

Great Mage 621

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Hoffman, who was walking carefully, stopped moving. Without a word, he lifted his hand above his shoulder.

It was a signal to stop.

“...”

Lukas and Yuriah obediently followed his instructions.

Gurgle...

Rattle...

Howl...

A sound similar to an animal howling rippled through the air, accompanied by the obvious sounds of undead moving.

These sounds were only made by low ranking undead who hadn't gained sentience. And it was made by a group of undead that were shambling through the dark forest.

In other words, it was already too late for them to use this path.

“Shit. How many times has it been already?”

Hoffman grumbled under his breath and Yuriah poked him in the back with her staff. Obviously, she was telling him to shut up.

“...can't we just pierce through?”

“That's a stupid idea.”

Yuriah immediately rejected the suggestion. Of course, Hoffman didn't actually mean it. No matter how hot headed he was, or how much he hated being placed in such situations, he would never recommend that they forcibly break through.

That wasn't being hot headed, it was stupidity.

The Amalgam Forest had completely become the land of the undead.

The trees and grass, which once boasted healthy colours, disappeared. In their place were rotted grey trees and withered grass. It was only a matter of time before the ground itself began to decay as well.

This was because of the death energy being emitted by the undead.

'The fact that the forest has been polluted to such an extent means that the number of undead is beyond imagination.'

Undead were particularly responsive to sound.

It wasn't impossible for them to defeat the horde of undead that were moving around in front of them. In fact, it wouldn't even be that difficult. But destroying all of them wouldn't solve the problem. Instead, the commotion it caused would only attract the attention of all the other undead in the area.

If they were surrounded, it would be impossible for them to escape.

Unlike before, they weren't in a situation where they had the river at their backs. They had already entered deep into the forest.

'...but where did such a large horde of undead come from?'

It wasn't just the corpses of the beings in the forest that had been reanimated.

Hoffman couldn't say that he knew every monster that inhabited the Amalgam Forest, but he was at least certain that there were no Wyverns or Ogres living here.

In addition, they had even seen a few high ranking undead like Dullahans, Death Knights, and Liches.

'They couldn't have openly sent such a large army of undead into this forest.'

This was already on the scale of a military mobilisation.

Regardless of whether it was the Circle, the Anti Circle Alliance, or some other organisation all together, there was no way that they wouldn't notice such a large movement.

In other words, someone had summoned these undead into this forest.

And that 'someone' was probably the 'threat' that Snow had encountered, and the main culprit behind all of these events.

Little by little, anxiety began to blossom in his heart. Of course, Snow wasn't so weak as to need the worry of someone like Hoffman.

In all honesty, he didn't think Snow would lose even if she were to face one of the Dragons or Demigods who had become extinct. (TL: If only he knew)

'So please, don't go crazy. Heart.'

As he begged his racing heart, Hoffman turned and began heading in a different direction.

Naturally, he was intending to find a different path. Lukas and Yuriah quietly followed suit. For a cripple, Lukas was doing a good job of keeping up with them.

They wandered through the forest at a slow pace without an exact destination in mind. They didn't know where Eric and the rest had gone so they could only carefully explore deeper while keeping an eye out for any traces.

Surprisingly, they were able to achieve results much faster than expected.

"...I can hardly sense the presence of any undead here."

Hoffman muttered as he straightened up. Crack, with a soft sound, his spine readjusted itself and his stiff expression became a bit more relaxed.

Lukas looked around for a while before pointing to the shadow of a tree.

"Over there."

"Huh? Is there something there?"

"Look for yourself."

Hoffman squinted to get a better view before unknowingly flinching slightly.

It was the 'corpses' of an undead. Or, to be precise, it was what was left of them.

There were shattered bone fragments as well as torn bits of flesh and internal organs scattered all over the place.

Someone had dealt with a group of undead in this place.

“I’ll go check it out. You guys keep watch.”

After they nodded, Hoffman leaped towards the corpses.

“...I’ll start from here.”

As Hoffman began working, Lukas and Yuriah, who were a short distance away, carefully observed their surroundings.

But after a while, Yuriah’s eyes drifted to look at Lukas’ face instead. She was naturally recalling the situation at the river.

...The undead had almost surrounded Hoffman.

And it was the White Hail that Yuriah had cast that wiped out the entire group in an instant.

But the spell contained power that she could never have imagined.

It was strange.

Even though she'd clearly been awake, whenever she recalled that scene, it felt like it had all been a dream.

It was a spell that she had cast personally.

As a Wizard who specialised in water and ice magic, she fully understood the power, range, and duration of the 5-star spell White Hail.

But the spell that had manifested far surpassed her expectations in every way.

'I'll help you with the calculations.'

That's what Lukas had said, but even now, she wasn't entirely sure what that meant.

It wasn't rare for multiple Wizards to work together to perform a spell, but in order to do so, there were several demanding criteria that had to first be met.

For one, the magic circles usually had to be drawn in advance.

It also depended on how much the participating Wizards understood each other.

But Lukas didn't meet any of the required criteria.

Nevertheless, in terms of efficiency, that spell was greater than any collaborative spell she had witnessed before.

'...with this man's help, the power of my spell was increased by several times.'

How was such a thing possible?

Yuriah had deep knowledge about magicology, but even she was not confident enough to explain that phenomenon.

Nevertheless, she was certain of one thing.

An unknown power from the sword Lukas wielded intertwined with her spell just before it was fully cast.

'...it's an ability any Wizard would long for.'

It still made her feel uncomfortable.

He'd used some kind of unknown power to enhance her spell, and as a result, they were able to overcome a crisis, but she couldn't stop the strange feeling of anxiety that developed in her chest.

Perhaps it was because Yuriah was a Wizard who disliked encountering things that she couldn't understand or explain.

"It was Lady Snow."

At that moment, Hoffman's voice awoke her from her thoughts.

"These traces were left by Lady Snow."

When she looked at him, she found that he was unable to hide his excitement.

"Did she pass through here?"

"Right. I can't tell when exactly the traces were left, but it's certain that she passed through this place."

Undead were corpses that had been brought back to life.

Therefore, it was hard to determine how much time had passed since they were returned to death, especially since their flesh and bones had been scattered all over.

Nevertheless, the fact that they found traces of Snow relieved them to an extent.

Crunch-

Suddenly, they felt a presence in the nearby grass.

Lukas and Yuriah, who were keeping watch, and Hoffman, who was examining the bodies, immediately raised their guard.

No, it would be more precise to say they got ready to run away.

But after a while, a familiar face appeared from the grass.

“Eric...! You son of a bitch, you’re alive.”

Eric, who appeared in front of them, smiled faintly.

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“Hoffman, Yuriah, you guys are okay.”

“Naturally. What’s that way? Why are you alone? Where are the others?”

“Everyone’s fine too.”

The other two members of the Swordnaz appeared from the grass.

“I’m sorry. As the leader, I failed to maintain my cool in a situation that demanded it. Instead of blindly chasing after the Monster Queen with no hesitation, I should have done my best to fully understand the situation in the forest first.”

“Enough of that. It’s already in the past.”

Eric smiled bitterly at Hoffman’s words.

Then, he finally looked at Lukas and opened his mouth as well.

“Ah. I’m glad you’re safe as well.”

“Yuriah helped me.”

“Is that so?”

“Look at this, Eric. There are traces of Lady Snow here.”

When Hoffman spoke in a slightly urgent tone, Eric nodded calmly.

“We saw that before and decided to hide here and wait for you guys to arrive.”

“You were waiting for us to arrive?”

“Thanks to Raven, we were able to ascertain Lady Snow’s whereabouts.”

“R-, really, Raven?”

“...”

The man called Raven was a blunt looking man with dark blue hair. Instead of responding, he simply nodded his head slightly.

“Lady Snow is headed towards the heart of the forest. It’s possible that she also eliminated all of the undead along the way instead of avoiding the enemies like we did.”

“Right. Even if hundreds of millions of undead were to gather here, they would not be a threat to Lady Snow.”

“...hundreds of millions?”

After softly muttering for a moment with a strange expression on his face, Eric continued.

“In any case, after following Lady Snow’s traces for a while, we eventually arrived at a cave. But we can’t go any further.”

“Why?”

“There is someone guarding it. Someone that the three of us can’t handle on our own.”

“...mm.”

