

Great Mage 651

Volume 2 - Chapter 351

Ash spoke in a cold voice.

“Our Master isn’t interested in the affairs of the world.”

“We know that. And what we’re asking will not trouble him in any way. We would only like to meet him for a short while.”

“That’s a request I can’t accept. The Master said that he will not meet anyone.”

“There are exceptions for everything. I’m pretty sure this will be one of those times for Hector.”

“...”

Ash fell silent for a moment before responding in a firm tone.

“That isn’t something that we can judge.”

Peran had a slightly embarrassed expression on his face.

Their stubbornness was like an iron wall... But he had expected something like this to happen. This was because he knew how inflexible these maids were.

He also understood just how absolute the orders of Hector, their true Master, were.

'That's why I tried to act like a guest.'

"We're trying to find Anastasia."

When she heard Lukas' words, Ash's expression changed for the first time.

"...that name... how..."

Suddenly.

The sound of footsteps came from outside the door.

It was clear that someone was walking towards the room with great momentum.

Realising this, Lukas and Peran tensed up.

Nix also seemed to sense it, but she continued to stare at the bread in front of her as if she determined that whoever it was wasn't a threat.

Bang!

Soon after, the door opened violently, and a red haired man strode in.

Hector.

Ten years had passed, but his appearance hadn't changed much from the last time Lukas had seen him. The only difference was that he seemed a bit thinner than back then.

The other thing he noticed was his eyes.

Hector was staring at Lukas with bloodshot eyes.

"Did I just hear my Ana's name in here?"

"Ma-, Master..."

The maids stared at Hector in surprise. His eyes swept across the crowd before settling on Peran.

"You are... Peran?"

He hadn't expected to meet Hector like this.

Peran turned to Lukas for a moment with a dumbfounded expression before turning back to Hector with a wry smile.

“Long time no see, Mr. Hector.”

* * *

Hector sat down at the table first.

Ragged beard, greasy hair, and dark bags under his eyes. All in all, he looked haggard. It looked like he had been working all night.

“Here you go, Master.”

Ash handed a cup of tea to him in a polite manner, which Hector accepted with a bright smile.

“Thanks, Ash.”

“...”

Looking at his scruffy face, it seemed that his personality hadn't changed much at least.

After taking a sip of the tea, Hector slowly opened his mouth.

“It has been a while, Peran. Has it already been 5 years?”

“Seven years. Have you been well?”

“I’m always well. How can I not be when I’m always stuck in a safe place?”

“I heard you decided to focus on business. I always knew that you were very resourceful, but you truly surprised me this time. I’ve seen your franchise in the Imperial Capital. I also heard that the response in other countries has been very good too.”

When he heard those words, a bright smile spread across Hector’s lips.

“Hahaha. I suppose my actions affected the winds of change which hastened our fated meeting. After all, every intelligent being with a working brain is destined to love maids.”

“...I... see.”

Peran’s smile cracked a bit as he replied.

“But why have you come here? Peran, I thought you were always very busy. Also.”

Hector's gaze turned to Lukas.

"It was you, right? The one who said my Ana's name."

"That's right."

"Hmm... This is my first time seeing your face. Pardon my manners, but what is your name?"

"It's Lukas."

"I see. I am Hector."

"..."

It seemed that Hector didn't remember him either.

Lukas was able to accept this fact calmly.

Perhaps it was because he was already used to it by now.

Or perhaps it was because he had already found people who remembered him.

Although one who submerged in someone else's consciousness and the other only remembered a part.

"I'll be blunt, Mr. Hector. We desperately need to know where Anastasia is."

"Please explain in detail."

Peran began to give him a brief explanation of the situation.

That Diablo had revealed his hand.

And that Snow had become his first victim and was on the brink of death.

"..."

Hector didn't really pay much attention to his story. But that didn't mean he ignored him. Instead, he gave vague responses to the things Peran said, sometimes nodding or letting out faint exclamations.

Then, when the story came to an end, he muttered.

"I see. So that's why you need Ana's knowledge as the Great Sage..."

“That’s right.”

“...but it’s still strange. Wasn’t Snow already capable of overwhelming Jekid a few years ago and inherited the title of Sword Master? I don’t think even Diablo is capable of pushing her to the brink of death.”

“I agree. That means he has a trump card that we don’t know about.”

“...”

When Hector’s face became a bit troubled, Peran added cautiously.

“...of course, I know that Anastasia isn’t with Mr. Hector right now.”

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Hector’s expression changed at that moment as if those words broke his heart.

“She’s in her rebellious phase right now. I thought she’d return home soon, but... Huh. It breaks my heart.”

“...”

“...in any case, I understand your situation. I did think that the continent was a lot more noisy lately, so it was probably because of Diablo.”

Although he spoke clearly, there was no alarm in his voice. Instead, his voice was calm as though he was talking about a war that was happening on the other side of the world.

This wasn't very surprising. Hector had always been like that.

Even when he'd been forced to be a minion for the Demigods, he hadn't shown any signs of pessimism. He was the type of person who perfectly suited the word 'optimism', but... there was a slight sense of incongruity with his current attitude.

“My desire to help you is burning, but as you said, Anastasia isn't here. You came to me despite knowing that because you want clues about that kid, right?”

“Yes. Do you have any clues to give us?”

“I do.”

“That's true. Mr. Hector probably doesn't know-”

Peran, who had already let out a low sigh, stopped talking for a moment and looked up at Hector with a startled expression.

“...huh?”

“I do have some clues. To be precise, I know where Anastasia is right now.”

“A-, are you serious?”

“Naturally. There is nothing I don’t know about my Ana.”

Hector spoke in a hoarse voice.

“Where is she now?”

“The Ispania Mountains.”

“...!!!”

In an almost synchronised motion, Peran and Lukas turned to look at Nix.

It was only then that they realised Nix had already finished all of the food on the table and was now reaching for Peran’s steak.

When their eyes focused on her, her fingers froze in the air and she raised her eyes to meet theirs.

Then, after pausing for a moment, she brazenly grabbed Peran's plate without changing her expression.

"...nom."

She swallowed the piece of meat as big as a palm in one bite.

Then she spoke to Peran in a slightly timid tone.

"You weren't eating anyway..."

"..."

"..."

It was now abundantly clear that Nix had not been paying any attention to their conversation.

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After hearing the words Ispania Mountains, Lukas was able to make a guess as to Anastasia's specific location.

The location was 'Drake Mountain', the tallest mountain in the mountain range. Or to be precise, 'Schweiser's Dungeon' which was inside the mountain. Most people didn't know about it, but of course, Anastasia would.

“Anastasia is called the Wandering Golem. I even heard that she was one of the heroes that saved the world 10 years ago. So why is she wandering the continent alone?”

“Well. Perhaps it’s for the same reason as Snow.”

“...”

If it was for the same reason as Snow, that meant that she was also tired of the division and conflict in the Circle.

...And that possibility wasn’t entirely unlikely. While they could be called separate beings, Anastasia’s personality was based off of Schweiser’s memories and personality. This meant that she would also be particularly sensitive towards division and betrayal among comrades.

“...so it’s the Ispania Mountains. Thanks for telling us.”

As he said this, Peran got up from his seat.

Hector’s expression darkened a bit when he saw this.

“Where are you going?”

“We’re going to leave immediately. Fortunately, I’ve visited the Ispania Mountains before, so we will be able to get there in no time with a Warp spell.”

“Stop. You won’t be able to meet her.”

“Huh?”

Peran looked at him with an expression of confusion for a moment before deciding to ask.

“Has she already left?”

“No. According to my predictions, she will be there for another week or two.”

“Then why...”

“Eighty nine times.”

“...?”

“That’s the number of times I’ve tried to meet Ana.”

Peran’s face became serious at Hector’s words.

“Did she attack you?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s like she’s filled with unending rage. Huh.”

Hector let out a deep sigh as if he was truly heartbroken, and Ash, who was standing behind him, quietly continued his explanation.

“Master almost died ten times.”

“...really?”

“Really.”

Peran sucked in a slow breath.

It felt like something which had seemed easy to solve at the beginning, was gradually becoming more and more twisted.

“Ana’s attitude probably won’t change even if you were to go instead of me.”

“Are you sure that she will try to kill us?”

