

Level 0 Master - Chapter 8

“Oh! I see! Now I’ve got it!”

Her knife tail stood upright, turning into an exclamation mark.

Sungjin wanted to cut off the path of the fire.

Wind, the layout of the buildings, the people’s condition, the shape of the fire—considering all of them, he made Jenna’s strength destroy the points where the fire could be cut off as much as possible.

The combination of a girl who had Thor’s particles and a cold, high-speed calculation, beat the pulse of a runaway fire.

“The fire has slowed down, fortunately.”

Her knife tail shook with joy.

“Oh... but those who couldn’t get out...”

Her knife tail stopped again.

What can I do? I must save the people.

Further damage was prevented, but those who were still in the fire could not be saved. The people isolated within the smoke were dying. However, if one ran into for the rescue, they would die together with them.

Just then—

“I will protect everyone. Shield of all People!”

A clear voice reverberated like a heaven bell, and the golden glare expelled the hell flames covering the city.

This was a resolution of protection, the decision of devotion built up by a girl who abandoned her happiness and chose to be a knight, even though she was born as the first beauty of the kingdom.

The light of salvation, covering one part of the city, enveloped the people in flames.

That was just the Ultimate of Princess Ereka—the Shield of all People. It was a shield of light that covered everyone within its range. Even the flames of hell could not dare to invade.

The girl, who raised the shield high in the center of the flaming hell, nobly stood alone as a beacon of hope.

“Your Highness!”

“You did come!”

Ereka smiled at the cheers of the saved people.

“Everybody! Run outside. This power doesn’t last forever.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The people who had been trapped and isolated in the fire fled quickly. Watching them, the princess did not move an inch into the fire.

Sungjin looked on with a warmer look than he had before. The scene with a look which the cold force was decreased somewhat.

Well, she at least knows that she has to keep her facade up in front of the people.

It was acceptable that she did not look on with folded arms and say, “The work of the lower class must be taken care of by themselves. How can this noble body work for them?”

Actually, it was another thing for her to use her power to save people, even though she got that power easily. Being rich didn’t mean giving to charity was a common thing.

Sungjin and Jenna went down the hill to head for the site. All the people escaped in the meantime, and Ereka put down the shield finally.

“That was good,” Sungjin praised her from the bottom of heart this time.

“I’ve done what I must do... Ah.”

Ereka fell backward without answering more.

“Huh?”

Sungjin caught her reflexively.

“Princess!” Jenna exclaimed with her knife tail flapping about.

“What happened? Did she overwork herself!”

“She exhausted her Heroic Power.”

“Don’t be so fussy, Miss Jenna.” Ereka straightened her posture with a cold slap to Sungjin’s hand.

“But...”

“I’ll be all right after a break.”

“But it’s dangerous to use up all your strength. The former king passed way by having done so.”

Ereka patted Jenna gently, who even cried.

“Okay, I’ll be careful.”

“You promised.”

Beside them, those who escaped from the site of the fire were also happy to see each other safe and sound. They were exhausted, but it was a relief just to be out of that hell.

Just then, a woman’s frightened scream burst from one side.

“My baby! Where’s my baby!”

Ereka stood up right away.

“What’s the matter?”

“My baby! My young baby is in the house! Oh my God. I thought my husband took our baby out of the house, but he thought I did... aah...”

The couple, who was busy running away from a hectic fire, confirmed the facts belatedly and cried out.

“Where is your house?”

“Rabla Avenue, 40th Street,” the husband.

Who could take the risk of jumping back into that fire?

Ereka saw the location they pointed to. It was where one would have to go deeply into the fire covering the east.

Sungjin’s quick brain finished calculating while listening to their conversation.

It was too dangerous to save a baby. It was almost impossible for the human body to reach the house where the woman spoke of and return. What was worse, the people who had Heroic Power had exhausted their energy because of their relief efforts. Unfortunately, it was a situation where two people would die to save one.

Up to here?

It was pitiable, but there was no way.

Then, Ereka picked up a bucket of water and poured it on herself.

“Princess?”

Jenna called out in surprise, but Ereka jumped into the fire without responding.

“Princess! No! You don’t have Heroic Power!”

There was no response, as she disappeared inside.

“Uh... Princess! What are you doing?”

Jenna was at a loss and shuddered. Even though she claimed to be smart, she was really just a child.

Sungjin looked at the figure in a daze for a moment.

“Ah... A woman who is so reckless...”

After a brief recitation, he shouted at the soldiers, “Get the city map over here right now! One having as much detail as possible!”

“Yes!”

“Hurry up!”

“Yes.”

In the meantime, Ereka ran through the fire.

