

Great Mage 581

Volume 2 - Chapter 281

He opened his eyes.

There was a severe ringing in his ears. It was as if thousands of hummingbirds were flapping their wings in his ears. His physical condition was also the worst. It felt like he would vomit at any moment.

'...my body.'

His body, which had been on the brink of collapse because of his forced usage of external force, was now only barely maintaining its shape.

It was clear to say that the current Lukas was no better than a half-corpse.

He could see some strands of his hair that flowed in front of his face. His hair had become white, completely losing all of its colour. His left arm was moving stiffly and he could barely feel anything from his right leg. His internal organs were even more of a mess.

This was the result of forcibly trying to restore a collapsing body.

It was like a patchwork of flesh and bone.

But that didn't matter.

Swaying, Lukas tried to get to his feet, but he fell to the ground again.

This was the best proof of just how bad his physical condition was.

'...I've returned.'

Was it the field of the qualifier?

Or was it Earth?

...Rather than that, he needed to figure out how much time had passed.

Lukas tried to look around, but his vision was so blurred that he couldn't even see the shape of the things around him.

A gentle breeze blew across his skin.

The feeling of the blades of grass brushing against his calves... as well as the breeze blowing on his body made him think that he was standing in the middle of an open field.

The sky was also the color of sunset. Although his vision was still not clear, he was still able to see that much.

Whoosh-

The wind blew once again.

He didn't know why, but his heart froze for a moment.

'...the nature here is preserved.'

As far as he knew, most of the Earth's nature had been severely polluted by the Demons. At the very least, there was no place on the planet where the nature had been preserved to such an extent.

In other words, he was probably somewhere in the Great World.

Clatter-

After some time, he heard the sound of horseshoes hitting the ground as well as what felt like a large carriage.

"Whoa! Whoa! Stop, stop!"

Because they stopped in such a hurried manner, a lot of dust was kicked into the air.

Lukas let out a cough.

“Hey! Why are you just laying there? Are you out of your mind?”

“...”

He couldn't answer. This language wasn't something that could be heard on Earth. But Lukas didn't have any problems understanding it.

After all, he knew this language.

“Goddammit. We have a long way to go... Can't you just get out of the way? Do I have to let the horses kick some senses into you?”

“Stop, I told you not to say things like that.”

“Ah... yes.”

It was at that moment that a soft voice sounded out.

“Are you okay?”

The speaker slowly approached him. He could tell that this person was quite tall because they blocked the sun from his face despite maintaining some distance.

Lukas raised his head. His vision still hadn't cleared up yet. In addition, the person standing before him had their back to the sunset.

He spoke in a stuttering voice.

"I... hurt my head..."

"Your head...? Oh my god."

The man couldn't help but let out a soft gasp when he saw Lukas.

Although he still couldn't see clearly, Lukas was sure that he didn't look very good.

"...looking at the mana around you, I'm sure that you aren't an ordinary person. Where are you from?"

...Mana?

That was a word that was used in the Great World.

They seemed to prefer calling mana the energy of nature.

The strange feelings he'd been having began to pile up one on top of the other and for some reason, his heart began to beat faster in his chest.

Nevertheless, he couldn't confirm anything just yet. It was possible that he was just in a different part of the Great World and not the Heavenly Realm.

When Lukas didn't answer his question after a long while, the man seemed to take his silence to mean something else and continued.

"We are headed towards Westroad Academy, but if you are unable to move, we can take you to the nearest city first."

"_"

At that moment, the strange feelings that had accumulated in his chest seemed to explode.

Lukas took a deep breath without realising it.

He had just heard something that he couldn't easily let pass.

"...what did you... just say?"

"Huh?"

“Where did you say... you were going?”

“Westroad Academy.”

It was a name that remained faint in his memories even after so many years had passed.

Westroad Academy.

One of the best Wizard training institutions in the Kastkau Empire, and the school he had attended for a while as ‘Frey Blake’ so long ago. (TL: He didn’t even stay a full semester)

Lukas suddenly looked down at the black ring on his finger.

[Aside from that, I also added a lot of functions of Master. Not to brag, but it took me more than 5 years to make it, so I’d be happy if you wore it all the time.]

Those were the words that had been written in Arid’s note.

‘Functions for me...’

Right. When he thought about it, it was strange.

There was no reason for Arid to engrave the coordinates of the Great World or Earth on the ring. At that point, it was impossible that Arid could have known that he would want to leave the Abyss.

Lukas looked down at the ring that had been given to him as a gift.

A gift for Lukas. Functions for him.

...It was possible for Arid's communication power to pinpoint the exact coordinates of a universe. In fact, he'd even used his power to show Lukas a scene from his homeworld.

What if...

What if the reason Arid had taken five years to make the ring was because he was looking for the coordinates of a specific 'universe'?

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And what if those coordinates were for the 'universe that Lukas wanted to return to'?

Lukas stared up at the man in front of him blankly.

It was only at that moment that his blurry vision gradually began to clear up.

The face he saw was also in his memories.

“What... is your name?”

“Huh?”

“Your name...”

The man seemed a bit suspicious of Lukas’ strange attitude, but he still replied with a friendly smile.

“My name is Peran Jun. By the way, have we met before?”

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“Aren’t you being too kind?”

Peran turned his gaze away from the scenery that flashed outside of the rattling carriage.

What he saw was the face of a woman who was unable to hide her displeasure.

No, it would be more accurate to say that this woman was deliberately showing him her displeased expression.

After all, this woman, who looked confident and capable, was Rina, a merchant belonging to the 'Red Hub', which was one of the top three merchant companies in the empire.

The standards of the Red Hub were so strict that everyone who wanted to become a member had to take several tests and interviews. And while she might seem unassuming now, Rina was a merchant with a remarkable track record even within the Red Hub. This meant that contrary to her proud, naive appearance, she had a lot of experience when it came to business.

As a merchant, one of the first skills that they mastered was being able to thoroughly hide their inner thoughts, and there was no way that Rina, who was famous in the merchant world, would not be able to hide something as simple as displeasure.

In other words, this woman, Rina, was actually complaining to Peran in a subtle way.

"What do you mean?"

Pretending not to notice, Peran tilted his head slightly and asked.

Rina continued with the displeased expression still on her face.

"He just happened to appear in our path at a time like this. I think that is too much of a coincidence."

"..."

“Also, don’t you think that saying that he lost his memory is the best lie to use to cover up the situation? No matter what you ask, he will just say he doesn’t remember.”

“Merchant Rina.”

A soft voice sounded in her ears.

Innocent young ladies might swoon just from hearing this voice. Of course, the thing that would have the biggest effect was Peran’s appearance.

Because of her job, Rina had traveled all over the continent. This wasn’t just limited to the human countries. She had also visited the countries of the other races, and she had even seen elves with her own eyes.

In her opinion, Peran’s appearance was no lesser than theirs.

‘This world is so unfair.’

Status, personality, appearance, and talent.

The young man in front of her was given everything from birth.

If Rina had been a bit more innocent, she might have been swayed into giving up her liver, kidney and everything else for this man.

Of course, that wouldn't happen because Rina loved money more than anything else.

"Please speak."

"While I respect your professional consciousness, I think it is a bit of an occupational disease to be suspicious of every unexpected thing. Excessive suspicion will only cause fatigue, so it's best to put it aside."

"..."

Rina closed her mouth and her eyes narrowed slightly.

She realised that Peran had conveyed his intentions by packaging the phrase 'stop prattling' in as old fashioned a manner as possible.

"I'm sure that he was simply involved in something that he has to keep to himself."

She couldn't help but question those mumbled words.

Was that really what he thought?

Or did he purposefully say something ridiculous in order to see her reaction?

Rina rolled this thought over in her mind for a long time, but she soon realised that although he might seem like an ordinary noble, Peran was a Wizard.

As they were the type to risk their lives for rationality, their minds were not things that could be understood by normal people. Perhaps he was analysing the young man in his own way.

“...I’ve heard of bandits who used similar methods in the past.”

“I think I’ve heard of it too. They would have some members infiltrate a merchant convoy while pretending to be civilians. That way, they could get an idea of the items being transported as well as lead the group to their hideout.”

For a moment, she was greatly amazed by the accurate answer.

While it might be a common story among merchants, the other was the son of a Duke family.

Of course, now that he’d transferred his real power to his younger siblings and was now journeying across the continent for some unknown reason he had learned some things, but that didn’t mean that the status he was born with would just disappear.