“If she could even show such an attitude to me, who is like her father. I doubt she would treat you any differently.”

“...”

Lukas didn't think Anastasia would easily attack anyone, but it had already been 10 years since their last meeting.

It was possible for her to have gone through several major and minor changes within that time.

In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if the changes Anastasia went through were even more drastic than the others.

At this point, it would be better to trust Hector's words, since he was the one who had met Anastasia most recently.

'In the worst case scenario, if Anastasia were to become hostile...'

Lukas and Peran alone would not be able to face her.

Anastasia's body could be called the culmination of the greatest techniques in alchemy, metallurgy, and golem crafting. Even though she had the form of a young girl, her entire body could basically be described as a weapon.

Her mana storage was a staggering 1 million ME.

If she had trained in martial arts and fine tuned the assimilation rate between her core and her body, it was possible that Anastasia may have experienced as much growth as Snow over the past 10 years.

Lukas' gaze turned to the woman sitting at the table.

'If Nix helped us...'

They might have a chance of survival. Nevertheless, it would still be impossible for them to subdue her.

No. That assumption was meaningless in the first place. From the start, Lukas had no intention of fighting Anastasia.

Afterward, a thought appeared in his mind. Lukas couldn't help but ask just in case.

"Did Anastasia show any strange signs?"

"Strange signs?"

"For example, looking for someone."

Hector pondered those words for a moment, but he eventually shook his head.

"As far as I know, nothing like that has ever happened."

“...”

“...Ana is... She’s a good kid, she’s just going through her rebellious phase right now. If you want to ask for her help, you’ll have to attract her attention first, and then you might be able to earn her favor. Peran, in my opinion, you’re still a long way away from meeting the conditions. That handsome face of yours won’t work on my Ana either.”

“...is there really no way?”

“There is.”

Hector wiggled his fingers.

“I know something that Ana might be interested in. If you give it to her as a gift, you might easily be able to earn her favor. Of course, it would also be easy for you to mention Snow’s treatment to her at that time.”

“What thing?”

“A relic of the Regal Emperor.”

Peran’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“By Regal Emperor... do you mean the 12th Ruler of one of the ancient countries, the Dragol Empire?”

“That’s right. I’m talking about a relic that he owned during his lifetime about 2,000 years ago. That’s something that is bound to catch Ana’s interest.”

“...but, how would I get something like that now?”

The higher the value of a magic relic, the more difficult it was to find than a specific star in the sky.

For a relic of the Regal Emperor, the price would be astronomical. In fact, it was highly likely that it would be impossible to obtain even if he offered a ridiculous amount of money.

“There is one here.”

“Huh?”

“A relic of the Regal Emperor. You can find it here, in the City of Pleasure.”

“...”

Peran fell silent.

The thing they needed was very close... At first glance, this might seem like good news, but he couldn't be happy just yet. He'd already been slapped in the back of the head when he'd rejoiced over finding Anastasia's current location.

"You know it's here, but you can't get it yourself. In other words, that item is very difficult to obtain."

"That's just the case for me. It is something that I will never be able to obtain."

"Why is that?"

"That's simple. Because I have a very bad relationship with the current owner of the relic."

"...the owner?"

"Yeah."

Hector showed a rare frown.

"The current Lord of this city, Yuterdam."

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The building was in a style he had never seen before in his life.

It had the appearance of hundreds of gold coins stacked on top of each other. The artificial light from the street reflected off the building, creating an indescribable splendor.

It looked as if the building was actually made of gold coins.

Of course, since it was being referred to as a 'building', it was clear how enormous the pile of gold coins were. In fact, this strange building was several times larger than the surrounding buildings. In addition, although they were made to be inconspicuous, several windows and doors could be seen on the building.

Looking at the shiny surface of the building, Lukas murmured.

"The Gold House. Quite the intuitive name. I like it."

"It's not made of real gold."

"I think it might be plated on the outside."

"I don't think anyone would try to take it off."

Peran gestured to a corner of the building.

There, a few large men were standing. They had harsh expressions and were all equipped with deadly weapons. They looked like mercenaries.

"...indeed."

It seemed that if anyone wandered around for no reason, those guys would probably not even leave their bones behind.

Well. From a casino's perspective, it was natural for them to hire mercenaries and bodyguards.

"The Lord of Yuterdam..."

According to Hector, he would be somewhere in this building.

He didn't tell them anything about his appearance or personality. This wasn't for lack of trying.

It was clear that Hector knew him well, but for some reason, he seemed unwilling to reveal any details about the Lord.

That came as a surprise to Lukas.

He'd never seen Hector hate a person so much.

"Do you know anything? About the City Lord."

Lukas turned to ask Peran, who was always well-informed, but surprisingly, he shook his head.

“The City Lord of Yuterdam is Marquis Mikhail, but I don’t think that’s who Mr. Hector is talking about.”

“...”

“Let’s go in first.”

After saying that, Peran entered the building first.

The inside of the building was bright, colourful and spacious. If the outside was gold, then the inside could be called platinum.(TL: Platinum coins are higher than gold coins in the Empire)

Not just the walls of the hallway, but even the chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were covered in jewellery that didn’t seem fake.

It could be felt from the open entrance, but it didn’t seem like they cared whether customers were coming or going.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t any security. The large suits of armour that were situated on either side of the entrance seemed to follow them with sharp gazes.

There was no limit to entry, but it seemed that if inferior people were to set foot in this place, they would be blocked.

“...so. How are we going to meet the owner of this casino?”

“That’s not too hard.”

Peran smiled confidently.

As he looked around, there was also no discomfort in his eyes.

“...you don’t have experience in casinos, do you?”

“I’ve played a bit of roulette, dice, and cards before.”

“...”

Although he said it like it was nothing, the games Peran just mentioned were all the core things that practically represented casinos.

Peran rummaged through his bag for a while before saying,

“Lukas, give me your hand.”

“My hand? Like this?”

Clink.

Something heavy landed in his palm.

It was a handful of sparkling platinum coins.

Not gold coins, platinum coins.

“This should be enough for you to play around with for a while. I’ll come get you later.”

“...I’ve never done anything like this before in my life.”

“First off, don’t play any game more than five times. Second, never bet all of your money at one time. Third, if you lost three times in a row to the same person, leave that game without hesitation.”

“...”

“If you follow those three rules, this much money is more than enough. Good luck.”

With those words, Peran really turned around and left.

...He never would have expected that he would like something like gambling. At least he didn't seem to like alcohol. For a moment, Lukas missed the pure and steady young man from 10 years ago.

"Huu."

Didn't he just tell him to play around?

Lukas turned to look at his surroundings. He could see money being transferred back and forth in every direction.

As expected of the place called the City of Pleasure. The opening amount for every game was rather high.

Nevertheless, Peran had given him 12 platinum coins before he left. If he were to exchange it, that would be 1,200 gold coins, an amount that would be able to last him for over a month in the casino, not to mention a single day.

'I'll save him some money.'

Gambling was based on probability calculations, and battles of wits.

While it was hard to guarantee a win, if he learned the tricks, then at least he wouldn't lose.

In addition, Lukas would be able to see through most tricks, so he didn't have to worry about being deceived.

But before that, he decided to take a look around.

The Gold House was Yuterdam's largest casino, but the building wasn't just a casino.

A dazzling stage was set up in the centre of the spacious lobby, where handsome young men and beautiful young women dressed in suits and dresses danced elegantly.

As he watched this scene, a man in a gold suit approached him with a glass of wine.

"Sir, would you like a drink?"

"I'm fine."

"...then please tell me if there is anything you need. I hope you enjoy your time here."

"Ah. I would like to exchange some money..."

"The currency exchange office is right beside the entrance. Would you like me to guide you there?"

"Please."

The man guided Lukas towards the front of the currency exchange office before leaving. The smile on his face didn't leave from start to end.

Lukas wasn't certain, but he felt that they probably paid a lot of attention to training their employees.

...Deciding it wasn't necessary, Lukas exchanged only one platinum coin.

Clink-

He lightly shook the heavy money bag.

100 gold coins.

If he had exchanged the money into chips, he would have been able to enjoy a wider variety of games in the casino, but he didn't feel the need to.

"...then."

He wondered how much money he'd make.

