

Great Mage 641

Volume 2 - Chapter 341

Drip.

The sound of water was the only thing he could hear.

Drip.

...It was annoying.

Drip.

Every time he heard the sound of the water dripping, he felt a throbbing pain as if it was resonating with it.

Gradually, his blurred consciousness began to clear up.

'...did I faint?'

Lukas forced himself to open his eyes.

Nevertheless, his vision was blurred, making it hard for him to distinguish his surroundings.

His entire body felt like it was on fire, and his head ached. His throat also felt dry as if he'd swallowed a mouthful of sand.

...His most grievous injury.

He subconsciously stretched his hand down to his stomach. The first thing he felt was a bandage that was wrapped tightly around his abdomen. That wasn't all, there were also sticky leaves stuck to his skin. It was bothering him.

"Those herbs are good for burns."

A pleasant, low pitched voice spoke to him.

Turning his head, he waited for his vision to clear.

After a while, he was able to see a man standing beside him.

"You lost too much blood."

It was Peran Jun.

He also didn't look very good.

His complexion was pale, he had heavy bags under his eyes, and his body was also covered in bandages.

“This is the second time I’m taking care of you when you’re sick. Apart from my younger siblings, you’re probably the person whose body I’m most familiar with.”

“...”

He was making a joke.

Lukas wanted to comment on it, but although his lips moved, no sound came out.

Seeing this, Peran handed him a canteen. When he tried to bring it closer with one hand, he almost dropped it. The canteen felt heavy as if it was made of lead. Of course, it wasn’t that heavy. This was just proof of how little energy Lukas had at that moment.

“Do you want some help?”

He shook his head and slowly raised the bottle to his lips.

As the cold water flowed down his throat, it felt like his mind was gradually clearing up. He forcibly raised his upper body to sit up, causing his entire body to cry out in pain, but enduring pain had never been a problem for him.

“...where is this?”

“A cave in the Amalgam Forest. Of course, it’s not the cave we were aiming for, but it is a cave nonetheless...”

“How long has it been since I lost consciousness?”

“About a day or so.”

“What about the Swordnaz?”

“Their injuries aren’t life threatening. They’re conscious, but they have difficulty moving at the moment. Everyone is in better condition than you are though.”

Peran sincerely answered Lukas’ one sided questions without showing any displeasure, but it was clear that he had questions of his own.

“...now that you’ve asked your questions. Don’t you think it’s time we had a proper conversation?” (TL: Rip Snow)

“ ... ”

Although he remained silent, Lukas agreed with him.

Peran remembered Frey Blake. And there was a lot he wanted to ask him.

After contemplating what to say for a while, Peran shook his head. It seemed that he took Lukas' silence to mean something else.

"No. Sorry. I was in too much of a hurry. You're not well, so you should get some rest. We'll talk later."

Before Lukas could stop him, Peran continued.

"Also, it seems that she wants to talk to you more than I do."

Peran disappeared soon after saying those words. He wasn't sure if he left the cave entirely or if he just moved out of sight.

Just as Lukas was beginning to wonder why Peran had left so suddenly, he saw a woman standing in the darkness of the cave.

With red hair that looked like red flames...

"...Nix?"

"No."

A mocking tone.

As she walked closer, the darkness around her receded.

Soon, her face came into the light, revealing her golden eyes.

“Torkunta...”

“Hmph.”

Torkunta snorted and sat down beside the bed before looking at Lukas with glowing eyes. His sharp eyes made Lukas very uncomfortable, as if he was being scrutinised.

“What is this? You pathetic bastard.”

“...what?”

“Why did you come back in such a pathetic state when you left so proudly?”

“You... I...”

“I remember.”

Lukas remained silent.

The blood drained from his face in an instant.

He didn't know what to say.

"...you remember, everything... about me?"

Those words sounded even more foolish when he said it outloud.

"Don't say such cheesy things. Is there any reason for me to remember everything about you? Since when were we so close?"

Torkunta raised an eyebrow as he responded. His tone carried a faint sense of hostility, but it proved that he remembered Lukas.

"Do you really remember me and not Frey Blake? Or something else?"

Nevertheless, Lukas still found it hard to believe.

That's why he couldn't help but persistently ask.

“Right.”

“How could that be? Why did everyone else forget, but you...”

“Hey. Calm down.”

“Now I really-”

“...Lukas Trowman.”

A low growl interrupted Lukas’ rambling.

Torkunta continued while staring at him with his slit pupils.

“You.... have changed.”

“...”

“Did your mind weaken together with your body? Isn’t being able to keep your composure in any situation the greatest strength of you Wizards?”

It was like a cold flame burrowed into his ears.

The thread that was wrapped around his head was engulfed by the flames before disappearing.

...That was right.

It wasn't like him to be dragged around by his thoughts like that without being able to calm down. In times like this, Lukas Trowman would remain rational and analyse the situation.

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“Sssp.”

He took a deep breath through his teeth, calming his excitement and allowing him to regain his composure.

Then, he opened his mouth again.

“...everyone forgot about me.”

“Seems so. I really want to know what happened to the world.”

“It’s not just the memories that disappeared. There are also no traces of Lukas Trowman in documents, publications or records.”

“I see.”

“But you remember me. So clearly.”

“It’s not very clear.”

Torkunta exclaimed in an annoyed voice.

This guy didn’t seem to like Lukas very much. This was natural considering that he had killed him once before.

“Do you have any idea what might have caused this phenomenon? Even small things are fine.”

“Ha. I can’t think of anything.”

Torkunta grit his teeth and spoke in a harsh voice.

“Immediately after you left, I was locked away for 10 years. Inside this goddamn Phoenix! I could hardly see what was happening on the outside, and this bitch acted like she forgot about my existence! Naturally, my voice couldn’t reach her either!”

Torkunta pounded on his chest as if he couldn't contain his anger.

"Can you imagine how frustrating it was to be locked in an empty space for 10 years!?"

"..."

The Great Mage, who had been imprisoned for more than 400 times as long in the past, stayed silent.

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"Not so long ago, Nix finally noticed my presence. She even called my name too... Although the process wasn't pretty, it was thanks to you."

"Because of me?"

"Right. You managed to shake Nix's mental state. Thanks to that, her memories, which had sank to the bottom, were able to rush to the surface."

"..."

It was a metaphor that was a bit hard to understand.

Nevertheless, he had a feeling that he shouldn't brush it aside easily.

Torkunta shared body and mind with Nix. In other words, he had the most objective and accurate grasp on Nix's condition.

'Her memories sank...?'

He couldn't help but wonder if that only applied to Nix.

Or if everyone else was the same.

If it was the latter, he wondered how he could help them recall their sunken memories. Could the method used against Nix work again?

What exactly did he say to Nix that caused it to happen anyway?

"How is Nix now?"

"She's hibernating. This is only natural considering that she had been on the verge of losing her mind."

As he spoke Torkunta raised his arms and stretched.

"Mmm-...I really gotta thank you. It's been a long time since I was allowed to see the outside and I love being able to move around like this. Ahh. It feels so good to move my body. Even if it's a lowly body without claws, scales, wings, or a tail."

“You do know that’s Nix’s body, don’t you?”

“Hmph. I know that. In the end, this is only a brief moment of freedom anyway. Nix is the one who is really in control of this body. As soon as she wakes up, I’ll be trapped inside again.”

“You also said that she couldn’t hear your voice either...”

“That was what it was like before, but... she seemed to notice my presence just before she fell unconscious, so things might be different now.”

“I see. That means I might not see you again any time soon.”

Lukas couldn’t help but feel that it was a pity. In this world where everyone had forgotten about Lukas, Torkunta was the only one who remembered him.

He never thought that there would be such a day, where Torkunta became the one who was supporting Lukas’ weakened spirit to an extent.

“Wh-, what are you doing? Stop that.”

However, Torkunta took a large step backwards with a pale blue complexion.

“What do you mean?”

“D-, don’t look at me like that.”

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like a male trying to court a female.”

“...that’s a misunderstanding.”

“I, I reject your courtship! Even if I look like this right now, my mind is still completely male!”

“You’re misunderstanding!”

After brushing off Torkunta’s nonsense, Lukas became lost in thought.

In any case, it was unclear when Torkunta’s mind would disappear into Nix’s subconscious again. But he could still use the limited time when he was in control to find out as much as possible.

“If Nix regains consciousness, will she still be hostile towards me?”

“I’m not sure. But if that does happen then you definitely won’t survive. Nix’s mind has fully stabilised now. So her power won’t be unstable like what you faced before.”

Lukas completely agreed.

From now on, if Nix wanted to, then all of the people in this cave, Lukas, Peran, and the Swordnaz, would be burned to ashes in the blink of an eye.

'What should I do?'