In other words, the reason why Rina was so impressed was because she knew that the child of a high class aristocratic family would usually not be interested in such things.

“...right now, we are in a situation where no matter how careful we are, it won’t be careful enough. Lord Peran, you have a much better idea of their influence than I do.”

“I know that. But he hasn’t said anything.”

“That can’t count as proof of innocence.”

“Trust me, Merchant Rina. There will be no obstacles on our journey as long as I’m here.”

Peran’s voice was still calm but Rina didn’t say anything more.

This was because it was the truth. Peran Jun. As long as she was accompanied by this Archmage, then it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that this carriage was one of the safest places in the world.

Besides, it wouldn’t be good for her to continue to press him like this.

Even if Rina was not a member of the Kastkau Empire, the hierarchical relationship between her and Peran was clear.

Of course, seeing as how amiable he was, this man would not be offended if she were to be rude to an extent. But Rina knew. The more like this someone was, the more special attention one had to pay to their behaviour.

‘Once they begin to dislike you, it’s all over.’

Although she was still suspicious of the man they had picked up by accident, it was none other than Peran who was tolerating his presence. Not only would nothing change if she kept complaining, but if she continued to press, it was highly likely that she would leave a bad impression.

After quickly calculating the profit and loss, Rina politely bowed her head and took a step back.

“...how strange.”

As she backed down, Peran muttered softly to himself.

Even during their conversation, his attention had been directed at the white haired young man they had picked up. But he kept doing the same thing he'd done since he'd entered the carriage. Blankly staring at the sky.

“Strange.”

He couldn't help but mutter again.

When they'd first met, he felt strange mana swirling throughout this man's body. This mana was so strange that even Peran couldn't help but feel wary.

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'I can't feel it at all now.'

Peran's eyes were discerning enough to see if there was mana flowing in the bodies of others, and if there was, how much there was and how concentrated it was.

But now, he couldn't even feel the slightest hint of mana from this young man.

'...I lost my memories.'

When he'd asked the young man a few questions, this was the answer he received. Of course, Peran didn't accept these words at face value...

'His expression wasn't a lie.'

But he clearly remembered the indescribable emotions on this man's face when they first met.

Among them, the most prominent emotion was confusion. He wasn't certain about anything else, but he was at least sure that the man didn't understand his situation at that time.

He was certainly full of mysteries.

If it were an ordinary person, they would definitely feel hesitant when they encountered a man like this.

But Wizards were different.

For them, 'something unknown' was a research subject to be carefully analysed and observed.

That was the best way to describe Peran's current state. Of course, this didn't mean he put aside his vigilance.

'...first things first.'

He would have to talk to him.

With this thought, Peran began walking to the young man.

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Lukas sat at the edge of the carriage's luggage compartment staring blankly at the sky. The sky was still tinted by the colors of sunset.

The sight of the westward heading orange sun, the smell of the fresh grass, and the faint sound of crows in the distance all resounded in his heart.

'...I've returned.'

The universe he had been longing for.

His homeworld.

He'd returned to the place he'd been born, raised and eventually left.

...A place he had hoped to see hundreds of millions of times. No, it was probably even more than that. His wish had come true.

Nevertheless, Lukas wasn't happy. He couldn't be.

This was not the return he'd hoped for.

He'd wanted to return after becoming a being that stood at the very peak of Absolutes. He'd wanted to return as the god of humanity in the truest sense.

And if that was impossible, he'd wanted to find an alternative answer.

A convincing answer that could explain the existence of 'Lukas Trowman.'

...But he hadn't found one.

In other words, Lukas had ended up washing up here like trash floating in a river without accomplishing anything. In fact, he was in a much more miserable state than when he'd left on his journey.

He was a defeated soldier.

There were many people here that he missed.

Whenever he closed his eyes, their faces always shined in his mind.

It had been a very long time. It was possible that the faces Lukas remembered were different from the real ones.

Nevertheless, he wanted to meet them.

Even at that very moment.

“...”

He shook his head.

But he wouldn't do that. Lukas didn't deserve to reunite with them.

'Why did I return to this universe?'

Lukas thought that there had to be some reason for it. Of course, he knew the fundamental reason. It was because he wanted it, and because Arid had engraved the coordinates on the ring.

...But the 'why' that Lukas was asking was from a different perspective. There must be a different, fate related, reason that had caused it to happen.

Twitch-

He tried to move his fingers.

The sensations from his two arms were different. The feeling in his left arm was much fainter than his right. This was proof that most of the cells in that arm were dead. This meant that it couldn't be restored even with the greatest healing techniques. At the very least, it would be impossible without a power on par with Arid's.

The condition of his right leg was even more severe. It might not look obvious on the outside, but it seemed that his bones had fused together, so it would be incredibly difficult for him to walk properly.

It was possible for him to stand on his feet, but he would not be able to avoid walking with a limp.

But the thing that drew the most of Lukas' attention was the condition of his internal organs, more specifically his mana room.

“ ... ”

His mana room had completely collapsed.

Far from just being unable to use magic, it was impossible for his body to even contain mana in the first place. In addition, the situation of his mana room was even more desperate than his arms and legs. This was because, while slim, there was still a chance that he would be able to fix them.

But that wasn't the case for his mana room. Even Lukas had never encountered a mana room that had collapsed in such a way. He didn't even have the slightest idea of how to fix it. And if he didn't know, it meant that no one in this universe would know about it either.

When he first arrived, mana had erupted from his entire body.

This wasn't Lukas releasing it on purpose. Instead, it was his body's inherent mana evaporating at an alarming rate without him being able to stop it.

'This situation is terrible.'

Despite having this thought, Lukas' expression didn't become more serious.

In fact, he looked quite calm.

—Because he'd prepared for death and annihilation.

Just the fact that he was alive and breathing at that moment could be considered a miracle. It would be too much to ask for more than that.

'...there must be a reason.'

A reason that Lukas returned to this universe.

It wasn't to be reunited with those that he'd been separated from.

Instead, Lukas' thoughts were being drawn to the image of a man in his head.

'Kasajin.'

He couldn't help but think that the decisive reason, or a clue, for why he'd abandoned humanity and became the Demon King must be somewhere in this universe.

It was at that moment that he felt something behind him.

"How's your body?"

A soft voice.

Lukas turned his head and looked at the handsome young man that had approached him.

—Peran Jun.

Memories of him faintly appeared in his mind.

A talented young man that he'd met at Westroad Academy and later became friends with.

A young man who had been unsure of his path at that time.

The moment he'd made a promise with him appeared in his mind.

It felt strange. He felt weird looking at this man that he'd smiled and bumped fists with at that time.

This was because he was now unimaginably old.

It was no exaggeration to say that the Lukas from that time was completely different from the current Lukas.

...Then what about Peran?

Did he change as well?

"I'm much better now... Thank you. I owe you one."

Swallowing his questions, Lukas expressed his gratitude.

—By the way, have we met before?

He couldn't help but think about the question he'd asked during their first reunion.

Why did he ask something like that?

Peran only knew 'Frey Blake'. Even until the end, he had never learned that his true identity was Lukas Trowman, the Great Mage from 4,000 years in the past.

And the current Lukas was completely different from both 'Frey' and the past 'Lukas'.

Nevertheless, Peran had looked at him and asked him if they'd ever met before.

Perhaps he had acquaintances that gave him a similar impression to the current Lukas.

Or perhaps it was just an instinct which was impossible to explain in a logical manner.

...It didn't matter either.

“It’s fine. Did you manage to remember anything else?”

“Yes. I managed to remember my name.”

“Oh.”

Peran looked relieved.

While looking up at his face, Lukas wondered.

Frey Blake.

Lukas Trowman.

Those were the two names Lukas called himself in this world.

But Peran knew both of them, so he couldn’t say either name.

Nevertheless, Lukas...

“My name is Lukas.”

Still chose to say his true name.

* * *

“I see.”

As expected, when Peran heard the name, he simply nodded without seeming particularly surprised.

The name Lukas was by no means rare.

In fact, it could even be considered a relatively common name. This was the case 4,000 years ago, and even more so in the present era. It was a name that Peran, as a citizen of the Kastkau Empire, must be quite familiar with.

As long as he didn't add in the last name 'Trowman', no one would find it strange.

'No.'

In his current state, even if Lukas revealed himself to be the Great Mage, he would only be treated as a madman.

Unlike his days as Frey Blake, he now had the body of 'Lukas Trowman', but his haggard appearance and white hair gave a completely different impression.