* * *

By far, the most popular games in the casino were those that involved cards.

There were so many varieties of card games that one would need two hands to count them, but in Yuterdam, the game that was, by far, the most popular, was 'Number Fight'.

"I-, it's grown so big."

"That board, how many piles are there now?"

"If we count Count Boboru's side alone, it's already 3,000 gold coins."

"Ha! That's the price of a house."

"..."

Count Boboru, a man covered in colourful jewels, was biting his nails.

Receive. Stop. Receive. Stop.

A conflict that anyone who sat at a gambling table had experienced was occurring within him at that moment.

Count Boboru, whose cheeks were trembling nervously, closed his eyes for a moment before finally crying out.

“Call!”

“He received!”

“Wow!”

The surroundings erupted.

Without being swept up by the atmosphere, Boboru revealed his hand.

“Double Five!”

Another cheer burst out from the crowd.

“A double appeared now.”

“There’s a reason why he held on till the end.”

“Hmm. I think that the Count will win this time...”

Nevertheless, Boboru didn’t relax just yet.

Double Five.

It was by no means a weak hand. In fact, it was a good enough hand that he could confidently say that he wouldn't lose.

...However, that confidence had been stamped down over and over again.

By none other than the handsome blonde man sitting in front of him.

"I'm sorry about this."

"N-, no way..."

"Double Seven."

As soon as those words were said, another wave of shouts swept through the crowd of onlookers.

"Wow!"

"It became a battle between doubles!"

“Kya. There’s a reason why the board became so big!”

Unlike his enthusiastic surroundings, Count Boboru looked like someone who had lost their soul.

All the money that he had earned in three weeks at the Gold House, had completely disappeared in less than 10 rounds. He had nothing left.

‘Impossible...’

This was a dream. It had to be a dream. Huhu. Hahaha...

While Boboru was struggling to accept reality, Peran was focused on calculating his winnings after receiving the piles of chips on the board.

‘I made about 5,000 gold.’

It was a large enough sum of money to cause even nobles to falter, but it was still not enough.

What Peran needed was enough money to draw out the owner of this place, the Lord of this city.

“...I’ll stop... I think I’ll stop here.”

Count Boboru staggered up from his seat.

Well, he had earned almost 3,000 gold coins from this man alone. He would probably not set foot anywhere near a casino for a while.

Of course, Peran felt no sympathy for this fact.

'Now that I've earned enough money, I should change games.'

There was no point in winning money from the customers.

To make the owner appear, he would need to take money from the dealers, the casino's money.

Dice or roulette would be better.

...However, it was against the rules to leave a game immediately after winning such a large pot. Of course, this was only an implied rule, but it was a type of etiquette that gamblers followed.

It would be fine if he lost two or three rounds first.

Just as Peran came to a decision and was about to shuffle the cards.

"Is this seat taken?"

“Ah. No. Please have a seat, My Lady.”

“Thank you.”

A sudden soft voice made Peran shudder slightly.

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

He looked up at the person sitting in front of him.

Purple hair that went down to her waist and gentle features. And the dark, mysterious eyes which made her seem so unapproachable.

When their eyes met, the woman nodded slightly.

“Huhu. To meet you in a place like this.”

“...”

“What a coincidence, Peran Jun.”

Iris Phisfounder smiled gently as she said those words.

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The light of the chandeliers above reflected brilliantly on the wine.

Peran took a small sip of the sweet smelling liquid into his mouth. Not only did it roll over the tongue like silk, but it also flowed down his throat almost as if it had a mind of its own.

This was, without a doubt, high class wine.

“If it’s alright with you, may I have a drink as well?”

His expression almost hardened like a stone when he heard the sudden voice.

A woman was standing behind him with a bright smile.

It was Iris.

From a naive girl to a seductive beauty.

Iris Phisfounder was a woman capable of completely changing her aura depending on her smile.

Peran deliberately turned his eyes away from her face. He'd only just moistened his mouth, but it already felt like he was intoxicated. This was proof that he was already being swept away by Iris.

"It would be my honour, my Lady."

After receiving a glass from a passing waiter, he politely poured wine for Iris.

Clink-

They lightly tapped their glasses before simultaneously bringing them to their lips.

Except, this time, Peran could hardly taste the wine.

"I'm surprised."

"What do you mean?"

"I never thought I'd meet you in Yuterdam."

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"..."

If her words were to be believed, that meant she hadn't come all the way here to meet Peran... In truth, that much was obvious. After all, Peran hadn't informed anyone that he would be coming to Yuterdam.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean he could be too quick to jump to any conclusions.

After all, this person was the Black Witch.

She was a master of negotiation and a wizard when it came to language and speech.

Even experienced politicians were nothing more than newborn babies in front of her, so for her, keeping her intentions hidden was as easy as breathing.

"Gambling sometimes serves as an excellent distraction. As long as you don't overdo it."

"Huhu, I still don't think you came all the way here to flip some cards."

"...well. Naturally, I came here for other business, it's just that I sadly can't tell Miss Iris what that is."

Rather than insist till the end that he didn't have any other goal, it was better to admit that he had other business and claim that it was too private to share. Of course, he didn't forget to mix a bit of firmness into his voice.

'She must never find out about Lady Snow.'

While Iris was a member of the moderate faction, she was by no means an ally. In fact, she was someone who had been deemed as a potential enemy by the alliance.

Therefore, it was imperative for him to hide the fact that Snow, the leader of the alliance, was currently wandering the small path between life and death.

“What did Miss Iris come here for?”

“I came to meet the Lord of Yuterdam.”

“...the Lord of Yuterdam?”

He couldn't help but ask back.

Iris chuckled gently before nodding.

“Yes. I've been having a bit of trouble lately so I've been meaning to ask for the Lord's help.”

“Then why Number Fight.”

“It's boring to just wait.”

It was thanks to this boredom that Peran lost half of the money he earned to her.

It was then.

“...excuse me.”

A tall young man approached them and looked at Iris before opening his mouth.

“Are you Lady Iris?”

“You are...?”

“I am Lady Asilla’s assistant, Merad.”

“Oh my, you came much faster than I expected.”

“...I was told that if I didn’t come hurriedly, the Gold House might have lost all of our money entirely.”

When she heard Merad’s words, Iris let out a soft chuckle.

“That’s not true. For a casino of this size, it would take about a week, even for me.”

“I, I see.”

She was saying that it would be possible in a week.

Peran couldn't help but feel a surge of awe for Iris.

The beautiful woman in question placed her wine glass on the table before turning to Peran.

“I want to give you something in return for the excellent wine, Peran. Won't you come with me?”

“Huh?”

“Don't you have business with her as well?”

“...”

How did she know?

Peran had a suffocating feeling in his chest, but he tried to hide it as best as he could.

“Then, please.”

“Is that alright, Merad?”

“That...”

Merad, who had an embarrassed expression on his face, tried to say something, but soon, his face changed and he nodded.

“Understood. Then, both of you, please come with me.”

Iris followed Merad with a smile. Peran watched her back for a moment before letting out a soft sigh.

Ever since he’d met Iris, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being dragged around by her.

‘There’s probably no one who can take the lead when she’s around.’

At the very least, he found it hard to imagine Iris being led around by anyone.

...Now wasn’t the time to think about this nonsense.

With a quiet shake of his head, he followed after them.

* * *

“Hey, brother. If you don’t want to play anymore, why don’t you give up your seat?”

“...”

“Hey. Didn’t you hear me...”

When the large man frowned, the man who was beside him restrained him.

“Hey, that’s enough. He lost like 1,000 gold coins in the last round.”

“What was that? What’s the point of gambling if you’re going to lose so much?”

“Forget it. Look at his face, this is probably his first time in a place like this. Imagine how terrible it would feel to step in dog shit as soon as you step out the door.”

“...ha.”

With a low snort, the man walked up to Lukas and patted him on the shoulder before handing him a gold coin.

“Eat a bowl of hot soup on your way home. Your head will still be hot so avoid going to a bar, alright?”

“...”

Lukas looked down at the coin in his hand in dismay.

A gold coin.

This gold coin, which glittered in his palm, was now the entirety of Lukas' fortune.

...In other words, Lukas had no money left.

1,200 gold coins.