Hoffman let out a soft sound, and Yuriah finally spoke up.

“The Monster Queen.”

“Right.”

Eric nodded and continued to explain.

“Do you guys remember? The Queen didn’t actually attack us, instead, she only burned the forest and passed through without caring about our life or death. What if her goal wasn’t to follow us, but instead, she was aiming for this forest from the start?”

“I don’t know. Regardless of what her goal is, it’s none of our business. Plus, there’s something that’s much more important than that.”

Hoffman’s eyes became cold.

“Can we break through the Queen and get to that cave?”

“...”

Eric didn't easily respond.

The Monster Queen.

To be honest, when they first saw her, he judged that three of the Swordnaz would be unable to defeat her, and decided that it would be best to wait for Hoffman and Yuriah.

But even with their addition, he couldn't guarantee that they would be able to win even if they were to go all out.

That was because he knew just how strong their opponent was.

“There is a chance of victory.”

It was Yuriah, not Eric, who muttered those words.

She wasn't just saying this because she wanted to. Instead, it was a realistic and logical conclusion that she reached after carefully estimating the Swordnaz's strength.

Eric asked in a cautious tone.

“Do you have a plan?”

“No. However, we have a helper.”

“...a helper?”

After she finished speaking, Yuriah turned to look at Lukas.

“If this man helps us, we can win.”

“Huh?”

Surprised, Eric turned to look at Lukas.

“Does this person have some kind of special power?”

Eric could also tell that Lukas was not a well trained Swordsman or Martial Artist from the state of his body.

He was not a Wizard either. It was none other than Yuriah herself that had affirmed this fact. (TL: How would Eric know that?)

“I can’t really explain it. But still...”

Just as a trace of doubt appeared in Eric’s eyes.

“Yuriah is telling the truth.”

An unexpected man bluntly came to stand beside Yuriah.

It was Hoffman.

Crossing his arms, he continued.

“This guy is reliable. If it wasn’t for him, we probably would have died.”

“...”

This was surprising.

Hoffman might seem like a hotheaded person at first glance, but surprisingly, he had a very keen eye when it came to people. It was also very difficult for someone as prideful as he was to acknowledge another person.

He even had a history of openly displaying hostility to Lukas before. This made Eric wonder why Hoffman, who hated to take back what he said, had changed his mind so easily.

'Is this man that powerful?'

...He wasn't sure.

However, Eric trusted his teammates.

"...you're called Lukas, right? I'm ashamed to ask this, but can you help us?"

"I don't know if I can be of any help, but I'll do my best."

Lukas didn't want Snow to die, so it could be said that he and the Swordnaz shared a common interest.

"Thank you."

After a brief word of gratitude, Eric's expression became serious once again.

“Then let’s hurry there. Time is of the essence.”

* * *

“ .. ”

Lukas blinked.

His expression was blank as if he was seeing snowflakes in the desert.

“What’s going on? Did he always blank out like that?”

“...he wasn’t like that last time.”

“I’m starting to feel a bit worried.”

The Swordnaz’s conversation didn’t enter his ears at all.

Instead, his attention was focused on the striking red hair.

The hair swayed gently in the breeze as if it was a flickering flame.

“...from what I heard, the Monster Queen often mumbles to herself while grabbing her head.”

“Is she mentally unstable or something?”

“I don’t know, but isn’t this a good opportunity?”

As he said this, Hoffman drew his sword.

“...be quiet. Shut up. Don’t interfere... I told you I don’t know... You can’t interfere... I... I...”

A faint muttering could be heard.

Her head was lowered so it was impossible to see her face.

Nevertheless, Lukas knew who this woman called the Monster Queen was.

It was at this moment that the Monster Queen lifted her head.

“...!”

Her red eyes met his.

Her lips parted.

“...!”

Her identity was exposed.

It was the Phoenix that Lukas himself had named.

“Humans... burn them all.”

Burning hate was mixed into Nix’s voice.

“Kuk! Yuriah! Barrier!”

“Everyone, gather around!”

“Shit! This is a familiar sight!”

A sea of flames spread out as if it intended to consume the entire forest.

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Not too long ago, Lukas had almost been hit by the artificial sun.

Right. At that time, he'd wondered how it was possible for someone to create such a large flame without using magic, but if the person in question was Nix, then it made sense.

'This is dangerous.'

He had no way to destroy the flames currently surging towards them. He couldn't even avoid it since the range was so large. It was like a remake of the earlier situation with the artificial sun.

Lukas had no way to respond to it.

—Who said anything like that? I'm just saying that if you encounter attacks that don't suit your fighting style, you should avoid fighting as much as possible.

Snow's voice resounded in his mind at that moment.

He couldn't help but feel strange.

Even though she'd only taught for a very short time, her attitude, gestures, and words had become deeply embedded in Lukas' mind.

This proved that she had a profound influence on him that he hadn't even noticed before.

Lukas' eyes instinctively turned to Yuriah.

He could see her lips moving slightly. Clearly, she intended to cast a spell. What kind of spell would it be?

...There was no time to communicate.

So he had no choice but to figure out what spell she was going to cast on his own.

He thought about it carefully.

In this situation, what kind of spell would be the best to stop the huge wave of flames that covered their entire field of view?

After carefully analysing a number of different spells, Yuriah's tendencies, and the current situation, he was able to quickly find an answer.

"Ice Wall!"

Once again, their voices resounded in unison.

Crack crack!

At the same time, a huge wall of ice rose up from the ground. It was so cold that white mist could be seen rising up from the wall. And yet, this 'shield' which was so cold it was capable of burning the skin of whoever touched it, melted like an old candle as soon as it came into contact with Nix's flames.

Nevertheless, that wasn't a problem.

In the first place, its purpose wasn't to perfectly block the flames, but instead to buy them some time.

"Use this opening to escape!"

The Swordnaz and Lukas obediently followed Yuriah's orders and were able to escape from the range of the flames that were being blocked by the Ice Wall.

"Formation A!"

When Eric shouted this as they ran, Hoffman and Raven twisted their bodies to position themselves as the frontline.

Crunch!

With the sound of flesh and bones tearing, Raven's body began to grow at an extreme rate.

Lukas couldn't help but look at him in surprise.

Originally, he had only been around half of Hoffman's height, but in an instant, he grew to tower over him.

Hair also began sprouting all over his body before turning into a shaggy coat, and his eyes became golden.

Saliva dripped from his elongated snout.

'Werewolf?'

He never would have thought he was a werewolf. In fact, it was almost unimaginable.

Nevertheless, the thing that was most surprising was that Raven had such a reserved temperament despite that.

'...a descendant of the Cursed Clan.'

Calling it the 'Cursed Clan' wasn't a form of mockery to Raven, instead, it was the correct way to address them.

This was because the ancestors of his clan had been cursed with black magic in the past by a very powerful witch, which caused their bodies to mutate on a genetic level.

Perhaps, over the generations, they had learned of a way to keep their reason which was why Raven was as calm as he was.

Taht.

He ran on all fours beside Hoffman as if it was something they had practised many times.

Eric disappeared into the forest. But before that, Lukas managed to see him pull out a bow. It seemed that he intended to hide in the trees and find a good opportunity to attack Nix's vital points.

The last member, a woman with blue-green hair whose name he hadn't yet heard, positioned herself between the front and back lines.

Then she licked her lips.

"..."

Nevertheless, she didn't say anything.

Lukas had actually never heard this woman speak, and he wondered if she might be mute.

Flash!

But his thoughts were interrupted in the next moment as a bright light shone from the bracelet on her wrist before an enormous, pure white shield appeared in her hand.

Thud!

She then slammed her shield into the ground as if she intended to embed it there.

Flash!

A bright light shone once again, except this time, it came from the large shield. Instead of disappearing after a moment, the light began taking on a physical shape.

It formed a barrier.

The shield was a magic tool.

A magic tool that had been engraved with powerful defence runes. This was something that could only be crafted by an extremely skilled alchemist.

It was only then that Lukas understood this woman's role.

She was, in effect, the shield that protected Yuriah.

"Frost Scream?"

Her tone was unfriendly, and there was no context in her question, but Lukas was able to easily understand the intentions behind Yuriah's question.

She was asking for an opinion on what spell to use in the current situation.

From someone who wasn't even a Wizard at that.