Perhaps the only people now that could see Lukas and identify his true identity were those who'd seen his true appearance 4,000 year ago.

Anastasia, who had Schweiser's memories and ego.

Or Iris...

"Did you remember anything else?"

"...no."

After saying that, Lukas added.

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologising? You're probably the one who's the most confused right now."

Peran smiled softly as he spoke.

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Of course, Lukas noticed the suspicions hidden in that smile, but it didn't upset him. Rather, in this situation, it would be strange if there wasn't even the slightest suspicion directed towards him.

“It is fate that we managed to meet like this, so I want to help you as much as I possibly can, but...”

He purposefully trailed off at the end of his sentence and Lukas easily guessed his intentions.

“I’m thankful that you are willing to take me to the nearest city.”

Peran gave a slightly apologetic smile.

‘...Circle.’

A group that most of the people Lukas wanted to reunite with were a part of.

Peran probably had some form of contact with them. After all, his father, Shepard Jun was a member of a Circle, and Peran himself had wanted to join in the past

‘The Circle is a hidden organisation...’

Although their identity had been revealed to an extent during the war with the Demigods, the Circle was, in essence, a hidden organisation. Therefore, Lukas didn’t think it would be easy for him to reach them.

Lukas had no intention of reuniting with most of his past relationships, but there was one person he felt he had to meet.

'Ivan.'

The successor of the Warrior King Fist.

Perhaps Ivan might know something about Kasajin's fall.

But Ivan had now become someone that wasn't easy to meet.

Grand Master.

According to his memory, that was the way Cairo Wilsemann had addressed Ivan.

So it was highly likely that Ivan had become the most powerful person in the current Circle and had effectively become the leader of the hidden organisation.

'It would be impossible for me to talk to him on my own in my current state.'

In the first place, it wouldn't be easy to meet the leader of the Circle.

In fact, it was nigh impossible. This was especially so considering how weak he was now.

It was at that moment that an ugly desire appeared in his heart.

Even when Ivan learned his true identity, he didn't revere him as a hero, but treated him as an equal, a friend.

So wouldn't it be alright for him to reveal his identity to him?

Couldn't he confess that he'd come back for a while because things had gotten messed up?

“...”

He shook his head.

That was such a disgusting thought that he couldn't believe it came from within him.

This was a matter of face. Lukas' pride would never accept such behaviour.

'...first...'

The thing he needed the most was information.

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Lukas couldn't help but look at the sky again.

Exactly how much time had passed?

What was the situation on the continent like now that the Demigods had disappeared.

Had the Circle revealed themselves or were they still hiding in the shadows?

Those questions and dozens more flitted around his head like flies.

"By tomorrow morning at the latest, we will arrive at the border of the Kastkau Empire. Ah, Kastkau is the closest country to where we are now."

The Kastkau Empire.

A powerful country that was famed for being a Magic Empire.

When the Demigods had revealed their true colours, the destruction they caused swept across the entire continent.

Some countries were completely destroyed, and even for the ones that weren't, most of their cities had been obliterated. The Empire was one of the few places that only suffered minor damage.

The reason for this was simple.

The Kastkau Empire were the ones who bowed their heads to the Demigods faster than any other country.

While it might have been considered a wise choice at that time, it obviously became an unwashable stain after the Demigods disappeared.

Their influence as a superpower that led the continental situation disappeared, and they received all forms of ridicule from the neighbouring countries.

As Lukas expected, the national turmoil that bloomed as a result of this would not dissipate easily.

He looked at Peran Jun.

While it was possible to see the dignity of a noble in his expression and actions, he was, surprisingly, wearing ordinary clothes. While he didn't look shabby, it still made it difficult to tell that he was a noble by just looking at him.

“...”

The Jun Duke Family was one of the pillars that supported the Imperial Family, and the power and influence they possessed in the Empire could be said to be in the top three of all the families.

Since Peran, the heir of the family, was dressed in such a frugal manner, Lukas couldn't help but wonder about what had happened.

"About two days after crossing the border is a city called 'Bailak'. Although it's just a small city, the security is very good so you won't have to worry about anything happening. If you choose to go to Bailak, I will help to approve of your temporary status."

After waking up from his thoughts, Lukas turned to Peran and nodded.

"Thank you."

"..."

But Peran's expression was a bit strange.

"...you are... strangely calm."

Unlike before, when he kept it hidden, there was a faint hint of suspicion in his voice.

This was a natural and expected response.

After all, just because you couldn't recall your memories didn't mean you forgot the basic logic you had built up through experience. It was just like an ordinary person wouldn't be able to overcome the loneliness and fear they felt if they woke up alone on the vast ocean without memories.

Lukas was also aware of this fact. If he wanted to, he could truly play the part of someone who had lost all of their memories. It wouldn't be hard for him to imitate the confusion and fear that loss of memory would cause.

But he didn't do that.

There was a hint of depth in Peran's eyes that didn't suit his age. (TL:...the estimated time that passed keeps getting less and less)

It would be almost impossible to fool this man with clumsy acting. Instead, it was better to just reveal his true personality as it was, and only use small lies that were difficult to distinguish from the truth.

"Being anxious won't help me regain my lost memories."

"Hmmm. That is true..."

Peran didn't say anything after that.

For a moment, their gazes met, and Lukas couldn't help but feel bitter inside.

-Speaking politely.

-Constantly wary.

-The hint of suspicion in his voice.

These three things made Lukas realise the thickness of the wall that Peran had placed between them.

'I see.'

At this point, this moment.

Peran was no longer his close friend.

'...I'll have to get used to that.'

He couldn't let himself feel so depressed. Otherwise, if he was sad every time he encountered one of his past relationships, his mind would collapse before he could achieve his goal.

Lukas couldn't help but think that his psyche had become as weak as his physique.

This was because the human emotions and characteristics that had been muted for a long time had been reawakened.

'Since I regained the [weakness] that I'd lost.'

Nevertheless, that didn't mean that he would show that weakness.

After all, the one who wished for a chance to start over was none other than himself.

* * *

Clatter.

Lukas sat in an empty corner of the luggage compartment. The sun had long since set, and the surroundings were pitch black. Perhaps because it was autumn, it became much colder after the sun went down.

It was dangerous to drive a carriage in the dark, so they would soon stop and prepare camp, perhaps after they left the flat plain they were currently traversing.

-Lukas' body and mind were currently in a stable state.

He was leaning against the boxes in the compartment, contemplating what he would do in the future.

'...what I have to do.

Now that he had returned to his homeland, Lukas currently had three main goals.

The first was to regain his power as an Absolute. He still had work to finish, and to do so he had to return to Earth. In order to travel across universes, it would be necessary for him to regain his position as an Absolute once again. Because the mind and body of a mortal could not withstand interuniversal travel.

His second goal was connected to the first. Finding a way to get back to Earth. There were still a few points that needed to be figured out for this goal, so he would leave it for later.

The third goal was to somehow find the reason for Kasajin's fall, something that could only be done in this universe.

None of those three goals were easy. If he rushed to solve any one of them, it was possible that he would end up failing all of them. So Lukas was aiming to solve all of them in the long term.

He would progress one step at a time.

At the beginning, it would be easy to get frustrated at the slow-paced progress, but in the long run, it would be the surest and quickest path.

First of all, he intended to leave the caravan at the city of Bailak, where he would stay for a while until he increased his ability to live on his own. He would also have to contemplate how to restore his collapsed mana room and also find some ways to protect himself while he couldn't use magic.

Finding those 'ways' would also not be an easy task.

After all, Lukas' current body was just like a normal human body. No, it was even less than that.

It would be difficult to train his body in a normal way because his arm and leg were practically disabled.

It was also not possible for him to use divine power.

Then what could he do?

Without mana or divine power,

What could Lukas do to protect himself or defeat someone?

This was a miserable situation. It would even be accurate to say that it was hopeless.

It was a situation where a being who was once an Absolute had collapsed, and they now had to find a way to defend themselves against mortals.

...But, surprisingly, Lukas didn't feel particularly gloomy.

'Four more days.'

After that, they would arrive in Bailak and Lukas would be left on his own, so he needed to get as much information from Peran as possible before then.

About the Circle.

When he was on Earth, he'd gotten a glimpse of Ivan with the help of Arid's power. And he remembered his expression of sadness and irritation.

Ivan looked deeply tired.

It seemed that he was struggling with another kind of situation other than the Demigods.

...Would Peran also know about Ivan's 'problem'?

'Now that I think about it.'