It had only taken him a single hour to lose all of the money Peran gave to him.

'Impossible...'

Something that should be nigh impossible probabilistically had happened.

From what he'd seen, he could win nine out of ten of the games in the casino.

And even the one he wasn't completely sure about, he was confident that his chances of winning were 90 percent at least. To bet on such odds could not be called gambling.

But he lost.

He lost again and again.

In fact, it would be easier to say that he never won.

In terms of probability, he'd made thousands, no, tens of thousands of calculations.

There wasn't any cheating, so how could this happen?

'...just one more round.'

Theoretically, the probability of losing 15 times in a row was almost zero.

But Lukas sighed as he looked down at the gold coin in his hand.

"...what are you doing?"

He asked himself.

After staring for a while longer, he got up and left the building.

Standing in the cold wind for a while allowed him to gradually come back to his senses.

He would never gamble again. Seriously.

Just as he made this important decision.

Whoosh-

“...”

Lukas' expression changed subtly.

He had a strange feeling. A feeling as if someone's breath had just brushed past his face.

It was a trace of magic. It was done in an extremely stealthy manner, too. If he had still been in the building, he probably wouldn't have noticed it at all.

Lukas narrowed his eyes.

'Who is it?'

It had obviously been done by a high level Wizard.

Was it one of Diablo's subordinates?

Lukas instinctively reached for his sword, but there was nothing at his waist.

Before boarding the ship, he'd bought a new sword, but he'd left it at Hector's store. This was because weapons weren't allowed in the casino.

At that moment, Snow's advice sounded in his ear once again.

Have your sword by your side at all times.

If those words were so easily forgotten, then their weight had already been greatly reduced.

Nevertheless, it wasn't like he was completely defenceless.

He put his hand in his pocket.

"..."

Feeling the cool touch of the dagger, Lukas looked around and tried to find the source of the strange feeling.

Book 2: Chapter 355

In a deep stairwell, only the sounds of three people's footsteps could be heard.

Iris was silent.

Was it because Merad was there? Or did she simply have nothing more to say to Peran?

As he mechanically climbed the stairs, Peran's thoughts never stopped.

It was only after the sounds of the first floor faded away and they came to a stop that he realised they had reached their destination.

Peran looked up to see a huge set of steel double doors.

It was not the size that one would expect for a normal person. This set of doors was so large that even a giant would easily be able to pass through.

"Lady Asilla is waiting inside."

With a nod, Iris walked towards the doors before tapping one with her slender white finger.

Creak-

Then, with a soft sound, these giant doors, which seemed almost immovable, began to swing open almost as if they had their own will. For a moment, Merad stood frozen as he stared at Iris in shock, but she ignored him and walked into the room behind the doors.

Peran followed suit.

Thud!

A breath after the two of them stepped into the room, the doors closed once again with a heavy sound.

But Peran's attention was no longer focused on the steel doors.

The interior of the room was bright, but that wasn't because of the light.

"..."

Gold bars.

There were piles of gold bars in the room like mountains in a mountain range.

Peran didn't dare to count the number. The inside of the room was large enough to match the size of the steel doors, but the mountains of gold bars still filled the space. And Peran was able to tell at a glance that all of these gold bars were authentic.

"Have a seat."

A gentle voice sounded.

His attention was then drawn to a work desk that sat in the centre of the golden mountains. And behind that desk, was a young woman reading a document.

She had blonde, almost white hair, and slim eyes with barely visible pupils.

Was it platinum blonde? She was a woman with strange hair colour.

Iris observed her for a moment before speaking.

"It's been a while, Asilla."

Peran didn't show it on his face, but he was shocked.

Iris was someone who consistently spoke in a polite manner, but this wasn't because she was showing or feeling respect for the other person.

She used the same attitude with everyone in order to build a wall around herself. In other words, it was a part of her persona.

But now, there was a clear sense of familiarity in Iris' tone.

"Right. It's been a while."

The woman named Asilla smiled with her naturally perfect face before her gaze shifted slightly.

"And that man is?"

Feeling that he should've left his introduction to Iris, Peran stepped forward and gave a polite bow.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Peran Jun."

"...Peran Jun."

Asilla murmured under her breath before asking.

"The Archmage of the Kastkau Empire, Peran Jun?"

“That’s right.”

After Peran nodded, Asilla’s gaze turned back to Iris as if to ask why she had brought him there.

“It seems he has business with you. So I brought him here.”

“Hmm. What business?”

Although it was a voice soft enough to melt the hearts of the listeners, Peran tensed up instead.

...Now, how should he answer?

Asilla.

He’d managed to meet the Lord of Yuterdam, which had been his goal, but not in the one on one setting that he’d envisioned. Beside him was Iris, a woman that one should never let their guard down around.

She’d probably brought him with her because she wanted to know what his purpose was.

‘...hiding my goal would be the wisest option, but...’

If he had intended to do something like that, then he wouldn’t have accompanied Iris in the first place.

Therefore, Peran exposed his purpose without any hesitation.

“I need the relic of the Regal Emperor.”

“Hmph.”

Asilla let out a soft huff as she folded her arms with an interesting expression on her face while Iris turned to look at Peran’s side profile.

“And who was it that told you that I have that relic?”

“...that.”

“No, I don’t even need to ask. I’m sure it was that bastard, Hector... How dare he go around spreading my business.”

Crunch.

She grit her teeth as anger leaked into her voice.

Although her tone was still gentle, it had become bone chilling.

“...but that doesn’t matter. I was going to call a high level Wizard anyway. It’s not a bad thing that a Great Wizard came to me of his own accord.”

“Huh?”

“Then, I guess I’ll show it to both of you at the same time.”

Taht!

After saying that, Asilla took something out from under her desk.

Peran blinked.

It was a pitch black box that was surprisingly large. It was so big that it could probably fit the upper body of an adult man.

“What do you think this is?”

There was a hint of humour mixed in with Asilla’s voice this time.

“A box?”

“And?”

“...”

Peran observed the box a bit more closely, a bluish haze emanating from his eyes.

“...is it a... magic relic?” (TL: It’s at this moment that my brain says ‘artefact sounds better’)

“Correct.”

“There seems to be a seal on it...”

“You were able to notice that in such a short time. Your eyes are pretty sharp.”

Asilla continued in a voice filled with anticipation.

“Peran Jun. The youngest Great Wizard in the empire and a super genius with unprecedented talent in magicology. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“...rumours often tend to exaggerate.”

“I believe the same, but I don’t think that is the case with you.”

“...”

“You said you wanted the Regal Emperor’s relic right? Fine. Although it is a priceless relic, I have no qualms giving it to you. On the other hand.”

Whoosh-

The black box moved suddenly and came to a stop right in front of Iris and Peran.

“Can you unseal this box?”

“...”

Peran silently stared at the box for a while before finally opening his mouth.

“...I must obtain that relic. To the point where I’m even willing to risk my life if necessary.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So I will be perfectly honest with you.”

Peran's voice was firm.

"It is absolutely impossible for me to undo that seal."

"Impossible?"

"Yes. To be more precise, I don't even have the slightest clue as to what magic was used to seal this box in the first place."

"...really? How unfortunate. Then should I find another Wizard?"

"It'll be the same regardless of which Wizard you call."

It wasn't Peran, but the silent Iris, that spoke at that moment.

She slowly circled the box with her elegant gait.

"As you said, Peran is the youngest Great Wizard in the Empire. But he has already reached a stage where he is a few steps ahead of those old coots that call themselves Great Wizards. Even I cannot think of more than 5 Wizards who surpass him."

"What are you trying to say?"

“Peran said that he couldn’t even guess what magic was used on the box. So it’s highly likely that any Wizard you call will say the same thing.”

“Even if it’s a 9-star Wizard?”

“Could you call a 9-star Wizard?”

“Well... No.”

“...besides, in my opinion.”

Iris looked at the box as she continued.

“Not even a 9-star Wizard would be able to solve this mystery. That’s why I’m even more curious now. Asilla, what the hell is this black box?”

Book 2: Chapter 356

“Diablo is beginning to move in earnest.”

That wasn’t an answer to the question. It seemed that Asilla was intentionally avoiding answering.

“That means that he has completed his preparations, while you guys, the Circle, are still arguing instead of doing something productive.”