Since Torkunta was in control now, he could send him as far away from them as possible. If he were to ask him to do so, Torkunta would probably agree without much fuss. But Lukas didn't want to let go of his only clue source.

"By the way."

Torkunta opened his mouth as if he was just talking in passing.

"There are other people who remember you other than me."

"What did you... cough!"

Lukas coughed heavily.

Dammit. His body was in a really bad condition. He couldn't believe that he was in so much pain just because his heart began to beat a bit faster.

"Are you okay?"

“...I’m alright, keep talking. Are there really others that remember me?”

“Maybe.”

“Who?”

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“I don’t know.”

“...”

Lukas almost cursed at that moment.

When he turned to glare at Torkunta, he was met with a dazzling smile.

“This is revenge for earlier. How do you like it?”

Earlier? Was he talking about the courtship eyes that he mentioned before?

“I told you that was a misunderstanding.”

“I didn’t misunderstand that look in your eyes.”

“...”

“...In any case. I wasn’t joking when I said I don’t know. All I know is that it was a woman. I don’t know anything more than that.”

An unknown ‘woman’?

“Right. It was few years ago, before Nix went completely mad. A woman came up the mountain and asked her, ‘Do you remember Lukas Trowman?’”

“...”

“Of course, Nix had already completely forgotten your existence, so she sent her away.”

The first person that came to Lukas’ mind was Iris, but he knew it couldn’t be her.

She hadn’t remembered Lukas’ existence even when he met her face to face, much less to mention his name to others.

Then who else could it be?

Someone who still remembered Lukas Trowman...

“What did she look like?”

“I don’t know. I was still locked away at that time, so I couldn’t see anything. At best, all I could hear was her voice. That’s how I knew it was a woman in the first place.”

This was becoming more and more mysterious.

Then, all of a sudden, the image of a person appeared in Lukas’ mind.

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Peran headed into the depths of the cave.

There, he found five people, who should have remained on bed rest, exercising in their own ways.

The Swordnaz.

“How are you all feeling?”

“...Ah. Magic Commander.”

Eric and the other Swordnaz quickly stopped what they were doing and tried to politely bow to him, but Peran shook his head.

“Don’t push yourselves too hard.”

“No. We’re fine.”

After speaking in a firm tone, Eric bowed politely.

He wasn’t just pretending, it seemed he had recovered quite well already.

“It seems your condition has improved by a lot.”

“Yes, sir. The others have no major problems either. While we haven’t returned to our peak states, we are still capable of fighting.”

The Wizard, Yuriah, in particular, was having some trouble because of her slow mana recovery speed, but the others were almost fully recovered already. In particular, Hoffman, who was regarded as the toughest among the Swordnaz, was already training with his sword.

“I see. Still, it would be best if you didn’t overdo it. You won’t be able to help if you make your injuries worse.”

“Yes, sir. Ah, Magic Commander.”

Eric hurriedly stopped Peran, who was about to turn away.

“What is it?”

“...it’s been five days since we lost contact with Lady Snow. No. We were unconscious for a day, so it’s been six days.”

He started talking with a cautious tone.

“That’s why I...”

Perhaps because he didn’t think it sounded right, Eric seemed hesitant to voice his thoughts.

Realising what he wanted to say, Peran asked first.

“Are you worried about Lady Snow?”

Eric’s body trembled slightly. He muttered to himself with an indescribable expression on his face before letting out a sigh.

“Yes. The Swordnaz have failed. At times like this, we should trust her even more.”

“That’s not true. Lady Snow understands the Swordnaz’s loyalty better than anyone else. I’m sure she would be happy to know you’re worried.”

“...really?”

“You should know what her temper is like. She would never summon her followers to a place of death if she had a choice. If possible, she would rather handle everything on her own.

“That... Yes. You’re right.”

Peran smiled gently.

“The fact that she called you to this place means that she trusts and relies on you. You should be proud of that fact.”

He knew just how prideful Snow was. She was the type who would not ask for any help in most cases.

And yet Snow had looked for them first in this situation. Peran was right. This was something they could be proud of.

“Plus, our leader is the strongest being on the continent.”

Peran had a faint smile on his lips.

“At the very least, I can’t imagine her losing to anyone.”

* * *

“What do you plan to do now?”

Torkunta’s question woke Lukas from his thoughts.

This was truly not the time to be too concerned about the mysterious woman. Her identity wasn’t something he could confirm just by thinking about it.

Instead, he would have to deal with one thing at a time, starting with the situation before him.

“First things first, we need to find Snow.”

“Do you mean the elf woman who wields a sword? Then you’d better hurry.”

“Do you know something?”

“It was Diablo that lured Nix to this forest. As far as I can tell, the Elder Lich intended to make use of her hatred.”

“...Diablo.”

Lukas couldn't help but feel strange as he thought about Diablo.

To be honest, he still found it hard to accept that Diablo the Demon Lord was causing chaos all across the continent.

Because the Diablo in Lukas' memory was a comrade who helped them tremendously in the fight against their common enemy, the Demigods. They weren't close enough to call him a colleague, but it could still be said that they had a cooperative relationship.

“...wait. So does that mean that Diablo is in this forest now?”

“Well, I can't say for sure. But I'm pretty sure that's the case.”

“...”

Currently, Snow was touching the very peak that one could reach as a mortal. No matter how he thought about it, he didn't believe Diablo would be able to defeat her.

...But he couldn't jump to conclusions just yet.

Lukas didn't know a lot about Diablo, but he did know that he had a very thorough personality.

He would never do something like this unless he was absolutely sure of his victory.

“Right. As you said, we need to hurry.”

“Well, I wish you luck. I’ll go now.”

When he heard this, Lukas looked at Torkunta and asked.

“You’re leaving? Where will you go?”

“I’m just going to look around. Or I’ll head back to my territory in the Ispania Mountains.

“Can’t you help us now?”

“Hmph. I know you’re desperate for help, but there is no way you don’t understand the current situation. Sooner or later, Nix will regain consciousness. Are you sure she won’t be hostile towards you when that happens? The risk would be too high to take the gamble.”

“...”

“Besides, what were they called again, the Swordnaz? How are you going to explain my presence to those guys that Nix kneaded like dough?”

Torkunta's words were very on point.

Even if Peran might accept it, the Swordnaz would definitely not be convinced about Nix's change of attitude. Even if he were to take the time to perfectly explain everything to them, he didn't believe that they would readily accept it.

"You don't have to bring them with you."

With a soft tone, Peran appeared.

Lukas glanced at him for a moment before turning to look at Torkunta.

"Does Peran know about your situation?"

"In a way. We talked for a bit while you were unconscious."

Lukas didn't believe that Torkunta would talk a lot about his situation. At best, he probably said enough so that Peran had a slight understanding.

Of course, the intelligent Peran should have been able to grasp a few more details from the explanation.

"What we need right now is to increase the strength of our group. We don't know what kind of undead are lurking in the cave, so even one extra person would be a lot of help."

“So... you’re asking me for help despite the fact that I just tried to kill you?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmph.”

Torkunta snorted, but Peran continued without hesitation.

“The Swordnaz are currently waiting in this cave. They don’t know about your presence yet. So if the three of us were to go to the cave before them, we wouldn’t cross paths.”

“You want the three of us to go alone?”

“Right. Of course, we would just take a look first, try to get a grasp on the situation, and if we think we can break through on our own, we can just go directly into the cave. How about that?”

This was probably the plan that Peran thought up while Lukas was unconscious.

It wasn’t a bad idea.

In fact, it might be the best course of action for them in the current situation.

Lukas nodded in approval while Torkunta didn't answer, but his expression showed that he agreed with the suggestion.

"Fine. Then let's set off right away."

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The cave Lukas and the others were staying in was quite far from the cave Snow was supposed to be in.

The fact that the nearby trees and grass were still alive was the best indicator of this fact.

The area around the cave with Snow, where Nix had gone wild, only had ashes and smoke left.

Although they were moving as fast as they could, they also made sure to remain careful. Nevertheless, Peran couldn't help but open his mouth after a while.

"...that's strange. I don't see any undead."

"The death energy in the forest is also thinner."

As if he agreed, Torkunta added.

It was as they said.

Even after travelling for more than an hour, they hadn't seen even a single undead.

At first, it could be said that they were expertly keeping their traces hidden. But this was different. As Torkunta said, even the unpleasant death energy that had drifted like fog in the forest was beginning to clear up.

The fact that they didn't encounter any undead didn't reassure them. On the contrary, it increased their vigilance and curiosity even more.

Nevertheless, they didn't have time to carry out further investigations.

Deciding to move a bit more openly, they soon reached the point where they could see the river in the distance.

"I will use Fly to take you guys over."

"Let me do it."

Fwoosh.

Wings of red flames sprouted from Nix's shoulders.

