The air was cold, and the atmosphere was so eerie that it wouldn't surprise her if a ghost were to suddenly pop out.

"Did you choose this place for any particular reason?"

"This city is like a stopping point for the hunters. There are very few Demons or Demon Beasts in the area. And there are bunkers at each stopping point equipped with food and daily necessities. There are even some weapons."

“So it’s a resting point.”

Hmm. But it didn’t look that way.

She couldn’t see any signs that this city was used for such a purpose.

By that time, the sun had set completely and the city was engulfed in complete darkness.

Joanna, who had thought that she had already adapted to some extent, felt stifled once again. The atmosphere in the city was much scarier than Demons or Demon Beasts.

“Then let’s eat first.”

“...all right.”

She simply nodded and spoke briefly because she didn’t want to give in to Lukas’ casual words.

Most of the food that they had received was combat rations that were easy to store and cook. In addition to those, there were high-calorie chocolate bars and beef jerky.

Crack-

She opened a can and ate the chicken that was inside. It was surprisingly good.

Even Joanna, who was a picky eater, managed to finish her share.

A while after, only the sound of utensils being washed could be heard.

After their meal, Lukas got up. Then he began walking and looking around, and he used his hands to measure the distance between broken street lights, broken benches, and collapsed buildings.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for places to plant the alarm spell.”

“Alarm spell?”

Joanna couldn’t help but ask in a curious voice.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a spell that warns you when someone is nearby.”

Was it something like a sensor that was implemented using magical science?

“Was there such a spell? This is my first time hearing about it.”

Lukas didn't answer. Instead, his hair fluttered slightly as though it had been hit by wind,

It seemed that he really was a Wizard, considering that she could faintly feel his mana resonate.

“That... can you teach it to me?”

It was an unexpected request.

When Lukas turned to look at her, Joanna looked away and muttered.

“...if the two of us set it up together, it would be much easier.”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

Lukas nodded when he saw the brief sparkle in her eyes. This sight made him smile subconsciously.

Indeed, contrary to his expectations, Joanna might actually have been the kind of person he liked.

After having this thought, he was about to tell her the formula. However, Lukas fell silent again.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s an old map, so I shouldn’t have trusted it blindly.”

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t written on the map.”

Krrk, krrk...

From the darkness, numerous figures began appearing. It was impossible to tell where they had all been hiding.

Dozens of Demon Beasts, who seemed to have been birthed from the darkness, were looking at them with shining red eyes.

Only then did Joanna’s expression change.

“It hasn’t even been that long since we left the city.”

She sighed.

“There are a lot of them, but they all seem to be fairly weak. You take the left side. I’ll take care of the right.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t kill Demons or Demon Beasts.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes.”

“I’m serious.”

“What the hell are you...”

Lukas turned around and looked into the darkness.

He could feel the traces there. His expression became strange.

“Please stay here and protect the truck.”

“H-, huh? Hey! Where are you going?!”

Lukas rushed forward without answering, avoiding the Demon Beasts as he went.

His subtle movements were something that a Wizard shouldn't have been capable of, but Joanna was so agitated that she didn't notice.

"Don't tell me you want to leave me alone and run away! Hey! Answer... Ah, seriously."

Dozens of Demon Beasts charged towards her at the same time. They weren't strong, but there were a lot of them.

Demon Beasts were known for being tenacious, persistent, and extremely troublesome when in large groups.

And now, he wanted her to protect the truck against so many of them? All on her own?!

Channeling her mana, Joanna shouted with a red face.

"You, you, you bastard!"

* * *

He chased after his target while avoiding the Demon Beasts.

Lukas' body flickered like a ghost, drifting past the Demon Beast as if they weren't moving. It was easy for him to trick them as they didn't have any intelligence. They never even noticed him passing.

Boom!

He heard an explosion behind him. It seemed Joanna had begun to use her magic in earnest.

There were only about 100 Demon Beasts charging towards her. A 7 star Wizard could have easily defeated them.

'She doesn't have much real-life experience.'

Lukas had never seen her fight. Nevertheless, it wasn't hard for him to realise that with just a glance.

She lacked the necessary experience. Perhaps she wasn't aware of it, or maybe she didn't think she needed it, but that didn't matter.

It wasn't good. In general, one of the things Wizards lacked the most was adaptability.

The majority of Wizards preferred to plan everything in advance. However, if something unexpected happened, their thoughts would be shaken and their reactions would be delayed.