“We know that. But the thing we need to pay attention to is timing.”

“Timing?”

“Yes. The Circle, Ivan’s forces, and the Anti Circle Alliance. The three groups who have been opposing and pressuring each other have agreed to a temporary cooperative effort. We planned to form a subjugation team in at most a few months and deal with Diablo directly.”

“This is my first time hearing about that.”

“That’s natural. Since it was a conversation that was only held between the top executives of each organisation. We were planning to let the other members know just before the deadline.”

“That’s no longer possible. Diablo showed his true colours at a time that makes it difficult for you to respond. Do you understand what this means?”

Iris was silent for a while before letting out a breath and speaking in a cold tone.

“A traitor.”

“...”

Peran wasn't surprised.

Although Iris' reasoning was sharp, her conclusion wasn't anything special. This was because it was an easy conclusion to reach after considering all of the clues.

It was only after then that she showed her truly terrifying side.

"Although it's unfortunate, we do have traitors. The process of getting rid of them is still ongoing even at this moment, but I honestly don't think it will end any time soon. It seems that there are many more traitors than I initially expected."

Tremendous momentum. It couldn't have been more than a few days since she realised the existence of traitors, but she had already begun the process of finding and removing them.

This would have been impossible if there weren't already systems in place to deal with traitors.

However, Asilla seemed to be surprised for a different reason than Peran.

"That's surprising."

"How so?"

“I thought you’d be a bit more cautious. I never would have thought you’d allow traitors to appear in a group you were personally leading.”

“Well, you see. It’s a bit weird. If they were ‘normal traitors’ then this wouldn’t have happened.”

Iris wasn’t boasting empty.

That was the truth.

Asilla was right. The woman named Iris Phisfounder would never have allowed traitors in an organisation that she was personally leading.

“So you’re saying they aren’t normal traitors?”

“Most of the traitors we found were Wizards. Or Magic Warriors, or Magicologist... and so forth, no matter who it was, they were closely related to mana.” (TL: ‘Magicologists’ is new to me too. It’s literally ‘Magical science people’ or ‘Magical scientists’)

Iris continued without changing her tone.

“Their desire for teaching and obsession with reaching a higher level was, to be frank, extremely disturbing, even for me. The stronger they were, the more severe it was.”

“...Wizards.”

In an almost synchronised motion, the two women's eye's turned to Peran.

Peran held back a sigh that threatened to slip out.

0

Although they couldn't be regarded as his allies, he couldn't just stand there and allow them to brand him as a traitor.

This wasn't the time for distrust and unnecessary pressure which would just exhaust them.

"Shepard Jun has betrayed us."

"..."

Both Iris and Asilla knew the name he had just mentioned. Peran was talking about his own father.

"I learned of it when I went to the Jun Family Mansion. He wanted me to become a traitor as well. It is as you said, Miss Iris, they use teaching as bait."

They didn't need to ask the outcome of that encounter.

If he had betrayed them then he wouldn't have been there, and he wouldn't have mentioned it either.

"I also confirmed the betrayal of Cairo Wilsemann."

"...he also betrayed us?"

Iris muttered, unable to hide the surprise in her eyes.

"He should have known that the information that he turned traitor would be revealed when they let me get away. So Cairo has probably already disappeared from Sir Ivan's side."

"So you're saying that our enemies have at least two 9 star Wizards."

Iris frowned openly.

It was quite intimidating when such an expression appeared on her usually emotionless face.

When Peran saw this, he felt a bit conflicted.

...Diablo's trump card was probably not the mass defection of the Wizards.

He had something that was far more dangerous than himself, Cairo Wilsemann, and his thousands of high ranking undead.

Snow de Predickwood.

He had 'some being' or 'some means' capable of pushing the strongest Swordsman of this era to the brink of death.

That was the first thing that anyone who opposed Diablo should be cautious of.

...However, if he brought that up, it would be inevitable for him to mention Snow, who had been seriously injured

Could he really trust these two that much?

Enough to tell them that Snow, the absolute leader of the Anti Circle Alliance, was currently in critical condition?

“ ... ”

In the end, Peran chose to remain silent.

Turning her gaze to the black box floating in front of them, Asilla opened her mouth.

“Diablo wants to obtain that box.”

“Since when?”

“Since I obtained it.”

“Why?”

“That—”

Asilla’s words cut off and her eyebrows twitched slightly.

“...intruders.”

“Huh?”

“Two high level Wizards are secretly spreading their mana across this city.”

“Are they Diablo’s underlings?”

“There’s a nine out of ten chance of that... Iris, can I ask your help to deal with them?”

Iris smiled beautifully and pointed at the box.

“Give this thing to me.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

“That just makes me want it more. I like riddles.”

Surprisingly, Asilla nodded her head without any further thought.

“I see. In that case, if you manage to unseal this box or learn what it is, please let me know.”

“Of course.”

“...and Peran Jun, I would also like to ask for your help to defend this city.”

“I accept.”

Peran spoke up before Asilla could say any more.

“As remuneration, I’ll accept the relic of the Regal Emperor.”

Book 2: Chapter 357

The mana reverberation was very faint.

If this wasn't a city, but in the middle of the wilderness filled with ambient mana, Lukas might have had a hard time tracking it down.

Thump-

It had been about an hour since he'd begun his search.

When he'd first noticed the sensation, it had only been a slight tickle. Now, it had clearly taken shape and took a form closer to pressure.

Gradually, the number of people and buildings in his surroundings began to reduce, and before long, it seemed like he left the city entirely.

At some point, the artificial light from the street lamps also became natural moonlight.

Although few, buildings lined the road, which was still paved. However, it appeared that these buildings hadn't been maintained in a long time, and there were many cracks in the stone, almost as if they would collapse at any moment.

The road was in a similar state. Here and there, weeds could be seen sticking out from some of the countless cracks.

It was a deserted area.

A place that was almost a ruin. Instead of being a different part of the city, a different city, or even a different country, it was almost like a completely different world. A world of the dead.

Lukas didn't expect such a place to exist just an hour away from the Gold House.

It was almost as if it was signifying that the darkness was as dark as the light was bright.

It was even possible that most of the people living in Yuterdam didn't even know of this place's existence. Because the light of Yuterdam was just that brilliant.

...In any case, for Lukas, who wanted to move stealthily, it was regrettable that his surroundings had become deserted.

As he looked at the dark road that even moonlight seemed unwilling to enter, he pondered.

'...what should I do?'

He was basically at a choice crossroad.

If he went any further, the risk would increase exponentially.

Should he continue his search? Or should he go back to the Gold House and call Peran?

The latter choice was much safer, but by the time he went back to get Peran, it was highly likely that the mana trace would disappear and it would be impossible to track it any further.

Lukas quickly made a decision.

'A bit further.'

He didn't feel like he'd reached the 'source' yet. If it had to be expressed, it felt like he was still hovering on the outskirts. In addition, although it was deserted, there was still plenty of cover, so hiding wouldn't be a problem. (TL: Don't Wizards have some kind of magic sense, especially high level ones?) (PR: But Lukas currently has no mana so could they even detect him?)

With that in mind, Lukas continued his search while staying close to the shabby buildings outlining the dark road.

It was a pity, if his legs were fine, he could have moved at twice the speed.

After a while.

Taht.

“ ... ”

He could no longer see any buildings in front of him.

This was probably the true end of the city called Yuterdam.

Lukas stood on the roof of a 4 story building and looked down.

There, not too far from the end of the city line, was a dark green meadow and a black forest that stretched behind it.

The mana reverberation was coming from there.

‘It’s here.’

There was no more cover after that point.

Even though it would be fine to walk through the forest, it would be dangerous to walk through the meadow in an open manner.

If we were to be discovered by the enemy halfway across the meadow, he may not have had the chance to advance or retreat before he received a baptism of magic.

Fortunately, he had already managed to find the source.

Now was the time to step back and get Peran and Nix.

“ —smart.”

A sweet voice whispered in his ear.

But it didn't come from behind him.

Instead, the voice came from above.

Lukas raised his head and was immediately met with the sight of a beautiful woman looking down at him with her back to the moon, a glint of interest in her eyes.

“ ... ”

At an unexpected moment, he'd encountered an unexpected person.