Peran, who had been thoroughly harassed by those wings, couldn't help but flinch slightly.

When he saw this, Torkunta grinned widely and flapped his wings once again.

“Are you scared? That’s cute, it’s not like you.”

“I’m not scared.”

With a shake of his head, Peran denied those words.

Suddenly.

Lukas, who had been calmly looking at the river, suddenly frowned.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Something is flowing downstream.”

At those words, Peran and Torkunta turned to follow Lukas’ gaze.

After a while, their expressions changed.

“Those are...”

“Hmm.”

It was the corpses of the undead.

It was more than just one or two.

There were a lot. Too many to count. The undead, which they couldn't find anywhere in the forest, were flowing along the river as though they had been placed there.

“...hnn.”

“What?”

When he heard Peran's soft grunt, Lukas asked.

“There are sword marks on each of those corpses. It must have been Lady Snow's doing.”

“Did she take care of all of these undead on her own...”

Lukas looked at the almost endless flow of undead corpses.

Peran nodded with a bright expression.

“Right. She is capable of something like this. Maybe she didn’t really need our help.”

“...”

“We should hurry. She might be in a situation where she is too heavily injured to move.”

...Was that really the case?

Lukas couldn’t make such optimistic assumptions like Peran.

It was his bad habit to always consider the worst when thinking about possibilities, but that wasn’t the only reason.

He had a strange feeling as though he was missing something...

“Those undead guys... are really rotten.”

Torkunta clenched his nose as he spoke with a disgusted expression.

“What?”

“I’m saying that at least dozens of hours have passed since they were returned to death. In other words, it’s been at least a few days since that woman named Snow killed them.”

“...!”

Lukas’ expression hardened.

When Nix had been causing a fuss because of her mental instability, the scale of the damage was large enough to burn down a small city.

In other words, it would have been impossible to miss the disturbance no matter where in the forest you were.

...Reserve energy.

If Snow had even the slightest bit of reserve left, she would have immediately noticed the disturbance and dragged herself over to help.

But Snow never appeared.

She failed to make an appearance even when Lukas, Peran, and the Swordnaz were on the verge of death.

This could mean one of two things.

Either she couldn't afford to.

...Or.

“ ... ”

Lukas stopped thinking about the other possibility.

There was no need to consider the worst case scenario right now.

In any case, even if he didn't want to, he would have to check for himself.

His gaze turned to the cave past the river.

* * *

There was no need for them to be careful as they crossed the river since Nix burned down all the trees in the area.

The only thing left in the surrounding area was a layer of ash on the ground, so there was no need to worry about hidden undead.

Thanks to this, they were able to reach the cave in a short span of time.

Whoosh-

The sound of wind blowing could be heard from within the cave.

The stench it carried was so powerful that the others didn't need Torkunta's keen senses to be affected by it.

Lukas and Peran couldn't help but cover their faces with their hands as the powerful smell assaulted their noses.

"There might still be undead here."

Lukas agreed with Torkunta.

Peran nodded before creating a ball of light that floated in front of them. The dark cave was immediately lit up.

They stepped forward.

The floor of the cave was covered in moisture, making it slippery, and the tepid air was damp.

Lukas realised that this was a limestone cave.

Suddenly, a ghoul, which had been lying in the shadows, jumped out at them with its claws outstretched.

Peran was a bit surprised by its appearance, but he didn't panic and instead fired an Ice Arrow at it.

Puk.

The ghoul, which was stabbed through the eye, didn't make a sound. Its body simply collapsed to the floor with a soft thud.

"...I guess I should say as expected. This is just the entrance, but there are already ghouls here."

"There might be more lurking in the shadows. How about I just shoot out my breath? All of them will be burned alive. No. They're undead, so they would be burned dead."

Torkunta made an offer with a vicious smile, but Peran shook his head firmly.

"No. Lady Snow might be in this cave. If you make a mistake, you might implicate her as well."

“...”

Torkunta frowned for a moment before finally opening his mouth.

“That woman, I think she’s probably a corpse by-”

“Torkunta.”

Lukas interrupted him.

Torkunta might be arrogant, but he was also smart. When he finally realised why Lukas interrupted him, he closed his mouth with a dissatisfied expression.

“For now, let’s progress carefully. We don’t know where the enemy might appear from.”

“Right.”

They slowly delved deeper into the cave.

The sphere of light illuminated their surroundings, but it couldn’t shine into the cold, empty eyes of the undead corpses around them.

...Corpses.

There were countless corpses.

The corpses that he and the Swordnaz had made.

The corpses that were swept away by the river.

The corpses that piled up like garbage in the cave.

“...”

When he thought of those corpses and looked at them, Lukas gradually grew angry.

“Why are you getting so angry?”

As if he felt the anger that was slowly rising within Lukas, Torkunta asked him. This guy really could be observant when he wanted to be.

As he had this thought, he responded simply.

“I really hate Necromancers.”

“Hmm. If I remember correctly, we have been working with Diablo for about a year.”

“..”

Peran, who was walking ahead of them, glanced back at those words, but he didn't interrupt their conversation.

Now that he thought about it, Lukas realised that he still hadn't gotten the chance to have a proper conversation with Peran. But he didn't think he would let it go.

This was true for both Peran and Lukas.

However, for now, their top priority was to check Snow's safety, so both of them continued to keep their mouths shut for the time being.

“I thought he was a Black Wizard.”

“Necromancer, Black Wizard? Is there a difference?”

They were different. Very different.

Lukas didn't hate black magic in itself.

Although it was different from magicology, it couldn't be denied that it was a branch that had been derived from it.

Moreover, he always thought that their hidden desire, their quest for truth, and their obsession with mana was a commonality they shared with Wizards.

That was why he acknowledged Diablo.

In that past, although he had the body of a Lich, he mainly fought using black magic.

"Necromancy is different."

"How is it different?"

"—because necromancy is the worst insult to the dead."

This time, it was Peran, who was walking at the front, that responded.

Torkunta's gaze turned to his back.

“It is far more unforgivable than digging up a corpse and beheading it. It is the greatest insult to the dead.”

“I don’t understand. Aren’t they already corpses? What pride is there to insult on flesh that can no longer move and simply waits for the day when they decay into nothingness.”

That was the view of Torkunta, who was a monster, a Drake, and a King.

Even after hearing these views that differed so greatly from his own, Peran didn’t get upset.

Instead, he continued to explain in a calm tone.

“Perhaps what you said isn’t entirely wrong. But what makes necromancy so terrible is the fact that reviving the dead inflicts indelible wounds on those who were close to them during their lives.”

It could be a lover, family member or friend.

Lukas listened in silence.

Surprisingly, Peran’s views were similar to his own.

Was it because the young man who admired ‘Lukas Trowman’ and sympathised with his ideal in the past still remained inside Peran?

Or...

...Suddenly, Torkunta looked over to Lukas and asked.

“Did that ever happen to you?”

“What?”

“Did anyone you know ever become an undead?”

“No.”

Although Lukas replied immediately, there was indeed a similar case to that.

The Green Dragon Isola.

Lukas recalled the scene of the Dragon, who had been his Master in the past, with just his head remaining, attached to the body of a sea serpent.

Of course, strictly speaking, that was a chimera instead of an undead, but Lukas still felt unbearable rage at the fact that someone had insulted his master’s body like that.

That’s why he wasn’t actually sure.

How he would feel if someone turned someone he knew personally into an undead.

“Ah.”

When he heard Peran’s soft exclamation, Lukas put aside his thoughts and looked ahead.

After a long while, the dark tunnel opened into a large cavern.

—An underground cave.

Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and there was an ankle deep pool of water on the ground.

But it was the mountain of hundreds or thousands of undead corpses that truly gained their attention at that moment.

“...that.”

In the meanwhile, Torkunta seemed to discover something else and narrowed his eyes slightly.

Turning his head, Peran followed his gaze.

“...Lady... Snow?”

His voice was muffled and cracked.

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Peran hurriedly ran towards Snow.

That wasn't like him. There was a mountain of corpses in front of them, but that didn't mean there weren't any undead still alive.

It was even possible that Snow was used as bait to lure Peran.

“...Torkunta, keep an eye on the surroundings.”

“Don't order me around.”

Torkunta replied in a harsh voice, but Lukas took it as a sign of acceptance and followed after Peran. He didn't forget to look around for any traces of movement as he moved.

‘They're all corpses.’

That was the conclusion he eventually reached. Even if there was an undead that could miraculously hide from him, he didn't think it would also be able to fool Torkunta's sharp senses.

Lukas soon arrived beside Peran.

...Snow de Predickwood.

The Elf Queen's body was half submerged.

“ ... ”

But she didn't look like a corpse.

Was it because her skin had always been deathly pale? Or was he having this thought simply because he refused to accept reality?