This was especially the case for Wizards like Joanna, who were basically raised in a greenhouse. She was a Wizard who was created by the elite education and full support of North America.

That was why Lukas couldn't help but wonder.

'If she was in my homeworld, Joanna would never have reached 7 stars.'

A 7 star Wizard. An Archmage. In other words, a state at which one could be called Great Mage.

When one reached this level, one's mana capacity increased explosively and the power, casting speed, and execution of one's spells would be completely incomparable from a 6 star Wizard's.

It was also natural that their mental power would also increase significantly.

No. If their mental power didn't increase in the first place, then it was impossible for them to reach the rank of Great Mage. (TL: Author is really throwing around Lukas' old title now)

Magical science was closely related to the human mind.

But Joanna was different. Her mind had been given the chance to grow. It would have been impossible for her to reach 6 stars, let alone 7 stars.

And yet, she could still use spells that did not shame the title of Archmage.

'...this world.'

It felt like the conditions or qualifications to gain 'power' were very lax.

That wasn't all. The rate of growth was also ridiculous.

No. Could it even be called growth rate?

Perhaps every human in this world gained too much strength for their efforts. And if that was true, then what was the reason?

This question remained in his head.

Nina always said that the reason humanity hadn't gone extinct was because of Lukas' teaching and support. But these days, Lukas couldn't help but think that they would have been able to survive even without his help.

As he was lost in thought, his surroundings became quiet. The sounds of explosions and the roaring of Demon Beasts had faded until they were almost inaudible.

"..."

The man Lukas was following was 'dressed' like a hunter.

In other words, he was supposed to look like one, but he wasn't.

He was an incredibly cautious individual. He made a number of unnecessary detours and checked his surroundings a number of times. And finally, after using every evasive method he knew, he moved through several alleys.

An inexperienced pursuer might have already lost him countless times over.

'He didn't notice my pursuit.'

Naturally, Lukas didn't have to worry about it. He simply needed to maintain a certain distance while ensuring he didn't make any noise.

And sure enough, after about ten minutes of constant movement, the man finally headed to an abandoned building.

Lukas continued to follow him calmly.

The man headed to the basement of the building, and just as Lukas was about to follow suit, he paused.

A camera sat in a shadowy corner of the hallway. It appeared to be broken, but he knew that it was working perfectly.

This meant that there was power circulating in this building.

Click-

In the meantime, the man opened a metal door in the basement and headed in.

It was trickier to fool machines than living beings. At least for Lukas, the small camera was much more annoying than a Master with great perception who was wary of his surroundings.

It was possible to completely remove any traces from his body. Those who didn't have strong mental power wouldn't notice Lukas even if he was standing in front of them.

But that was only tricking their senses; he didn't actually conceal himself.

Of course, he still had solutions for problems like this.

"Ghost."

At Lukas' soft chant, his body became a spirit body. It was a soul-like state that allowed the user to ignore the laws of physics and most physical attacks.

In the past, using Ghost would have made his body defenseless, but now, it was different.

Lukas' body had transformed into a spirit body. This was something that should have been physically impossible, but such restrictions didn't apply to Absolutes.

The problem was something else.

[...]

Lukas clenched his fists a few times.

He couldn't remain in this state for too long. For Absolutes like him, their bodies were vessels as well as seals. It could be called the dam that stopped their power from overflowing.

And this ghostly state temporarily lifted that seal.

In the first place, an Absolute's essence was contained in their soul instead of their flesh. To put it bluntly, this whitish state was closer to Lukas' true essence. If he remained in this state for a long time, his external force would begin to leak and Nodiesop, Letip, and Sedi would all be able to sense it.

Shuk—

Lukas' body floated through a wall before going down into the basement. The man had disappeared, and the only exit seemed to be the same door the man had entered through.

At least, that was how it appeared on the surface. Lukas turned to look at a shabby locker in the corner of the room.

Then he walked into it.

“No one tailed you, did they?”

“Are you looking down on me?”

He heard a whispered conversation.

Contrary to what one might expect, the locker led to a large room. This hidden room was probably the core of this building.

It was dark, but it was well organised and larger than he expected. And inside this room were two men.

One was the man Lukas had followed. He took off his shirt, grabbed a can of beer, and sat down on the couch with a groan.

“Did you deal with the intruders?”

“I released the Demon Beasts. But I’m not sure if that will be enough.”

“Hmm. They must be stronger than you expected.”

“I’m not sure about the man, but the woman is pretty powerful.”

Lukas looked at them.