In the past, Peran had been a member of the 'Trowman Rings', one of the student groups in Westroad Academy. And he hoped to one day join the 'real' Trowman Rings, instead of just a student group.

Perhaps it was due to this longing that Peran had never taken the orange ring off of his finger in the past.

'When I saw him earlier, he didn't have a ring.'

Peran's fingers were naked.

“...”

Either he had changed his mind. Or he had another reason for taking it off.

Lukas had a strange feeling, but he knew that he would never know the answer by wondering on his own.

‘I’ll have to talk to Peran more tomorrow.’

When the situation reached this point, the memory loss sets became a hindrance instead. Because he couldn’t even get a hint about the Circle.

For the rest of the night, Lukas carefully planned the things he would talk about with Peran in the morning.

But the next day.

He realised that his night-long contemplation had been for nothing.

The reason was simple.

-Peran Jun disappeared as if he had evaporated.

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Merchants were one of the professions that tried to avoid laziness the most. Of course, it was the same for Rina. Generally, her days began before even the sun started to rise.

“Mmm...”

With a soft moan, she stretched her body beneath the blanket as she woke up. After tying her hair up in a messy bun, Rina then began fixing her bedding. The dawns of late autumn were quite chilly, and the bed looked very inviting, but she ruthlessly suppressed the urge to climb back into its warm embrace. Nevertheless, she couldn't stop the yawn that burst out.

‘Did I sleep for about 4 hours?’

She hadn't slept for more than six hours in the two weeks since they'd started this journey, and the fatigue she felt was beginning to accumulate. But she knew that she just needed to hang in there a bit longer. Because once they got into the empire, her work could be considered half finished.

‘But I can't relax just yet.’

It would only take one more day before they arrived at the border. If nothing special occurred, they would be able to see the Rulan river by the next morning.

There wasn't much time left until they reached their destination, but it was all the more reason why she couldn't release her tension yet.

Usually, if something were to happen, this would be the time.

Of course, with Peran Jun accompanying them on this journey, most risks would not turn into crises.

Tap tap...

As she walked out of her tent, she saw a few mercenaries sitting around the dying bonfire. They were the night watch.

They all bowed their heads slightly when they saw Rina step out.

“You woke up early today too.”

“Was your bedding comfortable enough?”

While it might seem like they were being rude by talking like this to their employer, their behaviour could actually be considered very polite for mercenaries. Rina, who had the experience of hiring mercenaries dozens of times, understood this fact well.

“Of course, it was much more comfortable than sleeping on the ground. And I wasn’t cold since I was using blankets imported from the northern snowfields.”

“Kuh, I’m so jealous.”

“I really want a blanket like that. How much did you say it was again?”

“Since we’ve become friends after working together, if you buy one now, I’ll sell it to you for 3 gold and 47 silver coins.”

When Rina spoke with a professional smile on her face, the mercenaries all shrank back slightly. If they worked hard for a month, they could probably earn around 10 gold coins a month. While this might be a lot for mercenaries, no matter how much they made, it would be impossible for them to waste a third of their salary on a single blanket.

“...ah. You could probably drink as much black beer as you want with that much.”

Rina let out a laugh when the mercenaries tried to change the subject.

“Just bear with it a bit longer. You will all get a day off when we arrive in Bairak.”

“Oh!”

“Hearing that really does cheer us up.”

They chatted for a while longer in a jovial tone, but the atmosphere soon changed.

“By the way... who the hell is that guy?”

One of the mercenaries pointed towards one of the carriages with an expression of dissatisfaction on his face.

Without even looking, she knew who he was referring to. It was the carriage carrying the white haired man they'd found unconscious on the road.

Apparently, his name was Lukas.

"We're taking him to the city for free, can't he do a few chores to show his gratitude?"

"That's right. That's common morality, but that guy doesn't seem to have that. Just look at how shameless he is, resting in the luggage compartment as if it's only natural."

Such complaints were natural.

After all, sleeping in the luggage compartment was much warmer and more comfortable than sleeping outdoors.

Of course, it was difficult to secure much space in the luggage compartment that was filled with all kinds of packages.

So the only ones who usually slept in the luggage compartment were the employers Rina and Peran, or the leader of the mercenary group Idail and the vice leader Garp.

Apart from them, there was only enough space for one other person. The mercenaries usually decided who got this spot through bets, but now, Lukas, who had recently been picked up, had taken it from them.

Of course, this was only allowed because of Peran.

Rina spoke in an ambiguous tone.

“Please bear with it a little longer. We are only taking him to Bairak.”

“...yeah yeah.”

“Well... If that’s what the employer says.”

The mercenaries nodded their heads as though they understood, but their attitudes showed that it was insincere.

This was natural. After all, there was no coercion or deterrence in Rina’s words. So unless their leader Idail or vice leader Garp directly ordered them, they would continue to complain in the future.

Of course, Rina didn’t actually intend to stop them. After all, she was also somewhat dissatisfied with Lukas’ presence.

After greeting the mercenaries again, Rina headed to the carriages to inspect the luggage.

This was to confirm the amount of luggage they were carrying, as well as to make sure the mercenaries were doing their work properly.

After all, if she managed to catch any of them slacking off, she would be allowed to legally cut their wages.

Just as Rina stepped between two carriages to get to the other side.

“Can we talk for a moment?”

“...!”

In an instant, her heart leaped into her throat.

Forcefully suppressing the chill that swept up her spine, Rina turned to look behind her.

There, she saw Peran giving her an awkward smile.

“I’m sorry. Did I startle you?”

“I-, It’s fine.”

'Don't just appear like that.' Those were the words that she wanted to shoot back at him, but she only gave an awkward smile instead. If it wasn't for the influence of the other's family, no matter how handsome he was, her harsh words would have come out without hesitation.

Nevertheless, they were fortunate.

If she had let out a loud scream at the crack of dawn, it would have created an embarrassing situation for them, and especially for her. Even if she was just an employer, she still needed her own prestige in the group.

Ahem.

After letting out a soft cough, Rina spoke.

"What's the matter? You woke up much earlier today than usual."

"Something came up."

"...huh?"

"I think I need to leave immediately."

Rina's expression became even more confused.

He wasn't joking. In the first place, Peran was not the type to joke around, and a topic like this was not something to mention lightly.

"...seriously?"

"I've embarrassed myself."

For the first time since they'd met, Rina saw a crack in his persona.

Unlike before, he wasn't able to completely control his facial expressions.

Rina knew that at a time like this, the best response would be to put on a bright smile and tell him it's okay. In fact, it would be best to hide some awkwardness in the smile in order to make Peran feel guilty and owe her a debt in his heart...

But she couldn't do that.

'At a moment like this...'

She had just been thinking that this was the most dangerous period of their journey.

...Did Rina have the authority to stop Peran? Of course not.

In the first place, the fact that Peran had even decided to join her on this journey was outside of her expectations.

So, in all honesty, this situation wasn't Peran's fault, it was Rina's mistake. Because she believed in Peran's presence over the mercenaries, she'd directly cut the number of mercenaries she hired in half in order to cut costs.

"Is it very urgent?"

"I heard that an undead was found in Lake Comos in the south."

"Undead..."

She gulped subconsciously.

The Legion of the dead was now shaking the entire continent. So she knew how important it would be to properly investigate and deal with such a situation. Perhaps this was part of the reason why Peran had agreed to go with Rina.

"Will you come back after you're done?"

"If it doesn't take too long. Still, you should continue ahead at the planned speed without waiting for me. When you get to the Academy, you can hand the goods over to Dio." (TL: I'm assuming this is Professor Dio)

“...”

There were many things she wanted to say, but in the end, only one of them came out.

“Understood. Please take care of yourself.”

“Right. I apologise again.”

After saying that, Peran turned to look at the carriages once again. To be precise, he was looking at the carriage Lukas was staying in.

The sun hadn't risen yet, so he was probably still asleep.

“Please take good care of him.”

“Ah. Yeah.”

Peran nodded. Then he directly used the warp spell and, without any regrets, left.

Rin looked at the spot he had been standing for a long time.

“...dammit.”

Unable to suppress it any longer, a curse slipped from her lips.

Volume 2 - Chapter 286

‘Did he use Warp to leave?’

This was the guess Lukas made as he felt the flow of the surrounding mana.

It also seemed that his sense had been severely blunted. After all, Warp was a 7-star spell. Originally, it would have been impossible for him to not immediately notice when a spell of such a level was being used. Regardless of whether he was asleep or not.