Peran was looking down at her body with a stunned expression.

This was Lukas' first time seeing such an absentminded expression on this man who was always quite calm.

Lukas also had a hard time believing it, but it was clear that he was much calmer than Peran at the moment.

“Calm down.”

“...”

Peran remained silent, but he let out a shaky breath.

Lukas looked at him for a bit longer before turning back to Snow.

...He couldn't feel any traces of life from her face which looked like an ice sculpture.

He checked her pulse... Her wrist was cold. It felt like he was touching a chunk of ice instead of a person's skin. Moreover, he could not feel a pulse.

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“...why the hell did a Swordsman like you...”

Lukas couldn't suppress the slight hitch in his voice as he spoke.

“This can't... be real...!”

Splash!

Peran fell to his knees. In an instant, his clothes were soaked in the rotten water, but he didn't care. He grabbed Snow's wrist and placed his hand under her nose.

Lukas carefully looked at Snow's body from a step away.

What was the cause of death?

...The first thing he noticed was two holes on her abdomen,

The first hole was small, similar to a stab wound from a sword. It pierced through her clothes and skin and ripped the internal organs beneath.

The second hole was much larger than the first, and the shape of the wound was quite strange. It looked more like something had burst from her abdomen rather than stabbed into it.

This meant that something had come out from inside Snow, ripping through her intestines and skin on the way out.

Lukas narrowed his eyes.

'An application of space magic...'

There were traces of sinister mana.

So it was probably the Blink spell mixed with black magic.

Nevertheless, in order to deceive the heightened senses of someone like Snow, it would have required a very complex and stealthy formula.

As far as Lukas knew, there was only one Warlock* who had that kind of ability. (*: I think I'll change 'Black Wizard' to 'Warlock' since I feel like it's a good match for 'Witch'. 'Black Witch' is just Iris' title, the rest are normal 'Witches'.)

'Diablo.'

It was just like Torkunta had said. The Lich had been in this forest, in this cave.

Lukas examined the other wounds.

Snow also had wounds on her upper abdomen and chest.

Including a stab wound directly above her heart.

This was probably the direct cause of Snow's death. The first two wounds incapacitated her, and the final blow to her chest ruptured her heart.

It was at this moment that Lukas finally noticed something strange.

'...Deukid isn't here.'

Did Diablo take it?

Why?

Of course, Deukid was a treasured sword that was hard to find an equal of, but Diablo was, in essence, a Wizard.

No matter how amazing it was, in the end, it was still a sword. There wasn't really any need for him to take it.

...Something... wasn't right.

Lukas examined the sword wounds again.

At first, he thought she'd died after a fierce battle with the undead because there was such a large pile of them around her.

He believed the undead had launched attacks in waves to sap her stamina and concentration before Diablo took the chance to deal a heavy blow to the exhausted Snow.

The hundreds of undead would have used that opening and Snow, who was already exhausted, would have defended constantly until she eventually died.

While it might have been somewhat of an unfair death for a powerful being like Snow, the undead that were scattered around were by no means weak.

Every one of these undead were worthy of being called high ranking undead. If the location and timing were suitable, it was possible for this group to even destroy a small country in a week or less.

But now, it seemed that the true situation was a bit different.

There were only three major injuries on Snow's body.

The sword wound on her abdomen, the hole from the black magic that pierced from the inside.

And the last hole in her heart.

...If she had been killed by a lot of undead, her body wouldn't have been in such good condition. Her enemies were undead. They were a group so vile that it wouldn't be strange if they were to consume not only their enemies' flesh and blood but even their bones.

Nevertheless, Snow's body was relatively clean.

'...a small number.'

One or two at most.

Even including Diablo, their number wouldn't have exceeded three.

They were able to fight a fierce battle with Snow with just that many. And by the wounds, it was highly likely that one of them was a Swordsman.

'An undead swordsman, who had the ability to fight against Snow?'

He found it hard to believe, but it wasn't completely incomprehensible.

Diablo had confidently appeared in this forest and lured Snow over because he was confident that he would win.

In other words, the undead that he used in this fight were Diablo's 'trump card'.

"..."

A sigh leaked out of his lips.

Snow's death. Although he'd had his doubts before, he still found it unbelievable.

Although it was different from the blind faith that Peran and the Swordnaz had in her, Lukas also believed in her. Because he knew what Snow had achieved. She was a talented person who shouldn't have died in such a vain manner.

“...Lady Snow... is still alive.”

Peran’s soft murmur entered his ears.

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Lukas looked down.

It seemed Peran still couldn’t accept reality.

This showed how much Snow meant to Peran. Since even the spirit of an 8-star Wizard could be shaken in such a way.

“Peran, I’m sorry, but she-”

“No. She’s really alive.”

At those words, Lukas turned to look at him.

This was because the tremor in Peran’s voice disappeared. On the contrary, his voice seemed to contain a different emotion.

It seemed that he was truly convinced about Snow’s survival.

Lukas looked at Snow's body again.

"..."

But he still couldn't sense any signs of life.

If that was the case, then...

'Her wounds.'

His attention turned to the large hole in Snow's abdomen.

The bloodstains around them... were few.

It wasn't that they weren't there, just that there wasn't much there.

Usually, for a hole of that large, not to mention blood, it wouldn't be strange if her intestines were to fall out.

"...this is..."

Upon closer inspection, he realised that there was a faint white mist escaping from her wounds.

“Iceheart.”

Peran’s voice shook slightly as he spoke.

“What’s that?”

“It’s one of Lady Snow’s skills. It seems that she put herself in a false death state just before she died.”

“...”

“As expected, I knew she wouldn’t have died in vain like this.”

Peran seemed pleased, but Lukas’ thoughts were different.

The enemy was Diablo, a 9 star Warlock.

When it came to thoroughness, he would be second to none.

Did he really not realise that Snow had survived? Even if he hadn’t, there was no reason for him to leave her body here.

So there had to be a reason.

Why he left Snow alive...

'Did he intend to turn her into a puppet?'

No. That couldn't be it.

He should have known Snow's noble spirit. Even if she became an undead, there was a high chance that she wouldn't obey Diablo.

The success rate of the mind control varied dramatically depending on the personality, character, and willpower of the dead. As far as Lukas could tell, Snow was more likely to try and stab Diablo even if he were to bring her back to life.

'There's no way Diablo didn't know that.'

The more noble a person was, the more preparations the Necromancer needed to make to corrupt them.

They would have to inject a huge amount of death energy into the body for an incredibly long time before they had a chance of succeeding.

“...”

Lukas put his hand on Snow's body and frowned.

“...it's as you said. She's still alive.”

“Didn't I already tell you that?”

Peran answered Lukas with a bright smile on his face, but Lukas' expression still didn't improve.

“However, her situation is not good. There is a large amount of death energy laying dormant in her body.”

“I know that too. However, when Lady Snow regains consciousness, she will be able to force it out on her own...”

“That's not possible. She must have realised how bad her condition was since she put herself in a false death state.”

That was the conclusion Lukas reached.

Peran seemed to want to refute that statement without even thinking about it.

Blind faith.

To receive such blind faith from others. While it was a great accomplishment, it was also a great responsibility.

For the first time, Lukas felt sympathy for Snow. There had probably been some weakness from having to shoulder such heavy responsibilities, but she hid it behind her arrogant and broad-minded facade.

“Then what do you think will happen if she were to regain consciousness like this?”

“Her consciousness would start to corrode because of the death energy, and her soul would die. And without her soul, her body would also lose its life.”

“...what? That means...”

“Right.”

Lukas’ voice was firm as he spoke.

“Snow’s body would transform into a low ranking undead, like a ghoul or a skeleton.”

“...th-, that...”

Peran clenched his fist as his shoulders began to shake. His eyes became slightly red because of his anger.

...Reviving a Sword Master like Snow as a low ranking undead?

That was an insult, an insult to her very existence.

“How... dare he...”

“...”

It wasn't difficult to awaken her from her false death state. All they needed to do was warm up her cold body.

However, if they did that, the frozen death energy would also begin to move. The weakened Snow would be unable to remove the death energy and would slowly become an undead.

Her hair would fall out, her flesh would melt, her intestines would spill out, and her heartstopping appearance would become so hideous that there would be no traces of her former beauty.

‘So that is his goal.’

Diablo had probably noticed Snow's false death state.

And yet, he still left without finishing her off.

If he were to kill Snow here, the Anti Circle Alliance would stop at nothing to ensure that he was dead.

There was nothing more annoying than an entire organisation blinded by rage. This was something that Diablo knew too.

But if Snow was still alive, then they would not give up on her.

It was easy to tell how powerful Snow's influence in the organisation was by the actions of Peran and the Swordnaz.

It was none other than Snow's overwhelming charisma that brought them together.