They looked like humans. They had human physiques and normal faces. But they couldn't hide their demonic energy. These two were Demons.

Lukas' expression crumpled a bit. It would have been better if they were humans.

"Let's just watch the situation for now cause we can see that the Demon Beasts are dying pretty quickly."

"Yeah, let's do that."

Lukas decided to leave the room and search the entire building. Only after confirming that there was no one else there did he return.

And it wouldn't be difficult to subdue these two.

He released the Ghost spell.

"...huk?!"

The Demons only realised Lukas was there after they felt the ripples of mana. They turned around with the same gasping sound, but that was the last thing he allowed them to do.

Kiing-

“U-, urk...!”

Season 2 Chapter 58

“What the...”

The Demons’ entire bodies had been bound. It was still possible for them to speak, but they couldn’t even lift a finger.

Lukas turned his head, allowing them to see his face.

“Th-, this guy...”

The eyes of the Demon he’d followed widened in shock. He’d probably seen Lukas from a distance before.

He would never have imagined that this man would ignore the hundred or so Demon Beasts and chase after him instead.

“I’ll ask you a few questions, but I don’t really care if you answer.”

“Who are you?”

“What are you doing here?”

“...ha...”

They didn't answer. But this was to be expected.

Lukas reached out to the topless Demon who was sitting on the couch.

“What the hell are you... urk!”

His fingers gripped the Demon's head like a vice and slowly began to crush his skull.

The Demon cried out in pain as he felt his skull slowly break. And soon, he began making a bizarre sound as if he was struggling to breathe.

“Uk, uk, kuk, kuk...!”

“H-, Hyles! Dammit! What the hell are you doing?!”

Lukas was touching the Demon's brain, refining the information stored there to make it easier to say.

It was so painful that he would feel like he was dying, and it was possible that he would even lose his mind, but he didn't care about that.

It wouldn't kill him.

He doubted Sedi would have been able to notice him killing these two mutts, but since he was currently in an agreement with the Demon God's subordinate, he decided it was better to be safe.

Because he didn't know much about Sedi, just like Sedi didn't know much about him.

At some point, the eyes of the Demon, which had been shut tightly, slowly opened. And drool dripped out of his mouth.

Lukas asked again.

"What are you doing here?"

"We... we received... a mission."

"Hyles!"

When he saw his teammate suddenly answer the question in a languid manner, shock appeared in the other Demon's eyes. He didn't understand how he had changed so quickly.

“What mission?”

“Capture or kill the humans who pass through this city.”

“Where would the captured humans be sent?”

“To our superiors’ territories in Somalia or Algeria...”

“What would happen to the humans who were sent there?”

“S-, s-, s-, s...”

Hyles struggled to say the word.

“Slaves...”

After saying those words, Hyles’ expression became twisted.

“Hi-, hik. Uh, uh, uk, kuk. Th-, this is weird. Hee, hahahaha!”

“Uh, uhh...”

"H-, help me. My, my brain. Hi, hihhi!"

Gurk!

Hyles coughed up a mouthful of sticky blood before falling unconscious. It seemed the mental pressure from the mind control had been too much for him. His eyes remained open, and he shook like a convulsing frog.

Lukas' gaze then turned to the other Demon. If he could have moved his body, he would have flinched back harshly.

"His mind has broken. It will be difficult for him to return to the way he once was. Do you want to be the same?"

"I, I, I..."

"Tell me everything you know."

"I-, if I tell you everything... will you spare my life?"

His attitude and tone had become polite.

He'd realised what was happening and accepted it. That he could do nothing about Lukas.

When they were made aware of this fact, any Demon would lower their head willingly. A Demon who was deprived of the right to choose their own life or death was more harmless than an earthworm who crawled through the dirt and more miserable than apex predators who had fallen down to the bottom of the food chain.

All of the Demons whom Lukas had met were the same. After all, the only thing that mattered to them was their own self-preservation.

Emotions like friendship, kinship, or love were not things Demons had.

“I will spare you.”

Those words caused the Demon’s face to brighten up considerably. He could tell that Lukas wasn’t lying.

Unfortunately, he would not get the end he expected.

* * *

Sedi opened her eyes.

She hadn’t actually been sleeping. After all, an Absolute like her did not possess such physiological needs.

If she really wanted to, she could go into a sleep-like state, but that wasn't what she'd been doing. If it had to be put into words, it would be better to say that she'd been meditating.

That's why she was a bit annoyed. Anyone would feel the same if their concentration was interrupted.