Lukas knew what she wanted, but he wasn't able to answer easily.

"..."

Nix...

He hadn't been mistaken, it really was her.

The Phoenix that Lukas had saved in the Ispania Mountains in the past, who he let consume the heart of a thousand year old Drake King, and who was able to take human form because of her own desire.

Why was she called the Monster Queen?

What had happened to Nix in the past 10 years?

What about Torkunta?

...No.

'That's not it, Lukas.'

That wasn't what he was curious about at all, was it?

Even Ivan, Snow, and Iris had forgotten about Lukas.

So Nix had probably forgotten all about him too.

Nevertheless, Lukas was unable to suppress the sliver of hope that arose inside of him.

The moment he encountered one of his past relationships, the desire to know if he had truly been forgotten couldn't help but rear its head once again.

—This time... maybe... by chance...

"Kup."

Lukas couldn't help but feel disgusted by his own frailty.

“What are you doing?”

It was Yuriah’s that woke him from his thoughts.

“This is not the time to fall into a daze.”

Bang!

With a sound similar to that of an exploding firework, the white shield that was protecting them was pushed backward. Sweat dripped down the face of the woman with blue-green hair.

“I trusted your strength and believed that we would be able to win with your help, that’s why I suggested we fight the Monster Queen to Eric.”

“...”

“There is a limit to how much Sera can endure. Hoffman and Raven’s harassment tactics will end before that happens... My role in the Swordnaz is the spear. I’m the one responsible for unleashing the attacks that are threatening enough to break the enemy’s guard. That way, Eric can then accurately target their vital points.”

Even at that moment, a stream of spells was constantly being sent from the Yuriah to Nix.

A salvo of missiles made of ice and water rained down relentlessly.

But those weren't enough to threaten Nix.

Flap!

A pair of flaming wings sprouted from her back, erasing the spells shooting towards her with a single flap.

A wave of scorching heat rushed through the forest.

“...”

The heat brought him back to reality.

With a sunken gaze, Lukas finally opened his mouth.

“How much mana do you have left?”

Even Lukas was unable to determine how much mana was contained within someone else's mana room.

Yuriah took a breath before responding.

“...enough to cast one 7-star spell.”

“...”

It was by no means a small amount.

But it wasn't enough for them to relax either.

Even at that moment, Yuriah was constantly casting spells.

—White Hail.

Even if they were to use the spell they used to wipe out the undead before, it would be insufficient to deal with Nix's flames.

From the start, Nix, a Phoenix, and Yuriah, a Ice Wizard, were a bad matchup.

“Frost Scream.”

Yuriah once again brought up the suggestion she'd made earlier.

The 6-star spell Frost Scream.

In general, it had a smaller range than White Hail. But in return, it had far more penetrating power and lethality.

If she were to shoot a bunch of sharp shards of ice, it might be possible to pierce through those flame wings.

Of course, such a thing would not be possible with the power of a 'normal' Frost Scream.

She would need Lukas' power.

The possibility would only appear when the power of her spell was upgraded by that strange power he had.

"No."

But Lukas shook his head firmly.

He could hear the shield creaking.

The heat of the flames was gradually increasing, and it was beginning to feel like their skin was burning. The barrier that the blue-green haired woman, Sera, had erected around them not only blocked physical attacks, but also heat and cold to some extent.

This meant that the heat of the flames outside the barrier was even more intense. Raven and Hoffman probably felt like they were fighting in a furnace. Sooner or later, they would collapse from dehydration.

Nix, who was at the centre of the inferno, staggered slightly and appeared to be unstable.

Whoosh!

Nevertheless, the flames that continued to spread from her body were enough to pressure them greatly.

There was no time. By the time that Nix's mental episode ended, the Swordnaz would probably have already been wiped out.

"Then?"

"You need to use Blizzard."

"No."

Yuriah shook her head firmly.

"The battle has already reached the stage of melee combat. If I were to use a 7-star spell, there is a high chance I would endanger Hoffman and Raven, who are at the front, as well as the rest of us too..."

“Frost Scream would only make her pause for a while. Even if Eric was able to find an opening, his opponent is practically immortal. A clumsy attack would only make her angry.”

“...”

“It has to be a 7-star spell.”

Lukas spoke in a clear voice, but he felt different in his heart. In all honesty, even 7-star spells weren't enough.

But he felt that that was a truth that he should keep to himself.

“...”

Yuriah grasped her staff tightly.

Although she didn't say anything, Lukas could tell that she was considering it.

This was because she knew he was right. No matter how much it was strengthened, a 6 star spell would not be able to restrain Nix.

After a while, Yuriah made a decision.

“...frost that freezes even our breath.”

The soft chant of the spell began to resound.

Seeing that, Lukas slowly drew his sword from its sheath.

It wasn't just Yuriah.

It was also time for him to make a decision.

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The bowstring was pulled tight.

The elasticity of string made from the tendons of a Rock Troll was amazing.

Since they were supported by that much elasticity, the power of the arrows that were shot out of the bow naturally increased by a few times. Of course, the strength required to pull such a bowstring could be imagined.

He could feel the bowstring hum slightly beneath his fingertips.

“...ssp.”

He sucked in a soft breath and stopped breathing.

His eyes narrowed in concentration.

His aim focused on a vital point.

Twang-

He let go of the bowstring.

The arrow tore through the air and arrived in front of Nix in the blink of an eye. In a short span of time fast enough to be called nigh-instantaneous, the arrow reached the nape of Nix's pure white neck.

But that was all.

Fwoosh!

As Nix's wings unfolded, the approaching arrow was quickly burnt to ashes.

"Kuh."

He couldn't help but bite his lip.

That wasn't an ordinary arrow. The arrow he'd just fired was made from the wood of a lava tree which was well known for being able to withstand high temperatures. Nevertheless, in front of Nix's flames, it burned like dry firewood.

He'd heard a lot about her, but he never would have thought that she was such a monster.

Monster Queen.

It was only at that moment that he realised why she was given that name.

About three years ago, rumours that fire beasts called Phoenixes had been spotted in the Ispania Mountains came flooding in one after the other.

At that time, there was still a lot of speculation since Phoenixes were so rare that one might not be able to find one even if they were to search the entire continent.

Some countries and races referred to them as Divine Beasts, but to the general populace, they were just seen as monsters. But that didn't matter.

What the powerful people cared about was that all of the parts of the Phoenix held enormous collection value regardless of whether it was for magicology, alchemy, metallurgy, and so on.

So upon hearing the rumors, nobles and bureaucrats from all over the world joined forces to form a powerful subjugation team and sent the expedition to the Ispania Mountains.

Ten First Class Knights, and fifty Apprentice Knights, and five Knight Divisions.

Two 6 star Wizards, five 5 star Wizards, and twenty 4 star Battle Mages.

Two A rank Mercenaries, five B rank Mercenaries, and ten C rank Mercenaries.

Five hundred infantrymen.

There were also guides, cooks, and even hunters.

Thus, a large army of more than 1,000 men was gathered, but even until the end, no one knew.

That was the beginning of a disaster.

* * *

The Ispania Mountains were given the nicknames 'Monster Heaven' and 'Hell Mountains'.

In other words, apart from the Phoenixes, there were still many threats scattered everywhere. At that time, the members of the subjugation team only assumed that the other monsters living in the mountains were nothing more than the Phoenixes' food.

Nevertheless, they were monsters.

In front of such a systematically organised force, the monsters were helplessly overrun.

They attacked the Ispania Mountains with unstoppable momentum and soon arrived at a mountain that seemed to pierce the sky.

This was the location of the Phoenixes they were looking for.

But when they ascended the mountain, they were surprised.

Seven individuals.

There were only old and young individuals on the mountain. Thanks to this, their expedition became the easiest subjugation expedition ever.

But the subjugation force did not leave immediately.

The top of the mountain was quite peaceful, and for some strange reason, no monsters approached it.

Since it would take at least a month for them to return, they decided to stay at the top of the mountain and hold a small banquet.

It was the biggest and worst mistake they would ever make.

Early the next morning, a red haired woman appeared at the top of the mountain.

The Monster Queen.

'...there were only ten survivors from the subjugation force.'

Even if they were being negligent, they were still an elite subjugation force with close to 1,000 members. And yet, only 1 percent of them managed to survive.