The Alliance was also different from the Circle in the fact that they weren't separated into different factions within their organisation.

The Anti Circle Alliance was centred around Snow, and from now on, they would do everything in their power to revive her.

This meant that they would stop focusing on other things like keeping the Circle in check or dealing with Diablo's armies.

Even if they were to make the determination that Snow was unable to be saved, they would not stop trying despite knowing that their struggles would be in vain.

“...shit.”

Peran must have come to a similar conclusion. Sometimes, it was possible for one to regret their own intelligence.

Spitting out a swear that was very unlike him, Peran punched the ground, causing the water on the ground and even the very walls of the cave to shake.

Lukas looked at him for a moment before muttering.

“There’s a way to save her.”

“What?”

“Snow can be saved.”

“...”

Peran remained silent for a while before finally speaking in a low tone.

“...I trust you. However, I hope you’re not trying to give me some kind of false consolation right now. Say it clearly. Do you really know of a way to save Lady Snow?”

“I do.”

Lukas’ voice was firm.

“However, it will not be easy to get their help.”

In order to remove the death energy that was laying dormant in Snow’s body, they would need an authority in black magic.

Someone whose skill and knowledge in black magic was comparable to Diablo’s, or perhaps even more than his.

‘Iris.’

It wouldn’t be easy to convince her.

But she wasn’t the only person they’d need.

After expelling the death energy, Snow’s polluted body would still need to be purified to ensure that all of the aftereffects were completely removed.

In other words, it would require an intellectual with knowledge in the fields of basic medicine, anatomy, immunology, and pharmacology. If they were also skilled in purification then it would be even better.

It wouldn't be good to gather experts from each field because it wasn't something that could be done separately.

It had to be one person.

One person had to have all of that knowledge.

And Lukas knew one such person.

Unlike Iris, he didn't know anything about her whereabouts, but...

He turned to Peran and asked.

"Do you know of a golem called Anastasia?"

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"...Oh my God."

"I can't believe it..."

Upon seeing Snow's appearance, the Swordnaz despaired as though the sky was falling onto their heads.

Sera, who seemed unable to speak, could only clench her fists tightly with tears in her eyes.

The others' reactions weren't much different.

It was only Eric who was able to stay relatively calm.

"Magic Commander, will Lady Snow be okay?"

Nevertheless, he was unable to completely suppress the shiver in his voice.

"She's currently in a false death state, but fortunately, her life isn't in immediate danger."

Peran answered in a voice completely different from when he himself had discovered Snow.

Relief swept across the faces of the Swordnaz's faces like a wave.

Just this interaction was enough to show that Peran, while not as trusted as Snow, was still relied on quite a bit.

"I intend to go on a journey to heal Lady Snow."

“Will she be able to wake up again?”

“She will.”

Peran’s voice was quiet, but it was filled with unshakeable resolve.

With a grave expression on his face, Eric slowly opened his mouth.

“Then we...”

“No.”

But Peran, who knew what he was about to say, gently dissuaded the Swordnaz.

“I have something even more important for you to do.”

“By something more important...”

“You need to help Lady Snow. Be the shield that protects her while she is in this vulnerable state.”

“...all five of us?”

His face was asking if not even one of them could go along with him.

The important thing to remember was that the five of them were a unit. So it would be counterproductive to take only one of them.

“The Swordnaz can only reveal their true value when all five members are present. That is something Lady Snow used to say all the time. Was that a mistake?”

“...that’s... not it...”

As he spoke, Eric tried his best to hide his sorrow.

However, his expression of anger and frustration still seeped through.

“Eric, you need to take Lady Snow to ‘Lilund’. We need Lady Snow to be near the World Tree, Hruhiral, to stabilise her condition. This is something only you can do.”

The cold air around Snow’s body didn’t fade even after they left the cool cavern. In fact, it would probably be fine even if she were placed in a hot environment.

Her Iceheart wasn’t so weak that it could be shaken by the heat of the sun or a bonfire.

However, they were worried that the death energy in her body would begin to spread over time.

Hruhiral's sacred power also contained the element of purification. So if the death energy truly was to begin acting up, the World Tree would be able to suppress it a bit.

"No one should be allowed to know how critical her current condition is. Even if it's other elves. I believe you don't need me to explain why. Can you promise me that you will carry out this task?"

"I promise, Magic Commander."

Eric gave a stiff nod.

In other words, he would need to deceive his people, but now was not the time to be worried about that.

At least from Eric's perspective, Snow's life was much more important than the fundamental integrity and innocence that he had as an elf.

"Please hurry... And Yuriah."

"Yes."

"I would like to talk to you for a second."

"..."

Yuriah nodded without changing her expression.

Peran gestured with his head slightly, and the other Swordnaz got up from their seats.

After a while, only Peran, Lukas, and Yuriah remained in the cave.

“You have to be careful.”

“Huh?”

“...keep this in mind. From now on, it’s possible that any Wizard could be an enemy.”

Yuriah’s expressionlessness gave way to a look of confusion. She didn’t understand what Peran was saying.

He knew this.

But he didn’t have much time to explain.

“Before coming to the Amalgam Forest, I visited my home in Kausymphony. You know of my father, Shepard Jun, don’t you?”

“I’ve heard of his reputation. He’s a Great Wizard who represents the empire, and a high ranking executive in the Circle.”

“...”

Peran smiled faintly.

“He’s good at pretending... I suppose I should still call him father.”

At those words, Lukas, who had been leaning against the wall of the cave the entire time, lifted his head.

“What do you mean by that?”

“My father tried to kill me.”

“Huh...?”

It wasn’t just Yuriah that was shocked. Even Lukas had an expression of disbelief on his face.

“He has already sold his soul to Diablo. To see the end of magicology, he would not hesitate to commit any crime... My father, Shepard Jun, has already been corrupted.”

“But... why so suddenly...?”

Shepard Jun.

Yuriah had never met him personally, but she knew that he was a very straightforward person. This was because Peran often told her about him and because Yuriah had done a lot of research on the high ranking Wizards on the continent.

Shepard Jun was a man that she assumed would break long before he would bend.

“He was a 7-star Wizard. You are also at the same level, so you should understand, right? Just how high the wall in front of you is.”

...Of course, she knew.

In fact, she felt like even if she spent her entire life, she wouldn't be able to obtain any clues about the next level.

This kind of vague fear and self doubt put a lot of pressure on the shoulders of this young Wizard, who was considered a genius.

“Diablo promised them enlightenment. He proclaimed himself to be a teacher... It goes without saying how tempting that would be for an Archmage who thinks they cannot progress any further on their own.” (TL: I've always wondered why the author uses both Great Wizard(대마법사) and Archmage(아크메이지) to refer to Wizards above 7-stars. To this day, I'm unsure.)

“My loyalty to Lady Snow is much greater than my pursuit of magicology.”

Yuriah’s voice was firm.

“I know that. But it is not good to be overconfident... because even Cairo Wilsemann, the right hand of the Grand Master, Ivan, who has already reached 9 stars, has already joined Diablo’s side.”

“...!”

Both Yuriah and Lukas revealed shocked expressions at those words.

“Did you say Cairo Wilsemann...? That...”

“This information is concrete. After all, I was directly attacked by him. Maybe if it weren’t for the fact that they were trying to capture me instead of killing me, I would not have been able to make it to the forest.”

“...”

“Was Cairo working with Diablo from the start? Or did he only recently decide to betray the Circle? I don’t know.”

Both of them used to be a part of the organisation called Paragon. In other words, they were former colleagues. The possibility that Cairo had been deceiving them from the start could not be ignored.

“...listen carefully, Yuriah. Diablo has been saving up so much power that we couldn’t even begin to imagine. He crouched down and hid his claws for a long time, so he must still have a lot of hidden cards. And the fact that he is revealing it now means that he is confident in his victory regardless of what we do to try and stop it.”

“...”

“This is not all. It’s highly likely that this is only the beginning.”

That was the fact that worried Peran the most.

...10 years. The peace they obtained by overthrowing the Demigods had only lasted a short time.

Sooner rather than later, another storm would sweep across the entire continent.

“Whenever we meet again, treat me with suspicion, and I will do the same.”

“...”

Yuriah licked her lips over and over as if she had something to say, but she couldn’t say anything in the end.

She simply clenched her fists.

And nodded.

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They watched the backs of the departing Swordnaz, the sun setting behind them.

When their figures finally disappeared over the horizon, Lukas opened his mouth.

“Is what you said before true?”

“What do you mean?”

“The story about Cairo joining Diablo.”

Peran nodded his head slowly instead of responding.

“Cairo Wilsemann is a 9-star Wizard.”

“Right.”

“Enlightenment. And a desire to be taught. Did you notice? According to your words, Diablo will teach a 9-star Wizard.”

“...”