When she finally decided to head outside, Katherine bowed her head and greeted her with a smile.

"Hello!"

"..."

This was such a strange creature.

She didn't know why she was greeting her with such a bright smile.

Sedi had never shown a good attitude to Katherine. Instead, she used her as she pleased or simply ignored her.

Nevertheless, Katherine didn't show any displeasure, and she instead did everything she could for Sedi. At first, she seemed a bit scared of her, but now, that fear was nowhere to be seen.

Ignoring her, Sedi walked outside with an annoyed expression on her face.

A man was standing there.

Sedi knew who this middle-aged man in a biker jacket was. Although it was their first time meeting in person, she'd definitely felt his presence when she entered this world

It was Letip.

"Why are you here?"

"You have an alliance with Lukas."

"So what if I do? You're not here to bitch about it, are you?"

Letip simply smiled at Sedi's rude response.

"No way. But where is he?"

Those words made her frown.

How would she know where he was?

Her expression remained the same but she waved her hands impatiently.

“I don’t have time for your bullshit. What do you want?”

“Do you want to die?”

“Huh?”

The sudden remark caused her to freeze slightly, speechless. Then, her expression became cold. The shadows at her feet began to bubble before a black scythe slowly rose up.

“You didn’t have to say all of that nonsense. If you wanted to fight, you should’ve said so from the start.”

She would never back down from a fight. A sadistic smile slowly spread across Sedi’s face.

But Letip shook his head and raised his hands.

“You might have misunderstood. I’m not saying I want to kill you.”

Was this bastard messing with her?

Sedi looked at Letip’s face.

'...he doesn't look like he's joking.'

Then was he telling the truth?

Sedi put away her scythe before speaking with an amused expression.

"Then who? Nodiesop? Or Lukas?"

"No."

Letip's next word made Sedi's expression become strange.

"You're going to die from someone other than myself, Nodiesop, or Lukas."

"..."

If it wasn't a fellow Absolute telling her those words, she would have already cut his head off.

But it was strange.

Letip was smiling, but Sedi could hear the sincerity in his tone.

This Absolute was certain.

Certain that something Sedi didn't expect would kill her.

"I'm sure you don't want to be destroyed just yet, Sedi Glaston. If you want to live, call Lukas and borrow his strength. That's all I can tell you."

Letip disappeared immediately after saying those words.

Looking at the spot he'd been standing in, Sedi couldn't help but swear.

"Asshole."

* * *

"I was originally told that this was a stopping point for hunters, a resting point. To find Demons and Demon Beasts in this place... not to mention such a sophisticated hideout."

When Lukas looked at him, the Demon seemed to want to shrink in on himself.

"It's not possible in a short period of time. When did you first occupy this place?"

“It’s been a few years. I don’t know the exact details.”

“Did you know we were going to be here?”

“That...”

The hesitation on the Demon’s face said it all.

Lukas didn’t shout or act intimidating. Instead, he simply glanced at the other Demon.

The Demon was more scared by this than anything else.

“...we bought the information.”

“From whom? There is no one who could’ve known we’d be passing through this a—.”

No one...

Lukas suddenly stopped talking.

It had been less than a day since they left the Congo Branch. They passed through the wilderness, where it was hard for Demons to live, let alone humans.

And they only reached this city after the sun went down.

In other words, Lukas and Joanna's route had not been exposed and there was no one who could know where they would be going.

Except for one person.

Lukas recalled the map in his pocket. It pointed out the fastest and safest route to Egypt as well as the location of the rest stops along the way. On the 'original map', there was no route to Egypt and no locations of rest stops.

Those were all added by one man.

It was clear now. They hadn't been exposed during their travel. They had been exposed from the very beginning.

These Demons knew that they would come to this city before they even set out.

"Whom did you buy the information from?"

The Demon closed his eyes. If he revealed this information, then his safety wouldn't be guaranteed. Punishment that he could not bear would certainly befall him.

Nevertheless, it was better than having his mind broken right now.

And from that Demon's mouth, came the name Lukas expected.

"It was Destin, the President of the Congo Branch."

Season 2 Chapter 59

Joanna was absorbed in a feeling of freeness that she had never experienced in her life.

Her face was pale, and she felt like she would collapse at any moment. Her mind felt fuzzy, and everything she saw appeared blurred.

And yet, in this state, she was able to sense even the slightest change that happened around her. From the slightest change in wind direction to a grain of sand brushing against her hand.