According to the survivors' reports, the flames she spewed didn't just destroy the expedition party, instead, it even burned down part of the Ispania Mountains.

After that, the Monster Queen was unable to erase her hatred for humans.

She sometimes secretly and sometimes openly engaged in the burning of prominent human figures.

Then there were reports that she had recently come into contact with Diablo.

Krrr...

“...!”

Suddenly, with a loud crack, a tree began to fall towards Eric, but he was barely able to quickly roll across the ground and avoid it.

The tree, which had been exposed to death energy, had become dry and twisted, making it no different from firewood that had been covered in oil. This place, where the flames were so hot that it was beginning to melt the rocks around them, was gradually becoming more and more like hell.

His heart ached.

The Amalgam Forest had already suffered irreparable damage.

And yet, Eric, a High Elf, could do nothing to the culprit who had caused this tragedy.

[Eric.]

A voice.

He heard Yuriah’s voice. Was she using telepathy?

[Just listen carefully. I’ll be restraining the Monster Queen’s movements soon. It might even be possible for me to put those annoying wings of hers out for a while.]

“How?”

He asked back subconsciously, but telepathy was a form of one sided notification magic rather than back and forth communication. His voice could not reach Yuriah.

[That will give you an opportunity. If this fails, we all die. If you intend to run away, this will be our only chance. We can only do it now when the Monster Queen is unstable and spewing flames randomly.]

Run away.

That was the most logical response one could make when faced with an enemy they couldn't handle.

[If you want us to escape, shoot an arrow to the sky. Then I will give the order to the others.]

He'd witnessed the Monster Queen's formidable power. It was at a level where he wasn't even sure what to do. Even when all of the members of the Swordnaz were gathered, their chances of winning didn't exceed 10%.

In the current situation, the best thing for them would be to retreat, come up with a strategy, and arrange their formation accordingly.

'However... What will happen to Lady Snow if we run away?'

The 'Swordnaz' were the escort team created to protect Snow. None of them would hesitate to use their own bodies as a shield to protect Snow from attacks, and they were ready to give up their lives if she ordered it.

Raven said that the Monster Queen was blocking the path leading to Snow.

So running away now would be no different from abandoning their Lady. In other words, it was an act that defied their very reason for existing.

...So from the start, there was no choice.

Creak-

His bow let out a soft sound and his hand drew the bowstring back.

Eric aimed his bow.

Not at the sky, but at the Monster Queen's throat.

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7-star Wizards rarely used 7-star spells.

This may sound strange, but it was the truth.

Magic was harsh. Those without talent for it weren't even allowed to enter its doors.

In truth, anyone could be called a talent just for being able to faintly sense mana.

However, as the levels increased, the talent requirements also became greater.

In this way, only the most outstanding talents were able to enter the higher levels, like jade being separated after being mixed together with ordinary stones.

The world called these talents geniuses.

Nevertheless, there existed a place.

A place where even these geniuses, who pressed forward without pause while enjoying the admiration, envy, and praise of others, all came to a stop.

A place where they seemed to face an unclimbable wall and finally felt despair for the first time.

This 'place' was the bottleneck that one would encounter when trying to break through to 7-stars.

Countless geniuses were left frustrated by this wall. Some of them were even unable to overcome the sense of shame they felt for their paused progress and went crazy or lost their minds.

In other words, Archmages, people who managed to cross this seemingly uncrossable wall, were geniuses among geniuses.

It was only after Yuriah reached 7-stars that she finally 'understood' just how much power, range, and aftermath each 7-star spell had.

And that was exactly the reason why she rarely used it. The sharper a blade was, the more careful one had to be when determining whether to draw it or not.

In fact, she'd already thought of using a 7-star spell three times before.

Of course, this time was an exception. Because she didn't really have a choice.

“ ... ”

Yuriah knew what kind of spell Blizzard was.

It was a fierce snowstorm that even froze the air in the area it covered.

An extreme range spell.

That's what most 7-star spells were like. In some cases, the traces left behind by these spells would last for several years before fading away. This meant that they could completely destroy the environment and ecosystem of an entire area after being used.

According to Yuriah's expectations, the Blizzard that she could cast would have a range that was at least large enough to cover the entire forest in her sight.

But it wasn't.

Once again, Yuriah's spell had been changed.

'Impossible...'

Yuriah looked down at the ice crystals that were coalescing on her palm. The mere sight of it seemed to fill her with ecstasy. It filled her heart with excitement as though she was looking at an artistic masterpiece. The catharsis she felt at that moment was something she'd never experienced before in her entire life.

This wasn't magic.

This was art. She wholeheartedly believed this.

She felt like if she were to relax her mind for even a moment, she would fall into a daze. To borrow Hoffman's words, she would become a 'fool'.

Blizzard? No. It couldn't be called that anymore.

To call this a Blizzard was the same as calling an unprocessed tree a chair.

...Processed.

Right. Lukas was processing Yuriah's spell. She couldn't think of a better expression than that.

The principle in itself wasn't very difficult.

It was just maximising the power of a wide range spell by compressing it. However, what about the calculations that were required to do such a thing? Was it really possible to calculate a formula so large that just thinking about it would make her brain hurt in such a short time? Did he really create a brand new formula that was different from the normal Blizzard? And did he really just calculate this complicated equation that he'd created on the spot?

All of it just seemed impossible.

"All you have to do is calculate the course of the spell. You can do that, right?"

Lukas' voice woke her up from her thoughts.

Right. Of course, she could do that.

“Get ready.”

This wasn't the time for complicated thoughts.

Nevertheless, there was something that Yuriah had to say.

“...I really want to know who you are.”

She took a deep breath before continuing.

“When this is all over, can you teach me how to do that?”

“...”

Instead of answering, Lukas simply nodded his head slightly.

* * *

[Get out of the way.]

As soon as they heard Yuriah's voice through telepathy, Hoffman and Raven immediately retreated as they had previously agreed.

They quickly retreated behind Sera, the woman with the shield.

“...you... dare!”

Of course, Nix wouldn't let that happen.

With her wings spread, she stared at them with hate-filled eyes.

Whoosh!

But at that moment, a white storm erupted.

It scratched grooves into the ground, smashed trees, and even froze the very air as it barrelled towards Nix.

“...!”

The cold wind caused her wings to shrink back for a moment.

This was a natural reaction for a Phoenix, who was a being of fire, but in this situation, it became a decisive mistake.

Crackle!

Her toes began to freeze.

Nix tried to flap her wings again, but frost had already begun to spread on their tips. She couldn't move them as she pleased.

"Screech!"

Her fingertips were cold.

"I hate...!"

...She hated the cold.

This wasn't just because she was a Phoenix.

The cold reminded her of when she was alone. The loneliness, which seemed to have been engraved on her very soul like a curse, always forced her to reflect on her fate.

That was why Nix hated the cold.

“Haah...!”

She spat out fire.

She needed to warm up. Twisting her body desperately, she tried to escape the encroaching cold.

But the more she struggled, the more the frost spread. It was as though she was in a swamp, the more she struggled, the deeper she sank.

Seeing this scene, Eric couldn't help but mutter blankly.

“...Yuriah's magic... was it always this powerful?”

It wasn't strange for him to have doubts.

After all, it had been more than 5 years since he and Yuriah had become teammates. So he had a good idea of what level she'd reached. Raven and Sera were equally surprised.

One person, Hoffman, muttered without much surprise.

“It was that man.”

“That man?”

When Raven tilted his head slightly, Hoffman responded.

“I’m talking about Lukas. Yuriah, I guess he helped you again?”

Yuriah nodded quietly.

Eric, who began looking around after hearing that, spoke up.

“By the way, where is he?”

“Huh?”

“Lukas. He’s not here.”

At this, Hoffman’s expression stiffened and he also began looking around.

But Lukas was nowhere in sight.

“...!”

Suddenly.

Sera let out a quiet exclamation and pointed towards Nix.

Lukas was there.

“What the hell?!”

“Cr-, crazy!”

It wasn't strange for them to let out shocked cries.

This was because Lukas was currently walking towards Nix in a defenceless manner.

* * *

Tap, tap-

As he walked across the frozen ground, Lukas' mind wandered.

There were several reasons why he advised Yuriah to use Blizzard, but there was one crucial reason.