There was no answer, but he could tell from looking at Peran’s expression. This man was also considering that possibility.

“...we need to contemplate this situation more carefully, but I don’t believe most Wizards will be able to refuse Diablo’s temptation. As you said before, they are on the verge of going crazy from their hunger for teaching. They will accept it regardless of what he asks for in return.”

“That’s not teaching.”

Lukas’ voice was cold. Teaching wasn’t something that should be paid for. That was what Lukas always believed.

“But why didn’t you fall for Diablo’s tricks?”

“Huh?”

“You’re 8-stars. The higher the level, the greater the desire for enlightenment.”

“...”

Peran gave a small smile.

“Well. Perhaps it’s because I am less desperate. It hasn’t been so long since I reached 8-stars.”

Lukas didn’t think he was being completely honest, but he decided not to question him more deeply.

“In any case, now is not the time for us to worry about Diablo and the Wizards. Firstly, we need to focus on Snow’s treatment and resuscitation. To do that, we will need to find Anastasia like you said.”

“You said there was a place you thought she might be.”

“That’s true, but you shouldn’t trust that too much. It is outdated information.”

Peran spoke with a slightly troubled expression, but Lukas didn’t mind. This was because he hadn’t expected that Peran would have any contact with Anastasia in the first place.

But when he asked Peran about her, his strange expression told him that there was some story there.

“Even outdated information is fine. So where were we...”

Lukas turned his head slightly, and when he stopped, his gaze was resting upon Torkunta who was standing in the distance. He was half hidden behind a burnt tree.

Lukas beckoned towards him.

“The Swordnaz have already left, Torkunta. You can come over.”

“...”

“Torkun...”

Lukas paused for a moment.

...Nix and Torkunta.

They were two consciousnesses, two souls that shared the same body.

It was possible to tell which one was in control by looking at the colour of their eyes.

When Torkunta was in control, the eyes were golden and slit like a predator.

And when it was Nix, the eyes were red.

The reason Lukas paused was for one reason.

The eyes looking at him from behind the tree were bright red.

It was clear.

The one who was currently in control was Nix.

“Be careful.”

When Lukas spoke in a low tone, Peran, who also noticed something strange, began to draw upon his mana so that he would be able to cast a spell at any time.

‘...there are still a lot of things I wanted to ask Torkunta.’

Nix had woken up much faster than they expected.

Then what would happen now?

If she were to decide to kill them, there was nothing Lukas and Peran could do to fight back. In other words, they would have no choice but to run away. But did they really have enough time to escape from Nix?

‘I might need to try calling out Torkunta again.’

No, that would be difficult too.

There were two reasons why Torkunta's consciousness was able to come forward so easily last time.

One of them was because Nix's mind was unstable, and the other was because Lukas had successfully managed to threaten her life to an extent.

Now, it would be difficult for him to satisfy either condition.

"..."

It was strange.

He had been thinking for quite a while already, but Nix still continued to look at him without saying a word. To be more precise, her gaze was glued to Lukas' face.

When he lifted his gaze to meet hers, she turned her head to the side and folded her arms with a slight huff.

"...why is she acting like that?"

"Well."

Lukas and Peran weren't sure of what was going on.

But they could at least be certain about one thing.

For now, Nix wasn't showing any hostility to them.

“...”

Lukas and Peran exchanged glances while lifting their guards ever so slightly.

“It doesn't seem like she plans to kill us.”

“...that seems to be the case.”

“Then what should we do? If we talk to her...”

“We might end up stimulating her again...”

“She doesn't look as unstable as before.”

“That might just be how she looks. Those who are mentally and emotionally unstable don't always show it on the outside.”

“...so you’re saying if we try to approach her, we might get turned to ashes.”

“Should we just act like we don’t care? Maybe we should head to the main road.”

“...”

That wasn’t a bad idea.

With a slight nod, they slowly turned around and began walking side by side through the forest. Despite this, almost all of the attention of the two men were focused on the woman who was looking at them.

After taking about ten steps.

Tap tap-

They heard the sound of footsteps behind them.

“...she’s following us.”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t think that she will... hunt us down and try to kill... do you?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m also not sure what she’s thinking.”

“Should we use the Warp spell to try and shake her off?”

“That’s too risky.”

Lukas pondered for a moment before making a suggestion.

“Let’s leave the forest first before deciding what to do next. Don’t let your guard down.”

“Right.”

“...by the way, where are we going?”

When he heard this, Peran pulled a half broken compass from his pocket. Lukas guessed that it might have become like that during the fight with Nix.

Peran pointed to the northwest and spoke.

“Yuterdam.”

“...Yuterdam?”

This was his first time hearing that name.

Peran chuckled slightly as he added.

“It is the so-called City of Pleasure.” (TL: This scene was so funny to me.)

* * *

“...”

Nix, who was walking at a fixed distance behind them, suddenly frowned and mumbled.

“...why are you so noisy? Shut up.”

[...]

“The headache? It’s fine for now. It doesn’t hurt anymore. In fact, I’m sure...”

There was a strange glint in the eyes of Nix, which had been locked onto Lukas’ back since he turned around.

“It won’t hurt anymore.”

* * *

“It’s fine now.”

The doctor announced as they finished wrapping the bandage tightly.

Lukas bowed his head slightly.

“Thank you.”

“It is something you paid for. But you should be more careful in the future. The surgery was a success, but that was no minor wound. If you were to move too much, you might cause it to reopen.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Take these medicinal herbs twice a day after a meal for one week. Once in the morning and again in the evening. You may go now.”

Lukas nodded, put on his shirt, and left the room.

As he climbed the creaking stairs, he was greeted with a panoramic view.

The blue horizon that stretched endlessly, and the sails swaying in the salty breeze which brushed past the tip of his nose.

He was on a ship. A transport vessel headed towards Yuterdam.

It seemed that there were no Warp Stones in Yuterdam. In addition, since it would be the first time that Peran was visiting it too, he didn't know its coordinates. In other words, it meant that they had no choice but to travel there themselves.

'It is safer to travel by sea than by land.'

For one, it would help them avoid Diablo's tracking, and it would shorten their journey by a considerable amount.

Above all, it allowed Lukas to get the required rest to heal his wounds while they travelled. Thanks to this, his physical condition was able to improve rapidly over the past two weeks.

According to the doctor, as long as he didn't overdo it, he wouldn't have any trouble moving around.

'I can't tell if this body is weak or strong...'

It was surprisingly sturdy.

When his stomach had been pierced, he really thought that he would die.

...In any case, after leaving the Amalgam Forest, they received some proper treatment in a nearby town before heading to the nearest port town after a short rest. Then they immediately found a ship heading towards their destination and got on board.

It had already been two weeks since they'd left the Amalgam Forest, and five days since they'd stepped onto the ship.

According to the schedule, they would be able to see Yuterdam by sunset.

"Is your treatment over?"

He turned around when he heard the sudden voice behind him.

It was Peran.

Even though the sun was high in the sky, his skin was clammy and his hair was tousled as if he had just woken up. This wasn't strange. He had been constantly locked in his cabin, using the numerous communication stones he'd set up there to calm the chaos in the Anti Circle Alliance.

Lukas couldn't tell just how busy he was, but he was certainly busier than him, who just had to focus on his recovery.

“Right. You?”

“It was a bit rushed, but I’ve done everything I can. All that’s left to do is pray.”

“...I see.”

Silence fell.

The two men stood side by side, staring out at the open ocean.

It wasn’t particularly awkward. In fact, the silence was actually comfortable.

But this fact was even stranger.

It had been so long since Lukas had felt something similar to this that he’d already forgotten it.

“She’s doing it again.”

Lukas looked over when he heard Peran’s laughter filled murmur.

There, not so far away, stood Nix, partially hidden in the shadows.

“Have you spoken to her yet?”

“No. Whenever I get close, she runs away.”

“Really?... Well. It doesn't seem like she wants to kill us anymore, so I guess we can count ourselves lucky.”

That was something he could definitely agree with.

Of course, Lukas wanted to know a bit more about what was currently going through Nix's mind, but her power was too intimidating to provoke.

It was too risky to pursue her and ask her questions when she was avoiding him herself.

At the very least, it was something he had to avoid until he was absolutely certain that it was safe.

“...on a ship.”

Peran spoke slowly.

His expression and tone were completely different from before.

“That’s where we met for the first time.”

There was no subject.

But it was easy to tell who Peran was talking about.

Frey Blake.

“ ... ”

Until now, Peran hadn’t mentioned anything. They had been too busy in the Amalgam Forest. And even afterward, they’d been focused on finding a ship and seeking treatment from a doctor.

They’d had a few minutes of conversation between those times.

Nevertheless, Peran didn’t say anything, nor did he ask anything.

It was only now that he was bringing up Frey.

Lukas wondered why.