Was this what it felt like when you took drugs?

She'd never tried them before, so she wasn't sure.

'How long have I been like this?'

Joanna could clearly remember everything from the beginning.

The Demon Beasts swarmed towards her. At first, she thought that man was still around.

She didn't think that he'd really left her. She was certain that he'd help when things got truly dangerous. And she even thought about how mad she would be at him afterwards.

But that thought disappeared when the first Demon Beast's claws scratched her thigh.

The pain wasn't severe, but it was there. Her skin was torn more than she expected, and her blood flowed freely.

It was this injury that woke her up like a splash of cold water.

From that moment, she fought off the Demon Beasts fiercely, but they were persistent. They didn't care if even their legs or arms were blown off. Even if they lost half of their bodies, they still charged towards Joanna without hesitation.

Nevertheless, her spells were powerful enough to destroy them completely.

"Hyper Bolt!"

Joanna shouted a spell.

A powerful sphere of energy shot into the crowd of Demon Beasts. Following a small explosion of air, body parts were sent flying.

But Joanna had already turned her attention elsewhere. Half of the Demon Beasts were still alive.

She drew upon her mana once again.

'I still have enough mana, but...'

Her head felt like it was on fire.

Was her mental strength reaching the limit?

It was possible. After all, this was the first time she'd even been in such a desperate situation. She'd never fought so many enemies before. More importantly, she was on her own.

A Wizard without a Warrior to block from the front couldn't display even a third of their true power.

Two... No, if she had even one person to block the front, all of these weaklings would've died in an instant.

'No. It might still be difficult.'

Her eyes turned to the truck. And it was just in time as she saw a group of Demon Beasts crawling over to it.

“Fire Wall!”

Fwoosh!

Flames soared up from the ground and burned the bodies of the Demon Beasts. At the same time, she’d adjusted the power of her spell so that she didn’t damage the truck.

That was a problem as well. She’d never fought in a situation like this before. All of these problems stacked in a subtle way that lowered Joanna’s combat ability to its worst.

If there was even one other person there or if there were fewer enemies, she could’ve used ranged spells to her heart’s content.

“...”

She was out of breath, and her entire body was covered in cold sweat.

She couldn’t even afford to think.

There were only two thoughts looping infinitely in her head.

Get rid of the Demon Beasts and protect the truck.

What could she do?

There were dozens of opponents against her.

The most important thing in large battles was to have a firm grasp of everything on the battlefield. Having two objectives or, if you could afford it, three.

Move constantly. And always seek the most efficient path.

All of these were things she'd been taught, but it was only after being put in such an extreme situation that she was able to put them into practice.

Her resentment to that man had disappeared without a trace, and the despair she felt when she realised the situation did, too. Now, her mind was completely blank.

She cast spells as if entranced.

Larger.

Faster.

More efficient.

Something in her heart began to stir.

Just as an inexplicable pleasure began to fill her.

Crack!

“Aak..!”

A Demon Beast’s claws ripped into her shoulder, causing her flesh to be torn to pieces.

Unlike the wound on her thigh, this wound was almost fatal. In an instant, she’d almost lost her right arm.

‘It hurts.’

It hurt so much.

Her tears threatened to fall as she felt pain that she had never experienced in her life.

In an instant, her mind began to waver.

The Demon Beasts' claws and teeth could have poison. If she didn't act quickly, she might have to amputate her arm.

A sudden fear arose at that thought.

Her concentration was cracking, and her mana was about to scatter.

What was she doing right now?

She couldn't remember. The pain had caused her thoughts to fall into disarray.

A little more. She felt like she could have grasped something if she'd gotten just a little more time.

Joanna collapsed helplessly to the ground. And in an instant, the Demon Beasts charged towards her defenseless form.

She could only look at them approach her with despair-filled eyes.

She didn't want to die in such a way...

[Finish the incantation.]

A voice rang out in her head.

Her mind, which had become blurred, suddenly cleared up.

The Demon Beasts also stopped moving. No, it wasn't just the Demon Beasts. It seemed that space itself had stopped.

In this strange world, Joanna could finally think clearly again.

'Who...'

[Why did you let down your guard? Why did you stop focusing your mana? And you still dare to call yourself an Archmage?]

Joanna shuddered slightly at the reprimand.

'But... It hurts so much...'

[Pull yourself together. If you are an Archmage, then you should never stop a spell you started casting. Finish the spell. Even if your limbs are torn off, your ribs stab into your lungs, or your tongue is cut off.]