It restrained Nix's movements, and the icy atmosphere created by Blizzard lowered the temperature around her body.

Nevertheless, she would still be conscious. Even if it was faint, it would be enough for them to talk.

The thing Lukas wanted was to talk to Nix.

"..."

So he only stopped walking a few steps away from her.

"...kt."

She was glaring at him.

Indescribable rage overflowed from her burning gaze, and she didn't even try to conceal the hatred she felt for him.

She'd never looked at him like that before.

"Nix."

He called her name.

This caused a slight change in Nix's expression.

"You... Who are you?"

"..."

"How do you know my name?"

At least it was a start.

Or at least that was how it seemed from Lukas perspective.

"That's because... I named you myself."

"...what?"

This was different from Iris and Ivan.

Although they had forgotten Lukas' existence, they could not be considered obvious enemies.

Nix, on the other hand, had tried to kill Lukas, twice. Even now, her attitude hadn't changed.

If it wasn't for the fact that she was currently frozen by Blizzard, Lukas fragile body would have already been burned to ashes.

...But he couldn't make use of that spell anymore. This was because Yuriah's mana room was now empty.

So this was his first and only chance.

That was why Lukas wished with his entire heart.

He knew that it might be in vain, and he knew what kind of response he'd probably receive, but he couldn't help but hope for a miracle.

He hoped that Nix would remember him even a little bit.

"It's me... Lukas."

Otherwise.

"...it's a bit late... but I'm back."

He would have no choice but to kill her.

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That day, Nix should not have been away.

“...”

Black ashes covered the ground.

She knew what these ashes used to look like.

“Ah... ahhh...”

Her hoarse voice pierced the silence.

Nix collapsed on the spot.

Then she slowly began rubbing the ashes with her palms.

Trickle.

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

The moment she touched those ashes, she knew that the possibility she wanted to deny was an unavoidable reality.

“...why?”

Nix was clearly aware.

Even though they were called Phoenixes, that didn't mean that they were actually immortal. (TL: Phoenix and Immortal are homonyms.)

“...why?”

She murmured again, but no one was there to answer.

But she wasn't even asking herself.

Nix's murmur was nothing more than meaningless whining.

“Ah... uh... ah...”

Her head throbbed.

She had a splitting headache. It felt like someone was driving a nail into her skull.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

That was the moment when the headache that would torment her for years first arrived.

With a wince, Nix got to her feet.

“ ... ”

Her hair fluttered gently even though the wind was not blowing.

“ ... ”

The dead Phoenixes only left ashes behind.

She knew what that fact meant.

...Phoenix feathers.

As a material wanted by many fields, phoenix feathers were considered treasures with infinite value. However, they transformed into simple feathers when the phoenix died.

But the expedition party didn't care about that, after all, they had the solution.

All you needed to do was pluck the feathers when the Phoenix was alive. Then, the feathers would continue to burn with unquenchable flames

It wasn't just the feathers.

The beak, eyes, tongue, and even the claws. She was certain that they had taken every part that was of any use.

She could also imagine how frightening it must have been. How painful it must have been... And how much they must have hated them.

The Phoenixes that were on the mountain had been brought there by none other than Nix herself.

She'd gathered all of those who had been living on their own around the continent.

That's why Nix felt that it was her responsibility and duty to protect them.

But she'd failed to uphold it.

She shambled to the top of the mountain.

She could feel the heat now.

Humans...

The ones who trampled upon her territory with their muddy feet were holding a banquet with happy expressions on their faces.

It was at that moment that she realised.

The fact that annihilating Nix's people was nothing more than a war achievement for them.

They were dancing around a bonfire, clashing wine cups together, and hugging each other around the shoulders.

"...haha."

A soft chuckle escaped her lips.

...The urge to vomit surged up.

"Stop! Who are you?"

A sentry shouted in a cautious tone.

Instead of answering, Nix simply waved her hand.

Flames sprouted from the tips of her fingers and swallowed the sentry whole.

“...!”

The fire didn't even give him the chance to scream. His entire body was burned in an instant and his ashes fell to the ground.

“Wh-, what's going on?!”

“Enemy!”

The subjugation force quickly readied themselves for battle.

Each of them drew their weapons and surrounded Nix.

“You all... What the hell did you do?”

She muttered in a soft voice, but no one heard it except her.

“N-, Nick is dead!”

“It’s an unidentified enemy! Wizards to the rear!”

“4th and 5th Knight Divisions, subdue the enemy!”

Nix grabbed her head and screamed.

“Why the hell did you do that!?”

Fwoosh!

Flames rushed from her body.

The ones in the frontline who were looking directly at her felt their eyes burn before their bodies went up in flames soon afterward in a scene reminiscent of Nick.

In truth, they could still be considered lucky.

The Knights were the ones who suffered the most. The heavy armour they were wearing was engraved with high grade temperature resistance runes. But in this case, it was their greatest misfortune. The

runes on the armour had a greater effect on the wearer than on the equipment itself. This prevented the Knights' bodies from being turned to ash, and instead, allowed them to gain the experience of dying by having their armour melt into their flesh.

Crash, crash...

The 4th and 5th Knight Divisions, the B rank Mercenaries, the C rank Mercenaries, 200 infantry units, and ten Battle Mages.

Those were the ones that had been killed by Nix's first eruption.

"Ah... uh..."

The Knight Commander and 6 star Wizards, those who could be said to have steel like wills, couldn't help but take a few steps back as they felt genuine fear for the first time in their lives.

Nevertheless, Nix didn't intend to let them off.

Not a single human there would be able to escape with their lives.

She would never allow them.

Nix hated humans.

'...hate?'

That word made her feel strange.

Did she like humans in the first place?

Right. It seemed that she did like them at first.

When she remembered that, an indescribable warmth flowed into her heart.

At that moment, the memory of her sitting in the cool shade of a tree as someone stroked her hair filled her with the warmth like the sun.

[...stop!]

She heard a faint voice.

Nevertheless, she didn't feel panicked or surprised. It was a voice she heard from time to time.

It was nothing but an ordinary auditory hallucination.

"Shut up."

She spoke in a low voice.

Ignoring her splitting headache, Nix spread her wings.

She was going to kill all of the annoying humans.

Nix looked at the man standing in front of her.

He had white hair, a thin body, and seemed to have a weak looking arm and leg.

Weak.

Even among the humans, he was particularly weak.

Nevertheless, the impression he left on her was greater than any human she'd ever encountered before.

...Those eyes.

They felt familiar.

Flash-

“U-, urg...”

Suddenly, her head began to hurt so much she felt like screaming.

She’d never felt such intense pain before in her life.

That wasn’t all. Her heart began to ache.

Looking at this human made her heart ache.

“I hate it.”

She hated feeling more pain.

“...I don’t know anyone like you.”

Nix took a deep breath before exhaling harshly like she was about to faint.

“So don’t recklessly call me by my name.”

“...”

Once again, his expectations had been trampled upon.

He didn't know.

He didn't know that having your existence denied over and over could be so hard to bear. In the end, the conversation with Nix did nothing other than dig further into his wounds.

Lukas looked at Nix.

She had changed. She had changed so much. Compared to her, Iris and Ivan's changes were not that significant.

She was like a completely different person now.

...Lukas knew her secret.

Torkunta. The ego of the thousand year old Drake King lived on inside her. Then what if the person in front of him now wasn't Nix, but Torkunta instead?

'No.'

That wasn't true.

This was Nix.

Lukas was certain that this was the young Phoenix that he'd saved in the Ispania Mountains.

"...Nix."

What the hell happened to her?

Just as Lukas was about to ask.

Pak!

Someone suddenly came running up to him and grabbed him with their thick palm.

It was Hoffman.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"..."

“Dammit. Why the hell do you think that monster would talk to you? Thousands of people have been burned at the hands of the Monster Queen!”

Lukas turned to look at him.

“...why does she hate humans?”

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“Hah? You don’t know that?”

Hoffman put Lukas down a long way away from Nix. There were no signs that they were pursued.

Nix’s body was still being restrained by the Blizzard, and she looked like she was in even more pain than before.

“Apparently, all of her people were captured and killed by humans.”

“Her people...?”

“Right. So her eyes were blinded by revenge.”

Lukas wanted to ask him some more questions, but Hoffman didn’t have time for that.

“We can’t expect any more help from you, can we?”