“Right.”

He nodded.

Peran paused for a moment before opening his mouth again.

“I didn’t really care about the pirates, but the Lich was a problem.”

“With your level at the time, he could be considered a formidable opponent. But compared to Diablo, he’s like a newborn.”

“Haha. That’s natural.”

Lukas looked up at the sky for a moment before muttering.

“I just realised something.”

“What is it?”

“Both then and now, our enemy was a Lich.”

“...”

Peran turned to Lukas with a look of confusion for a moment before he burst into laughter.

“Ha, hahaha. Hahaha...”

His smile was as refreshing as the ocean breeze.

Lukas didn't think his words were particularly funny, but Peran laughed so hard that tears appeared at the corners of his eyes. Nix, who was standing a bit away, seemed to become curious as she inched closer. But when her eyes met Lukas', she stopped moving and went back to her original spot.

“...right. That's right.”

Peran muttered to himself while nodding as though he understood something.

When he looked at Lukas once again, his expression seemed a bit brighter, as though he'd let go of some kind of burden.

“By the way, what should I... No. What do I call you?” (TL: Hard to portray in English. The first 'what do' is formal, the second is more casual, like the way you'd speak to a friend.)

For some reason, it felt like this was something that was important to him.

Lukas cleared his throat and answered in a clear voice.

“Lukas, Lukas Trowman.”

“Lukas Trowman... Good.”

Peran smiled brightly and stuck out his hand.

“I’m Peran Jun. Please take care of me, Lukas.”

“Right.”

He grabbed his outstretched hand.

Perhaps it was just a feeling. But Lukas felt like a refreshing air was blowing in his chest.

Volume 2 - Chapter 349

Yuterdam was the capital and largest city in the country of Freeland. Its size was about one third of the size of Kausymphony, which could be considered quite large among the cities in smaller countries.

Although it had a population of about 100,000, the proportion of original residents was not that large because it was a well known trade and tourism hub.

It was said that many people who visited as tourists ended up staying because the process for getting a visa and obtaining permanent residence was not very complicated.

Currently, it was very noisy...

“...is there a festival or something?”

It wasn't strange for Lukas to ask this question soon after disembarking from the ship.

The noise was so loud that it made his ears ache.

The lights that hung above their heads illuminated the streets that were so crowded that it seemed almost impossible for them to pass, and the scent of food that made their mouths water tickled their noses.

The entire city buzzed as though some kind of festival was going on.

“No. It's like a festival all year round. To put it bluntly, Yuterdam is well known as 'the city where one is happiest as long as they have money'.”

...he did say that it was called the City of Pleasure.

Now that he was seeing it for himself, it truly did live up to its name.

Lukas and Peran decided to move to a quieter place before considering their next move.

“First off, before we start moving around, we should prepare.”

“Prepare?”

“Right. We don’t look very good right now.”

While they couldn’t be called dirty, they certainly did look quite poor and shabby compared to the well dressed people around them.

After briefly telling him to follow him, Peran skillfully traversed the streets through the endless sea of people.

Seeing his reckless steps, Lukas couldn’t help but call out to him.

“Didn’t you say you’ve never been here before?”

“That’s right. So I did my research as thoroughly as I could.”

...It seemed that he had even memorised the map of the entire city.

As he was thinking that it was something that Peran would do, they arrived at their destination.

It was a clothing store.

There were a few people inside already.

It was a very high end store, this could be seen both by the atmosphere and the level of clothes being displayed.

Peran approached one of the clerks in a very familiar manner.

“Welco-... Ah.”

The clerk turned her face to greet them, but she froze slightly when she saw Peran’s face and blushed.

“I’m here to look for some clothes.”

When Peran smiled, the clerk continued to look at him blankly for a while before her face became even redder.

“Th-, that’s right! Do you have any design or material that you prefer?”

“Do you have any silk shirts?”

“Of course we do. As for the color...”

“I’d like white, please. I’d also like it to be tight, but not too restricting. The outerwear should be large and thin, and I think it would be better if it was embroidered in dark gold...”

“We have several similar designs. Please follow me.”

The clerk nodded and guided Peran through the shelves. As he walked, Peran looked at the clothes with a serious expression.

Lukas, who was left alone, looked at the price tag on one of the nearby outfits.

“...”

It was an unimaginable price.

An amount of money that ordinary people wouldn’t be able to touch even if they worked for their entire lives. Were some strips of cloth really worth such a price?

...He wasn’t trying to disparage the clothing industry, but Lukas just couldn’t understand.

After a while, Peran came out fully dressed in his new clothes.

“What do you think?”

He smiled brightly, showing off his white teeth.

It was needless to say what the result of this action was.

The clerk beside him immediately looked like she was about to faint. To put it in other words, her expression seemed to say ‘I would have no regrets even if I were to die right now’.

The other customers in the store were also staring at Peran with bated breaths. It didn’t matter whether they were men or women.

‘...the clothes are like wings.’

In this case, it was like adding wings to a white horse.

When Lukas nodded slightly, Peran grinned.

“Now then, it’s time to choose your clothes.”

“No. These are fine.”

“No. We’re going to a place where first impressions are very important.”

“...”

There was a bit of firmness in this voice like he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Peran’s gaze shifted to behind Lukas.

Without them realising, Nix had followed them into the store. She looked around with a clueless expression for a while before her attention seemed to be drawn to a scarlet dress.

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to buy this dress for you.”

“...”

Nix didn’t answer, but she turned her head shyly.

* * *

...There was a saying about being uncomfortable, like wearing clothes that didn’t fit.

That was exactly how Lukas felt at that moment. He usually only wore clothes like large robes or armour that protected his body, but when he wore clothes like this, even just the feeling of the cloth rubbing against his skin annoyed him.

“It suits you.”

“Empty words.”

“It’s not. Look. Everyone is looking at us.”

‘They’re looking at you and Nix.’

Lukas muttered inwardly and sighed.

“So where are you going now?”

“The most important store in Yuterdam.”

“Store?”

“It’ll be faster for you to see it for yourself.”

Peran didn’t say more than that and continued walking. Lukas had no choice but to follow him.

“We’re here.”

The place they arrived at was a building with a dark atmosphere.

It was neither large nor small, but it was built in a way that made it hard to spot at a glance. Nevertheless, there was a long line of people waiting outside the door.

Looking at them, Lukas couldn’t help but frown slightly.

‘...they are all excited.’

In fact, there was even a hint of madness in their eyes as though they were longing for something.

“I heard an explanation, but I think we’d be able to figure out more details by going inside.”

After muttering a reply, Peran began to walk towards the door.

“What about the line? Don’t we have to stand there?”

“I made a reservation in advance.”

“When?”

“While we were looking for a ship.”

He had a very meticulous attitude. It seemed that he hadn't just settled on a preliminary investigation.

The group headed into the building. The interior was dark, but it consisted of a single long hallway. At the entrance of the hallway was a figure wrapped in a dark robe.

“Welcome to [Memories of Heaven].”

Lukas narrowed his eyes.

It wasn't possible to tell if this person was male or female. They were using some trick to change their voice.

“I made a reservation.”

“May I please have your name?”

“Peran Jun. I contacted you five days ago.”

The person fell silent for a moment before suddenly opening their mouth again.

“...pink?”

“Angels.”

It was a secret code.

It was only after Peran responded without hesitation that the person nodded their head.

“Your identity was confirmed. Please continue along this path. Then heaven will begin.”

“Thanks.”

After saying that, he walked past the woman, and Lukas followed him.

“I think I know what this place is. It has a familiar scent.”

“...”

Peran blinked in surprise at those words.

“...you... do?”

“Right.”

The line of customers waiting outside. The faint obsession and madness in their eyes. The fact that this building was built in such a secretive location. And last but not least, the security.

This most likely meant that it was a place that handled illegal goods.

They were probably selling drugs under the name of [Memories of Heaven].

‘There are clues about Anastasia in a place like this?’

He didn’t want to believe that she would be associated with such a thing, but Peran was by no means a fool. There was no way he’d travel for five days by boat to come to this city if he didn’t have some level of confidence.

“...that’s... really surprising.”

Peran’s voice was filled with all sorts of complicated emotions.

And it was a bit weaker.

“This is my first time coming to a place like this... Mm. Well, to be precise, I didn’t even know they existed until I started investigating.”

“That’s surprising to me too.”

Drugs.

Even if it wasn’t a word that he would associate with Peran, it was still surprising that he never even heard about it despite being relatively experienced in the world.

In addition, not only was he a high level Wizard, but he was also a member of one of the most influential noble families in the empire. While he didn’t expect him to like this sort of underground thing, he should have at least been aware of it.

“Haha. Well, I’m not that trendy. I heard that there are many places like this nowadays. The times really are changing, you can even find them on main streets.”