‘...first things first.’

He wanted to find out whether Peran had completely left the journey, or whether he was only going to be absent for a short while.

Lukas walked around the camp for a while before finding Rina handling documents near the main carriage.

As she was the highest authority in the group besides Peran, he thought that she would have some idea about Peran’s whereabouts.

“Excuse me.”

“...what is it?”

Rina shot him a glance from the corner of her eye.

There was also a hint of annoyance in her voice. Had he done something to this woman?

That couldn't be it. After all, this was Lukas' first time actually talking to her.

“Do you know where the man named Peran went?”

“Why are you asking about that?”

“He is my saviour.”

Suddenly, a loud laugh was heard.

“Puhahaha. What saviour?”

It wasn't Rina who was speaking so rudely. It was a mercenary who had suddenly appeared beside her. His bald head, which didn't have a single strand of hair on it, glittered in the sun.

“You’re just worried because your strong supporter has disappeared. Isn’t that it?”

“...”

Lukas had a subtle feeling at that moment. Perhaps you could call it longing.

How long had it been since he’d had such a childish argument?

Not knowing how to react, he remained silent, but Rina opened her mouth at that moment.

“Hey, can’t you see that we’re talking?”

“Ah, sorry ‘bout that.”

With a chuckle, the mercenary shrugged before swaggering off. Rina looked at him with a sullen expression for a moment before turning back to Lukas.

“Sir Peran had to leave because of an urgent matter. He probably won’t be able to come back any time soon.”

“I see. Understood.”

“...and.”

Rina pressed her fingers to her temples for a moment before adding.

“While it was certainly uncalled for, what you just heard wasn’t entirely wrong. As you can see, I don’t have enough deterrent power to protect you.”

Then she left without waiting to hear his response.

Lukas, who was left alone, finally understood his situation to an extent.

Right.

It seemed that he was being looked down upon now.

* * *

Lunch that day.

During the meal.

“Hey, cripple leg.”

“...”

Lukas turned to look over. It was the bald mercenary that had argued with him before when he was talking to Rina.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Is there someone else I could be talking to besides you?”

He looked around as he said that and his fellow mercenaries snickered.

In fact, calling him a ‘cripple’ wasn’t exactly wrong. After all, Lukas’ legs weren’t working properly at the moment.

Instead of responding, Lukas scooped a spoonful of stew into his mouth.

“Ha.”

“This bastard doesn’t even have respect.”

The mercenaries all frowned and swore at him, but none of them made any openly threatening movements. He didn’t think it was because they were being patient or sensible. Instead, it just meant that Peran’s influence still had some effect even though he was no longer with the group.

Nevertheless, they were going too far.

That day alone, Lukas was caught up in no less than ten large and small disputes. From tripping him when he was walking to spraying him with water. There was even a time when he was almost stabbed by a dagger.

Nevertheless, Lukas wasn't upset by this, instead, he found it a bit refreshing.

That night.

Lukas had basically been kicked out of the luggage compartment and was forced to sleep outdoors.

In addition to that, he was made to suffer because the bald mercenary, who slept right beside him, snored louder than a chainsaw.

“...”

After a while, he got up from his spot and looked down at the man laying defenceless beneath him.

Paak!

Then he kicked him.

“Urk!”

The mercenary quickly got to his feet, his wide eyes looked around in every direction.

Surprisingly, his reaction had been quite fast. It seemed that despite his looks, this mercenary could at least be considered second class.

“Wh-, what the hell?!”

After looking around for a while, the mercenary’s gaze finally landed on Lukas.

“Were you the bastard that did that?”

“That seems to be the case.”

“Ha, haha. Hahaha!”

The mercenary let out a laugh as if he’d gone mad before stopping. With a murderous glint in his eyes, he bent down and picked up his axe.

“...you’re finished, you bastard. I’ll turn you into minced meat right here.”

“You want to fight me?”

“Are you really saying that like you don’t know?”

“Well, I don’t mind, but don’t you think you should do your duty before that?”

“What kind of bullshit are you sprouting now?!”

Instead of answering, Lukas pointed behind the mercenary.

As if there was someone there.

“You crazy bastard. Who do you think would fall for such an obvious-”

Twang-

The mercenary stopped talking. His cheek tingled slightly as something flew past his head before hitting the carriage.

Pak!

As something else flew past, he finally caught a glimpse of what it was.

An arrow.

“Huh?”

“You don’t even know how to welcome guests.”

In an instant, the sounds of bows being released and arrows flying through the air came from all directions.

Twang, twang-

The surroundings also became brighter.

The mercenaries, who were keeping watch, immediately realised the situation and shouted.

“F-, fire arrows!”

“We’re under attack! Everyone, wake up-!”

The bald mercenary looked around blankly for a moment before quickly coming to his senses. Without giving another glance to Lukas, he immediately rang off to assist his comrades.

Although he might not be the best at his job, he still knew what he needed to do in times like this.

“...”

Lukas, who was left alone, looked around.

After the wave of arrows, people who appeared to be bandits appeared. Their numbers were quite large, and their movements were surprisingly coordinated.

He had a feeling that they would not be able to easily overcome this attack. Soon, there would be a river of blood.

In such a situation, he couldn't just stand around defenceless.

Although it was earlier than he anticipated, he needed to quickly find a way to defend himself.

With that thought in mind, Lukas headed to the luggage compartment of a nearby carriage. The inside was a mess. This was because a few arrows had managed to get into the compartment and damage the parcels. Thankfully, this allowed him to easily see their contents.

“This...”

It turned out that most of the items being shipped were weapons and armour.

The quantity was also much more than he expected.

In fact, he couldn't help but wonder how a single carriage could hold this much. Considering the fact that there were still three carriages left, it wouldn't be surprising if their intended goal was to supply a small-scale battle.

In any case, this was good news for Lukas. He looked at the various weapons that were piled on the floor, but in truth, there wasn't even a choice from the very beginning.

Without hesitation, he leaned over.

Sssng-

And picked up a sword.

Volume 2 - Chapter 287

The sword was by no means special.

There were at least a dozen more swords scattered on the ground with the same sheath and hilt as the one he'd chosen.

This was probably a shipment of mass-produced weapons that were being delivered after being completed by a blacksmith.

Sssng—

He drew the sword from its sheath.

The condition was excellent. This proved that it was properly maintained before being placed in the crate.

'...a sword.'

It didn't feel like it fit snugly in his hand. Rather, it gave him a strange feeling instead. Lukas couldn't help but turn his gaze back to the other weapons scattered on the floor.

There weren't just swords. But also spears, axes, and maces.

Nevertheless, he had judged that the sword was the only weapon he could properly use in his current condition.

Weapons like spears, axes or maces, while they might have advantages in reach and destructive power, had individual characteristics that were too strong. More importantly, they might hurt him more than they would help him in his current unbalanced state. He would need to be in perfect physical condition in order to properly wield such weapons.

For example, a person with only one arm would have to be extremely skilled to wield a spear properly.

In such a situation, the balance of a weapon like a sword was near perfect. This was part of the reason why it was given the title of 'king of weapons'.

Swoosh-

Lukas roughly swung the sword in front of him. His left arm wasn't working well, so it would be better for him to just use his right hand unless he was forced to do otherwise.

"..."

He couldn't help but feel a bit strange wielding a sword. It felt like he was forcibly wearing clothes that didn't fit.

But it couldn't be helped. He had no choice but to get used to it as quickly as possible.

'...first.'

It was important for him to get used to the unfamiliar sensation.

With that in mind, Lukas ignored the noises coming from the outside as he immersed himself in a brief training session.

* * *

Since they were attacked in the middle of the night, it took a while for the mercenaries to gather themselves together and fight back in an organised manner. Although it wasn't fast, it was still the most accurate response to the situation.

As she glanced at them, Rina couldn't help but recall her role.

'Leave the command of the battle to Idail and Garp...'

"Cough!"

She couldn't help but let out a cough. This was because the surroundings were filled with smoke.

Two of the four carriages in the convoy had been set on fire. Rina couldn't help but call out in a strained voice.

"Someone put out the fires! Where are the Wizards?"

"Here!"

Several hired Wizards used water spells to extinguish the fire. Rina calmly analysed the current situation.

'...I can't believe something like this really happened.'

Of course, she had considered the possibility several times on their journey.

However, assuming that it would happen and it actually happening was as different as the heaven and the earth.

In addition, these guys were no joke.

'Who are these guys?'