'I... I...'

Archmage.

It was a word she both loved and hated.

She knew.

She knew that she wasn't worthy of that title.

Joanna was just a finished product of North America's Wizard Institution.

She was proof that an Archmage could be created simply by using a set training regimen and mechanical mana enhancement. Without needing practical experience or independent research.

The implications were great.

Although it varied depending on the individual, it implied the possibility that Archmages could be 'mass produced' in America. It was something that would shock the entire world.

Joanna was also proud of that fact.

Of the hundreds of applicants, she was the only one who successfully became an Archmage. The best ones after her could only reach 5 stars at best.

She was the only special one. One of the few 7 star Archmages in North America.

That was what she thought she was.

But on her first day in Asia, she realised she was just a frog in a well.

She met a 'real Archmage'.

A Great Wizard who was on a completely different level from a manufactured Wizard.

Weren't they the same 7 stars?

Nevertheless, Joanna didn't believe she could defeat him even if there were five of her.

The Asian Hunters laughed at Joanna. And the other Archmages in America also ignored her.

They never said it openly, but it was clear that they never treated her like a peer. Their thoughts were obvious.

'What a disgrace to North America.'

Stupid girl.

But the thing that hurt the most was that she couldn't refute their criticism.

Those memories had become a trauma, and it stayed with her in the form of nightmares.

Since then, Joanna had never gone on a mission. And if she did go, it was only extremely safe missions with absolutely no risk at all.

Instead, she gained recognition by visiting events or meeting with celebrities.

This allowed Joanna to become one of America's most famous hunters. Without actually fulfilling the duties of a hunter.

When she met Wizards below her level, she would bare her fangs because she wasn't proud of herself.

Seeing someone calling themselves a Wizard reminded her of herself in the past.

A defective product.

A lucky loser who didn't even qualify as 6 stars, not to mention 7 stars.

That was her identity.

[An Archmage isn't something that's created by luck.]

'What do you know...'

[I can guarantee that you deserve it.]

"...!"

Those words caused Joanna's heart to shake violently.

Those were the words she wanted to hear most from someone.

[And I will give you a mission. It's not your destiny to be torn to death by these Demon Beasts. Overcome this ordeal.]

'Wh-, who... are you...?'

[...]

She didn't receive an answer. The presence in her mind was slowly fading.

...The being had left.

Joanna felt that the owner of the voice was somewhere far away, and it had only spoken to her in passing.

'The owner of that voice... No way...'

She'd heard of it.

It was a legendary tale that was often played off as baseless rumors.

That there was a voice that could only be heard by the chosen ones.

'If it was...'

If that was really 'his' voice...

If that being was truly talking to her...

Then it was a revelation!

Joanna wasn't defective.

She raised her head, her expression changing completely.

'I deserve it.'

She was someone who had the qualifications to be an Archmage, a being worthy of the title of Great Wizard.

So she couldn't die there. There was no way she was going to die.

This was only a trial at best.

An unknown courage erupted inside of Joanna. Clenching her teeth, she slowly rose back up to her feet.

The pain in her shoulder and thigh seemed to have eased slightly. She knew that it was just an illusion, but she didn't care.

"Kieek!"

"Kyak! Kyak!"

Dozens of Demon Beasts lunged simultaneously. The time, which had stopped, had resumed once again.

Fwoosh!

Flames erupted around Joanna's body.

Season 2 Chapter 60

"Huff, huff..."

Joanna flopped down to the ground.

She won. No. Instead, it would be better to say she 'survived'.

In any case, she'd managed to defeat all of the Demon Beasts.

Her stamina was at its limit. She felt like if she relaxed her guard even a little bit, she would fall unconscious in an instant.

Forcing herself to sit up, she looked at her shoulder.

The longer she took to take care of it, the more dangerous it could get. If she didn't get first aid immediately.

It was at that moment when she saw someone walking towards her from the ruined city.

It was a man with gray hair and a black coat.

The very same man who'd abandoned her.

"You...!"

His carefree attitude made her rage rise up in an instant.

"Where the hell were you-?!"

She suddenly stopped talking.

The man was just looking at her with a blank expression on his face. And somehow, seeing his stupid face made her calm down.

"Hah. Seriously..."

She sighed.

In all honesty, she didn't even have the energy to be angry. It could be said that her resentment had been sapped.

The man looked around without saying anything. His expression didn't change even when he saw the devastated surroundings and piles of corpses.