Ha... if my Heroic Power had just a little bit more...

This fire wouldn't be so scary if some of her power remained. Now her whole body was hot and breathless.

The pillars collapsed one by one, and the roof fell down. She ran away by side-stepping them narrowly.

Rabla Avenue, 40th Street... There it is.

She found the child who was lost in the corner of the burning house. Its body was already burned by the heat around it, and it couldn't breathe well, but it seemed to be alive.

Good luck. I was not too late.

She held the child firmly in her arms and made her way back through the road. A wall next to her fell down on her again.

“Haah. Haah...”

She side-stepped it narrowly and ran. She was out of breath, and the view before her became blurred, and her sense of direction began to fail.

Which way is out? That way or this way. Still... I must go so... so much more...

Feeling distracted by smoke and fire, Ereka staggered.

The water poured on her body had already evaporated a long time ago, and the scorching heat had corroded her fine skin. Her body was not different from a normal human being when she exhausted her Heroic Power.

I jumped in with the determination to save someone... Was it too much?

She couldn't die in the fire like this. She had a lot to protect for herself.

"Right...? Left...?"

If I fall, the baby in my arms will also die.

At that time, a burning pillar fell down. She ran one more step forward in a hurry and evaded it. She fell down, feeling dizzy in her head and fatigued in her legs. The oxygen in her body was too low.

No... I must get up...

But she could not summon power into her hands.

What is the last thing that I can do well?

Even though she held up the shield to protect all the people, were her abilities still too weak?

Can't I even protect this kid...?

The strong hand of a man lifted her up at that moment.

"You're...!"

She, feeling it was Sungjin, tried to move away, but the resistance of her exhausted body was weak.

"Come on," Sungjin spoke.

"I don't need your help."

"You should rely on me at a time like this," Sungjin spoke strongly.

"Hmph..."

"I don't ask for a price with this kind of thing."

Sungjin ran out while holding her in his arms.

"Waaa... ah!"

Jenna, who was worried, leaped while shaking her knife tail.

“Your Highness!”

All the people gathered around and shouted in relief.

“Let me go.”

Ereka got out of his arms immediately and handed the baby over its mother who was waiting for it.

“Fortunately, it is still breathing. I’ll call a healer for you.”

“Your Highness... Your Grace... thank you... Ahhhhhh... my baby... my baby...”

Ereka smiled when she saw the baby being embraced in the weeping mother’s arms. It was so lucky to be alive.

“Because of us, Your Highness... we’re such trouble...”

“It wasn’t a big trouble. Don’t worry too much.”

Ereka stood smiling even though she was about to collapse.

“Ha, that’s sheer bravado...” Sungjin said lowly.

Ereka turned and stared at Sungjin beside her; she relaxed her gaze slowly.

“First of all, thank you for saving me.”

“It was nothing. I only just came right when you were reaching your limit.”

“You still saved me.” Ereka expressed her gratitude undauntedly.

“I couldn’t do it without a fool having to run in,” Sungjin retorted.

The baby couldn’t be saved; there was no error in this calculation. If a human jumped in, it was perfectly right to say that he would fall on the way. The only thing was that the initial data was wrong.

There was a fool who ran in regardless of their life.

Sungjin only filled in the part of the equation needed to make the rescue plan a success. He didn’t deserve to be thanked.

There was an awkward atmosphere between the two.

“Let me ask you a question.”

It was Sungjin who opened his mouth first.

“Go ahead, please.”

“I understand that you saved people with your Heroic Power.”

One who claims noble blood may turn away, but a realistic and ambitious person must not disregard the assets that provide tax and labor.

She, whom he hated, might have the wisdom of not treating the people poorly for her own profit.

But...

“It was too reckless for you to jump in to save a baby at the time when your Heroic Power was exhausted, wasn't it?”

“I admit it was dangerous.”

Ereka looked away.

“But... I was too eager to save the baby.”

All she could think of was the moment where she saw a mother crying over her possibly dying child in the fire.

“However, the people are tax sources, they don't have any meaning when you're in danger because of them.”

That was what Sungjin couldn't understand. The only way to enjoy wealth and power was when you had your life.

Some people risked their lives thinking they won't die, but that was only when they could gain a lot in return. It was not like an “ambitious, royal woman” to risk her own life to save a baby of the lower class.

Ereka answered the question calmly, straightening her back, and narrowing her eyes.

“No. The most precious thing in my royal palace is the happiness and well-being of the people.”

That sounded just like the word of a politician back on earth, but, this was a girl who jumped into a fire to save a baby, the royal maid who gave up her dream as a girl and sacrificed herself to the country. She was a knight who held a shield of defense while discarding the pleasure as a royal maid. The words of this girl contained the weight of truth. Those were the words she inherited along with the artifact—the Shield of all People—from her beloved father.