She was certain that they were no ordinary bandits.

The time was probably around 2 or 3 am. This was usually the time when the night watch would begin to lower their guard because everyone would soon wake up. In other words, it was the best time to launch a sneak attack.

Mindless bandits would never use such tactics. Even if they knew that it was the best time to launch an attack, they were bound to make mistakes because of their shallow and vulgar impatience.

These guys, on the other hand, were different.

At the time when their group was the least vigilant, they perfectly launched their attack without warning as if it had been properly planned beforehand. No matter how experienced a mercenary was, or how many life and death battles he'd experienced, he would still die like anyone else if he were attacked by a fire arrow while sleeping.

And while the camp was panicking from the sudden attack, the group stealthily invaded the camp and sent no less than ten mercenaries to the afterlife without suffering any casualties of their own.

'They clearly have a high level of planning and organisation.'

And no one would think that such a group like this would be simple bandits.

No. Others might think so, but Rina certainly wouldn't.

'Were there any bandit groups of this size in this area?'

Although she'd hired fewer mercenaries because of Peran's presence, she'd picked these mercenaries more carefully to make up for it. Among mercenaries, the ones protecting their convoy could be considered elites. None of the mercenaries there were lower than C rank, so they were definitely not a group to be looked down upon.

But the 'bandits' were also nothing to scoff at. Now that she looked at them closely, it didn't seem that they had a numerical advantage.

In other words, this meant that even when fighting with similar numbers, the 'bandits' were at an advantage.

'This doesn't look good, but it's not over yet.'

As time passed, it was possible for their side to gain more of an advantage. Soon, the Wizards who had been sent to put out the fires would return and the mercenaries, whose minds and bodies were still slow because they had just woken up, would gradually regain their condition.

Nevertheless, Rina's expression didn't improve. This was because, while she wasn't very good at reading the flow of battle, she was one of the best when it came to reading the expressions of others.

And she could guarantee that the bandits were hiding some kind of trump card.

'...are they just trying to buy time?'

What were they waiting for?

Reinforcements? Or the next stage of their operation?

...In truth, nothing would change even if she found out what it was. At that point, all Rina could do was pray that the mercenaries would win.

It wasn't like they could abandon their cargo and leave just because the enemies might suddenly increase or were planning a lethal strategy.

'Or, perhaps they are...'

A sudden thought caused chills to go down her spine. Although she thought that, she knew that the probability was incredibly low. After all, this transaction was so secretive that she was the only merchant in the group together with the mercenaries. This wasn't done to monopolise the profits.

Nevertheless, as the fight progressed, Rina's expression became progressively worse.

'These aren't bandits.'

Even she, an amateur, could see that now.

It didn't mean that they were particularly strong for bandits.

It meant that there was absolutely no way they could be bandits in the first place.

While they were disguised by their shabby clothes, each of them was strong enough to fight toe to toe with the best mercenaries she'd hired.

Just as Rina had become certain of their true identity.

"I think you should run."

Idail, the leader of the mercenary group, approached her with a solemn expression.

"...Leader Idail."

"I'll give you two of my men, so run to the north as fast as you can. As long as you don't get lost, you should see the Rulan River in a few hours."

“Do you mean I should cross the Rulan Bridge?”

Idail nodded.

The Rulan Bridge was the largest bridge built on the Rulan River. It was also a must-go if one wanted to officially enter the empire from this direction.

Naturally, guards from the empire were always stationed there in order to check the identities of those passing through.

In other words, if she went there, the ‘bandits’ wouldn’t be able to touch her.

“Do you think that we can’t win?”

As Idail nodded again, this time much more heavily, a dark cloud crossed Rina’s face. In truth, when she’d asked that question, she’d already expected this answer. If he was certain of their victory, he wouldn’t have bothered evacuating Rina.

“...There are still two carriages in good condition. The equipment in them are the key items for this journey. Can we not take one or both with us?”

“Have you not understood the situation yet? They are deliberately not attacking the carriages.”

“Huh?”

Idail sighed.

“At first I wasn’t sure why they hadn’t at least tried to stop them from leaving, but now I understand. It was to make you hesitate because of lingering feelings.”

“Me? Why...?”

“Isn’t it because their real goal is actually your life?”

“...!”

Those words caused Rina’s heart to sink.

Idail was about to add something else, but in the end, he just clicked his tongue.

“I guess it’s too late. We wasted too much time.”

In the next moment, they heard the sound of footsteps.

Rina subconsciously held her breath.

“I’ve warned you countless times before Rina Traine. If you only chase immediate profits, your life will end up shortened.”

“...”

With his cold, deep voice resonating in the air, a man stepped out of the shadows.

It was a middle-aged man who was dressed quite neatly. His gentle expression despite standing in the middle of a mess created an extremely strange aura.

However, when Rina saw this man, she trembled as if she was looking at the reaper himself.

“Budilem.”

Volume 2 - Chapter 288

The man named Budilem smiled brightly, his white teeth contrasting starkly with the dark surroundings.

“Long time no see. Has it already been a week?”

“Y-, you’re mistaken... I...”

“I’m mistaken...?”

Swoosh!

A faint flicker of light came from Budilem's pocket, and Idail had no time to respond.

Crack!

"...?"

Idail couldn't help but stare at Budilem in confusion. He saw something move, but that was it. Suddenly, his vision began turning red. He didn't feel any pain. Instead, she just felt his eyelids become heavy as weakness overtook his body. He also felt something warm flowing from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

"Ah."

That was Idail's last word.

Before he even realised what happened, a dagger had been embedded into his forehead. The small dagger had easily pierced through his skull before piercing the brain matter behind it.

Idail, the leader of the mercenary company who had successfully completed a total of 123 missions, collapsed on the spot and died without even making a sound.

"Leader Idail...?"

Rina couldn't help but call out in a dazed tone. Seeing her panic, Budilem clicked his tongue in derision.

"A corpse cannot speak. Even a merchant should know that much."

While speaking in a nonchalant tone, Budilem threw another dagger. But he wasn't aiming for Rina.

The dagger passed close by her ear before flying towards the luggage compartment behind her. To be precise, it was aimed at the hood(1) that covered the luggage compartment.

Rip!

The fabric was torn apart, revealing the crates and boxes contained in the compartment.

Rina's expression hardened. But Budilem simply smiled as he threw one dagger after another.

Crack!

As if they had wills of their own, the daggers moved in complex ways as they broke apart the crates. Naturally, the items contained within them fell out.

There were all kinds of equipment.

From weapons like swords, axes, and spears, to armour like breastplates, helmets, gauntlets, and boots...

There were also quite a few magic items that were quite expensive.

“You said I was mistaken, Rina Traine. So can you tell me where you intended to transport this equipment?”

“That...”

“It’s Westroad Academy, is it not? Kukuku... One of the base camps of those disgusting reactionary forces.”

“...!”

Did he know everything from the beginning?

Unlike the thoroughly shocked and frightened Rina, Budilem’s smile continued to grow wider.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know? It seems you underestimated our intelligence division.”

“S-, since when...?”

“Since the moment you signed that contract with Peran Jun.”

In other words, they’d known from the very beginning.

Rina collapsed on the spot.

“Actually, I had several chances to kill you. But I held myself back. I wanted to aim for a more certain moment. Ah, of course, it was never the mercenaries that I was afraid of.”

“...”

“No matter how confident I am, I don’t want to go up against an Archmage like Peran Jun.”

Rina looked at Budilem with an anxious expression.

It had been less than a day since Peran had left. When he left, he did so in as quiet a manner as possible due to the chances that such an attack might occur.

Nevertheless, Budilem had accurately grasped the time of Peran’s departure.

Did he plant a spy? No, that was impossible. Rina thoroughly investigated the personal information of all the mercenaries she hired this time. She didn’t hire anyone who had even the slightest hint of suspicion or uncertainty.

“...!”

At that moment, Rina’s eyes suddenly became wider.

The image of a person appeared in her eyes.

“...ha. So in the end, he was your person after all.”

“Mm?”

They had suffered because of an obvious ploy.

This could probably be considered Rina’s mistake as well. Because she hadn’t strongly appealed her opinion since she didn’t want to draw Peran’s ire.

She should have stopped him from accepting a mysterious person no matter what.

“What are you talking about?”

“Are you still planning to keep it a secret when you’ve already won?”

“Hmm...”

Budilem looked down at Rina in confusion for a while before smiling.

It didn't matter. She was going to die soon anyway, so he didn't have to pay attention to her nonsense.