Lukas nodded.

Yuriah had run out of mana, and Nix said she didn’t remember him.

...There was nothing else for Lukas to do in this fight.

“...”

“Unfortunately, our chances of winning aren’t very high.”

Hoffman left after saying those words. As he headed back to his teammates, his gaze turned to Eric.

Rumble-

A strange aura was rising up from his body.

It was Eric’s skill, Force Arrow.

Had it been 3 years since he’d last seen it in person?

“...he’s putting all of his energy into it.”

That bastard... He was intending to risk his life with this attack.

Hoffman’s thoughts were by no means an exaggeration.

The further Eric drew his bow back, the more his muscles trembled. Blood dripped from his bulging eyes, and the veins in his face bulged as though they were about to burst.

Nevertheless, he persevered.

In order to gather more power, even if it was only by a bit.

—Finally.

Twang.

A sharp sound rang out.

Swoosh!

Crack crack!

As the arrow flew, it tore the icy ground beneath it like paper. Shards of ice once again scattered in every direction before falling to the ground like snow. Everything in the arrow's path was destroyed.

To put it simply, the power behind this single arrow was stronger than a normal 7-star spell.

The destination of the arrow, which was charging forward with the same momentum as a raging wave, was, naturally, the frozen Nix.

Boom!

—No one would think that was the sound of an arrow hitting its target. The nearby trees, which were hit by nothing but the shockwaves from the explosion, were all uprooted.

Lukas finally realised why Eric was the leader. It wasn't just because of his gentle personality which helped him mediate between the members who had strong personalities.

Instead, he was clearly the strongest among the Swordnaz.

“Kyaaak!”

From the dust cloud created by the explosion came a roar that sounded like a mixture between a bird's screech and a woman's scream.

It was Nix's scream.

"I think that was a good hit."

Eric muttered in a weak voice. He blinked his tired eyes over and over.

"However, that is still not enough. Raven, Hoffman, it'll be up to you to finish this..."

That was Eric's last order. Afterward, he collapsed onto the ground and directly fainted.

Taht!

It was Raven who made the first move.

The developed vision of a werewolf was enough to find where Nix was struggling in the smoke.

He closed the distance in the blink of an eye and slashed at her with his claws that were sharper than most swords.

With this, he would cut off that pure white—

Fwoosh!

Raven's thoughts were interrupted before they could go further.

Flames erupted from Nix's body, causing a huge explosion. The force of the explosion was so great that Raven was sent flying back in the direction that he came from. Hoffman, who had appeared not long after Raven did, was also caught in the same situation.

They flew across the clearing their battle had created in the forest before crashing heavily into the treeline and falling heavily to the ground. Afterward, they remained on the ground because they had already lost consciousness.

Thud!

Sera once again slammed her shield into the ground and formed a barrier. But she wasn't able to completely defend as she had before.

"...!"

As if they had physical force, the waves of flames smashed against the white barrier.

Jurk.

With each blow, it felt like her insides were being shaken.

“Urk...”

Sera couldn't help but cough up a mouthful of blood.

This was dangerous. The Monster Queen had suddenly become several times more powerful than before.

Nevertheless, she couldn't back down.

Sera grit her teeth heavily. Blood continued to spill for her lips and her consciousness felt like it was beginning to fade, but she didn't care.

Unfortunately, her desperate defence didn't last very long.

Crash!

Nix's rage-filled flames shattered the shield barrier.

Just before the flames hit, Sera grabbed Yuriah and rolled across the ground.

Sera was afraid of fire. It was to the extent that she couldn't even get close to a campfire. So, for Sera, these flames were no different from the flames of hell.

As soon as the flames hit her back, she didn't even get a chance to scream before she passed out on the ground.

Lukas was not unharmed either.

Even though he was a fair distance away, he was still swept up in the aftermath. But this wasn't too much of a surprise. Just the wind from Nix's eruption was enough to uproot the trees around him, so it was natural that he was also caught up in it.

The windstorm that was formed sent him flying like a piece of garbage. He was bounced off of trees and rocks, covering him in bruises, and making his ankle, thigh, and shoulder throb. Worst of all, he could feel excruciating pain in his torso.

He was having trouble breathing, so it made him believe that he had broken a rib that was piercing one of his lungs.

"Cough...!"

Unable to bear it, he coughed up a mouthful of blood.

An acrid smell filled the air.

Through the hazy smoke, he saw the five Swordnaz collapsed on the ground.

The five elites that Snow had nurtured had been rendered unconscious by Nix without being able to put up much of a fight.

“...Nix.”

Once again, he muttered the name he'd given to her.

Did she hear it?

Nix, who had been standing in the centre of the burning world, let out another scream.

“Kyaaak!”

The only thing that could be felt from that scream was indescribable pain.

Then, the staggering Nix turned to look at Lukas.

Her eyes shook slightly, and the flames surrounding her body flickered as if they would go out at any moment.

...She was weakened.

But it wasn't because of Eric's attack.

'Transcendent body.'

Lukas understood. Nix was halfway to that point.

In general, it was a level that only those who had reached the peak of mortality could enter.

This was probably a miracle caused by a combination of her characteristics as a Phoenix, and Agni's crystal, but it wasn't necessarily a good thing for her.

This was because a strong mind was needed to control a transcendent body. Once someone reached this stage, it was possible to be resurrected dozens or hundreds of times as long as their mind remained intact. No attack would be truly fatal to them unless it threatened their 'source of existence'.

But Nix's mind was unstable. Her body had become transcendent, but the strength of her mind was not able to keep up. It was this deviation that made her situation so much more dangerous.

...The current Nix was weak.

Not physically, but mentally.

This was proven by her next course of action.

She let out a scream of anger and hatred before charging towards Lukas.

In other words, she simply rushed towards him with no semblance of technique or skill.

If Lukas swung the simple steel sword in his hand now, he would probably be able to kill her.

'...I.'

He couldn't die yet.

There were still many things that he needed to do.

That wasn't all.

He also had the personal desire to not die without being remembered by anyone.

Nix was trying to kill Lukas.

Therefore, there was only one way for him to live.

'Nix... I...'

Screech-

“...”

As Nix rushed towards Lukas, she began to return to her original shape as Phoenix.

—A faint memory surfaced in his mind.

In the past, a young Phoenix with an appearance identical to the one flying towards him now had saved him in the Ispania Mountains.

Just to save him, this young Phoenix had stood up to a thousand year old Drake King that was on a completely different level than her.

But.

Why was he thinking about that now?

“...Huht.”

A soft chuckle escaped his lips.

Lukas weakly stretched out his sword.

He was completely defenceless.

Nevertheless, Nix didn't notice that.

Her broken mind and sight which was covered by a red haze made it impossible for her to make proper judgments.

'...I can't kill her with my own two hands.'

Right. It was an impossible task from the start.

A sad smile blossomed on Lukas' lips.

And a moment later,

Paak—

Nix's beak pierced Lukas.

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It had always been like that.

Even when his vision was blurred, the color of blood was always clear.

“Cough...”

...The spilled blood made his entire body feel warm. A feeling of drowsiness similar to when one rested in a bathtub began to settle on his mind.

But after a while, he began to feel cold as though wind was blowing on his wet clothes.

His body was getting colder.

He couldn't help but feel like this was dangerous.

Compared to the internal and external wounds that he'd suffered while being tossed around by the shockwave, this was much more serious.

He forcibly moved his numb hand to touch his stomach.

“...”

A fatal injury.

An injury so serious that he would likely die.

0

He could feel the blood dripping from his abdomen. Fortunately, the wound wasn't too large. If the hole had been even a tad bigger, his intestines would have spilled out.

"Kuh..."

This wasn't good.

It wasn't just his vision anymore, his consciousness was also beginning to blur.

In the first place, he was so messed up that it was a surprise he hadn't directly fainted, and he was probably only able to hold on until now because of his exceptional mental strength.

Although it was possible because he had complete control over his body, he was quickly approaching his limit.

His body was beginning to collapse before his mind could be broken.

This meant that he could feel the shadow of death slowly drawing closer.

“...why did you move your sword?”

Nix’s voice still trembled like a raging flame, but it sounded like she had regained some stability.

She had returned to her human form and was looking down at Lukas.

He forced himself to raise his head and look at her. The emotions in her burning eyes were so mixed that they were indiscernible.