“You said the peace of the people. Do you really want that?”

“Want it... that may be a little different.”

When she was nine years old, her father was bleeding to death. He was dying. Her father was called a sage king and protected the people as the king of this country. He taught her martial arts as a knight and the duty of a king, while strictly saying that she must succeed him.

It was all her fault.

She ran away saying that she couldn't do it anymore and that she was forced to.

She went out of the royal castle and entered a dangerous place by mistake.

“I prefer to play with dolls and a dress rather than armor...” she said loudly.

She went to a place that she was prohibited from going to and said, “I hate my father! I hope he disappears!”

And then... her father came to the rescue and got hurt like this instead of her.

“Father... Father... Don't die. You can't die!”

The injuries and deaths outside of the battlefield are not reversed even after the battle has ended. That was why God forbade fights between heroes outside of the battlefield. But the Xenogenic people, which were born from far-off ruin, sometimes came across the border and dealt surprise attacks. And injuries from the Xenogenics were not affected by the recovery magic.

“Ereka...” her father called out in a warm voice, but the light was fading in his eyes.

“No... Don’t die because of me!”

Her father was so badly injured in trying to protect her from the Xenogenics.

“Waa... Waaah... Father! You said you’d retire when I grew up and go back to being a painter! You said it was your childhood dream, but you had to put it off because of your duty as a king! So you can’t die like this.”

Her father hugged her, but his hands were losing strength.

“It’s okay. Ereka... I have no regrets in my life... even though I threw away what I wanted most...”

Her father had a small smile on his mouth despite the blood flowing out continuously.

“I was able to protect you and the people of this country who are the most precious...”

“Father! Father!”

“But... you’ve always been fond of dancing, cooking, dolls, and such things... since you were a kid... Keeping the country safe for you is the same as... making a deer live like a lion.”

He had no regrets in his own life as a king. But at the last moment, the former king was a father, and he wanted his daughter to find her own happiness.

“The throne... will be handed over to the most outstanding one among the other heroes... You go to a peaceful foreign country and take the treasures. Find happiness as a woman... there... Rittier will have wardship over you... Be free... my dear daughter...”

“Father... Father!”

Ereka hung onto him closely as tears fell, but there were no more responses.

“Dad...”

Ereka began to wail, but still, the dead did not come back.

Ereka became a complete orphan from that day. And, her elder sister returned unexpectedly the next day when Ereka thought she was alone in this world. At first, Ereka was truly pleased with her sister's return. She had known only through stories that her sister disappeared when she was a child. She thought that she would live in peace with her sister.

But...

Her sister was not the kind sister that she imagined.

She held a magic sword in her hand and sacrificed the people as prey and committed tyranny. The happiness of the people, whom their father had cherished, was trampled on, and their faces were filled with pain instead of laughter.

What could she do?

Her sister was much bigger and scarier than her. She couldn't dream of the happiness that she wanted when becoming a ruler. However, if this condition continued, everything that their father had kept safe would collapse.

Ereka was in agony.

In the meantime, the state funeral was over. The next day, Rittier found Ereka in the treasure warehouse.

"Your Highness, it's time to go to another country."

Ereka, 9 years old, turned back with tears in her eyes.

"No... I'm not going anywhere."

"Your Highness?"

"Father... has kept this country... and the people... I'm going to keep them as well."

There were treasures cherished by the former king behind her—jewels and precious metals, works of art that had been handed down for generations in the royal family. And... clumsy portraits of Ereka, painted by the former king himself. From the age of one to the present, nine paintings were painted yearly. The last one was only an uncolored sketch.

“But, Your Highness.”

Wiping away her tears, she said with a stiff face, “I have already told all my friends who played with me, too.”

“I told them, ‘I’m going to protect all the people on behalf of my father in the future. I can’t play together with you guys because I have to study and train hard to be a ruler...’”

She picked up the only shield that her father used, leaving all the other treasures behind.

She defended the country by first expelling her sister, citing her father’s old testament that said the true successor was her.

A few years later, her sister, who liberated the magic sword completely, returned. Ereka kept what her father had left behind until the pre-purchased vassals betrayed her. She kept the happy smiles of the people. That was why the people praised her as, Knight Princess Ereka.

Although they didn’t know her dream as a girl, which was buried under the name of a knight, and they didn’t know that she kept dresses in her closet despite always wearing armor, she still protected the people.

“As my father did, I also threw away what I wanted most in order to protect the most precious things.”

The day she took out her old dress, she decided to be a sacrifice to the demidevil.