Instead, he simply walked over to Joanna and inspected her injuries before taking a potion out of his bag.

Judging from the color, she could tell that it was a potion that had been made with high purity soul crystals.

Then, he poured it onto Joanna's injuries.

Tsss.

"Ugh..."

Joanna couldn't help but groan in pain for a moment. Nevertheless, the fact that she could feel the pain was a good thing. At least it meant that the nerves in her arm hadn't been badly damaged. And it also meant that she wouldn't need to worry about amputation anymore.

Only then did the man open his mouth.

"You're pretty skilled."

How ridiculous.

She couldn't help but shake her head and wonder if that was all he had to say.

"...hmph. I *am* an Archmage."

As she said these words, Joanna's expression was humbler than usual. This was because she now felt assured of this fact.

When she recalled how she used to introduce herself like this in the past, she felt a stinging sensation in her chest.

"Besides..."

But those feelings disappeared when she recalled what she just experienced.

Joanna's face became bright with excitement as she continued.

"I also heard the Great Mage's voice."

"Huh?"

She felt slightly smug when she saw the surprised expression on his face. She had never seen him make such an expression before.

Mmm. It was definitely worth it.

“Haven’t you heard about it? The Founder of Magical Science, the Master of Spells, the God of Magic!”

“...this is the first time I’m hearing about it.”

Joanna couldn’t help but look at him.

“Why are you so surprised? Don’t you go around saying you’re a Wizard?”

Unlike sorcery and witchcraft, magic was not a supernatural power that had existed in the world before.

Instead, this mysterious power with a solid system had suddenly appeared in the world one day.

Therefore, unlike swordsmanship or martial arts that had thousands of years’ worth of legacy, there were only few records about magic.

Naturally, this meant that it was only possible to get hints from the grimoires that were randomly scattered across the various regions.

Eventually, after reaching a certain point, Wizards had no choice but to start carving their own path.

Walking towards the next level, which no one had ever reached before. Something that they weren't even sure existed in the first place.

It went without saying just how thorny that path was.

As time passed, more and more wizards became blocked by this proverbial wall, causing them to become frustrated. Time and time again, they gathered together to discuss a solution, but no conclusion was ever reached.

They wondered if that was the limit.

Wondered whether they'd ever be able to take the next step.

Then, just as all the Wizards became filled with despair, something strange happened.

All of the Wizards who had been stuck successfully jumped over the wall simultaneously. It happened at the same time as if it had been planned.

And all of the Wizards who stepped into the new stage said the same thing one after the other.

They heard a 'voice' who gave them the hint of how to move forward.

From that moment, this voice was called the Great Mage, or the God of Magic.

And suddenly, a rumour emerged that only a Wizard who had heard this voice could reach the legendary 9 stars level.

It was one of the few legends in the Wizard community.

Joanna had also heard the tale. When she was younger, she often fantasised about hearing the Great Mage's voice. But as she grew older, that thought gradually faded away.

Because she thought it was just a fairytale.

But today, she'd heard that voice. Clearly and indisputably.

Without a doubt. She'd heard the voice of the Great Mage.

Her heart beat violently in her chest.

Wasn't she the first person in the world to have such a lengthy conversation with the Great Mage?

"..."

Joanna smiled smugly when she saw the man's blank expression.

“Ah, well. It’s not unreasonable for you not to know. After all, the God of Magic only reveals himself to those who have the talent to reach 9 stars.”

“...is it so amazing? You just heard a voice.”

“Just a voice?! Ugh!”

Joanna shouted before feeling hot pain ripple through her shoulder.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she spoke bitingly.

“You’re so annoying. Don’t you understand how great this is? It’s said that only the chosen Wizards can hear the voice! And I’m one of them!”

Joanna’s voice became louder as she continued.

“I was chosen by the Great Mage!”

* * *

Destin.

He thought he was a reliable person.

At first glance, he hadn't been able to see any dishonesty, and there was even a glint of determination in his eyes. So he hadn't inspected him too deeply.

As a result, he realised that it was a hasty judgment. He wasn't an upright man but a man who thought what he was doing was upright.

There was no hesitation or unease in the eyes of such a person. Because they wouldn't feel guilty even if they did something morally wrong.

It was either one of two things.

Either he was doing shady things in the shadows to survive or he believed he was doing the right thing.

Lukas looked down at the map in his hand.

The map given by Destin was supposed to display the shortest route to Egypt. And it seemed that Destin had drawn the route himself.