“Answer me. Why didn’t you attack me?”

It was just an ordinary sword without any special properties, but at that moment, Nix’s body had been in a very dangerous state.

Even an ordinary steel sword would probably have been able to deal severe damage to her.

...Did this man not know this?

Or did he think that such a desperate attack wouldn’t work?

‘No.’

The denial to those questions appeared in her mind in an instant.

Lukas' expression had never been one of a desperate human.

Throb-

She felt pain once again. Except this time, it was her heart, not her head.

She felt stifled.

She felt so stifled that she wanted to pound her fist against her chest.

Why?

"Kuk."

Nix frowned with a cold expression.

Why did she feel so frustrated? Was it because she hadn't killed this man yet? Would that change anything?

No. It wouldn't change anything.

The pain in her chest wouldn't go away. And her headaches wouldn't disappear.

Nix's years of experience were able to tell her this.

She'd already come too far.

'...I'm tired.'

For some reason, today was just as tiring as the day she'd lost her family. She wanted to just get some rest.

But before that, there was still something she had to do.

Tap tap.

Nix walked towards Lukas.

Fwoosh-

Sparks of flame danced on her fingertips.

Then, she heard a faint voice that seemed to pierce through her thoughts.

Huff, huff...

Lukas was breathing heavily.

Now, he could barely even feel the pain.

“...humans.”

Cough.

Before he could finish his sentence, he coughed up a mouthful of blood. It was so hard to utter even the few words he wanted it to. He wanted to just close his eyes at that moment and fall asleep.

But he couldn't do that.

Because he knew what it would mean to close his eyes and fall asleep now.

He couldn't do that yet. There were still things he wanted to say.

Not for himself, but for her.

“...I heard you hate them.”

“So?”

“I heard they hunted all of your people.”

“That’s right. So what?”

“...”

Did she really not know? Or was she just pretending to not know?

It didn’t matter which one it was.

“So... why are you using a human form?”

“...”

The voice that had been speaking to him coldly, stopped.

He wanted to look at Nix's face, but he couldn't. This was due to a combination of the smoky surroundings and his blurred vision.

Nevertheless, beneath the sound of the fire burning in the background, he was able to hear a sharp intake of breath.

"If you hate them more than anything else in existence, then why are you still using their form?"

"..."

"Nix."

Once again.

He called out the name he'd given her himself.

This time, there was a faint smile on Lukas' lips.

"It must have been really hard, right?"

"...!"

Bang!

Flames erupted from Nix's body once again. He knew that the reason for this phenomenon was the strong reaction inside her.

"What... are you talking about?"

"I shouldn't have left you alone. I should have taught you more. Not only about the good side of humans, but also the evil side as well."

"...shut up."

Lukas couldn't help but pity for Nix.

The reason why she was subconsciously clinging to her human form.

Despite being so badly hurt by humans, she still couldn't give up the love for them in the corner of her heart.

He knew this because he was the same.

"Not all humans are like that. No matter how much anger blurred your vision, you must have had at least that level of discernment."

It would have been better if she had completely lost her mind to anger.

At least that way, she wouldn't have to suffer because of her complicated emotions.

"Be quiet..."

This crazy human.

This man's voice, tone, and expression. Everything about him pissed her off.

That's why she just had to make sure he couldn't say anything more.

But...

'Why am I still letting him talk?'

...The more she listened to his voice, the more her heart ached.

Nix held her head with a face that looked like she was about to cry. No, she was about to cry.

But why?

'What the hell is this?'

It had never been like this when she killed other humans.

But when she looked at this man, her heart ached.

It felt like her heart was being torn apart. It made her sad, desperate, and teary.

She hated it.

Nix didn't want to feel pain anymore.

So she'd burn it. That was the best solution she could think of.

She'd burn everything that made her suffer, that hurt her.

So that, when everything became black ashes, she would be numb to this pain once again.

Fwoosh-

Fire covered Nix's body. Compared to the flames she'd shown so far, it was like the difference between a bonfire and a candle, but Lukas didn't have the power to stop it.

“I’m sorry.”

With a soft mutter, Lukas closed his eyes.

Tap tap.

The approaching footsteps sounded slow. But this wasn’t because Nix was walking slowly.

“—”

It was because Lukas’ consciousness was on the verge of death.

Nevertheless, there was no reason for her to move quickly. Even if he was given time to think, it wasn’t like he’d be able to come up with some kind of plan. There was no way for Lukas to stop Nix now.

No matter what he said, there was no way for him to persuade the current Nix. The only thing that could stop her now was force, not a few words.

But the current Lukas had no power.

So there was only one possible ending for him.

Death.

....

....

But Lukas couldn't help but feel strange as he had this thought.

I...

Was Lukas Trowman really trying to accept death?

'Am I really?'

He reflected quietly.

Looking back, he'd had several opportunities to escape without directly fighting Nix.

It was the same since he first met her again. When he realised that she was not in a normal condition, he should have fled far away without hesitation.

But he didn't.

Instead, he chose to confront her face to face, and afterward, he restrained her movements with Blizzard and tried to talk to her.

'She might remember me.'

He threw himself forward with this baseless hope.

And now, he was trying to accept death.

'Was this really a situation where I had no choice but to die?'

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Lukas wondered if his current crisis was really one that could not have been avoided, or if he'd secretly intended for this to happen.

Wasn't it just a convenient excuse?

He couldn't kill Nix. So he was the one who would end up dying by her hand.

...If that was the case.

Then his actions were nothing more than disgusting, hypocritical justification wrapped up as self-sacrifice. (TL: deja vu anyone?)

'No.'

Self-disgust filled his mind.

What the hell was he doing by giving up?

He still had a lot of work to do. There was still a lot of information he needed to obtain, and people he needed to meet.

No, more than that.

He didn't want to hurt Nix more than he already had.

If she kills him now, and if in the future she were to understand exactly what she had done, she would never be able to live with herself.

Lukas opened his eyes again.

His eyelids, which he thought he'd never open again, were forcibly lifted until they were half open. That alone was proof of how desperate his struggle was.

He saw Nix, who was still approaching him at a slow pace.

First of all, he needed to stop her approach.

“...in the Ispania Mountains.”

No matter what happened, he had to say it.

His mind moved as he spoke.

“Do you remember? That is where you met Frey Blake for the first time.”

“...I don't know such a person.”

“I saved you there, and you saved me. And we joined forces to defeat the Lord of the Mountain.”

“I told you I don't know you.”

“Our victory was injury filled. But your condition was worse than mine so I had no choice but to leave you in the mountains while looking forward to the day I met you again... Have you really forgotten everything?”

“...Shut up. Be quiet. Don't say any more.”

Nix shouted as though she was having a fit.

“Something like that, something like that...!”

Fire erupted around her.

“I already said I don’t know!”

Whoosh!

The wave of flames surged towards Lukas.

He couldn’t avoid it. And he had no way of stopping it.

...He was foolish. It had taken him much too long to realise.

In the end, Lukas’ voice was unable to reach Nix.

...

...

...But 'Nix' couldn't reach him.

Crack!

Ice sprung up from the ground.

The momentum behind it was so strong that it caused Nix to flinched slightly.

"Magic..."

Who?

This forest had already become no different from Hell. Flames spread all over the place, so it shouldn't have been possible to use ice magic there.

Nevertheless, the wall of ice in front of her, which had white mist drifting from it, was cold enough to make her shiver.

'Yuriah?'

Lukas could only think of the only Wizard there.

However, she shouldn't have been able to do something like this with the state of her mana.

Out of habit, Lukas observed the spell more closely before quickly realising.

It was different,

The quality of this spell was different from the spells Yuriah used.

This was not a spell that had been casted by Yuriah.

Suddenly, Nix raised her head and looked in a direction.

“...”

The direction that she was looking with a fierce glare was none other than the sky.

Lukas followed her gaze.

Someone was standing there.

Unlike the dark blonde hair that Lukas had before, this man's hair shined like a star in the night sky that had been tainted with death energy.

"...the Frey Blake I knew..."

A voice rolled in on the wind.

Although he was still some distance away, his words could be heard as clearly as if he was standing in front of them.

His voice shook slightly. But it was so faint that, if one didn't listen closely, they would never notice.

It was as if a man who had been overwhelmed by his emotions was trying to keep his composure.