“You just chose to stand on the wrong side.”

His voice became low and cold.

Rina looked around again. There was no mercenary close enough to protect her. All of them were still fighting fiercely.

Although it still seemed like they were slowly gaining the advantage, that was only because Budilem hadn't made a move yet.

Rina knew just how unreasonably strong this middle-aged man in front of her was.

He'd turned Idail, who was easily one of the strongest in the mercenary group, into a cold corpse in an instant.

If he killed Rina and joined the battle, the battlefield would be completely cleaned up in a few minutes.

Tap tap.

Budilem continued as he slowly walked towards her.

“And that’s enough of a reason for you to die tonight.”

Clatter-

Budilem suddenly stopped moving. He could feel a presence inside a carriage.

It was not the carriage he had torn up, but the one behind it.

‘Someone is in there.’

A hint of wariness appeared on his face.

Peran Jun might have already left, but it was still possible for unknown variables to appear.

Of course, he felt that it was highly unlikely given the expression of despair on Rina’s face, but in his profession, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Should he attack first? Or should he wait?

Before he could even finish wondering what to do, a white-haired young man directly stepped out of the carriage.

“...”

Budilem quickly scanned the young man's entire body.

The first thing he noticed was the sword he was holding, but his attention was drawn to his clothes. At best, what he was wearing could only be called dirty scraps that had once been a robe, and in no way could it be considered armour.

‘He's not a Swordsman or a Knight.’

He could tell that much with a simple glance. There were no signs of training on the young man's body at all. Not only was his body quite skinny, but the way he held the sword was also clumsy and awkward as if it was the first time.

“Who is this skinny brat?”

Budilem asked in a disbelieving voice.

But the most surprised one there was Rina.

Firstly, she was surprised that the mystery man, Lukas, and Budilem didn't know each other, and secondly that he'd picked up a sword from the luggage compartment.

"Is this guy supposed to be some kind of last resort?"

Swoosh.

A dagger silently shot out of Budilem's hand before he even finished his sentence. The small dagger was barely visible in the dark as it quietly flew towards Lukas' throat.

He hid the sound of the dagger and his killing intent with his voice and gestures.

'He could be a Wizard or a Spiritualist.'

Or he could be something else with powers he was unaware of.

In other words, this attack was a test. Nevertheless, that didn't mean that the power of this attack was low. It was at least three times faster and more stealthy than the dagger he'd used to kill Idail. The expression might sound a bit strange, but it was best to test with as much power as he could spare.

This might seem a bit excessive, but this young man was the only one there that he had not yet identified.

So even if he were to easily die without being able to react, it wouldn't be considered a waste of a bit of attack.

Clang!

...

...

Lukas shook his wrist slightly and frowned.

On the other hand, Budilem's expression became exceptionally hard.

Then, something fell to the ground, inches away from Rina's hand.

It was Budilem's dagger which glowed slightly in the moonlight.

"Uh..."

Rina, who finally understood what had just happened, couldn't help but gulp slightly.

She'd heard the sound of the sword and knife clashing, and there were no visible wounds on Lukas' body.

Which meant one thing.

Although it was hard to believe.

Lukas had completely blocked Budilem's dagger.

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"I think it would be better if you didn't use a sword."

Although it was said in a soft voice, the firm undertone could not be missed.

Lukas panted for a while, unable to answer. After a long time of trying to catch his breath, he finally opened his mouth.

"...really?"

"Of course, if you're just doing this for physical training then there's no need to stop..."

Instead, he would recommend that he did even more. After all, one of the shortcomings of being a Wizard like Lukas was lack of physical fitness.

"If that's all I was doing it for..."

“Didn’t you already go to Kasajin before coming to me? I heard that you even learned the Warrior King Fist.”

Lukas had nothing to hide, so he nodded.

“To be honest, when it comes to training your body, the Warrior King Fist is much more effective than my Dridment.”

“I don’t want to be a musclebound pig like Kasajin.”

“Ah. So your goal is to get little muscles?”

They both looked at each other for a moment before laughing.

It was Lucid who dropped his smile first.

“...but before that, I heard that you also went to Iris and Schweiser to learn magic engineering, black magic, and Demon contracts.”

“That’s right.”

“Is it that you’re tired of magic?”

Lukas couldn't help but let out a soft snort at that.

"No way."

"Then..."

"I just need a change."

He hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"Recently it feels like I've reached a wall. And since it's my first time encountering such a feeling, I'm not sure what to do."

"..."

Lucid narrowed his eyes.

When it came to magic, the talent of the blonde haired young man standing in front of him was historically unprecedented.

Of course, Lucid and the others also had the talent and tenacity to keep up with him in their own fields, but that wasn't important right now.

“And the other reason?”

“To find any clues. After all, you already have the end of Swordsmanship in your sights, so I thought if I looked at your sword technique it might be able to help me somehow.”

“There is no end in Swordsmanship. I’m just fully aware of the path I intend to walk.”

“That in itself is already amazing.”

Lukas spoke in a serious tone before smiling bitterly.

“Still, the Warrior King Fist would definitely have some impact on my body, but if I picked up the sword instead, there wouldn’t be much change from the way I am now.”

“Swordsmanship and Martial Arts are completely different. I’d be sorely disappointed if you thought the only difference was the addition of a sword.”

Lukas couldn’t help but smile sheepishly when he saw Lucid’s offended expression.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to belittle you.”

“Of course, I know that.”

Lucid chuckled.

“Don’t be in such a rush. I don’t think you need any hints from the sword. If it’s you, I’m sure you’ll reach 9 stars someday.”

“...”

At first glance, it might seem like he was just comforting him, but Lukas knew this man named Lucid well.

Therefore it was easy for him to understand the exact meaning contained in that soft voice.

“Do you mean that?”

“...”

Lucid didn’t answer, instead, he just turned to look at a distant mountain.

Lukas smiled bitterly once again before looking down at the sword in his hand.

In any case, he felt that he wouldn’t use a sword again in the future.

* * *

Swoosh-

He could feel the daggers ripping through the night air.

Gripping the sword tightly in his palm, Lukas swung it forward.

Clang!

And once again, he hit a dagger.

His wrist tingled.

...I see.'

Instead of focusing his strength on his grip, it was also necessary to add enough strength to his wrists, hips, and back.

As it was, if the force of the dagger had been a bit stronger, his wrist bone would have already been sticking out.

'I can see the movements.'

Although Lukas had lost all of his powers, he was still alive and he could still rely on his trained eyesight and experience.

Budilem had great confidence in his own attack method. In particular, if it was someone he'd never fought before, he could still utilise his experience to figure out the things they could not respond to.

This was indeed the case now as well.

'It takes at least 10 years.'

He hid daggers in the darkness, in the wind, and in the terrain. He also used intentional gestures and a loud voice to mask their movement.

It would take a talented person about 10 years focusing on one field in order to reach the same level.

Nevertheless, Lukas didn't think too much about it.

He realised that there were at least 40 knives hidden in Budlem's pockets and at least ten different types. The bag tied to his waste also seemed to be filled with some kind of poison

Clang! Clang!

He hit the daggers away once again. This time, three daggers were thrown, two were hit away, and the other was dodged by a narrow margin.

Lukas tried to calculate whether his opponent would run out of daggers first, or if his wrist would break first.

'I'm in more danger.'

His body was weak and his joints were weaker. He would have to retrain his body from scratch.

"..."

Budilem no longer had a relaxed expression on his face.

He'd already accepted that this man in front of him was not an easy opponent. At first, he thought everything would be fine as long as they avoided Peran Jun, but he didn't expect such a difficult enemy to be hiding still.

'His eyes are amazing.'

This man didn't seem to have any special powers and also no ability. He could confirm at least that much.

Nevertheless, he effortlessly responded to his attacks as if he could read all of his intentions.

No, it wasn't just his eyes.

Generally speaking, it should have been impossible for him to hit the daggers away with his weak body. In other words, this man was an expert at using his body and balancing his usage of power.

'A retired Knight... or a mercenary?'

He looked too young for that. It usually took several decades to build up that kind of discipline.

...But now wasn't the time to have such messy thoughts.

'If I keep delaying here, this job might become annoying.'

He knew that Peran was already gone, but it wouldn't be strange for him to come back now that the commotion was becoming so big. He may have just temporarily left to do something. And Budilem knew just how annoying fighting a versatile and troublesome Wizard was.