But it was strange.

His heart wasn't thumping as violently in his chest as it had when they'd met before.

Lukas could now face this woman, Iris Phisfounder, while remaining relatively calm.

He wondered why.

When he briefly inspected his thoughts, he came upon a surprisingly simple answer.

It turned out that Lukas had already accepted the fact that he'd been forgotten.

“Your body would have been turned into a sieve if you had gotten any closer.”

“Are you talking about the alarm spells in the meadow?”

“Oh my. So you knew.” (TI: For all my weebz, Iris' 'oh my's are basically 'ara's)

As she said that, Iris slowly descended.

Taht, with a soft sound, she landed beside Lukas. Her uniquely mysterious smile hung on her lips.

“We met in the meeting before, didn't we? I believe your name was Lukas Trowman?”

...A common name, although the last name was a bit odd.

When Iris added this softly under her breath, it left a bitter taste in Lukas' mouth.

...Not like this. Lukas swallowed the words that threatened to spill out and instead said.

"Do you have some business with me?"

"Huhu. There's no need to be on edge. I have entered a temporary partnership with Peran. Naturally, that means I won't hurt you, his subordinate."

Lukas didn't think Peran would ever call him his subordinate. This was probably just Iris' guess. Well. Ninety-nine out of a hundred would think the same thing.

"I heard a bit about Diablo and the alliance. I know this isn't the time to put pressure on you."

"..."

"While I'm sure this is hard to believe, I assure you..."

Iris went on to slowly and logically lay down the evidence for him to believe her words.

...Lukas was almost certain that she had already formulated it before she revealed herself to him. He knew. Iris' preparedness. And what kind of woman she was.

Lukas looked at her face.

Her hair, which swayed in the gentle night breeze, her voice, which swam into his ears like a pleasant song, and her gaze, which remained unshakeable.

These things that he was so accustomed to, he missed.

“...”

A thought suddenly came to him that he might have been wrong about something.

He thought that everyone he knew had undergone many major and minor changes over the past 10 years. In fact, it was natural.

But Iris had managed to endure 4,000 years on her own. During those long years, she had continued being that amazing and confident woman whose faith did not waver despite getting swept by the winds and waves of time.

—Even if Lukas had disappeared from her memory.

Iris Phisfounder was still Iris Phisfounder.

It felt like he had only just realised that fact.

“Huht.”

He couldn't suppress the soft chuckle that leaked out.

Iris paused slightly and tilted her head to the side.

“Did I say something funny?”

The corners of her lips only stretched ever so slightly, but he could tell that she was upset.

Lukas pretended not to notice.

“There are about four more spells in the meadow besides the alarm spell.”

After a while, he decided to speak with a faint smile on his lips.

“...so?”

“I have a way of removing those spells without the caster noticing. So let's enter the forest. We should be able to cross the meadow in about five minutes.”

“...”

Iris blinked for a moment.

It was one of the habitual things she did when she was surprised.

“...you... Do you know who I am?”

“The Black Witch Iris Phisfounder. You’re one of the heroes from 4,000 years ago.”

“You know that, and yet you still dare to order me around?”

“It’s not an order, I’m describing a plan I have.”

“Ah. I see.”

Iris smiled again.

“Then let me explain the plan this time. There is no need to remove the spells. I can enter the forest on my own without triggering the spells, so you should just return to Yuterdam.”

“You can’t. It’s too...”

He stopped himself just before saying the word 'dangerous'.

If he did that, it might end up stimulating Iris' pride. At the moment, she didn't even acknowledge Lukas. Instead, she treated him as a burden. If he were to make such a presumptuous remark, she would directly send him away without hesitation.

"...it would be safer if you didn't go alone."

"I think it would be better if I did go alone."

"No. Firstly, you can't go in by leaping through space."

"Why not?"

"9-star Wizards have a deep understanding of the concept of space. If there is a 9-star Wizard in the forest, and they are the ones who set up the barrier on the meadow, then it would be impossible for you to enter it without leaving a trace."

"You're underestimating me."

"If you really think so then look for yourself. If you're confident that you can cross the meadow without a trace, then I will return to Yuterdam as you said."

“...”

When she heard those words, Iris turned to look at the meadow again.

Perhaps she was trying to tell if Lukas was really telling the truth. Lukas, on the other hand, quietly waited until she was convinced.

“...uht.”

After a while, a soft sound leaked out of her mouth, but it was quickly carried away by the wind.

Lukas pretended not to hear.

“...so you.”

Iris turned her head slightly and spoke.

“...have a way to remove that barrier?”

She had taken a step back. That was enough.

Lukas took the dagger from his pocket.

Then he went downstairs and walked toward the front of the meadow. The elaborately woven alarm spell had been set to sensitively react to 'any disturbances in space'. In other words, the Wizard who set up this barrier likely knew of Iris' presence in the city.

'However...'

They had focused too much on Iris' ability, which resulted in them creating gaps in other places.

Shuk.

The moment his dagger fell through the air, the barrier split apart without warning.

"..."

Iris was silent.

She could already tell that the barrier was no longer functional.

"...wow."

Clap.

His new partner, Iris, gave him a brief applause with a small smile.

“Amazing. Did you always have this ability?”

“...”

“I can understand a bit why Peran carries you around now. Wow. Truly amazing~”

There was no fakeness in Iris’ tone of acknowledgement and praise.

But Lukas could tell.

Others might not notice, but he could never miss it.

The tips of Iris’ brightly smiling lips were twitching slightly.

This...

‘...she’s being sarcastic.’

Was also a habit.

Book 2: Chapter 358

Spreading across the ground of the city.

In general, the most reasonable assumption people would make was that this was done in preparation to cast a colossal spell.

And the task of removing the mana from the ground was something that could only be done by a Wizard.

In other words, there was no person currently in the city more suitable for the task than Peran.

Asilla's decision and request was not wrong.

But there was one thing that Peran regretted.

'...I wish I had gone with Lukas.'

As he busily removed the mana, Peran couldn't help but worry.

This was because Iris' behaviour was difficult to predict. It was almost impossible to tell what she was thinking about at any time. And with Lukas' cautious nature, it would be hard for him to trust Iris, who wore secrets like a shroud. (TL: Lukas: Iris? What secrets?)

Although he wasn't entirely certain, he believed that his presence was necessary for Lukas to use his full power. This was because, regardless of how powerful Iris was, it was impossible for her to create a mana room outside of her own body. That was a skill that only 8 star Wizards, like Peran, had.

Of course, this situation was unavoidable since they couldn't possibly entrust Iris with the task of clearing away the mana.

"Huu."

He let out a sigh.

In the current situation, the best response that Peran could make would be to finish his work in the city as quickly as possible.

But as he looked at the mana on the ground, he couldn't help but frown.

It was strange.

Ironically, if someone were to ask him what was strange, he wouldn't be able to give them a clear answer.

The Wizard who had secretly been spreading mana throughout the city of Yuterdarm, was at least on par with Peran himself.

'That's why I can't help but guess their intentions.'

Sighing again, he turned to look to the west of Yuterdam.

Would those two be okay?

Lukas' sword technique could create and destroy spells at the same time. Of course, Peran still hadn't managed to grasp the principle behind it. After all, he'd never seen Lukas' technique, which was called the Zero Technique, up close before.

However, he still knew that its strategic value was enormous.

In the current situation, where most Wizards had probably betrayed them, it wouldn't be enough even for ten mouths to explain how high the value of Lukas, who could even break down high level spells without a sweat, was.

'...Iris Phisfounder is known for being greedy for talent.'

In fact, this was a trait that any leader of an organisation had.

Even Snow, who led the alliance, and Ivan, would be no different.

Peran smiled bitterly.

In the end, the thing he was worrying about was that someone else would notice Lukas' true worth.

'...no.'

With a shake of his head, he denied that thought.

In any case, he was just worried about Lukas and Iris being alone together.

As he cleared the mana away, Peran's footsteps were gradually heading towards a certain direction.

Hector's shop.

And to the red haired woman that would still be there.

* * *

The night wind was exceptionally cold today.

Lukas sighed as he looked down at his clothes. A simple cloth outfit with no defensive capabilities. In other words, it was the worst clothes to be wearing in a place like this.