...Lukas...

Knew the owner of this voice.

"Had grey hair. His physique was the same as yours, except he was a bit shorter. Nevertheless, his impression was more blunt."

The man in the sky continued to mutter softly as he slowly descended, coming to land just beside Lukas.

He still couldn't see his face.

All he could see was his fluttering white robe, the staff in his hand, and the view of his back.

"He was a few years younger than me, but he was so mature that I didn't think he was younger."

"..."

"I learned a lot from watching his attitude towards life. Our time together was brief, but Frey left the most meaningful mark on me."

Lukas couldn't say anything.

Instead, he could only stare with half lidded eyes, an open mouth, and a blank expression.

The man continued.

"I haven't forgotten."

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"_"

—Those words.

Lukas' mind was blank.

Although he was near death, with tears in his eyes, he felt something rise up in his throat.

It wasn't blood. It was something hotter than that. His mixed emotions stopped just below his adam's apple.

Lukas couldn't open his mouth.

He felt that, if he did, he would release a very strange, pathetic sound.

"I didn't forget."

The words he muttered.

They were the words Lukas wanted to hear the most.

They were the hope that prevented him from giving up even as he wandered and struggled with despair.

'...this is it.'

Even if it wasn't perfect, even if it wasn't who he really was.

He'd just wanted one person to remember him, to remember the path he walked, with a sad expression.

And there was one.

"What are you doing here?"

Nix, who had come to her senses, growled. Once again, flames erupted around her.

"Piss off. Don't get in my way. That guy..."

"You're wrong."

He cut Nix off with a simple utterance.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's you, not me, who's getting in the way, Monster Queen. This time, I managed to find clues about a man I have been looking for for a very long time. I will not forgive anyone who gets in my way."

“So what if you can’t forgive me?”

The man sighed.

“...I’m not in a good mood right now. A lot of things have happened these past few days.”

“...”

“So what? It’s simple.”

Fwoosh!

The man’s white robe billowed as his mana became a visible cloud around him.

“I will just have to let my anger out on you.”

The man, Peran, smiled.

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“Frey Blake?”

“Yes.”

The male cadet nodded as he responded. Peran turned to look at this cadet’s face before narrowing his eyes slightly.

This cadet, what was his name again?

‘...ah.’

Douman.

That was definitely his name.

“Umm. Th-, there...”

Douman’s eyes swiveled back and forth and he began to stutter. Being stared at so silently by Peran made him worried that he might have made a mistake.

Peran smiled slightly to ease his anxiety before falling into his thoughts once again.

Frey Blake.

Of course he knew him. He’d been a hot topic in the academy from the moment of his admission.

As the third son of Count Blake, it was natural for him to draw attention. After all, the Blake Family was one of the magic families with great influence in the empire, especially Isake Blake, the current head of the family, who was a 7 star Archmage and the Tower Master of the 6th Magic Tower.

'Father praised him.'

Although Shepard Jun had a mild personality, his view towards magicology was much colder than anyone else.

Therefore, the fact that his father praised him was enough to give a hint of Isaka Blake's capabilities.

Nevertheless, Isaka wasn't the only one that was famous.

His two sons Mischael and Heinz were both geniuses who stood out from a young age. In addition, they were very popular among the noble young ladies due to their outstanding character and beautiful appearances.

With their performances, everyone had high hopes for the future of the Blake Family.

But what many people didn't know was that there were actually three sons in the Blake Family. The same was true even for Peran. The name Frey Blake was something he'd never heard before.

That's why he'd become interested.

Peran was deeply interested in the title 'genius'. In the first place, the reason he'd gone to Westroad Academy was to look for a genius, which made his interest increase even more.

Since he was a member of the Blake Family, then his talent should be around the same level as his own.

...But Peran's expectations were soon dashed.

This was because many rumors about Frey Blake began to spread.

[The Shame of the Blake Family.]

[The Greatest Dunce in the history of the Westroad Academy.]

[Trash who had absolutely no talent for magicology.]

In less than a month, he received no less than five such titles.

Peran only found out later that Frey was the half-abandoned child of the Blake Family. This wasn't because he was an illegitimate child or anything of the sort.

If there was a reason, it was purely because of his abysmal mana sensitivity.

Frey didn't feel mana until he was already in his teenage years. And the magic families were well aware of how miserable that fact was.

'...but it's a bit strange.'

Mana sensitivity was deeply influenced by one's innate talent. However, even if you are not born with it, it is possible to use special elixirs, training, and teaching during childhood, when the muscles were not yet fully developed, to partially convert someone's body.

In other words, this meant it was possible to artificially create a body that was suitable for mana.

Of course, it was insufficient in many ways to those who were naturally talented, but it couldn't be denied that it was the second best alternative that a majority of magic families used to ensure the continuance of their line.

'There is no way the Blake Family doesn't know that.'

Was his talent so bad that even those methods wouldn't work?

If that was the case then why did they send him to the academy? Were they planning to have him learn magicology in a systematic manner?

Or...

“It is said that he changed a lot recently.”

“What do you mean?”

“That...”

As he listened to Douman’s explanation, Peran’s expression changed slightly.

Frey Blake had been severely bullied in school for the year or so that he’d been there, but his personality had suddenly changed one day as if he was a completely different person. Not only that, he seemed to have received great enlightenment in magicology as he defeated the students who had been bullying him one after the other.

“I heard that members of other clubs were also beaten pretty badly.”

It was at that moment that Peran understood why Douman had brought Frey up to him.

“You want to recruit Frey Blake to our club?”

“Yes.”

Douman nodded.

At that point, Peran couldn't help but feel curious about Frey.

But he only nodded his head coolly.

"Do it yourself."

* * *

Nevertheless, things took an interesting turn.

"...he refused?"

"Yes. That cheeky bastard... I can't believe he's looking down on us just because he gained a bit of skill."

"It's not just a bit of skill. I heard he even defeated Alex Drimid."

"That... Yes."

Douman could only nod his head slightly with a disgruntled expression.

Alex Drimid was one of the more talented cadets who had even participated in a relatively famous magic competition and reached the round of 16. Of course, Peran believed that there were some underhanded dealings at play between his family and the organisers of the competition, which allowed his luck in the matchmaking to be exceptionally good, but even then it was still a surprising feat.

It was amazing for a cadet class Wizard to advance to the round of 16 in an official magic competition.

“Did you tell him [■■■■ ■■]?”

“Yes. But that didn’t work either.”

“...”

When he heard that he’d rejected their offer, Peran’s curiosity about Frey became even stronger.

In fact, Peran wanted to meet him for himself, but, unfortunately, their vacation was soon approaching. It had been a while since he’d last shown his face at home. Moreover, this time, he would be forced to have a conversation about his engagement that he had been avoiding, so Peran didn’t have a choice but to go.

‘...it can’t be helped.’

No matter how much he wanted it, he didn’t have the time to spare.

So, unfortunately, he would have to postpone their meeting for a while longer.

Or so Peran had thought, but after a while, he was able to meet Frey.

During his trip home no less.

* * *

They were attacked by pirates.

Nevertheless, Peran wasn't really concerned. This was because there were two Battle Mages from the Magic Tower accompanying them, and he was confident in their skills.

However, the pirates were also accompanied by their own reinforcements that no one could have expected.

A Lich, a high ranking undead. One that was at 6 stars no less.

...He didn't even think about fighting back. There was no way for them to break through. It was at that moment that Peran realised just how much he was like a frog trapped in a well.

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The feeling of helplessness that he was experiencing for the first time reminded Peran of the fear that he'd all but forgotten.

Nevertheless, he never showed any signs of his emotions on his face.

As a member of the Jun Family, the son of an Archmage, and above all else, as Peran Jun.

He needed to be confident in everything he did.

But when he forced his body, which was half frozen by fear, to move, another man moved before him.

Frey Blake.

Peran couldn't help but stare blankly at this figure.

In an instant, the Lich as well as all the pirates were killed.

Unhesitating judgement, determination, and amazing magic.

When he saw this, for the first time in his life, he thought of the word 'amazing' while looking at someone his own age. He genuinely felt admiration and respect.

It was a bit different from the respect he had for his father.

Peran wanted to know more about him.

He wanted to talk to him.

...And more importantly,

He wanted to be friends with Frey.