That's why Budilem set the maximum time for this attack at 30 minutes. About 20 minutes had passed since their attack began, so 10 minutes would be quite tight considering that they had to steal all of the cargo and clean up their traces.

The opponent's weakness was obvious.

His mobility was particularly low. He also noticed that he seemed to have a crippled leg.

Unfortunately for him, his main specialty was hunting down prey like this whose movements were impaired.

If he had an extra 10 minutes, or even 5 minutes, he could have shown this annoying guy what hell was like.

But it was Budilem who was currently pressed for time.

“It’s time to stop messing around.”

Suppressing his anxiousness, Budilem pulled out more daggers with his fingers this time before throwing them. Unlike before, he threw eight at the same time.

This was no longer an attempted sneak attack, but an all out kill strike.

The force and speed of each dagger was noticeably less than the ones before, but that shortcoming was offset by the number of them.

Or at least that would have been the case if his opponent wasn’t Lukas. Instead, Lukas, who had been waiting for an opportunity to counterattack, saw this as an opportunity.

He took a big step forward.

Thud!

Then, with a slight twist of his wrist, he struck three of the daggers with the flat side of his sword at the same time.

Crack!

He blocked the attack. But because he swung his sword too harshly, the blade couldn't withstand the force of the impact and broke. The pain he felt in his wrist was also much greater.

Nevertheless, Lukas didn't throw away the broken sword.

Puk puk.

One dagger stabbed him in the left shoulder and the other in the abdomen.

Of the eight daggers, he'd avoided three, blocked three, and was hit by two.

Lukas ignored the burning pain.

Instead, he gripped the broken sword in his hand, flipped it over, and stabbed it behind him.

“Kuk.”

The sound of someone coughing up blood came from behind him.

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Even a broken sword could still be considered a lethal weapon.

Lukas wasn't sure about cutting, but when it came to stabbing, it gave him a feeling of viciousness.

“...”

When he turned, he saw Budilem's wide eyes staring at him.

'How did you know?'

His eyes seemed to ask this question. But there was no reason for him to clear the confusion of someone who was about to die. Some might even call it mercy.

Lukas pulled his sword out.

Puuk!

Blood spewed from Budilem's throat as he collapsed. His body convulsed a few times on the ground before it finally stopped moving.

"..."

It had been obvious.

The exaggerated act of throwing eight daggers was just a feint, the real attack was his attack from behind.

In the end, Budilem's tactics started with deceiving the eyes and ended with deceiving the eyes. However, such a fighting method would only prove effective against those who were less experienced or less patient than him.

So, in short, Lukas had been the worst opponent for Budilem to encounter from the start.

"Huuu..."

Lukas slowly let out a breath.

Although it had ended in an instant, both his mind and body felt deeply tired. He'd expended much more concentration than he expected in that short battle.

He looked around.

The fight between the bandits and mercenaries was just beginning to reach its climax when one of the bandits noticed Budilem's body on the ground. For a moment, his body went stiff with shock before he quickly pulled something out of his pocket.

'A pipe?'

Although its appearance was a bit unique, it truly did appear to be a reed pipe.

Tweet-

A sharp sound echoed in the night. The bandits then immediately began retreating without any hesitation.

"You bastards!"

"Are you trying to run away now? You all should stay here and play!"

With loud shouts, the mercenaries began to chase after them excitedly.

"Stop! Don't chase them-!"

It was the vice leader, Garp.

Reluctantly, the mercenaries stopped their pursuit. The excitement also gradually disappeared from their faces.

Garp looked around before speaking in a low voice.

“5th squad, and 7th squad.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

“What are the damages?”

“5th squad, two deaths, one serious injury, the rest only have minor injuries.”

“7th squad, two minor injuries, the rest... dead.”

Garp fell silent for a moment before speaking again.

“Squads 5 and 7 will be merged temporarily. You guys go make sure those bastards have really left and keep an eye on the surroundings.”

“Yes.”

“The other squad leaders, figure out the damage of each unit and report to me. Wizards, make sure no residual fires spread to the forest!”

Garp shouted out more orders loudly before turning his head and coughing in a quiet, indiscernible manner. Lukas realised that Garp had also been injured, but he was trying to not show it in front of his subordinates.

Nevertheless, there was still work to do, so he continued to walk around instead of resting.

It took Lukas a moment to realise he was walking towards him.

“I would like to thank you for your help this time.”

He spoke in a respectful and polite tone.

Perhaps he'd seen the fight between Lukas and Budilem from the corner of his eyes.

“I was just doing it to protect myself.”

“You could have just run away, you didn't need to fight.”

“With this leg?”

This caused Garp to fall silent for a moment before he lowered his head even further.

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is the result. We were only able to survive because you defeated that man. So thank you.”

“...”

A straightforward man. That was the impression Lukas gained of Garp’s personality.

‘...in theory, it wouldn’t be difficult to deal with them.’

But there was no reason for him to do that. When he nodded his head slightly and accepted his gratitude, the wrinkles on Garp’s forehead reduced slightly.

Putting that behind him for now, Lukas turned to look at Budilem’s cooling body that lay behind him.

“Who were those people?”

“I don’t know either.”

“—That man is called Budilem.”

A voice answered from behind them.

It was Rina, who was still sitting on the ground. She looked at Lukas with a complicated expression for a moment before bowing her head again.

“Budilem? Do you mean ‘Budilem of the Marshes’?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh... my God.”

After sucking in a cold breath, Garp closed his eyes for a moment. Then he turned to stare at Rina with anger hidden in his eyes.

“This journey, do you mean to say that they attacked us because of it?”

“Yes.”

“...why? Aren’t you a part of the Red Hub as well?”

“This journey was my own choice. It has nothing to do with the organisation.”

“...”

Garp’s beard shook and he clenched his fists tightly. It seemed like he desperately wanted to vent his anger, but in the end, he let out a deep sigh as if to say it wasn’t worth it.

“...if the leader had known that, he wouldn’t have accepted this mission.”

“That would have been the case. However, the contract has already been signed.”

Garp knew how useless and foolish it was to blame Rina for this situation. So he simply let out another sigh.

“Right. HUUU. I’ll do my best, but... it would probably be in your best interest to make sure my men don’t learn of this.”

Rina simply nodded, not really indicating whether she agreed or not.

After being silent for a while, Lukas finally spoke again.

“Who are these people that you are so surprised to learn their identity?”

“You already lost your memories, so why are you curious about that?”

This wasn't said in a mocking or criticizing manner.

Instead, it seemed that she was truly asking out of pure curiosity.

“Even if I don't want to, I got caught up in your business. I think I have the right to know exactly what I'm dealing with.”

“...there is a saying that 'ignorance is bliss'. Knowing their identity might cause you to become even more involved than you already are.”

Ah. It seemed she was worried about him.

Her voice was surprisingly stubborn when she said this, so Lukas pondered for a while before deciding that it would be better to say something than silently accept her words. It didn't take him very long to think of something.

“...it's just that I felt something familiar when I fought this man. Maybe... it might have something to do with why I lost my memories or why my body became like this.”

He only roughly muttered what had popped into his head at that moment, but it surprisingly came out as a plausible excuse.

Suddenly, a glimmer appeared in Rina's intelligent eyes. She tapped on her palm like a merchant calculating profit and loss before finally nodding.

"...indeed. That could be possible."

"..."

"Understood. Then I'll tell you about those who attacked us."

Rina's voice lowered imperceptibly.

"They are currently one of the most influential organisations on the continent. They're so powerful that not only nobles but even kings and people in authority of several different races have no choice but to listen to them."

"Are you saying that a single organisation has that much influence?"

"It's not just power. They also have enough justification as well as a slew of historic achievements under their belt."

Rina fell silent for a while. It appeared that she was thinking about how to explain it properly.

“In truth, it’s not small enough to call it a single organisation. It is basically formed by hundreds of groups, large and small, that are interconnected like a spider’s web.

In Lukas’ mind, there was only one organisation that had all of those characteristics.

His expression gradually became a bit more subtle.

“You may not know about it since you lost your memories, but in the past, this continent was dominated by transcendent beings. They controlled everything that happened from the shadows.”

“...”

“They were the only ones who knew about those transcendents and kept them in check. And finally, about 10 years ago, they finally succeeded in defeating all of the transcendents.”

It was no longer an illusion.

There was only one organisation he could think of after listening to Rina’s explanation.

However, he still couldn’t believe it.

“...what is the name?”

Rina looked into Lukas' eyes for a while before finally opening her mouth.

"They're called... the Circle."