This proved his thoughts that these clothes were made purely for aesthetic purposes while completely ignoring any kind of practicality or functionality.

Although he'd said that it was a necessity if they wanted to enter the Gold House, Lukas couldn't help but resent Peran, who'd dressed him in these clothes in the first place.

Crunch.

There was a soft sound beneath as his foot crushed the blades of grass.

The forest was silent, and there were little to no signs of life. The most they could hear were the cries of crickets.

There was no conversation either.

Lukas looked at the back of the woman, who had chosen to take the lead, in front of him.

Iris' purple hair undulated like a wave as she trodded lightly in the soft moonlight.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Iris suddenly spoke up in a strangely sharp voice.

It was like she had eyes on the back of her head.

Unable to give a good reason, Lukas was silent for a while before finally opening his mouth.

“I was thinking about your strange hair colour.”

“Really?”

“Right.”

“...”

Silence fell again as their conversation cut off.

This silence didn't make Lukas feel particularly uncomfortable. After all, the other person was Iris.

However, what about Iris?

Perhaps she was finding this silence uncomfortable.

He wondered what she thought about him.

When such a silly thought appeared in his mind, a bitter smile spread across his lips without him realising.

“Is Snow alright?”

Iris suddenly changed the subject.

Or at least, it would have been a sudden change if the other person wasn't Iris.

Although others might be fooled, he was certain that she had done this intentionally.

It was possible that she'd noticed something from Peran or Lukas' behaviour which gave her the vague sense that something had happened to Snow.

That was likely why she was probing him like this.

“I think she's alright. I'm not an actual member of the alliance, so I don't know.”

This was the truth.

After all, the incident had occurred when Lukas was taking the test to join Snow's faction.

Snow, who had been carrying out the test, was now in a near death state, so naturally, Lukas' entry into the alliance was put on hold.

"Hmm."

Iris made a soft nasal sound, but her steps didn't stop.

She probably didn't want him to see her face.

'...'

In all honesty, Lukas wondered if he should tell Iris about Snow's serious condition.

After all, he knew her well and had confidence in her as a teammate. If he explained the situation to her properly and formally requested assistance, there was a high chance that she would agree to cooperate fully in Snow's treatment.

However, he couldn't do that.

Because the one who had to do this was Peran, not Lukas. If he remained silent, then Lukas would stay silent too.

It would be incredibly presumptuous for him to mention Snow here, not to mention how disrespectful it would be to Peran.

'I don't think Snow is in imminent danger...'

At least, not right now.

She was certainly in an incredibly serious situation, but they still had some time.

'...one thing I can be certain of is the fact that Iris' current power is not enough to save Snow.'

He was sure that this situation would be explained in time.

"Your arm and leg seemed to have some problems."

Iris spoke once again.

"Is that congenital?"

"No."

To put it more accurately, they were acquired defects.

This was because his bones had been fused incorrectly when his body was being reconstructed.

“I will try to protect you as much as possible, but you shouldn’t expect too much. If this situation doesn’t work out, I will abandon you without hesitation.”

“Right.”

“...”

This time he could almost feel her click her tongue.

Those words had probably not been sincere, and were instead used as a way to feel out Lukas’ intentions.

...He wondered if he should give her the reaction she was looking for. But after thinking that for a moment, he soon shook his head. It was too tiring to care about that.

“Shh.”

Iris suddenly turned around and lifted her finger to her lips before pointing ahead of them.

A few steps away from them was a large clearing.

And in the centre of this clearing was a person.

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“...!”

Lukas forcibly suppressed his heart which seemed to want to leap out of his throat.

Standing in the centre of the clearing was a white skeleton wrapped in a ragged black cloak which rippled like a shadow.

...Diablo.

“...I think he knows we are here.”

“That’s probably the case.”

“Hmm.”

Iris made a soft sound in her throat before stepping forward into the clearing without any hesitation. Lukas followed her.

[...]

As they expected, Diablo wasn't surprised.

He just turned his flickering eyes towards them.

"Are you pretending to be the God of Death in the moonlight? Diablo."

[I despise the word God. Honestly, I'd prefer if you called me the Guide of Death instead.]

"Hmph."

Iris still had a smile on her face, but her displeasure was obvious.

"It's been a long time since we were able to meet like this."

[That's right. Because I didn't want to take part in your little tea party.]

"...I've been trying to understand just what's going through your head, but I can't. So this is your chance to tell me yourself. Why the hell are you doing this? Is it a pursuit of nihilism? A desire to see the end of all life?"

[Even if I explain it, you won't understand... None of you will ever understand.]

"You didn't even try to explain. That's all your own assumption. Typical lunatic logic."

It was at this moment that Lukas muttered in a soft voice.

“Be careful.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Diablo is a thorough man. There has to be a reason why he chose to appear so openly.”

“You talk as if you know him.”

“...”

“In any case, I know that already. But this time is different. Diablo has too much confidence in his own power. It is overconfidence.”

No. That wasn't the case at all.

Lukas was well aware of how powerful Iris was.

Black magic, demon summoning, and authority over space. While none of them were special in their own right, her level of skill with them was by no means small.

However, when it came to black magic, Diablo was no less knowledgeable than Iris was.

Her demon summoning ability would also be of no use in this situation. To be a threat to Diablo, the demon would have to at least be on par with the Lords of the Demon World, but they couldn't be summoned since they had all died during the war with the Demigods. Several high level demons would not be enough to threaten Diablo.

And finally, her authority of space could be considered the most powerful among the group, but 9 star Wizards had some level of resistance to it... but that wasn't all.

Part of the reason was the strange feeling that Lukas was currently experiencing which he was almost reluctant to put into words.

This was his first time facing Diablo since his return.

As he stood in front of him with his weakened body, he was suffocated by the death energy that simply exuded from Diablo's body, and his muscles began to twitch uncontrollably.

He was strong. So strong that it instinctively filled him with a nauseated and uncomfortable feeling.

However, apart from that, there was one thing he was absolutely certain of.

'It's impossible that Diablo is alone.'

Although he was strong, it would have been impossible for him to defeat Snow on his own.

He was able to confirm this fact after meeting him personally.

In other words, it wasn't 'Diablo' that pushed Snow to the brink of death.

In the fierce battle in the underground cave, there was a being who managed to suppress Snow.

And that being was probably...

'Here, too.'

He was only able to prepare for what happened next because of that prediction.

In the next moment, the sound of something falling from the sky filled the clearing.

Boom!

Dirt and rock fragments, which were scattered by the impact, shot out in all directions, and a thick cloud of dust filled the clearing. (TL: Death by allergies)

In it, a lone undead slowly straightened its bent knees.

The only thing that was visible in the billowing dust was the shape and colour of its armour. The armour wrapped around its body was as black as the night sky.

Although it was clearly an undead, its death energy was very faint, almost unnoticeable.

Despite the sudden entry of another enemy, Iris' response remained calm and accurate.

She hadn't expected Diablo to be alone either. From the moment she stepped into the clearing, she'd been on the lookout for an ambush from the front, back, left, right, and even the ground beneath them.

Therefore, she wasn't that surprised by the appearance of an enemy from the sky.

Srrrng.

The sound of a sword being drawn filled the clearing.

The undead, which drew its sword in an instant, then charged towards them.

It moved so fast that it could only be described as a flash of black light. The undead appeared in front of Iris in the blink of an eye.

Firstly, she tried to widen the distance between them with a space leap.

Crackle-

But her authority was stopped before it could activate.

For a moment, a puzzled expression appeared on her face.

'...Absolute?'

The power of a 9 star Wizard.

It was a power that gave them dominion over a certain portion of space.

However, was that really enough to interfere with her own authority?

"Kuk."

0

Just as Iris was about to hurriedly use a black spell, the dust settled and the undead's face was finally revealed to them.

—And Iris froze.

“...Lucid?”

The colour quickly drained from her face.

Why the hell... was he like this?

As if oxygen stopped being supplied to her brain, Iris' thoughts were completely paralysed.

This created a small, but nonetheless fatal, gap.

At the very least, the gap was enough for a Sword Master like Lucid to take his opponent's life.

After that, everything happened in a blink of an eye.

Paak!