...Trendy? Can even find them on main streets? Times are changing?

It felt like something was wrong with their conversation.

Just as Lukas was about to open his mouth to mention this, they reached the end of the hallway.

Creak-

The door opened.

And there, as he expected, the dark, musty smelling drug deal-

“Welcome! Master!”

“ ... ”

...Was not there.

Instead, Lukas felt like he would go blind.

Their surroundings had become bright, and a group of beautiful women with various skin and hair colours stood there with bright smiles.

“ ... ”

This unbelievable sight caused the blood to drain from Lukas’ face.

“Are the three of you a group?”

“It’s been a while since we got a Mistress.”

“Wow. You are all so beautiful.”

The beautiful women burst into laughter and chattered among themselves, but Lukas couldn't hear any of it.

“What's going on? This...”

When Nix, who was standing behind them, muttered with a shell-shocked expression, Peran responded.

“Firstly, it's a restaurant, but the customers here call it [The Garden of Hopes and Dreams] or [The only Heaven you can go to while alive].”

“...”

“So it's a type of concept restaurant. As long as you are in this store, you are the Masters and Mistresses of these maids... Ah, of course, that doesn't mean you can treat them rudely.”

He patted Lukas on the shoulder and let out a relieved laugh.

“Anyways, I'm glad you have experience. I was planning to move around secretly until I could meet the owner here.”

“...”

“So Lukas, what do we do now?”

“...”

“...Lukas?”

Volume 2 - Chapter 350

An enormous circular lobby.

Dozens of doors were connected to this lobby. It seemed that meals were served in private rooms.

There wasn't any noise coming from behind the numerous doors, but considering the waiting line outside, it definitely couldn't be because there were no customers. This meant that the soundproofing of these rooms was exceptional.

“Please come this way.”

Following the maids' guidance, they entered one of the rooms. The interior of the room was much too large for just three guests.

Lukas, Peran, and Nix sat down at the table positioned in the center of the room first. A maid politely handed a menu to each of them with both hands. Lukas didn't pay her much mind and instead skimmed over the menu.

[Hotter than Ash's Love ★ Garlic Hot Steak]

[As sweet as Jamie's voice ♥ Honey Bread]

[Thaws even Luna's frozen heart → Karul Mountain Tea] (PR: what, no emoji for this one? xD)

“...”

He forcibly suppressed the sound that almost escaped his lips.

Apart from the special names of the menu items, the prices were also quite startling. They were unreasonable enough to be described as extortion.

When he turned to glance at the girl waiting beside him, she smiled brightly and said,

“We hope Masters will enjoy the food we made!”

“...”

‘1 person per menu, per customer.’

As such, their voices overlapped as they recited their lines.

...Since he hadn't eaten anything since they'd disembarked, he was quite hungry.

Lukas ordered grilled skewers. Peran ordered steak and a glass of wine.

As for Nix, she tilted her head to the side as she looked at the menu in front of her.

"Which ones are delicious?"

"Everything is delicious!"

"Then I want everything."

"Wow! I love you! Mistress!"

"..."

Lukas turned to look at Peran with an expression that seemed to ask if it was fine for her to do that. Since he would be the one paying for everything. But Peran simply shrugged his shoulders like it didn't matter.

"We will prepare them right away! So please wait a moment!"

They spoke in sweet voices as if there were hearts attached to the ends of their words.

The girls smiled cheerfully before carefully closing the door behind them as they left.

Peran took a sip of cold water before speaking.

“The service here is much more thorough than in an ordinary restaurant. I can see why the food is so expensive.”

“...”

Lukas was beginning to have an inkling as to the real reason why Peran wanted to visit this store.

Beautiful women who entertained guests with bright smiles, all of them much more beautiful than the noble girls who gave their all to maintain their appearances. Their features were so flawless that it seemed a bit unrealistic.

Not to mention the maid outfits that they all wore...

Lukas knew of a man who had such a wicked hobby.

Hector.

The red Dragon, the prisoner of the Demigods, and a man who had a large role to play in the creation of Anastasia.

To make Anastasia, Lukas had found and gathered the best experts at golem creation.

Among them, Hector was a particularly key figure. At the very least, when it came to 'golem crafting', he was probably the only person whose knowledge had managed to surpass that of Schweiser in the past.

'It's highly likely that Hector knows Anastasia's whereabouts.'

...He never would have thought that he would be hiding(?) so openly in a store like this in the City of Pleasure.

No. On second thought, such a place was a perfect fit for Hector.

"We need to meet the owner of this place."

After saying that, Peran took another sip of water.

"Maybe we can tell the employees we want to meet him."

"That will be hard. The owner here... he's like a zombie."

He spoke like he knew Hector well.

'He's secretive...'

To put it nicely, and to put it badly, he closed himself off.

Even in the past, Hector had shown no particular interest in the happenings around the world.

Hector was an alchemy master, the highest authority when it came to golem crafting, and the owner of a vast amount of knowledge that he accumulated over a very long time. He could acquire an astronomical amount of money just by using a fraction of what he had in his head, so opening this store was probably just a simple extension of his hobby.

"Your meal is here!"

Following the lively cry, the door swung open. Then, the food, from which fragrant smells instantly filled the room, was brought in.

...It was a good thing that the table was so big. If it were even a bit smaller, it wouldn't have been able to hold all of the food.

"..."

Nix looked at the spread of food with bright eyes like a child looking at treasure.

While Peran elegantly unfolded his napkin before cutting into his steak.

“Bon appetit.”

Lukas looked up at the maid who just spoke from beside him.

The first thing he noticed was her strange orange hair. Her pale skin and almond eyes drew his eyes next. From the outside, she looked no different from an ordinary human, but all of the maids in the room were probably golems.

Since Hector had always had a kind of fanatical obsession with the external aspects while neglecting actual performance, it was not easy to pinpoint any differences with the naked eye.

Suddenly, the maid turned her face to him and met his eyes.

“Ah. Did you fall for Ash?”

“...Ash?”

“That’s my name, Master!”

“...”

Her way of speaking in 3rd person caught him by surprise.

When Lukas remained silent, Ash smiled gently.

“Would you like me to feed you?”

“...no. It’s fine. We didn’t come here for that.”

“Huh? But the other Master over there...”

Ash drifted off at the end of her words and her gaze turned to another side of the table. Following her gaze, Lukas was met with the sight of Peran who was leisurely eating the steak that was being fed to him by a maid.

“...what are you doing?”

“Mm. Since we’re paying for it, shouldn’t we enjoy the full services? The steak here is excellent.”

After saying that, he smiled at the maid beside him.

“I think it would be better if the steak was cut into thinner slices.”

“Yes! Master!”

The maid nodded with an enthusiastic expression before feeding Peran another piece of steak which he ate happily.

...Obviously, in the past, Peran hadn't seemed to be very experienced in relationships with the opposite sex and had even been reluctant to go along with his family's arrangements. But it seemed a lot had changed in 10 years. (TL: Yes Lukas, not everyone can last for thousands of years)

Nix seemed to be wary at first, but after she reluctantly ate a piece of meat offered by a maid, her attitude changed completely. Afterward, she just sat back in her seat and opened her mouth without a word, waiting for the maid to feed her as if she was a chick waiting for its mother.

There was still no emotion on her face, but her eyes were sparkling.

Lukas couldn't understand Peran's relaxed attitude at first, but he soon realised his disposition.

Peran was probably the type who progressed steadily, albeit slowly.

That was why he could still leisurely eat steak despite being more worried than anyone about Snow's injuries.

Lukas' disposition wasn't much different, but there was one crucial difference.

There were times when he pushed forward despite everything.

“We would like to meet the owner of the restaurant.”

Lukas brought up the main point right away, but Ash simply responded with a professional smile.

“I’m sorry. But the Owner isn’t here right now.”

“When will he be back?”

“That is a very difficult question to answer. The Owner is like the wind... Ah. But if Master is here when the Owner gets back, Ash will tell you right away!”

“...!”

At first glance, this seemed like a normal response, but Lukas was certain that this answer was more like an ‘indefinite hold’.

Perhaps even if he were to visit the store every day for a year, he would not be able to meet the ‘Owner’ Ash had mentioned.

“That’s an interesting lie. There’s no way Hector would go far away from you all.”

“...”

Clink.

The movements of the maids froze at the same time.

Their smiling expressions disappeared like smoke, and instead, the only thing that remained was emotionless doll-like faces.

Peran looked at Lukas with a slightly startled expression, and Nix, who had just been about to eat a piece of bread like a baby bird, closed her mouth with a small pout.

“...who are you?”

Ash’s tone changed, becoming stiff and unfriendly.

Before Lukas could answer, Peran opened his mouth first and took the initiative.

“We are acquaintances of Hector’s. We came here because we really need his help.”