If they were to continue along this path, it was clear that they would run into countless Demons and Demon Beasts.

Nevertheless, Lukas decided not to switch routes immediately.

He turned to look at Joanna.

She was humming happily while driving.

It was completely different from the day before when she grumbled constantly.

'...God of Magic.'

He hadn't known that such a legend had circulated among the Wizards.

About 20 years ago, some time after he'd first introduced magical science to this world, some Wizards were frustrated by the huge wall that they'd encountered for the first time.

The wall of 7 stars, called Archmage.

The Wizards who were at the forefront had no Masters. This meant that they had no one to consult when they were lost or unsure about something. The best conclusion they could reach was to come together with those on their level and discuss their different opinions.

In a way, this wasn't a bad thing. In fact, it was actually better than being taught by a Master.

However, such methods usually took a long time before revealing their effectiveness.

If they were left alone, it might take them decades before they were able to find even the slightest clue.

So Lukas stepped in.

He gave hints only to those who were blocked by the wall, especially those extremely talented individuals.

And those Wizards were able to get a great realisation due to Lukas' advice and take the step to the next level.

Lukas checked the effectiveness of his action before leaving them to their own devices once again.

...But he hadn't realised that his actions had developed into such a legendary story over time.

'The Great Mage's Chosen Ones.'

Great Mage.

The strange feeling that this title gave him caused his heart to flutter slightly.

Lukas had never mentioned the title 'Great Mage' to anyone.

The terms Great Wizard, Archmage, or Mage referred to the state, but 'Great Mage' was different.

In his homeworld, everyone thought of only one person when they heard the name Great Mage. That was a title that had only been held by Lukas Trowman.

But in this world with no magical history whatsoever, he was once again called the Great Mage. As if it was a logical conclusion from his spreading and teaching magical science.

...Perhaps.

'Is this related to my essence?'

"Hey!"

Lukas was shaken from his thoughts.

Joanna, who had been humming to herself all this while, was looking at him.

"What are you daydreaming about? You didn't answer even after I called you ten times."

"Did you really call me that many times?"

“Well, no. It was only two or three times.”

“...”

“Anyways, I think we should take a break. Aren’t there any safe spots nearby?”

Joanna tapped her thigh.

She wasn’t whining. It was just that it had already been three hours since she started driving.

The gas was running low, and she was a bit hungry, so she thought it was a good idea to rest now.

Lukas opened the map. Then Joanna stretched her neck to look at it.

“Focus on driving.”

“Isn’t it fine to just step on the accelerator in this wilderness without even the shadow of a person? I don’t even have to hold the steering wheel.”

Her words might have been a bit exaggerated, but she wasn’t exactly wrong.

Lukas hadn't told Joanna about what he'd learned about Destin. This was because there was nothing she could do about it and because, with her personality, she might try to turn back and try to raze the Congo Branch to the ground.

Or report it to Neil in North America.

Neil Prand. What would that man do if he learned about this?

'He might not even care.'

Even if Africa became hell, or worse, Neil wouldn't care as long as it didn't affect North America.

What about Joanna? How would she react?

"...let's go here."

Hiding his thoughts, Lukas pointed to a location on the map.

It wasn't the location of a city. In fact, it was an uninhabited rocky area that was completely out of the way of Destin's recommended route.

"Don't you think it'll be hard to move through such a rocky area with the truck?"

“We’re not going across it. We’ll just rest at the entrance before taking another route.”

“Huh? I think it would be better to stick with our current route... there are many cities and well-paved roads.”

In all honesty, Lukas didn’t particularly care what route they took. The reason he decided to go to the rocky area was purely out of consideration for Joanna.

If they continued along the original route, it was highly likely that they would encounter more Demons and Demon Beasts. And Lukas had no intention of fighting Demons or Demon Beasts on this mission.

In other words, the burden of fighting would entirely be on Joanna. Of course, the injury to her thigh and shoulder that she’d received the previous night had already been healed, but there were still some aftereffects. More importantly, constantly pushing her limits in a fierce battle like the one she just fought should have given her a lot of mental fatigue.

But Joanna didn’t show it.

Was it because she didn’t want to show any weakness?

Perhaps it was because of her pride.

“We can’t blindly trust the information on the map. Destin said that the map was old. It seems that there are large mountains in the rocky area, so it would be better if we went there and got a good look at the surroundings before making a decision.”

“Hmmm... All right.”

Seemingly convinced by Lukas' words, Joanna turned her head once again to look out the windshield.