Iris felt someone push her, causing her to roll several times across the ground. Her hair, which had always been perfect, was messed up.

“Ugh...”

Staggering, Iris got to her feet.

“Were you hurt?”

She heard Lukas’ voice.

He had saved her. Her pride was bruised once again, but now was not the time to argue about that.

Iris answered with a cough.

“Yeah. Thanks. You saved my life.”

“...right.”

But at that moment, Iris felt something damp on her palm.

It was warm.

This...

'Blood?'

Both of her palms were covered in bright red blood.

Of course, it wasn't her blood.

Iris' quickly raised her head.

She immediately caught sight of Lukas' pale complexion which was no different from that of a corpse.

"...still."

His bloodless lips trembled.

"You still dislike unexpected situations."

"Ah...?"

His lips were stretched in a gentle, bloody smile.

The now bloodied Lukas Trowman looked into her eyes.

“...but... I’m glad you didn’t get hurt.”

And with those words, he collapsed to the ground.

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[Things got a bit messed up.]

Diablo muttered softly as he looked across the clearing.

There was a trace of blood there.

This blood, which had flowed from someone’s body, had formed a small puddle in the place they had once been.

[...well, it was a hasty plan, so I couldn’t expect it to go as smoothly as with Snow.]

It hadn’t been a long time since he noticed the presence of Iris Phisfounder in the city.

Yuterdam, the city that Diablo would soon turn to ruins. Although Asilla, who was in control of this place, had a strong heart, she lacked military power.

In fact, she’d probably called Iris here because she had managed to read Diablo’s intentions to some extent.

He hadn't known that they were acquainted with each other.

Iris Phisfounder. One of the three beings capable of interfering with Diablo's plan.

If he had known she was here from the beginning, he would have planned it more thoroughly. Then, she would have gotten the same end as Snow.

[How unfortunate.]

Revealing Lucid now had also been a bit of a gamble on Diablo's part.

He knew that doing so would inevitably agitate Iris' mind, which would cause her to unintentionally reveal a fatal opening. Although he knew she would try to respond with a space leap after recovering, he could suppress that with the power of Absolute.

Despite his hasty preparations, everything had been perfect.

Except for the actions of the white haired man beside her.

[Who was that?]

He couldn't catch a glimpse of his face because of the dust cloud. And even before it had appeared, his attention had been solely focused on Iris, but...

[Hmm.]

In any case, Diablo's improvised plan had ended in failure.

Firstly, Lucid's existence had been discovered, and secondly, Iris had learned that he could use the power of Absolute to interfere with her space leap. Iris would probably be many times harder to kill when they met again.

Clink-

In a slow, mechanical motion, Lucid placed his helmet onto his head, once again hiding his appearance in his armour.

[Right. Even if that failed, I can still move on to the original plan.]

As he said this, the flames in Diablo's eyes emitted a bluish glow.

His gaze was directed to the City of Pleasure which lay beyond the forest.

[Let's go, my army, to retrieve my lost property.]

Crunch, rattle...

Corpses slowly began climbing out of the ground beneath him.

And after freeing themselves, the army of the dead began marching towards Yuterdam at a tottering pace.

* * *

This person was probably the first one to encounter them.

Adam Luid. 31 years old. A refugee from the now destroyed Geotanbul.

After losing his home, Adam wandered aimlessly before visiting Yuterdam five years ago. At that time, he loved this city so much that he immediately got a permanent residence permit. He'd even managed to start a family with a woman, whose eye he'd managed to catch, and was currently earning a living by working as a street vendor.

The income wasn't bad. In fact, it could even be considered quite good. After all, in the City of Festivals and Pleasure, there was a large proportion of floating population, and his skill at making food was nothing to scoff at.

'I wish I could set up my stall closer to the centre.'

Adam's stall was located near the outskirts of the city. Although this area was relatively quiet when compared to the rest of Yuterdam, the scenery of the forest to the west was quite romantic, making it a very popular destination for lovers to visit.

Nevertheless, as it was around 2 or 3 in the morning, there was no one around.

This was usually around the time when Adam prepared to close his stall. Today, as usual, he was packing up all his leftover ingredients when he saw a person stumbling in the distance.

At first, he thought it was just a drunkard, and while he hoped that they wouldn't come toward him, he wasn't very surprised.

This was because it was a common occurrence.

But this time, he decided that he wouldn't lose his momentum.

Just as he opened his eyes wide and took a deep breath in preparation to scream 'get lost', he finally noticed something strange.

Tuk, tuk tuk.

Something was dripping from the person's mouth. At first, he thought it was just vomit, but he later realised that it couldn't be the case.

There was no way that someone would vomit bright red objects like that.

"U-, uhh...?"

Leaking from that person's mouth was blood and bits of bloody flesh.

A moment later, the person's face was finally revealed to him.

It was a rotten, decomposing face, like that of a corpse that just stepped out of its coffin. It didn't even have eyes.

Adam's heart sank when he saw those dark, empty eye sockets.

"U-, undead!"

His shout felt more like a scream. He felt cold sweat drip down his face.

Undead... in Yuterdam?

Those words didn't match at all! It was like mixing oil and water, just putting those two words together made him feel uncomfortable.

No. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about such things.

Adam hastily turned his body and tried to escape, but his body soon became as stiff as a rock.

There was another undead rushing towards him from the other side of the street.

“D-, dear God...”

Adam placed his trembling hands together.

If this was a nightmare, he begged to wake up.

Crack!

And with that thought, Adam’s body became a piece of meat.

* * *

“Lady Asilla! The city!”

“I already know everything. Calm down, Merad.”

Although she spoke in a calm voice, Asilla was not as relaxed as she seemed. Her palms, which were hidden under the table, were soaked in sweat.

‘Why did it have to be a Wizard...?’

Most of the defences built around Yuterdam were magic barriers.

It was very effective when dealing with low level threats, but the entire defence structure was inevitably neutralised when a Wizard who was a higher level than the Wizard who placed the barriers interfered.

...And now, a terrifying army of undead had appeared in the city.

It was obvious.

Diablo was currently attacking Yuterdam.

'Has Iris already been defeated?'

The reports stated that the undead first appeared in the west. In other words, there was a high possibility that they came from the forest where Asilla had just sent Iris.

Hiding her anxiety, she forcibly squeezed out a calm voice.

"Where is Marquis Mikhail?"

"I... I was unable to reach him."

"..hmpf."

A sneer appeared on her lips subconsciously.

What a useless, disgusting old man. She was certain that he'd already run away.

"I will entrust the command of the city guards to you. First things first, secure the safety of the civilians and evacuate them to the city square."

"Understood."

"Angela! Are you there?"

"Yes, Master."

"I need you to request assistance from the nearby cities. Tell them that a first class catastrophe is occurring... and inform Freeland as well."

"I will obey your commands."

"And..."

Asilla hesitated for a moment, but after turning it over in her mind for a while, she finally came to a decision and opened her mouth.

“Contact a man named Hector in the southwest...”

“There’s no need.”

With a calm voice, a man walked through the open steel doors.

It was a young red haired man who she would never have wanted to meet if it wasn’t for the current situation.

“Since I’m already here.” (TL: Hector’s badass entrance score: 8.5/10)

Seeing his calm, innocent expression, Asilla couldn’t help but make a snarky smile.

“Oh my. Why did your heavy ass come all the way here? In a situation like this, I would have expected you to close your store and focus on playing with your dolls even more.”

“That’s cause you don’t know anything. Peace comes from stillness. If my surroundings are a mess, I won’t be able to enjoy a cup of tea with my angels.”

It was at this moment that Merad, who was about to leave, caught himself.

“Lady Asilla, that man...”

“It’s fine. He’s... an acquaintance. More importantly, you two. Is this really the time for you to be sitting there blankly?”

“Ah. Yes!”

With a loud shout, Merad and Angela hurriedly left the room.

And as if to replace them, Peran strode in.

“I’m sorry. I am the one that called Hector. I felt that it was a necessary response given the current situation.”

“...”

In truth, Asilla really wanted to berate him for doing something wrong, but she knew that it wasn’t the time to be led by her pride. Certainly, with Hector’s knowledge and the golems he possessed, he was a reliable force in this emergency situation.

In the end, Asilla could only let out a soft sigh.

“Thank you.”